

ARTICLE

At Times Like These: Fredi Washington, the New Negro Renaissance, and American Democracy

Laurie Woodard

Black Studies Department, The City College of New York, The City University of New York, NY, USA
Email: lwoodard@ccny.cuny.edu

(Received 16 July 2025; revised 23 February 2026; accepted 17 April 2026)

Abstract

This essay explores the work of artist and activist Fredi Washington during the New Negro Renaissance. It frames Washington as an unconventional “Triple Threat,” not as an artist who dances and sings and acts, but as a performing artist, a writer, and a civil and human rights activist. It focuses upon Washington’s most direct engagement with the failures of American democracy—her writings for the progressive Black newspaper *The People’s Voice* from 1942 to 1947. A fierce advocate for Black people in the United States and around the world, Washington offers a model of resiliency and resistance in the face of white supremacy, misogyny, and the contemporary collapse of democratic institutions across the globe.

Keywords: New Negro Renaissance; Fredi Washington; African American Cultural and Political History; American Democracy

They had no intention of changing. And then along comes Reagan.

Fredi Washington, 1983

At times like these, I find myself thinking of Zora Neal Hurston. Not her stunning and well-known 1937 literary contribution to the New Negro Renaissance *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. And not her works in the fields of folklore and anthropology, such as 1935’s *Of Mules and Men* or 1938’s *Tell My Horse: Voodoo and Life in Haiti and Jamaica*. And not her renowned hats. At times like these that sport an administration seemingly determined to eradicate, among many other aspects of human life and experience, along with “equity,” “inclusion,” and the ever-dreaded D-word, Black history, Black culture, and quite possibly Black “ness,” from these “united” states, I find myself thinking of Hurston’s 1945 essay, “Crazy For This Democracy.” In her scathing critique of U.S. domestic and foreign policies, Hurston penned her artful and felicitous articulation of the “arse-and-all” of American democracy. Castigating Western European and American oppression of the Indo-Chinese, Indonesians, Burmese, Malayans, and African Americans, Hurston argued wryly, “They tell me this democracy form of government is a wonderful thing. It has freedom, equality, justice, in

Special thanks to Hazel V. Carby.

© The Author(s), 2026. Published by Cambridge University Press. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives licence (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided that no alterations are made and the original article is properly cited. The written permission of Cambridge University Press or the rights holder(s) must be obtained prior to any commercial use and/or adaptation of the article.

short, everything! Since 1937 nobody has talked about anything else. The late Franklin D. Roosevelt sort of re-decorated it, [*sic*] and called these United States the boastful name of ‘The Arsenal of Democracy.’”¹ Hurston added, “Maybe, I need to go out and buy me a dictionary ... Or perhaps a spelling-book would help me out a lot. Or it could be that I just mistook the words. Maybe I mistook a British pronunciation for a plain American word. Did F.D.R., aristocrat from Groton and Harvard, using the British language say ‘arse-and-all’ of Democracy when I thought he said plain arsenal? Maybe he did, and I have been mistaken all this time. From what is going on, I think that is what he must have said.”² Denouncing Jim Crow segregation in the United States and South Africa, she added, “The Ass-and-All of Democracy has shouldered the load of subjugating the dark world completely.”³

At times like these, a more hopeful me thinks also of my students at The City College of New York. At the beginning of 2025, c. 1/22/2025, one of my very wise and very prescient undergraduates posed the question: What does the New Negro Renaissance offer us at times like these?⁴ We talked about it as a class for a while, and the word that resonated most was resilience—the resilience of the Black artists, intellectuals, and activists that led the early twentieth-century movement for cultural expression and sociopolitical justice. At times like these, when thinking about resilience, especially the resilience of the women of the dark world, I find myself thinking most of all about Fredi Washington, a Triple Threat of the New Negro Renaissance.

Born in Savannah, Georgia, on December 23, 1903, Fredericka Carolyn Washington joined the Great Migration at age 12, arriving in New York City’s Harlem during the Red Summer of 1919. Once there, she embarked upon a personal and professional journey that took her from theaters on Broadway, cabarets in Paris, sound stages in Hollywood, and film sets on the islands of the Caribbean, to the Negro Actors Guild and *The People’s Voice* in New York and to the National Negro Congress in Washington, D.C.—all before the conclusion of World War II and her 42nd birthday. Most well known for her performance as Peola, the young, light-skinned Negro woman who chooses to pass for white in the 1934 film *Imitation of Life*, Washington represents the quintessential New Negro Renaissance story: a story of Black self-determination, resistance, and resilience—especially the resilience of Negro women in the United States in the face of white supremacy, racism, and discrimination. With gray eyes and skin light enough to pass for white, Washington proudly claimed her Blackness and devoted much of her life and career, on and off the stage and screen, to fighting for civil and human rights for Black people and for the full realization of American democracy.⁵

In the world of the performing arts, an artist who dances, sings, and acts is known as a Triple Threat. Though Washington did not sing, she was a Triple Threat of another kind: a performing artist, a writer, and a civil and human rights activist. Excelling in the artistic genres of dance, theater, and film, she used her talent, flexibility, and resilience to sustain a thirty-year career as a performing artist, without ever taking a “day job.” Each time she stepped onto the stage or in front of a camera in the United States or anywhere around the

¹ Hurston 1945, 45–47.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Special thanks to Miles Wadlington.

⁵ Unless specifically noted, throughout this work I use “Negro,” the term Washington and her contemporaries used to describe themselves, interchangeably with “African American,” “Afro-American,” and “Black.” Although today “Negro” is often deemed derogatory, during the New Negro Renaissance of the early twentieth century, it was understood as an accurate and respectful term.

For more on Fredi Washington and the New Negro Renaissance see, Woodard 2020, 2026.

world, Washington asserted her humanity, dignity, and will to determine her own destiny. She continuously pushed back against racism and sexism and attempted to foster empathy and understanding for a range of complicated, often seemingly unlikable characters by playing multiple aspects of Negro women's identity and experience as truthfully and as comprehensively as she could.

Simultaneously, Washington wrestled with tropes, stereotypes, and audience expectations as she resisted the limitations imposed upon her by the entertainment industries and the larger public, who sometimes failed to perceive the subtle and overt ways in which she attempted to refashion narrowly drawn characters. As she grew and matured as an artist and as an individual, she continued to perform, but increasingly focused her sociopolitical consciousness and activities on more easily legible forms of activism, including journalism, labor organizing, protests, and support of progressive politics. Ultimately, Washington exemplified her own belief that Black artists were central to the performing arts, which were central to a democratic nation, and that Black artists had a responsibility to themselves, to each other, to the Black community, and to the world.

Active from the 1920s through the 1940s, Washington was both a participant in and an exemplar of the New Negro Renaissance, the early twentieth-century cultural and political quest for social justice led by Negro intellectuals, artists, activists, and artists/activists, which began in 1915, surged throughout the 1920s and 1930s, and wound down with the end of WWII and the rise of McCarthyism.⁶ Though often excluded from the dominant narratives, Washington was central to the Renaissance, which was a cornerstone of the Black Freedom Movement and the social transformation of twentieth-century America. Her fusion of artistry and activism and her determination to fight oppression on myriad fronts, in myriad forms, and in myriad locations, casts her as an influential actor in the unrelenting African American quest for civil and human rights. Although she would never have used the phrase about herself, it is not hyperbolic to call Washington a life-long "forthright crusader" for justice.⁷

Washington's career as a New Negro performing artist/activist was officially launched in 1922 when she joined the touring company of the all-Black production of *Shuffle Along*, initially as a dancer on the show's chorus line. She quickly became a featured dancer, developing the adagio partnership *Moiret et Fredi* with African American dancer Al Moore. The pair would tour internationally throughout the 1930s, performing choreography including the Black Bottom, Tango, and Waltz. Soon expanding her career to include dramatic acting on the stage and in films, Washington would go on to perform on Broadway in productions including Alex A. Aarons and Vinton Freedley's *Singin' the Blues* (1931) and Hall Johnson's *Run Little Chillun* (1933) and in Hollywood films such as *Imitation of Life*, directed by John M. Stahl, and *One Mile from Heaven* (1937), directed by Allan Dwan. Throughout, she sought incessantly to redefine narrowly drawn characters and tropes of Negro women. In an effort to expand their place in the United States, she explored the complexity of Black women's experiences, opportunities, weaknesses, and hurdles as she sought to transform her roles from the outside in to engender empathy and action. In *Imitation of Life*, for example, by imbuing the character of Peola with the strength of a New Negro woman determined to forge her own destiny and claim the full rights of U.S. citizenship, Washington highlighted the unfairness of Peola's circumstances,

⁶ For more on the New Negro Renaissance; its spatial and temporal boundaries; and its relationship to the Harlem Renaissance and the New Negro Movement see, Baldwin and Makalani 2013; Gates 1988; Gates and Jarrett 2007; Johnson 1930; Lewis 1981; Locke 1925; Knupfer 2006; Krasner 2004; Wall 2016; Woodard 2026.

⁷ Uncredited 1939.

challenged the trope of the tragic mulatto, and made visible the injustice of second-class citizenship as defined by race. However, even though she fought with the film's writers, who, as Washington later observed, "didn't seem to realize that a decent life, not white skin, was the issue," moviegoers—both Black and White—often failed to appreciate the complexities of her interpretation of Peola.⁸

Washington's most direct, and arguably most successful, engagement with the failures of American democracy came in her writings for the progressive Black newspaper *The People's Voice*. From 1942 to 1947, she covered topics including, but not limited to, Negro performing arts, World War II, and the many faces of Jim Crow segregation in featured articles and her signature columns, "Headlines/Footlights," "Freda Says," and "Footlights and Floodlights." Even before the publication of Hurston's denunciation of the arse-and-all of American democracy, Washington lambasted America's treatment of the dark world.

While there is no conclusive evidence that Hurston and Washington ever met, Fannie Hurst, author of the novel *Imitation of Life*, upon which the film was based, frequently created her fictitious characters as composites of people she actually knew. She likely based the relationship between Peola's mother, Delilah, and the novel's White heroine, Bea Pullman, on her own relationship with Hurston. The two women first met in 1925 when Hurst presented Hurston with the second prize at the National Urban League's *Opportunity* magazine's first literary competition award ceremony.⁹ Hurst briefly engaged Hurston as her personal secretary, and in 1931, while Hurst was certainly contemplating *Imitation of Life*, which would be published in 1933, the two women took a road trip across New England and Canada.¹⁰

Washington was not involved in any way. But the vociferous reader, Black activist, and future featured actress in the film version of the novel was certainly aware of Hurston's body of work when she called for "an all-out fight against domestic fascism."¹¹ Perhaps the New Negro performing artist/activist even inspired Hurston when in 1944 she issued her own critique of the hypocrisy of America's arsenal of democracy, describing the international struggle to end Black oppression in *The People's Voice*: "To Negroes on the battlefronts in France or a defense factory at home," Washington explained, "D-Day has a double significance. It means also the liberation of Negroes wherever they might be who live under homegrown systems of fascism and tyranny."¹²

A vocal advocate for the New Negro Renaissance throughout the 1940s, Washington consistently connected the work of Black performing artists (and spectators) to the "life and death struggle" facing "black [sic] America, for their rights as citizens." After attending a performance at the iconic Apollo Theater, she noted that while she had devoted many columns, and "yelled loud and long" about the material offered to Black artists on the stage and screen, she was deeply concerned about the reproduction of aspects of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century minstrelsy, "which ha[d] no place in the new order of the new Negro." Whereas she would later champion the artistic value of a complex Negro woman in a "good bitchy role," into which an actress could sink her teeth, Washington drew a clear distinction between complexity and what she deemed "insulting boredom." She castigated the performance for presenting the "no reading, dumb

⁸ Darden 1978, 105. See Woodard 2026, chap. six.

⁹ "Prizes to Negro Writers" 1925.

¹⁰ See Woodard 2026, chap. six.

¹¹ Washington 1943a.

¹² Washington 1944b, 22.

arguing, razor wielding, name calling, liquor drinking, woman debasing, vulgar, stupid brand of so called [sic] comedy,” adding that we, “in our indignation, have left our own back yard [sic] pretty durn dirty.”¹³

Equally troubled by the behavior of the audience that consisted primarily of teenagers and men, whom Washington believed should be “working or in the army,” she condemned their guffaws and almost constant banter with the performers, charging that the quest for equal rights for Negro Americans had never entered their minds. For Washington, Black complicity, inadvertent or deliberate, in upholding American racism, especially by feeding into the stereotypical beliefs held by much of mainstream America, retarded the progress of the entire race and undermined American democracy. Tying the “offensive sketches” on the stage and the “rude and disgusting behavior” of the audience to the racialized violence of lynching, Washington argued that both were a part of “the very long rope which we as a minority group have place around our necks.” She concluded that Black America must face these facts if “we are to succeed in our fight to abolish discrimination of our boys in the armed forces, our workers in the factory and all of the other places where it is found in our American set-up.”¹⁴

Washington’s critique apparently struck a nerve with at least one of the artists appearing at the Apollo. The following week, she acknowledged that her column had “stuck its neck way out” in its discussion of the material on the stage and the deportment of its audience. She explained that her point was to show the responsibility of Negroes in the theater to the progress of all American Negroes, as well as to those of Black people around the world. Condemning European imperialism she asserted, “we are the yard stick [sic] by which the freedom and equality will be measured for the oppressed Negroes of British and French rule.”¹⁵ She also included excerpts from a letter she received in response from comedian Tim Moore, who was on stage at the Apollo weekly. Moore took umbrage with her assessment of his performance, noting that his repertoire did not include “razor wielding, woman debasing, etc.” and questioned Washington’s claim that his work had “no place with the New Negro.” Moore went on to denounce Washington’s own work in both *Singing the Blues* and *Imitation of Life*, wherein he “did not see anything uplifting” in the parts she played. *Singing the Blues* portrayed dice shooting and murder, and *Imitation of Life* depicted a woman “who was ashamed of her own mother because she was dark.”¹⁶

Never afraid to focus her sharp analysis wherever it was due, Washington squarely admitted the limitations of her own career. She noted that she did not take exception to Moore’s criticism of the roles she played that dated back 10 years or more, but argued that since the War began, the world was undergoing a change. Unprecedented attention had been given to Black people, she declared, because “we are theoretically free but actually part slave under a vicious system.” Lambasting the legislative branch, Washington denounced Congressional representatives who “orate about our lack of responsibility, culture, education, etc.,” to keep Black people “from the polls in the south, to segregate our men and women in the armed forces, to perpetuate the damnable jim-crow laws of the south ... which are now invading the north, [and] to keep us in ignorance of the rich history of American Negroes.”¹⁷

¹³ Washington 1943b, 24, 1945, 22.

¹⁴ Washington 1943b, 24.

¹⁵ Washington 1943c, 24.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

“What was considered all right in the theatre or on the screen ten years ago,” she continued, “are not all right now.” While Negroes were “shedding red blood for democracy which we do not have,” a battle was being waged on the home front, where culture and education via “every stage, screen and radio” was of utmost importance. “Every Negro in the field of amusement,” she continued, had a responsibility to “see with clarity his or her relation to this fight.” Adding that it was not her intention to heckle any one individual, she concluded, “All of us in the theatre must do our part toward the realization of our rights as American Citizens in a truly democratic America.”¹⁸ Throughout her multifaceted career, Washington’s battle for Negro rights as American citizens and the full realization of American democracy would take her across some seemingly unlikely borders, but her commitment to fighting for “a free America for all peoples,” and against white supremacy and American imperialism across the globe, remained at the heart of her written activism.¹⁹

Today, some in the country are fighting desperately to return to the world before the New Negro Renaissance: the world of *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), which celebrated racialized violence and white supremacy, and the world of largely uncritical acceptance of U.S. imperialism and global economic bullying, seen for example in the seizure of the Haitian National Bank in December 1914 and the occupation by U.S. marines of the first Black republic in the Western Hemisphere in September 1915. Seen also in the Congressional passage of H.R. 6060, “An act to regulate the immigration of aliens to and the residence of aliens in the United States,” including a Senate amendment “excluding from admission to the U.S. all members of the African or black race,” in early 1915. Perhaps ironically, then President Woodrow Wilson vetoed the bill because it embodied

a radical departure from the traditional and long-established policy of this country, a policy in which our people have conceived the very character of their Government to be expressed, the very mission and spirit of the Nation in respect of its relations to the peoples of the world outside their borders.²⁰

Despite the rise of the New Negro Renaissance, H.R. 6060, reinvented as H.R. 10384, AKA the Asiatic Barred Zone Act, would be passed by the 64th U.S. Congress with an overwhelming majority that overrode Wilson’s veto in 1917. However, as they did in the early twentieth century, by performing, writing, and fighting, Fredi Washington and the New Negro Renaissance offer a model of resilience and resistance in the face of white supremacy, misogyny, and the arse-and-all of American democracy for artists, activists, and even the so-called leadership of the political classes. Resilient People of Color, and their allies, in the United States and around the world must build upon that model to influence hearts, minds, culture, and policy more than ever, *at times like these*.²¹

Laurie Woodard began her professional life as a dancer with the Dance Theatre of Harlem. She completed her BA in History at Columbia University and her PhD in African American Studies and History at Yale University. Her research focuses upon the intersection between the cultural and sociopolitical realms and employs interdisciplinary methodologies, drawing from cultural history, performance studies, biography, and critical race theory. She is the recipient of the National Endowment for the Humanities Faculty Award; the National Endowment for the

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Washington 1944a, 26.

²⁰ Wilson 1915. See also, “Veto of Immigration Legislation,” UVA MILLER CENTER: Presidential Speeches. <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/january-28-1915-veto-immigration-legislation#:~:text=If%20the%20people%20of%20this,and%20all%20men's%2C%20are%20involved.>

²¹ While recognizing diversity of history, culture, and experience, I use the broad definition of People of Color that includes Black people.

Humanities Schomburg Scholar-in-Residence Fellowship; and the Sylvia Arden Boone Prize. Her work has appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Journal of African American History*, and *American Quarterly*. Her book *A Real Negro Girl: Fredi Washington and the New Negro Renaissance* is forthcoming from Oxford University Press.

Author contribution. Conceptualization, Writing - original draft: L.W.

Conflict of interests. The author declares no competing interests.

References

Primary sources

- Hurston, Zora Neale. 1945. "Crazy For This Democracy." *Negro Digest*, December, 45–8.
- "Prizes to Negro Writers." 1925. *New York Times*, May 2.
- Uncredited. 1939. "She Is Frail Ingenue by Night, A Forthright Crusader by Day." *New York Herald Tribune*, March 6, Fredi Washington Papers, 1925–1979, reel 2, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.
- Washington, Fredi. 1943a. Fredi Washington to Langston Hughes, July 1. *James Weldon Johnson Collection in the Yale Collection of American Literature*. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. Yale University.
- Washington, Fredi. 1943b. "Headlines/Footlights," *The People's Voice*, July 31, 24.
- Washington, Fredi. 1943c. "Headlines/Footnotes," *The People's Voice*, August 7, 24.
- Washington, Fredi. 1944a. "Headlines/Footlights," *The People's Voice*, May 27, 26.
- Washington, Fredi. 1944b. "Headlines/Footlights," *The People's Voice*, June 17, 22.
- Washington, Fredi. 1945. "Fredi Says," *The People's Voice*, September 8, 22.
- Wilson, Woodrow. 1915. "Message from the President of the United States Vetoing H.R. 6060, An Act to Regulate the Immigration of Aliens to and the Residence of Aliens in the United States." January 28. UVA MILLER CENTER: Presidential Speeches. <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/january-28-1915-veto-immigration-legislation#:~:text=If%20the%20people%20of%20this,and%20all%20men's%2C%20are%20involved.>

Secondary literature

- Baldwin, Davarian L., and Minkah Makalani (eds). 2013. *Escape from New York: The New Negro Renaissance beyond Harlem: Minneapolis and*. University of Minneapolis Press.
- Darden, Norma Jean. 1978. "Oh Sister! Fredi and Isabel Washington Relive 1930s Razzamatazz." *Essence*, September 9, 98–9, 105–6, 108–9, 111.
- Gates, Henry Louis Jr. Fall 1988. "The Trope of a New Negro and the Reconstruction of the Image of the Black." *Representations* 24: 129–55.
- Gates, Henry Louis Jr., and Gene Andrew Jarrett (eds.). 2007. *The New Negro: Readings on Race, Representation, and African American Culture, 1892–1938*. Princeton University Press.
- Johnson, James Weldon. 1930. *Black Manhattan*. Alfred A. Knopf.
- Knupfer, Anne Meis. 2006. *The Chicago Black Renaissance and Women's Activism*. University of Illinois Press.
- Krasner, David. 2004. *A Beautiful Pageant: African American Theatre, Drama, and Performance in the Harlem Renaissance, 1910–1927*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Lewis, David Levering. 1981. *When Harlem Was in Vogue*. Oxford University Press.
- Locke, Alain. 1925. *The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance*. Albert & Charles Boni, Inc.
- Wall, Cheryl. 2016. *The Harlem Renaissance: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press.
- Woodard, Laurie A. 2020. "A Free America for All Peoples..." Fredi Washington, the Negro Actors Guild, and the Voice of the People." *The Journal of African American History* 105 (3): 452–78.
- Woodard, Laurie A. 2026. *A Real Negro Girl: Fredi Washington and the New Negro Renaissance*. Oxford University Press.

Cite this article: Woodard, Laurie. 2026. "At Times Like These: Fredi Washington, the New Negro Renaissance, and American Democracy." *Public Humanities*, 2, e81, 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2026.10189>