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America never was America to me,

And yet I swear this oath—

America will be.

—Langston Hughes

Now is a difficult time to be an American. Never have we witnessed such a massive onslaught on—and undoing of—the basic tenets of decency in public life, freedom of protest, freedom of speech, freedom to breathe clean air, freedom to make decisions about our reproductive health, the protection of minority rights, equal justice under the law, and respect for science and empirical grounds of truth. Rarely have we seen the door slammed shut with such force against ideals of international cooperation and respect. These rights and freedoms have been hard won through political and social struggles, through belief in the power of education, by activism and broken heads and legislative battles, violence and assassinations, massive public mobilization in support of the ideals that have defined our republican experiment, and civil war. We now face, according to a poll of national security experts conducted by *Foreign Policy*, a 35 percent chance of another civil war in the next ten to fifteen years.¹

In this context, patriotism becomes an explosively charged concept, harboring within its red, white, and blue bunting a deep-dyed argument about what America means, what it is, and what it might become. For me, patriotism means loyalty to an *idea* of America, constructed by those whose lives and words and actions have embroidered the edges of our great founding documents—as well as those documents themselves—from Henry David Thoreau and Herman Melville to Abraham Lincoln to Dorothy Day to Martin Luther King; from Civil Disobedience to the Underground Railroad to the Anti-Globalization movement to Occupy Wall Street to Black Lives Matter. The ideals I associate with patriotism are forged in a civic sphere where the idea of the nation may be debated and renewed in daily actions. These ideals have very rarely, and only momentarily, been realized in practice. They are principles represented more often in their moments of contestation than in their moments of robust realization.

The culture wars we are now living through are being fought over different versions of patriotism. The greatest rift is between those who place the meaning of patriotism in unflinching loyalty to a static image of the nation, as hollowed out of history as the emblems that keep it alive; and a patriotism loyal to a set of ideals only realized in time. The first

version has very little to do with the nation in time and history; it is untested by experiences beyond the narrow ground of individual belief. For too many, it is forged in defiance of history itself: the dream of a white ethnic nation where immigrants and descendants of enslaved people have no place.

Central to both these versions of patriotism are words and images, visual and spoken rhetoric. Putting this rich history of visual culture, the fine arts, architecture, and material culture—our archive as art historians—into conversation with ideas about the republic itself and its contested legacies at specific historical moments has opened for me—and I trust for my students—the richest point of entry into this field. To take these mute documents of visual culture as containing utterances about power, identity, race, community, nation, and cross-cultural exchange is also to wrest these images out of their naturalized claims to represent America or life or history. And to understand form and media also as languages that carry meaning in relation to how citizens and cultures present themselves to one another is to send these objects and artifacts back into the stream of history, where they take their place within a broad field of politics, mythic imagining, different versions about who we are as a nation. Form prefigures possible futures, whether the balanced compositions of Bingham’s riverboat scenes anticipating a new civil order of things, or the improvised grace of jazz ensembles melding instrumental voices into dynamic new unities, or the suggestive sequences of Walker Evans’ *American Photographs* and the question mark that attends Robert Frank’s photographs in *The Americans*. Understanding images and artifacts in their dialectical relationship to history is one possible pedagogy for citizenship and for a patriotism chastened by history.

Notes

- ¹ Robin Wright, “Is America Headed for a New Kind of Civil War?” *New Yorker* (August 14, 2017). <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/is-america-headed-for-a-new-kind-of-civil-war> Accessed September 30, 2017.