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# John Sloan's Slow Awakening

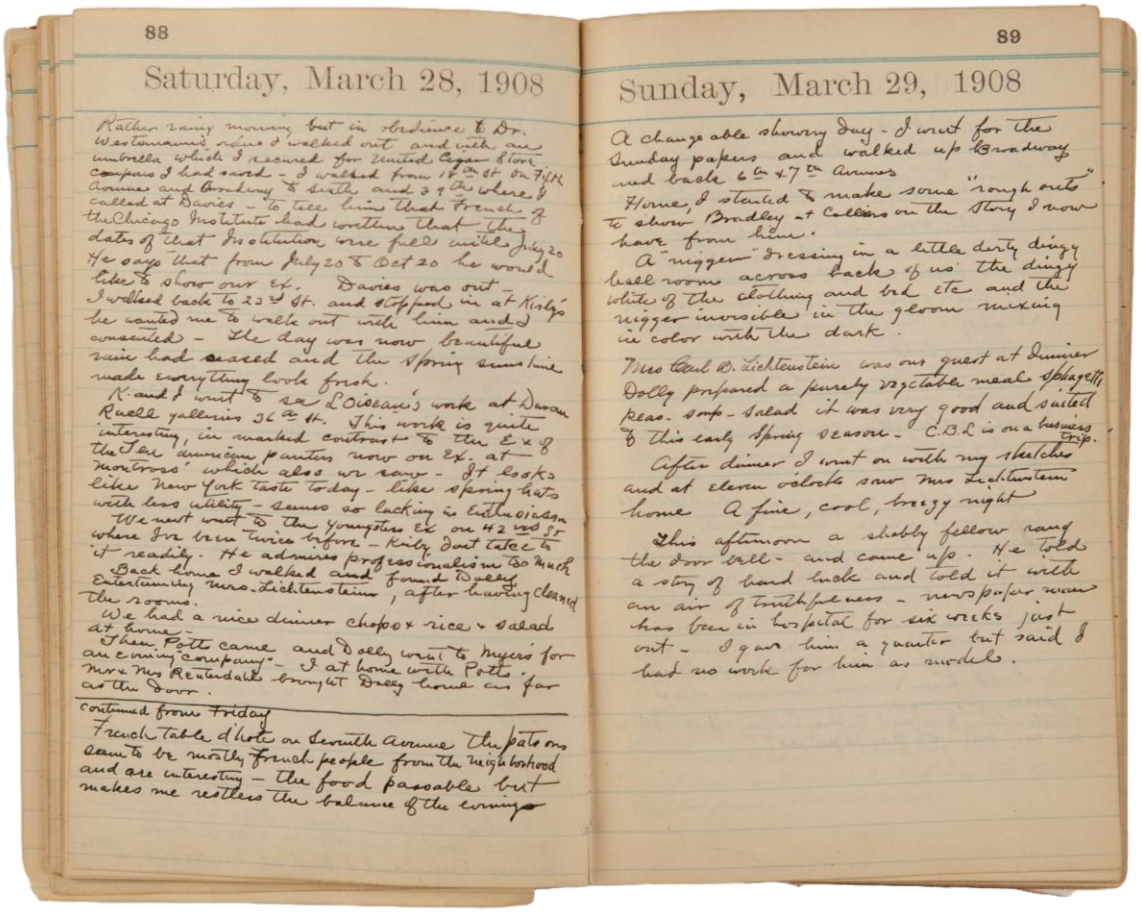
**John Fagg**

***The following essay contains language and images that readers may find disturbing or otherwise challenging to encounter.***

"Sloan is the past participle of slow." That was Robert Henri's (1865–1929) joke about how long it took John Sloan (1871–1951) to finish a painting, but the members of the Ashcan School were slow in other ways too. They are associated with the speed of modern life, as skyscrapers, elevated trains, and playful crowds first appeared on their canvases, in rapid brushstrokes that connote on-the-spot reportage, around 1910. But that journalistic eye and quickfire execution derived from their work as newspaper sketch-reporters, a role rendered obsolete by photography. More generally, their formal approach took old ways of seeing, including genre scenes and genre portraits, to new ways of life. Sloan and his peers were not only slow to relinquish traditional picture making but also slow to let go of their prejudices. They were slow to connect their (otherwise progressive) politics to antiracism and slow to picture people of color in their art. Insofar as they sought to record the social history of American city life, they were slow to understand W. E. B. Du Bois's assertion that "the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line."[1]

That prophetic statement in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) was informed by Du Bois's first book, *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899), which focuses on structural inequalities shaping Black life in Northern cities but also addresses the "deeper and less easily described results of the attitude of the white population toward the Negroes: a certain manifestation of a real or assumed aversion, a spirit of ridicule or patronage, a vindictive hatred in some, absolute indifference in others."[2] It was in Philadelphia that Sloan formed his racist beliefs and made his start as an illustrator and painter. It was out of such prejudices he made a "puzzle of a mammy figure watching a group of Black children being kicked by a donkey" for the *Philadelphia Press* in August 1900. Art historian Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw cites this puzzle, alongside the diary Sloan kept following relocation to New York in 1905, to demonstrate that he held "remarkably clear colonialist beliefs of white racial superiority."[3] On March 29, 1908, Sloan wrote, "A 'n****r' dressing in a little dirty, dingy hall room across back of us. The dingy white of the clothing and bed, etc. and the n****r invisible in the gloom, mixing in color with the dark."[4] The slur, in its first iteration, is marked off from the discursive plane of the diary in quote marks. But, when repeated, it fits seamlessly, in the same smooth hand that records a "spaghetti, pea, soup, salad" dinner, into the quotidian detail of Sloan's day (fig. 1). Where the puzzle may, conceivably, have been made under the hegemonizing pressure of mass culture, here, in private, is Sloan's unmistakably racist

self. Citing praise for Du Bois and other Black artists and intellectuals in his later 1944–51 diary, together with the "personhood fully visualized" she sees in a 1950 drawing of the African American baritone William Warfield, Shaw concludes that "Sloan got 'woke' before he died."[5] The withering tone acknowledges that taking nearly half a century to understand one's place in history is just too slow.



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Saturday, March 28, 1908

Rather rainy morning but in evidence to Dr. Westermann's advice I walked out and with an umbrella which I secured for [illegible] Logan & Bloor company I had saved - I walked from 18th St. on 7th Ave. and Broadway to 34th and 39th where I called at Davies - to see him about French & the Chicago Institute had written that the dates of that Exhibition were fixed within July 20 He says that from July 20 to Oct 20 he would like to show our ex. Davies was out I walked back to 23rd St. and stopped in at Kraus's he wanted me to walk out with him and I assented - The day was now beautiful rain had ceased and the Spring sunshine made everything look fresh.

K. and I went to see L'Oiseau's work at Durand Ruell galleries 36th St. This work is quite interesting, in marked contrast to the Ex of the Ten American painters now on Ex. at Montross' which also we saw - It looks like New York taste today - like Spring hats with less utility - seems so lacking in enthusiasm We next went to the youngsters Ex on 42nd St where I've been twice before - Kirby don't take to it readily. He admires progressionalism so much Back home I walked and found Dolly Entertaining Mrs. Lichtenstein, after having cleared the rooms.

We had a nice dinner chops + rice + salad at home.

Then Pott came and Dolly went to Myers for an evening company - I at home with Potts, Mrs + Mr Reutedall brought Dolly home as far as the door.

continued from Friday

French table d'hote on Seventh Avenue the patrons seem to be mostly French people from the neighborhood and are interesting - the food passable but makes me restless the balance of the evening

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Sunday, March 29, 1908

A changeable showery day - I went for the Sunday papers and walked up Broadway and back 6th to 47th Avenues

Home, I started to make some "rough outs" to show Bradley at Colliers on the story I now have from him.

A nigger dressing in a little dirty dingy hall room across back of us the dinginess of the clothing and bed etc and the nigger invisible in the gloom merging in color with the dark.

Mrs Carl B. Lichtenstein was our guest at dinner Dolly prepared a purely respectable meal Spaghetti peas - soup - salad it was very good and suited to this early Spring season - C.B.L is on a business trip.

After dinner I went on with my sketches and at eleven o'clock saw Mrs Lichtenstein home A fine, cool, breezy night

This afternoon a shabby fellow rang the door bell - and came up. He told a story of hard luck and told it with an air of truthfulness - newspaper man has been in hospital for six weeks just out - I gave him a quarter but said I had no work for him as models.

Fig. 1. John Sloan's Diary, March 29, 1908, John Sloan Manuscript Collection, Helen Farr Sloan Library and Archives, Delaware Art Museum, Wilmington

Sloan was not the only one to have been slow. His racist images, letters, and diary entries have been ignored, even suppressed, by historians of American art. I am among the scholars given access to an unexpurgated pdf of Sloan's diary around 2007; I read those diary entries but failed to say anything about them. With, again, well-placed scorn, Shaw refers to "scholars for whom issues of race have not been 'a part of the project.'" In 2023 I published a book about genre painting that includes extended analysis of Sloan's diary but only belatedly, at chapter's end, acknowledges his racism. I thought addressing the kind of racism found in the March 29, 1908, diary entry would overwhelm my arguments about Sloan's intimate observation of the domestic sphere, protofeminist recognition of women's labor, and adaptation of Dutch genre-painting compositions. And it does. That complicit silence diminishes everything else in the book.[6]

The "Whiteness Problem" Sonita Sarker identifies in modernist studies and adjacent fields is the tendency to treat whiteness as a discrete topic, when it "is not just a feature of material structures and the ideologies on which they are based, but the very climate of our constructions."[7] Foundational scholarship on the Ashcan School folds anti-Black racism into a general analysis of the artists' approach to difference and brackets prejudice as one among many facets of their art. Ashcan artists made "efforts to depict real life in New York, *although* they frequently indulged in well-worn stereotypes," including "apelike" caricatures of African Americans; Henri's student diaries contain white supremacist statements at odds with later expressions of "a wide-ranging 'love of mankind,' *but* his continuing preoccupation with racial types is evident in his writings on nationality and art."[8] These "although" and "but" articulations are embedded, habituated even, in scholarship on twentieth-century white artists and writers. This essay begins, as writing on Sloan must, by acknowledging the racism manifest in his early diaries and at the core of his then-inchoate worldview. It explores the mutability of that worldview, as it was gradually reshaped by public encounters and restructured by political engagement. And it tracks those developments to the rare instances in which Sloan pictured Black people: as an aberrant presence in his white world; in the compromised idiom of *The Masses*'s socialism; and, at last, in efforts to depict "personhood fully visualized." Saying someone "got 'woke'" implies a flip from unconscious to conscious, or from racist to antiracist, that does not account for the depths of colonialist and racist thought or the difficulty white people of Sloan's generation faced in extricating themselves from it. Slowing down to observe a process of gradual awakening reveals the ways such thinking conditioned Sloan's life and art and the genres and structures he operated in as well as the partial and incomplete ways he began to move beyond it. That doing so risks insinuating a redemption arc points to the larger challenge of addressing Sloan's (and his contemporaries') racism in terms that neither prosecute nor excuse.

The diary's March 29, 1908, nadir contains two of the thirteen uses of "n****r" in approximately 2400 entries assiduously kept from January 1906 to January 1912 and then sporadically through to June 1913. This is not an invitation to weigh how many is too many. Rather, these infrequent overt slurs operate within a wider pattern of racialized thinking that conditioned Sloan's lived experience and artistic practice. Diary entries include the seemingly prosaic record of names and roles in his personal and professional network, increasingly forthright political commentary, and observations of domestic and urban life. Like many diaries, this is intimate writing that, "developed blindly," forms its own generic rules and idiosyncratic, self-referential language and that, as a "generative self-practice," is intimately bound to the formation of private and public selves.[9] Theorist Sara Ahmed suggests that "whiteness functions as a habit, even a bad habit, which becomes a background to social action."[10] Keeping a diary was a habit through which Sloan recorded and reinforced white ways of seeing; readers risk taking on, accepting, and excusing those habits.

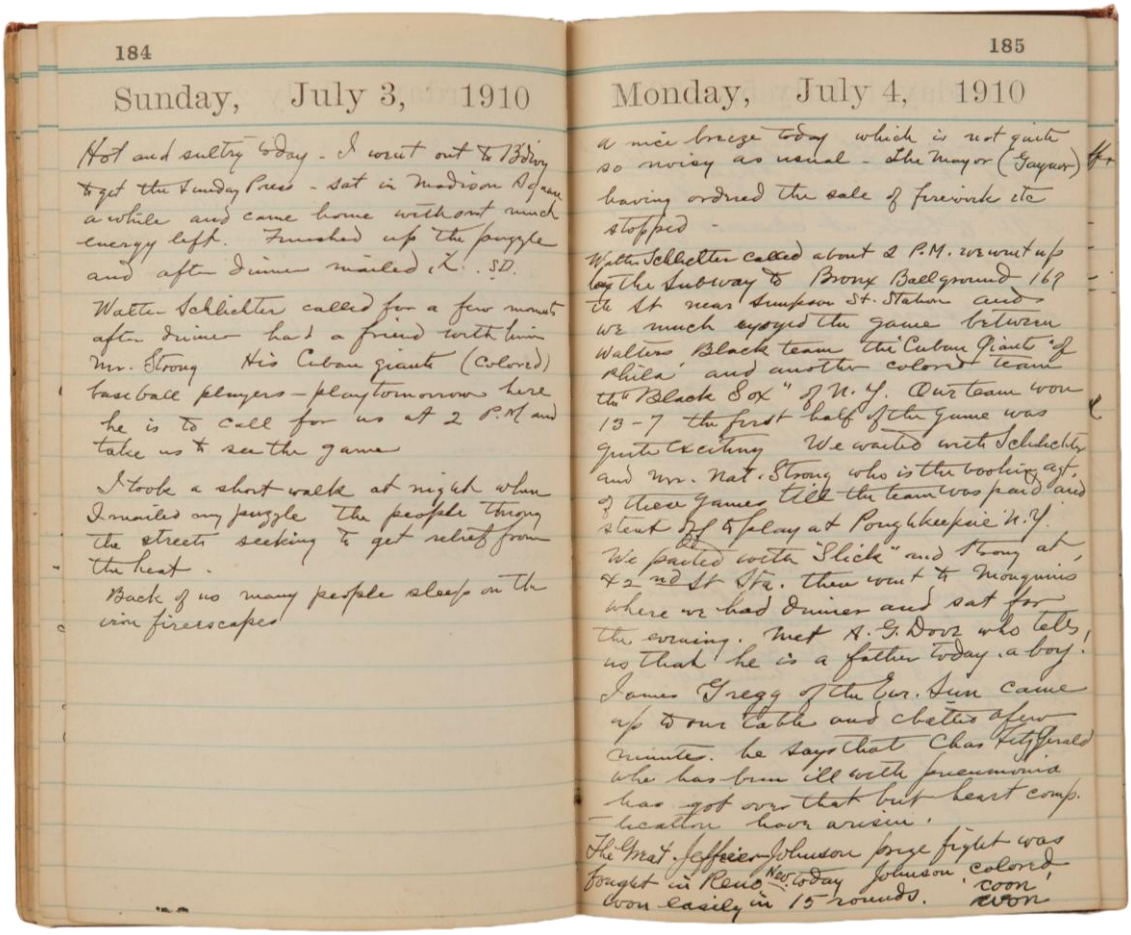
Sloan's diaristic practice included noting salient details about new acquaintances. Carl Moellman is pleasant, a lithographer, and a student of Henri; on finally meeting Rockwell Kent, Sloan notes his vegetarianism and socialism. No mention is made of ethnicity or nationality as, like Sloan, these men came from families with roots in northern Europe and several generations in the United States. By contrast, Moellman's girlfriend, Miss Napier, "is very pleasant, French and Italian parentage, born in this country I believe" (June 2, 1908).

Here comment on character precedes nonjudgmental interest in New York's cosmopolitan mix. But other identities are noted forcefully and first: the illustrator J. C. Fireman is a "Hungarian Jew of Philadelphia" (July 6, 1906); at a gathering in Henri's apartment, Sloan meets "Balinson [*sic*] and a friend, also Semitic, and a pretty, young, bright Jewish schoolgirl" (March 2, 1911). That Abraham S. Baylinson was a painter studying with Henri goes unmentioned. As Ahmed observes, "whiteness becomes worldly through the noticeability of the arrival of some bodies more than others."[11] Sometimes that noticing takes on anti-Semitic tropes: Sloan encounters newspaper publisher Adolph S. Ochs as a "short, stocky Jew man" who is "apparently only interested in whether he can make money on the work as done by me" (December 27, 1910). The frequency with which he encountered Jewish people in social settings and deemed those encounters noteworthy indexes the process of Jewish American assimilation and the gatekeeping role men like Sloan played as migrant groups "became white."[12]

A sharper distinction marks Sloan's interactions with Black people, which were never social, always business: "Up early and helped Edward Allen, colored, 127 W. 31st St., who started in to apply the Kalsomine to the studio walls" (October 6, 1910). The single-word clause disrupts the flow of the sentence, marking Allen's body as an unfamiliar presence in Sloan's daily round. John and Dolly Sloan often employed Black men and women to maintain their apartment and studio in a series of encounters that were at once transactional and marked by their inherent respect for labor and tendency to join in. Three spring 1908 entries, starting one month after the March 29 nadir, suggest that Sloan might slowly learn something from such interactions. On April 30, "a colored man, sent by Mrs. [Edith] Glackens at Mrs. Sloan's request, came and I let him start to clean the studio." Then, on May 1, "William Bell, the colored 'cleaner' came again today. I worked with him a good deal, cleaning picture glasses, etc. . . . I left William to finish his work and lock up." Bell's full name now precedes mention of his race and role; proximity and shared endeavor are marked by the move to first-name terms; trust is implied in the final line. Work stopped over the weekend, then Monday, May 4, was "Another day 'on the floor' of the studio. I applied one coat of wax and polished it, looks very fine. Dolly 'bustled' all day finishing up the cleaning which Mr. Bell, colored, had left undone." Does the one-word-clause, "colored," now insinuate reproach? Or was there merely more cleaning than Bell could do during the hours he was paid to work? How conscious or habituated was Sloan's use of "colored" in three near-consecutive entries? And was he aware that this excess of noticing insistently reduces Bell?

Habituated ways of seeing became "social action" as Sloan chose to turn urban observations into pictures—or not. Art historian Lee Ann Custer demonstrates that several views from Sloan's apartment, including the painting *Pigeons* (1910; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston) and the etching *Night Windows* (1910), "knit together a composite picture." She cross-references this with census data and his own diary entries to make the compelling case that "Sloan elided his Black neighbors' presence in the pictorial version of his tenement block interior."[13] Such acts of elision are marked in the diary when Sloan contemplates picturing Black people but does not follow through. In another nadir, on April 20, 1906, Sloan "Saw n****r wench watching cats today. Good subject." Any sense of genuine observation is negated by the derogatory phrase, which seems alien and anachronistic in New York in 1906. Whether from purposefully eliding Black presence, self-censoring recognition of his stereotyped conception, or contingency, Sloan did not

depict a Black woman watching cats. Nor did a painting materialize when, three years later, he saw a mixed film and vaudeville program at the Dewey Theatre featuring "one very amusing 'yeller gal' buck and wing dancer, a very interesting type—I'd like to try to paint her as I saw her there" (January 19, 1909). This feels like slow progress as again, three years later, a Black woman is identified with a fixed type and the urge to paint her thwarted. But there is a sense that such encounters were reshaping Sloan.



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Sunday, July 3, 1910

Hot and sultry today - I went out to Bdwy & got the Sunday Press - sat in Madison Sq. a while and came home without much energy left. Finished up the puzzle and after dinner mailed it. SD.

Walter Schlichter called for a few moments after dinner had a friend with him Mr. Strong His Cuban giants (Colored) baseball players - play tomorrow here he is to call for us at 2 P.M and take us to see the game

I took a short walk at night when I mailed my puzzle the people throng the streets seeking to get relief from the heat.

Back of us many people sleep on the iron fireescapes

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Monday, July 4, 1910

a nice breeze today which is not quite so noisy as usual - the Mayor (Gaynor) having ordred the sale of fireworks to be stopped -

Walter Schlichter called about 2 P.M. we went up by the Subway to Bronx Ballground 161 st near Simpson St. Station and we much enjoyed the game between Walters' Black team the 'Cuban Giants of Phila' and another colored team the "Black Sox" of N.Y. Our team won 13-7 the first half of the game was quite exciting We waited with Schlichter and Mr. Nat. Strong who is the booking agt. of these games till the team was paid and started off to play at Poughkeepsie N.Y. We parted with "Slick" and Strong at 42nd St Sta. then went to Monquins where we had dinner and sat for the evening. Met A. G. Dove who tells us that he is a father today a boy. James Gregg of the Eve. Sun came up to our table and chatted a few minutes. he says that Chas Fitzgerald who has been ill with pneumonia has got over that but heart complication have arisen.

The Mat. Jeffries-Johnson prize fight was fought in Reno Nev today Johnson 'colored' won easily in 15 rounds. 'coon' won

Fig. 2. John Sloan's Diary, July 4, 1910, John Sloan Manuscript Collection, Helen Farr Sloan Library and Archives, Delaware Art Museum, Wilmington

The most famous buck-and-wing dancer of the era, Aida Overton Walker, wrote that stage performance "does more toward the alleviation of color prejudice than any other profession among colored people."[14] As it would for successive generations of white Americans, popular culture demanded acknowledgment of Black people—and so did sports. Sloan placed the phrase "yeller gal," plausibly lifted from the theatre's promotional material, in quote marks, as he did with several other slurs in the diary, as if trying out or distancing himself from racist vernacular. On October 29, 1909, Sloan watched "the Cinematograph Pictures [filmed re-enactment] of the recent prize fight between [Stanley] Ketchel and the negro, Jack Johnson," noting Johnson's race, in respectful terms, while Ketchel's whiteness goes unnamed. Eight months later, following the much-hyped bout with Jim Jeffries, Sloan wrote, "Johnson colored won easily in 15 rounds. 'Coon' won" (July 4, 1910). A charitable reading marks the distinction between Sloan's own term for Johnson

and the slur, seemingly appended to the sentence, as if quoted from general public discourse (fig. 2). In that same diary entry, Sloan describes watching the Philadelphia Giants, a Black baseball team managed by his friend Walter Schlichter, and reports, "Our team won 13–7." Then (as now) white fandom and identification with Black performers and sportspeople could coexist with racism. But these diary entries do evince some shift in attitude, though not enough self-reflection to see the contradiction between identifying with the Giants and othering Johnson.

On the two occasions in this period when Sloan painted Black New Yorkers, his diary makes no mention of their presence. He briefly notes that "a 5¢ show of Kinematograph pictures on 6th Avenue . . . might be a good thing to paint" (June 29, 1907) but says nothing more about *Movies Five Cents* (1907), whose crowd includes a Black woman in profile. The elision is more striking in the detailed account of making *Fishing for Lafayettes* (1908; fig. 3):

> In the afternoon I took my sketch box and, with much dread of what might happen, I walked down to the 22nd St. pier of the Coney Island boats and, after casting about screwing up my courage, I finally got to work. Sat on the string piece and made a sketch of a group of men and boys fishing from a float. . . . I was in a moment the center of a great crowd of boys, etc. "Give us that Mister?" said one with proper audacity. I explained that while this is a "rough sketch," I earned my living by my work in this way. (August 28, 1908)


Fig. 3. John Sloan, *Fishing for Lafayettes*, 1908. Oil on linen, mounted on cardboard, 8 1/2 x 10 1/2 in. Huber Family Collection. Photo: Peter Harholdt

Habituated to walking the city, identifying subjects, returning to his apartment, sometimes making a note in his diary, and then, over several days, slowly remembering the scene on canvas, Sloan attempted plein air painting, likely at Henri's behest, and found himself in a different orientation to the world. With much to say about himself becoming the center of attention, he makes no mention of the Black man at the center of his composition, who looks up from the river toward him, as if subject and artist were surprised to meet each

other in this way. Disorientated, shaken out of the familiar practices of eliding and stereotyping, Sloan here "depicts a black man in a far more humane light."[15] Perhaps the Black fisher goes unremarked in the diary because Sloan lacked the language to express the human connection he depicts in paint.

Socialist politics brought Sloan more fully into public discourse and expanded the terms in which he talked and thought about race. He contributed to socialist publications, ran for office, and proselytized for the cause. The day after the Johnson–Jeffries fight, he met "a stranger on the street near Madison Square. Talked from prize fight n****r hatred to Socialism," before taking the man's contact details and appraising him "good material for Socialism" (July 5, 1910). Did Sloan instigate or join in with the hate speech and use "racism to recruit," as Shaw suggests? Or could Sloan's turn of phrase also imply *talking him round*, redirecting the man's anger from race to class politics? Or might the two men have commented on, rather than participated in, racist responses to the fight? All options seem possible in the contexts of Sloan's diary and American socialism in 1910.

Sloan attended lectures by the white supremacist Socialist congressman Victor Berger, befriended "Big Bill" Haywood, leader of the vehemently antiracist International Workers of the World, and gravitated to the democratic socialism of party leader Eugene Debs. The "Debsian view" on race is often reduced to the class-reductionist line: "We have nothing special to offer the Negro." But, as historian William Jones explains, quoting this statement in isolation disregards the wider spirit of "The Negro in the Class Struggle" (1903), which Debs begins by castigating socialists "who either share directly in the race hostility against the Negro, or avoid the issue, or apologize for the social obliteration of the color line in the class struggle."[16] Sloan read Debs carefully and likely absorbed this well-intentioned but ambiguously articulated antiracism. Through the socialist press, he came to support the revolutionary struggle to overthrow Porfirio Díaz in Mexico. He complained that, when discussing this topic, Henri's brother, Frank Southrn, "is rather prejudiced by his acquaintance with Mexico and Americans who are there interested (and justly hated), profiting by the work of slaves" (November 25, 1910). Like the anarchist Emma Goldman, whom he also admired and read, Sloan learned to critique American colonialism abroad, while remaining ignorant of or indifferent to the legacies of slavery and ongoing forms of Black indentured labor within the United States.[17] He also befriended the antiracist socialists Willam English Walling and Anna Strunsky, who alongside W. E. B. Du Bois, Oswald Garrison Villard, and Mary White Ovington, founded the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. From a family of enslavers, Walling's antiracism was at once energetic—spurred by witnessing a 1908 race riot and expressed in forthright prose—and shallow—marked by an "unwillingness, approaching aversion, to engaging in social relations with African Americans."[18] In this context, which was Sloan's political formation, Du Bois, who voted for Debs, wrote, "The Negro problem . . . is the great test of the American Socialist."[19]

As a creator of socialist propaganda, Sloan failed this test. He was part of the group who took over *The Masses* magazine, with Max Eastman as editor, in December 1912. In his first attempt to address the "problem," the drawing *Race Superiority* (June 1913), an emaciated white family trudge to the cotton mill directing variously prideful, disdainful, and envious looks at a Black boy who, grinning, eats a watermelon. The cartoon, as Leslie Fishbein observes, "attacks white racism while incorporating its own racial stereotypes."[20] In a letter to the editor likely prompted by Stuart Davis's April 1915 full-page cartoon of a

"Mammy" figure, Carlotta Russell Lowell complained that, while *The Masses*' "general policy is to inspire the weak and unfortunate," the magazine's "pictures of colored people . . . depress the negroes themselves and confirm the whites in their contemptuous and scornful attitude." Eastman responded to this "serious charge" by setting out the conflict between contributing editors, who "realize that because the colored people are an oppressed minority, a special care ought to be taken not to publish anything which their race sensitiveness . . . would misinterpret," and those committed to "realism." He enlisted Sloan to explain that "Davis is absolutely the first artist . . . who ever did justice to the American negro!"[21] This is no longer the inchoate racism of Sloan's early diaries; indeed, contributors to *The Masses* considered themselves to be antiracist. But they also located racism as a problem of the South, denied Black artistic self-representation, and assumed a white readership unharmed by their ironic play with stereotypes.

Sloan's second take on race for *The Masses* eschews overt stereotyping but in other ways reveals a limited conception of Black life (fig. 4). He pictures Black men gathered at a park bench. The central figure, brandishing a strong forearm, fits the left's iconography of the vigorous worker; the standing man, his face pulled into a dark mass of lines that might connote determination, makes a proposition. These men talk, among themselves and absent white interlocutors or observers, on a topic that, given the context and their demeanor, is serious and political. In isolation the drawing works like the genre scenes of (white) men loitering that Sloan often made in this period. But in the aftermath of the Paterson strike, the September 1913 issue of *The Masses* was full of the conspiratorial language of secretive "interests," distrust of large trade unions, and fear of strikebreakers. In this context, the title, "During the Strike*,"* affirms the illustration's political significance, while small-print dialogue fixes its meaning:

> "Sure, there's lots of jobs—200 men wanted."
> "What kind of work?"
> "Work, hell! Strong arm!"[22]

Fig. 4. John Sloan, *During the Strike; "Sure, there's lots of jobs—two hundred men wanted." "What kind of work?" "Work, Hell! Strong arm!"*, 1913. Crayon on paper, 10 15/16 x 17 5/8 in. Delaware Art Museum, Wilmington, Gift of Helen Farr Sloan, 2000

These lines twist the standing man's face to viciousness and make the seated man's fist a weapon to beat workers. Captions imposed by editors would lead Sloan to quit *The*

*Masses*, but a vernacular draft of this dialogue—"Sure, yo can git a job"—is appended to the original drawing in his own hand. Sloan could picture Black men as self-determining political agents but only if defined as the threatening and pervasive "specter of the Black strikebreaker."[23]

An alternative possibility, interracial class solidarity, is also invoked in the September 1913 *The Masses*. Walling's "World-Wide Battleline" column describes labor relations in South Africa, where skilled white workers made up just 5–10 percent of the workforce but held the balance of power. Like others on the left, Walling found it easier to think across the color line outside the United States, though the questions posed also applied at home: "Are they going to cast in their lots with their colored brothers for a long up-hill struggle against capitalism? Or do they merely want to use them?"[24] Here and elsewhere, *The Masses* raised without resolving tensions that would resonate widely—and for decades to come. Indeed, in 1913, Black workers' place in left and labor politics was the subject of essays by both W. E. B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington. Du Bois framed a "theoretical" problem: "Can the problem of any group of 10,000,000 be properly considered as 'aside' from any program of Socialism? Can the objects of Socialism be achieved so long as the Negro is neglected?" Washington sketched a practical history of Black distrust of organized labor, explaining that workers "shut out . . . of employment by the unions, have been in the past very willing strike-breakers."[25] "During the Strike," despite the narrow intentions fixed in Sloan's dialogue, depicts the contentious issue of Black organized labor, as debated among Black intellectuals and activists in the period and as a disruption of *The Masses*' white working-class-versus-capital binary. The deeper logic of socialism in America forced Sloan, as Du Bois suggested it must, to a reckoning with Black workers; politics pushed his worldview out of the private language of the diary into the public sphere.

The years after 1913 can be understood as a period of retreat for Sloan: from the politics of *The Masses*, which he quit over editorial propagandizing, and socialism, which he became disillusioned with during the First World War; from painting the urban social scene to studio experimentation; and from New York to artists' enclaves in Gloucester, Massachusetts, and then Santa Fe, New Mexico. He also changed his habits, abruptly ending the diary in June 1913. Between 1913 and 1918, Sloan took on a practice with which he had long struggled, making around one hundred modest portrait studies.[26] Like plein air sketching, portraiture was encouraged by Henri, who specialized in the form and advised Sloan on technique. Mostly depicting unnamed white women in generic interiors, the homogeneity of Sloan's series is broken by occasional outdoor settings, named male acquaintances like Floyd Dell, and a young Black woman, *Gwendolyn* (c. 1918; fig. 5).

Fig. 5. John Sloan, *Gwendolyn*, c. 1918. Oil on canvas, 24 x 20 in. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC, Gift of Mrs. John Sloan, 1966.5; © Smithsonian American Art Museum/ Art Resource/Scala, Florence

*Gwendolyn* does not stand out in format, pose, or setting from Sloan's portraits of white women. Nor does the painting differ in the qualities of attention

(and abbreviation), which register a painter's capacity to see their subject. Working toward the "personhood fully visualized" that Shaw finds in his later drawing of William Warfield (1950; Delaware Art Museum), Sloan moves beyond the flat black pigment of the fisher's face in *Fishing for Lafayettes*, attending closely to his sitter's skin, which catches the light and darkens with fatigue around eyes that well with the intensity of her gaze. Discussing another white artist who took a long time to see Black subjects, Shaw argues that for much of his career, Winslow Homer "utterly failed when it came to creating chromatically pleasing depictions of Black bodies."[27] That failure may be set against the facility and subtlety with which Homer painted white bodies. By contrast, Sloan, an awkward portraitist, brought a limited expressive idiom to the task, such that sitters whether white or Black, anonymous models or his wife, Dolly, are never far removed from the generic "type." "The minority genre portrait," writes art historian Jacqueline Francis, "outnumbered by those of the majority, carried the weight of a documentary." Sloan's earlier urban observations were tainted by habits of racialized looking, and his attempts at political commentary circumscribed by *The Masses*' naive and arrogant antiracism. This seemingly sincere portrayal of a Black woman is conditioned by its position in a series of portraits of predominantly white sitters and by the genre conventions of the Western portrait form. *Gwendolyn* is freighted with the "noticeability" of people marked as "colored" in Sloan's diaries and with the expectation of "objective information about a minority group's difference and particularity" that Francis finds to be inherent in such genre portraiture.[28]

Henri was deeply invested in this kind of picture making. It was the stated purpose of his 1914 painting trip to the Southwest, during which he made portrait studies of African American, Mexican, and Pueblo people. He published a selection of these works in *The Craftsman* alongside his 1915 manifesto, "My People," stating, "My love of mankind is individual, not national, and always I find the race expressed in the individual." Over the next decade Henri made portrait studies that sought to show that "the Irish peasant has nobility of language and facial expression; the North American Indian has nobility of poise, of gesture."[29] This was clearly not quite Sloan's approach: he did not survey or categorize portrait types; having followed Henri to Santa Fe, he recalled, "I never brought an Indian into the studio to pose . . . having no interest in the 'picturesque' or costume type of painting."[30] But since Sloan's diary stopped as his genre portraiture started, his close friend's statements might be taken as a discursive frame for *Gwendolyn*. In a long, detailed essay, Allan Antliff argues that Henri's portraits worked to "decolonize modernity." The portrait of a Tewa Pueblo woman reproduced alongside "My People" "suffuse[s] Tom Po Qui in a harmonious sensorium of colors imbued with 'order' by Henri's emotionally charged empathy for his sitter."[31] By contrast, Alexis Boylan flatly states that Henri's portraits of "nonwhite sitters speak in easily readable and despicable codes of racism."[32]

That two art historians (publishing in the same moment) take divergent positions points to the "Whiteness Problem" as a wicked problem for American art history. In her book, and still more directly in her conclusion to this series, Boylan models a critical practice that prioritizes an unambiguous antiracism that is vital for contemporary audiences and readers understandably unmoved by "he was racist, but . . ." arguments. Antliff deploys those very arguments, contextualizing as generational habits of speech and dismissing as "anomalies" the racist slurs in Henri's correspondence. He selectively quotes—acknowledging the use of "chinks" and "greasers" but not the phrase "tribe of indians,"

which is most damaging to his case—from the letter to William Glackens (1870–1938) concerning his 1914 trip that Boylan cites here as more than "enough" to indict Henri.[33] While that silence diminishes his claims, Antliff slowly builds, through close analysis, a mass of sources, and careful reconstruction of anarchist discourse in the 1910s, a strong case for Henri's empathetic and respectful engagement with non-white subjects. Neither complicit advocacy nor unequivocal calling out fully serve the visual and archival evidence. To argue the general truth that Ashcan School artists excluded Black people from New York scenes, Boylan makes the specific claim that "black bodies are entirely missing" from their "dock sites," which requires a tenuous footnote justifying the exclusion of *Fishing for Lafayettes* from this small corpus.[34] But my focus on and illustration of *Fishing for Lafayettes* is at least as misleading, risking the false impression that this work is in some way representative of Sloan's oeuvre. Likewise, amassing details about support for Black baseball teams or Mexican revolutionaries risks downplaying or burying the simple fact of his "remarkably clear colonialist beliefs." It is difficult to avoid overstating, oversimplifying, misrepresenting, or excusing here, difficult not to fall into modes of defense and prosecution.

This essay's attention to Sloan's slow awakening, to how his beliefs were held and shifted, may encourage reflection on what is "easily readable" and "remarkably clear." Any artwork made out of the mindset and worldview from which Sloan produced his 1900 "mammy" cartoon is abhorrent. But what of works made in the 1910s as he navigated the ambiguous and flawed race politics of Debsian and *The Masses* socialism? There was no flip or epiphany; indeed we might feel the dial barely moved: racist slurs occur infrequently in Sloan and Henri's correspondence throughout the 1910s, not as anomalies but indicators of lingering and ingrained patterns of thought. In Santa Fe in the 1920s, Sloan withdrew from directly depicting Pueblo people and "became involved in the promotion and preservation of American Indian art"; a 1933 funding application identifies him as president of artist and educator Cloyd Boykin's Primitive African Art Center; a letter from Elizabeth Catlett to Du Bois names him as chairman of the organizing committee for a 1946 Negro History Week exhibition.[35] These roles evince a more decisive break from colonialist beliefs but raise the problematics of patronage and self-defined allyship. To get to this point, I have pursued a kind of slow scholarship that reads closely and charitably, that nuances and contextualizes Sloan, that risks merely accommodating his racism within art history practices that have long served white artists. It brings verbiage and ambiguity to a topic and in a moment that demand clarity—and perhaps prosecutorial zeal. It traces a slow decade's progress from the dehumanizing, derogatory diary entry of 1908 to *Gwendolyn*, painted around 1918. I do not know how best to interrogate, weigh, or reconcile these different but interrelated ways in which Sloan saw Black people.

*John Fagg is senior lecturer in American literature and culture in the School of English, Drama and Creative Studies at the University of Birmingham.*

**Editors' Note:** John Fagg's book *Re-Envisioning the Everyday: American Genre Scenes, 1905–1945* is reviewed in this issue of *Panorama* by Justin Wolff.

## Notes

[1] W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903; Oxford University Press, 2007), 1.

[2] W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1899), 350.

[3] Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw, "The Decolonization of John Sloan," *Panorama: Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art* 7, no. 2 (2021), https://doi.org/10.24926/24716839.12714.

[4] John Sloan, diary entry, March 29, 1908, John Sloan Diaries, 1906 through 1913, John Sloan Manuscript Collection, Helen Farr Sloan Library and Archives, Delaware Art Museum, https://delart.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/John-Sloan-Diaries-1906-to-1913.pdf. Subsequent references in parentheses.

[5] Shaw, "Decolonization of John Sloan."

[6] John Fagg, *Re-Envisioning the Everyday: American Genre Scenes, 1905–1945* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2023).

[7] Sonita Sarker, "The Whiteness Problem," *Modernism/Modernity Print Plus* 7, no. 3 (June 12, 2023), https://doi.org/10.26597/mod.0258.

[8] Robert W. Snyder and Rebecca Zurier, "Picturing the City," in *Metropolitan Lives: The Ashcan School and Their New York*, ed. Rebecca Zurier, Robert W. Snyder, and Virginia M. Mecklenburg (W. W. Norton, 1995), 115 (emphasis added), 129; Rebecca Zurier, *Picturing the City: Urban Vision and the Ashcan School* (University of California Press, 2006), 109–10 (emphasis added).

[9] Julie Rak, "The Diary among Other Forms of Life Writing," in *The Diary: The Epic of Everyday Life*, ed. Batsheva Ben-Amos and Dan Ben-Amos (Indiana University Press, 2020), 60. Rak quotes "developed blindly" from Philippe Lejeune, *On Diary*, ed. Jeremy D. Popkin and Julie Rak, trans. Katherine Durnin (University of Hawai'i Press, 2009).

[10] Sara Ahmed, "A Phenomenology of Whiteness," *Feminist Theory* 8, no. 2 (2007–8): 149.

[11] Ahmed, "Phenomenology of Whiteness," 150.

[12] See Karen Brodkin, *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says About Race in America* (Rutgers University Press, 1998).

[13] Lee Ann Custer, "The Clean, Open Air of John Sloan's Tenement Paintings," *American Art* 37, no. 2 (2023): 34, 38.

[14] Aida Overton Walker, "Colored Men and Women on the Stage," *Colored American Magazine*, October 1905, 571.

[15] Snyder and Zurier, "Picturing the City," 129.

[16] William P. Jones, "'Nothing Special to Offer the Negro': Revisiting the 'Debsian View' of the Negro Question," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 74 (Fall 2008): 212.

[17] See Clare Hemmings, *Considering Emma Goldman: Feminist Political Ambivalence and the Imaginative Archive* (Duke University Press, 2018).

[18] Susan D. Carle, *Defining the Struggle: National Racial Justice Organizing, 1880–1915* (Oxford University Press, 2013), 26.

[19] W. E. B. Du Bois, "Socialism and the Negro Problem," *New Review: A Weekly Review of International Socialism* 1 (February 1913): 140.

[20] Leslie Fishbein, introduction to *Art for The Masses: A Radical Magazine and Its Graphics, 1911–1917*, by Rebecca Zurier (Temple University Press, 1988), 17.

[21] Max Eastman, "*Masses* and the Negro," *The Masses*, May 1915, 6.

[22] John Sloan, "During the Strike," printed in *The Masses*, September 1913, 16.

[23] Eric Arnesen, "Specter of the Black Strikebreaker: Race, Employment, and Labor Activism in the Industrial Era," *Labor History* 44, no. 3 (2003): 320.

[24] William English Walling, "World-Wide Battleline," *The Masses*, September 1913, 18.

[25] Du Bois, "Socialism and the Negro Problem"; and Booker T. Washington, "The Negro and the Labor Unions," *Atlantic Monthly*, June 1913, 757.

[26] See Rowland Elzea, *John Sloan's Oil Paintings: A Catalogue Raisonné* (Associated University Press, 1991), 1:130–229.

[27] Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw, "'The Various Colors and Types of Negroes': Winslow Homer Learns to Paint Race," in *Winslow Homer: Crosscurrents*, ed. Stephanie L. Herdrich, Sylvia Yount, et al. (Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2022), 51.

[28] Jacqueline Francis, *Making Race: Modernism and Racial Art in America* (University of Washington Press, 2011), 81.

[29] Robert Henri, "My People," *The Craftsman* (February 1915): 459.

[30] Sloan "Notes," quoted in Elzea, *John Sloan's Oil Paintings*, 245.

[31] Allan Antliff, "Decolonizing Modernism: Robert Henri's Portraits of the Tewa Pueblo Peoples," *Art Bulletin* 100, no. 3 (2018): 112.

[32] Alexis L. Boylan, *Ashcan Art, Whiteness, and the Unspectacular Man* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 47.

[33] See Alexis L. Boylan's article in this In the Round: Alexis L. Boylan, "Can't Get Enough: The Logics of Evidence, Anti-Blackness, and American Art History," in "Blackness, the Ashcan School, and Modern American Art," edited by Jordana Moore Saggese and Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw, In the Round, *Panorama: Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art* 11, no. 1 (Spring 2025), https://journalpanorama.org/article/blackness-the-ashcan-school/cant-get-enough.

[34] Boylan, *Ashcan Art*, 112, 123n68.

[35] Sascha T. Scott, *A Strange Mixture: The Art and Politics of Painting Pueblo Indians* (University of Oklahoma Press, 2015), 147; Mary Ann Calo, "A Community Art Center for Harlem: The Cultural Politics of 'Negro Art' Initiatives in the Early 20th Century," *Prospects* 29 (2005): 180n35; Committee for the Detroit Art Exhibit, letter to W. E. B. Du Bois, January 18, 1946, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312), Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries, https://credo.library.umass.edu/view/full/mums312-b109-i366.