Aaron Douglas. Aspects of Negro Life:
From Slavery through Reconstruction *(detail). 1934.*
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Aaron Douglas and *Aspects of Negro Life* *

LEAH DICKERMAN

> *The murals look down on me and I can look up at them for relief and pleasure and support when any of the so-called superior race comes to look at our wonders.*
>
> —Arturo Alfonso Schomburg[1]

In many ways, Jacob Lawrence grew up at the 135th Street branch of the New York City Public Library in Harlem, now the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. Lawrence joined history clubs and took art classes there. He showed his first works there. So perhaps it is not surprising that in 1941, before he picked up a brush to paint his sixty-panel *Migration Series* addressing the mass exodus of Black Americans from the rural South to the urban North, he went to the library, spending months in the reading room as he researched his topic. While there, he would have visited with a work that had become familiar, almost familial: Aaron Douglas's epic four-panel mural series, *Aspects of Negro Life* (1934).

* An early version of this essay appeared as "An American Scene: Aaron Douglas and *Aspects of Negro Life*" in a special issue of *Marg* magazine on Art and Conflict (June 2020), edited by Glenn D. Lowry, pp. 84–93. Much of the writing and thought that transformed this essay from the form in which it appears there to its current incarnation took place in the spring and summer of 2020, during the shock waves of the COVID-19 pandemic, the deaths of George Floyd and so many others and the racial reckoning they prompted, and the spectacle of a base and corrupt president who often invoked the myths of the Lost Cause. This essay has been shaped by all of these things, and also by the ways in which research departed from normal access to books, archives, and libraries. I have often used Kindle and other electronic editions, have made use of digitally accessible materials, and have checked archival sources via email. The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, now more than ever, remains an invaluable place to engage with a heritage of ideas. Special thanks to Kevin Young, Michelle Commander, and Tammi Lawson. Emily Stoller-Patterson and Francesca Lo Galbo provided critical research assistance. Homi Bhabha, Laura Brodie, Rachel Churner, Huey Copeland, Hal Foster, Jennifer Harris, David Joselit, Adam Lehner, and Khalil J. Muhammad all offered thoughtful comments at various junctures along the way. I am grateful for such a community of friends and colleagues.

1. Syretta McFadden, "Harlem's Schomburg Center: Celebrating History and Culture of the Black Experience," *Carnegie Reporter*, November 1, 2019. https://www.carnegie.org/news/articles/harlems-schomburg-center-celebrating-history-and-culture-black-experience/.

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W. E. B. Du Bois and the staff of The Crisis *at the magazine's offices. Date unknown.*

Douglas was almost two decades older than Lawrence, an eminence within Lawrence's midst and the visual artist perhaps most closely associated with the Harlem Renaissance. In the library panels, which answered a call to represent "an American scene" from the first major program of federal support for the arts in the country, Douglas traced the trajectory of African-American history in four stages and across two mass migrations: from Africa into enslavement in America; through Emancipation and Reconstruction; into the modern Jim Crow South; and then northward with the Great Migration to Harlem itself. The narrative Douglas constructed was remarkable in both its historical sweep and as a story of America seen through Black eyes. One can imagine that it framed the younger artist's thinking—that it offered a prompt—as Lawrence worked on a migration story of his own. In looking to Douglas, Lawrence was not alone: Douglas forged a model, keenly resonant with the generation to come, of how one might be Black, American, and an artist.

"I had hardly reached the city," wrote Douglas of his arrival in New York in summer 1925, "before I was called upon to produce cover designs and drawings and sketches to be used for illustrating texts of various kinds for both *The Crisis*

and *Opportunity* magazines."[2] The commissions provided entry into Harlem's intelligentsia, an interdisciplinary nexus of thinkers, activists, and artists that included W. E. B. Du Bois, the co-founder of the NAACP and co-editor of *The Crisis*; sociologist Charles S. Johnson; poet-activist James Weldon Johnson; bibliophile Arturo Schomburg; and philosopher-critic Alain Locke. Rich conversations across the next decade—about what it meant to be Black in America, how the "African" in *African-American* was to be understood, and what a distinctly African-American modernism might be—were crucial to determining Douglas's approach to the trenchant and understudied *Aspects of Negro Life* panels.[3] Looking at Douglas's visual narrative in this context offers insight into how parallel practices of archive-building, art-making, history-writing, and criticism came together not only to shape a vision of America but also to champion a model of Black modernism framed through diaspora.

Douglas in Harlem

At the time of Douglas's appearance in Harlem, the circle notably lacked a visual artist. Charles Johnson, who was the editor and co-founder of *Opportunity*, the house organ of the National Urban League, seems to have felt this to be a disadvantage. Johnson met Douglas—the child of migrants to Kansas and a recent graduate of the University of Nebraska, where he had been the first Black student in the fine-arts department—at an Urban League convention in Kansas City. He attempted to recruit the young artist to Harlem, launching a campaign in which at least three enthusiastic letter-writing emissaries encouraged Douglas to move: Eric Walrond, Ethel Ray Nance, and Gwendolyn Bennett.[4] Despite the hard press, it seems Douglas decided to join the cultural revolution happening in New York only after reading the March 1925 special issue of *Survey Graphic* on young writers in Harlem, which was put together by Alain Locke and the jour-

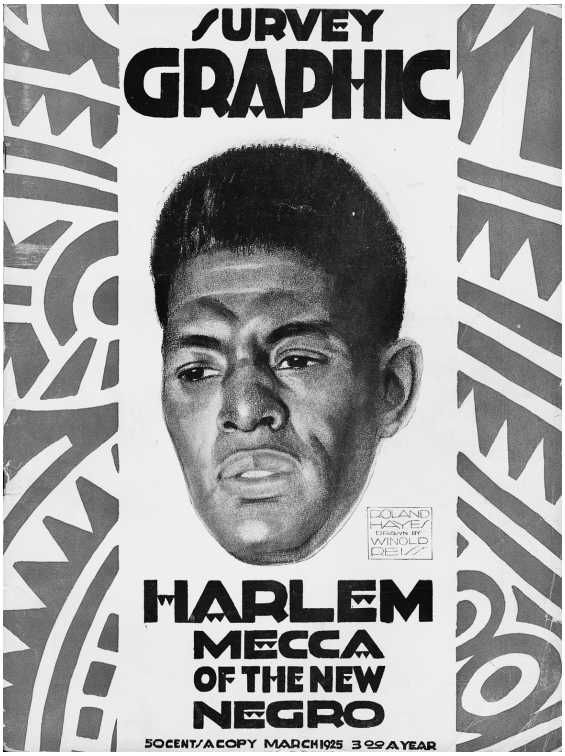
2. Aaron Douglas, "The Harlem Renaissance" speech (ca. 1970), the Aaron Douglas Collection 1937–1974, Box 3, Folder 3, Douglas Papers, Fisk University Archives; cited in Amy Helene Kirschke, *Aaron Douglas: Art, Race and the Harlem Renaissance* (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi, 1995), p. 12. Kirschke deals briefly with the Schomburg cycle, pp. 121–24.

3. Harlem's emergence as a cultural center is, of course, well-trodden terrain: The stage that it provided for a modernism that put Blackness at its center has been explored, especially in its literary forms, in groundbreaking texts including: Houston A. Baker Jr., *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); Ann Douglas, *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s* (New York: Noonday Press, 1995); Susan Gubar, *Racechanges: White Skin, Black Face in American Culture* (London: Oxford University Press, 1997); Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003); Kevin Young, *The Grey Album: On the Blackness of Blackness* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2012); and Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* (New York: Norton, 2019).

4. Kirschke, *Aaron Douglas*, pp. 55–56; Cheryl R. Ragar, "Plunging into the Very Depths of the Souls of Our People: The Life and Art of Aaron Douglas" (PhD diss., University of Kansas, 2008), p. 66. Ragar describes the formative impact of his midwestern upbringing in chapter 1, pp. 48–73.

nal's editor, Paul Kellogg. It was, Douglas recalled, "the most cogent single factor that eventually turned my face to New York."[5]

"We may be altogether wrong," Kellogg had written to George Peabody of the project, "but we think we sense a new approach—growing out of the northward migrations and the city environment—the silver lining of the injurious circumstances you speak of; the Negro expressing himself not against something but for something and so break with the Du Bois tradition."[6] At the first *Opportunity* magazine dinner on March 21, 1924, at the Civic Club, organized as a strategic gathering of interracial literati for, as Johnson put it, "frank and unapologetic discussion of subjects long tabooed," Locke announced the coming of a new generation.[7] Kellogg in turn proposed to Johnson and Locke that they dedicate an issue of the mainstream, left-leaning journal to these emerging writers: Locke would be the co-editor. For Locke, the *Survey Graphic* issue was a tactic in a larger effort to craft the activities of this younger generation of Harlem-based thinkers—urban and urbane, race-proud and confident in voice—into something larger, something that could be named.



Winold Reiss. Cover of Survey Graphic. *March 1925.*

For illustrations, Kellogg turned, surprisingly to some, to the Munich-trained modernist Winold Reiss, who had gained some renown for painting sensitive and dignified portraits of Native Americans, especially the Blackfeet of Montana, as

5. Douglas, "The Harlem Renaissance" speech, Box 3, Folder 3, Douglas Papers, Fisk; cited in Kirschke, *Aaron Douglas*, p. 13.

6. Paul Kellogg to George Peabody, March 13, 1925, University of Minnesota; cited in Mark Helbing, "African Art: Albert C. Barnes and Alain Locke," *Phylon* 43, no. 1 (1982), p. 60.

7. Johnson to V. F. Calverton, cited in Jeffrey C. Stewart, *The New Negro: The Life of Alain Locke* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 410.

well as of Mexican workers and revolutionaries in Tepotzotlán and Cuernavaca.[8] Kellogg invited him to create a gallery of portraits of "Harlem types" for the issue, though it seems Kellogg did not know many "types" and asked Locke for help in arranging for subjects.[9] Locke shared his collaborator's admiration for Reiss's closely observed *Neue Sachlichkeit* style, praising the artist for his ability to "portray the soul and spirit of a people" and setting his work against restrictive norms of beauty and the many caricatured representations of Black subjects: "Here they are seen as we know them to be in fact."[10]

Along with these images, Locke gathered essays for the issue on philosophy, history, anthropology, music, poetry, and art, as well as stately declarations, short stories, and poems. The range of contributors ultimately crossed racial, ethnic, and national boundaries, a kind of "fusing of sentiment and experience," a "great race welding," as Locke wrote in his introductory essay.[11] This critical gathering across disciplines allowed the issue to function as a calling card—proof of the presence of a new sensibility that was brave, thrilling, frank, and fractious—saying, in effect, "We are here." "Our poets have now stopped speaking for the Negro—they speak as Negroes," Locke wrote of the freedom felt by this new generation to write about whatever they wished. The issue succeeded in pushing certain writers, all of whom confidently addressed the subject of Blackness, into the public eye.

In the wake of the issue's striking success, the publisher Albert Boni proposed an expanded book-length version in the hopes that it would reach the shelves of libraries and schools. This second iteration would be titled *The New Negro: An Interpretation*; the term and the concept of the "New Negro" was not Locke's innovation, though the book did much to popularize it. As the critic and historian Henry Louis Gates Jr., who has written about the topic many times over his career, points out: "There couldn't exist a New Negro without some condemnation of the Old Negro."[12] This essential modern figure emerged in the decades of the Jim Crow assault on Black rights supported by a white-supremacist ideology that was dependent on a vision of Black humanity as lesser. Urban and race-proud, the "New Negro" seized creative and political agency.[13] In this sense, this protagonist was the avatar of the Great Migration, of those thousands and ultimately millions who left the rural South for cities northward in pursuit of safety, opportunity, and dignity, who voted with their feet in a leaderless mass revolution.

For this volume, Locke extended an invitation to Douglas—now Reiss's student thanks to an introduction arranged by Johnson—to contribute illustra-

8. Regarding criticism of Kellogg and Locke's choice of Reiss, see Stewart, *The New Negro: The Life of Alain Locke*, pp. 480–81.

9. Ibid., p. 438.

10. Alain Locke, "Harlem Types," *Survey Graphic* 53, no. 11 (March 1925), pp. 651, 652.

11. Ibid., p. 630.

12. Henry Louis Gates Jr., *Stony the Road: Reconstruction, White Supremacy, and the Rise of Jim Crow* (London: Penguin Press, 2019), p. xvii.

13. Ibid.

Douglas. Illustration from The New Negro: An Interpretation.
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tions as well.[14] Douglas followed Reiss's cue in making bold "drawings and decorative designs"[15] that drew inspiration from African masks and sculptures. With this first important commission, a Harlem debut in the pages of Locke's already famous manifesto-anthology, Douglas began to define the vocabulary with which he would work for the rest of his career—sharp-edged graphic forms with silhouetted and geometricized figures shown in profile. In most of these simple but powerful images, Douglas gives equal weight to black and white: Neither sits as background, defining only negative space; rather, form is produced in the interrelation.

*

Two full-page illustrations by Douglas—"Roll, Jordan, Roll" and "An' the Stars Began to Fall"—prefaced a new text by Locke on "The Negro Spirituals." At the conclusion of the essay, the full musical notation of two spirituals drawn from early collections of folk songs were reprinted. These graphic bookends—Douglas's images on one side, the songs on the other—flank Locke's claim that spirituals were

> the most characteristic product of the race genius as yet in America. . . . It may not be readily conceded now that the song of the Negro is America's folk song; but if the Spirituals are what we think them to be, a classic folk expression, then this is their ultimate destiny.[16]

14. Charles Johnson arranged for Douglas to meet Reiss. Reiss's studio was the first professional artist's studio Douglas had seen, and Reiss accepted him as a student without fees. Romare Bearden and Harry Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists: From 1792 to the Present* (New York: Pantheon, 1993), p. 128. On the relationship between Douglass and Reiss, see Kirschke, *Aaron Douglas*, pp. 59–64, and also Jeffrey Stewart, *The New Negro: The Life of Alain Locke*, pp. 460–62, 473, 480–86.

15. "Drawings and decorative designs" is the description given in the list of illustrations in Alain Locke, *The New Negro: An Interpretation* (1925; Mansfield Centre, CT: Martino Publishing, 2015), p. xvii.

16. Locke, "The Negro Spirituals," in *The New Negro*, p. 199.

Locke was launching the refrain, harmonized throughout the volume, that Black culture *is* American culture: It feeds what is distinctive about American culture itself.

Douglas also spoke of spirituals as the touchstone of his own efforts to fulfill the commission. He described himself as seeking to channel the mindset of the enslaved singer in attempting to create a visual idiom analogous to that "most characteristic" expression of race genius:

> I shall not attempt to describe my feelings as I first tried to objectify with paint and brush what I thought to be the visual emanation or expressions that came into view with the sounds produced by the old black song makers of antebellum days, when they first began to put together snatches and bits of Protestant hymns, along with half-remembered tribal chants, lullabies and work songs. These later became the early outlines of our spirituals, sorrow songs and blues.[17]

Douglas. Illustration from The New Negro: An Interpretation. *© 2020 Heirs of Aaron Douglas.*

Already Douglas was setting his work in a relation to a distant heritage, if one that was half-remembered and not quite graspable across the distance of generations. And he understands the process of producing distinctive forms of African-American artistic expression as one of hybridization, of bringing together diverse cultural idioms into something new and quintessentially American.

Douglas's graphic figures appear throughout the volume—on the colophon and as headpieces, tailpieces, and section breaks for individual essays, as well as full-page illustrations—framing its texts with a profusion of visual markers.[18]

17. Douglas, "Harlem Renaissance" speech; cited in Kirschke, *Aaron Douglas*, p. 62.

18. Douglas's work on *The New Negro* volume cemented the artist's relationship to the writers championed within to the degree that in the years following his distinctive graphic work seemed almost to function as a signature imprint. He provided illustrations to many titles, including James Weldon Johnson's *God's Trombones: Seven Negro Poems* (1927); the second edition of *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (long thought to be memoir; also by Johnson) (1912/1927); Langston Hughes, *Six Poems: Opportunity Art Folio* (1926); Locke and Gregory Montgomery, *Plays of Negro Life: A Sourcebook of Native American Drama* (1927); and Claude McKay, *Home to Harlem* (1927) and *Banjo* (1929).

Indeed, the book, in a much more pronounced way than that of the original *Survey Graphic* issue, staged a series of graphic interventions. Locke ended up cajoling his artist and writer friends, many of whom he also tapped for contributions, to sit for portraits by Reiss, which appeared in the volume and helped to define a New Negro pantheon.[19] Photographic reproductions of African works from Alfred Barnes's collection were also published, including masks from the Baule and Bushongo and a Dahomey bronze. Along with these were reprinted pages of sheet music, transcribed recordings of folklore by Arthur Huff Fauset, and the title pages of rare books drawn from Arturo Schomburg's collection, including Frederick Douglass's short fictional tale of rebellion, *The Heroic Slave: A Thrilling Narrative of the Adventures of Madison Washington* (1852); the thesis of Jacobus Elisa Johannes Capitein (1742), who, forcibly taken from his Ghanaian family, became one of the first sub-Saharan Africans to study at a European university and be ordained as a minister in the Dutch Reformed Church; and the enslaved poet Jupiter Hammon's *Address to the Negroes in the State of New York* (1787). Houston A. Baker Jr. was right when he wrote that Locke's anthology represented a "broaden-

19. Stewart, *The New Negro: The Life of Alain Locke*, pp. 461–62.

Reiss. Alain Leroy Locke. *Ca. 1925. © Estate of Winold Reiss.*

ing and enlargement of the field of traditional Afro-American discursive possibilities."[20] The volume made a visual claim, knitting together Black cultural production across national boundaries and periods using sound, story, images, and rhetoric. It defined its subject not as Black people or Black history but as the cultural manifestations of Blackness.

In his introduction, Locke took a strong stance: Developing a "race literature" and art was critical for the advancement of Black political aims. Locke made this argument with keen awareness of the flood of caricatures and images of prejudice—of "'aunties,' 'uncles,' and 'mammies'"[21]—that sustained the creed of Black intellectual inferiority at the core of white-supremacist ideology in the post–Civil War period, as Gates, among others, has described.[22] But writers of a younger generation seemed "suddenly to have slipped from under the tyranny of social intimidation and to be shaking off the psychology of imitation and implied inferiority."[23] Against this backdrop, Locke saw the flourishing of Black cultural expression as the pathway to the liberation of the mind from the social and ideological trauma of racism, the "repair of a damaged group psychology."[24] Culture was the way the achievements of a people might be judged, a means to disprove assertions of inferiority.

It was a point of frustration for Locke that younger African-Americans, so he believed, were blind to their own cultural legacy, binding themselves to academic traditions and white perspectives and relinquishing their African heritage. In contrast, certain members of the European avant-garde—Pablo Picasso, for one—had recognized the power of African art in reimagining plastic form. "It is thus, an African influence at second remove upon our younger Negro modernist painters and sculptors," Locke argued. "In being modernistic, they are indirectly being African."[25] He proposed forging a more direct link by turning to African art and explicitly embracing Black heritage and authorship, to create a race-proud modernism.[26] ("Nothing is more galvanizing than a sense of a cultural past," Locke had written the year before.)[27] In making this argument, Locke was pointing to a central irony of European modernism: In its claims to break with what had come before, it appropriated the traditions of non-Western art but subordinated Black

20. Houston A. Baker Jr., *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), p. 73.

21. Alain Locke, "The New Negro," in *The New Negro*, p. 5.

22. Gates, *Stony the Road,* pp. xv, xviii, 4, 125–36.

23. Locke, "The New Negro," in *The New Negro*, p. 4.

24. Ibid., p. 10.

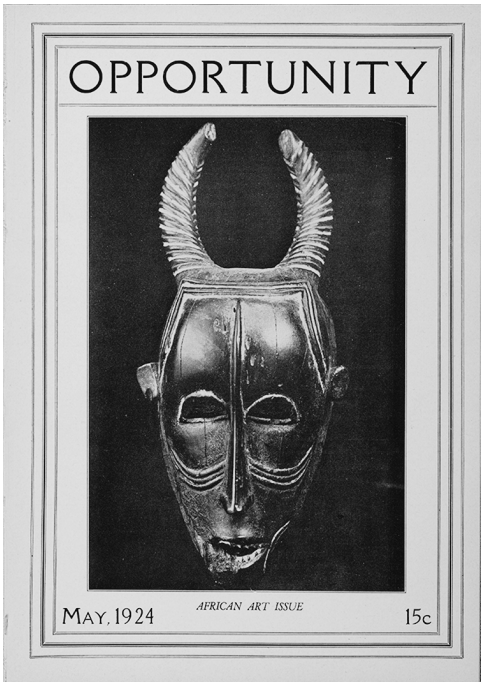
25. Locke, "The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts," in *The New Negro,* p. 264.

26. Ibid., p. 256.

27. Alain Locke, "A Note on African Art," *Opportunity* 17 (May 1924), p. 138, in Ethel M. Vaughan Ellis, *Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life, Cumulative Index, vols. 1–27, 1923–1949* (New York: Kraus Reprint, 1971).

creativity as primitive, relegating it to a primal, unchanging past.[28] The Black modernism Locke envisioned would assert ties that were both prior and more authentic to European modernism's animating source.

Alfred Barnes was among the first to collect and display African objects as art in this country—as well as to develop a theory of formal connoisseurship for evaluating them. He had built his African holdings swiftly in the years between 1922 and 1924, largely through bulk purchases through the French dealer Paul Guillaume, and housed them at the educational foundation in Merion, Pennsylvania, that he had founded in 1922 and opened in 1925.[29] Members of Douglas's circle saw the proximity of a great collection of African art as a catalyst for their goal of nurturing a new American race consciousness. Charles Johnson highlighted Barnes's collection in a special issue of *Opportunity* published in May 1924. An unsigned editorial, presumably by Johnson, predicted that the presence of such a collection of African artwork in the United States would prompt greater recognition of Black contributions to American culture: "Soon primitive Negro art will invade this country as it has invaded Europe. And there will come a new valuation of the contribution of Negroes, past and yet possible, to American life and culture."[30] Locke invited Barnes to contribute an essay and reproductions of works from his collection to the *New Negro* anthology, while James Weldon Johnson encouraged Barnes to award scholarships to talented young Black artists to study his collection—which brought together both extraordinary African and modern French holdings.



Cover of Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life. *May 1924.*

28. In his new book *Heritage and Debt*, David Joselit speaks of the way the West made claims to possess the future in the realms of technology and culture, thus relegating the rest of the world to the past. Joselit, *Heritage and Debt: Art and Globalization* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2020).

29. See Christa Clarke's account, *African Art in the Barnes Foundation: The Triumph of L'Art nègre and the Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Skira Rizzoli, 2015), pp. 21–71.

30. Alain Locke, "Dr. Barnes," *Opportunity* 17 (May 1924), p. 133.

Johnson nominated four candidates, two of whom—Douglas and Gwendolyn Bennett—began to study there in October 1927.[31]

Douglas had first visited Merion in April 1926, writing to Barnes afterwards:

> Thus far the "new consciousness" among Negroes has produced nothing of value in the plastic arts. This is due mainly to the three hundred years of bondage separating the American Negro from the roots of his native traditions and culture; and, to the substitution of alien culture and ideals, which, even among those to the manor born have never proven, especially fertil [*sic*] soil for the cultivation of the arts. Never-the-less, it now seems only a matter of time before the American Negro will learn again to express himself in plastic forms original and enduring.[32]

This sense of being ready to enter onto the stage of history—the "matter of time" noted here—seems to refer to Douglas himself as much as to any broader cultural reckoning.

Douglas had already set his direction. Writing to Langston Hughes in December 1925, he defined the path before him:

> Your problem, Langston, my problem, no our problem is to conceive, develop, and establish an art era. Not white art painted black. . . . Let's bare our arms and plunge them deep through laughter, through pain, through sorrow, through hope, through disappointment, into the very depths of the souls of our people and drag forth material crude, rough, neglected. Then let's sing it, dance it, write it, paint it.[33]

Douglas's use of the word "souls" is precise: It invokes W. E. B. Du Bois's profoundly influential book *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), framing his own thinking within the psychic crisis that Du Bois describes. In his opening essay, Du Bois, insisting on the importance of Black subjectivity, defines the tension produced through the experience of being Black in America. He writes of living in a world in which one can see oneself only through the eyes of others, a condition he famously speaks of as a kind of "double consciousness": "One ever feels his twoness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it

31. Clarke, *African Art in the Barnes Foundation*, p. 62.

32. Aaron Douglas to Alfred Barnes, April 6, 1926, Barnes Foundation Archive; cited in Clarke, *African Art in the Barnes Foundation*, p. 63. On the tension that developed in the relationship between Douglas and Barnes, see Kirschke, *Aaron Douglas,* pp. 105–09.

33. Aaron Douglas to Langston Hughes, December 21, 1925, Langston Hughes Papers, James Weldon Johnson Memorial Collection of Arts and Letters, Beinecke Rare Books and Manuscripts, Yale University, New Haven.

from being torn asunder."[34] Du Bois emphasizes collective trauma—a splitting of consciousness that resonates, in its simultaneous acceptance and rejection of social reality, with Freudian models of the unconscious just being defined in these years. Instead of the individual, the group is subject to traumatic shock.[35] As Du Bois would assert, the fracture is produced in framing not only African-Americans through white eyes but also America itself. For it was not just that the Black citizen was American, but also that America—its cities, culture, and population—was Black, and its Blackness could not be filtered out.[36] In his murals for the library, Douglas seems to ask: What image of America would bring together these perspectives—that of being Black and of being an American? What image would make them whole?

Diasporic Thinking

The intellectual origins of a pan-national "race consciousness" that embraced African cultural heritage are multiple. What is clear: Such consciousness of race did not come from Africa itself, as Isabel Wilkerson reminds us in her new book, *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents* (2020). "Africans are not Black," she reports one Nigerian-born interlocutor telling her. "They are Igbo and Yoruba, Ewe, Akan, Ndebele. They are not Black."[37] One pathway to race consciousness can be seen in Locke's own evolution. In the fall of 1911, Locke returned to the United States after four years of study abroad as the first Black recipient of a Rhodes scholarship. (At Oxford, he was among those who launched the African Union Society, whose mandate was to encourage "a wide interest in such matters as affect the welfare of the race in Africa and all other parts of the world.")[38] John Edward Bruce, president of the New York–based Negro Society for Historical Research founded just a few months earlier to promote the study of Black history, welcomed the young scholar to speak at his Yonkers residence in front of a gathering of the group's members in early

34. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Amazon Classics Edition, 2017), p. 3.

35. The resonance with Freudian thought is striking. Perhaps we can understand it in relation to what sociologist Robert K. Merton has called "multiples"—independent, simultaneous intellectual discoveries. Many have discussed the origins of Du Bois's use of "double consciousness," often pointing to his studies of Hegel in Berlin and studies with William James at Harvard. See, among others, Henry Louis Gates Jr., "The Black Letters on the Sign: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Canon," series introduction, in W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 4–5. For more on the Hegelian strain of Du Bois's thought, see Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Lines of Descent: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Emergence of Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).

36. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America*, pp. 218–25. Gates stresses this latter point in "Black Letters on the Sign," pp. 5–6.

37. Isabel Wilkerson, *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents* (New York: Random House, 2020), p. 53.

38. Cited in Stewart, *The New Negro: The Life of Alain Locke*, p. 45.

December.[39] Schomburg, a co-founder and secretary-treasurer of the Society, attended: It was likely where he and Locke first met. In Locke's talk that evening, "The Question of a Race Tradition," a variation of one that he would give several times that year, the twenty-six-year-old posed the question of "whether or not the Negro wishes to have a separate history, apart from the general history of this country?"[40] The frame for understanding Black experience, he argued, was not that of nation but that of a "race culture" that extended across boundaries along the vectors of migration and dispersal. "Our involuntary transportation is analogous to the colonial Americans' voluntary revolution," he declared. "We must, like him, go back to claim as tradition and culture all we have broken with as government and authority."[41] Rather than a sentimental view of the past, what was needed was a period of "reconstructive scholarship" to build a new understanding of a "heritage of ideas."[42]

When Locke spoke to the gathering of eminent elders in Yonkers in 1911, the word *diaspora* was not yet used to describe the dispersal of peoples of African descent. The term—with its origins in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible and the story of the exodus of the Jews after the destruction of the Second Temple—was used in English from the mid-nineteenth century to refer to the scattering of Jewish populations as a historical and demographic event, and it arrived in the vocabulary of Black studies in the 1950s and '60s.[43] Black internationalism, however, was well established. African-American thinkers and activists had sought to align with an international Black community, including at the first Pan-African meeting organized by opponents of colonialism in 1900. Du Bois picked up the mantle after World War I, organizing Pan-African congresses with

39. Elinor Des Verney Sinnette notes in her biography of Schomburg that Locke delivered the talk in Yonkers on December 9. Sinnette, *Arthur Alfonso Schomburg: Black Bibliophile and Collector* (Detroit: New York Public Library and Wayne State University Press, 1989), p. 45; Stewart says December 12 in *The New Negro: The Life of Alain Locke*, p. 228.

40. Alain Locke, "The Question of a Race Tradition" (1911), clipping, exact date and place of publication unknown, Schomburg Papers, SC Mico R-2798, Reel 10, Frame 0783, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. As far as I can ascertain, this talk has not been otherwise published or preserved.

41. Ibid.

42. Ibid. A variation of this idea appears in Locke, "The Negro and a Race Tradition" (1911), Alain Locke Papers; see Stewart, *The New Negro: The Life of Alain Locke*, p. 227.

43. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp. 205–08; Krista Thompson, "A Side Long Glance: The Practice of African Diaspora Art History in the United States," *Art Journal* 70, no. 3 (Fall 2011), p. 8; Brent Hayes Edwards, "The Uses of Diaspora," *Social Text* 66, vol. 19, no. 1 (Spring 2001), pp. 45–73. Gilroy's landmark study helps us see the radicalism of Locke's thinking, which in many ways anticipates Gilroy's own. (A painting by Douglas graces its cover, though neither he nor Locke play major roles within.) Gilroy describes the concept of the Black Atlantic as a means to counter certain ways that we often speak about modernism and modernity: its national boundaries; its linear narratives; the absence of concern with race or ethnicity; the complicity that modernisms have with regimes of power; stresses on originality and the view of tradition as repetition or derivation rather than a catalyst for innovation.

allies in 1919, 1921, 1923, 1927, and 1945 that aimed to discuss and coordinate the common political interests of peoples of African descent. "Pan-Africa," Du Bois would famously declare in an article in *The Crisis* in 1933, the year before Douglas began work on his series for the library, "means intellectual understanding and co-operation among all groups of Negro descent in order to bring about at the earliest possible time the industrial and spiritual emancipation of the Negro peoples."[44] (In 1915, as he launched himself into the role of international organizer, Du Bois also wrote *The Negro*, a history of the race, over half of which was dedicated to African history, crafting it so that, as John K. Thornton writes in the introduction to the Oxford edition of the book, "African history had movement . . . and Africans were seen as historical actors.")[45] In Locke's thinking, however, we can begin to discern something new, an emergent idea of *diaspora*—though he didn't use that pivotal word—understood not as a historical or demographic event, a mass dispersal of population under duress, nor as an alliance around common political interests, but rather as a cultural theory. Connecting the descendants of Africa in a transcultural formation, Locke begins to articulate a dynamic concept of heritage bound by neither nation nor ethnicity. It is a prescient idea, one with echoes in the later writings of thinkers such as Amiri Baraka, Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy, Kobena Mercer, Saidiya Hartmann, Huey Copeland, Krista Thompson, and others.

"As with the Jew," Locke would later note in the introduction to *The New Negro*, "persecution is making the Negro international."[46] Jewish thought on diaspora may have sparked Locke's thinking, his biographer Jeffrey Stewart suggests.[47] Locke attended the First Universal Races Congress in London in July 1911, the first international conclave of its type, as its name suggested, organized by Felix Adler, the founder of the Ethical Culture Society. The sociologist Georg Simmel was there, and Du Bois attended as leader of the American delegation, offering a hymn that he had written as a sort of benediction: "Save us, World Spirit, from our lesser selves! Grant us that war and hatred cease, Reveal our souls in every race and hue!"[48] Simmel and Du Bois took their places alongside others attracted to the gathering including Mahatma Gandhi, Annie Besant, Werner Sombart, Ferdinand Tonnies, and Franz Boas. With such a list, perhaps it is not surprising that the topic of inquiry seems to have been modernity itself, with race as the constitutive frame.

44. W. E. B. Du Bois, "Pan-Africa and the New Racial Philosophy," *The Crisis* 40 (November 1933), p. 247.

45. Thornton cited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "The Black Letters on the Sign: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Canon," Introduction to Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America*, p. xxi.

46. Locke, "The New Negro," in *The New Negro*, p. 14.

47. Stewart, *The New Negro: The Life of Alain Locke*, pp. 219–20. Gilroy stresses the fertile link with Jewish sources in the idea of "diaspora"; Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, pp. ix, 144, 206–08.

48. Elliott M. Rudwick, "W. E. B. Dubois and the Universal Races Congress of 1911," *The Phlyon Quarterly* 20, no. 4 (1959), pp. 372–78.

At the conference, Locke listened with particular attention to Israel Zangwill's talk, "The Jewish Race," in which the writer and Zionist activist focused on the "real Jewish problem"—that of the preservation of Jewish identity and culture across dispersed populations.[49] Modern Jews' hearty embrace of their adopted cultures gave them a "chameleon quality," he argued, as the greatest students and proponents of the national heritage of the places in which they lived.[50] "If a Russian Jew, [Bernard] Berenson, is the chief authority on Italian art, and George Brandes, the Dane, is Europe's greatest critic . . . all these phenomena find their explanation in the cosmopolitanism of the wandering Jew."[51] With this pull to assimilation, preservation of Jewish identity as a displaced nation required that Jews themselves develop a racial self-consciousness, Zangwill suggested. The message seems to have resonated with Locke.

In his Yonkers talk a few months later, Locke argued that the foundation for a race history required reaching back beyond "the trauma of the slavery experience" and the "sentimental ties which bind us to the Abolitionist period" to an African past.[52] "We cannot afford to let our regard for our immediate past [in the United States] blind us to the remote racial past [in Africa]," he argued. Locke was proposing a diasporic identity that he would call "group" or "race consciousness."[53] "The historical dilemma of the American Negro," he reflected, "is the painful position of standing between two heritages, one lost, the other not fully realized."[54]

The Library

Following the Yonkers talk, Arturo Schomburg forged an alliance of sorts with the young scholar. Locke, who was named an associate member of the Society, would prepare bibliographies, suggest books to read and purchase, and answer research questions for Schomburg. Schomburg, in turn, seems to have been spurred by the relationship to lead campaigns as bibliophile-in-chief, amassing books, manuscripts, prints, and other materials that testified to the historical and cultural achievements of people of African descent.[55] Schomburg also deputized Locke to acquire things for the collection on his travels, listing materials he wished to buy and the shops and dealers to visit in order to do so. Soon, others were asked to perform roles, with

49. Stewart, *The New Negro: The Life of Alain Locke*, p. 219.

50. Ibid. and Israel Zangwill, "The Jewish Race," First Universal Races Congress, University of London, 1911, London: P.S. King & Son, pp. 268–79.

51. Zangwill, "The Jewish Race."

52. Locke, "The Question of a Race Tradition," unpaginated.

53. For example, Locke, "The New Negro," in *The New Negro*, pp. 7, 14.

54. Locke, "The Question of a Race Tradition," unpaginated.

55. Sinnette, *Schomburg*, pp. 46, 88–89.

Hughes and James Weldon Johnson acting as agents in acquiring books and other materials on Schomburg's behalf.[56]

Schomburg was a migrant from Puerto Rico, where his parents had themselves been migrants—his mother was a Black woman from the Virgin Islands and his father was from Germany and of mixed race. Schomburg later described his motivation in collecting the documents of Black history as a reaction against the denial of that history: A grammar-school teacher had told him that Black people had "no history, no heroes," providing the spark that ignited his desire to uncover that past.[57] The collection's scope encompassed myriad forms of evidence concerning the history, lives, and achievements of people of African descent. Highlights included a first edition of Phillis Wheatley's poetry; astronomer and mathematician Benjamin Banneker's almanacs and papers, which Schomburg spent many years pursuing; items related to the life of Aleksandr Pushkin, one of whose great-grandfathers was born in central Africa; and the correspondence of Haitian revolutionary leader Toussaint L'Ouverture. Though Schomburg particularly prized documents related to individuals of great erudition, courageous leadership, and/or unheralded genius, he also gathered materials that offered witness to the lives of those who were dispossessed and disenfranchised, including Charles Ball's *Slavery in the United States* (1837) and Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), which provided a frank account of the sexual abuse that permeated the institution of slavery, as well as Frederick Douglass's more famous *Narrative* (1845).[58]

These collecting efforts were matched by robust packaging initiatives, part of what Brent Edwards has described as the "compulsively documentary" impulse of the New Negro movement and Gerard Early has called a "considerable obsession in anthologizing the Negro."[59] James Weldon Johnson helped Schomburg compile his *Bibliographical Checklist of American Negro Poetry* (1915), a landmark effort to record the work of Black poets, then used the collection to create his anthology *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1922), one of the earliest of its type and the first gathering of Negro verse distributed by a major US publisher. Johnson returned to the collection for *The Book of American Negro Spirituals* (1925), edited with J. Rosamond Johnson, and his *Black Manhattan* (1930, a volume for which an aggrieved Schomburg felt he received insufficient credit).[60] Du Bois similarly proposed to Schomburg an "Encyclopedia Africana which would gather, among other

56. Ibid., pp. 92–93.

57. Sinnette, *Schomburg*, p. 13.

58. Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Hollis Robbins, eds., *The Portable Nineteenth-Century African American Women Writers* (New York: Penguin, 2017). Michelle Commander, Associate Director for the Lapidus Center for Historical Analysis of Transatlantic Slavery at the Schomburg Center, confirmed via email that these texts were part of the original Schomburg collection (the archive has been closed since the onset of COVID-19); she is currently working on a project on Schomburg's seed library.

59. Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora*, p. 44. Gerard Early as cited in Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora*, p. 566. See fn. 60 for a partial list of these anthologies.

60. Sinnette, *Schomburg*, pp. 31, 187.

things, bios of distinguished Negroes"—a project that greatly occupied both men in the 1930s.[61] What comes through is that the archive served as a cornerstone of New Negro ambitions—its documentary mass as a bulwark of facts against those who would ignore or distort history. "Here is the evidence," as Schomburg wrote in "The Negro Digs Up His Past," his contribution to the *New Negro* anthology (with heavy editing from Locke).[62]

One feels the compensatory pain in this archival impulse, this urge to prove one's being, to lay out the facts of Black existence and its manifestations.[63] Yet this "documentary compulsion"—researching, collecting, creating and annotating bibliographies, editing anthologies, and writing framing texts—can also be understood as work done in articulating the archive. As Michel Foucault has taught us, the archive is not merely a collection but a generative system: It maps the terrain of possibility.[64] It frames what can and cannot be said, when things begin and when they end, giving shape, place, and time to what has been inchoate. The inchoate, of course, is the ether of primitivism's no-particular-time and no-particular-place. The archive pulls Black culture into history. In this sense, the production of "facts" is also a claim to the modern, to the construction of history in parallel with the modern professionalized discourses of science, sociology, policing, and detection.

By the time the collection came to the library, in 1926, with ten thousand dollars of grant support from the Carnegie Corporation secured with the help of the Urban League, Schomburg had amassed over five thousand books, three thousand manuscripts, and two hundred etchings.[65] The collector reunited himself with his collection in 1932 when he assumed the role of curator at the library, which he occupied until his death in 1938. In the years in which Douglas's panels were commissioned, created, and installed, Schomburg was a familiar presence in the reading room, pointing readers to its treasures and offering impromptu lectures on Black history, all the while continuing to add to it—an important note in understanding how the collection's contents were used in what might be understood as an open classroom.[66] (One WPA project—carried out by the writers' division—was an annotated bibliography of the collection's rare manuscripts, advised by Schomburg himself.)[67] This, in combination with the many classes, clubs, programs, and exhibitions hosted there, meant that the library became far more than the books on its shelves and the printed

61. Ibid., p. 34.

62. Schomburg, "The Negro Digs Up His Past," in *The New Negro*, p. 232.

63. Brent Edwards speaks of a drive to authentication with a long history in Black literary production before it might be seen to emerge in these archival impulses of the 1920s and '30s: He describes slave narratives, for example, as "a persistently framed mode of production: They are almost always supported and sometimes suffocated by a mass of documentary and verifying material serving to 'authenticate' the Negro's subject's discourse by positioning and explicating it." Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora*, p. 499.

64. Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon, 1972), pp. 128–29.

65. Sinnette, *Schomburg*, p. 78.

66. Ibid., p. 99.

67. Ibid.

matter in its flat files, and rather a new kind of community space: a repository of collective knowledge designed to activate engagement with a "heritage of ideas," as Locke had described years earlier.

Douglas (left) and Arthur A. Schomburg in front of Douglas's Aspects of Negro Life: Song of the Towers. *1934.*

The commission given to Douglas to paint the mural series was made possible by the support of the country's first federally sponsored program for art: the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP). Created by the Department of the Treasury with an extraordinary budget of over one million dollars, the PWAP carried the mandate of blunting the human impact of the Great Depression by giving "work to artists in arranging to have competent representatives of the profession embellish public buildings."[68] Artists were encouraged to represent the "American scene"[69]—to address the idea of America itself. The word "scene" carried with it an idea of America's multiplicity, its varied regions, occupations, and populations, and helped set an agenda for WPA projects to come. In the first four months of 1934, the PWAP hired more than 3,700 artists, many recruited through newspaper ads.[70] Successful applicants had to prove they were professional artists and pass a needs test. If they qualified, they were placed in one of two categories—artist or laborer—that determined their salary. Yet

68. Elizabeth Brown, "Foreword," in Ann Prentice Wagner, *1934: A New Deal for Artists*, by Ann Prentice Wagner (London: Giles, 2009).

69. Ibid.

70. Ibid.; Jerry Adler, "1934: Art of the New Deal," *Smithsonian Magazine* (June 2009), pp. 62–67; Thomas Thurston, "The New Deal and the First Federally Sponsored Art Program: The Public Works Art Project (PWAP) 1933–1934," in *Art for the People: The Rediscovery and Preservation of Progressive and WPA-Era Murals in the Chicago Public Schools, 1904–1943*, ed. Heather Becker (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2002), p. 75.

as federal money was available only to artists who qualified as professional, most Black artists were de facto ineligible, as they were largely excluded from jobs in art schools or gallery representation. Aaron Douglas was among a very few African-Americans who did qualify. (When Douglas joined Augusta Savage and others in founding the Harlem Artists Guild in early 1935—Douglas was named president of the new organization, Savage vice-president—one of the primary purposes was to get more Black artists on federal projects and payroll.)[71] I imagine that, like the campaigns of collecting materials, publishing articles and anthologies, and securing funds to give the archive a home in the heart of Harlem, Douglas's commission for the *Aspects of Negro Life* series, too, was the result of a collective community effort.

In its finished form, Douglas's historical cycle, in both its placement at the 135th Street Library and in its narrative address, celebrated one of the most critical endeavors of the New Negro group: It served as a capstone for the two-decade project of defining and building an active archive as a foundation for claiming history. "The American Negro must remake his past in order to make his future. . . . History must restore what slavery took away," read "The Negro Digs Up His Past," "for it is the social damage that the present generation must repair and offset."[72] And the panels presented a far more complex history of America than was usually told.

Panel 1: The Negro in an African Setting

> *The first of the four panels reveals the Negro in an African setting and emphasizes the strongly rhythmic arts of music, the dance and sculpture, which had influenced the modern world possibly more profoundly than any other phase of African life. The fetish, the drummer, the dancers, in the formal language of space and color, recreate the exhilaration, the ecstasy, the rhythmic pulsation of life in ancient Africa.*
>
> —Aaron Douglas, typescript handout, 1949[73]

For any storyteller, the question is, Where to begin? Douglas sets the stage with a scene amidst lush foliage in Africa: A pair of dancers perform, accompanied

71. Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, p. 131. Bearden conceived of this volume before his death in 1988, and Harry Henderson continued work on it until its publication in 1993. Based on many oral interviews and firsthand accounts, the text contains many details not found elsewhere.

72. Schomburg, "The Negro Digs Up His Past," originally published in *Survey Graphic* (March 1925), p. 670; then in Locke, *The New Negro*, p. 231. Locke claimed that the essay was so poorly organized that he had to rewrite it. Stewart, *The New Negro: The Life of Alain Locke*, p. 462.

73. Aaron Douglas, "Notes from Aaron Douglas," October 27, 1949, Box 1, "Miscellaneous" Folder, Douglas Papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

Douglas. Aspects of Negro Life:
The Negro in an African Setting. *1934.*
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by drummers and encircled by armed onlookers. At center is a sculptural personage, perhaps a deity. Other human figures are shown in profile. Some seem to take inspiration from the African works that Douglas studied in Barnes's collection. (The central image in particular, with its frontal symmetry, elongated torso and arms, and seated posture, bears a general typological resemblance to certain Dogon, Senufo, and Fang carved works.)[74] From the upper center, a series of radiating circles defined by progressively lighter tones emanate from the deity itself. This motif, seen in all the Schomburg panels, suggests sensory extension, perhaps in the form of light or sound—a "rhythmic pulsation" that emanates from the flat planes of the paintings outwards and from Africa across time and space.

To begin a story of America in Africa was unusual: It is hard to find precedents in the fine arts, though, to be sure, they existed in the stories told by those who had been enslaved, whose narratives were published in the rare volumes now held in the Schomburg collection.[75] And they could be heard in the stories of street preachers, self-taught historians, as well as Garveyite stump speakers, who

74. Clarke, *African Art in the Barnes Foundation*, p. 63. For works in Barnes's collection that offer points of comparison, see Clarke, *African Art in the Barnes Foundation*, for example: figs. 1, 7, 8, 99, 37 b, 37 c.

75. Charles Ball, for example, traces his lineage to the Afro-Muslim royalty of his grandfather's generation in his *Slavery in the United States, A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Charles Ball, a Black Man, Who Lived Forty Years in Maryland, South Carolina and Georgia, as a Slave* (Pittsburgh: J. T. Shryock, 1853).

embraced Egyptian and African origins and were often heard at Speakers' Corner, which was situated diagonally across the intersection of 135th and Lenox from the library and offered a platform for voices not represented in mainstream media.[76] It is, nonetheless, a remarkable beginning for a painting cycle commissioned with federal funds as an "American scene." Beginning in Africa shifts the framing of the tale, to use Du Bois's words, toward "the strange meaning of being Black here."[77] America begins not with the *Mayflower* and Pilgrim Rock nor the fleet of three from the London Company arriving in Jamestown of schoolbook lore, but rather—implicitly, for it is not shown—with the slave schooner *White Lion* that carried the first enslaved Africans to British North America in 1619. The panel, then, foregrounds forced migration and slavery as America's foundation and original sin. In this sense, Douglas's panels mark a beginning as well: We see in many of the WPA projects headed up by Black writers and artists a concerted effort to tell a story of America with enslavement at its origin and center.[78]

At the same time, this image of the African roots from which Black Americans had been separated by "three hundred years of bondage"[79] also celebrates a rich heritage of art, music, and dance. Locke reviewed the show of African art organized by the Museum of Modern Art in 1935, which displayed over four hundred objects on six floors. Presented just six years after the museum's founding, the exhibition suggested a geographically expansive definition of modernism with Africa as a point of origin. Locke was delighted, praising the exhibition for documenting African high-cultural achievement: "Aside from being the finest American showing of African Art," he wrote, it "reveals it for the first time in its own right as a mature and classic expression."[80] The show spurred Locke's own, ultimately unsuccessful, efforts to found the Harlem Museum of African Arts.[81]

76. Thanks to Huey Copeland for the prompt to think of other modes in which this narrative appeared. Of course, more work is needed here.

77. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Amazon Classic edition), p. 2.

78. Such WPA projects include the "75 Years of Freedom" exhibition held at the Library of Congress to celebrate the 75th anniversary of the Thirteenth Amendment, offering documents of Black contribution to American life beginning from the seventeenth century; the initiatives within the Federal Writers' Project and the WPA's Department of Negro Affairs, run by poet Sterling Brown, and various state projects to record the oral histories and testimonies of those elders who had been formally enslaved; the volume *The Negro in Virginia*, also published with the support of the Department of Negro Affairs, which incorporated documents and the testimony of many formerly enslaved individuals; and mural projects such as Charles White's *Five Great American Negroes* (1939).

79. From Locke to Barnes, cited in Clarke, *African Art in the Barnes Foundation*, p. 63.

80. Alain Locke, "African Art: Classic Style," *American Magazine of Art* 28, no. 5 (May 1935), p. 271.

81. On these efforts, see Stewart, *The New Negro: The Life of Alain Locke*, pp. 545–65.

Panel 2: From Slavery through Reconstruction

The second panel is composed of three sections covering periods from slavery through the Reconstruction.

From right to left:

the first section depicts the slaves' doubt and uncertainty, transformed into exultation at the reading of the Emancipation Proclamation;

in the second section, the figure standing on the box symbolizes the careers of outstanding Negro leaders during this time;

the third section shows the departure of the Union soldiers from the South, and the onslaught of the Klan that followed.

—Aaron Douglas, typescript handout, 1949[82]

Douglas's second panel acknowledges the Civil War, though troops are seen only in faint silhouettes standing in formation at the right and in recession at the left. Foregrounded are spiky cotton plants with their fluffy buds, the global commodity that, as Sven Beckert has described, defined America's destiny, spurring its rise onto the global stage, shaping its political and economic structures, and providing the rationale for the enslavement of African workers and the cause for civil war.[83] All this seems implicit in the historical panorama that Douglas lays out amidst the cotton plantings.

Beginning at the right, a federal soldier reads the Emancipation Proclamation; the document itself emits an aura of light. At the edge of the circle of light, sounds a bugle player, whose brass instrument foreshadows the birth of jazz with a singer by his side offering, one imagines, a song of thanks or of prayer for the journey to come. While a group rejoices with their arms above their heads, one figure raises a fist. At the very center, a speaker stands on a soapbox podium, holding a rolled paper scroll tightly in his hand: Is it the Emancipation Proclamation? Or the Constitution itself? At his flank, voters wait to take their turn at the ballot box. To the left, laborers picking cotton in a field rise up as they take in the words of the Black candidate. Above in the upper left, under cover of darkness, are a trio on horseback of cone-headed Klansmen, the paramilitary forces of white supremacy. Barely visible, a long figure seems to turn to challenge one of them.

Douglas's mural lays out the achievements, aspirations, and terrors of the twelve-year period of Reconstruction with historiographic precision. It was an

82. Douglas, "Notes from Aaron Douglas," October 27, 1949.

83. See Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (New York: Vintage Books, 2014).

Douglas. Aspects of Negro Life:
From Slavery through Reconstruction. *1934*.
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unusual focus of commemoration; these years were more generally absent from, or diminished in, the historical telling. Du Bois recounted an experience in which he submitted an entry on the American Negro for the *Encyclopedia Britannica* that included a paragraph on the achievements of Black Americans in the Reconstruction era. The editors asked him to delete it. He withdrew the article instead.[84] By 1936, Walter White, executive secretary of the NAACP, would write to studio head David O. Selznick of his concerns over the making of the film *Gone with the Wind*: "The writing of the history of the Reconstruction period has become so completely confederatized during the last 2 or 3 generations that we naturally are somewhat anxious."[85] Both Du Bois's experience and White's anxieties reflect the profound influence of Edward Pollard's book *The Lost Cause: A New Southern History of the War of the Confederates* (1866), written in the wake of the Confederacy's defeat. Pollard began with the proposition that after military loss, "all that was left of the South was the 'war of ideas.'"[86] "The war properly decided only what was put at issue: the restoration of the Union and the excision of slavery: and to these two conditions the South submits," he wrote. "But the war did not decide Negro equality."[87]

Du Bois chose Reconstruction for his own project of revisionism, writing several articles and then an extraordinary, groundbreaking book, *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935), the first full-length study of the role and experience of Black Americans in the decades immediately following Emancipation, and a sweeping

84. W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America,* p. ix. Du Bois writes of his experience with the entry for *Encyclopedia Britannica* in the preface, loc. 16722. He first wrote on the achievements of the Reconstruction period in "Reconstruction and Its Benefits," *American Historical Review* 15 (July 1910), pp. 781–99, the first article by an African-American to be published in the journal.

85. Jennifer Schuessler, "The Long Battle Over 'Gone with the Wind," *New York Times*, June 14, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/14/movies/gone-with-the-wind-battle.html.

86. Pollard, cited in Gates, *Stony the Road*, p. 18.

87. Ibid.

corrective to Lost Cause narratives. In his preface, Du Bois felt the need to frame the radicality of his proposition: "I am going to tell this story as though Negroes were ordinary human beings," he wrote, "realizing that this attitude will from the first seriously curtail my audience."[88]

Du Bois was completing his manuscript—he had moved from New York to take a position at Fisk University—while Douglas was working on his historical cycle; it was published the following year. The centrality given to Reconstruction in Douglas's murals—and the unusual points of emphasis in the artist's depiction—seems clearly framed by Du Bois's concurrent project. The twelve years of Reconstruction, Du Bois suggested, offered a vision of America's destiny of full and equal citizenship for all. He sketched the achievements of the period: the passage of the country's first civil-rights law and the miraculous trio of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth amendments to the Constitution that laid the foundation for modern citizenship in banning slavery (1865), extending due process of law to all (1868), and granting universal (male) suffrage (1870). Prodigious numbers of freedmen—enabled by federal military occupation of the states of the former Confederacy—took up the promises of these amendments and asserted their right to vote, electing approximately two thousand Black officeholders and creating a robust Black leadership class.[89]

Yet Du Bois also defined a counterforce often left unacknowledged—the effort at reconquest backed by violence. The dozen years after Robert E. Lee's surrender at Appomattox were among the most violent periods in American history outside of wartime, a time when lynching was pervasive (now conservatively estimated to be over four hundred Black people across the South between 1868 and 1871),[90] along with other forms of racial terror.[91] The Reconstruction period's hopes came to a fatal end with the Hayes-Tilden Compromise of 1877, which secured the election of Rutherford B. Hayes as president with a Faustian bargain that traded Southern electoral votes for a commitment to withdraw federal troops from the South and led to both Jim Crow segregation laws and suppression of the Black vote. Du Bois wrote sorrowfully, "The slave went free; stood a brief moment in the sun; then moved back again toward slavery."[92]

Read against this text, as it seems to have been conceived, the panel gives visible form to the tension described by Du Bois: The orator places the Black candidate at the very center of the work—a candidate who indeed could hardly be imagined in 1930s America, either North or South—creating a monument to Black agency, suffrage, and political power. At left, the presence of hooded night riders acknowledges the surging forces of the neo-Confederacy in stark terms. The contrast sets the joy of Emancipation and the dispersal of the Confederate Army

88. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America*, loc. 967.

89. Gates gives the number of officeholders in *Stony the Road*, p. xvi.

90. Equal Justice Initiative, *Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror*, 3rd edition, 2017, p. 15, https://eji.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/lynching-in-america-3d-ed-080219.pdf.

91. Gates, *Stony the Road*, p. 9; and Equal Justice Initiative, *Lynching in America*, pp. 10–15, regarding the degree of violence in the post–Civil War period.

92. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America*, loc. 1577.

against federal abandonment with the departure of Union troops. At the same time, this panel, hanging in the 135th Street library in the heart of Harlem, speaks to the latent legacy of these years as thousands of Black Americans moved northward to claim their rights as citizens.

Panel 3: An Idyll of the Deep South

> *The third panel, "An Idyll of the Deep South," portrays Negroes,*
> *toiling in the fields,*
> *singing and dancing in a lighter mood, and*
> *mourning as they prepare to take away a man who has been lynched.*
> —Aaron Douglas, typescript handout, 1949[93]

The title of Panel 3, "Idyll of the Deep South," seems to offer ironic mimicry of Lost Cause nostalgia: It marks the dark years of waiting. On the right, a handful of figures till the soil, with sharecroppers' cabins behind them: Their postures echo those of their enslaved forebears in the second panel. At center, at the focal point of Douglas's radiating circles of light, a group gathers, perhaps in secret, in a leafy glade to sing and play music; the presence of a banjo and guitar suggests the blues. At far left, kneeling figures look up at the base of the tree, where we see a pair of hanging feet, an image that is still searing despite the years that have passed since it was painted. A distant star casts a beam of light that cuts across the panel.

We are shielded from the sight of the lynching victim's broken body—or perhaps Douglas is protecting it from our eyes, giving a kind of rarely extended

93. Douglas, "Notes from Aaron Douglas," October 27, 1949.

Douglas. Aspects of Negro Life: An Idyll of the Deep South. *1934.* *© 2020 Heirs of Aaron Douglas.*

Flag from from the window of the NAACP headquarters on 69 Fifth Avenue, New York City, 1936.

respect to the victim of a racial crime. The image shifts the focus to those who remain, and in doing so points to the paradox of such murderous tactics: Despite hooded costumes and secret, extralegal societies, the spectacle of damaged bodies was required for lynching to serve its aim of terrorizing communities into submission. With these feet, Douglas points to the way that Jim Crow—its laws of segregation, the economics of sharecropping, and white-supremacist ideology—was undergirded by violence.

Anti-lynching legislation was among the foremost political aims of Douglas's circle. The NAACP had aggressively lobbied for this goal since 1912, and other key officials included James Weldon Johnson (executive secretary, 1920–1930) and Walter White (executive secretary, 1931–1955). White, who was blue-eyed and sufficiently light-skinned that he could pass for white, traveled undercover to investigate lynchings, mob violence, and other acts of racial terror for the NAACP, gathering information "by the simple method of *not* telling those whom I was investigating of the Negro blood within my veins,"[94] then publishing first-person reports in *The Crisis* and other Black press outlets. Sometimes, he wrote of the risk taken in his covert operations: "I found it rather desirable to disappear slightly in advance of reception committees imbued with the desire to make an addition to the lynching record."[95] Between 1920 and 1938, whenever news of a lynching was received, the NAACP would hang a banner reading A MAN WAS LYNCHED YESTERDAY from its offices on Fifth Avenue, creating a relay for information between South and North. The practice was discontinued after the threat of eviction.

More than two hundred bills to make lynching a federal crime were introduced in the first half of the century and failed, meaning that the federal government failed to intervene on behalf of its Black citizens and left enforcement of racially motivated murders to the states. (Legislation outlawing lynching was signed only in 2018.) All this makes clear the enormous stakes of Douglas's inclusion in a commission supported by federal monies and the subject of which was America itself. The challenge was recognized: One reporter noted in a piece headlined "Lynching, Klan Shown in Panels Created on Relief Funds" that the subject "brought instant objections from his PWA superiors."[96]

94. Walter F. White, "Color Lines," *Survey Graphic* (March 1925), p. 681.

95. Walter F. White, "I Investigate Lynchings," *American Mercury*, January 1929; here from the National Humanities Center Resource Toolbox, *The Making of African American Identity*, vol. 3, 1917–1968, http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai3/segregation/text2/investigatelynchings.pdf.

96. T. R. Poston, "Aaron Douglas Moves to the Left with PWA Decoration. New Mural Unveiled in Assembly Hall of Library Here," *New York Amsterdam News*, November 24, 1934, Schomburg Papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

Yet despite the vivid specter of violence, the composition centers on music: on men gathering with banjo and guitar, singing the blues. The poet Sterling Brown, the Williams College–educated son of a minister born into enslavement, offered commentary, along with Alain Locke and the ethnomusicologist Alan Lomax, on Black musical genres in the opening program for the exhibition that they organized with others for the 75th anniversary of the Thirteenth Amendment at the Library of Congress in 1940. Brown described the poetic structure of the blues—usually twelve-bar stanzas with three lines of four stressed syllables, with the second line often repeating the first and the third line clinching it with a rhyme. More importantly, he underlined its distinctive spirit: Where Spirituals and gospel are religious, the blues are profane: "the Negro's secular songs of sadness, disappointment, frustration." They have a manner that is "wry, twisted and hard," steeped in the truth of living Black in America.[97] "This is the way that the blues singers and their poets have found life to be," he reflected in a later essay on the subject. "And for these reasons, the Blues are Black, are Black songs for Black audiences."[98]

Panel 4: Song of the Towers

In the fourth mural, "Song of Towers,"
*the first section on the right, showing a figure fleeing from the clutching hand of serfdom, is symbolic of the migrations of Negroes from the South and the Carribbean [*sic*] into the urban and industrial life of America during and just after World War I;*
the second section represents the will to self-expression, the spontaneous creativeness of the later 1920's, which spread vigorously throughout all of the arts in an expression of the anxiety and yearning from the soul of the Negro people;
the last section of this panel attempts to re-create the confusion, the dejection, and frustration resulting from the depression of the 1930's.
—Aaron Douglas, typescript handout, 1949[99]

The jazzman stands at center, holding his saxophone aloft. An instrument is once again the focal point of Douglas's radiating circles of light. He is poised on a gear of a giant machine, the emblem of an industrial economy, a far cry from the

97. Sterling Brown, "The Blues, Ballads and Social Songs," in *75 Years of Freedom: Commemoration of the 75th Anniversary of the Proclamation of the 13th Amendment to the Constitution of the United States, Library of Congress* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1943), p. 17.

98. Sterling Brown, "The Blues," *Phylon* 13, no. 4 (1952), p. 291.

99. Douglas, "Notes from Aaron Douglas," October 27, 1949.

Douglas. Aspects of Negro Life:
Song of the Towers. *1934.*
© 2020 Heirs of Aaron Douglas.

sharecropping of the previous panel. Another figure, holding a briefcase or toolbox, runs up the circle of the gear. A third figure in the left foreground lies prone in despair. There is no doubt that these figures are urban denizens and citizens of New York in particular. They are surrounded by skyscrapers of the kind that had risen with great speed on New York's horizon in the five years immediately before this work was painted. The Statue of Liberty can be seen in the distant background, reminding us as viewers of its bold poetic embrace: "Give me your tired, your poor, / Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free." Lady Liberty, with the broken chains of slavery at her feet, underscores the figures' status as refugees, among the thousands who had traveled from the South northward, shifting the bulk of the Black population from countryside to city.

By 1925 Harlem had become, as Locke described in his introduction to the *New Negro* anthology, "the largest black community in the world," an Afro-metropolis, built of the confluence of different streams of migration.[100] Between 1916 and 1926, New York's Black population increased by sixty-six percent.[101] In 1910, Harlem was ninety percent white, by 1930 it was seventy percent Black.[102] For

100. Locke, "The New Negro," p. 6.

101. L. Diane Barnes, "Great Migration," in *Encyclopedia of African-American History, 1896 to the Present: From the Age of Segregation to the Twentieth-first Century*, ed. Paul Finkelman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 326–29.

102. Gates, *Stony the Road*, p. 203.

Locke, the meaning of this concentration in population went far beyond demographics. "In Harlem," he wrote, "Negro life is seizing upon its first chances for group expression and self-determination. It is—or promises at least to be—a race capital. . . . Harlem, I grant you, isn't typical—but it is significant, it is prophetic."[103] It offered both a claim to world connection and a home for diaspora, a place for the scattered people of African descent to take their rightful place on the contemporary world stage. "The pulse of the Negro world," Locke wrote, conjuring a sleeping giant, "has begun to beat in Harlem."[104] An echo of his studies with Georg Simmel resonates in Locke's description of Harlem; the German sociologist understood modern societies as fluid constructions, holding heterogeneous elements and people together in dynamic interaction, whereas rural communities required social conformity. This is the Harlem that Douglas enshrines as his New Zion, urban and urbane, Black and American, whose pulsing light and sound reverberate internationally and which heralds the dream of full and untrammeled citizenship—"a mass movement toward the larger and more democratic chance."[105] Yet in the prone figure to the left he also signals the Depression-era disillusionment of the Black worker.

The (Absent) Fifth Panel

> *Mr. Douglas is openly apologetic about the note of defeat upon which his mural ends. As a student of Marx and an artist who has been "bolshevized by conditions," he knows that he has not finished the picture. Had there been a fifth panel, he believes, he could not have escaped pointing to the way out for the Negro—to the one way outlined by Karl Marx and his disciples—the unity of the black and white works in the class struggle. Had this been done, however, the whole mural would undoubtedly have been rejected by the FWA authorities.*
>
> —*New York Amsterdam News*, 1934[106]

In his conversation with reporter Ted Poston, Douglas suggests that he envisioned a fifth panel that would have brought the series to its revolutionary conclusion, and that its absence left him with some regret. He complained: "Under our

103. Locke, "The New Negro," p. 7.

104. Ibid.

105. Ibid., p. 6.

106. Unsigned [T. R. Poston], "Aaron Douglas Moves to the Left with PWA Decoration. New Mural Unveiled in Assembly Hall of the Library Here," *New York Amsterdam News*, November 24, 1934, Schomburg Papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. Reporting for the *Amsterdam News*, Poston covered the 1932 trip taken by Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and others to the USSR and the Scottsboro Trial in 1933. See Kathleen A. Hauke, *Ted Poston: Pioneer American Journalist* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998).

present system, the artist must paint what his employer wants. If he is to keep his own self-respect, however he must try to maintain a certain honesty and present the picture as he sees it."[107] There are hints of affiliation nonetheless. The orator on a soapbox in Panel 2 resembles a monument, its form perhaps taking a cue from the scores of Soviet monuments erected to Lenin in the previous decade. And then there are the feet of the lynching victim, the hooded figures of the KKK, and the broken body at the base of the cogwheel.

Things become clearer in a conversation that took place in 1971 between Douglas and the art historian David Driskell. Driskell, who owned a study for Panel 3, asked about the star seen to the left of the lynching tree in that work. The star, which might seem to evoke the Star of Bethlehem or the North Star that guided fugitives on the Underground Railroad, was in fact, Douglas related, the red star of communism.[108] Squeezed underneath a rough sketch of the composition, Driskell added in tight lines: "I had to all but swear to Aaron that I would not speak about its meaning, the star and the ray, that is, until after his death." The artist recounted with hindsight that there were those who "(got a little pink) from this Red Star, thinking that they were going to get relief from oppression . . . and were disappointed," naming Hughes, Paul Robeson, and activist and educator Louise Thompson as among those who "leaned pink," though not himself. Nonetheless, it seems that the perception of communist sympathy had consequences for Douglas and the work at hand: It provoked the premature termination of his WPA assignment. "They wanted to punish me at the WPA," he told Driskell, "that white woman who felt she couldn't control me, so she fired me."

The touch of "pink" was new to Douglas, and suggests some of the shifts that had taken place since the publication of the *New Negro* anthology in 1925, years that saw the mass unemployment of the Great Depression and its outsized impact on Black workers; the beginning of the "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work" boycotts; the Scottsboro Trial; and a new interest in the class analysis of racial issues from a younger generation of writers and sociologists. This combination of race consciousness and Marxism offered novel insight: Racism was grounded in economic exploitation, and dismantling it required rethinking capitalism itself. Douglas tells the reporter Ted Poston that he has put aside his interest in other theories, including the theosophy of G. I. Gurdjieff that had interested Jean Toomer and other writers, and joined a group of like-minded thinkers who studied Marx.[109] "I had sought escape through so many of these theories," he says with

107. Unsigned [T. R. Poston], "Aaron Douglas Moves to the Left," unpaginated.

108. David C. Driskell, Notes on Talk with Aaron Douglas (April 1971): Folder T 132–13. David C. Driskell Papers, Personal. David C. Driskell Center Archive. Accessed via driskellcenterarchives.wordpress.com/2013/10/24/an-idyll-of-the-deep-south-and-david-c-driskells-discussion-with-aaron-douglas.

109. Unsigned [T. R. Poston], "Aaron Douglas Moves to the Left," unpaginated. On Douglas's interest in Gurdjieff, see Marissa Vincenti, "A Matter of Spirit: Aaron Douglas, Gurjiieffian Thought, and the Expression of 'Conscious Art,'" *The International Review of African American Art* 21, no. 3 (2007), pp. 11–15.

all the passion and conviction of a new convert, "that when I finally encountered the truth through the revolutionary movement, I was absolutely unable to face reality. I had to cast aside everything that I had once believed and begin anew."[110] The group was certainly the Vanguard group, a left-wing salon of sorts that Douglas and Augusta Savage often hosted: Participants included Hughes, Thompson, and Romare Bearden.[111]

Douglas found a new role as a labor leader on behalf of art workers. One facet of this work was his role as president of the Harlem Artists Guild, founded to organize collective action to improve conditions for Black artists and, especially, to apply pressure to place greater numbers of Black artists on federal projects.[112] Bearden recalled the first meeting: "I was astonished to find nearly fifty artists present, since I had no idea there were that many Black Artists in the entire country. My surprise was shared by most of the other artists, because until then we have been isolated."[113] In this capacity, Douglas served as the only Black delegate to the First American Artists Congress held in New York in February 1936, organized in response to the Popular Front call for artists to unite against the threat of fascism. In an appearance on the floor, Douglas addressed the gathered crowd of hundreds, clearly chafing at judgments about what the Black artist should and should not paint: "What the Negro artist should paint and how he should paint it can't accurately be determined without reference to specific social conditions. . . . Our concern has been to establish and maintain recognition of our essential humanity, in other words, complete social and political equality."

He concluded with a reminder:

> If there is anyone here who does not understand Fascism let him ask the first Negro he sees in the street. In America, race discrimination is one of the chief props on which Fascism can be built. One of the most vital blows the artist of this congress can deliver to the threat of Fascism is to refuse to discriminate against any man because of his nationality, race or creed.[114]

The month following Douglas's appearance, art historian Meyer Schapiro published an essay in the first issue of *Art Front*, the official organ of the Artists

110. Unsigned [T. R. Poston], "Aaron Douglas Moves to the Left."

111. Ragar describes the Vanguard group in "Plunging into the Very Depths," pp. 144–145.

112. Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, p. 131.

113. Romare Bearden, "The 1930s—An Art Reminiscence," *New York Amsterdam News*, September 18, 1971; cited in Ruth Fine, "Romare Bearden: The Spaces Between," in *The Art of Romare Bearden* (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, 2003), pp. 26–29.

114. Douglas, "The Negro in American Culture," published in *Artists Against War and Fascism: Papers of the First American Artists' Congress*, ed. Matthew Baigell and Julia Williams (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1986), pp. 82–84. See also Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists*, pp. 132–33.

Union (with which the Harlem Artists Guild was affiliated as the only Black unit). "There are Negro liberals," Schapiro writes without mentioning Douglas or Locke by name, "who teach that the American Negro artist should cultivate the old African style, and that he must give up his effort to paint and carve like a white man."[115] For Schapiro, the proposition depended on a belief in a flawed concept: the belief in a transhistorical national style and the idea of race itself. Style is not static, he argues, but changes with social and economic transformation. Nor does style reflect the psychology of a nation; instead, it speaks to class. Race itself is a flawed construct; there are not distinct psychological characteristics bound up with physical traits. "If this analysis is correct," writes Schapiro, "then we must denounce appeals for an American art which identify the American with a specific blood group or race, or which identify American art with supposedly fixed and inherent psychological characters inherited from the past."[116]

Schapiro, of course, had simplified Locke's argument: Locke had championed the idea not of a time-bound mimicry but rather of a consciousness of heritage that could serve as a source for a distinctly new and race-proud modernism. The text belies Schapiro's own concerns, heightened, as one can imagine, in 1936 with the threat of virulent Nazi anti-Semitism:

> Such distinctions in art have been a large element in the propaganda for war and fascism and in the pretense of peoples that they are eternally different from and superior to others and are therefore, justified in oppressing them. The racial theories of fascism call constantly on the traditions of art. . . .[117]

Schapiro rejects a modernism that defines itself in relation to Blackness—or any other specific cultural heritage and identity. Yet his defense of universality comes from a position of vulnerability; it offers a lesson in the distinction between anti-fascism and anti-racism, as well as in the shaping of our own modernist canon. For Schapiro, the Enlightenment ideal of the equality of men still holds in the present. He is skeptical of heritage as a validating myth and sees culturally distinctive forms as belonging firmly to the past. Douglas and Locke begin in a different place: They assume the presence of a caste hierarchy, take it as a given. For them the role of art is to dismantle such myths.

Thread Lines

In the four-part cycle of *Aspects of Negro Life*, Douglas traces threads of continuity reaching back across the Middle Passage. His signature style—of flat planes echoing lines and figures in profile with sharp graphic cuts—self-consciously draws

115. Schapiro, "Race, Nationality and Art," *Art Front* (March 1936), p. 10.

116. Ibid., p. 12.

117. Ibid., p. 10.

on ancient Egyptian and African sources. This idiom carries through the historical chronology of the panels, tracing a lineage that suggests a still powerful, if latent, visual heritage. Music offers another thread of connection. Musical motifs recur in each of the panels—the drums of Africa; the spirituals of enslavement that chart symbolic journeys of escape and the repurposed brass instruments of the Civil War; the sorrow and defiance of the Jim Crow blues, and the triumphant figure of the jazzman in Harlem. The panels offer "aspects" of Black history—a chapterized narrative—defined by musical forms: a suggestion that on its own, each musical genre can be seen as emblematic of an era and that together, in their interweaving, they trace Black experience in America. Here, the reverberating tonal circles one often sees in Douglas's work focus attention on musical elements—instruments and players—and imply a sonic rhythm, a throb and beat that carry through American history for those who care to listen. At points, however, these roving beams of light spotlight other details—the sculptural deity in the first panel; the Emancipation Proclamation and paper scroll in the hand of the Black candidate in the second; both the sax and the Statue of Liberty together in the third—creating a list of those things held most dear.

While the highbrow Locke saw spirituals as the ultimate expression of a distinctly African-American art form, and while Sterling Brown saw blues in that light, for Langston Hughes it was jazz. "Jazz was one of the inherent expressions of Negro life in America," he wrote.

> The eternal tom-tom beating in the Negro soul—the tom-tom of revolt against weariness in a white world, a world of subway trains, and work, work, work; the tom-tom of joy and laughter, and pain swallowed in a smile. . . . To my mind, it is the duty of the younger Negro artist, if he accepts any duties at all from outsiders, to change through the force of his art that old whisper "I want to be white," hidden in the aspirations of his people, to "Why should I want to be white?" I am a Negro—and beautiful. . . . [118]

Hughes's tom-tom connects the syncopations of modern jazz and the percussive beat of African drumming to Blackness, resilience, and resistance, defining a cultural legacy that could be discerned in the modern sound, and one that offered a way forward.

This recognition—that music offers a framework for understanding African-American experience—was new, new in the sense that it was enabled by modern recording technologies that emerged shortly before Douglas painted his panels. Performers in early "race records"—78-rpm recordings of Black music intended for Black consumers—among them Mamie Smith (first recording 1920), Louis Armstrong (1923), Jelly Roll Morton (1923), Ma Rainey (1923), and Bessie Smith

118. Langston Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," *The Nation* 122 (June 23, 1926), www.thenation.com/article/negro-artist-and-racial-mountain.

(1923)—sang and played with a kind of confidence, virtuosity, and emotional range that audiences would not have previously heard from Black entertainers in the vaudeville or minstrelsy shows that were the mainstay of American popular culture. Their appearance marked what poet Kevin Young speaks of as "the invention of a Black 'I' in American culture."[119] It's hard not to smile at the easy bravura of the final refrain of Bessie Smith's first record, "Downhearted Blues" (1923), a hit with over eight hundred thousand sales: "I got the world in a jug, the stopper's in my hand / I got the world in a jug, the stopper's in my hand / I'm gonna hold it until you men come under my command." The way that Douglas foregrounds music throughout the series, concluding with the figure of the jazzman in Harlem with arms aloft, suggests that we too might see music as the manifestation of that Black modernism that he, Locke, and others had championed.

The larger framework for this thinking was the Migration itself—its massive human flow bringing the singers, musicians, sounds, and instruments of the South northward into a new urban framework. Conversely, the hunger of Black audiences for Black song and the commercial success of race records—sold through newsboys, door-to-door salesmen, and Pullman porters—led both record-company scouts and folklorists to the South in a kind of reverse (and parallel) migration. Field recordings with newly portable audio equipment uncovered the voices and playing of Black musicians born into slavery, including four harmonized male voices urging listeners to "get on board" in the gospel hymn "Old Ship of Zion"; J. M. Mullin's virtuoso banjo playing in "Old Coon Dog" (recorded by Alan and Elizabeth Lomax); and Billy McCrea singing work songs like "Blow, Cornie, Blow," recalled from his experience as an enslaved cook on a steamboat (recorded by John Avery Lomax).[120] Recordings such as these brought the history of Black music in America into visibility, or, perhaps more aptly, audibility, while radio popularized race music with a mass audience, bringing crossover fame and record sales and, to a more limited extent, radio appearances by Black musicians. (The radiating circles in Douglas's mural might be seen to evoke the sound waves of broadcast technology.) The Great Depression brought an end to race music: Record companies eliminated their race catalogues, and commercial radio networks like NBC and CBS employed white musicians to cover Black genres and songs instead,[121] a fact that may have given extra impetus to Douglas's celebration of (and insistence on) the Black origins of American musical forms—a way of giving credit where credit was due.

In tracing these intertwined threads of form, sound, and history, Douglas's panels define—along with Locke's and Du Bois's writing and Schomburg's collecting—a concept of historical inheritance that travels along the pathways of migra-

119. Young, *The Grey Album*, p. 54.

120. See Wesley Morris, "Episode 3: The Birth of American Music," *1619* podcast, *New York Times*, September 6, 2019.

121. Guthrie P. Ramsey Jr., *Race Music: Black Cultures from Bebop to Hip Hop (Music of the African Diaspora Book 7)* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), and William Barlow, "Black Music on Radio During the Jazz Age," *African American Review* 29, no. 2 (Summer 1995), pp. 325–28.

tion. Linkages are maintained, if transformed, over space and time. This heritage and the cultural authorship it connotes might be heard—like the distant sound of drumming, the "rhythmic pulsation" that Douglas describes—with finely tuned ears.

An American Problem

Storytelling, Walter Benjamin suggested in a 1936 essay, helps us transmute information into wisdom. It is graced with sense-making power, allowing for the communication of experience beyond facts alone: "The storyteller takes what he tells from experience—his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to the tale." The art of storytelling, increasingly rare within the media-saturated, shock-laden conditions of modernity, is a profound tool in building community and connection: It absorbs collective testimony ("the ability to exchange experiences") and conveys wisdom across generations, time and space ("counsel woven into the fabric of real life").[122] Benjamin's insight, it strikes me, suggests the role that Douglas's epic visual narrative might have been intended to play in relation to the archive of printed matter housed in the library where it hangs…. And why it may have been so important for Schomburg and this cohort of collection builders to place a story—with the narrative amplitude that the German critic longed for—there.

Schomburg's papers, now housed at the library that bears his name, include a slim file that contains a prospectus by Douglas for a project entitled "Portrait of the American Negro." No other information is given, nor is any date. It seems to be an early outline for Douglas's mural project: If that is so, we can see how far the artist's thinking had come. The prospectus charts "the most important characters and events in Negro History," moving in nine sections through 1) the Revolution; 2) slave revolts, abolition, the Civil War, and Reconstruction; 3) foreign wars; 4) migration from the South; 5) riots; 6) famous trials; 7) a black leadership class; 8) political movements; and 9) religious, social, and educational institutions.[123] The sequence catalogues historical inflection points, moments of collective agency. It lays out a claim for the fullness of Black participation in the history of the country.

As completed, however, the panels do something quite different. They testify to the aspirations and failures of America, holding these things against each other—the promise of Emancipation and Reconstruction in constant tension with the dark and violent forces that would deny them. Douglas outlines the afterlife of slavery. The structures of slavery (itself barely pictured) appear in continued forms of disenfranchisement, racial terror, and the oppression of labor. In each of the three American panels, domination is never fully achieved, forms of resistance are found. Nor, however, is freedom ever fully gained. The emergence of Black politi-

122. Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller," *Illuminations*, translated by Harry Zohn, edited and with an introduction by Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), pp. 83, 86–87.

123. Aaron Douglas, "Prospectus for Portrait of the American Negro," Arthur A. Schomburg Papers.

cal power in the years after the Civil War is set against the rise of the Klan; the birth of the blues as a distinctively African-American musical form is bound up with Jim Crow sharecropping and racial terror; jazz, Harlem, and the promise of "democratic chance" against the abuses of capitalism that disproportionately impact Black labor.

The last chapter of Du Bois's book about Reconstruction, "The Propaganda of History," reflects on what he calls "the lies agreed upon,"[124] the confrontation with history that white America has largely avoided. To look squarely at America would require unraveling the stories we tell ourselves about our nation as principled, as a fundamentally innocent moral force, editing out its brutality, violence, and dependence on ideas that contradict those great ideals. This myth of America is tightly held; its undoing meets resistance. "We have too often a deliberate attempt so to change the facts of history," writes Du Bois, so "that the story will make pleasant reading for Americans."[125]

Du Bois's words point to one facet of what strikes me as so extraordinary about Douglas's work: It is insistent in its refusal of these myths of America, "the lies agreed upon." Douglas's panels address the complexities of the nation that most did not want to hear or see. They picture the practices that contradict its principles, holding them side by side: law and racial terror, civil rights and segregation, suffrage and disenfranchisement. With this doubling, Douglas shifts the sense of "double consciousness" described by Du Bois. Rather than the psyche of the Black citizen riven through the experience of being seen through the eyes of others, it makes visible America's own fault line: the discrepancy between creed and practice. Locke writes in a similar mode in *The New Negro*:

> So the choice is not between one way for the Negro and another way for the rest, but between American institutions frustrated on the one hand and American ideals progressively fulfilled and realized on the other. There is, of course, a warrantably comfortable feeling in being on the right side of the country's ideals. We realize we cannot be undone without America's undoing.[126]

What Douglas pictures is not a "Negro problem" but an American one.

124. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America*, loc. 16739.

125. Ibid., loc. 16721.

126. Locke, "The New Negro," p. 12.