

# On Time, In Time, Through Time: Aaron Douglas, *Fire!!* and the Writers of the Harlem Renaissance

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Aaron Douglas's associations with writers of the Harlem Renaissance are many and the resulting collaborations, whether in the form of dust jackets or illustrations, have bequeathed us a body of work deserving far greater critical attention. The dust jackets he designed for many of the movement's leading lights are proof. He illustrated James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1927) and *God's Trombones* (1925), Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem* (1927), Arthur Huff Fauset's *For Freedom* (1927), and Langston Hughes' *Not Without Laughter* (1930). Douglas however, was much more than an illustrator of Harlem Renaissance publications. He was also a major architect of the intellectual and aesthetic contours of the New Negro Movement as well. So, when we speak of his collaborations with writers we must see him as an equal partner in shaping the aesthetic and political vision of the time as well.

This essay focuses on Douglas' work on the brilliant but short-lived publication, *FIRE!!*, which appeared only once in November 1926. Nonetheless, it remains a lasting document of the period. After a brief overview of the context in which the journal was created I will turn my attention to Douglas' interior set of three drawings and the cover (Figures 5-8). This exploration of Douglas' work on *FIRE!!* will reveal his importance not only as a visual artist but also as a critical and historical thinker as well.

## On Time

The story of *FIRE!!* is one of the legendary tales of the renaissance. Having been supported, nurtured, chided, and chastened by their elders, a group of educated, cosmopolitan young artists—migrants most—came together to produce a high quality, if incendiary publication. Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Wallace Thurman, Richard Bruce Nugent, Gwendolyn Bennett, Aaron Douglas, Arthur Huff Fauset, Countee Cullen, and Arna Bontemps were the most serious, disciplined and talented of their generation; they gave of their time, talent, and treasure to produce a journal containing fiction, drama, essays, and visual imagery that focuses on black folk in both the urban and rural contexts. Born from a number of conversations, correspondences, and a few manifestoes, the work was what Douglas biographer Amy Helene Kirschke has called “the epitome of collaboration in the Harlem Renaissance.”<sup>1</sup> Group meetings at Hurston’s or the Douglas’s, where they edited manuscripts and made design decisions, resulted in a gem of a journal conceived and produced by black people free of the guiding hand of *Opportunity*, *Crisis*, DuBois, Charles Johnson, Charlotte Osgood Mason, and Alain Locke.

The journal succeeded in shattering expectations of respectability; expectations that confined the representation of the Negro, expectations born in struggle against the violence, both discursive and literal, of American racial stereotypes.

Douglas was not only, nor even, *the* illustrator of *FIRE!!*. He was central in helping to shape the intellectual and aesthetic vision of the publication and in guiding the interventions its editors hoped to make. While Langston Hughes’s essay “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” (1922)<sup>2</sup> is rightly hailed as the manifesto of his generation and the call to which *FIRE!!* was a response, his was certainly not the only manifesto. These were manifesto-writing times!! Perhaps not like the politically radical calls to action that would follow in the 1930s, but this group of artists were thinking, meeting, and writing about the responsibility of their generation with great passion and conviction. Zora Neale Hurston wrote constantly, especially to Langston Hughes. At one point she even wrote that she thought she’d found a better painter than Douglas. (The painter was Joe Mitchell.)<sup>3</sup> While it is not surprising that poets, novelists, and essayists wrote such pieces, Douglas also penned his own aesthetic statements as well. In a letter dated December 21, 1925 and written to Hughes, he wrote:

Your problem dear Langston, my problem, no our problem is to conceive, develop, establish an art era. Not white art painted black. . . . Let’s bare our arms and plunge 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. Let’s do the impossible. Let’s cre-

ate something transcendently material, mystically objected.  
Earthy. Spiritually earthy. Dynamic.

There is so much to say about this statement. First of all, Douglas is a writer. The construction and rhythm of this paragraph are writerly. The rhythm is established by triplets. Listen to the groupings of threes: “Your problem. . . . My problem. . . . Our problem.” This is followed by “conceive,” “develop,” “establish.” Next he gives us a series of prepositional phrases that take us deeper and deeper until a kind of resolution that ends in a final prepositional phrase:

Through laughter  
Through pain  
Through sorrow  
Through hope  
Through disappointment  
. . . into the very depths of the souls of our people.

This is no arbitrary listing. If you go beneath the surface of the laughter there is likely to be pain, the source of which is a deep sorrow, but it is neither sentimental nor nihilistic because hope still rises. Often this hope is shattered by a bitter, bitter disappointment: The hope of Reconstruction followed by the Nadir. The hope that World War I would bring justice and equality at home only to endure the riots and terrorism of East St Louis (1917) and Houston. The hope of Du Bois’ “Close Ranks” of 1918 followed by the disappointment of the Red Summer of 1919. “Close Ranks” was the editorial in which Du Bois encouraged African Americans to silence criticism of the American government, to join the war effort, and after having proven their valor and loyalty, they would finally acquire citizenship rights. However black soldiers returned to lynch mobs and race riots. Digging deep into laughter, pain, sorrow, hope and disappointment one finds the Souls of Black Folk. This is the journey the black artist must take. Douglas’ description of that journey echoes Jean Toomer’s Cane, particularly the poem “Song of the Son.” In that poem the black artist is heir to a “song-lit race of slaves” and must take the seed of that culture to create an everlasting song, “a singing tree,/caroling softly souls of slavery” Douglas’ paragraph ends by collapsing apparent binaries: “transcendently material, mystically objected, spiritually earthy.” (An aside: note the bold use of “our people,” a phrase that would be challenged by the end of the twentieth century as essentialist.)

The call of the letter is to establish “an art era,” to document a people and a time and in so doing create an era recognized for all times and by all cultures. Finally, one of the most important things about this letter is the date: December 25, 1925. Recall, Hughes “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” is not published until June 28, 1926. So Douglas’s statement predates that most famous document showing that these ideas were in the air, circulating, amongst the

artists—they were the ideas of their times. Hughes’s may have been the most articulate statement of them but they did not originate with him.

Douglas would pen other such pieces. Writing specifically about *FIRE!!* he wrote: “We believe Negro art should be trained and developed rather than capitalized and exploited. We believe finally that Negro art without Negro patronage is an impossibility.”<sup>4</sup> I have most recently seen this quotation, unattributed in Valerie Boyd’s biography of Zora Neale Hurston, *Wrapped in Rainbows*.<sup>5</sup> As such it stands out as a definitive statement about the vision and the goals of *FIRE!!*. In *Aaron Douglass: Art, Race & The Harlem Renaissance*, Douglas’s biographer, Amy Kirschke says that the statement was penned following a meeting of *FIRE!!*’s Board of Editors. We should read Douglas’ letters along with Hughes’s “Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” as companion pieces. I have devoted so much attention to the letters because I want to emphasize Douglas’ role amongst his peers. Again, he did not “illustrate” *FIRE!!*. He helped conceive, conceptualize and design it. He helped to establish its rhythm, to provide its pulse, to keep it on the beat, *on time*.

### In Time

In addition to the cover and the decorative elements, Douglas provided three drawings for *FIRE!!*. These are set off in their own section. Together they constitute their own story, their own set of visual poems. Situated between Gwendolyn Bennett’s “Wedding Day,” a story of interracial love and interracial betrayal, and Nugent’s “Smoke, Lilies and Jade,” an experimental work centering on the bohemian bisexual, Alex, the drawings have not been discussed at length. They differ greatly from Douglas’ more recognizable work though this style does appear in the February 1926 issue of *Opportunity*—the Industrial Issue. The drawings are formed by a series of uninterrupted lines. Neither silhouettes nor shadows characterize the style. Professor Kirschke finds them “far less interesting than the cover.”<sup>6</sup> Indeed they are less dramatic, but they are quite compelling when considered within the context of the rest of the publication. In *When Harlem Was In Vogue*, David Levering Lewis doesn’t mention them, referring instead to illustrations that evoke an “unspoiled Africa.”<sup>7</sup> I am not sure to what he is referring because none of these drawings reference the continent.

Let’s linger a while with the drawings of three figures, three types, indeed three characters: What story do they tell?

It is important that the drawings of the preacher (Figure 6) and the artist (Figure 7) appear side by side in the open book, for they mirror, echo, and parallel each other. The preacher stands at the pulpit, Bible open, his head turned up and away, he holds one of the characteristic or stereotypic stances of the black man of the cloth. If you’ve seen Alvin Ailey’s “Revelations” you will recognize the same bodily vocabulary: elbows bent, fist in waist, bowed leg, poised for flight. The bent arm, hand on hip breaks the vertical line of his body making a

45 degree angle with the podium. The other hand is also bent at the elbow, but it reaches across the body, forming a perpendicular line across his lanky body ending in an elastic hand with elongated fingers gesturing “where?” The preacher presents the artist to us. The artist’s figure echoes the preacher: arm also bent at the elbow forming a perpendicular line across his lanky body ending in an exaggerated, elastic hand, elongated fingers holding a paint brush. Instead of lectern and Bible we have an easel and canvas. The squares and rectangles of the easel and canvas mirror the squares and rectangles of the lectern and Bible. Both figures have the same facial features, same bodies, same feet and shoes. The artist’s Afro is bigger. They are the same or brothers, kindred spirits. The preacher is an oratorical artist, “making Moses and Jesus words into song” (Toomer). He bears the culture of oratorical virtuosity as much as he lifts and bears the hope of his people. The artist is a spiritual guide, digging deep into the souls of his people in order to offer them visions of themselves, their past and their future. Indeed this does seem to be a tale that is fitting, in style and content for the pages of *FIRE!!*. The artist as an extension of a culture emanating from ordinary black people, creating an art that is at its best when it portrays them unrestricted, free of constraint and in so doing, affirms their messy, complicated, sometimes beautiful, sometimes ugly humanity. The last image is of a waitress (Figure 8), a working-class black woman with a flapper bob, rolled stockings, and high-heeled pumps. Her coquettish, flirtatious, mischievous eyes gesture back at the two men. Her features are softer and less serious than theirs but she is linked to them in posture (though she is less angular) and in the relationship of her body to the table behind her. Unlike the podium, the artist’s table and easel, the café table is round as are the objects that sit atop it and the tray she holds. She is sensual and slippery probably not controlled by the preacher’s rhetoric or the artist’s brush. Much of the discourse of the Harlem Renaissance revolved around whether and how to represent the newly emergent black working class. The waitress’s refusal to be controlled evokes this discussion. Where is she? A restaurant? A café? A cabaret? A speakeasy? She is one version of the New Negro woman; certainly not Victorian, she is clearly sexual and sensual though not like Thurman’s Cordelia who “physically, if not mentally, was a potential prostitute.”

Douglas’ narrative situates the artist between the preacher (a classic folk figure) and a new, urban, working-class woman. So placed in the publication, *IN TIME*, with the pulse of the journal, Douglas’s drawings, so different from his abstract silhouettes, create a narrative linking a Southern folk tradition to the urban working class. (In *Cane*, Toomer does this as well.) How fitting that a volume that gives us Thurman’s young prostitute Cordelia, Hurston’s cakewalkers Effie and John, Hughes’s elevator boy, Bennett’s brute Paul, Nugent’s bisexual Alex—how fitting that Douglas would contribute the preacher, the artist and the waitress. All of them in motion, on trains, elevators, horse and buggy, on the dance floor. Douglas’ figures possess mobility in the very bodies they inhabit. They move in time.

## Through Time

Let us now turn our attention to the cover, which is so very different from the interior drawings. It is more in line with Douglas's other work, especially the poster of the Krigwa Players Little Negro Theater of Harlem, May 1926. Upon first glance of the cover our eye is drawn to the Sphinx. At his hindquarters a circle linked to another circle ends in a hook; this gives the appearance of a chain. If we step back we see the links form an earring and the hook is on the ear of a black head—a person of African descent by features and color—a person of Sub-Saharan African descent. The Sphinx sits inside the black figure. Its chin echoes the figure's chin, as do its lips and nose. Only the eyes and hairline differ. The chin is also an outline of Sub-Saharan Africa. The images here are also found on the Krigwa Players poster where the Sphinx sits separate from the figure in the upper right corner, the east: land of the rising sun, facing the pyramids. The black ear-ringed figure sits on a mat, yogi like, holding a mask in his uplifted, flattened hand. Visually there is much more going on the poster than the cover but the cover is at once more simple and more complex: the Sphinx inside the African whose head is filled with *FIRE!!*.

Douglas often made use of Egyptian imagery and form. He used silhouettes much in the manner of the Egyptians. He took specific elements from them, the hand, for instance. Douglas often spoke of the significance of Egyptian forms to his own art: "The only thing that I did that was not specifically taken from the Egyptians was an eye."<sup>8</sup> Many artists of his day were inspired by Egypt. Even filmmakers turned there: think of, for instance, Theda Barrer in *Cleopatra*. Black artists were calling upon Egyptian imagery as well. Professor Kirschke writes: "Egypt was a common vocabulary to achieve the goal" of "representing African ancestry and common heritage." Egyptian art, Cubism, Art Deco (itself influenced by Egypt): Douglas would utilize all of these visual vocabularies. In insisting upon Egypt's relationship to the continent of Africa, Douglas is a precursor to latter day Afro-centrists whose insistence that Egypt was an African civilization still sparks controversy and ire. One need only consider the more recent debates over Martin Bernal's *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization*. In three volumes Bernal argues Egypt provided the source for the cultural achievements of ancient Greece (and therefore for Western civilization).<sup>9</sup> Bernal's research was greeted by a strong scholarly critique by more conventional classicists.<sup>10</sup>

So Douglas looks forward to contemporary Afro-centrists (let alone to the jazz artist and composer, Sun Ra). But he is also situating himself in a debate that had been going on since the nineteenth century. The imagery of this cover is in dialogue with and departs from both those who proceed and those who follow him.

As early as 1828, if not before, African Americans were arguing for Egypt's significance as an African civilization. They were countering thinkers like David Hume and Thomas Jefferson who claimed that no great civilization ever arose

from the Dark Continent. In addition, they also were intervening in a discourse currently known as American Egyptomania—a discourse that posited Egypt as a white civilization and as proof of the Negro’s inferiority. One reader of *Freedom’s Journal*, identified only as “A Constant reader,” wrote to the journal citing sources that identify the Ethiopians and Cushites as black skinned people who inhabited Egypt. According to Constant reader, these were people of tremendous creativity, valor and achievement in the arts, sciences and warfare. The letter was published Dec. 5, 1828 and concluded: “Our origin is such that, no one, however exalted his station in life; need be ashamed of having descended from black parentage.”

In 1830 David Walker, in his *Appeal to the Colored People of the World*, would agree: “The Egyptians were Africans or colored people, such as we are—some of them yellow, others dark, a mixture of Ethiopia and the natives of Egypt.”

In 1879 Martin R. Delany in *Principia of Ethnology: The Origin of Races and Color* wrote: “The Negro race comprised the whole native population and ruling people of the upper and lower region of the Nile.”<sup>11</sup>

Even Frederick Douglass, who so often disagreed with Delaney would write in 1884:

The fact that Egypt was one of the earliest abodes of learning and civilization is as firmly established as are the everlasting hills. . . . Egypt is in Africa. . . . The ancient Egyptians were not white people . . . but about as dark in complexion as in any in this country who are considered genuine Negroes.<sup>12</sup>

The excitement over and debates about Egypt were resurrected with the discovery of King Tut’s tomb in November 1922. (Tutankhamon 1341-1323 BC) The media provided intense coverage of the discovery throughout Europe and the United States and the debate about the race of the ancient Egyptians came to the fore yet again. In an exciting new project, the historian Robert Hill is exploring the relationship between Art Deco, the discovery of Tut’s tomb, and the Harlem Renaissance. According to Hill the interest in Egypt generated by the discovery of Tut’s tomb had a much stronger influence on the thinkers and artists of the Harlem Renaissance than did the cultures of West Africa. However, according to Hill, scholars have focused primarily on the influence of West African plastic arts because of the influence of Alain Locke and the white philanthropist and collector, Albert C. Barnes. Hill argues that the Harlem Renaissance was the result of “an extraordinary African American interest in things Egyptian that led the way for a regeneration of African American culture.” According to Hill, both Locke and Barnes dismissed Egyptian influences in an effort to link African American arts with more “primitive forms” of African art because those forms were influencing modernist artists such as Picasso and Matisse.<sup>13</sup> According to

Hill, the classical Egyptian influence on artists such as Douglas is much more longstanding than their engagement of primitivism.

While my discussion of Douglas departs from Professor Hill's, we are in agreement that by the time the Douglas image appears on the cover of *FIRE!!* Black intellectuals had devoted a century of energy, time, and ink to arguing that Egypt was an African, Black African civilization. For Egypt is in Africa and some Egyptians were black. In Douglas' image for *FIRE!!* Egypt is literally situated within Africa. In so doing, Douglas is not only participating in the century long discussion about the relationship between ancient Egypt and sub-Saharan Africa, he is also privileging black Africa. However, while the figure, the content of the work represents sub-Saharan Africa, the form, with its flattened silhouette is not that of an African mask, but Egyptian.

There seems to be a special irony in celebrating the grand achievements of an empire built on slave labor in the context of a publication that seeks to highlight and uplift those who have been most victimized by imperialism, greed, degradation of the slave trade and the institution of slavery and the high cost of civilization.

The same might be said of those intellectuals who have celebrated the Pyramids and the Sphinx at the expense of sub-Saharan Africa because it so resembles European notions of Civilization and Empire. But, here, on the cover of *FIRE!!* Douglas seems to be saying that Egypt is not only in Africa, it is of Africa. It does not sit hierarchically at the top of all African societies but is consumed by and within a construct of Africa that is decidedly black. A simple shift in perspective reveals the dominant figure is unquestionably Black. The *FIRE!!* in his brain parallels the grand artistic achievement of the Sphinx and gives birth (Athena-like, Black Athena) to the vision of younger Negro artists whose own brilliant creative achievement we find within . . . on time, in time, through time.

## Notes

1. Amy Helene Kirschke, *Aaron Douglas: Art, Race, and the Harlem Renaissance* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995), 51.
2. Langston Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," *The Nation*, 23 June 1926.
3. Zora Neale Hurston to Langston Hughes, Sept. 20, 1928, in *Zora Neale Hurston: A Life in Letters*, ed. Carla Kaplan (New York: Doubleday, 2002), 126.
4. Quoted in Amy Helene Kirschke, *Aaron Douglas: Art, Race, & The Harlem Renaissance* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995), 87.
5. Valerie Boyd, *Wrapped in Rainbows: The Life of Zora Neale Hurston* (New York: Scribner, 2003), 134.
6. Kirschke, 88.
7. David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (New York: Penguin, 1997), 229.
8. Quoted in Kirschke, *Aaron Douglas*, 83.
9. See *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization*: I, The Fabrication of Ancient Greece 1785-1985; II, The Archaeological and Documentary Evidence; III, The Linguistic Evidence (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987, 1991, 2006).
10. See Mary R. Lefkowitz & Guy M. Rogers, *Black Athena Revisted*; Lefkowitz, *Not Out of Africa*.
11. Martin R. Delany, *Principia of Ethnology* (Philadelphia: Harper & Brother, 1879), 78.
12. Frederick Douglass, "The Claims of the Negro Ethnologically Considered," a speech delivered at the Western Reserve College of Rochester in Rochester, New York, July 12, 1854.
13. See Interview with Robert Hill, "The Origins of the Harlem Renaissance in the Discourse of Egyptology, 1922-25" <http://will.illinois.edu/focus580/interviews/C487/> Professor Hill also shared

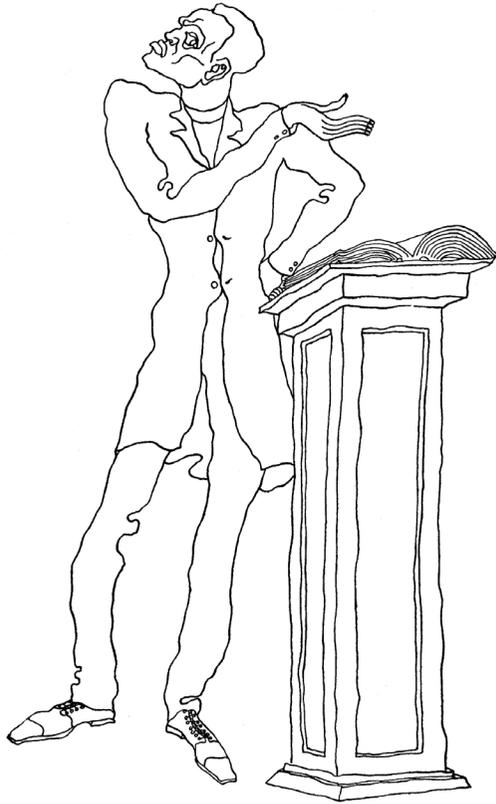
his research in a talk at the Institute for Research in African American History, Columbia University, Interview with Robert Hill, "The Origins of the Harlem Renaissance in the Discourse of Egyptology, 1922-25" Sept. 15, 2008.

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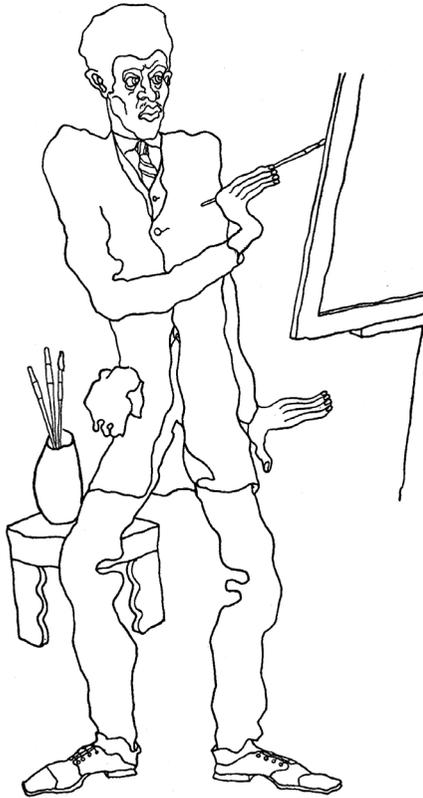
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**Figure 5:** Aaron Douglas (American, 1899-1979), *FIRE!! A Quarterly Devoted to Younger Negro Artists* cover, November 1926. Courtesy of Collection of Thomas H. Wirth, Elizabeth, New Jersey.



**Figure 6:** Aaron Douglas (American, 1899-1979), untitled drawing (The Preacher) from *FIRE!! A Quarterly Devoted to Younger Negro Artists*, November 1926. Courtesy of Collection of Thomas H. Wirth, Elizabeth, New Jersey.



**Figure 7:** Aaron Douglas (American, 1899-1979), untitled drawing (The Artist) from *FIRE!! A Quarterly Devoted to Younger Negro Artists*, November 1926. Courtesy of Collection of Thomas H. Wirth, Elizabeth, New Jersey.



**Figure 8:** Aaron Douglas (American, 1899-1979), untitled drawing (The Waitress) from *FIRE!! A Quarterly Devoted to Younger Negro Artists*, November 1926. Courtesy of Collection of Thomas H. Wirth, Elizabeth, New Jersey.