

The Burden of Black Womanhood: Aaron Douglas and the “Apogée of Beauty”

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We are possessed, you know, with the idea that it is necessary to be white, to be beautiful. Nine times out of ten it is just the reverse. It takes lots of training or a tremendous effort to down the idea that thin lips and straight nose is the apogee of beauty. But once free you can look back with a sigh of relief and wonder how anyone could be so deluded.¹

Aaron Douglas came to Harlem in 1925, full of dreams and aspirations to work as an artist in New York. He left a secure position as a high school teacher in Kansas City, Missouri and risked coming to a city where he had only one acquaintance. This was characteristic of him. Douglas was an artist who would take risks his entire life: he had entered University of Nebraska ten days into the term as a young student, traveling to Nebraska with no transcripts or letters, just a determination to learn. He was willing to do whatever he needed to do to obtain a college education, despite late enrollment. Douglas had taken similar risks as a young man, when he traveled to Detroit to try to find summer employment in fields of work where he held little or no experience. Douglas was willing to take the risk of accepting a position at a high school in Kansas City which employed only one other black teacher; finally, he was willing to take the risk to leave that position and travel to New York, with little money, but plenty of hope and expectation.

Douglas's amazing success was greatly influenced by two women in his life. His mother, Elizabeth, encouraged his interest in visual arts and provided

inspiration for Aaron as a young boy, when he spent hours watching his mother paint and draw. Elizabeth had taken lessons from itinerate artists traveling through Topeka. His second great inspiration came from Alta Sawyer, his high school sweetheart and future wife. Although Douglas repeatedly referred to Alta as his inspiration, she was more than that. His numerous letters to Sawyer reveal her strong role in his creative process and his unique and progressive view of beauty in a time when African American features in portraiture were rarely celebrated. Sawyer would become Douglas's partner in every way; making creative decisions with him, navigating the politics of Harlem, at which she was particularly adept, choosing patrons and commissions that would further his career. Sawyer was a teacher, as was Douglas, and certainly helped provide insight for his very positive images of women, particularly as educators. Their home on Edgecombe Avenue in Harlem would provide a central place for the creative elite to meet, plan, and socialize.

Immediately upon his arrival in Harlem, Douglas was introduced to W.E.B. Du Bois, the by-now legendary black intellectual and leader of the time, and editor of the NAACP's *The Crisis* magazine. Douglas's life-long connection with Du Bois would greatly influence his art, including his images of women. Du Bois was a strong advocate of women's rights, including economic rights, the right to vote, and reproductive rights, which he called the "right of motherhood at her own discretion." He compared some aspects of womanhood to slavery: "Many things still remind us of that stage of culture: the loss of a woman's name by her marriage; the persistent idea that a married woman should not have a career; and the older opposition to women suffrage."² Du Bois recognized the plight of black women was even more difficult than that of their male counterparts, referred to by historian Michael A. Gomez as "triple consciousness."³ Du Bois employed numerous women as visual artists and writers. One of his most important collaborators was Jessie Fauset, who worked with Du Bois when he served as editor of *The Crisis* magazine. Du Bois's image of women went beyond that of African American woman; as a passionate advocate of the Pan-African movement, he saw the strength in all women of African descent. He celebrated the strength, resolve, and beauty of black women, which Aaron Douglas, as a visual artist, would do his entire life. Du Bois wrote in *Blackwater* of the oppression of women in Western societies:

Our women in black had freedom thrust contemptuously upon them. . . . [W]e have still our poverty and degradation, our lewdness and our cruel toil; but we have, too, a vast group of women of Negro blood who for strength of character, cleanness of soul, and unselfish devotion of purpose, is today easily the peer of any group of women in the civilized world. And more than that, in the great rank and file of our five million women we have the up-working of new revolutionary ideals,

which must in time have vast influence on the thought and action of this land.⁴

Du Bois noted the beauty of African American women. “I honor the women of my race. Their beauty,—their dark and mysterious beauty of midnight eyes, crumpled hair, and soft, full-features. . . . No other women on earth could have emerged from the hell of force and temptation which once engulfed and still surrounds black women in America with half the modesty and womanliness that they retain.” Du Bois searched to “bring some tribute to these long-suffering victims, these burdened sisters of mine, whom the world, the wise, white world, loves to affront and ridicule and wantonly to insult.” He went on to proclaim “none have I known more sweetly feminine, more unswervingly loyal, more desperately earnest, and more instinctively pure in body and in soul than the daughters of my black mothers.”⁵ Du Bois also understood that one of the greatest obstacles black women faced to achieve the vote, was racism from white suffragists.⁶

Aaron Douglas held black women in the same high regard as Du Bois. His letters to Alta Sawyer indicate an excitement and anticipation of endless possibilities. Their intimate correspondence, some of which took place while Sawyer was briefly married to another man, reveals a strong partnership and mutual respect, as well as a celebration of the splendor of black women. Douglas saw the beauty of African American features; this can be seen in his art, including in his 1936 portrait, *Alta*, at the Fisk University Galleries in Nashville. The portrait is respectful, straightforward and accurate, reflecting as well the portrait style of Winold Reiss, his white teacher, whose studio he would join shortly after his arrival in Harlem. Douglas wrote Sawyer of his frustration with how African American were depicted, and the need to reeducate the black audience too:

I have seen Reiss’s drawings for the New Negro. They are marvelous. Many colored people don’t like Reiss’s drawings. We are possessed, you know, with the idea that it is necessary to be white, to be beautiful. Nine times out of ten it is just the reverse. It takes lots of training or a tremendous effort to down the idea that thin lips and straight nose is the apogée of beauty. But once free you can look back with a sigh of relief and wonder how anyone could be so deluded.⁷

He understood the power of creating “as nearly like nature as possible.” “I have no objection to a pretty face else how could I love you as I do,” Douglas wrote Alta Sawyer in 1925. “But I do object to people holding up pretty faces as the acme of beauty, then saying that the business of art is to depict beauty. It is revolting. So when you see these pictures by Reiss please don’t look for so called beauty. It ain’t there. But there is a powerful lot of art.”⁸

It was during these formative years, his first years in Harlem, that along with Sawyer, Du Bois and Reiss, Douglas formed his view of beauty, and the

unique way in which he depicted women. Winold Reiss encouraged Douglas to explore modern art, including Cubism. He also asked him to consider the German folk art cut-out technique *Scherenschnitt*, and to research African and other non-western art forms. He suggested that Douglas examine Egyptian art and investigate American Negro spirituals, dance, and folklore as possible symbolic motifs in his visual designs. He believed that Douglas, as an African American, had the chance to depict African Americans with dignity and accuracy, to celebrate beauty in his work. Douglas believed that Reiss wanted him to arrive “at something of a style in art that would reflect my background. . . . What kind of picture, what kind of world does a black artist see, and transcribe. . . .” Douglas recognized the Reiss was a wonderful artist, but that Reiss understood he could not see the world as a black artist would. “I had to do this,” Douglas concluded.⁹ Douglas also regularly collaborated with women writers, as early as 1925 illustrating Georgia Douglas Johnson’s “The Black Runner” for the September *Crisis*. His collaboration was not limited to *Crisis*; he also worked regularly for *Opportunity* magazine. Sometimes this collaboration was merely an assignment to provide illustrations for an essay or poem; other commissions, to a lesser extent, as his extensive letters with Alta Sawyer reference, include discussions and the exchange of ideas between Douglas and the writers at *Crisis* and *Opportunity*. The majority of contributing writers to these journals were men.

Aaron Douglas was an educator, as were Alta Sawyer and W.E.B. Du Bois. One of Du Bois’s passions in the magazine *Crisis*, was to encourage the pursuit of education, including a university education. Du Bois wrote in *Darkwater* “no nation tomorrow can call itself civilized which does not give every single human being college and vocational training free and under the best teaching force procurable for love or money.”¹⁰ Douglas sometimes combined the image of teacher/mother in his work; this becomes clear in one of his greatest works, a large mural series for Fisk University’s new Library, Cravath Hall. In this commission, the Fisk administration gave Douglas the freedom to create any subject or design he chose, and would include the second floor card catalogue room, the north and south reading rooms, as well as the periodicals room and Negro Collection room on the third floor. Douglas described the cycle as a “panorama of the development of black people in this hemisphere, in the new world” beginning with Africa, through slavery, and culminating with life in contemporary America. He called this cycle, “The Pageant of the Negro.” He also planned seven panels that included representations of Day, Philosophy, Drama, Music, Poetry, Science and Night in the card catalogue room. Douglas included the great inspirations and sources of spiritual light in the South Reading Room, the *Negro in America*. One of these inspirations was the light of education, symbolized by Fisk’s Jubilee Hall. This mural, which no longer exists, can be seen in a photograph of the time. (Figure 9) In the mural, Fisk’s Jubilee Hall is shown in silhouette. Jubilee Hall was the first permanent college building for Negroes in the South, built by funds raised by the Jubilee singers. Douglas described the hall as “in the early years of freedom a beacon of light in almost total darkness. This building, springing

from the depths of the souls of black folk, makes a perfect symbol for Negro education.”¹¹ The mural shows graduates leaving the building to work in their various professions. Douglas brought together his strong belief in education as the escape from racial discrimination and poverty and his sense of an African American group identity that could be realized through a collective historical memory of Africa. Among those figures representing professions: a woman in the front of the figures exiting Jubilee Hall, her body parallel to the picture plane in the style of Egyptian relief, one hand on a glove, her other hand turned away from her, her face in profile looking out to her future. She combines characteristics of Egyptian Art, Cubism, and West African masks of the Ivory Coast, particularly the Dan society; she is truly the pan-African woman. She is an educator, and she can also be representative of a mother figure. Du Bois often wrote of the important position of the educator/teacher, as well as the parent in the position of educator. Douglas would repeat this strong woman’s profile in his 1944 *Building More Stately Mansions*. (Figure 10) Here, in a panel meant to represent the progression of cultures and civilizations from the dawn of recorded history to the present, Douglas included male figures carrying out work in agriculture, construction, science, and industry. He reserved the most important position in this composition for the sole woman in the group of adults, the teacher/mother figure, who is highlighted by a series of concentric circles, executed in a style reminiscent of Orphism. The circles bring us to her hand, which is open, reaching out and receiving knowledge, her other arm is around two young children. She stands in front of a globe, her role as teacher and mother is of the utmost importance. She is executed in the characteristic Douglas style, a pan-Africanist woman of strength and conviction.

The recently restored Fisk library murals, “The Pageant of the Negro,” also reveal Douglas’s unique view of women and their role in African American identity and collective memory. When the mural depicting enslaved figures, chained together and en route to the slave ship, was restored in spring of 2003, Douglas’s sensitive portrayal of the woman slave was fully revealed. Douglas shows a series of slaves on the south wall of the North Reading Room, nine men and one woman, trudging across foliage with tropical palm fronds framing their outlined bodies, as they approach the slave ship. Some of the men look forward towards the ship, some look backwards, a few look down at the ground. The one figure who is truly emotive and expressive is the sole woman in the group of slaves. Only she openly mourns this living nightmare, the loss of her life, her family, her home, the terror of the future. While her muscular legs carry her forward, her face points heavenward, her hair indicates movement and she trudges ahead. She cries out in sorrow and mourning, her expressive “slit eyes” of an Ivory Coast Dan mask look towards the sky, her mouth cries out, with open, full, expressive lips, in pain and sorrow. She is the only one of the group who openly mourns the destruction of her life in Africa. (Figure 11) Perhaps she cries out in Ashanti a saying which also existed as the Adinkra symbol *Nyame Biribi wo soro*, “Nyame biribi wo soro na ma embeka mensa,”¹² a statement of

hope, this time, desperation: “Oh God, There is something in the heavens, let it reach me.” In the newly discovered end wall mural in the North Reading Room, Douglas again allows the woman to express the profound sorrow of the effects of slavery, but this time, in a totally new way: the slave ship sails away from the coast of Africa, highlighted by concentric circles behind it which provide the ship a dramatic silhouette. On the shore, left behind, is one sole woman, a slave who was not taken with the group. Her sorrow is just as profound: her family, her friends are gone; she is left behind, alone. No other artist of the period creating such murals on African American life, created such an expressive figure, an expression of emotion and extreme grief that Douglas reserves again for only a woman. (Figure 12)

Douglas never forgot his commitment to express all forms of beauty, including that of an African woman. The apogée of beauty he embraced was not that of a white woman, and his May 1927 cover for *Opportunity Magazine* makes that perfectly evident. Douglas carefully copied a photograph of a Mangbetu woman in the Belgian Congo (now the Democratic Republic of Congo), a photograph taken by Leon Poirier and George Specht during the French Citroën expedition through Africa in 1925. The image they took was heavily reproduced in postcard form, and featured a Mangbetu woman as an expression of beauty in the Congo, with an elongated head and an artistic hair style, wrapped around a basket frame, to make it appear even more elongated. Douglas’s cover celebrated another form of beauty, one whose culture saw it as a symbol of wisdom and magnificence.

Du Bois appointed Douglas to the position of Art Director of the *Crisis* between March and December 1927. While this was a largely titular position, Douglas nevertheless created some of his more interesting images of women during this time period, as did other artists of the magazine. While Douglas served as art director, a special education issue was published in August 1927, which featured a cover by Charles C. Dawson. (Figure 13) Dawson illustrates two figures, one is a young black man wearing a mortar board and carrying the banner of *The Crisis* with an American flag partially exposed behind it. The figure who leads the cause for education is a position reserved for a woman: she is young, attractive, in Egyptian dress with the nemes headdress, holding a torch. She ties the male student to the past of African history and culture via Egypt and leads him to the future.

In September 1927 Douglas created one of his most forceful images of a woman, for the cover of *The Crisis, The Burden of Black Womanhood*. It is here we see his own view of women, and that of Du Bois as described in his 1920 essay in *Blackwater*, illuminated. (Figure 14) This composition includes the figure of a woman in a long Egyptian-influenced garment. We see a side view of her hips and a silhouette of the front of her body. She holds up a round shape, “The World.” She looks up, with face in profile and slit eyes that resemble African masks of the Ivory Coast, a style frequently employed by Douglas. Her lined hair too recalls the headdress of an Egyptian nemes. A cityscape is included below, resembling art deco drawings of skyscrapers, with the billowing smoke of industry behind

it. One simple cabin, perhaps representing her humble beginnings, is on the far right. On the left, we see three pyramids and a palm tree, perhaps indicating her origins. Papyrus blossoms in outline, with a deco handling, are scattered in the composition. This woman is not just the African woman carrying her wares balanced on her head, as Douglas would illustrate many African women: the woman bears the burdens of the world; she carries them like a female Hercules. Art Historian Richard Powell has called her an “Afro-Deco Caryatid.” This expressive face would be used again in his Fisk murals; it is similar to that of the young woman slave. The image appealed directly to the female audience of the *Crisis*.

Douglas’s style would influence several artists who followed him, including two women artists. Other artists turned to Egyptian art for inspiration. Joyce Carrington’s untitled September 1928 cover shows a woman in an African setting, complete with palm tree, pyramid, and African necklace. She also sports a 1920s hairstyle and what appears to be a string of beads, typical for a flapper’s attire. (Figure 15) She is a symbol of modern Africa, a universal woman of the Diaspora. Her 1920s contemporary styling makes her accessible and familiar to readers of the *Crisis*. Likewise, Celeste Smith’s deco-influenced drawing, *Excelsior*, which appeared inside the January 1929 issue, demonstrates an obvious influence of Aaron Douglas. (Figure 16) Smith depicts a nude figure, arms reaching out, balancing on the world, standing on an outline of the continent of Africa. Smith uses rays of light inspired by cubism, Orphism, and modernism to accentuate the figure. Two rays intersect to spotlight the figure, providing bright white light behind the body. Two shadows appear behind it in three different shades, surely indicating the many colors of African peoples, a pan-Africanist touch. Both are strong, positive images of women, in this case inspired by Douglas and created by women artists.

Douglas often collaborated with writers, not only on the pages of *Crisis* and *Opportunity* magazines, but also for book illustrations. He created numerous covers and illustrations for notable Harlem Renaissance writers, including Langston Hughes and James Weldon Johnson. Many of these images include strong, modern women, who are pan-Africanist in style, including elements of African iconography from several different cultures such as Egypt, Ethiopia, and the Ivory Coast. His modern African American woman, seen in his *Prodigal Son* (Figure 20) done in 1927 for James Weldon Johnson’s *God’s Trombones* and similarly in an undated pen-and-ink drawing of the same period, (Figure 17) shows such a pan-Africanist woman. The central female figure is the essence of the contemporary woman, the embodiment of modernism. She is shown in flat silhouette, again, her body parallel to the picture plane, dancing with abandon while she holds the hand of a man in a stationary position, a horn player to the left of her, precisionist skyscrapers behind her, with hints of her heritage behind her to the right, an African idol, palm fronds, and her more recent past, a humble cabin as her rural roots. Her face is again that of a Western African mask, yet she is all about modernity and abandon. She is free to do as she pleases. An artist and

scientist are placed to the right of her, freedom and release is achieved through education and through the arts, through music and dance.

So too Douglas created images of strong women of Africa and the Western world for Paul Morand's *Black Magic*, published in 1930 and for numerous book covers and interior illustrations for leading black writers of the era. Douglas would continue his images of women as leaders, with his May 1929 cover of *Crisis* honoring the twentieth anniversary of the NAACP, an event commemorated by the image of a contemporary African American woman, and in his 1933-40 *Founding of Chicago*. (Figure 18) Here Haitian Jean Baptiste Pointe du Sable points toward the city, with an enslaved woman/mother behind him, her face again showing the emotion and pain of slavery, feelings Pointe du Sable does not express in a face that is not visible to the viewer. The woman/mother holds up her baby, her arm still shackled, her face facing heavenward, crying out, her Dan-mask-inspired face in silhouette. The baby embodies hope; unlike the mother, the baby is free and is therefore the promise of the future.

Douglas would repeatedly use women to express profound emotion, to allow the viewer to empathize with the experience of African American life. In his painting *Into Bondage* (1936), a mural created for the Texas Centennial Exhibition, Douglas creates a line of shackled slaves, who trudge towards two slave ships, heads hanging (Figure 19). One male figure looks towards the light of a single star, emotionless. The figure whom Douglas has depicted with emotion is the sole woman in the composition; placed on the far left. She holds her manacled wrists straight above her head, while concentric, Orphist circles of light pierce her arms and face. Her arms seem to touch the slave ship in the distance, her mouth is open, she cries out, looking heavenward for hope. Renée Ater has explained the use of these concentric circles in the composition: they move the viewer's eyes outward and also act as the sorrowful sounds of the spirituals. Douglas used such circles to suggest the melodies of slave songs.¹³

In the companion panel, *Aspiration* (1936) the sole woman in the panel, who is seated next to two standing men, is not overtly emotional. She is the only figure, however, who is depicted in profile, and her face is again highlighted in the composition by concentric circles and a star, which Renée Ater has identified as the lone star of Texas.¹⁴ The woman holds a book in her right hand, she is educated, and in contrast to the scientists next to her, represents the humanities, in particular, arts and literature.¹⁵

Aaron Douglas's view of women was formulated by a strong and dedicated mother who largely raised Douglas on her own. As an artist, his mother Elizabeth provided the role model of both determination and artistic expression that would stay with Douglas throughout his lifetime. His relationship with Alta Sawyer Douglas, an educated woman who became extremely important in the running of the Urban League in Harlem, with whom he had a strong and equal relationship, also provided inspiration for his images of women. Finally, his close working relationship with the difficult, but surely inspiring W.E.B. Du Bois, who spent a great deal of time partnering with women in the creation of the *Crisis*, both

in the employment of women artists, and in the numerous editorials which supported women's causes, provided insight for Douglas as a young artist. Aaron Douglas formulated a style of art during the Harlem Renaissance that included a consistently strong and positive, as well as emotionally expressive view of women that was unique in the era. He celebrated black identity, an apogée of beauty which was shared with a large audience in his paintings, murals, and most importantly, his book and magazine illustrations.

Notes

1. Douglas to Alta Sawyer, 1925, Box 1, Folder 1, Douglas Papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.
2. Irene Diggs, "Du Bois and Children," *Phylon* 36, 4 (1976): 386-387.
3. Micheal A. Gomez. "Of Du Bois and Diaspora: The Challenge of African American Studies," Special Issue: "Back to the Future of Civilization: Celebrating 30 Years of African American Studies" *Journal of Black Studies* 35 (Nov., 2004), 185.
4. Du Bois, "The Damnation of Women," *Darkwater: Voice from Within the Veil*. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1920), (rep., Millwood, NY: Kraus-Thompson, 1975), 185.
5. *Ibid.*, 185-186.
6. Glenda Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 211-212.
7. Douglas to Alta Sawyer, 1925, Box 1, Folder 1, Douglas Papers.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Interview of Aaron Douglas by Ann Allen Shockley, November 19, 1975. Black Oral Histories (BOH), Fisk University Special Collections, Nashville.
10. Du Bois, "The Immortal Child," *Darkwater*, 212.
11. Douglas, "An Autobiography," pp.14-15, box 1, folder 1, Aaron Douglas Papers, Fisk University, Franklin Library Special Collections, Nashville.
12. West African Ashanti Adinkra symbols have been traced back to the seventeenth century.
13. Ater, "Creating a 'usable past' and a 'future perfect society.' Aaron Douglas's Murals for the 1936 Texas Centennial Exhibition," *Aaron Douglas African American Modernist*. Susan Earle, ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 107.
14. *Ibid.* 108.
15. *Ibid.*



Figure 9: Aaron Douglas (American, 1899-1979), *Negro in America*, 1929-1930. Oil on Canvas attached to wall (Mural), Office of Admissions, Cravath Hall, Fisk University. Courtesy of Fisk University. Photography by George Adams.



Figure 10: Aaron Douglas (American, 1899-1979), *Building Thee More Stately Mansions* 1944. Oil on canvas, Fisk University Galleries Collection, Fisk University.



Figure 11: Aaron Douglas (American, 1899-1979), *Slave Crying Out*, 1929-1930. Oil on Canvas attached to wall (Mural), Board of Trustees Conference Room, Cravath Hall, Fisk University. Courtesy of Fisk University. Photography by George Adams.



Figure 12: Aaron Douglas (American, 1899-1979), *Slave Left Behind* 1929-1930, Oil on Canvas attached to wall (Mural), Board of Trustees Conference Room, Cravath Hall, Fisk University. Courtesy of Fisk University. Photography by George Adams.

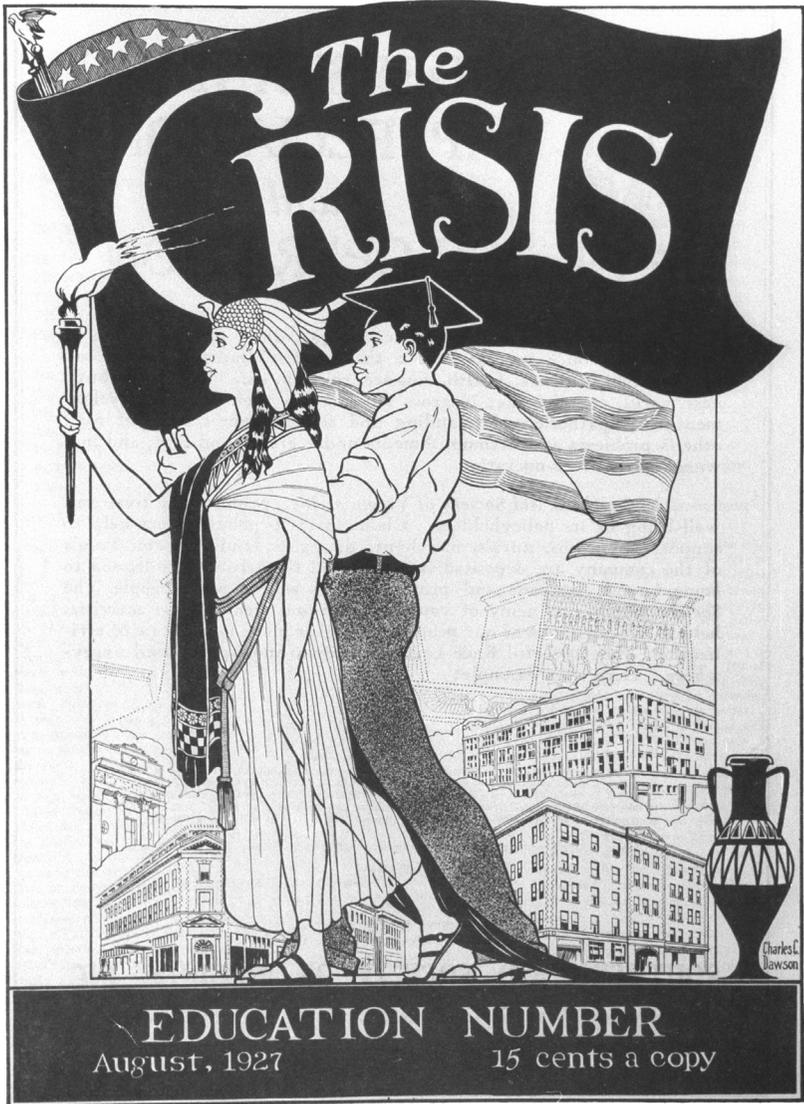


Figure 13: Charles Dawson (American, 1889-1981), untitled, *The Crisis* cover, August 1927.



Figure 14: Aaron Douglas (American, 1899-1979), *The Burden of Black Womanhood*, *The Crisis* cover, September 1927.

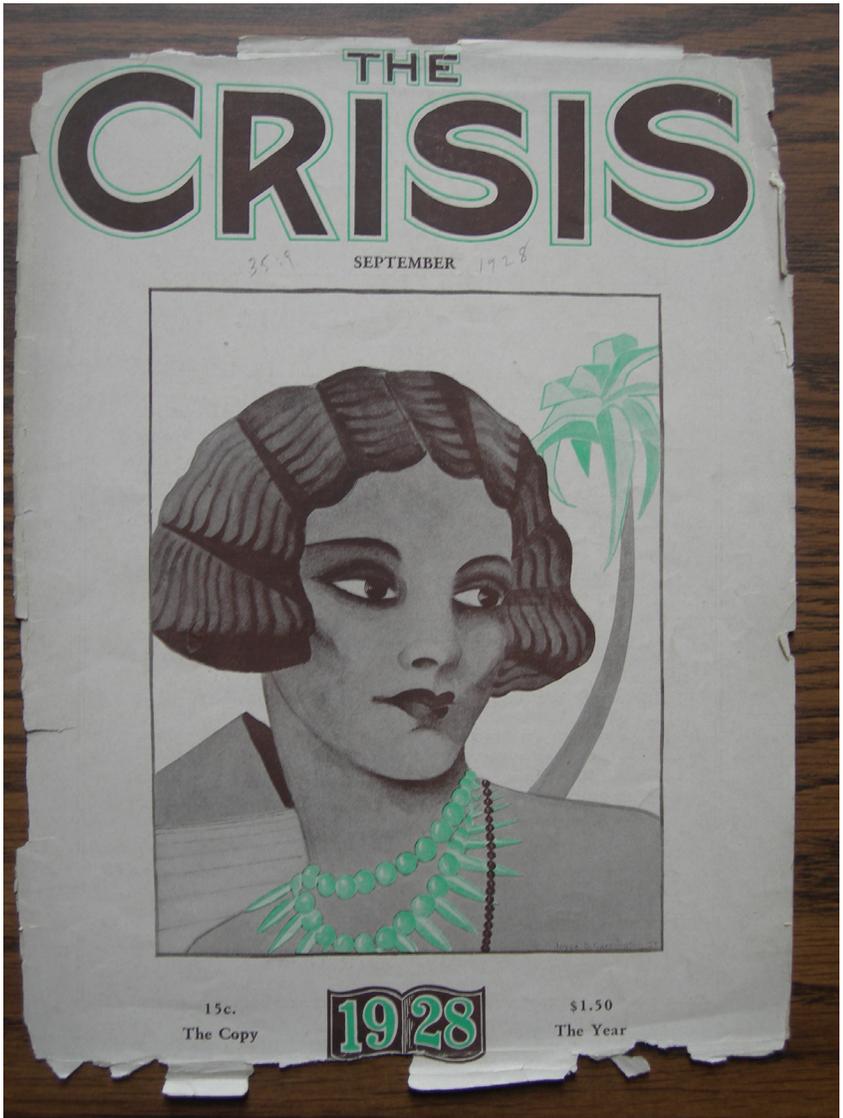


Figure 15: Joyce Carrington, untitled, *The Crisis* cover, September 1928.

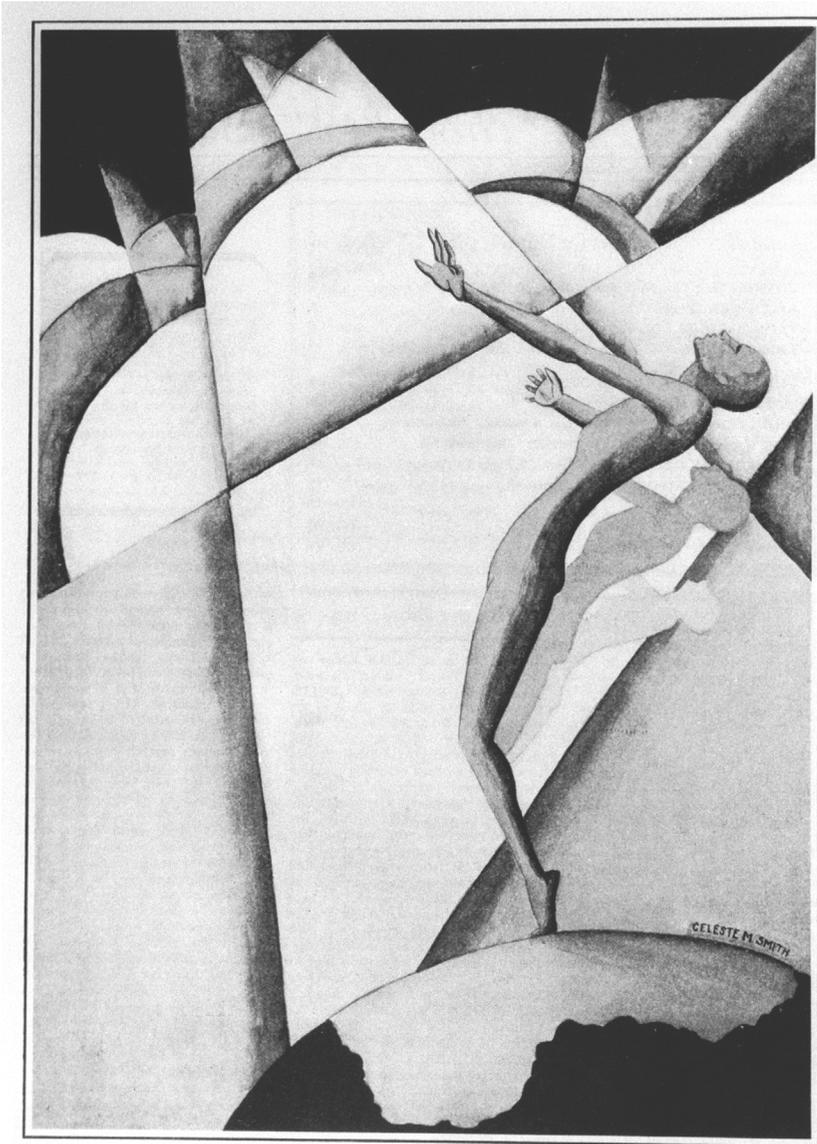


Figure 16: Celeste Smith, *Excelsior*, *The Crisis* interior image, January 1929.



Figure 17: Aaron Douglas (American, 1899-1979), undated pen-and-ink drawing. Private collection.



Figure 18: Aaron Douglas (American, 1899-1979), *The Founding of Chicago*, circa 1933. Gouache on paper. Courtesy of Spencer Museum of Art, The University of Kansas. Museum purchase: R. Charles and Mary Margaret Clevinger Fund, 2006.0027.



Figure 19: Aaron Douglas (American, 1899-1979), *Into Bondage*, 1936. Mural, Texas Centennial Exhibition. Courtesy of Collection of Jason Schoen, Princeton, New Jersey.



Figure 20: Aaron Douglas (American, 1899-1979), *Prodigal Son*, 1927. From James Weldon Johnson's *God's Trombones*, gouache on paper. Courtesy of The Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, The Yale Collection of American Literature.