Paint that Thing!
Aaron Douglas's Call to Modernism

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In the Preface to the 1999 book *The Great American Thing: Modern Art and National Identity, 1915-1935*, a disclaimer is briefly put forward to explain why the art of the Harlem Renaissance and, specifically, the works of painter Aaron Douglas, are not included in that study. I won't reiterate all the reasons, but it is worth repeating two points made at the very end of the accompanying endnotes for this disavowal. The first rationale is that "the newest scholarship on the Harlem Renaissance" is less about "individual figures" and more about "racial interactions and crossovers between black and white communities in the 1920s in both Paris and New York." This observation is followed by how future scholarship "needs to think more about how the European fascination with black American life enhanced self-understanding and self-picturing in Harlem. . . ." In other words, a more pressing charge over a critical focus on Douglas and other Harlem Renaissance artists (in this study's findings) might entail the role that their Euro-American counterparts played in helping to shape black identity.[1]

In another survey, *Art Since 1900: Modernism/Antimodernism/Postmodernism* (2004), none of the reticence of the aforementioned study is present, and Aaron Douglas figures in this text as the creator of "an original modern black art." In the book's description of one of Douglas's signature works, recognition of his harnessing of "the American Precisionists' sharp angles and exuberance for the industrial landscape" for the purposes of "expressing black pride and history" situates Douglas within the same modernist impulses explored in *The Great American Thing*, but without apology or foregrounding him within the larger Euro-American visual art project. While it could be argued that *Art Since*

0026-3079/2008/4901/2-107$2.50/0 American Studies, 49:1/2 (Spring/Summer 2008): 107-119

1900, with its broader European focus and privileging of transatlantic art theories realizes the proposals concerning future Harlem Renaissance scholarship as set forth in *The Great American Thing, Art Since 1900's* willingness to carefully recap previous Harlem Renaissance scholarship and highlight important artists like Douglas, arguably, sets this book apart in terms of a more inclusive and accurate art history.[2]

Rather than pitting these two views of Aaron Douglas against one another, I see an opportunity to expand upon both and build a sustainable argument for Aaron Douglas's suitability, if not his centrality, to an early twentieth century, American modernist enterprise in art. However, unlike the standard narratives of modernism which are eternally moored in a Euro-American axis of non-illusionism, cubistic fracture, and declarations of artistic independence, I want to further trouble these already turbulent waters with a decidedly African-American vortex of ideas and sensations. Aaron Douglas was completely aligned with these cultural rumblings, and through his work, we can trace his evolving vision of an art that, not unlike the other moderns discussed in assorted art history texts, bonds twentieth century visuality with the particular states of mind, body and spirit that marked many women and men of that era.

This will be done in two ways. First, by examining the circa 1920s and 1930s equation of modernity equaling blackness.[3] I use Aaron Douglas's art as a template for a certain kind of fascination with black American life. But rather than locating this intrigue within the simplistic framework of a cross-racial voyeurism, I want to broaden and deepen our sense of this interest, largely through a comparison of the "race films" of director Dudley Murphy with Aaron Douglas's work. I hope to demonstrate that this vogue "for all things Negro" frequently operated on a subterranean level: a psychological plane that veers from a social realist model and, instead, enters an impressionistic purview (which, in its most spectacular form, employs the medium of cinema to visualize this conceptual break).[4]

Secondly, I want to argue for a shift in understanding the American Negro through the lens of urbanity and a kind of hybrid, part organic, part architectonic paradigm. I want to revisit the love affair among jazz age visual artists with tall buildings and urbanity, but propose that Aaron Douglas was especially implicated in making city images that confront rather than acquiesce to these soaring, impersonal edifices. I'm thinking about a broad swathe of "skyscraper painters" whose works are aligned with Douglas's paintings in ways that the "Machine aesthetic" and "Precisionism" only scratch the surface of a spiritual yet constitutive understanding of two-dimensional monumentality.[5] Although rarely associated in Harlem Renaissance studies with Aaron Douglas, novelist Rudolph Fisher shared the painter's commitment to a kind of part organic, part architectonic, cultural portrait and, in a comparison of their respective works from this period, I will argue for their common investment in a radical, or what Douglas would call a "mystically objective" image of black America, circa 1920s and 1930s.

It is important to state at the outset of this comparative assignment that, as far as the scholarship has demonstrated, Aaron Douglas was not directly influenced by Dudley Murphy's films or Rudolph Fisher's novels and short stories. But at the same time it would be historically short-sighted to intellectually isolate Douglas from the vibrant and multi-sensory cultural scene that surrounded him and to which his art was integral. Thanks to the important research into Douglas's correspondence and other writings by art historians Amy Kirschke, Susan Earle, Marissa Vincenti, and others, a portrait of Aaron Douglas has gradually emerged that underscores his broad intellect, his cosmopolitan worldview, and his appreciation for an expansive sweep of artistic expression in the 1920s and 1930s.[6] Harlem Renaissance literature, music, theater, dance, and cinema (not to mention the visual arts) were all prime subjects to Douglas's aesthetic discernments, and his paintings and graphic arts, while not transliterations of these other artistic genres, were the kith and kin of that era's modernist tomes and tones. It is not, therefore, a conceptual stretch to compare Murphy's films or Fisher's writings—imbued as they are with staccato imagery and expressionistic forms—with Douglas's visual innovations.

The end product of this comparative exercise is not only a more nuanced picture of Aaron Douglas's art, but also a greater appreciation for how the Harlem Renaissance is an intrinsic part of any truly comprehensive examination of visual modernism. Historical studies that persist in ignoring the important cultural sea change that not only Harlem Renaissance musicians and writers enacted in the 1920s and 1930s, but also that New Negro painters like Miguel Covarrubias, Archibald J. Motley, Jr., William H. Johnson, and Aaron Douglas imposed on a jazz-age visual consciousness, risk being hopelessly ahistorical, if not intellectually myopic.[7] The Harlem Renaissance mode—manifested in the constant play of light and shadow seemingly over everything, and in the idea of an evocative, self-actualizing urban landscape—circumnavigated over the geographical and racial precincts of its times, and contributed mightily to making twentieth-century America the world's next "big thing" when it came to modern arts and letters. Hopefully this examination will show Aaron Douglas's pivotal role in this paradigm shift.

Modernity Equals Blackness

I want to start with Aaron Douglas's cover illustration for the infamous "little magazine" *FIRE!!* Although legendary in literary studies for the provocative writings of its young artistic firebrands (Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Richard Bruce Nugent, and Wallace Thurman, among others), Aaron Douglas's stark, red-and-black cover surely merits equal notice. Just a few months out from under the tutelage of the German-born artist/designer Winold Reiss, Douglas betrays some stylistic debt to his teacher, as seen in a comparison between the *FIRE!!* cover and Reiss's highly stylized, black and white illustrations and designs from circa 1925.[8]

But there's arguably something *else* that's going on with the *FIRE!!* cover. Unlike Reiss's geometric designs, Douglas has pushed his Africanesque face and patterns to the outer edge of the magazine's rectangular format. This consciously deployed design insurrection, along with the low-budget contingency of printing black ink on a red cover stock, was, in many respects, just as provocative and transgressive as Thurman's literary odes to prostitution or Richard Bruce Nugent's stream-of-consciousness, gay characterizations.[9] With his resolutely more-abstract-than-representational design, Douglas was clearly responding to Harlem Renaissance patriarch Alain Locke's artistic directives in his essay/manifesto "The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts." When Locke writes that "the African spirit . . . is at its best in abstract decorative forms," he's actually cajoling African American artists to broaden their horizons.[10] And in the following reminiscence by Douglas, one can deduce that he concurred with Locke's other observation in this essay that African *and* African American aesthetics provide a "double-source" for a non-representational artistic modernism:

> I clearly recall [Reiss's] impatience as he sought to urge me beyond my doubts and fears that seemed to loom so large in the presence of the terrifying specters moving beneath the surface of every African masque and fetish. . . . 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 emanations or expressions that came into view with the sounds produced by the old black song makers of the antebellum days when they first began to put together snatches and bits from Protestant hymns, along with half remembered tribal chants, lullabies, and work songs. . . .[11]

What starts off in Douglas's memory as an African art viewing at the Brooklyn Museum suddenly switches into traveling back in time to Africa, to the days of slavery, and to something impressionistic, acoustic, and racial. It would not be long before Douglas would combine Africa's abstractions with black America's improvisatory "rhythm'ning" to create his signature painting style.[12]

In several of Douglas's illustrations for James Weldon Johnson's book of sermonic poems, *God's Trombones*, Douglas united disparate histories and aesthetic impulses, culminating in some of the most modernistic drawings and paintings produced under the banner of the New Negro arts movement.[13] Layering silhouetted forms and chromatic gradations over one another in a series of spare, geometrically conceived compositions, Douglas had achieved by 1927 a pictorial modernism on par with such leading abstractionists as the German-American cubist Lionel Feininger and fellow New Yorkers Charles Demuth and Arthur G. Dove. Dove described his own, home-grown abstraction as "a flexible form or formation that is governed by some definite rhythmic sense beyond mere geometric repetition." In his painting *Swinging in the Park (there were colored people*

there), Dove explicitly acknowledged the aesthetic fount from which both he and Douglas imbibed and, as a result, both painted tonal, skein-covered scenarios, with Douglas's being more planar and, thus, purposefully non-illusionistic.[14]

Yet Douglas's roster of book and magazine assignments during these years suggested that there was enough in his work that was *illustrative* to merit its complemental proximity to selected prose, criticism, and poetry. Notwithstanding the visual overlays of painted diagonals, circles, arcs, and stars, Douglas's works included figures and other recognizable elements that, with their cultural specificities, linked them to the assorted themes and, perhaps even more important, the prevailing moods of the Harlem Renaissance.

Another Aaron Douglas illustration in James Weldon Johnson's *God's Trombones*, entitled *The Prodigal Son* (Figure 20), perfectly exemplified this thematic and psychological resonance with the times. Rather than painting the biblical account of an inheritance-squandering, wayward youth, Douglas's protagonist is the slit-eyed silhouette of a modern man, surrounded by billboard-size versions of every jazz-age vice imaginable, and flanked on either side by the twisting silhouettes of women. As expressionistic as this gouache painting by Douglas appears, he was largely translating into painting what an actual Harlem cabaret looked like and, perhaps more importantly, what it felt like. We see the same subject matter in the Mexican artist/illustrator Miguel Covarrubias's spectacular painting *Rhapsody in Blue* but, arguably, the fuller palette and the more realistic treatment of the figures make it more illustrative than Douglas's painting. While Covarrubias rhapsodizes, *The Prodigal Son* throbs with the relentless beat of snare drums and the feet of shuffling dancers, accentuated by soulful trombones and the high pitched clinking of gin bottles.[15]

To underscore the psychological atmospherics in *The Prodigal Son* and similar paintings, one can compare these works by Douglas to another Harlem Renaissance interpreter of the black cabaret scene, filmmaker Dudley Murphy. The son of a turn-of-the-century New England academic painter, Dudley Murphy grew up in Southern California, and was a pioneering participant in Los Angeles's burgeoning motion picture industry. But it was probably Murphy's involvement in experimental filmmaking (following his 1922 move to Paris and his collaboration with artist Fernand Léger on the 1924 film *Ballet Mecanique*) that launched his cinematic penchant for usual camerawork and visual dazzle.[16]

In 1926, when motion pictures incorporated sound, Murphy (who by then was back in Hollywood) wholly embraced the technology and, revealingly, turned to jazz, blues, and the African American cabaret scene for his subsequent film projects. Taking inspiration from W.C. Handy's popular song "St. Louis Blues," in 1929 Murphy scripted a short feature where the story revolved around the real-life blues singer Bessie Smith, and her difficulties in love. Murphy makes "St. Louis Blues" the film's coda and a script of sorts, with the underlying action, choreography, and edits referencing and responding to the soundtrack.[17]

Murphy acknowledged Miguel Covarrubias for introducing him to Harlem's cabaret life, but Aaron Douglas's aesthetic sensibilities loom in this film as well;

circuitously if not directly. I'm thinking about the call-and-response between corporeality and atmosphere: how figures like those in Douglas's *The Prodigal Son* and Murphy's *St. Louis Blues* pulsate with everything in and of the scene in which they are depicted. For Douglas this alignment is realized through the overlapping of light, shadow, and symbolic form; for Murphy, it is manifested through these same visual elements, plus a contiguous soundtrack and performances that coalesce and magnify the cinematic vision. Even the little things in *St. Louis Blues* (like the male gigolo Jimmy Mordecai's sharply tailored suit, or the chevron-like pattern the napkins make on the bar behind Bessie Smith) bring us back to Douglas's geometric designs and their rhythmic capacity to signify.[18]

Later that year Murphy made another short film that utilized African American artists and a Harlem Renaissance context. Like his adaptation of Handy's "St. Louis Blues," in the film *Black and Tan* he also utilized contemporary music, but this time Duke Ellington's similarly named jazz instrumental "Black and Tan Fantasy." Murphy's *Black and Tan* was very much a cinematic ode to Ellington, in that the direction, camera angles, and editing harmonized with the composer's unique brand of musical artistry. Despite *Black and Tan's* conventional scenario of a set of bandstand performances, Murphy managed to incorporate an array of visual effects and sound/image atmospherics. By replicating aspects of the Cotton Club floor show, Murphy put film audiences in a virtual Harlem Renaissance setting. Murphy's experimental cinematography in *Black and Tan* (similar to his angles and perspectives in his *Ballet Mecanique*) served Ellington's music admirably, with the camera's refractive views corresponding to the melodies and underlying rhythms of compositions like "The Duke Steps Out," "Black Beauty," and "Cotton Club Stomp."[19]

Created five years after *Black and Tan,* Aaron Douglas's *Song of the Towers* (Figure 1) (from his *Aspects of Negro Life* murals for the 135th Street branch of the New York Public Library) employed some of the same surrealistic perspectives as experienced in Murphy's film. Douglas's central, saxophone wielding figure in *Song of the Towers* (like Duke Ellington in *Black and Tan*) morphed under the visual tenets of jazz-age simultaneity, although Douglas's figures tended to reinforce the painting's explicit, multi-perspective historicism. *Black and Tan's* doubled, tripled, and quadrupled visions—accentuated by Murphy's inclusion of a mirrored dance floor—gave his audiences the sense of being intoxicated (Prohibition-style), and predated the choreographed camera work of Hollywood extravaganza director Busby Berkeley by a few years.

This delirium and a compression of history, culture, and struggle were prime ingredients for visualizing and, as both Murphy and Douglas's works demonstrated, applicable to a representation of the contemporary black cultural ethos. The malaise that Douglas perceived as an outgrowth of modern life—symbolized in the gauntlet race that his silhouetted protagonist in *Song of the Towers* runs on top of a huge, machine cogwheel—will be cinematically invoked again by actor/director Charles Chaplin in his 1936 film *Modern Times*, indicating that

great minds think alike, and that a big part of coming to terms with modernity encompassed a vertiginous surrender to urban stimuli, cultural and industrial.

The Architectonic Negro

Of course, one should not forget that, for all of the artistic fascination and creative possibilities in the 1920s in visualizing a modern Negro psychology, artists like Aaron Douglas had, first, to come to terms with the New Negro, in all of that designated persona's complexity and uncharted truths. And Douglas was certainly aware that in order to fully realize that composite, racial portrait, he would have to implement not just one artistic mode, but several representational strategies for the desired outcomes.[20]

As Aaron Douglas's figurative work suggests, the New Negro was more than a neo-primitive child of nature, or a rhythm-producing embodiment of jazz. While the African past and the star-studded, Cotton Club present were no doubt worthy models upon which to re-imagine African Americans, Douglas did not have to go much further than the community itself for examples of what novelist Charles W. Chesnutt described in 1926 as "the good, the bad, and the indifferent" in artistic characterizations of black life. Chesnutt's opinions on the how the Negro should be portrayed in literature—appearing in the same issue of the *Crisis* that featured Douglas's pensive, semi-abstract portrait bust of a black man—strongly resonated with Douglas's ecumenical view.[21]

Just one month prior to Chesnutt's sentiments appearing in the *Crisis*, the controversial magazine *FIRE!!* had just published, along with Aaron Douglas's bold, black-and-red cover, his three contour drawings of a bible thumping preacher, a paintbrush wielding artist, and a flirtatious café waitress. The undulating yet assured lines that encapsulated each figure are, in a sense, not that unrelated to the agitated brushstrokes in Douglas's more conventional portraiture: all of them pulsating with the inner dynamism of a suppressed and closeted public façade.

One of Douglas's fellow provocateurs in those years, the novelist and short story writer Rudolph Fisher, explored similar terrains, penning remarkable literary snapshots of the whole spectrum of Harlem, circa 1925-1934. Short stories like "The City of Refuge" and novels like *The Walls of Jericho* and *The Conjure Man Dies* raised the ante on what the community could yield in terms of inspiring stories and portrayals. A Howard University-trained radiologist and an amateur musician, Fisher often infused his writings with deep, philosophical digressions that, along with creating a more complete and complex picture of African Americans, introduced proto-existential ideas from his characters that surprised many of his readers at the time. In this following passage from Rudolph Fisher's book *The Conjure Man Dies*, a Harlem confidence (or "conjure") man, a Mr. Frimbo from West Africa, pontificates to a physician (and a skeptic) on the extra-sensory powers that everyone, whether they realize it or not, is capable of unleashing:

> . . . So-called mental telepathy, . . . is no mystery, so considered. Surely the human organism cannot create anything more than itself; but it has created the radio-broadcasting set and the receiving set. Must there not be within the organism, then, some counterpart of these? I assure you, doctor, that this complex mechanism which we call the living body contains its broadcasting set and its receiving set, and signals sent out in the form of invisible, inaudible, radiant energy may be picked up and converted into sight and sound by a human receiving set properly tuned in.[22]

Was Aaron Douglas in part responding to Rudolph Fisher's monologue here about "invisible, inaudible, radiant energy" but, in this pictorial instance, "converted" by his spirituals-and-folksong-performing African American ancestors? We can only speculate, but it is clear that, like Rudolph Fisher, Douglas frequently invested African American subject matter with this extra-sensory dimension. As early as 1927 Douglas gave his iconic men and women the power to see beyond normal sight and, as shown in his painting *Rise Shine for Thy Light Has Come*, the spiritual fortitude to transcend terrestrial burdens and to seek higher, moral ground. Douglas highlights black achievements and aspirations in these paintings, but with the pictorial tools and devices of a part spiritual, part abstract visionary who articulates his message of racial uplift in a visual *glosolalia* of deep shadow, emerging light, and syncopated patterning.

And metaphor, too. Like his literary colleagues Langston Hughes and Rudolph Fisher, Douglas did not hesitate to incorporate a seemingly incongruous motif or theme into a work of art, and embellish it with all of the cultural allusions and poetic symbolism possible. Arguably Douglas's favorite metaphor was urban architecture and, like so many American artists in the 1920s and 1930s, he deployed skyscraper-like forms and industrial imagery as an expression of human striving, social progress, and spiritual transcendence.[23]

In his cover design for a special "Industrial Issue" of *Opportunity* magazine, Douglas created a vision of energy incarnate, where men, tools, and assorted forms of fuel and power all resonate with one another in an agitated, thunderous composition. By integrating his two silhouetted workers into the mechanized rhythms, flames, and din of this factory, Douglas was making the case for an indelible, African American presence in modern life and, indeed, that African American muscle and imagination participate in the creation of modernity. Two cover designs from *Crisis* paid special tributes to women as builders and anchors in their respective communities and the world-at-large. In typical Douglas fashion these two covers linked a nascent feminism and modern progress with architectural elements and ancestral legacies from ancient Egypt.[24]

This aesthetic leap across millennia was not peculiar to Aaron Douglas, given the visual allusions to antiquity found in the works of 1920s artists ranging from William van Alen's Chrysler Building to Charles Demuth's *My Egypt.* But what

distinguished Douglas's neo-Egyptian impulse was that architectural and design tradition's implicit racial associations. When Chicago artist Charles C. Dawson created his own cover for *Crisis* in 1927, featuring an ancient Egyptian torch-bearer, a recent college graduate, and, in the background, detailed line drawings of Egyptian temples and modern black businesses, Dawson, like Douglas, was forging a metaphorical link between "Negro architecture" and "Negro progress," past and present. Douglas's "afro-deco" caryatids—slit-eyed, marcel-coiffed, and columnar—were the perfect armatures for a Harlem Renaissance uplift program that even the usually stoic W.E.B. Du Bois could take inspiration from and relate to.[25]

The anthropomorphizing (and ethnicization) of brick, mortar, and steel was not confined to the visual artists of the Harlem Renaissance. Consider the following passage from Rudolph Fisher's 1928 novel *The Walls of Jericho*, where he perceptively endows Manhattan's Fifth Avenue—its ethnicity and poverty versus its whiteness and affluence—with a split personality:

> The truth about Fifth Avenue has only half been told, that it harbors an aristocracy of residence already yielding to an aristocracy of commerce. Has any New Yorker confessed to the rest—that when aristocratic Fifth Avenue crosses One Hundred Tenth Street, leaving Central Park behind, it leaves its aristocracy behind as well? Here are bargain-stores, babble, and kids, dinginess, odors, thick speech. Fallen from splendor and doubtless ashamed, the Avenue burrows into the ground—plunges beneath a park which hides it from One Hundred Sixteenth to One Hundred Twenty-fifth Street. Here it emerges moving uncertainly northward a few more blocks; and now—irony of ironies—finds itself in Negro Harlem.
>
> You can see the Avenue change expression—blankness, horror, conviction. You can almost see it wag its head in self-commiseration. Not just because this is Harlem—there are proud streets in Harlem: Seventh Avenue of a Sunday afternoon, Strivers' Row, and The Hill. Fifth Avenue's shame lies in having missed the so-called dickty sections, in having poked its head out into the dark kingdom's backwoods. A city jungle this, if ever there was one, peopled largely by untamed creatures that live and die for the moment only. Accordingly, here strides melodrama, naked and unashamed.[26]

In Rudolph Fisher's literary conception, metaphors to Manhattan's pyramid-like splendors give way to urban insecurities, personified in burrowing subway lines and hunched over architecture. Visually responding to Harlem Renaissance author Marita Bonner's award-winning short story "The Young Blood Hungers,"

Douglas, in his same-named design for a 1928 cover of *Crisis*, also makes the city bow and sway to human emotions and states of consciousness.[27]

The geometric patterns that the windows created against Douglas's askew skyscrapers in *The Young Blood Hungers* bear strong resemblances to Georgia O'Keeffe's 1927 *Radiator Building—Night, New York.* As art historian Wanda Corn has argued, this painting fulfilled O'Keeffe's desire to create something "so magnificently vulgar" that, upon viewing it, her coterie of supporters would be shocked into silence.[28] Whether it was the audacity of inserting "STIEGLITZ" (her husband's name) into a glowing red neon sign, or the visual improvisations with the city's incandescent illuminations and staggered architecture, *Radiator Building—Night, New York* possessed some of the same jazzy elements found in Douglas's art and, as a result, stood apart from O'Keeffe's standard floral fare. Perhaps it was this perceived difference and O'Keeffe's ambivalence about *Radiator Building* that prompted her in 1949 to donate it to Fisk University, as part of an unprecedented gift in honor of her late husband, Alfred Stieglitz, and her friend, the Harlem Renaissance patron Carl Van Vechten.[29]

By the time O'Keeffe's *Radiator Building* arrived at Fisk University, Douglas had been teaching there for about a decade. And just five years prior to O'Keeffe's gift, he had painted *Building More Stately Mansions* a major composition that, although created in the midst of World War II and an artistic milieu that advocated social realism and visual abstraction, followed more in the architectonic lineage of *Radiator Building* and other 1920s paintings. Unlike its predecessors, *Building More Stately Mansions* exuded an idealistic, populist feeling that, paradoxically, co-existed during the war years with an African American mood of social pessimism and distrust. If viewers had given themselves completely over to Douglas's laborers and scholars who stand in the shadows of the Sphinx at Giza, the Acropolis, the Arch de Triumph, etc., they might have heard the final stanza of Oliver Wendell Holmes's 1858 poem, "The Chambered Nautilus," from which Douglas took the painting's title:

> Build thee more stately mansions, O my soul,
> As the swift seasons roll!
> Leave thy low-vaulted past!
> Let each new temple, nobler than the last,
> Shut thee from heaven with a dome more vast,
> Till thou at length art free,
> Leaving thine outgrown shell by life's unresting sea![30]

Douglas's visionary painting—where a one-room shack and an inflamed, inner city high-rise are dwarfed by monuments old and, as of yet, only imagined—transposed Holmes's building metaphors into architectural meditations of an even higher order. Not so content as to represent architecture for its own, aesthetic sake, Douglas turned 1920s urbanism into a mid-twentieth century evocation of African American hope, conceived in the pictorial language of a streamlined,

chromatically atmospheric art. Unlike the strident and often cynical paintings of Douglas's artistic contemporaries Jacob Lawrence, William H. Johnson, or Hale Woodruff, *Building More Stately Mansions* recalls an earlier, starry-eyed time, when the ambitions of the New Negro Arts Movement pushed Douglas and others towards an efficacious and ethical modernism. Working at Fisk on the frontlines, so to speak, of the battleground for African American minds and advancements, Aaron Douglas drew inspiration for *Building More Stately Mansions* from his youth: the years of *FIRE!!,* of his visual/literary collaborations with James Weldon Johnson, Langston Hughes, and others, and of his important murals in Harlem, Chicago, Greensboro, and Nashville.

Conclusion

In Douglas's oft-quoted, December 21, 1925 letter to Langston Hughes, he essentially lays out for his Harlem Renaissance compatriot their modernist mission in art. When Douglas rhetorically tells Hughes that their "problem is to conceive, develop, establish an art era. . . . Not white art painted black," he was arguing for artists to not just create with 1925 in mind, but to imagine themselves as part of a long, cultural continuum, and to produce work that could be genuinely placed within an African diasporic locus. When Douglas says "Let's bare our arms and plunge them deep, 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," he was articulating several key points. But the accumulated meaning here was to do away with delimiting class boundaries and an insidious racial caste system, and to undertake the grunt work of seeing the tragic and the comedic in life as valid spheres of artistic inquiry. And finally, when Douglas invites Hughes to "sing it, dance it, write it, paint it," the charge is not so much a plea for multi-tasking, as it was for adjusting one's aesthetic antennae to sufficiently acknowledge the breadth and depth of black cultural expressivity.[31]

In the same year that Douglas penned his famous letter to Hughes, the blues singer Ethel Waters recorded "Shake That Thing" and, in a sly, roundabout way, she echoed the terms under which Douglas's call to an avant-guardism would, in its own context, contribute to "the Great American Thing" called modern art. In Ethel's blues recording, she sings:

> Now the old folks start doin' it, the young folks, too,
> But the old folks learn the young ones what to do,
> About shakin' that thing,
> Ah, shake that thing!
> I'm gettin' sick and tired of telling you to shake that thing![32]

Aaron Douglas, working consistently in the Harlem Renaissance mode until his death in 1979, was neither "sick" nor "tired" of painting that reverberating,

vibrating "Great American Thing." Although written out of too many art histories and accounts of an early twentiethth century visual modernism, Douglas's unique blend of a modern and folk consciousness was the essence of a blues aesthetic, and the supreme embodiment of what he ultimately described in his 1925 letter to Hughes as "something transcendentally material, mystically objective. Earthy. Spiritually earthy. Dynamic." This supernatural equation was Douglas's offering to the history of an American modernism, reflected in abstract rays of Divine inspiration and recalled against a chorus of silhouetted movers and shakers.

Notes

1. Wanda Corn, *The Great American Thing: Modern Art and National Identity, 1915-1935* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), xxi, 360.
2. "The Harlem Renaissance," in Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, and Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, *Art Since 1900: Modernism/Antimodernism/Postmodernism* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2004), 304-305.
3. The Paris-based African art collector and black cultural enthusiast Paul Guillaume spoke often of the equivalency between blackness and modernity, and these statements are cited in Petrine Archer-Straw, "Fetishism and fashion," in *Negrophilia: Avant-Garde Paris and Black Culture in the 1920s* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2000), 51-78.
4. For the psychological potential of cinema to recast culture and problematize genre in general, see Brigitte Peucker, *Incorporating Images: Film and the Rival Arts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).
5. One of the earliest and critically important meditations on the 1920s fascination with skyscrapers in art, see "The Image of Urban Optimism," in Joshua C. Taylor, *America as Art* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1976), 186-215. Also see Karen Tsujimoto, *Images of America: Precisionist Painting and Modern Photography* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982).
6. Amy Helene Kirschke, *Aaron Douglas: Art, Race, and the Harlem Renaissance* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995); Susan Earle, (ed.), *Aaron Douglas: African American Modernist* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007); and Marissa Vincenti, "A Matter of Spirit: Aaron Douglas, Gurdjieffian Thought, and the Expression of 'Conscious Art'," *International Review of African American Art* vol. 21 no. 3 (2007): 11-15.
7. One of the most glaring instances of this is Michael J. Lewis, *American Art and Architecture* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2006).
8. For an in-depth look at Reiss's early design work, see Robert Kashey, *Winold Reiss, 1886-1953. Centennial Exhibition: Works on paper, architectural designs, fantasies and portraits* (New York: Shepherd Gallery, 1986).
9. For a discussion of Douglas's *FIRE!!* partners, see Elsa F. Glick, "Harlem's Queer Dandy: African-American Modernism and the Artifice of Blackness," *Modern Fiction Studies* 49 (Fall 2003): 414-442.
10. Alain Locke, "The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts," in *The New Negro* (1925; reprint, New York: Atheneum, 1980), 254-267.
11. Aaron Douglas, "The Harlem Renaissance," unpublished manuscript, March 18, 1973, box 3, folder 7, Aaron Douglas Papers, Special Collections, Fisk University Franklin Library, Nashville.
12. I am indebted to literary and jazz critic Robert G. O'Meally for introducing me to the musicological concept of "rhythm'ning."
13. James Weldon Johnson, *God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse* (New York: The Viking Press, 1927).
14. Arthur G. Dove, as quoted in Frederick S. Wight, *Arthur G. Dove* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1958), 64.
15. For an extended inquiry into Covarrubias's art and career, see: *Miguel Covarrubias: homenaje nacional, cuartro miradas* (Mexico City: Editorial RM, 2005).
16. Susan Delson, *Dudley Murphy: Hollywood Wild Card* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).
17. For another recounting of Dudley Murphy's film production of *St. Louis Blues,* see Chris Albertson, *Bessie: Empress of the Blues* (London: Abacus, 1975), 140-142.
18. I discuss Aaron Douglas's use of chevrons and zig-zag-like patterns in Richard J. Powell, "The Aaron Douglas Effect," in *Aaron Douglas: African American Modernist*, Susan Earle, (ed.) (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 53-73.
19. Susan Delson, *Dudley Murphy.*

20. I discuss these "New Negro" types in Richard J. Powell, "Enter and Exit the 'New Negro,'" in *Black Art: A Cultural History* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2002), 41-65.

21. Charles W. Chesnutt, "The Negro in Art," *Crisis* 33 (November 1926): 28-29.

22. Rudolph Fisher, *The Conjure-man Dies: A Mystery Tale of Dark Harlem* (1932; reprint, Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 225.

23. For an extending reflection on American art and the skyscraper, see Elizabeth Sussman and John G. Hanhardt, *City of Ambition: Artists & New York* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1996).

24. See *Opportunity* 4 (February 1926), *Crisis* 34 (September 1927), and *Crisis* 36 (May 1929).

25. Caroline Goeser, *Picturing the New Negro: Harlem Renaissance Print Culture and Modern Black Identity* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007).

26. Rudolph Fisher, *The Walls of Jericho* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1928), 3-4.

27. Marita Bonner, "The Young Blood Hungers," *Crisis* 35 (May 1928): 151, 172.

28. Wanda Corn, *The Great American Thing*, 26.

29. *Catalogue of the Alfred Stieglitz Collection for Fisk University* (Nashville, Tennessee: Carl Van Vechten Gallery of Fine Arts, Fisk University, 1949).

30. Oliver Wendell Holmes, *The Chambered Nautilus* (1858; reprint, San Francisco: The Grabhorn Press, 1943).

31. Aaron Douglas, in a letter to Langston Hughes, 21 December 1925. First published in Richard J. Powell, *The Blues Aesthetic: Black Culture and Modernism* (Washington, DC: Washington Project for the Arts, 1989), 24.

32. Ethel Waters, "Shake that Thing," *The Incomparable Ethel Waters* (Sony B00009VU2H, 2003).

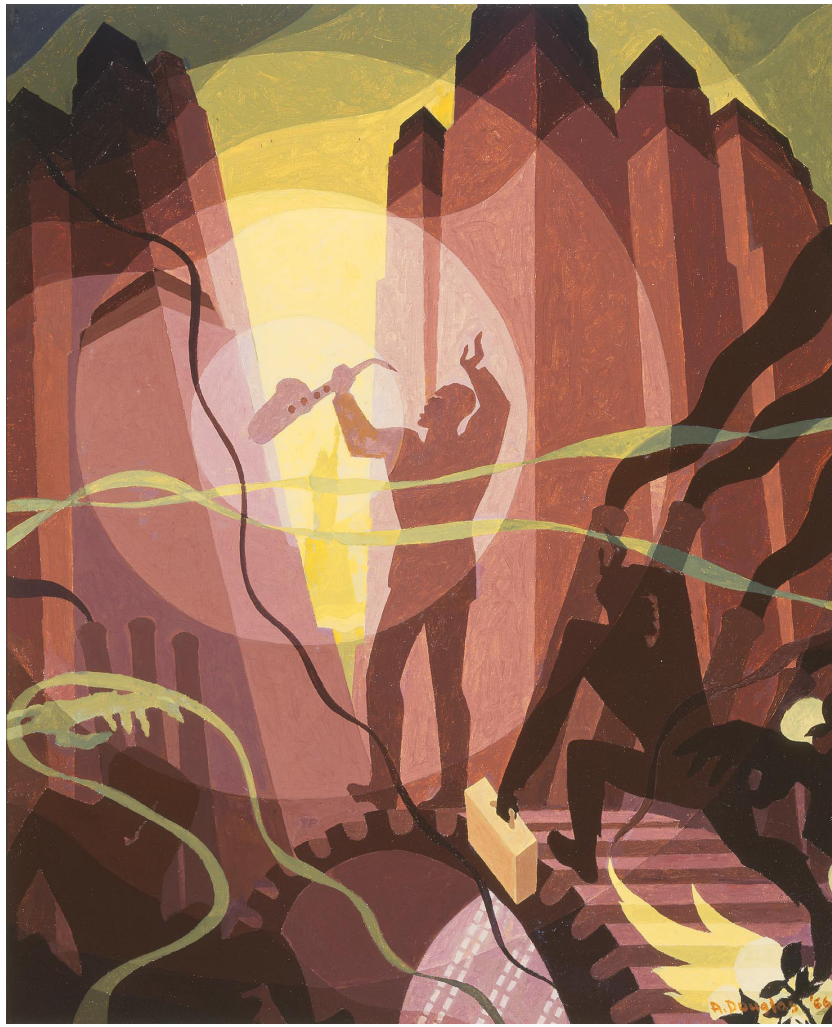

Figure 1: Aaron Douglas (American, 1899-1979), *Song of the Towers*, 1966. Oil and tempera on canvas, 25 1/4 x 20 3/8 in. Courtesy of Milwaukee Art Museum, Lent by State of Wisconsin, Executive Residence, Madison WI L1.2006. Photography by John R. Glembin.

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.