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GREAT PLAINS PRAGMATIST

AARON DOUGLAS AND THE ART OF SOCIAL PROTEST

AUDREY THOMPSON

Like most of the luminaries of the Harlem Renaissance, its leading visual artist, Aaron Douglas, was not himself a product of Harlem.¹ Although Winold Reiss and Alain Locke were to guide Douglas in the development of his artistic vision once he arrived in Harlem, his early years in Kansas, Missouri, and Nebraska gave rise to both the communal values and the artistic sense of isolation that were to lead him to Harlem. It was in the black church and in Topeka's "cohesive and politically active" African-American community that Douglas

first experienced black solidarity and embraced "the values of education and social uplift."² Many years later, meeting William Dawson, a like-minded black musician, in Kansas City proved to be a "first step" out of artistic and racial isolation.³

Growing up in Kansas, pursuing a bachelor of fine arts degree at the University of Nebraska, and teaching in Missouri, Aaron Douglas developed the commitment to pressing against the limits of the known that was to shape his artistic vision as a "pioneering Africanist."⁴ His vision partook simultaneously of a sense of political urgency and artistic expansiveness, both referenced to the situation and possibilities of blacks in America. Among the influences on that vision were the writings of W. E. B. Du Bois, debates in Topeka's progressive black press, and Douglas's own experiences as a soldier and a laborer.⁵ Together with the "optimism and self-help philosophy" imbibed from the black community in Topeka, Douglas's experiences of racism, racial solidarity, and adventure infused him with an eagerness to play a role in promoting social change.⁶ Under the influence of Winold Reiss and Alain Locke, Douglas was to forge

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[GPQ 20 (Fall 2000): 311-22]

that desire for social change into a bold and liberating artistic vision.

This essay examines the tension between art and politics in Aaron Douglas's art of social protest by framing his project in the terms set by the African-American pragmatism of the era. As George Hutchinson argues, "a large proportion" of those "fighting for black liberation . . . in the first three decades of the twentieth century had been molded by pragmatism and considered themselves pragmatists," although not necessarily "in the strict philosophical sense."⁷ As a general phenomenon, pragmatism represented a rejection of fixed cultural assumptions about the way things had to be; instead, pragmatists sought multiple, new ways of framing meaning. Whereas conventional approaches to knowledge solidified existing assumptions about the nature of reality into a foundation upon which all further knowledge would be built, pragmatists set aside prevailing assumptions about truth. Rather than taking their cue from supposedly universal truths, pragmatists attempted to construct new, emergent knowledge based on both actual conditions and as-yet-to-be-imagined possibilities.

Because they saw all existing forms of knowledge as problematic, African-American pragmatists sought to create the conditions for constructing new knowledge from social experience. Simply trying to persuade whites—or blacks—that the racist stereotypes of blacks were untrue would not lead to significant change, for any new racial knowledge explicitly tied to the old "knowledge" would have to "build upon" falsehoods. The solution, therefore, was to shift away from existing frameworks of knowledge by appealing to an altogether different framework. Inducing shifts in perception and experience afforded the opportunity to reorganize social relationships and therefore social possibility. Whether ideational (as in the case of art and literature) or material (as in the case of economic relations), such shifts were to be guided not by reference to timeless standards or absolute truth but by instrumental considerations: by projections as

to whether they might promote socially useful change.

African-American pragmatism thus stood for progress *tied to* experiential and interpretive pluralism. It also stood for possibility: under the terms of pragmatist instrumentalism, meaning depended not on the innate character of things but on the uses to which things were put. Insofar as Aaron Douglas, Alain Locke, W. E. B. Du Bois, and other contributors to the Harlem Renaissance sought to gain leverage on blacks' shared experience by devising new intellectual and cultural tools, and insofar as they saw planned cultural activism as helping to guide social progress, they formed part of the newly emerging tradition in African-American pragmatism.⁸ Aaron Douglas figured among the African-American pragmatists of the twenties and thirties whose work was to shape a new understanding of black experience and black possibility.

ALAIN LOCKE AND AFRICAN-AMERICAN PRAGMATISM

Rejecting fixed categories and absolute truths as the reference for knowledge, pragmatism regards experience as the ground of knowledge; for that experience to be meaningful, however, it must be *mediated* by the tools of intelligence. While Aaron Douglas brought considerable cultural and political experience with him to Harlem, he did not yet have the artistic tools he would use to interpret and frame that experience. Winold Reiss was the German artist who introduced Aaron Douglas to a new way of painting African Americans; Alain Locke, a philosopher and a leading spokesman for the Harlem Renaissance, provided Douglas with the pragmatist framework that identified art as playing a crucial role in social protest and racial education.

OVERCOMING THE EFFECTS OF MIS-EDUCATION

While most white pragmatists of the time did not understand experience in racial terms,

African-American pragmatists such as Alain Locke, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Carter G. Woodson pointed out that, in the context of American culture in the early part of the twentieth century, race was a defining aspect of black experience. Because of the stigma attached to blackness, African Americans could not choose to ignore race; insofar as African Americans were beginning to realize and celebrate the distinctiveness of black culture, however, they could choose to emphasize race as a positive factor in experience.

Before African Americans could address black cultural experience in all its diversity and complexity, they had to be in a position to acknowledge and understand that experience on its own terms. Having learned to think like whites, educated African Americans were among those least likely to understand their experience outside the deficit terms set by the dominant social order.⁹ So successfully had whites framed blackness as a problem, Locke said, that “the thinking Negro” had been led to neglect his own experiential standpoint as a basis for knowledge.¹⁰ Confirming Locke’s emphasis on the need to overcome the effects of mis-education, Aaron Douglas commented enthusiastically on Winold Reiss’s portrayal of African Americans in his drawings for *The New Negro*.

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. . . . 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.¹¹

The new artistic tools of racial representation that Douglas encountered in New York allowed him to return to his youthful experiences of blackness with a fresh eye. Church, work, education, and community were to figure in Douglas’s art not as provincial, Great Plains imitations of the high culture of New

York but as the authentic folk culture at the heart of a new racial vision.

ART AS SOCIAL PROTEST

With John Dewey, Alain Locke believed that “the moral function of art . . . is to remove prejudice, do away with the scales that keep the eye from seeing, tear away the veils due to wont and custom, perfect the power to perceive.”¹² If art was to tap the African-American experience, artists had to learn to see that experience afresh, setting aside the racist conventions that prevented the perception of beauty in blackness.¹³ From a pragmatist perspective, posing a *rational* challenge to deficit conceptions of blackness was unlikely to make a significant difference in how either blacks or whites perceived the “race problem.” Because appeals to reason can only engage us in terms of what already makes sense to us—thereby appealing to the very assumptions that challenges to old ways of thinking are meant to unsettle—they cannot induce shifts in our overall system of beliefs but can only effect adjustments between existing beliefs. African-American art grounded in an authentic folk culture, however, offered the possibility of re-orienting both white and black thinking.

In order for African-American artists to achieve freshness and spontaneity of perception, Locke advocated that they return to sources largely untouched by white influence: the ancestral legacy of Africa and the contemporary riches of black American folk culture.¹⁴ Because Africa represented a pre-contact past, it served to move the perception of blackness outside the context of the American Negro “problem.” Africa pointed to a history before 1619, when the first black slaves were brought to the American colonies. Insofar as New World slavery and racial oppression had prevented assimilation, they could be said to have provided the conditions that had helped keep the African legacy pure and uncontaminated. Drawing upon the African legacy also allowed Harlem Renaissance artists to capitalize on the European interest in Africa that was lead-

ing to a new appreciation of black artistry. "To American Negroes, long deprived of the importance of a past, save that which meant humiliation and despair, this renaissance of knowledge" regarding Africa brought a "new and growing enthusiasm for self-expression."¹⁵

African-American folk culture, meanwhile, provided the historically American experience upon which black artists could draw in developing an art form that would be distinctively new, distinctively American, and distinctively black. Because it had arisen under conditions of cultural segregation, black folk culture represented an organically African-American framing of experience that could be seen as independent of white culture. Like some of the white patrons of the Harlem Renaissance, Locke saw black folk culture as a source of vitality, purity, and spirituality not available to the dominant, materialist strain in American culture *except* through the intermediary of the black artist, who would transform "primitive" feelings and insights into high culture.¹⁶

MODERNISM AND PRIMITIVISM IN THE WORK OF AARON DOUGLAS

PRIMITIVISM

Primitivism for Aaron Douglas, as for Alain Locke, referred both to the ancestral legacy of Africa and to the folk culture of African Americans—folk culture meaning, above all, the blues, jazz, spirituals, and dance. The appeal to primitivism was in part a celebration of the spirit and culture that had been strong enough to survive slavery, in part a recognition of working-class African Americans (as opposed to the black aristocracy or the Talented Tenth that the older generation of race propagandists preferred to feature), and in part a bow to the contemporary fad of exoticism connected to the urban dance halls. Although to some extent the themes in Douglas's illustrations and murals reflect "decadent" primitive themes stressing night life in the cabarets, much more of his work invokes African masks, fetishes, and plant life, African forms of dance

and music, and Egyptian imagery such as pyramids. Folk imagery also plays an important role, bespeaking a close familiarity with black religious beliefs and symbolism. Douglas's painting was in fact intended to be a visual counterpart to black music, based especially on the iconography of the spirituals.¹⁷ Romare Bearden and Harry Henderson quote Douglas as saying, with respect to his illustrations for *God's Trombones*,

I tried to keep my forms very stark and geometric with my main emphasis on the human body. I tried to portray everything not in a realistic but [an] abstract way—simplified and abstract as . . . in the spirituals. In fact I used the starkness of the old spirituals as my model—and at the same time I tried to make my painting modern.¹⁸

Among the themes in Douglas's work are the struggle, work, and suffering involved in the African-American experience. *The Crucifixion*, for example, depicts a monumental black figure carrying the cross for Jesus, the soldiers' spears pressing behind him. Jesus himself, a much smaller figure, is painted as a figure of light surrounded by circles of light.¹⁹ The central and dominant figure in the painting is "the legendary Simon, a Black man who took upon himself the yoke of Jesus' cross"; upon his face we see imprinted the "strain and agony of his travail," for he carries the "weight of the world" on his shoulders. "He is the worker among men, the builder of cities that circumscribe his access."²⁰ But while our attention is drawn to Simon's suffering, we do not lose sight of his faith. Even in works wherein struggle and pain are foregrounded, strength, hope, and spirituality maintain a powerful presence.

The illustrations and paintings that celebrate black folk creativity, on the other hand, in some cases include violent counterpoints to the black cultural experience. *Charleston*, for example, depicts a relaxed nightclub scene framed by a noose hanging from overhead and clutching hands reaching in from the fore-

ground.²¹ In other works, Douglas included portrayals of chattel slavery, industrial enslavement, and lynching. Yet while Douglas never lost sight of the threat posed by racism, perhaps the most important effect of his concentration on African and African-American folk themes is the rendering of an all-black world in which whiteness is not a point of reference. Racism, oppression, and violence are all factors in black experience—represented in the paintings and illustrations by chains, nooses, clawlike hands, and spears, for example. But although racism and its consequences impinge upon black experience, they do not define it. Still less does whiteness define blackness in Douglas's work: racism is acknowledged as a historical and sociological fact, but it is not allowed to give whiteness center stage. Indeed, whiteness appears only by implication.²²

The centrality given to black experience in Douglas's work reflects the foregrounding of racialized experience characteristic of African-American pragmatism. Like both Carter G. Woodson and Alain Locke, Douglas avoids letting white frameworks set the terms for understanding black experience; the world he portrays is a black world. To the extent that Douglas emphasizes work and struggle, he shares Woodson's political, often oppositional, pragmatist orientation. To the extent that Douglas emphasizes the artistic and expressive achievement represented by the spirituals, he participates in Locke's cultural pragmatist tradition, which ties the distinctive experience of African Americans to universal forms of experience.

In calling artists' attention to African and African-American folk themes, Locke urged a specifically instrumental and emergent use of primitivism—a way of framing black experience outside the terms set by the prevailing discourse of race. By contrast, most critics have assumed that primitivism refers to a fixed, racist set of meanings. In reifying primitivism as a sentimental, white view in which “the Negro” was exoticized and treated as a spectacle, such critics have ignored the actual uses to which primitivism was put in the art of the Harlem

Renaissance. Nathan Huggins, for example, takes a foundationalist rather than instrumental view of the imagery of primitivism, arguing that it “rested on very superficial imagery of African life,” with correspondingly superficial realizations in the art produced.²³ Yet Huggins acknowledges that the African influence had different effects in the visual arts, particularly in the work of Aaron Douglas, than it did in the poetry and fiction of the Renaissance: “Aaron Douglas borrowed two things from the Africans. He thought that art should be design more than subject. And his personal predilections for mysticism encouraged him to find racial unity and racial source in Africa.” Because Douglas's emphasis was on design, the appeal to African primitivism as symbol was more successful than in work intended as representational; nevertheless, Huggins sees him as subordinating art to the idea of the primitive and argues that Douglas was “abstract for philosophical not for painterly reasons.” In Douglas's work, Huggins argues, the legacy of Africa was “necessarily abstract: mere design through which he wanted to see a soul-self.”²⁴

Certainly Douglas saw African Americans as sharing a unique racial gift and believed that there was a universal dimension to the black experience.²⁵ His notes from a meeting of the editors of *Fire!!* proclaim, “We believe that the Negro is fundamentally, essentially different from their Nordic neighbors. . . . We believe these differences to be greater spiritual endowment, greater sensitivity, greater power for artistic expression and appreciation.”²⁶ But while Douglas was not unaffected by the romantic conception of primitivism, he cannot be said to have accepted a fixed or static account of the African-American spirit. His notes also stress that the young black artists involved, while “group conscious,” were not unified by any specific message or cause: “We have no axes to grind.”²⁷ What unified the group was the spirit of the artistic community itself. As Douglas was to explain in a 1971 interview, the “togetherness” of the black artistic community “was the thing that created the Renaissance.”²⁸

Calling upon the African heritage, while a way of symbolizing and celebrating a shared community and a shared history, also offered a way to gain perspective on the present by looking at the black American experience from another angle. In effect, primitivism became a tool of modernism. As Amy Kirschke notes, Douglas followed the basic Egyptian "rule of stylizing the body by painting the figure as if it were being observed from several different viewpoints."²⁹ In his early work in analytical cubism, Picasso took the same approach, but whereas Picasso's work "suggested three-dimensional form through faceted-angular shapes with more depth," Douglas favored a flat, hard-edged, silhouette style.³⁰ In both cases, the viewer sees a scene from several perspectives at once. Such an effect is impossible in naturalistic approaches, but in cubism and so-called primitive folk painting traditional (academic) perspective is absent. The refusal of "correct" perspective represents a refusal of the conventions of realism and thus a refusal of the description of reality that those in power take to be obvious or natural or neutral.

Metaphorically, the juxtaposition of perspectives in Douglas's work suggests a pragmatist and modernist endorsement of pluralism: of multiple, simultaneous perspectives as the measure of truth, rather than a single, unifying God's eye view. Douglas's own observation supports this metaphorical reading. Africanism, he said, could not simply be transplanted into the life of black Americans. Instead, he suggested, "we can go to African life and get a certain amount of understanding, form and color and use this knowledge in development of an expression which interprets our life."³¹ The primitive legacy thus affords both leverage on the present and a "classic" library of images that serve as a resource for interpolating and reinterpreting present experience. By using "primitivism" as a means of representing the distinctive group experience of blacks, Douglas avoided framing that experience in the terms set by racism; by including modernist motifs, he emphasized that that

experience was not to be conceived in static or sentimental terms but was to be understood as an emergent experience, a journey into possibility.

MODERNISM

Much of the art of the Harlem Renaissance, argue the authors of *Rhapsodies in Black: Art of the Harlem Renaissance*, was the very prototype of modernist art.³² Not only did Renaissance artists draw on explicitly modern themes such as migration to the cities, urban life, and alienation in the modern industrial workplace, but primitivism itself represented a modernist theme. The admittedly problematic and sentimental "modern cult of the primitive" was only one dimension of this modernism.³³ Just as integral to modernism was the "celebration of the primordial in art: truth, beauty and power residing in basic elemental forms, rather than in overwrought ones."³⁴ The return to basic forms organizes such modern art forms as Art Deco, cubism, and orphism, among others.

Because the combination of primitivism and futurism is one of the hallmarks of Art Deco, I wish to focus particularly on Douglas's affinities with Art Deco, which features simplicity and boldness of outline, formalism in the concentration on geometric shapes, and abstract, idealized, stylized depictions of the human body. Associated both with fine art and with art for the masses, Art Deco bridges the usual high/low culture divide—an important consideration for any art of social protest. To the extent that it is a popular style, Art Deco speaks in a language more directly accessible than that associated with high culture. In much of its expression, moreover, Art Deco has been more visible to a mass audience than paintings or sculptures confined in private collections or museums. Most of Aaron Douglas's work was either in the form of murals, such as those in the 135th Street branch of the New York Public Library (now the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture), or in the form of illustrations in books and magazines—

more often than not on the covers of magazines like *The Crisis* and *Opportunity*—and thus was particularly accessible to broad audiences.

As with Art Deco more generally, Douglas's work finds in stylized abstraction the possibility of a universal art form. The modernism of his figures consists in their abstraction: while identifiably black, the figures represent, above all, human beings. Symbolic and idealized, Douglas's abstract, elegant human figures are devoid of any superficial characteristics that might lend themselves to caricature. Human beings in their simplest form—objects reduced “to their basic shapes”³⁵—are portrayed as creatures of dignity, who work, suffer, dance, and pray. Abstraction thus helps to clear away some of the debris of stereotypic detail and racial caricature attached to depictions of blackness. Yet the simplicity in Douglas's work also lends itself to an emotional starkness that is at once unsentimental and dramatically evocative. His murals and illustrations have an undecorated, bold directness that differentiates his work from the formalism of Art Deco, which is usually associated with decorativeness and a kind of leisure, even luxury. The illustrations for *God's Trombones*, for example, are concerned not with the body as object but with the body as objectified: the black body under the institution of slavery. In contrast to much other work in the Deco style, Douglas's figures are emotionally expressive, stark in their depiction of human suffering.

Far more than is typical of Art Deco, Douglas's work has a specifically historical and narrative orientation to the past; many of his illustrations and murals depict periods in African or African-American history. The narrative focus speaks to his interest in experience, above and beyond style or form. Whereas most artists in the Deco style treat “primitive” art as a storehouse to be mined for its patterns and motifs, Douglas takes up the historical and political themes, as well as the decorative elements, of the collective African-American past.³⁶ Because they are engaged in action that has narrative meaning, his figures are not simply elements of decoration but symbolic fig-

ures: mythic, idealized figures that speak for both the past and the future.

While the primitive motifs in Douglas's work serve to foreground blackness and celebrate the historical dimensions of the African-American experience, Douglas's modern themes and modernist style speak to his belief in progress and a possible future to be shaped by present action. In the words of Bearden and Henderson, Douglas believed that “art can be the deepest communicative channel between the races” and across national divides.³⁷ Indeed, the symbolism of the concentric circles in much of Douglas's work speaks specifically to this theme. *Song of the Towers*, the final panel of the mural *Aspects of Negro Life*, depicts a jazz saxophonist, a desperately scurrying worker with a briefcase, and an exhausted figure in the corner, all framed by a giant cog, skyscrapers, industrial chimneys, and ribbons of smoke; grasping, threatening hands intrude in the foreground. In the distant background—central, but so small as almost to escape notice—is the Statue of Liberty.³⁸ Despite the dominant impression of despair conveyed by the painting, the circles of sound that surround the musician offer some degree of hope. The pattern of expanding circles invokes the possibilities of mass communication represented by radio sound waves.³⁹ And communication, of course, carried a promise not only of the spread of information but of organization for social change.

Most of Douglas's work suggests a forward-looking stance, whether through the use of modern symbols such as skyscrapers or the smoking chimneys of modern industry, the aspiration signified by upward turned faces, or the play of light and angles of vision indicative of a modern outlook. Yet his masks, pyramids, skyscrapers, and industrial cogs cannot be read literally, as a straightforward celebration (or, alternatively, condemnation) of primitivism and modernism. For Douglas, African symbolism serves primarily to *frame* perception—to provide a formal, classical reference point for perceptions of blackness, thereby offering a perspective that de-centers

such perceptions from the framings imposed by American racism. Just as African tropes are not meant to represent a literal, known past, the modernist imagery is not meant to offer a simple endorsement or celebration of "progress." Rather than using skyscrapers, for example, in the way that many Art Deco painters did, as a wholesale celebration of *form* as progress, Douglas included his skyscrapers to remind viewers of the contribution that black labor was making to the building of the future.⁴⁰ That Douglas shared much of the cultural pragmatists' optimism regarding the future seems clear; that his outlook was unromantic must also be acknowledged. Neither social progress nor skyscrapers were inevitable: both were produced by work. The future could not be predicted or controlled in absolute terms but it could be redirected from its existing racist course and guided by an emergent understanding of alternative possibilities.

The progressive orientation of Douglas's work is a matter both of theme and of treatment. His narrative framework speaks of progress for the race and for civilization as a whole. The style and technique of the murals and illustrations also express the sensibility of "Art Moderne," particularly in the use of light, which suggests the kind of spotlighting that came to be associated with the movies. There is the same alternation between large picture and close-up, except that the two co-exist in a single image. The fragmentation and multiplication of the circles and rays of light, while challenging conventions of realism in light and shadow, also suggest the multiplicity of perspectives, of focal points or centers. The multiple rays of light work to focus our attention, giving narrative structure to the viewer's gaze and creating an impression of movement and relationship beyond the flat juxtapositions of the figures.⁴¹ Suggestive of hope, the light also may be seen as religious; in most cases, the central figures seem to look up both to God and the future. In other cases, the light may be that of the future on the past, probing an obscure past for knowledge to be used in creating a new future.

The treatment of both primitive and modern themes in Douglas's work, then, is far more political and historical than that of Art Deco painters in general. Douglas shares the modern faith in progress, but he also pays attention to having come, as the spiritual says, "a mighty long way." Looking back on the legacy of the Harlem Renaissance, Locke was to comment, "By stages, it seems, we are achieving greater democracy in art,—and let us hope through art."⁴² Locke's view of art was that it afforded Americans the opportunity to really *see* blackness for the first time: to see blackness not as the shadow of whiteness but as a distinctive culture to be understood on its own terms. By putting into practice Locke's philosophy of racial art, Douglas "effected the crucial move toward affirming the validity of the Black experience and thereby made one of America's most worthy contributions to art," argues David Driskell. "Had Douglas not led the way in using African-oriented imagery," Alain Locke's vision of "'return[ing] to the ancestral arts of Africa for inspiration'" might have been delayed much longer in its realization.⁴³

THE "UNIVERSAL" ART OF AARON DOUGLAS

Among the more politically-minded of the artists and writers associated with the Harlem Renaissance, Aaron Douglas participated enthusiastically in the Renaissance project as Alain Locke framed it: as an artistic attempt to set the United States on the path toward full political inclusiveness and cultural understanding.⁴⁴ A measure of the resistance of racism to "cultural" reconstruction, unfortunately, is the virtual invisibility of Aaron Douglas's work and of African-American themes in most contemporary discussions of Art Deco. In *American Art Deco*, for example, Alastair Duncan opens his chapter on painting and graphics with the words, "One has to search hard to find an Art Deco influence in American paintings of the 1920s and 1930s"—and although Duncan then discusses the Works

Progress Administration projects sponsored under the New Deal (in which Douglas participated), Aaron Douglas goes unmentioned.⁴⁵

The lag in the art world's recognition of Aaron Douglas as an artist of "universal" caliber suggests the inadequacy of analyses claiming that Douglas's rendering of the African-American experience traded upon stereotypes. So radical was Douglas's challenge to Eurocentric conceptions of art, in fact, that his work has been dismissed as failing to meet the "neutral" and "individual" terms upon which blackness can safely be acknowledged. It is ironic, therefore, that Douglas was accused by some of his contemporaries of playing into racist assumptions regarding black primitivism. James A. Porter, for example, called Douglas's paintings "tasteless" and reminiscent of black minstrel stereotypes.⁴⁶ As Bearden and Henderson were later to read this reaction, it represents that of "many academic artists to painting that did not present black people as well-dressed citizens, charmingly preoccupied in comfortable surroundings. The same attitude was expressed by members of the black middle class who were ashamed of jazz."⁴⁷

As Douglas commented, the decision to represent black experience in particular ways is always a response to a certain historical situation: "What the Negro artist should paint and how he should paint it can't accurately be determined without reference to specific social conditions."⁴⁸ Such a view of art is pragmatist insofar as it suggests setting aside any appeal to ultimate truths, instead taking an instrumental approach to the making of meaning. Douglas's own explicit view was that black art could not be understood or appreciated apart from a recognition of the role played in experience by the politics of race. In contrast to colonizing approaches to universalism that assimilate all human experience to that of the specifically individual experience of the white, middle- and upper-class art connoisseur, Douglas's form of universalism stressed the shared historical and cultural experience of African Americans as a group. Not only did

he challenge the notion of universalism predicated on parallels between *individual* forms of experience, but he challenged the equation of universalism with colorblindness. Instead, he sought universalism in the historical particularity of black experience. His "universal man" was black—and sometimes a woman.

In conjuring a black modernist vision of possible worlds, Aaron Douglas and his fellow Renaissance artists and writers looked toward a New Negro and a New Nordic not confined to Manhattan life. Drawing on their localized experiences of blackness in California, Kansas, Utah, Jamaica, Illinois, Florida, Nebraska, and elsewhere, and on their shared dream of Africa, the Renaissance artists and writers projected rediscovered "folk" and "primitive" values into a future articulated to a black, modernist perspective. The effects of their visionary and revisionary insight into possibility continue to resonate today. In setting aside the white-centered frameworks of meaning attached to race, urban life, and history, and reinventing modernity in black-centered terms, the artists of the Renaissance instigated a form of social protest that helped to shift racialized understandings.

Almost three quarters of a century after the Harlem Renaissance, the generative themes found in the work of Aaron Douglas and other Renaissance artists are again being taken up by black artists, activists, and others both in the United States and in the diaspora; indeed, the Harlem Renaissance itself is being reconceived as a movement confined neither to Harlem nor to the 1920s. Artists and writers connected with the movement, including Aaron Douglas, Jacob Lawrence, and Langston Hughes, produced important work many decades after the Renaissance was said to be over. Today, other artists on both sides of the Atlantic continue to explore the themes and insights of the Harlem Renaissance.⁴⁹ The original Renaissance artists came from almost everywhere but Harlem: from the West and the Midwest, from the Great Plains, from the South, from the East, and from outside the United States. Their successors are found not

only in the Americas but in Europe, Africa, and everywhere else in the diaspora.⁵⁰

NOTES

1. During the period between the mid-twenties and the mid-thirties, the term "Negro Renaissance" was used to refer to the flourishing of African-American arts and letters that later came to be known as the "Harlem Renaissance." Calling it a "Negro Renaissance" rather than the "Harlem Renaissance" signaled the integral character of the renaissance. As Jeffrey Stewart points out, "after 1925, cities such as Chicago, Philadelphia, Cleveland, and Washington, D.C., experienced their own 'renaissances.'" Jeffrey C. Stewart, "Introduction," in *The Critical Temper of Alain Locke: A Selection of His Essays on Art and Culture*, ed. Jeffrey C. Stewart (New York: Garland Publishing, 1983), p. xviii. Some recent commentaries also refer to this period as the "First Black Renaissance" to distinguish it from the "Second Black Renaissance," which stretched from the early fifties through the seventies. In addition to Aaron Douglas, other Harlem Renaissance emigrants included Zora Neale Hurston (Florida), Alain Locke (Philadelphia), Wallace Thurman (Salt Lake City and Los Angeles), Claude McKay (Jamaica), Jessie Fauset (Washington, D.C.), Langston Hughes (Missouri, Topeka, Chicago, Cleveland, and Mexico), Louis Armstrong (New Orleans), Alberta Hunter (Chicago), and Augusta Savage (Florida).

2. Amy Helene Kirschke, *Aaron Douglas: Art, Race, and the Harlem Renaissance* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995), pp. 2, 3. Douglas was born in Topeka, Kansas, in 1899; he graduated from the University of Nebraska in 1922.

3. Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 9.

4. This description of Aaron Douglas is attributed to Alain Locke in Steven Watson, *The Harlem Renaissance: Hub of African-American Culture, 1920-1930* (New York: Pantheon, 1995), p. 89.

5. Although middle-class, Aaron Douglas "experienced some of the hardships of the new black proletariat . . . taking shape in the cities of the North," and "sympathized with" the common worker. Kirschke, *Aaron Douglas* (note 2 above), pp. 5, 8.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 4; see also p. 2.

7. George Hutchinson, *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White* (Cambridge: Belknap/Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 38. Hutchinson sees pragmatism in the first decades of the twentieth century as a pervasive philosophy to which American intellectuals and artists in general responded, whether or not they were directly informed by it.

At the same time, pragmatism was itself influenced by other movements; Hutchinson makes an argument for a mutually informing relation between pragmatism and the aesthetics of the Harlem Renaissance. For example, he sees Dewey's *Art as Experience* as "at least partly indebted to African and African American aesthetics as filtered through Barnes" (p. 46).

8. In *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), Cornel West makes a case for Du Bois as a pragmatist, but because he took a variety of theoretical and political positions over the course of his long and active career, it is difficult to categorize Du Bois with any finality. As I concentrate here on the Harlem Renaissance years, when Du Bois's position was in some ways more conservative than Locke's but still identifiably pragmatist, I have simply identified Du Bois as a pragmatist. It should be noted, however, that Du Bois embraced a number of political positions, including socialism and pan-Africanism.

9. Pragmatists are concerned specifically with the uses and misuses to which tools of thought are put, and the degree to which the intellectual tools accepted by a society promote or preclude new ways of understanding experience. Carter G. Woodson's *The Mis-Education of the Negro* (1933; Washington, D.C.: The Associated Publishers, 1972) gives the classic analysis of the inadequacy of white intellectual tools for understanding or shaping black experience. Because of its emphasis on structural conflict as well as cultural difference, Woodson's analysis might be characterized as an instance of political or radical pragmatism.

10. Alain Locke, "The New Negro," in *The New Negro*, ed. Alain Locke (1925; New York: Atheneum, 1992), pp. 3-4.

11. Quoted in Kirschke, *Aaron Douglas* (note 2 above), p. 61. (Quote dates from 1925.)

12. John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, in *John Dewey: The Later Works, 1925-1953*, ser. ed. Jo Ann Boydston, vol. 10 (1934), ed. Harriet Furst Simon (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987), p. 328.

13. See Alain Locke, "Harlem Types — Portraits by Winold Reiss," in *Critical Temper* (note 1 above), p. 18. (Originally published in 1925.)

14. Stewart argues that most African-American Renaissance artists had no real interest in Africa or in being race representatives, and that Locke's own sense of Africa was too vague to allow for any insights into distinctively African artistic motifs or techniques. Nevertheless, Stewart credits Locke with helping to legitimate Africa in African Americans' eyes and with helping to pave the way for the Second Black Renaissance in the 1960s. Jeffrey C.

Stewart, *A Biography of Alain Locke: Philosopher of the Harlem Renaissance, 1886–1930* (Ph. D. diss., University of Michigan–Ann Arbor, 1979), pp. 68–70, 193, and 335–36. Also see Alain Locke, “The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts,” in *New Negro* (note 10 above), pp. 254–67.

15. W. E. B. Du Bois, “A Negro Art Renaissance,” in *W. E. B. Du Bois: A Reader*, ed. David Levering Lewis (New York: Henry Holt, 1995), p. 507. (Originally published in 1925.)

16. Many commentators—including Aaron Douglas and the other young artists and writers connected with the *Fire!!* project—have been troubled by the influence that the white patrons of the Harlem Renaissance exerted on black art. Some critics have even gone so far as to dismiss the entire Renaissance as a failure, arguing that writers and artists were compromised by the need to placate white patrons and consumers. (For a provocative discussion of these arguments, see Hutchinson, *Harlem Renaissance* [note 7 above].) To the extent that the Harlem Renaissance appeal to “primitivism” did partake of the sentimentalization of African Americans as untouched by modern decadence, it is of course problematic; it is a simplification of “primitivism,” however, to see it as a strictly white, strictly patronizing trope. As I discuss in the next section, primitivism also had other meanings, particularly as interpreted in Aaron Douglas’s work. See, too, the extended discussion of this issue in Kirschke’s *Aaron Douglas* (note 2 above). As Kirschke points out, the patrons of black art were by no means exclusively white—most of Douglas’s illustrations, for example, appeared in black periodicals.

17. David Driskell, “Aaron Douglas: Singing a New Song of Heritage” (paper presented at the *African Americans and the Great Plains Conference* in Lincoln, Nebr., February, 1997).

18. Romare Bearden and Harry Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists: From 1792 to the Present* (New York: Pantheon, 1993), p. 130.

19. Reproduced in The Studio Museum of Harlem, *Harlem Renaissance Art of Black America* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1987), p. 121 (plate 32).

20. David Driskell, “The Flowering of the Harlem Renaissance: The Art of Aaron Douglas, Meta Warrick Fuller, Palmer Hayden, and William H. Johnson,” in *Ibid.*, p. 112.

21. *Charleston*, an illustration from *Black Magic* (1929), by Paul Marand, is reproduced in Kirschke, *Aaron Douglas* (note 2 above), fig. 62.

22. For example, David Driskell identifies the “Roman sentinel” in *The Crucifixion* as “representing the white guardianship of Black affairs in America and Africa.” Driskell, “Flowering” (note

20 above), p. 112. Interestingly, there is nothing in the actual portrayal of this figure to suggest whiteness; his coloring and the distinctive Aaron Douglas eyes resemble those of black Simon. Even the grasping hands that appear in images like *Charleston* and *Song of the Towers* are not explicitly identified with whiteness, for although in one instance they are white, in the other they are black.

23. Nathan Irvin Huggins, *The Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 188. Huggins criticizes Countee Cullen’s “Heritage” in this regard, for example (pp. 164–65).

24. *Ibid.*, pp. 169, 171, 172.

25. In the first part of the twentieth century, many African Americans accepted the view that the white and black races were fundamentally and naturally different, not only by virtue of their different histories but by virtue of “race” itself as a quasi-biological category. Liberal and leftist African Americans, however, repudiated the Social Darwinist characterization of those differences in deficit terms, instead emphasizing parallelism and the distinctiveness of the race spirit, “gift,” or racial identity that set African Americans apart from white Americans. Among the prominent African Americans subscribing to the idea of an inherited racial identity were Marcus Garvey, Carter G. Woodson, Alain Locke, and Aaron Douglas.

26. Quoted in Kirschke, *Aaron Douglas* (note 2 above), p. 87. (Quote presumably dates from 1926.)

27. Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 87.

28. Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 51. Kirschke’s discussion makes a strong argument for the centrality of group consciousness in Aaron Douglas’s work.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 77.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 79.

31. Douglas, quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 47.

32. Richard J. Powell et al., *Rhapsodies in Black: Art of the Harlem Renaissance* (Berkeley: University of California Press with the Hayward Gallery and the Institute of International Visual Arts, 1997).

33. Richard J. Powell, “Re/Birth of a Nation,” in *Ibid.*, p. 25.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 26. Powell draws here upon Robert Goldwater’s 1938 book, *Primitivism in Modern Painting*, reprinted as *Primitivism in Modern Art* (Cambridge: Belknap Press/Harvard University Press, 1986).

35. Bearden and Henderson, *History* (note 18 above), p. 128.

36. Art Deco during the years between the wars took a particular interest in folk and Native American art, African art (particularly sculpture and carving), Egyptian art (after Tutankhamen’s tomb was opened in 1922), and pre-Columbian art.

37. Bearden and Henderson, *History* (note 18 above), p. 134.

38. The original mural (painted in 1934) is at the Schomburg Center; a reproduction can be found in *Harlem Renaissance* (note 19 above), p. 24 (plate 10).

39. Aaron Douglas, who worked with David Driskell at Fisk University for many years, described this connection between radio sound waves and the concentric circles in some of his paintings, in a conversation reported in Driskell, "Aaron Douglas" (note 17 above).

40. Driskell, "Aaron Douglas" (note 17 above).

41. By contrast, the majority of other work in the Art Deco tradition seems to resist narrative or dynamic composition. In most examples of the style, it is the *thing itself* that is dynamic, forward-looking, not the thing in relation to other things. Hence the fascination with the contours of objects (including persons as objects) as *symbolic* of movement — for example, the stepped silhouettes of futuristic skyscrapers, which of course do not actually move.

42. Alain Locke, "Up Till Now," in *Critical Temper* (note 1 above), p. 194. (Originally 1945.)

43. Driskell, "Flowering" (note 20 above), p. 131.

44. By no means did all those associated with the Harlem Renaissance see its project in political terms. Aaron Douglas was among the more self-consciously political of the artists and writers of the time. Like the other contributors to *Fire!!*, an artistically successful but short-lived magazine, he took an economically as well as artistically Africentric stance; for a time, he also studied Marxism.

45. Alastair Duncan, *American Art Deco* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1986), p. 234. In the many books on American Art Deco that I have examined, only one mentions Aaron Douglas at all, and even that book does not offer any illustrations of his work. The author does, however, provide some brief discussion of Aaron Douglas and of African-American issues in the '20s and '30s. See Eva Weber, *Art Deco in America* (New York: Exeter Books, 1985), also published in an identical ver-

sion but with a different cover in Greenwich, CT, by Dorset Press (1985). Given that books on Art Deco published by prestigious art houses like Abrams, Rizzoli, and Abbeville mention neither the Harlem Renaissance in general nor particular African Americans such as Aaron Douglas, it may be a comment on the politics of art that both versions of Weber's book are published by bargain presses.

46. Quoted in Mary Schmidt Campbell, "Introduction," in *Harlem Renaissance Art* (note 19 above), p. 50.

47. Bearden and Henderson, *History* (note 18 above), pp. 133–34. A painting by Palmer Hayden from around 1937, *The Janitor Who Paints* is testament to the artistic tensions between demeaning racial stereotypes and the politics of "correct" racial representation. When the painting was x-rayed a few years ago, it was discovered that the underpainting was almost grotesquely unflattering to blacks. The painting, says Regenia Perry, "was undoubtedly altered by Hayden in response to widespread criticism of his works by his peers who felt that Hayden was caricaturing blacks for the amusement of whites." Regenia A. Perry, *Free within Ourselves: African-American Artists in the Collection of the National Museum of American Art* (Washington, D.C.: National Museum of American Art and San Francisco: Pomegranate Artbooks, 1992), p. 89. The gorgeous silver print photographs of James Van Der Zee from the Harlem Renaissance, of elegant, middle-class blacks, are representative of the preoccupation of Harlem Renaissance artists with presenting best-foot-forward images of black Americans to the rest of the world.

48. Quoted in Bearden and Henderson, *History* (note 18 above), p. 132.

49. Powell et al., *Rhapsodies* (note 32 above).

50. An earlier version of this essay was presented at the *African Americans and the Great Plains Conference* in Lincoln, Nebraska (February, 1997). I would like to thank Wilfred Samuels for his very helpful comments on an earlier draft of the paper.