Introduction

William J. Harris

> I had the good fortune to be one of a small group of eight, ten, perhaps a dozen young men and women who, met in the street, the libraries, the churches, and the cabarets of Harlem; which was at the time the Mecca, the intellectual and artistic focal point of the black world of the twenties. By the middle of the decade, some inspired individual with an unbelievably wild or perhaps inspired rhetorical or poetic gesture declared this period should be known as the Harlem Renaissance. At the time now one stopped to think how absurd, illogical, incongruous it was that a few young, black, inexperienced writers, artists, and scholars, coming together for the most part from lowly backgrounds such as ours should even aspire to the eminence that comes to mind when you think of the great Renaissance of the 15th and 17th century Italy . . . In like manner what we young blacks were tinkering with in the 1920s in our poems and songs, pictures and novels was nothing less than a revival, a stirring of the souls of black folk which had continued to beat though ever so faintly from man's first appearance on earth to our troubled time.
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> —Aaron Douglas[1]

The essays for this special issue of *American Studies* primarily come from "Aaron Douglas and the Arts of the Harlem Renaissance," an interdisciplinary

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conference held in conjunction with the Spencer Museum of Art's exhibition, "Aaron Douglas: African American Modernist," on the University of Kansas campus on Friday, September 28 and September 29, 2007.

As we can see from the above Douglas quotation, Douglas and the Harlem Renaissance were cross-disciplinary and interdisciplinary, and I wanted the conference to have that same spirit. Hence, it would not simply be another gathering where art historians talked to art historians; we wanted to go beyond that world. I invited speakers from a variety of disciplines: cultural history, visual art, music, literature, dance, theater, as well as art history. Moreover, the art historians I invited, especially, Richard Powell, have radically expanded the perimeters of that field. I modeled this conference after my more than decade experience of meetings of the Jazz Studies Group at Columbia University's Center for Jazz Studies where we enriched our understanding of jazz by situating it within a great variety of contexts, from visual art, to literature, to politics to religion, to New Orleans and to numerous others.

The goal of the conference was to assess the complex constellation of artists, writers, and political and creative thinkers who comprised the Harlem Renaissance and to highlight Douglas's place within it. Whereas the exhibition "Aaron Douglas: African American Modernist" presented works created by Douglas throughout his career, the conference was an opportunity to focus on the Harlem Renaissance, the era during which Douglas made a name for himself and with which he is most closely associated.

The presenters were a talented and inspiring group and I am delighted that most could transform their presentations into polished essays.

In the beautifully written and textured, "The New Negro Era and the Great African American Transformation," Professor Gerald Early, of Washington University, St. Louis, examines how the Great War shaped the New Negro. "I would argue, " he originally notes," that the war made African Americans a truly modern national consciousness and this, in turn, helped to make the New Negro Movement possible."

In "The Flat Plane, the Jagged Edge: Aaron Douglas's Musical Art," Professor Robert G. O'Meally, of Columbia University, through scrutinizing Douglas's flat planes and jagged edges, theorizes "the relationship between music and visual art" and moreover, expands his insights by examining Duke Ellington's "musical flatness" and Romare Bearden's Douglas influenced "musical collages." One of O'Meally's most tantalizing and informative statements in the essay is: "The black American communities where Douglas grew up and found his voice as an artist, both in the Midwest and in New York, were *music-centered*. In sacred and secular settings, women and men, working-class and otherwise, were not only influenced by music; they were washed in the ubiquitous flow of musical sound: culturally speaking, they were saturated with it."

Terry Adkins, of the University of Pennsylvania, a visual artist, in "The Vigilant Torch of an Olympian Painter" comments on Douglas's art and his

importance, suggests persons who would be "invaluable resources for further study" of the man and his ideas and discusses his own memories of Douglas at Fisk University when Adkins was a student there.

In "On Time, In Time, Through Time: Aaron Douglas, *Fire!!* and the Writers of the Harlem Renaissance," Professor Farah Jasmine Griffin, of Columbia University, focuses on the collaboration of black American visual and literary artists during the Harlem Renaissance in the one shot but legendary literary journal, *Fire!!*. As well as showing Douglas's intellectual centrality to that moment, she closely reads Douglas's three drawings in that 1926 volume and his celebrated cover.

In "Dark Tower and the Saturday Nighters: Salons as Themes in African American Drama," Professor David Krasner, of Emerson College, shows, by using two specific salons—Georgia Douglas Johnson's in Washington, D.C. and A'Lelia Walker's in New York—that salons "played a critical role in the clustering of ideas, in linking people across genres, and influencing themes germane to African American drama."

Professor Amy Kirschke, of University of North Carolina, Wilmington, decided to change her topic for this issue. Her original one explored the visual rhetoric of identity and memory in Douglas and the Harlem Renaissance. In her new essay, "The Burden of Black Womanhood: Aaron Douglas and the 'Apogée of Beauty,'" she ponders Douglas's celebration of "the strength, resolve and beauty of black women."

In "Paint that Thing! Aaron Douglas's Call to Modernism," Professor Richard J. Powell of Duke University, as well as speaking of Douglas as an artist, about his "unique blend of modern and folk consciousness," also insists that to understand modernism fully, not just black modernism, you must understand the Harlem Renaissance. One of his most interesting insights occurs during his discussion of Douglas's use of "urban architecture," where he observes "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."

In "The Stories Pictures Tell: Dance Footprints in Selected Works of Aaron Douglas," Professor Brenda Dixon Gotschild, of Temple University, emeriti, "deconstructs dance tropes in . . . [Douglas's] visual images and see[s] what somatic stories are revealed in those pictures." Professor Dixon Gotschild's contribution was performance-based and did not translate well into an essay; thus we will not have the privilege of encountering her fine ideas about dance movements and visual images.

The conference was moderated by Sherrie Tucker and me.

For this special issue, I and the editors of the journal, Sherrie Tucker, David M. Katzman, and Randal Jelks have asked Professor Cheryl Ragar of Kansas State University to provide a biography of Aaron Douglas—she also gives us a bonus: a personal account of her discovery of this Kansas artist—and Stephanie

Knappe, Assistant Curator of American Art at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, Missouri to provide a history of the exhibition.

In a sense at the conference there were no experts, there were no border guards—nobody controlled the land—nobody controlled the turf. In fact, it was a time of turf crossing. We encouraged the participants to develop a language that crossed the borders among the visual, literary, performing arts and they pulled from any relevant knowledge to elucidate their topics. Art historians learned from literary critics, dance critics learned from visual artists—we all learned from each other. In short, we, indeed, did have a conversation among the disciplines. Furthermore, the audience was atypical as well; it was made up of Douglas's family, scholars—local and national, international—graduate and undergraduate students and town's people and we all talked to each other. Since time was built into the structure of conference for the audience to speak, they did. It was a great day; it was a great experience—truly a public intellectual event. I hope these essays reflect the experience.

To enhance the reader's experience of Aaron Douglas and this special issue she or he should peruse the beautifully illustrated catalogue of Douglas's work, *Aaron Douglas: African American Modernist*, (Yale, 2007) edited by Susan Earle, the Curator of European & American Art at the Spencer Museum of Art.

Note

I want to thank the Spencer Museum of Art, especially, Saralyn Reece Hardy, Director, for making the conference possible. From the beginning the Spencer understood the importance of putting Douglas into a larger cultural and intellectual context. I also want to thank the editors of *American Studies*, Sherrie Tucker, David Katzman and Randal Jelks for their editorial wisdom, and the sponsors of the conference: the Henry Luce Foundation, the Spencer Museum of Art, the KU Interdisciplinary Jazz Studies Group, the Hall Center for the Humanities at the University of Kansas and the KU University Theatre.

1. Box 3, folder 2, Aaron Douglas Papers, Fisk University Franklin Library Special Collections, Nashville