RE-MEMBERING THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN PAST

Langston Hughes, Aaron Douglas and Black art of the Harlem Renaissance

The Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s was part of the New Negro Movement that swept the USA in the early twentieth century. Through fiction, poetry, essays, music, theatre, sculpture, painting and illustration, participants in this first Black arts movement produced work that was both grounded in modernity and an engagement with African-American history, folk culture and memory. This paper focuses on two Harlem Renaissance artists, the poet and fiction writer Langston Hughes and the illustrator and mural painter Aaron Douglas, who were particularly concerned with matters of history, memory and meaning. Themes such as the African past, slavery, freedom, lynching and migration figure powerfully in their art; and they employed modes of artistic expression that were accessible to a broad audience of African Americans. I explore such works as Hughes’ ‘The Negro Speaks of Rivers’, ‘The Negro Mother’, ‘Afro-American Fragment’ and ‘Aunt Sue’s Stories’ and Douglas’ four-part mural Aspects of Negro Life. I ask: What were the cultural politics of this art? Why was it so concerned with shared experience and collective memory?

Keywords Identity; cultural politics; Harlem Renaissance; New Negro; Langston Hughes; Aaron Douglas

Over a period of more than three centuries, in the slave ships of the Middle Passage and the plantations of the American South, peoples from many nations of what is now called West and Central Africa, brought together under conditions of extreme brutality, reinvented themselves as one people — and they renamed themselves ‘African’, ‘Coloured People’ and ‘Negro’. Later, from end of the nineteenth century to the first few decades of the twentieth century, mostly in northern urban centres of the USA, the descendants of the slaves reinvented themselves again — this time as the ‘New Negro’.1

I have begun with two origins stories about race and identity in the African diaspora, specifically in the USA: the first story concerns the birth of ‘Black people’, while the second concerns the birth of modern, Black identity. These
stories remind us that Black subjects, like White subjects, are only a fairly recent invention – the effects of relations of power and meaning. In this essay, I address a part of one of these stories: my topic is the birth of the ‘New Negro’; and my specific focus is on the role of Black art and collective memory in that process.

Remaking themselves through portrait photography

These are examples of studio photographs taken in New York City in the 1920s and early 1930s of people of African descent (see Figures 1 and 2). We need to remember that these portraits ‘were created during an era when the overwhelming majority of postcards, greeting cards, comic strips, and other popular cultural artefacts made with images of African Americans consisted of crude, degrading racial caricatures’ (Willis-Braithwaite 1993, p. 13); and when ‘scientific’ representations of people of African descent tended to consist of racist images and narratives drawing on phrenology, physiognomy and eugenics. By presenting themselves to the camera as they did, these men and women, many of whom had only recently migrated to the city, countered a long history in American popular culture of negative racial stereotypes and

FIGURE 1 James VanDerZee, Couple, 1924. © Donna Mussenden VanDerZee.
partially erased a collective memory of degradation. They also constituted themselves as ‘New Negroes’—modern, proud, dignified and stylish. The self-presentation and self-transformation that you see here was achieved in the Guarantee Studio in Harlem, where the legendary photographer James VanDerZee was ‘tireless in devising ways to use composition, image manipulation, props, and staged studio setups to establish a space in which his subjects could expand spiritually, emotionally, and symbolically’ (Willis-Braithwaite 1993, p. 13). In VanDerZee’s studio, the photographer and his sitters collaborated to co-produce portraits that ‘can be viewed as the visual embodiment of the racial ideals promoted by . . . leading African American intellectuals and writers of the era’ (Willis-Braithwaite 1993, p. 13), such as W. E. B. DuBois, Jesse Fauset, Alain Locke and Langston Hughes.

VanDerZee’s studio provided an ideal space within which these subjects could rehearse and perform their new identities, and if they did not quite have the training and cultural capital to choreograph and sustain their performance, the artist assisted them. In her introduction to Harlem Renaissance: Art of Black America, Mary Schmidt Campbell emphasizes VanDerZee’s role in the construction of New Negro photographic portraits:

FIGURE 2 James VanDerZee, Looking Backwards (World War I Veterans), 1932. © Donna Mussenden VanDerZee.
All of his subjects bear a stylish resemblance. His studio portraits are identifiable by a few carefully composed sets, which were meant to represent an orderly bourgeois life. Mr. VanDerZee arranged everything. He coaxed his subjects to sit with their legs crossed, their backs straight, a hat cocked to the side, a coat collar turned up, all to convey a studied, almost defiant confidence. Sartorially, his subjects are impeccable. All of them, men, women, and children, wear the most stylish clothes, made from the luxurious fabrics and tailored with the most intricate detailing. And if, by chance, a sleeve was frayed or a button missing, VanDerZee conveniently hand-painted and corrected the detail. In fact, he touched up imperfections, straightened teeth, sketched a few extra pieces of jewelry, smoothed out skin color — whatever was necessary to make his clients fit the New Negro mould. In scene after scene, a regimented, formalized image recurs, all cut from the same pattern. The image of the Harlem Renaissance, captured by VanDerZee’s photographs, was partially real pride and partially carefully constructed artifice.

(Schmidt Campbell 1987, p. 36)

Schmidt Campbell emphasizes the role of the artist in the construction of the New Negro portraits. There is, of course, the other side of the coin as well: the subjects in VanDerZee’s studio were active agents in the construction of new subjectivities and imagery.

Image was crucial to New Negro subjects: their beautifully produced portraits were hung in special places in their homes (as a reminder to themselves of who they had become) and sent to relatives still living in the South (as a statement about the freedom and prosperity that could be theirs in the North). New Negroes were well aware that representation is a matter of cultural politics (Jordan and Weedon 1995); that it is a crucial terrain for contesting racist discourse and practices. They seem to have understood what many theorists are only coming to understand today — that identity is not simply given but performed; that subjectivity can be remade but this often requires access to cultural and social power. VanDerZee took subjects who wanted to be otherwise — who sought to re-write their bodies against a remembered history of degradation. With the artist’s help, these African-American subjects stood up straight and looked back at White power.

It is these Black subjects, who had already begun the process of remaking themselves, that were the primary addressees of the art produced by the writers, visual artists, musicians and playwrights of Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s. Deborah Willis, the photographic historian of Black America, is right when she says:

We tend to think of VanDerZee as an observer, as a recorder, of the drama that we call the Harlem Renaissance . . . but it might be more faithful to his role in it to think of him as one of its creators . . . . There is a
powerful connection between the literary works of the Harlem Renaissance writers, which demanded full democratic participation for African Americans in American life, and VanDerZee’s photographs. (Willis-Braithwaite 1993, pp. 12–13)

Whereas Deborah Willis-Braithwaite refers to these portraits as VanDerZee’s photographs, I prefer to think of them as co-productions – as the result of a collaborative process between subjects who desired to look proud, stylish and respectable and a photographer who, with his props and retouching, ensured that they realized their dreams.

Thus far, I have introduced the ‘New Negro’ via portrait photographs, commenting on the stance of the subjects and the role of the photographer in creating such images. I want to turn now to a historical question, as a way of providing some necessary background that will help us to make further sense of this new subject position.

The New Negro: origins, philosophy and stance

The questions I turn to now are these: Who were the New Negroes? Where did they come from?

The ‘New Negro’ was the product of certain historical developments in the USA during the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first decades of twentieth century. Specifically, this new mode of racialized subjectivity was the product of (1) White dominance and racial violence in the American south, (2) Black Nationalist philosophies, (3) mass migration and (4) the First World War. Let us briefly consider each of these in turn.

White dominance and racial violence

The enslavement of African Americans officially ended in the USA in 1865. Slavery was followed by a period of Reconstruction (1865–1877) in which African Americans in the South gained the right to vote and various other basic freedoms associated with liberal democracies. The 1880s and the decades that immediately followed were different: African Americans in the southern states found themselves at the mercy of institutionalized White power. They were abandoned by all three branches of the US government: by the congress and the presidency, who removed the troops and revoked laws that had offered them protection; and by the Supreme Court, whose rulings, such as Plessy v. Ferguson in 1896, re-institutionalized segregation and otherwise supported White southern power (see Logan 1965).

In addition to the erosion of African-American political and civil rights, this was also the period of the rise of the Ku Klux Klan, of widespread lynching and other acts of racial violence. Indeed, acts of extreme racial violence
directed against a relatively defenceless African-American population became routinized as part of everyday life, often with the support of the local state apparatus. Here are two newspaper reports, among hundreds that one could provide, of such incidents.

**Lynched Negro and wife first mutilated**

An eye-witness to the lynching of Luther Holbert and his wife, negroes, which took place in Doddsville yesterday, today gave the Evening Post the following details concerning retribution exacted from the couple prior to their cremation yesterday:

When the two Negroes were captured, they were tied to trees and while the funeral pyres were being prepared, they were forced to hold out their hands while one finger at a time was chopped off. The fingers were distributed as souvenirs. The ears of the murderers were cut off. Holbert was beaten severely, his skull was fractured and one of his eyes, knocked out with a stick, hung by a shred from the socket. Some of the mob used a large corkscrew to bore into the flesh of the man and woman. It was applied to their arms, legs and body. Then pulled out, the spirals tearing out big pieces of raw, quivering flesh every time it was withdrawn.

*(Vicksburg Evening Post. Vicksburg, Mississippi, 8 February 1904)*

**Negro tortured to death by mob of 4,000**

LANSING, TEX., MAY 22 – Dudley Morgan, a negro accused of assailing Mrs. McKay, wife of Section Foreman McKay, was burned to death at an iron stake here to-day. A crowd of 4,000 men, most of whom were armed, snatched him from the officers on the arrival of the train. Morgan was taken to a large field on the edge of town. An iron stake was driven into the ground and to this he was bound until he could only move his head. Heaps of inflammable material was then piled about him and he was given a few moments for prayer.

It was 12:12 when all arrangements were completed. The crowd by this time numbered at least 5,000. The husband of the woman Morgan was accused of abusing applied the match and the pyre was soon ablaze. Then began the torture of the negro. Burning pieces of pine were thrust into his eyes. Then burning timbers were held to his neck, and after his clothes were burned off to other parts of his body. He was tortured in a horrible manner. The crowd clamored continuously for a slow death. The negro writhing and groaning at the stake, begged piteously to be shot.
Mrs. McKay was brought to the field in a carriage with four other women, and an unsuccessful effort was made to get her near enough to see the mob’s victim.

*(Chicago Record-Herald, 23 May 1902)*

Note that these acts were acts of impunity and they often included ritualized, sadistic violence. They were also a form of mass entertainment — for the White crowds, often numbering in the hundreds, sometimes in the thousands, who came along:

In the peak years of the Terrible Nineties [i.e., the 1890s], . . . a black was lynched somewhere every day or two. From this time forward, lynching became in Charles S. Johnson’s words ‘a hybrid of sports-vengeance,’ became in Gunnar Myrdal’s words a ‘form of witch-hunting’, became in H. L. Mencken’s words a diversion which often took ‘the place of the merry-go-round, the theatre, the symphony orchestra, and other diversions common to larger communities.’ It was not unusual in these days for newspapers to advertise a lynching and for crowds to come from afar on chartered trains.

*(Bennett 1993, p. 271)*

Although there is a widely accepted view that most African Americans who were lynched in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century were accused of rape, this is not the case. The overwhelming majority were lynched for acts that could be seen to be challenging — often in the smallest ways — the dominance of White power: ‘the overwhelming majority . . . were charged with the ‘crimes’ of testifying against whites in court, seeking another job, using offensive language, failing to say ‘mister’ to whites, disputing the price of blackberries, attempting to vote and accepting the job of postmaster’ (p. 271). That is, they were lynched for failing to stay in their place — in the subordinate subject-positions offered to them by institutionalized White power.

Lynching was terrifying. However, perhaps even more terrifying were anti-Black race riots that routinely occurred in American cities beginning in the 1890s.

In 1898, for example, a highly emotional campaign to eliminate black suffrage triggered a riot in Wilmington, North Carolina, which resulted in thirty-six black casualties. In 1904 racial violence swept through the small town of Statesboro, Georgia. Following the conviction of two blacks for the murder of a white family, a white mob took action against the growing ‘insolence’ of local blacks. After capturing and burning the two murderers, the mob turned its wrath on the entire black community. They attacked blacks indiscriminately, burned their houses, and drove a
number from the town. Two years later an even more serious riot erupted in Atlanta. Like the Wilmington riot, trouble began in Atlanta during a campaign to disenfranchise blacks . . . Finally, on September 22, 1906, a white mob gathered and began attacking every black in sight. In the four days of violence that followed four blacks died, many others were injured, and there was wholesale destruction of black property.

(Wintz 1988, p. 8; also see Bauerlein 2001)

These brutal, mob attacks on Black Americans and their property were not confined to the South. As Cary Wintz notes:

There were large-scale race riots in New York (1900), Springfield, Illinois (1904), and Greensburg, Indiana (1906). In addition, white gangs frequently assaulted blacks in large northern cities, while several small towns in Ohio and Indiana sought to avoid racial disorder by simply preventing blacks from settling there. The most serious northern riot before World War I took place in Springfield, Illinois, in 1908. Trouble began when a black man, George Richardson, was accused of raping a white woman. By the time that a grand jury cleared Richardson of the charges, whites in Springfield were determined to seek vengeance on their own. . . . As usual, there was widespread destruction of black property. The Springfield riot also struck a symbolic blow to the hopes of black Americans, coming so close to the centennial of Lincoln’s birth and occurring just two miles from the great emancipator’s burial place.

(Wintz 1988, p. 8; also see Dray 2002, pp. 167–170)

While African Americans ‘fought for democracy’ abroad during the First World War, the incidence of lynching did not decline. Indeed, as the war ended, the lynchings increased. As Lerone Bennett notes:

There were sixty lynchings in 1918 and seventy-six in 1919 [including twenty-six during the Red Summer of 1919]. More disturbing than the number was the increasing sadism of the mobs. The Mary Turner lynching of 1918 was unquestionably one of the most barbaric acts ever committed in a civilized country. Though pregnant, the black woman was lynched in Valdosta, Georgia. She was tied to a tree, doused with gasoline and motor oil and burned. As she dangled from the rope, a man stepped forward with a pocketknife and ripped open her abdomen in a crude Caesarean operation. ‘Out tumbled the prematurely born child,’ wrote Walter White, ‘Two feeble cries it gave — and received for the answer the heel of a stalwart man, as life was ground out of the tiny form.’

(Bennett 1993 p. 352; also see Dray 2002, pp. 245–247)
I have suggested that the race riots were perhaps even more threatening to African Americans than lynchings. Why? Because, however barbaric it was, a lynching ‘constituted violence committed against an individual in response to a specific transgression, real or imagined. Lynching targeted ‘bad’ blacks to serve as an example for all blacks’ (Wintz 1988, p. 9). The race riots that occurred in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were different: they ‘were characterized by indiscriminate, wholesale violence directed against all blacks regardless of their actions’. Being a Good Negro did not help you: ‘A law-abiding and accommodating black could reasonably expect to be safe from lynching, but there was no protection from the random violence unleashed by these riots’ (p. 9).

Black nationalist philosophies

In this situation of brutal, institutionalized oppression, many African Americans, especially in the rural South, reverted to the accommodationist survival tactics that had helped them to survive slavery. That is, from the perspective of urban African Americans in the 1920s, they played ‘Old Negro’ games. Their champion was Booker T. Washington (1856–1915), who advocated a conservative form of Black nationalism. 7

Booker T. Washington’s philosophy, as it was publicly expressed, was fairly simple and remarkably consistent over the course of his career. Essentially, he argued that thrift, industry, and Christian morality would eventually earn blacks their Constitutional rights. The first essential step toward equality would be for blacks to learn trades so that they might compete effectively with whites in the economic arena. Therefore, blacks must make, as their educational objectives, the acquisition of those practical skills that would promote their economic development. Thus far Washington merely echoed the call for industrial education that was already widely accepted in the black community. Far more controversial was the corollary to his thesis for racial advancement that urged accommodation with segregation. (Wintz 1996, pp. 36–37)

Washington was prepared to set aside the struggle for desegregation and political emancipation, arguing for the development of Negro economic, social and educational institutions within the context of the Apartheid South. He counselled patience, discouraging African Americans from fighting for social justice. By the 1890s, Washington had positioned himself as the most important Black person in the USA, the power broker who mediated between African Americans and both the government and White capital. Others, however, sought another path – a path of resistance against injustice. Their champion was Frederick Douglass and, later, W. E. B. Du Bois. 8
A third path, which developed during and after the First World War, was the Black nationalist path represented by Marcus Garvey. This perspective, like that of Booker T. Washington, urged Black people to establish separate institutions and to develop economic independence. But it was far more radical than Washington’s, not least in its Pan-Africanist argument that the fate of Black people throughout the world is linked to that of Africa; that our first priority, therefore, should be the liberation and development of the Motherland. A fourth path was offered by the Black socialists, like A. Philip Randolph, who argued that the key to African-American liberation lay in class struggle. They argued for active participation in the union movement and encouraged African Americans to support a socialist party agenda.

What is the point of this brief discussion of the main ideological currents that were flowing through the African-American community at the time of the emergence of the New Negro? I want to make three arguments. The first is that the New Negroes did not subscribe to a single political philosophy. It is true that they would all have been united in opposition to the accommodational aspect of Booker T. Washington’s conservative Black nationalism — that is, they would have been more inclined to the militant civil rights agenda of Frederick Douglass and W. E. B. Du Bois, the pan-Africanist perspective of Marcus Garvey (minus his flamboyant style) or the socialist workingman’s agenda of leaders like A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen. However, many New Negroes would have accepted Booker T. Washington’s emphasis on the development of skills and the acquisition of wealth, and many would also have accepted his emphasis on morality and Christian values. My second point follows from the first: New Negro subjects often subscribed to bits of one ideology and bits of another. Their philosophy ‘was never a simple or comfortable blend of these ideologies; it was rather a dynamic ideology filled with internal conflicts and even contradiction whose fundamental questions remain unresolved’ (Wintz 1996, p. 47). My third and final point here is that all of these perspectives could be appropriated by New Negroes, as they all emphasized pride, dignity and, as it was put at the time, ‘uplifting the race’.

Thus, it is no accident that serious popular interest in African-American history began in Black America in the 1910s and 1920s: for example, the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History was founded in 1915; the Journal of Negro History began in 1916; and Negro History Week, which in the early 1970s would become Black History Month, started in 1926. The appropriation of African-American history — and, sometimes, also African history — as a source of strength and pride (rather than despair and shame) was a recurrent theme in the cultural politics of New Negro subjects.

Exodus

Africans Americans began migrating from the South in substantial numbers from the 1890s. However, the census figures show that by 1910, 90% of
African Americans still lived in the South. After 1910, the situation would be very different. Between 1910 and 1920, 300,000 African Americans migrated from the South to cities in the North, such as New York, Chicago, Pittsburgh, Detroit, Cleveland and Gary. Between 1920 and 1930, 1,300,000 came, and in the 1930s and 1940s still more arrived. Why did they come? They came for economic opportunities – the women to jobs as cleaners and domestics, the men to factory jobs in the new industrial order. They came because of drought, flooding and the infestation of the cotton crop by the boll weevil. But they also came as an act of resistance – fleeing the exploitation, lynching and racial violence of the South. Observing the phenomenon, Alain Locke argues in the introduction to *The New Negro* (1925) that ‘in the very process of being transplanted, the Negro is becoming transformed’ (Locke 1925, p. 6). Against the economic historians, Locke argues:

The tide of Negro migration, northward and city-ward, is not to be fully explained as a blind flood started by the demands of war industry coupled with the shutting off of foreign migration, or by the pressure of poor crops coupled with increased social terrorism in certain sections of the South and Southwest. Neither labor demand, the boll-weevil nor the Ku Klux Klan is a basic factor, however contributory any or all of them may have been. The wash and rush of this human tide on the beach line of the northern city centers is to be explained primarily in terms of a new vision of opportunity, of social and economic freedom, of a spirit to seize, even in the face of an extortionate and heavy toll, a change for the improvement of conditions. With each successive wave of it, the movement of the Negro becomes more and more a mass movement toward the larger and the more democratic change – in the Negro’s case a deliberate flight not only from countryside to city, but from medieval America to modern.

(Locke 1925, p. 6)

Decades later, the African-American historian Lerone Bennett would echo Alain Locke’s explanation for the African-American exodus out of Babylon:

[T]here came a new feeling, vague at first but always waxing clearer, that there was another way and another and better place. The feeling moved, became a mood, an imperative, a command. Without preamble, without plan, without leadership, the people obeyed that command, going from the plantations to Southern cities, going from there to the big cities of the North. . . . New vistas, new hopes, new opportunities: these stimulated the most significant movement in the history of black Americans. Seen thus, as an explosion of hopes and fears, the Great Migration was a revolt . . . . An idea – the idea of freedom – moved the people, sending them in ever-increasing numbers . . .

(Bennett 1993, p. 344)
The argument, then, is that the Great Migration, which was sometimes called a ‘stealing away from the South’ to the North (Jackson 1996, p. 234), was a crucial factor in the development of New Negro subjectivity — and that the process of reinvention began from the moment that they took flight. As Henry Louis Gates puts it:

African Americans reinvented themselves, as more than a million souls removed themselves from the provinces to the metropole, from the periphery to the center, from the South to North, from agriculture to industrial, from rural to urban, from the nineteenth century to the twentieth.

(Gates 1993, p. 19)

The First World War

Thus far, I have argued that three factors played crucial roles in the development of the New Negro: (1) White dominance and racial violence, (2) Black political discourses and (3) the Great Migration. I come now to the last factor that I wish to emphasize here — the experience of World War One. When the USA entered the Great War of 1914–1918, many African-American leaders, including the radical W. E. B. DuBois, urged the Black population to be patriotic and to serve in the forces (against the will of the segregationists who wanted to keep the forces White). As Bennett recalls, ‘Four of the outstanding American regiments were composed entirely of black enlisted men – the 369th, the 370th, the 371st and the 372nd. Three of these regiments ... received the Croix de Guerre for valor and the fourth covered itself with distinction in battles in Argonne Forest’ (Bennett 1993, p. 347). These men, two of whom are pictured in Figure 2, were regarded as heroes in Europe, and their heroic acts were widely reported in the Black press back home.

One of the effects of African-American participation in the Great War was an increase in militancy. Those who had ‘fought for freedom’ and returned to find continued oppression, asked the obvious question: We have been fighting for the freedom of others, what about our own? We have laid down our lives for this country, isn’t it about time that we got something in return? There was also a further problem: a number of African-American servicemen were stationed in France during the War, and they were treated like human beings. Their stories of sacrifice, heroism and freedom of association in Europe entered African-American collective memory. The germ of the 1950s and 1960s Civil Rights Movement began then.

When race riots swept American cities in 1919, Black Americans fought back. This was virtually unprecedented. It signalled the presence of a new mode of subjectivity: the militant, New Negro had arrived on the scene. One of those militant New Negroes was Langston Hughes. It is to his work that I now turn.
Langston Hughes: re-membering through writing

Langston Hughes (1902–1967) was the most popular African-American poet and short story writer of the twentieth century. He was a people’s artist, whose work was known by millions of Black Americans: they regularly read his work in African-American weekly newspapers; they thronged to Black colleges, schools and other venues to listen to him speak; and they bought his books. A key theme in a number of Hughes’ poems is collective memory – memory of Africa, the slave trade, the plantation, day-to-day oppression in ‘the valley of tears’. Another key theme is survival – the strength of a people who would not be denied hope.

Here, I want to call your attention to two of these poems, ‘Aunt Sue’s Stories’ and ‘The Negro Mother’. Let us begin with ‘Aunt Sue’s Stories’:

Aunt Sue has a head full of stories.
Aunt Sue has a whole heart full of stories.
Summer nights on the front porch
And Aunt Sue cuddles a brown-faced child to her bosom
And tells him stories.

Black slaves
Working in the hot sun,
And black slaves
Walking in the dewy night,
And black slaves
Singing sorrow songs on the banks of a mighty river
Mingle themselves softly
In the flow of Aunt Sue’s voice,
Mingle themselves softly
In the dark shadows that cross and recross
Aunt Sue’s stories.

And the dark-faced child, listening.
Knows that Aunt Sue’s stories are real stories.
He knows that Aunt Sue never got her stories
Out of no book at all,
But that they came
Right out of her own life.

The dark-faced child is quiet
Of a summer night
Listening to Aunt Sue’s stories.
(in Hughes 1995, pp. 23–24)
'Aunt Sue’s Stories’ is about memory and its transmission through the family unit: Aunt Sue, an African-American woman who has endured the brutality and sorrows of slavery, tells stories of her life to one of her descendants — and thus helps keep African-American collective memory of slavery alive. Aunt Sue speaks as a witness — as one whose mind and body remembers the lived experience of slavery. The poet privileges her memory — i.e. the collective memory of those who had been slaves over accounts of slavery told by those (e.g. professional historians) who were not there or who did not suffer.

I turn now to a second poem — one of Langston Hughes’ most powerful and memorable poems. ‘The Negro Mother’, published in 1931 in a book of the same title, is also about memory. However, the voice, narrative and subject position are different. I want to discuss the poem in some detail — not as a literary critic but as a cultural studies scholar interested in questions of history, memory and African-American subjectivity. Listen to ‘The Negro Mother’:

Children, I come back today
To tell you a story of the long dark way
That I had to climb, that I had to know
In order that the race might live and grow.
Look at my face — dark as the night —
Yet shining like the sun with love’s true light.
I am the child they stole from the sand
Three hundred years ago in Africa’s land.
I am the dark girl who crossed the wide sea
Carrying in my body the seed of the free.
I am the woman who worked in the field
Bringing the cotton and the corn to yield.
I am the one who labored as a slave,
Beaten and mistreated for the work that I gave —
Children sold away from me, husband sold, too.
No safety, no love, no respect was I due.
Three hundred years in the deepest South:
But God put a song and a prayer in my mouth.
God put a dream like steel in my soul.
Now, through my children, I’m reaching the goal.
Now, through my children, young and free,
I realize the blessings denied to me.
I couldn’t read then. I couldn’t write.
I had nothing, back there in the night.
Sometimes, the valley was filled with tears,
But I kept trudging on through the lonely years.
Sometimes, the road was hot with sun,
But I had to keep on till my work was done:
I had to keep on! No stopping for me —
I was the seed of the coming Free.
I nourished the dream that nothing could smother
Deep in my breast — the Negro mother.
I had only hope then, but now through you,
Dark ones of today, my dreams must come true:
All you dark children in the world out there,
Remember my sweat, my pain, my despair.
Remember my years, heavy with sorrow —
And make of those years a torch for tomorrow.
Make of my past a road to the light
Out of the darkness, the ignorance, the night.
Lift high my banner out of the dust.
Stand like free men supporting my trust.
Believe in the right, let none push you back.
Remember the whip and the slaver’s track.
Remember how the strong in struggle and strife
Still bar you the way, and deny you life —
But march ever forward, breaking down bars.
Look ever upward at the sun and the stars.
Oh, my dark children, may my dreams and my prayers
Impel you forever up the great stairs —
For I will be with you till no white brother
Dares keep down the children of the Negro mother.
(in Hughes 1995, pp. 155–156)

Who speaks in this poem? To whom is it addressed? How does it position the addressee, that is, what subject-position does it encourage him or her to assume? Why was it — and other poems by Langston Hughes — so popular among African-American subjects?

This poem, like VanDerZee’s portrait photography, both addresses and seeks to construct a Black subject — a New Negro aware of the past and acting for the future. The narrator assumes the subject-position of ‘the Negro Mother’, not a particular mother but a generalized figure who belongs to a collective history — a subject who originated in Africa, came to America via the treacherous Middle Passage and survived 300 years of slavery; a figure who endured sorrow and pain not because she was weak but so that the African-American people could survive. This ancestral figure, whose spirit lives on, returns to talk to her children — to the African-American subjects who hear and read this poem. Her message is that we Black subjects living in the present must keep the dream alive, marching ever forward, resisting whatever obstacles White power puts in our way. Her message is that because of our collective history — because of the sacrifices made in the past by our ancestors, we can be free.
The poem engages with collective memory in a twofold way. First, it draws on a remembered past. Written only two generations after the end of slavery in the USA, many African Americans alive at the time (e.g. my own parents and grandparents) would have known women who were either slave mothers or their direct descendants. Stories about their lives on the plantations, including the rape and other abuse that they suffered, would have been current. This is a topic—a shared memory—about which African-American subjects felt and feel very strongly. The response of African Americans to this collective memory—indeed, to the remembered history of slavery in general—tended to be silence, anger and shame.

Secondly, the poem constructs a counter-memory. Against a remembered history of degradation, defilement and shame, it presents a historical narrative of survival—a collective story that can be a source of strength and pride.

I am reminded, as I write this, of another poem by Hughes, a short poem entitled ‘Still Here’, which, again, is written as a first-person narrative:

I’ve been scarred and battered.
My hopes the wind done scattered.
Snow has friz me, sun has baked me.
Looks like between ’em
They done tried to make me
Stop laughin’, stop lovin’, stop livin’—
But I don’t care!
I’m still here!

(in Hughes 1995, p. 295)

‘Still Here’, like ‘The Negro Mother’, rewrites the collective memory of slavery as a story of survival. The voice we hear/speak is that of direct, lived experience: the ‘I’ guarantees the truth, the authenticity of the narrative. The reader is positioned as part of a collective experience—an experience both of suffering and survival.

Such poems, acts of cultural politics, offer empowering subject-positions to their African-American readers and hearers. ‘The Negro Mother’ was very popular. Shortly after it was published in 1931, Hughes toured the American South, stopping for readings in Virginia, North Carolina and South Carolina. The tour was very successful, especially the new book The Negro Mother, as Hughes’ biographer, Arnold Rampersad, explains:

With his booklets, pamphlets, and broadsides selling briskly, the tour was beginning to pay for itself. Langston’s entire store of The Negro Mother was gone just one week after the start; Prentiss Taylor rushed 450 copies to Durham in time for a major reading, as Hughes worked the school circuit in North Carolina until early December. On December 1, Taylor
acknowledged receipt of an ‘enormous check’; soon after, Hughes sent Van Vechten $48 on his loan, and the printer, W. J. Clark, was paid off before Christmas.

(Rampersad 1986, pp. 225–226)

Hughes’ poetry was (and is) popular because it directly addresses African-American subjects in a language that they understand, engaging not only with their present position but also with their collective past and possible future.

Thus far, we have read three poems that explore and appropriate themes from the African-American past. Langston Hughes, however, like a number of other New Negro thinkers and writers, was a pan-Africanist. Thus, the experience and memory of the collective Black subject in his writing often include Africa.

‘My Soul Has Grown Deep Like the Rivers’


So long.
So far away
Is Africa.
Not even memories alive
Save those that history books create,
Save those that songs
Beat back into the blood —
Beat out of blood with words sad-sung
In strange un-Negro tongue —
So long,
So far away
Is Africa.

Subdued and time-lost
Are the drums — and yet
‘Through some vast mist of race
There comes this song
I do not understand,
This song of atavistic land,
Of bitter yearnings lost
Without a place —
So long,
So far away
Is Africa’s
Dark face.

(in Hughes 1995, p. 129)

But this sense of estrangement from Africa is not a consistent theme in Hughes’ writing. Consider ‘The Negro Speaks of Rivers’, his first published poem and one of his most famous:

I’ve known rivers:
I’ve known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood in human veins.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young,
I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.
I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.
I hear the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln went down to Orleans, and I’ve seen its muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset.

I’ve known rivers:
Ancient, dusky rivers.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

(in Hughes 1995, p. 23)

This poem is also about collective memory and Black American history. However, it connects not only with memory of the plantation — a site of memory that might induce shame — but with Africa. Slaves, it should be remembered, were sometimes transported over land but often down rivers; and we arrived in ships. Crossing water, travelling down and across rivers — these were frequent themes in the music of the slaves. The phrase ‘sold down the river’ is a fragment from African-American collective memory: the term originally referred to that practice by which African-American slaves were sold to planters in the Deep South and transported down the Mississippi River to their new homes. Southward movement signified increased brutality to the slaves. Note that Hughes does not simply reference the Mississippi River, that key artery in the internal slave trade. Rather, he also references two important rivers on the continent of Africa, the Congo and the Nile, and, one, the Euphrates, that is often said to be the birthplace of civilization. These rivers are symbols of power and pride, linking Black subjects to ancient civilizations. Thus, the poem serves as a counter-memory — against both that widespread popular discourse that presented Black people in the USA as people without
history and that African American collective memory that began with the degrading experience of slavery.

The question is: How can we, the descendants of African American slaves, imagine and represent the experience of our ancestors? Can it be done in ways that do not leave our heads hanging in shame? Langston Hughes, like his contemporary, Aaron Douglas, suggests that we can.

Aaron Douglas: re-membering through painting

I turn now to the premier African-American visual artist associated with the New Negro movement. That artist, a friend of Langston Hughes, is Aaron Douglas (1898–1979) – the illustrator, muralist and teacher who played a key role in the development of African-American art and artists in the twentieth century.13 I want to focus on four works by Douglas that were produced in the 1920s and 1930s: The Crucifixion, Harriet Tubman, Into Bondage and Aspects of Negro Life.

The Crucifixion

Let us begin this discussion by looking at a painting that was originally published in 1927 as an illustration in James Weldon Johnson’s important little book, God’s Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse. Employing the flattened perspective of Western modernist art, while also echoing ancient Egyptian figurative art, The Crucifixion is a narrative painting. The source of the narrative is the Apostle Mathew’s account of the crucifixion, specifically Matthew 27, 31–32, which says (Figure 3):

And after they had mocked Him, they took His robe off and put His garments on Him, and led Him away to crucify Him. And as they were coming out, they found a man of Cyrene named Simon, whom they pressed into service to bear His cross.

The context is the story of the crucifixion of Jesus. This death was not an easy one. The burdened, agonizing Jesus carries the heavy cross to the place where he is to be crucified. At one point, with the cross on his shoulder, Jesus stumbles and, according to the narrative, the Roman soldiers order a man named Simon from Cyrene (or Simon the Cyrenian) to carry the cross for him. As it turns out, Cyrene is a place in North Africa – specifically, in present-day Libya. Thus, it is quite possible that Simon was a person who would have been referred to in the twentieth century as ‘Coloured’ or ‘Negro’ or ‘Black’. In any event, some Black nationalists have appropriated the story as a way of rewriting history – to tell another story about Black people, Christ and Christianity.
Look closely at *The Crucifixion*. Who is that the dark, flat, giant figure in the foreground, with his broad shoulders bearing the weight of an enormous cross and his eyes gazing upwards towards heaven? He is Simon the Cyrenian. Jesus is the smaller figure below with the halo overhead — lit by both concentric circles of light and a cone-shaped beam of light, presumably the light of God, which streams from the right-hand corner. The Christ figure is followed by his disciples and enemies, but it is the large, heroic figure of Simon that dominates the image. The poem that the illustration accompanies says:

Up Golgotha’s rugged road
I see my Jesus go.
I see him sink beneath the load,
I see my dropping Jesus sink.
And then they laid hold on Simon,
Black Simon, yes, black Simon;

They put the cross on Simon,
And Simon bore the cross.

(Johnson 1990, p. 41)

The artwork is true to the poem.

The illustration, like the poem, is a powerful example of New Negro ideology. New Negroes were, on the whole, Christian. From their perspective, this appropriation of the Biblical story, based on a careful, scholarly reading of the scriptures, is perfect. First, it rewrites accepted histories of Christianity, placing a Black man at the centre of the story: ‘Simon was cast as the truer disciple of Christ’ who, unlike some of the other disciples, did not deny or betray Jesus (Goeser 2007, p. 218). Secondly, it engages with the African American oral tradition, which, through spirituals and folk sermons, was filled with stories of the suffering Christ (who, in African-American religion and collective memory, empathizes with the enslaved and oppressed). It challenges those commonsense representations that paint the Biblical story in White: It is a precursor of that Black nationalist artwork, born of the Black power movement of the 1960s, that would go one step further — painting Jesus himself as Black. Finally, note that the illustration shows a Black subject being pressed into service. (Simon is forced by the Roman soldiers with their spears to carry the cross.) The story is thus a source of pride and an illustration of an old story — that of Black people being made to do the hard, dirty work while White people watch, supervise and threaten. The Crucifixion is thus an example of Black nationalist (or Afrocentric) history: more specifically, it is an example of a type of Black scholarship and cultural politics, known as 'vindicationalist' (see Drake 1977), which reverses dominant representations, presenting the historical experiences of people of African descent as a positive story of struggle and pride. As the art historian David Driskell notes, the cultural politics of this appropriation resonates with that of the African-American slave spiritual:

The Crucifixion breaks with traditional Christian iconography. A Black subject dominates the Christian theme. Man’s inhumanity to man, as seen through Black eyes, is poignantly revealed through cultural disguises. Like the Negro spiritual, which made much of satire and cultural subservience by reworking Christian dogma through alliterations that spoke of the tragic conditions of Black slavery and human deprivation, Douglas’s message comes alive in a visual record that strikes out at the core of American racism and denial of the Black man’s [and woman’s] humanity.

(Driskell 1987, p. 112 and 129)

Breaking Chains

Consider the following two images. Figures 4 and 5 are both representations of African diaspora slaves in chains. Both are examples of cultural politics in

FIGURE 5 Aaron Douglas, Harriet Tubman, mural, 1930 (detail). Reproduced by kind permission of Bennett College.
support of a progressive cause – namely, the liberation of Black people from bondage. Both are intended to raise consciousness – to mobilize a constituency in anti-slavery or anti-racist struggle. However, in terms of their modes of representation, the two images are profoundly different.

Figure 4 is an image chosen in 1789 as the emblem for the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade, a British, Quaker-led anti-slavery society. Made into a medallion at a pottery factory owned by Josiah Wedgewood, the emblem was widely worn as a political statement by abolitionists in Britain. Within 10 years, the design had migrated to the USA, where American abolitionists adopted it for their own uses – as etchings in anti-slavery leaflets, newspaper articles and brochures; as ceramic bracelets and hair ornaments. In the nineteenth century, in both the UK and USA, images consisting of a kneeling Black male slave weighted down by chains and accompanied by the words ‘Am I not a Man and a Brother?’ were widely used as part of campaigns to abolish the trans-Atlantic slave trade and end the institution of slavery.

Figure 5 is a twentieth-century image by the Harlem Renaissance artist Aaron Douglas. It is from Harriet Tubman, a one-panel mural located at Bennett College for Women, an African-American college in Greensboro, South Carolina. Apparently, the mural came about through the actions of a White American patron – ‘Douglas was asked to execute the work by Alfred Stern of Chicago, son-in-law of philanthropist Julius Rosenwald’ (Kirschke 1995, p. 116) – but the cultural politics of this artwork belong to militant Black art. By the time this mural was painted, there were many images in circulation of African-American slaves in chains, but this one was different.

Let us compare Figures 4 and 5, looking at the body language of the central subjects. He kneels; she stands. He looks up – in supplication, as though praying for intervention by a higher power; she looks straight ahead – with determination. His hands are folded in prayer; her hands are raised in triumph. His chains signify his bondage; her broken chains are testimony to her self-attained freedom. He is passive; she is active. He begs for us to recognize his humanity; she insists that hers cannot be denied.

Whereas the target audience for the chained and kneeling slave consisted of White Americans and White British who might be attracted to the abolitionist cause, the target audience for Douglas’ Harriet Tubman mural were New Negroes. The New Negroes were committed to self-help and political activism, not deliverance by well-meaning White people.

Harriet Tubman, like Simon the Cyrenian, is a heroic figure in Douglas’ art. During a time when negative images of Africans and people of African descent were the norm, Aaron Douglas chose to do otherwise: his Black people are dignified, strong and often majestic. His murals, like his book illustrations, provide a direct alternative to a long history of negative portrayal. Moreover:
... in Douglas’ oeuvre, women are largely presented free of (negative) gender stereotypes. In this way he departs from such European modernists as Matisse, Cézanne, and Picasso, whose formal experimentations frequently exploited women’s bodies. Douglas generally stayed away from female nudes ... Douglas’ positive depiction of women was in line with his experience in Harlem, where a powerful array of female writers, dancers, poets, and singers fashioned key aspects of the era, including its charged urbanity and modernity

(Earle 2007, p. 20)

Figure 6 is the complete Harriet Tubman mural. Douglas’ murals date from his ‘Hallelujah period’ (his term), which began in the late 1920s. These large-scale commissions include the Fisk University Library Murals (1930), Dance Magic (1930–31), Harriet Tubman (1931), Aspects of Negro Life (1934) and four large paintings that were hung in the Hall of Negro Life at the Texas Centennial Exposition in 1936.

Who was Harriet Tubman? After escaping from slavery, Harriet Tubman became a nineteenth-century militant activist and abolitionist, whose actions liberated scores of African Americans from the slave plantations:

Easily the most outstanding conductor on the Underground Railroad was Harriet Tubman. Although frail of body and suffering from recurrent spells of dizziness, she not only escaped from slavery herself but also conveyed many others to freedom, including her sister, her two children, and her aged mother and father. She is said to have gone south nineteen times and to have emancipated more than 300 slaves. Unable to read or write, she nevertheless displayed remarkable ingenuity in the management
of her runaway caravans. She preferred to start the journey on Saturday night, so that she could be well on her way before the owners had an opportunity the following Monday to advertise the escape of their slaves. She tolerated no cowardice and threatened to kill any slave who wished to turn back. Well known in Philadelphia, New York, and Boston, where she frequently delivered escaped slaves, she preferred to lead them all the way to Canada after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law in 1850, explaining that she could not trust Uncle Sam with her people any longer.

(Franklin and Moss 1994, p. 187)

How is the Harriet Tubman mural composed?

Tubman is the centre of the composition, enhanced by a ray of transparent light coming from the sky and a series of concentric circles. She is in complete silhouette, dramatically enhanced by the light background, with her arms overhead triumphantly holding the broken shackles and chains of slavery. She stands on a dismounted cannon with a smoking muzzle.

(Kirschke 1995, p. 116)

What are the themes and modes of representation in this mural? Here we find a re-writing of that hegemonic narrative of slavery and emancipation in which the White abolitionist emerges as hero: here, the artist inscribes African-American slaves as the agents of their own liberation and destiny. Referencing familiar modes of representation from Emancipationist publications, which sought to appeal to White conscience by featuring Black people subdued and in chains, Douglas reverses the imagery and meanings. In this mural, it is not by a change in White attitudes that freedom is achieved, but by Black struggle, heroic leadership, civil war and the gun.

Moreover, this militant Black agency has divine support. Douglas suggests a Black Christian message in which Tubman is doing God’s work in breaking her chains: this is implied by the ray of transparent light coming from the sky. As Douglas himself suggested, he ‘used Tubman to idealize a superior Negro woman, a heroic leader breaking the shackles of bondage and pressing on toward a new day’. Yet, this is not only the triumph of a ‘superior Negro woman’. The line of figures behind Tubman in the mural shows the long journey through slavery undergone by African diaspora people in the struggle to emancipate themselves. It is a history that stretches back through 300 years from the plantation to Africa (Kirschke 1995, p. 116).

Key moments in Black history

Aspects of Negro Life, Douglas’s second cycle of murals, was completed in 1934. It was sponsored by the Public Works Administration (PWA) during the Great Depression. The murals were made for display in the 135th Street branch
of the New York Public Library, in Harlem, where they could reach a large African-American audience. The murals comprise four huge panels that depict the history of African Americans from pre-slavery life in Africa to the 1920s or early 1930s. Taken together with the painting *Into Bondage* (1936), the works provide a periodization of Black American history into the following categories: (1) Africa before the Europeans came; (2) the trans-Atlantic slave trade; (3) plantation slavery in America; (4) Emancipation and Reconstruction; (5) the effective re-enslavement of Black people in the post-Reconstruction South, which was reinforced by intimidation and racial violence; and (6) the Great Migration to the North.

The first of the *Aspects of Negro Life* panels is set in Africa prior to the European presence. At the centre of the composition are two dancing figures, facing each other. At the lower right and middle left are drummers, beating out the intricate polyrhythms that spur the dance. In the foreground, there is foliage from tropical rainforest plants. In the background, at the centre of the composition, is a ‘fetish’ figure. Also, in the background, standing erect, are male members of the group, presumably warriors, holding their spears. The image evokes a sense of community, spirituality, sovereignty and self-determination.

The panel is, of course, a representation of an imagined Africa. The artist had not been to Africa. There were few photographs of life in Africa at the time (and no television). Although there were some accounts by nineteenth-century Black explorers, scholars and political thinkers (such as Edward Blyden, Martin Delaney and Alexander Crummell), there was no collective memory of Africa (or of the Middle Passage) – no memories and stories like those ex-slaves and their children told of life on the plantation. The painting essentially seeks to create a memory – or rather a collective understanding, feeling and narrative – where it had been absent (Figure 7).

In 1949, looking back, Aaron Douglas describes the mural in the following terms:

> The first of the four panels reveals the Negro in an African setting and emphasizes the strongly rhythmic arts of music, the dance, and sculpture, which have influenced the modern world possibly more profoundly than any other phase of African life. The fetish, the drummer, the dancers, in the formal language of space and color, create the exhilaration, the ecstasy, the rhythmic pulsation of life in ancient Africa.

(quoted in Bearden and Henderson 1993, p. 131)

Douglas’ description and interpretation of the painting, like aspects of the image itself, raises the question of primitivism – that is, of whether the artist manages to appropriate aspects of the visual (and philosophical) language of primitivism without falling victim to its binaries and ideological straightjacket.23
The art historian Sharon F. Patton makes the point that ‘Douglas employs [some of] the popular tropes of ‘primitivism’ — dancing figures, standing figures holding spears, drummers, and a highlighted fetish statue’ (Patton 1998, p. 141). Yet, if the panel evokes certain primitivist motives, the image is not primitivist in any simple way. First, it is important to recall that the mural is directed at a Black audience — many of them New Negroes or New Negroes-in-the-making, who are interested in Africa as part of a quest for dignity, pride and ‘self-awareness’. Moreover, the stances of the dancers and musicians, together with what Patton describes as the ‘elongated Egyptian style’ of the warriors standing behind them, link the image to traditions of Black nationalist history-writing that represent Africa as autonomous and free before the trans-Atlantic slave trade. This panel is best read against the subsequent history of enslavement, which is the subject of two of the panels that follow this one.

Before turning to the next panel in the Aspects of Negro Life series, I want to look at Into Bondage (1936), a painting by Aaron Douglas that illustrates the next moment in his vindicationalist visual narrative of African-American history — namely, the forced march of captured Africans towards the slave ships (Figure 8).

Produced for the Texas Centennial Exposition in 1936 (as part of a series of four murals), Into Bondage uses a similar compositional style to the Aspects of Negro Life murals, with pastel colours and concentric circles of light directing the viewer’s gaze towards the floating prisons on the horizon. The viewer is offered a specific subject-position from which to enter the scene: the viewer
sees the ships from the perspective of the captured Africans, as if she or he were next in the long line of enchained people that stretches into the distance towards the ships. Highlighting them via the use of strong contrasting colours, the painting also directs attention to the shackles worn by the captives. The two shackled figures in the foreground – one positioned on a wooden stool or table, the other with arms raised – stand upright looking up into the heavens. Although they are in chains, they are not bowed (Figure 8). 24

A number of Aaron Douglas’ murals are divided into sections, which represent different moments in a historical narrative. From Slavery through Reconstruction (Figure 9), the second panel in the Aspects of Negro Life series, is one such mural. The dark figures on the left side of the mural are African-American slaves picking cotton on a southern plantation, at the end of the American Civil War. Douglas explains that this segment of the mural ‘depicts the slaves’ doubt and uncertainty’, whereas the section on the right, with the trumpet player, the dancing figures and those with their hands raised giving thanks to God for deliverance, represents the slaves’ ‘exultation at the reading of the Emancipation Proclamation’. The figure in the middle of the composition represents the ‘outstanding Negro leaders during this time’. Standing on a box and illuminated by concentric circles, he points towards the City on the Hill, that is, a glorious future where Black people have rights and political power. However, all is not well: in the distant background, on the right and the left, we see ‘the departure of the Union soldiers from the South’
and, ominously, on the left, we see the Ku Klux Klan, with their white robes, white hoods and death-white horses, riding into the frame. ‘The historical narrative’, as Douglas tells us, ‘is of Black struggle against overwhelming White forces’ (Bearden and Henderson, 1993, p. 131).

The next panel in the Aspects of Negro Life series represents a period in African-American history – the post-Reconstruction, Apartheid period – that is often described as worse than slavery.

*An Idyll of the Deep South* (Figure 10) is a triptych, which should be read from right to left. On the right, we see southern African Americans, perhaps former slaves and the children of slaves, toiling in the fields. In the middle segment, highlighted by concentric circles, we see them singing and dancing – in a joyful mood despite the difficulties of their lives. On the left, a group of African Americans mourn the loss of one of their group who has been lynched.
As mourners surround the body of the hanged man, one figure pulls himself to his knees and looks toward the distant ray of light, which crosses the scene, perhaps in a gesture of hope. Muted purples, blues, and clay browns provide contrast for a soft green sky.

(Kirschke 1995, p. 123)

The final panel in the Aspects of Negro Life series is Song of the Towers (Figure 11).

Painted with a palette of black, blues, greens, violet and brown, this mural represents the Great Migration, the flight from the South to the industrial cities of the North, a movement in search of freedom. Song of the Towers is a triptych, which, like many of Douglas’ murals, is to be read from right to left. As Douglas explains, the first section on the right shows ‘a figure fleeing from the clutching hand of serfdom’ (i.e. that brutally exploitative sharecropping system that replaced slavery in the American South). It is ‘symbolic of the migration of Negroes from the South and the Caribbean into the urban and industrial life of America during and just after World War I’. The middle section, illuminated by concentric circles, features an African-American jazz musician. His saxophone in his mouth, his right foot tapping the beat and his left hand raised enthusiastically in the air, the Black jazz saxophonist — playing solo, improvising, creating — stands here, as in the work of some later

African-American artists, as a symbol of freedom. (Neither the cogwheel of industry nor the long arm of southern agriculture can pull him down.) The middle section of the triptych ‘represents the will to self-expression, the spontaneous creativeness of the later 1920s, which spread vigorously throughout all the arts in an expression of anxiety and yearning from the soul of the Negro people’. However, again, all is not well: ‘the last section of this panel attempts to recreate the confusion, the dejection and frustration resulting from the depression of the 1930s’ (Douglas quoted in Bearden and Henderson 1993, p. 132). Douglas later repainted this mural using a palette of orange, green, yellow, brow and black: in the original version, the colours are more sombre; the jazz saxophonist appears less triumphant.

Aaron Douglas was, unashamedly, a political artist – who articulated his views not only through his drawings and paintings but also through his teaching, writing and public speeches. In ‘The Negro in American Culture’, an address presented to the American Artists’ Congress Against War and Fascism, which met in New York in February 1936, Douglas says:

What the Negro artist should paint and how he should paint it can’t accurately be determined without reference to specific social conditions . . . Our chief concern has been to establish and maintain recognition of our essential humanity, in other words, complete social and political equality. This has been a difficult fight as we have been the constant object of attack by all manner of propaganda from nursery rhythms to false scientific racial theories. In this struggle the rest of the proletariat almost invariably has been arrayed against us. But the Negro artist, unlike the white artist, has never known the big house. He is essentially a product of the masses and can never take a position above or beyond their level. This simple fact is often overlooked by the Negro artist and almost always by those who in the past have offered what they sincerely considered to be help and friendship.

(quoted in Bearden and Henderson 1993, pp. 132–133)

In his correspondence with other Black artists of the time, one finds similar statements. The following is from a letter written in December 1926 to Langston Hughes:

Your problem, Langston, my problem, no our problem is to conceive, develop, establish an art era. Not white art painting black…. Let’s bare our arms and plunge them deep through laughter, through pain, through sorrow, through hope, through disappointment, into the very depths of the souls of our people and drag forth material crude, rough, neglected. Then let’s sing it, dance it, write it, paint it. Let’s do the impossible. Let’s create something transcendentally material, mystically objective. Earthy. Spiritually earthy. Dynamic.

(quoted in Kirschke 1995, pp. 78–79)
The art historian Sharon Patton argues, as I have, that Aaron Douglas’ work was very much part of the broader cultural political movement among African Americans. She describes Aspects of Negro Life as Douglas’ ‘most impressive response to Alain Locke’s directive to use African art and African-American folk culture as an inspiration.’ She adds that Aspects of Negro Life ‘also reflected W. E. B. Du Bois’ conviction that any art of any value must be morally responsible and instructive’ (Patton 1998, p. 140). Douglas achieved this, I have suggested, through a conscious, radical engagement with African-American history and collective memory — that is, by reclaiming and reinventing the past.

Reflections

In 1926, Langston Hughes published an essay entitled ‘The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain’, a strongly worded defence of New Negro consciousness and art. The work provoked discussion at the time and has since been widely anthologized. In the first part of the essay, Hughes says that most African-American artists are the product of middle-class families that have an aversion to engaging with African-American masses and their folk and popular culture: i.e. they prefer Anglican churches to those churches where African Americans sing Black music and ‘shout’; they prefer Beethoven to the Blues; they seek to ‘act White’ and hope that they will be accepted. Hughes argues that, given this background, it is no wonder that many African-American artists do not want to be ‘Black artists’ — despite the fact that African-American culture offers phenomenally rich material for the artist who would engage with it. In the second part of the essay, Hughes points out that he, on the other hand, has no problem in grounding his poetry in the African-American experience. The essay reaches its climax in the following passage:

Let the blare of Negro jazz bands and the bellowing voices of Bessie Smith singing Blues penetrate the closed ears of the colored near-intellectuals until they listen and perhaps understand. Let Paul Robeson singing ‘Water Boy,’ and Rudolph Fisher writing about the streets of Harlem, and Jean Toomer holding the heart of Georgia in his hands, and Aaron Douglas drawing strange black fantasies cause the smug Negro middle class to turn from their white, respectable, ordinary books and papers to catch a glimmer of their own beauty. We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn’t matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too. The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs. If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn’t matter either. We build our temples for
tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves.

(Hughes 1926, p. 168)

This paper has sought to explore a new militant stance that flourished in Black America in the 1920s. My interest has not been in the art per se (my approach is not that of the art historian or art critic), but in issues of history, shared memory and subjectivity. I have argued that African Americans, in their thousands — perhaps hundreds of thousands — remade themselves as ‘New Negroes’ in the early twentieth century. And I have suggested that this process was assisted by the work of Black artists who were part of what was then called the New Negro Arts Movement and came subsequently to be known as the Harlem Renaissance; and by engagements with history, popular culture and, especially, African American collective memory.

With regard to the engagement with history, culture and memory, my argument has been that the stance of the New Negro was positioned against (1) the Old Negro, the accommodationist who bowed and scraped and shuffled and feigned in the face of White power; (2) a long history of racist caricature in White American popular culture and pseudo-science; and (3) a remembered and imagined history of degradation and shame — of whips and shackles, rape and lynching, intimidation and emasculation. In relation to racist discourse and imagery, and Old Negro subject-positions, the New Negroes re-wrote themselves as dignified, intelligent and proud. In relation to African American collective memory, the New Negroes, perhaps especially the artists and intellectuals, engaged in critique and selective appropriation, which included the construction of counter-memory.

In a poem entitled ‘Joal’ (published in 1945), Léopold Sédar Senghor, the Senegalese Négritude writer, says, a number of times, ‘Je me rappelle ... Je me rappelle’. In English translations of the poem, the French phrase is usually rendered as ‘I remember’, but it also suggests ‘an important act of self-creation in the exercise of memory.’ That is, ‘The reflexive verb can mean literally ‘I myself recall’ or ‘I recall myself,’ thus bringing the self into being’ (Dixon 1994, p. 25). Helping to bring a new collective Black subject into being, through critical engagement with African-American history and memory — that is a crucial part of what New Negro artists like Langston Hughes and Aaron Douglas sought to do.

With the rise of the New Negro, the modern Black subject was born — and memory was remade.

Notes

1 From the 1960s to the present, other renamings have occurred: ‘Black’, ‘Black American’, Afro-American’, ‘African-American’, ‘African Ameri-
can’. These shifts reflect changing stances in relation to Africa, White America and the African diaspora.

2 Needham Roberts (seated left) and Henry Johnson (standing right) were both members of the all-Black 369th Regiment of the US Army. The 369th Regiment, which was from Harlem, served with great distinction in France — and the French recognized their contributions. Roberts was a recipient of the Croix de Guerre with Palm — making him one of the most highly decorated American soldiers of the First World War. Although the photograph is dated 1916 by the photographer, it ‘was probably made in the VanDerZee studio in 1932, when he also photographed Roberts alone’ (Willis-Braithwaite 1993, p. 142).

3 Key texts on James VanDerZee include Willis-Braithwaite (1993), Mercer (2002) and Westerbeck (2004). To place VanDerZee’s work in the relation to that of other African-American photographers, see Willis (2000).


5 The Ku Klux Klan began in the latter 1860s, during the Reconstruction period (see Trelease 1971).

6 There is a substantial literature on lynching and other forms of racial violence in the USA in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For

7 On Booker T. Washington, see Harlan (1975), Harlan (1983) and Norrell (2009); also see Washington’s autobiography, Up from Slavery (2009, orig. 1901).

8 On Douglass, see his autobiographical writings (Douglass 2003, orig. 1881; and Douglass 1970, orig. 1855); also see McFeely (1991), Andrews (1996) and Lawson and Kirkland (1999). On Du Bois, see David Levering Lewis two-volume autobiography (Lewis 1993 and 2000); also see Lewis (1995).

9 On the development of Black nationalist thought in the USA from the late eighteenth century through the 1960s, see Bracey et al. (1970). On Marcus Garvey and his Universal Negro Improvement Association, see Garvey and Garvey (1986) and Martin (1986).


11 The classic study of Langston Hughes’ life and work is Rampsad 1986 and 1988; also see Hughes’ autobiography The Big Sea (orig. 1940) and I Wonder as I Wander (orig. 1956). On Hughes’ poetry, see Hughes (orig. 1959) and Hughes (1995). For examples of his short stories, see Hughes (1989, orig. 1961), which is a selection by the author from his books Simple Speaks His Mind (1950), Simple Takes a Wife (1953) and Simple Stakes His Claim (1957), Hughes (1994), Hughes (2000, orig. 1965) and Hughes 1962 (orig. 1934). For examples of his plays, see Smalley (1968) and Duffy (2000). For examples of his essays on race, politics and culture, see De Santis (1995) and Berry (1992); also see Hughes (1926), his most famous essay. Hughes also wrote one novel (Hughes 1968, orig. 1930), children’s books and songs, including lyrics for musicals. Hughes (1958) provides an excellent selection of work from the various genres in which he worked.

12 There are many other examples of poems written by African-American artists that appropriate the collective memory of slavery as a story of survival. The most famous example is ‘Lift Every Voice and Sing’ (Johnson 1993, pp. 101–102). Written in 1900 by James Weldon Johnson and set to music in 1905 by his brother, the composer John Rosamond Johnson, the lyrics have been sung daily by African Americans for 100 years (e.g. in historically Black American colleges and universities). The song is referred to as their ‘national anthem’.
Arguably, in terms of influence, Aaron Douglas was the most important African-American artist of the twentieth century: indeed, he is sometimes referred to as ‘the father of Black American art’. On Aaron Douglas’ life and work, see Earle (2007), Kirschke (1995) and Bearden and Henderson (1993, pp. 127–135). Various books on the Harlem Renaissance include discussions of aspects of Douglas’ work: see, e.g. Powell and Bailey (1997). Douglass is also discussed in a number of books on African-American and African diaspora artists; see, e.g. Bearden and Henderson (1993), Lewis (1990), Patton (1998) and Powell (2002).

This representation still has currency. The Wedgewood medallion was re-released in 2007 in commemoration of the official abolition of the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

Aaron Douglas did cover designs and illustrations for a number of books during the Harlem Renaissance era, including several books by Harlem Renaissance writers: e.g. James Weldon Johnson’s novel *Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* (1927), Arthur Huff Fauset’s *For Freedom: A Biographical Story of the American Negro* (1927), Claude McKay’s *Home to Harlem* (1928), *Banjo* (1929), *Banana Bottom* (1933) and *A Long Way from Home* (1937), Wallace Thurman’s *The Blacker the Berry* (1929) and Langston Hughes’ *Fine Clothes to the Jew* (1927). His illustrations of James Weldon Johnson’s *God’s Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse* (1927) and Paul Morand’s *Black Magic* (1929) are widely acclaimed. (A number of White American and European intellectuals were associated with members of the Harlem Renaissance movement. Paul Morand, the French novelist, poet and playwright, was one of them.) Also see his illustrations in Georgina A. Gollock’s *Sons of Africa* (1928).

Douglas’ murals were usually painted on canvases, which were then glued to the wall.

The Fisk University Library Murals (1930) was Douglas’ first large-scale commission, offered by Charles S. Johnson, former editor of the Urban League’ journal *Opportunity*, who had become president of Fisk University, the historic Black college in Nashville, Tennessee. The intent of these murals was to inspire African-American students – to seek knowledge, especially classical education, and to engage with their history. The seven panels include *Apollo, Philosophy, Drama, Music, Poetry, Science and Diana*. In two of these panels, and in some of his other work, Fisk University’s Jubilee Hall stands as a symbol of African-American freedom. (Among the first students to attend this institution were the sons and daughters of slaves.)

*Dance Magic* (1930–1931) is a five-panel mural behind a bar at the Sherman Hotel in Chicago. This mural linked modern African-American musical and dance culture, in particular, jazz and cabaret, to traditions of African music and dance. Douglas described the mural as ‘going back to the primitive thing before we came, our people were brought here and then up to the present. . . . Singing, dancing and cabarets, and that sort of thing.’ The panels used the ‘gay, fanciful side of Negro life as subject matter. . . . I tried to use a
flowing, rhythmic, progressive series of tones and special areas to create a visual equivalent of joy, lightness of movement and laughter’ (quoted in Kirschke 1995, p. 115).

19 See Earle (2007, pp. 98–112) for a fascinating discussion of the Hall of Negro Life at the Texas Centennial Exposition of 1936 – including how there came to be such a hall, what it contained and the audience’s response to Aaron Douglas’ contribution.

20 On Harriet Tubman, see Clinton (2004) and Sernett (2007).

21 Organized by opponents of slavery, the ‘underground railroad’ (see Still 1970 and Buckmaster 1992) consisted of secret routes and safe houses that could be used by escaping African-American slaves and their ‘conductors’ (chief among whom was Harriet Tubman). As the historian Benjamin Quarles explains in his foreword to the 1970 edition of The Underground Railroad (orig. 1871), an extraordinary collection of narratives told by escaped slaves and edited by William Still, who was himself a former slave:

The underground railroad may be defined as the organized effort to assist runaway slaves in their dash for freedom. Since slipping away from one’s master was a hazardous step, most runaways required help.

The underground railroad was the popular name for the process of receiving the fugitives, hiding them overnight and then conducting them to the next station in en route to freedom. (Quarles 1970, p. v.)

22 On runaway African-American slaves, see Franklin and Schweninger (1999).

23 On the cultural politics of modernism’s encounter with ‘the primitive’ (and with Black artists), see chapters 10, 11, 12 and 13 in Jordan and Weedon (1995): that is, ‘Primitives, Politics and the Avant-garde: Modern Art and Its Others’ (pp. 315–394); ‘Dialogues: Race and the Cultural Politics of the Avant-garde’ (pp. 395–431); ‘Encounters: Postcolonial Artists and the Art Establishment’ (pp. 432–472); and ‘From Primitivism to Ethnic Art: Neocolonialism in the Metropolis?’ (pp. 473–488).

24 In addition to Harriet Tubman (1931) and Into Bondage (1936), there are other paintings by Douglas, in which Black people are in chains: see, e.g. Study for God’s Trombones, 1926 (reproduced in Earle 2007, p. 146) and The Founding of Chicago, 1933–1940 (in Earle 2007, p. 29). Perhaps the most interesting point about Douglas’ appropriation of this motif is that his chained Africans and African Americans do not appear to be fully subjected: they raise their arms, they pull the chain and they even break the shackles.

25 Incidentally, the Harlem Renaissance art movement, along with surrealism, would profoundly influence the Négritude movement, which developed in Paris during the 1930s and 1940s among French African and Caribbean students, intellectuals and artists. Surrealism. Key figures in the movement include the Martinican poet Aimé Césaire, the French Guyanese poet Léon Damas, the Senegalese poet Léopold Senghor. Visual artists connected with the Négritude movement include the Cuban artist Wifredo Lam.
The struggle between ‘New Negroes’ and Old Negroes’ led to serious conflicts on various African-American college campuses in the 1920s. See Wolters (1975); also see W. E. B. Du Bois’ 1927 article on the student strike at Hampton Institute (reprinted in Aptheker 1973, pp. 564–565) and the text of a leaflet issued by students participating in the Fisk University strike of February 1925 (in Aptheker 1973, pp. 493–498).

Notes on contributor

**Glenn Jordan** is Reader in Cultural Studies & Creative Practice at the University of Glamorgan and Director of Butetown History & Arts Centre, a community-based archive, gallery and educational resource in Cardiff, Wales. From 1971-76 he worked as a Research Assistant to St. Clair Drake, the pioneer African diaspora scholar and Director of African & Afro-American Studies at Stanford. Before coming to the UK in 1987, he was Assistant Director of Afro-American Studies at the University of Illinois. He has published widely on people’s history, race, visual culture and immigrants and minorities in Wales. His books include *Cultural Politics* (Blackwell, 1995, with Chris Weedon); and *Somali Elders: Portraits from Wales* (Butetown History & Arts Centre, 2004). He is currently working on two projects combining photography and oral history: *Mothers and Daughters: Portraits from Multi-ethnic Wales* and *Hineni*, a project on elderly Jewish migrants in Wales, some of whom survived the Holocaust. A Sikh Face in Ireland, an exhibition of his photographs accompanied by life stories, ran from May to September 2010 at the prestigious Chester Beatty Library in Dublin Castle. This essay is part of larger study called “birth of the Black subject”.

References


