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How Silhouettes Became “Black”: *The Visual Rhetoric of the Harlem Renaissance*

Silhouettes confront us in our daily encounters with new digital media, advertisements, computer games, and films. They appear in the outline of company logos on smartphones and iPads, and on movie posters and advertisements in global urban environments. They remind us of the iconic Bat-Signal in the DC Comics series and the silhouetted credit sequences by Maurice Binder for the James Bond films. Silhouettes have also informed visual styles in fine art from Aaron Douglas and Winold Reiss, via Jacob Lawrence and Romare Bearden, to Kara Walker. Echoes of such precedents are perceptible in the iTunes gift cards offered in supermarkets from Berlin to Paris and New York (fig. 1). The cards use dancing silhouettes in front of monochromatic backgrounds in green, pink, and blue to gain the attention of and generate a specific affect among consumers. These silhouettes are highly recognizable all over the world. Despite the persuasive powers of silhouettes in the modern art and media world, this ancient art form and its cultural reinterpretation in different media contexts have received comparatively little attention.

In this essay, I argue that during the Harlem Renaissance¹ the allegedly obsolete art of silhouettes underwent a significant change. Many artists turned to the European art of cutouts to create a remarkable bridge between aspiring African American artists in the field of literature and white audiences. The quest for a modernist visual code that was appealing, instantly recognizable, and easily reproduced in

Winold Reiss, *African Phantasy: Awakening*, from *The New Negro: An Interpretation* (detail, see fig. 7).





1
 Advertisement found in
 a newspaper flyer in a
 German supermarket on
 May 20, 2014.

print media, and that could cross ethnic and racial boundaries, produced a striking visual rhetoric. I show that 1920s silhouettes function as a paradigmatic case for analyzing the complex process of Americanization and cultural reappropriation by way of intermedial circulation and remediation.

How can we critically map, analyze, and evaluate this process? In the United States, nineteenth-century immigration and industrialization led to challenges in communication within a culture defined by ethnic differences, intercultural confrontations, and challenges in multilingual encounters. In order to create a national culture, artists were encouraged to develop a visual rhetoric capable of addressing an extremely diverse audience.² In particular, cultural transmission from central Europe to the United States contributed to making silhouettes a key element for pioneering work in American modernism. Furthermore, taking a critical look at the transmission, circulation, and mediation of silhouettes in art and popular culture, I argue that there is a racial dimension encoded that continues to inform the use of silhouettes.

The visual aesthetics of silhouettes often evoke a sense of kinetic energy, rebellious attitude, and performance styles associated with African American culture. My guiding question therefore is, how could silhouettes contribute to a new visual rhetoric that both affirmed African American cultural recognition and became complicit in

racialized fantasies of modernism? Or, to frame it as an ironic paradox, how did silhouettes become black? With the term “black,” I am referring both to the problematic racialized denominator of African Americans as well as the color code for silhouettes. While cutouts were most often (but not always) produced on black paper, they usually referred to white bourgeois people. Thus my aim is to trace the genealogy of an artistic form that in Western civilization traditionally referred to profiles of white people and later became more and more associated with the figuration of African Americans’ culture of creative self-expression. One of the turning points in the use of silhouettes can be traced to the Harlem Renaissance, which coincided with several revolutions in mass media: the advent of radio broadcasting, the premiere of sound films such as *The Jazz Singer* (1927), the popularization of the gramophone and race records, and what could be described as an Afro-Americanization of popular music.

I trace the ambivalent use of silhouette bodies in three parts. First, I briefly evoke the emergence of silhouette cutouts in nineteenth-century Europe. Second, I trace transatlantic and inter-American processes of transmission in silhouette aesthetics, with a specific focus on the different styles of silhouettes employed by the German immigrant artist/designer Winold Reiss, the African American painter Aaron Douglas, and the Mexican caricaturist Miguel Covarrubias (1904–1957) during the Harlem Renaissance. Third, I outline a palimpsest situation in the use of silhouettes in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. By turning to recent research in transatlantic transfer, my effort to reconnect the literary Harlem Renaissance with the visual communication of today’s digital media brings into focus the intermediary and transnational dimension in the use of silhouette bodies in popular culture.³

Silhouettes in Black and White: Theoretical Premises

By focusing on the intersection of American art history, media studies, and American studies, I successively identify moments of intercultural contact in different media environments; trace specialized groups or individuals of cultural mobility, translators, and intermediaries; and map inter pictorial clusters (in the sense of Udo Hebel)⁴ in which silhouettes (re)emerge.⁵ On the one hand, the lack of research regarding complex processes of resignification of silhouettes in American modernism and the digital age has hindered visual studies to fully recognize developments in the quest for an “American” code of communication. On the other hand, the commercial sector and marketing

industries often utilize silhouettes without an awareness of the underlying primitivist, racialized, and gendered fantasies that inform the visual discourse and processes of aesthetic empowerment.

Silhouettes offer a remarkably rich, unexplored corpus of images emerging from ancient Greece and China, transmitted via the Western culture of portraiture and twentieth-century advertising to the digital age of remediation and global image distribution processes.⁶ The novel functions of silhouettes in American modernist advertisement and art create unforeseen opportunities of intercultural communication. Because of their close relationship to stereotypes, it is of central importance to also analyze how silhouettes can lead to misunderstandings and intercultural confrontations. In the first case, silhouettes signify a democratic promise of aesthetic empowerment transcending national and cultural boundaries. In the second case, silhouettes can trigger projections that rely on colonial fantasies and asymmetric gender power relations that continue to inform performance culture. How can we understand this paradoxical effect?

I turn to concepts of remediation. With “remediation,” I refer to a process of translation or transformation of one medium into another. In the case of silhouettes, the remediation undergoes several developmental stages from shadow plays, illustration, and film to painting and advertisement. Depending on the medium, the transformation creates different effects and operates as a form of memory, interpretation, recontextualization, popularization, and upgrade, as well as reaffirmation of older media in the digital age. My understanding of remediation refers to a process that David Bolter and Richard Grusin describe as media “continually commenting upon, reproducing and replacing each other.”⁷ If we agree with Marshall McLuhan that new media often make us more self-conscious of their predecessors, we should ask in which ways silhouette artists draw on residual media (in the sense of Charles R. Acland) by reconfiguring, renewing, and recycling visual styles that have been neglected, abandoned, or thrashed over the course of time.⁸

In my analysis, I aim to understand the processes related to projective seeing. I find the concept of interpictureoriality⁹ useful since it puts special emphasis on visual dialogues, exchanges, and negotiations in categories such as imitation, parody, quotation, or variation—elements that are at the heart of the visual discourse in today’s multi-valent use of silhouettes in art and audiovisual media. While the concept shares theoretical structures with literary intertextuality, interpictureoriality is not only concerned with documentation and description

of relations, influences, or sources, but rather investigates, in the words of Udo Hebel, “the semantic and semiotic implications of the frame(s) of reference and act(s) of signification added to the respective image by means of its inter pictorial rhetoric.”¹⁰ There is a semantic surplus behind the image, which allows for participation, signification, transformation, and resignification.¹¹

The Origins of Silhouettes in Transatlantic Contexts

At the very time when silhouettes had become seemingly obsolete at the turn of the twentieth century, E. Nevill Jackson called for a precise historical overview to bring to attention the art of silhouettes in the United States. In 1911, she argued: “Surely it is high time the art of black profile portraiture had a historian of its own and the great masters of silhouette portraiture were rescued from oblivion. Shadows are impalpable things which fade away almost before we are aware of their existence.”¹² How can we describe silhouettes? The most general definition in the *Oxford English Dictionary* identifies a silhouette as a “dark outline,” for example, “a shadow in profile,” which appears “against a lighter background.” When it comes to the representation of human beings, silhouettes refer to “a portrait obtained by tracing the outline of a profile, head, or figure by means of its shadow or in some other way, and filling in the whole with black; an outline portrait cut out of black paper; a figure or picture drawn or printed in solid black.”¹³ The process of cutting a silhouette can also be reversed so that the portrait is cut as a hole and then placed on dark material to bring about the profile. Sometimes we also encounter portraits that are cut on white paper and mounted on black.¹⁴

While the roots of silhouettes can be traced to Paleolithic times in which vases from ancient Greece show black figures in profile, Pliny the Elder connects silhouettes in his *Natural History* (AD 77–79) with the very origins of art. Pliny describes how in 600 BC Dibutades, the daughter of a Corinthian potter, traced the profile of her lover on a wall before he left on a journey. During the period of romantic classicism with its interest in the classical past, the mythical story of the first silhouette artist and the artistic practice gained particular attention. Jean-Baptiste Regnault’s work entitled *The Origin of Painting* from 1785 is merely one of many artworks from the era to capture the romanticized version of shadow traces.

In Germany, silhouette art reached its climax in the second part of the eighteenth century, with its centers in Weimar, Dessau, and Berlin. In 1779, Friedrich C. Müller provided the first overview in his

book *Ausführliche Abhandlung über die Silhouetten und deren Zeichnung, Verzierung, Verzierung und Vervielfältigung*. With the silhouette chair and the so-called *Storchschnabel*, a technical device created by the Jesuit Christoph Schreiner in the early seventeenth century, silhouettes could be created in a mechanical fashion.¹⁵ In his extremely successful book *Physiognomische Fragmente zur Beförderung der Menschenkenntnis und Menschenliebe*, published in 1775, Johann Caspar Lavater (1741–1801) argued that the silhouette was the most truthful and immediate reflection of a human being; in the profile, one could trace a person's character. Lavater built on the theories of the Dutch physician Petrus Camper (1722–1789) who showed via changes in the profile that human beings moved away from the world of animals. Lavater's pseudoscience gained great popularity among many intellectuals. When Lavater visited Goethe in Frankfurt in 1777, the German poet was fascinated by his approach to revealing individual characteristics of a person in the tracing of his or her profile (fig. 2).

In 1794, Lavater's book was published in the United States in an abridged version with plates engraved by Samuel Hill under the title *Essays on Physiognomy*. Lavater's ideas were disseminated widely thanks to inexpensive paperback versions. Theorists such as Thomas Dobson, whose essay on physiognomy was published in the United States in his *Encyclopedia: or, Dictionary of Arts Sciences and Misc. Literature* (1790–1797), presented the classification of human features as an accepted science.

In the 1830s, the silhouette mania reached the United States because of the work of artists such as August Edouart (1789–1861), who has been hailed as the “Raphael of Shadowgraphy.”¹⁶ In the United States between the Jacksonian era and the period known as Reconstruction, the popularity of silhouettes flourished because of a specific cultural situation distinct from that of Europe. First, the ever-increasing flow of immigrants to the New World created a large market for silhouette artists.¹⁷ Immigrants with little or no disposable income turned to the inexpensive yet accurate quality of shadow profiles as a means of communication across the Atlantic. Silhouettes were fast, cheap, and portable, and thus perfectly suited for physical transport across the Atlantic to provide a sign of life for those friends and family members who stayed behind.¹⁸ Second, Americans embraced more enthusiastically than Europeans the new techniques of employing modern machinery for the act of shadow tracing. These silhouettes acquired the quality of “authentic” snapshots representing a forward-looking new nation. The silhouette machines from the early 1800s

2

Goethe vor einem Grabmal mit weiblicher Büste (Goethe facing a grave monument), ca. 1780. Cut paper. From Hans Wahl and Anton Kippenberg, *Goethe und seine Welt* (Leipzig, Ger.: Insel-Verlag, 1932), S.92.



predate the arrival of photography and later amateur Kodak cameras by several decades. Thus, silhouettes mark the first visual media revolution in the sense of Walter Benjamin's famous thesis on "art in the age of mechanical reproduction."¹⁹ Third, the experience of comparing silhouette profiles among Dutch, English, Irish, French, French Canadian, German, Italian, Polish, Russian, and Scandinavian immigrants made Americans particularly susceptible to the theories of physiognomy published by Lavater.

Edouart ranks among the most prolific silhouette artists in the United States, producing about six hundred cutouts per year between

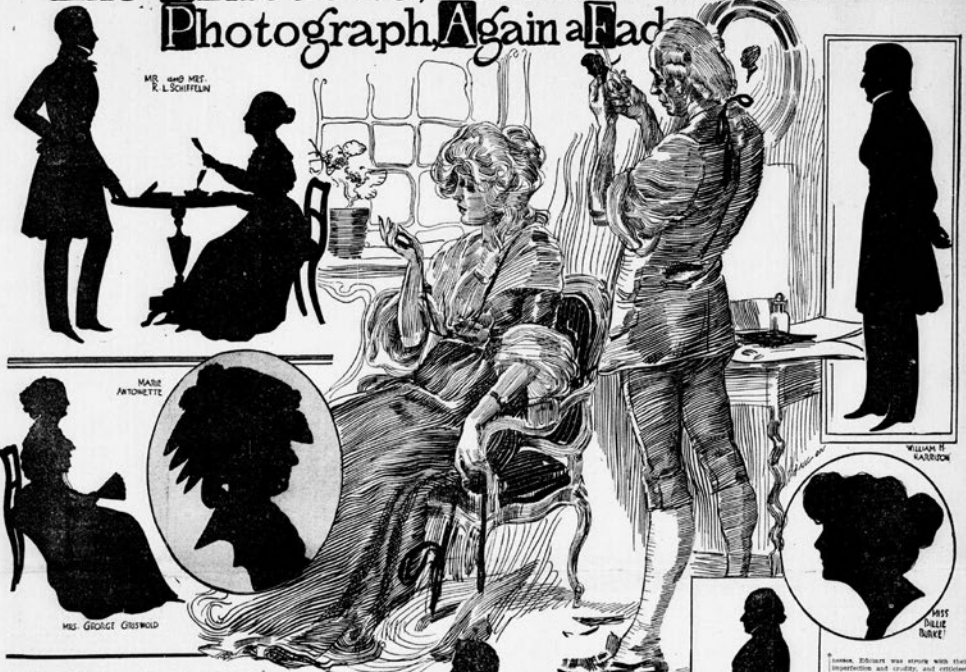
1842 and 1844, and accumulating about three thousand silhouettes of the most prominent American citizens during his travels through the United States. His work includes silhouettes of upper-class members of the economic and political elite and social reform movements, but also slaves from the South. His elaborate tableau of a large middle-class family attending a magic lantern show links silhouettes with the world of shadow productions (fig. 3). At the same time, the cutouts in front of a lithography link silhouettes with popular entertainment foreshadowing the use of silhouettes in the medium of film, albeit in reverse order with the audience rather than the iconic figures on-screen appearing in silhouettes.

3
August Edouart,
The Magic Lantern Show, 1826–1861.
 Cut paper and wash,
 9½ × 13⅜ in. (24.13 ×
 34 cm). The Metro-
 politan Museum of Art,
 New York. Bequest
 of Mary Martin, 1938,
 38.145.392.

As a matter of fact, when a large-scale exhibition on American silhouettes was staged in New York, Edouart’s work on portraits was hailed in the *New York Tribune* as offering “so complete a pictorial record of the social and political history of the time (1839–49) as probably no other nation possesses.”²⁰ The exhibition was prominently announced. The author described silhouettes as a kind of “ghost of the modern photograph” (fig. 4). When photographs had successfully



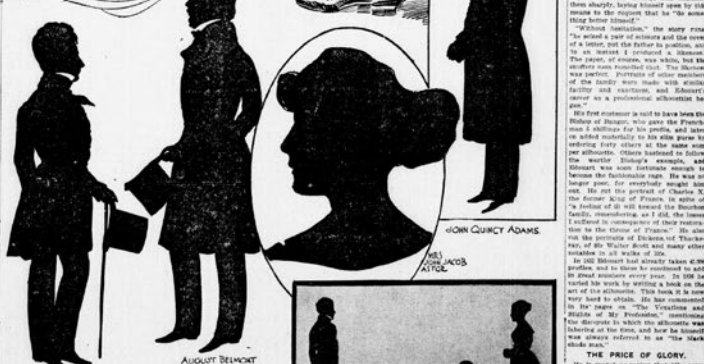
The Silhouette, Ghost of the Modern Photograph, Again a Fad



New Yorkers Now Have the Opportunity to View the Vernay Collection, Including the American Silhouettes of August Edouart, the "Raphael of Shadowgraphy."

THE Devil, that foe of old religions, is not so crafty as he used to be. In the Dark Ages he did not know where to hide, and he was obliged to show himself. The invention of a kind of shadowgraphy was required, and the shadow was cast upon the wall of the church by the light of a candle. The shadow was not a true shadow, but a silhouette, and it was not a true silhouette, but a shadow. The shadow was not a true shadow, but a silhouette, and it was not a true silhouette, but a shadow. The shadow was not a true shadow, but a silhouette, and it was not a true silhouette, but a shadow.

It was one of the reasons, perhaps, that silhouette became so popular for every day by visiting the black paper and being in the shadow of the light. The shadow was not a true shadow, but a silhouette, and it was not a true silhouette, but a shadow. The shadow was not a true shadow, but a silhouette, and it was not a true silhouette, but a shadow.



From 1802 to 1810 silhouette was made by August in this country at the rate of one to ten. The shadow was not a true shadow, but a silhouette, and it was not a true silhouette, but a shadow. The shadow was not a true shadow, but a silhouette, and it was not a true silhouette, but a shadow.

4
"The Silhouette, Ghost of the Modern Photograph, Again a Fad," *New York Tribune*, October 26, 1913, 17.

replaced the art of silhouette cutouts, the older medium became part of a national cultural heritage for display in museums or shows. Silhouettes were now again, as the headline suggested, a “fad.” However, the silhouettes shown on the newspaper cover do not so much illustrate the ethnic diversity, which Edouart allegedly captured, but instead depict prominent white intellectuals, artists, and well-known public figures such as Marie Antoinette, Mrs. George Griswold, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and John Quincy Adams. Meanwhile, however, an emphasis on ethnicity and race was crucial for the heated debates about immigration laws between the time of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act and that of the Immigration Act from 1924. Silhouette profiles played a prominent role in establishing a racialized quota system.²¹

The connection between immigration, urbanization, and changing silhouette aesthetics can be traced to the growing preoccupation of publishers with pictorial media in the early twentieth century and the rise of urbanization on both sides of the Atlantic. As Jan Baetens has argued, “Visual print culture and visual storytelling [emerged] by way of engraving.”²² The woodcuts of the early twentieth century are informed by Expressionism in the fine arts, the visual codes of Expressionist silent cinema, and the cartoons of newspapers and journals.²³ A striking example of visual storytelling in print media can be found in Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century with so-called woodcut novels. The Belgian-born artist Frans Masereel (1889–1972) coined the term *roman in beelden* (novel in pictures). Masereel created stories about modern urban dwellers surrounded by cityscapes, which seemed to promise liberation but also embody a sense of claustrophobia, violence, and self-alienation. His influential work *Mon livre d'heures: 167 images dessinées et gravées sur bois* (1919, later published under the title *My Book of Hours* in 1922 and afterward as *Passionate Journey* in 1948) traces the arrival of a young man in a prototypical European metropolis after World War I. The black-and-white images tell of moments of crisis and tragedy and the isolation of urban life. Weary of civilization, the protagonist embarks on a quest for redemption and inspiration in “primitivist cultures” (fig. 5). After his return to the city, the young man assumes a carefree attitude of complete freedom and independence. Masereel’s visual style is intrinsically linked to the fine arts. It would soon be appropriated by the commercial arts in the field of advertisement. Like his preceding effort, *The Passion of Man* (1918), Masereel’s work influenced a number of artists working in other media such as writing, music, and film. For example, in the United States, the German-trained woodcut artist Lynd Ward (1905–1985) appropriated

Masereel's technique to provide an iconographic visual account of American urban city life during the Great Depression in works such as *Madman's Drum* (1930) and *Wild Pilgrimage* (1932). In the latter, Ward uses the Expressionist techniques of woodcut prints to confront his protagonist with the practice of lynching, contrasting the more detailed figures of the aggressors in white with the black silhouetted body of an African American with a rope around his neck hanging from a tree.²⁴ Woodcut novels are thus one of the "missing links" in the circulation of images that triggered a renewed interest in the art of silhouettes to advertise the African American naissance in literature, art, and music in the United States.

In 1911, E. Nevill Jackson's *The History of Silhouettes* opened with the nostalgic remark that great pleasure comes from "the silhouette of

5
Woodcut from Frans
Masereel, *Passionate
Journey: A Vision in
Woodcuts* (1919), n.p.



bygone days.” While the first chapter offers an overview on “black profile portraiture,” little did the author know that the term “black” would soon carry new meanings in the renaissance of silhouettes in the United States. Two years later, a New York exhibition by the well-known art and antiques dealer Arthur S. Vernay brought new attention to the technique of silhouette cutouts as an artistic treasure worth preserving and putting on public display. The emphasis, however, was on representing cutouts of the white upper class. New Yorkers, as an article in the *New York Tribune* suggested in 1913, “should be particularly interested, as the shades of many of their ancestors are included.”²⁵ In the past, silhouettes could convey information on the ethnic background of the sitters. Soon, however, silhouettes gained a new function: they could convey information on racial aspirations and cultural recognition.

Interpictorial Clusters and Transatlantic Circulations

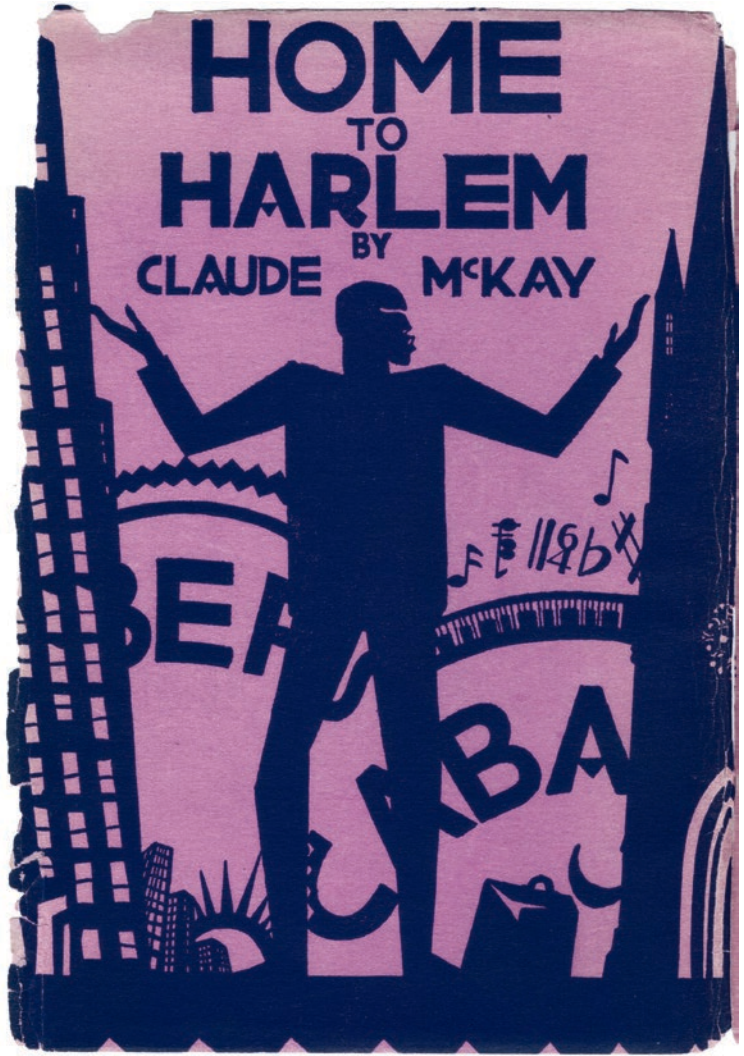
In the 1920s, silhouettes underwent a remarkable transformation. The collaboration between immigrant artists from Europe with Latin American and African American artists led to a reevaluation of silhouette aesthetics that became most prominently pronounced in works related to African American culture. The “New Negro” movement utilized silhouette figures to recodify associations of silhouettes by opening up new perspectives on African American music, literature, theater, and dance.

The “dean of African American painters” and leading visual artist of the Harlem Renaissance,²⁶ Aaron Douglas set out to counter stereotypical, often degrading images of African Americans with the very visual genre that is prone to stereotyping because of its radical omission of detail: silhouettes.²⁷ Turning to mural art and illustration, Douglas wanted to portray African American lives, dreams, and realities to provide a new sense of racial uplift, self-recognition, and general appreciation of the contributions of African Americans to modern American culture. Silhouettes played a key role in his artistic vision.

Douglas contributed significantly to American modernist art with dust jacket designs to create a bridge between readers and the poetry and fiction emerging from new aspiring artists of the Harlem Renaissance. Through the support of the white, Iowa-born writer, editor, and photographer Carl Van Vechten (1880–1964), Douglas was able to establish a fruitful relationship with the publisher Alfred A. Knopf (1892–1984). The same holds true for

6

Aaron Douglas,
illustration for dust
wrapper from Claude
McKay, *Home to
Harlem* (New York:
Harper & Brothers, 1928).
Beinecke Rare Book
and Manuscript Library,
Yale Collection of
American Literature,
New Haven, Connecticut.



Langston Hughes (1902–1967), who published his first poetry collections with Knopf. The young Miguel Covarrubias was also among the friends of Van Vechten. Knopf recognized the economic potential of publishing African American writers in the 1920s. What distinguished Knopf from other publishers was his keen interest in bringing innovative modernist design and high printing quality to the visual appearance of his books. This involved dust cover designs, book binding layouts, typeface, page design, and the selection of paper. As a member of the production department explained, Knopf insisted on being involved in all processes and called for final approval.²⁸ Knopf established a lasting and highly productive collaboration with

Van Vechten, Hughes, Covarrubias, and Douglas, commissioning artwork that was decorative but also significant for the perception of the contents of the product.²⁹

Douglas's dust jackets for James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* (1927), Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem* (1928) (fig. 6) and *Banjo* (1929), André Salmon's *The Black Venus* (1929), and Langston Hughes's *Not without Laughter* (1933) employ stylized silhouettes of African Americans surrounded by abstract modern cityscapes or silhouettes in motion, often with references to music and dances. Because of the different cultural contexts on both sides of the Atlantic, the associations of silhouette figures shift from European or Orientalist contexts to African American culture and the "jazz craze." Undoubtedly, the dreamlike quality of the exotic stories represents a powerful tool to stimulate the imagination. In the works of Douglas and other African American artists such as E. Simms Campbell (1906–1971) and Richard Bruce Nugent (1906–1987), the silhouette bodies assume a double function as shadows and literal representations of the black body. The setting is not limited to a dreamlike mythical realm of the imagination. Rather, we often encounter hybrid spaces that reference both the African mythological past and the modern urban environment of American big-city life.

The silhouette figures with slit eyes became the most recognizable feature of Douglas's mural artwork. Douglas's use of flat, black silhouettes is tied to the aesthetic vision of the German immigrant artist Winold Reiss.³⁰ In the 1920s, when Douglas participated in Reiss's New York–based art school, he worked as an illustrator receiving commissioned work in the field of advertisement and book cover design. The artistic appropriations of Douglas are linked to the transatlantic circulation of silhouettes and wood-block prints. Reiss functioned as a mediator, teacher, and mentor who enabled Douglas to collaborate with influential intellectuals and publishers such as Paul Kellogg (1879–1958), Alain Locke (1885–1954), and Carl Van Vechten. Indeed, it was Reiss who encouraged Douglas to explore the German folk art of the *Scherenschnitte* (cutouts) in order to reflect on his own African American background.³¹ Reiss had explored silhouette aesthetics since his arrival in the United States in 1913 to contribute to the lively visual culture in New York.

Reiss came to New York with an impressive portfolio. He had been educated at the Akademie der Bildenden Künste (Academy of Fine Arts) in Munich and had studied with the famous Art Nouveau painter, sculptor, engraver, and architect Franz von Stuck. He also

had attended the Kunstgewerbeschule (School of Applied Arts), learning from the influential painter, designer, and graphic artist Julius Diez. Reiss believed that he was riding on top of the “tidal wave of modernism” that had swept across the Atlantic. Envisioning himself as a transcultural mediator, he set out to “try and develop the European conception of modernism in this country.”³²

The New Negro: An Interpretation (1925), one of the founding documents of the Harlem Renaissance, marks a major breakthrough in the use of silhouettes. The title page of the book features two names in a prominent position: below the title, just above the center of the page, Alain Locke is identified as the editor of the anthology; and in the center of the page, the book decorations and portraits are attributed to the visual artist Winold Reiss. A prominent drawing in three colors

7
Winold Reiss, *African Phantasy: Awakening*, from *The New Negro: An Interpretation* (New York: A. and C. Boni, 1925).
The Reiss Archives.



is his *African Phantasy: Awakening* (1925) (fig. 7). Here, we have the theme of a naissance in the sense of Locke translated into expressive silhouettes and masks. These imaginations of a new spiritual beginning combine human beings in the shape of African silhouettes in harmony with nature and the spiritual world. These images are in dialogue with an epiphany Reiss had during a two-month trip to Mexico between October and December 1920. Here, Reiss embarked on a journey driven by his disillusionment with American democracy, professional and personal challenges after World War I, and a generally hostile attitude toward all things German in the United States. After his encounter with Mexican folk art, architecture, landscapes, and the spirit of the people after the revolution, Reiss expressed his disappointment with American culture explicitly in December 1920: “And now that I am here again in America, the land of today’s perhaps most extreme egotism and materialism, quite a few thoughts arise in me clearly which before had been inside me only as foreboding and longing. Contrast alone can result in deeds and works. Same here. Returning from a land that has a great, beautiful soul and has been desperately mistreated and misunderstood, I perceive America to be repellently dead and lifeless.” Reiss envisioned a new path to enlightenment in which humanity is the new religion. “We ourselves are the temple,” Reiss explained.³³ He saw a connection between his art of picturing the human body and the necessity to overcome selfishness and egotism in the United States. Reiss greatly empathized with Locke’s project of African American cultural recognition and suggested to include, among other visual genres, silhouettes in his manifesto work on African American literature and culture.³⁴

Locke explained that he selected Winold Reiss to illustrate large parts of *The New Negro* anthology based on a shared conviction: to conceive and execute a visual narrative “as a path-breaking guide and encouragement to this new foray of the younger Negro artists.” Locke continued to emphasize the innovative approach that Reiss brought to the visual connection between the poetry, essays, and short stories of *The New Negro* and the audience: “In idiom, technical treatment and objective social angle, it is a bold iconoclastic break with the current traditions that have grown up about the Negro subject in American art.”³⁵ Thus, Reiss became an intercultural mediator and teacher for Douglas who acknowledged his formal and spiritual influence: “I have seen Reiss’s drawings for the *New Negro*. They are marvelous. Many colored people don’t like Reiss’s drawing. We are possessed, you know, with the idea that it is necessary to be white, to be beautiful. Nine

times out of ten it is just the reverse. It takes lots of training or a tremendous effort to down the idea that thin lips and straight nose is the apogée of beauty. But once free you can look back with a sigh of relief and wonder how anyone could be so deluded.”³⁶

For example, Douglas’s silhouette drawing *Music* (1925) shows how far he appropriated the silhouette designs Winold Reiss had brought to the art scene of New York. While the silhouettes show a dancing couple with stylized musical notes in the background, it is not precisely clear what kind of dances and songs we are supposed to imagine. Given the reference to African American music, we are most likely invited to create associations with the latest dance crazes, such as the black bottom, Charleston, or shimmy, and with Harlem, the immediate neighborhood of Douglas.³⁷ The association is made explicit by the position in the book that the editor, Alain Locke, assigns to the silhouette drawing. The image appears above J. A. Rogers’s essay “Jazz at Home.” Considering the circulation of silhouette styles in the transatlantic sphere in the 1920s, it is fitting that Rogers connects the new innovative musical expressions labeled “jazz” with a style that transcends clearly defined national and racial codes: “Jazz is a marvel of paradox: too fundamentally human, at least as modern humanity goes, to be typically racial, too international to be characteristically national, too much abroad in the world to have a special home.”³⁸

In a similar fashion, silhouettes represented a paradox. While pointing toward the bourgeoisie of the Gilded Age, they also functioned as novel signifiers for African American cultural (self-) recognition. Rogers argues that what was commonly referred to as jazz was “more at home in Harlem than in Paris.”³⁹ One might argue in a similar vein that silhouettes, when they emerged as a highly successful means of advertising in the 1920s, became more and more associated with a visual code for the African American cultural renaissance than with nineteenth-century bourgeois portraiture. Reiss’s *Interpretation of Harlem Jazz I* (ca. 1924) (fig. 8) captures the spirit of novel dances in a modernist visual style, which Richard Powell has identified as a novel kind of “blues aesthetic” in the visual arts.⁴⁰ With a reference to an African mask in the upper-right corner, and a banjo, a key instrument of African American music, between the male dancer’s feet, Reiss offers a visual staccato rhythm juxtaposing legs, bodies, and modernist layering of geographic forms.⁴¹

The transnational dimension of silhouettes and their connections to the “New Negro” in the arts is further heightened by the

presence of the Mexican artist Miguel Covarrubias. His caricatures on jazz combine silhouette aesthetics with more-detailed outlines of clothes and emphasize the flow of movements. The connection to dance and jazz is clearly defined via silhouettes, as his illustrations for *Vanity Fair* and Zora Neale Hurston's work illustrate, to name but a few creative outlets. In addition, the Mexican artist became friends with African American musicians such as W. C. Handy, Ethel Waters, and Florence Mills, and collaborated with Van Vechten, photographer Nickolas Muray, playwright Eugene O'Neill, and poet Langston Hughes. All these artists became involved in one way or another with Covarrubias's idiosyncratic artistry of silhouette caricatures. Alain Locke praised his particular source of imagery and contributions to the visual Harlem Renaissance, emphasizing his Mexican background:

This typical Latin interest and tradition, with its kindly farce in which there is no hint of social offense or disparagement, no matter how broad or caricaturistic the brush, is familiar to us now in the work of Miguel Covarrubias. It may yet be an antidote for that comic art which is so responsible for the hypersensitive feelings of American Negroes and stand between them and the full appreciation of any portrayal of race types. Surely the time has come when we should have our own comic and semi-serious art, our own Cruishanks and Max Beerbohms.⁴²

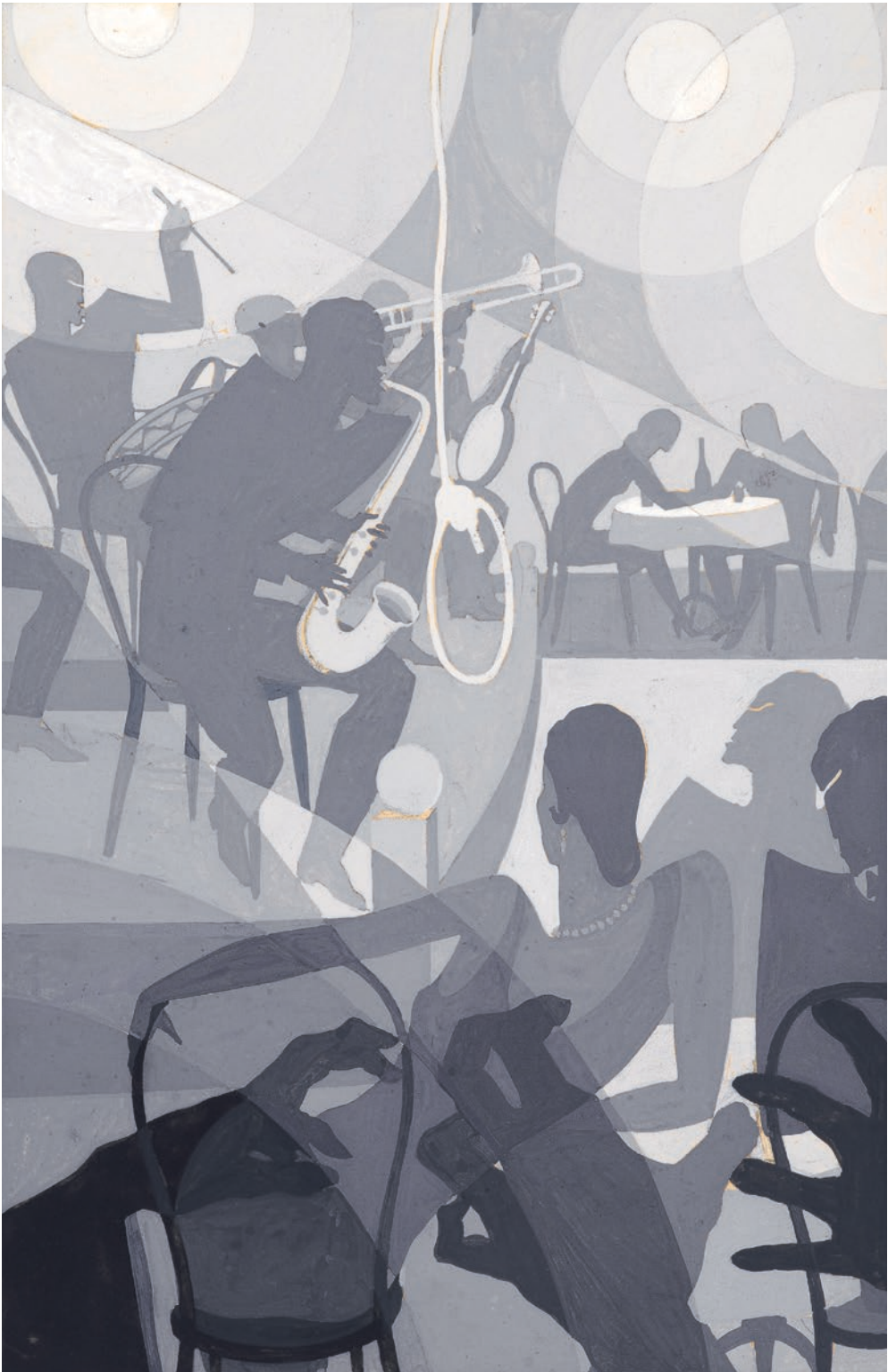
8
Winold Reiss, *Interpretation of Harlem Jazz I* (also published under the title *Drawing in Two Colors*), ca. 1924. Offset lithograph print on Japanese paper, 20 × 15 in. (50.8 × 38.1 cm). Gift of Tjark Reiss. Library of Congress, Washington, DC. Prints and Photographs Division, Winold Reiss Collection, LC-USZC4-5687.

In addition to a number of highly influential and often reproduced caricatures in *Vanity Fair* and *The New Negro*, Covarrubias's design in stark red, black, and yellow colors for the dust cover of Langston Hughes's first publication of poems, *The Weary Blues* (1926), is highly recognizable.⁴³ The silhouette figure of a piano player, the light of a dull gas light, and the piano keys offer a visual translation of the first poem of the collection, which also provides the title for the book. The cover is a striking example of the advertisement industry's interest in exploiting the affective power of African American literature and music. Van Vechten offers a guide regarding how to read the poems by turning to stereotypes: "[Hughes's] verses are by no means limited to an exclusive mood; he writes caressingly of little black prostitutes in Harlem; his cabaret songs throb with the true jazz rhythm; his sea-pieces ache with a calm melancholy lyricism; he cries bitterly from the heart of his race in *Cross and the Jester*." This evocation of prostitutes in Harlem, authentic jazz rhythms, and the



Drawing in Two Colors

Winold Reiss



aching feelings from the heart of the “black race” is found on the back of the dust cover, thereby inviting the reader to project these stereotypes onto the silhouetted figure by Covarrubias.

The work of Douglas on African American music resonates with the aesthetic approaches of Reiss and Covarrubias⁴⁴ but adds a new dimension. Ominous shadows serving as a reference to the African American trauma of slavery and lynching inject a disturbing subtext in the visual artwork. A prominent example is Douglas’s gouache-and-pencil drawing with the somewhat innocent title *Charleston* from 1928 (fig. 9). With his signature style of slit-eyed silhouettes, he envisions a contemporary scene in a club where a jazz band plays to an audience enjoying themselves with drinks and food. The diagonal lines with slight tonal gradations and various layers of translucent geometrical forms combine modernist primitivism with popular culture and American urban imaginations, which Douglas explored in murals such as *Aspects of Negro Life: The Negro in an African Setting* (1934) and *Building More Stately Mansions* (1944). Douglas places a white silhouette of a rope with a noose at the center of the drawing. His clear reference to lynching disrupts the joyful scene of nightlife and music, adding a sense of unexpected violence and a morbid undertone. The reference ties in with what Ken Gonzales-Day calls a “landscape without memory” and the horrible practice of marketing lynching photographs, souvenir cards, and postcards.⁴⁵ Gonzales-Day refers to specific landscapes or environments in which the history of lynching has been erased from collective memory. As tens of thousands of African Americans left the South to find new opportunities in metropolitan cities in the North and Northeast of the United States in what is known as the Great Migration, the memory and images of lynching and their traumatic effects traveled with them. One could point toward media such as postcards, films such as D. W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation* (1915) and Oscar Micheaux’s *Within Our Gates* (1919), and the visualization of actions of the Ku Klux Klan. Born in Topeka, Kansas, Douglas has a close biographical link to the experience of the Great Migration. With the rope at the center of the image, Douglas forces an irrational element into the otherwise typical scene of urban nightlife in the 1920s. In addition, Douglas’s *Charleston* offers another telling visual clue, which links the silhouette drawing with German Expressionist films: in the lower quarter, Douglas depicts silhouette hands frantically grasping one of the relaxed audience members enjoying the musical performance.

The work of Douglas can also be related to pictorial clusters in European art and cinema. Works such as the 1922 Expressionist horror

9

Aaron Douglas,
Charleston, ca. 1928.
Gouache and pencil
on paper board, 14 ¹/₆ ×
9 ¹/₆ in. (37.3 × 24.9 cm).
North Carolina Museum
of Art, Raleigh.
Purchased with funds
from the North Carolina
State Art Society (Robert
F. Phifer Bequest) and
the State of North
Carolina, by exchange.

films by Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau (1888–1931) use shadows of the vampire and particular stylizations of his hands as a means to translate the intrusion of the irrational and horrific into our world. The ghastly hands also create an inter pictorial reference to the Expressionist masterpiece *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* (1919) by Robert Wiene (1873–1938) and even more explicitly to his 1924 film *Orlac's Hände* in which a concert pianist loses both hands in a train accident.⁴⁶ Thanks to a medical operation, the pianist receives new hands. After he learns that the hands are from a murderer called Vasseur, he is traumatized and becomes haunted by nightmarish visions. In the United States, the film was released under the title *The Hands of Orlac* in the very year that Douglas infused the familiar scene of jazz in a music club with the terrifying image of silhouette hands grasping the audience. Wiene uses Expressionist techniques to create a strange disconnection between the sight of hands and the pianist as a person. It is as if the hands have a life of their own and cannot be controlled any longer. In another classic of German Expressionist cinema, the shadow of hands emerges as a sign of death and the supernatural. In the horror classic *Nosferatu* (1922), Murnau plays with silhouetted hands on walls to suggest imminent destruction, death, and disease as the vampire is about to capture his victim and suck the lifeblood out of the body. Film critic Béla Balázs felt that with the vampire's silhouette (and other images of nature), the film evokes an "ice-cold breath from the beyond."⁴⁷ It is this evocation of terror from another sphere that also permeates Douglas's jazzy bar scene. The painter appropriates the psychological language of Expressionism and the uncanny to translate film silhouettes to the specter of lynching in 1920s America.

With these examples, we understand how silhouettes are racially codified to create a bridge between texts by African American writers and an audience that was for the most part made up of white, middle- or upper-class readers. When Douglas talked about the illustrations he created for the collection of poems *God's Trombones* (1927) by James Weldon Johnson (1871–1938),⁴⁸ he closely linked his silhouettes with Egyptian art. This pattern became his signature visual style: "I used the Egyptian form, that is to say, the head was in perspective in a profile flat view, the body, shoulders down to the waist turned half way, the legs were done also from the side and the feet were also done in a broad perspective. . . . The only thing that I did that was not specifically taken from the Egyptians was an eye . . . so you saw it in three dimensions. I avoided the three dimensions and that's another thing that made it sort of unique artistically."⁴⁹



10
Aaron Douglas, *Song of the Towers*, 1966. Oil and tempera on canvas, 34 × 30 in. (86.36 × 76.2 cm). Milwaukee Art Museum, Lent by State of Wisconsin, Executive Residence, Madison, L1.2006.

Interestingly, Douglas does not use the expression silhouette here. He rather emphasizes the direct connection to African origins. The statement is in line with Romare Bearden's evaluation of African American art at the beginning of the 1930s. In his 1934 article for *Opportunity* magazine entitled "The Negro Artist and Modern Art," Bearden explained that "at the present time it is almost impossible for the Negro artist not to be influenced by the work of other men."⁵⁰ Bearden criticized particularly the filter of a white artistic tradition, which prevented African American artists from seeing "with their own eyes" and expressing themselves in a highly original fashion steeped in the tradition and environment they live in. As an example, Bearden

mentions the mural work of Mexican artists such as Diego Rivera and José Clemente Orozco. In his own art, Bearden repeatedly turned to the link between jazz and silhouette bodies, thereby reaffirming the frame of reference in which dark, silhouetted bodies function as signifiers for African American artistic self-expression. Thus, a creative interplay exists among the silhouette aesthetics that Winold Reiss brought to the visual Harlem Renaissance when he collaborated with Alain Locke on *The New Negro*, the illustrations of his student Aaron Douglas for African American magazines and novels, and the continuation of so-called jazz artists such as Jacob Lawrence and Romare Bearden who interlinked reduced, flat, silhouetted bodies with jazz music. Bearden, along with Harry Henderson, explicitly outlined the connection the art of silhouettes had with ancient Greek art and Cubist experiments: “Douglas’s lively, flat black silhouettes impressed many publishers, editors, and artists but upset some academically trained African-American critics. Few realized that he was impressed by the classic black silhouettes on Greek vases, such as *The Return of Hephaistos*, a masterpiece by Lydos in the sixth century B.C. . . . Utilizing black silhouettes and reducing objects to their basic shapes, as in Cubist paintings, he created relationships among the flat figural groups that have a rhythmic movement similar to that in Greek vase painting. Sometimes these figures were dancing.”⁵¹

In one of his well-known paintings, *Song of the Towers* from the series *Aspects of Negro Life* (1934) (fig. 10), Douglas condenses his distinctive style in line with his trajectory as an artist. He wanted his art to be “transcendentally material, mystically objective. Earthy. Spiritually earthy. Dynamic.”⁵² Douglas offers a juxtaposition of silhouetted workers and Cubist representations of skyscrapers. At the center of the image is the silhouette of an African American saxophone player and the Statue of Liberty. Concentric circles radiate from the center. With its emphasis on the centrality of African American musical expression in the United States, this image breaks with Paul Whiteman’s agenda to present himself as the true “king of jazz” since he created the soundtrack of American modernism through symphonic jazz.⁵³ While Whiteman set out to uplift jazz from the realm of primitivism and civilize it, he actually Europeanized it, adding symphonic elements and turning down syncopated rhythms, dissonances, and elements of improvisation. He thereby streamlined the different ethnic influences on jazz and took away, as Sieglinde Lemke argued, “its original hybridity.”⁵⁴ Douglas, however, Americanizes the visual codes for jazz. He incorporates a notion of playfulness

through arrangements of graphical elements and stylizations of flat silhouette figures positioned at the heart of hypermodern urban landscapes in New York. With the concentric circles, Douglas explores what he calls in an unpublished lecture “correspondences or analogies between these arts [plastic arts] and music.” Douglas moves beyond the work of Cubists such as Braque and Picasso and other modernists such as Mondrian and Casotti to explore the essence of jazz forms with lines, tones, colors, and texture. At the same time, he goes back to ancient forms of visual culture to achieve an all-encompassing visualization: “The use of line in the arts of the Chinese, Japanese, Indian, and Persian peoples gives one the impression that it is always drawn with a kind of rhythmic response to the total life of the people.”⁵⁵ Douglas, thus, offers a synesthetic counterstrategy to the effects of “whitening jazz” by reconnecting the new soundtrack of American modernism with African American contributions to the urban experience of leisure, work, and art.

The image resonates with a wood-block print Douglas created for Johnson’s poem “Judgment Day.” Johnson describes a biblical scene in which the angel Gabriel blows his silver trumpet to wake the living nations. Douglas turns this musical evocation into a visual composition, which in 1927 fit into the cultural self-recognition Alain Locke and other African Americans called for. The silhouette image referencing African masks and the signature slit eyes makes a clear connection to illustrations dedicated to jazz. In the context of the poem, African American jazz and silhouettes of the human body take on the function of calling for a renewed sense of artistic expression for racial uplift. One could argue that the silhouetted image of an African American blowing his horn in “Judgement Day” and the playing of the saxophone in *Song of the Towers* is what Romare Bearden had in mind when he envisioned a new kind of artist who “must be the medium through which humanity expresses itself. In this sense the greatest artists have faced the realities of life, and have been profoundly social.”⁵⁶

Repercussions in Black and White

The foregoing effort to critically analyze, map, and evaluate silhouette aesthetics and the recodification of the eighteenth-century European tradition of cutouts may help us answer the question whether Douglas successfully developed an art that was not “white art painted black,” a problem he communicated to Langston Hughes in a letter from December 21, 1925. By going back to the origins of art, drawing on ancient Chinese art reflected through German *Scherenschnitte*, appropriating





Cubist experiments, and reconnecting stylized black silhouettes with African masks, Douglas strove to “bare our arms and plunge them deep, deep through laughter, through pain, through sorrow, through hope, through disappointment, into the very depths of the souls of our people and drag forth material crude, rough, neglected.” In the remainder of this essay, by drawing attention to the works of Kara Walker and Apple advertisements, I briefly address the later repercussions of the visual rhetoric Douglas designed to inspire people to “sing it, dance it, write it, paint it.”⁵⁷

In contemporary art, Kara Walker (b. 1969) ranks as the artist who almost single-handedly has brought new attention to the complex frames of reference of silhouette cutouts. “The silhouette says a lot with very little information, but that’s also what the stereotype does. So I saw the silhouette and the stereotype as linked,” says Walker.⁵⁸ Her work highlights the potential of silhouettes to intervene in the current discourse on race, class, and gender. The appropriation of silhouette aesthetics in the murals of Walker has inspired new scholarship on negative or thoughtlessly stereotyped representations of blacks in the context of American minstrelsy.⁵⁹ In Walker’s work, black silhouettes critically address the trauma of slavery. They are intrinsically linked to an American narrative of painful exploitation and what Toni Morrison has described as a white success story realized “on the backs of blacks.”⁶⁰ Walker’s silhouettes most often reference African American people. She builds on a cultural memory in which representations of blackness are tied to stereotypical silhouettes. This is remarkable considering that during the heyday of their popularity in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, silhouettes represented the likeness of mostly white bourgeois sitters. For example, *Endless Conundrum, An African Anonymous Adventuress* (2001) (fig. 11) shows a tableau of various silhouettes, which in some form or another critically engage with issues of slavery, sexual exploitation, violence against African Americans, and deconstructing modernist aesthetics. One image shows a silhouette dancer with a particular emphasis on her breast and vagina while bananas are flying around her hips. The image clearly references the famous banana dance by Josephine Baker who became a celebrity in the Parisian art scene (and later other European metropolitan centers) in the 1920s.⁶¹ “My works are erotically explicit, shameless. I would be happy if visitors would stand in front of my work and even feel a little ashamed because they have . . . simply believed in the project of modernism,” explains Walker.⁶² Hence, Walker’s silhouettes are both beautifully attractive and shockingly repulsive.

11
 (Previous spread)
 Detail of Kara Walker,
*Endless Conundrum,
 An African Anonymous
 Adventuress*, 2001.
 Cut paper, 180 × 420 in.
 (457.2 × 1066.8 cm).
 Walker Art Center,
 Minneapolis.

Another revealing case study for modernist appropriations of veiled racialized fantasies behind silhouette aesthetics is the design philosophy of Apple, recently put on display in Jonathan Ive's design concepts in the exhibition *Stylectral* (2012) on the history of electro-design at the Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe Hamburg. This exhibition and the catalogue *Apple Design* refrain from investigating the link between physical products and the use of silhouettes in their marketing campaigns.⁶³ The iPod and the distribution of digital music files have revolutionized the way we listen to music as few other inventions since the advent of broadcasting technology in the 1920s. A crucial element in generating consumer interest in and desire to switch to digital portable playback devices and earphones drew on visual tropes that date back to ancient Chinese shadow plays. The second wave of iPod advertisements from 2003 relied on a unified, distinct campaign of silhouettes in front of brightly colored monochromatic backgrounds. The silhouettes suggest highly kinetic energy captured in dance modes. While the silhouette bodies are black, the product on display is rendered in white with a distinct emphasis on the white earphones and cables supplied by Apple. The advertisement campaign proved to be highly successful on a global scale. One might argue that what we see is a translation of pop art elements into the realm of advertisement. However, the use of silhouettes and their function within popular entertainment challenges cultural critics to ask about the desires associated with the black silhouette bodies on display. The images of the Apple commercial tap into the visual rhetoric of silhouettes to activate both conscious and unconscious associations and perhaps hidden desires associated with black silhouette bodies in motion.

In our increasingly connected world of digital information, instant dissemination, and potential manipulation of images, we can better understand the persuasive function of silhouettes in the field of advertisement by mapping, tracing, and critically evaluating response patterns to silhouettes. In the quest for an instantly recognizable and appealing visual rhetoric, silhouettes can help open up new forms of self-empowerment and de-hierarchization. Silhouette aesthetics have been particularly attractive not only for Americans but also for people outside the United States since silhouettes can express remarkably well defiant subcultural values like antiauthoritarianism, informality, immediate corporeal experience, and instant gratification. Silhouettes continue to inform a visual rhetoric intrinsically tied to the African historical experience as exemplified by the example of Kara Walker's

use of silhouettes as a critical weapon to expose racism and racialized fantasies of complicity. While the racially codified visual rhetoric continues to be influential and persuasive, other forms of silhouette usages are also visible. Silhouettes have informed the pop art revolution of the 1960s, with Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein at the forefront. Street art and graffiti often employ silhouettes to draw attention to specific issues important to local communities. Hollywood films, television series, music videos, and comics regularly employ silhouette aesthetics for a specific emotional or dramatic effect. Hence, the encounter of silhouettes in our modern-day media environment is best understood as a palimpsest situation.

Conclusions

My analysis of recodification of silhouettes before, during, and after the Harlem Renaissance turns to inter pictorial readings in order to trace clusters of visual communication practices. My reading reveals a veiled racialized discourse that forms an integral part of the novel visual rhetoric in the 1920s. This discourse continues to inform silhouette aesthetics. For example, the transnational silhouettes of the Apple iWorld both fulfill and exploit the promise of fusing art and life by projecting oneself into the narrative of expressive dancing to hip-hop songs such as “Hey Mama” by the Black Eyed Peas, the song that accompanied the first silhouette advertisement for the iPod in October 2003. In comparing the visual repertoire of silhouettes in European and American contexts, with a particular focus on circulation, reedification, and appropriation, the code of communication often relies on racial stereotypes. Following an aesthetics agenda of “amplification through simplification,”⁶⁴ silhouettes enable viewers to activate their own fantasies of “the black body” in modernist environments. At the same time, silhouettes trigger desires of transgression, of entering into a world that promises adventure, recognition, and seemingly unrestrained self-expression — themes that artists explored during the Harlem Renaissance with their new visual rhetoric. In the age of globalization, the iPod silhouette campaign by Apple inaugurated an aesthetic response to silhouettes that seemed to suggest that by listening to the new digital MP3 music format and using the musical device, you, too, could “become black.”

1 Richard Powell describes the term “Harlem Renaissance” as an “accurate yet elastic description of the levels and range of black creativity in the 1920s.” However, he points out that it hardly allows for the recognition of influential artists beyond the agency of African American creative activity. For the analysis of the visual rhetoric of the Harlem Renaissance, I would like to also draw attention to the work of European and Mexican artists in order to go beyond the familiar narratives of the Harlem Renaissance where we usually find references to the photographer James Van Der Zee, the African American painter Aaron Douglas, and the works of Archibald J. Motley Jr., Palmer Hayden, and Jacob Lawrence (namely, his *The Migration of the Negro* [1940–1941]). These African American artists shaped, in the words of Erika Doss, “a modern visual art that accommodated ethnocentric perspectives.” Powell, *Black Art: A Cultural History*, 2nd ed. (London: Thames & Hudson, 2002), 41; Doss, *Twentieth-Century American Art* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002), 93. See also Emily Bernard, “The Renaissance and the Vogue,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Harlem Renaissance*, ed. George Hutchinson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 28–40; Henry Louis Gates Jr., “Harlem on Our Minds,” *Critical Inquiry* 24, 1 (1997): 1–12; Patricia Hills, *Painting Harlem Modern: The Art of Jacob Lawrence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009); and Jeffrey O. G. Ogbar, *The Harlem Renaissance Revisited: Politics, Arts, and Letters* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010).

2 I follow Winfried Fluck’s argument that the specific multiethnic and multicultural composition of US audiences formed the basis for the Americanization of modern culture. See Winfried Fluck, “The Americanization of Modern Culture: A Cultural History of the Popular Media,” in *Romance with America? Essays on Culture, Literature, and American Studies*, ed. Laura Bieger and Johannes Voelz (Heidelberg, Ger.: Winter, 2009), 239–69.

3 This essay focuses for the most part on the first half of the twentieth century and is part of a larger research project on silhouettes and visual communication in the transatlantic sphere.

4 Udo Hebel, “American’ Pictures and (Trans) National Iconographies: Mapping Interpictorial Clusters in American Studies,” in *American Studies Today: New Research Agendas*, ed. Winfried Fluck, Erik Redling, Sabine Sielke, and Hubert Zapf (Heidelberg, Ger.: Winter, 2014), 401–32.

5 I agree with Stephen Greenblatt that there is “no going back to the fantasy that once upon a time there were settled, coherent, and perfectly integrated national or ethnic communities” that produced a specific cultural narrative. Instead, media circulations are at the heart of silhouette aesthetics, which undermine notions of fixity and stability of cultures. I focus on the contact zones “where cultural goods are exchanged.” Greenblatt, *Cultural Mobility: A Manifesto* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 2, 251.

6 Most research on silhouettes, such as Emma Rutherford’s richly illustrated catalog entitled *Silhouette: The Art of the Shadow* (New York: Rizzoli, 2009), either focuses on the eighteenth-century bourgeois tradition of silhouettes or addresses well-known stereotypes in caricatures of African Americans in the nineteenth century.

7 Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 55.

8 Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), 8; Charles R. Acland, *Residual Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

9 In the German cultural context, the term is sometimes used interchangeably with “Interbildlichkeit,” “Intervisualität,” and “Interikonizität.” See, for example, Margaret R. Rose, *Pictorial Irony, Parody, and Pastiche: Comic Interpictoriality in the Arts of the 19th and 20th Centuries* (Bielefeld, Ger.: Aisthesis Verlag, 2011).

10 Hebel, “American’ Pictures and (Trans)National Iconographies,” 414. As Udo Hebel explains, visual art is always already part of a “network of repertoires and conventions” (*ibid.*, 404). The challenge for American studies is to better understand the cultural matrix that one brings to decoding the frames of reference (in Stuart Hall’s sense) informing the decoding processes.

11 As far as silhouettes are concerned, the concept of interpictoriality needs to be enlarged in order to come to terms with the extreme art of omission in silhouettes and the surplus of interpictorial connections activated in the process of viewing. I offer a radicalization of Erwin Panofsky’s practice of interpictorial readings by arguing that *Bildtheorie*

needs to combine the three stages from the pre-iconographical description of recognizable empirical givens and experiences in the picture under consideration, to the iconographical tracing of representational conventions, motive clusters, and archival repertoires, and, finally, to the iconological interpretative synthesis exploring the possible meaning, significance, and cultural impact of the picture. The act of seeing silhouettes often transcends the visual dimension since it also stimulates an aesthetic transfer based on sounds and music in popular culture. Panofsky, *Perspective as a Symbolic Form* (New York: Zone Books, 1991).

12 E. Nevill Jackson, *The History of Silhouettes* (London: The Connoisseur, 1911), 5.

13 *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. "silhouette," accessed Nov. 13, 2016, <http://www.oed.com.proxy.uchicago.edu/view/Entry/179668?rskey=3b6lxj&result=1>.

14 When I talk about silhouettes and silhouette aesthetics, I do not limit my subject to paper cutting with knives and scissors (or the German expression *Scherenschnitte*). Rather I include (1) the practice of thirteenth-century shadow puppets, which were popular in Turkey and the Middle East before they informed Western culture, such as in magic lantern shows; (2) painted silhouettes on different material such as paper, ivory, plaster, or porcelain; and (3) silhouettes in stop-motion photography with moveable cutout figures and hand-drawn or digital animation. Today, we encounter a palimpsest situation in which older techniques of silhouette are layered and reappear in digital formats on the Internet.

15 Müller described the process in detail in *Anweisung zum Silhouettenzeichnen und zur Kunst sie zu verjüngen nebst einer Einleitung von ihren physiognomischen Nutzen* (Leipzig: Römhild, 1779).

16 "The Silhouette, Ghost of the Modern Photograph, Again a Fad," *New York Tribune*, Oct. 26, 1913, 17.

17 Emma Rutherford speculates that Lavater's ideas were "embraced even more passionately in America than in Europe as the country attempted to define a national identity" while facing the specific challenge of integrating a vast number of immigrants from all parts of Europe and other countries around

the globe. In addition, the issue of slavery loomed large over the project of establishing a new expression of Americanness. Rutherford, *Silhouette*, 188.

18 This aspect of the portability of silhouettes and their physical movements can be productively linked with Jennifer Roberts's thesis that geographical distance inscribed itself "not only on the outsides but also on the insides of pictures." Roberts, *Transporting Visions: The Movement of Images in Early America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 2.

19 Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version," in *Selected Writings*, vol. 3, 1935–1938, trans. Edmund Jephcott, Howard Eiland, and others, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002), 101–33.

20 "The Silhouette, Ghost of the Modern Photograph, Again a Fad," *New York Tribune*, Oct. 26, 1913, 17.

21 Another set of conventions important to understanding the recodification of silhouettes in "Black Manhattan" is the technology of racial profiling practiced by anthropologists. During the Harlem Renaissance, indeed, various, partly opposing racialized discourses appropriated silhouette aesthetics for different purposes. In the field of anthropology, Lavater's theories were recalled with efforts to use silhouettes for racial type studies. In an article from 1928, the anthropologists Ida McLearn, G. M. Morant, and Karl Pearson explained how, through the use of a new technical device, they could create standardized silhouettes based not only on the shadows of actual sitters but also on the rich reservoir of existing photographs. One example is Rudolf Poech's and Johann Weniger's collection of photographs of one hundred black West Africans published by the Viennese Anthropological Society under the title *Physische Anthropologie* in 1927. The complete title reads *Rudolf Poechs Nachlass, Serie A: Physische Anthropologie, Band 1*, with a special title: *Eine morphologisch-anthropologische Studie, durchgeführt an 100 westafrikanischen Negern, als Beitrag zur Anthropologie von Afrika*. McLearn, Morant, and Pearson optically superimposed one hundred silhouettes as a basis to create a single one with contours reflecting average proportions. The authors arrived at the questionable conclusion that

they had “reached a truly typical West African Negro.” In addition, the type silhouettes of the English sitters established the invisible norm from which aberrations were measured, described, and thereby used to stabilize familiar patterns of creating stereotypes through exaggeration: “The prognathism is now still more marked; the whole of the Negro’s lips and chin project, but his chin rises with the under surface of the jaw well above the English, the gulion being situated nearly a centimeter farther forward. The Negro nose is much shorter, and with a much smaller base; it is so rounded at the portion that it protrudes beyond the English, giving the Negro his snub-nose appearance.” McLearn, Morant, and Pearson, “The Importance of Type Silhouette for Racial Characterization on Anthropology,” *Biometrika* 20, 3/4 (1928): 396, 399.

22 Jan Baetens, “Graphic Novels,” in *The Cambridge History of the American Novel*, ed. Leonard Cassuto (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 1138.

23 See, in this context, Peter Kuper, introduction to *Wordless Books: The Original Graphic Novels*, ed. David A. Beronā (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2008), 7–9.

24 In the realm of graphic novels, artists have remediated the techniques of woodcut prints. Consider in particular Frank Miller’s film noir–inspired *Sin City* saga (1991–2000). With a focus on the often-conflicting experience of modern urban life after World War I and the Great Depression, the stark social contrasts, violence, social unrest, and loose sexual codes are translated into stylized silhouettes of what might be called hard-boiled silhouettes. For example, in “Just Another Saturday Night” (Aug. 1997), Miller draws on the early style of wordless novels and woodcut techniques, and the fifteen-page narrative “Silent Night” (Nov. 1995) tells its story exclusively through black-and-white silhouette images. Miller, “Silent Night,” in *“Sin City”: The Frank Miller Library, Set 2* (Milwaukee, WI: Dark Horse, 2006), 6:28–54.

25 “The Silhouette, Ghost of the Modern Photograph, Again a Fad,” *New York Tribune*, Oct. 26, 1913, 17.

26 The aesthetic premises of the Harlem Renaissance are usually traced back to the written word. Many scholars have overlooked the visual contributions by the German immigrant Winold Reiss and the Mexican Miguel Covarrubias to seminal publications

such as *The New Negro: An Interpretation*, ed. Alain Locke (New York: A. and C. Boni, 1925), or the advertisement campaigns of Alfred Knopf, the leading publisher at the time.

27 For an example of the period’s many distorting representations of African Americans as “savage” and “carnal,” see Paul Colin’s lithographs of the caged, half-naked Josephine Baker (1927) for the revue *Le Tumulte Noir* in Paris. Paul Colin, Karen C. C. Dalton, and Henry Louis Gates Jr., *Josephine Baker and La Revue Nègre: Paul Colin’s Lithographs of “Le Tumulte Noir” in Paris, 1927* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1998).

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

29 One might argue that it was this kind of white agency combined with international nonblack artists and a patronizing attitude toward African American painters and illustrators that contributed to pushing the visual narrative of the Harlem Renaissance to the margins in favor of the African American literary body of work.

30 Reiss’s impressive range of creativity, rich work of ethnic portrait paintings, distinctive interior modernist design, and cutting-edge graphic design have been relegated to the margins of American art history. In Germany, he is hardly known at all. Wanda Corn, in *The Great American Thing: Modern Art and National Identity, 1915–1935* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), has speculated that Reiss’s work may indeed embarrass scholars. Caroline Goesser, in *Picturing the New Negro*, has brought attention to Reiss’s groundbreaking illustrations for book covers.

31 See Amy Helene Kirschke, “The Black Burden of Black Womanhood: Aaron Douglas and the ‘Apogée of Beauty,’” *American Studies* 49, 1/2 (Spring/Summer 2008): 100.

32 Winold Reiss, from an unsent letter dated Jan. 28, 1915, found among Reiss’s personal belongings, Reiss Archives. Reiss offers a wealth of visual approaches to express the notion of a naissance or renaissance of African American expression in the arts. The first indication can be gleaned from the design of letters and graphic elements on the cover of *The New Negro*. Some of the shapes, such as the geometrical

triangles and parallel colorful lines, refer to Native American and Mexican folk art. In *The New Negro*, we find what Reiss describes as a type study entitled “Ancestral.” In a veristic portrait style, Reiss depicts a dark-skinned young woman in the foreground, and the background shows a blanket or carpet with folk art elements, including the triangular shapes he used—among many other prints and drawings—effectively on the cover of *The New Negro*.

33 Winold Reiss, quoted in Frank Mehring, ed., *The Mexico Diary: Winold Reiss between Vogue Mexico and Harlem Renaissance*, an illustrated trilingual edition with commentary and musical interpretation (Trier, Ger.: WTV, 2016), 123, 124.

34 It is revealing to use the African American professor of philosophy Alain Locke’s philosophical concepts and the Mexican philosopher and politician José Vasconcelos’s concept of the “Cosmic Race” to contextualize Reiss’s fascination with all things Mexican. Vasconcelos’s groundbreaking outlook on the future of a postracial civilization was published in 1925, the year that also marks the beginning of what is commonly referred to as the “New Negro” movement. Vasconcelos, *The Cosmic Race / La raza cosmica* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).

35 Alain Locke, “The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts,” in Locke, *The New Negro*, 266.

36 Aaron Douglas, quoted in Kirschke, “The Black Burden of Black Womanhood,” 99.

37 See, in this context, Lucy Moore’s *Anything Goes: A Biography of the Roaring Twenties* (London: Atlantic Books, 2010), 58, where she argues that nightclubs in Harlem delivered exotic, erotic, and “primitivist fantasies” to a largely white audience with racist undertones.

38 J. A. Rogers, “Jazz at Home,” in Locke, *The New Negro*, 216.

39 Ibid.

40 Richard J. Powell, *The Blues Aesthetic: Black Culture and Modernism* (Washington, DC: Washington Project of the Arts, 1989). See also Jeffrey Stewart, *To Color America: Portraits by Winold Reiss* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989), 57.

41 The interpretation of dance via silhouettes deviates from the repertoire that German silhouette animation films brought to the United States. The 1920s saw the rise of silhouette films such as Lotte Reiniger’s feature-length silhouette animation of *The Adventures of Prince Achmed* (1923–1926). Here, Reiniger translates stories from the *Arabian Nights* as silhouette animations moving gracefully to the musical soundtrack by Wolfgang Zeller. The narrative and aesthetics are in line with German constructions of Orientalism, which found its literary expressions in Karl May’s travel accounts of the Middle East and in films such as *Die Todeskarawane* (1920, based on May’s 1892 *Von Bagdad nach Stanbul* [From Bagdad to Istanbul]) and *Das Indische Grabmal* (1921) and *Der Tiger von Eschnapur* (1921) (released in the United States as *Mysteries of India, Part I* and *Mysteries of India, II* in 1922). A 1926 article by Hermann G. Scheffauer on the world premiere of *Prince Achmed* in the *New York Times* emphasizes the “innate power of these dark moving figures.” Instead of the term “silhouettes,” the article refers to the expression “shadow film.” Considering the renewed interest in silhouette aesthetics in the Harlem Renaissance and in advertising for African American literature and music, the author implies that the Germanized Orientalism could be easily appropriated for more-contemporary purposes: “At least such technical perfection has been achieved through the simplest mechanical means directed by the trained eye and artistic hand, that the form and medium may be applied not only to fairy themes, but to real and modern subjects.” Scheffauer, “New Shadow Film Enriches the Screen,” *New York Times*, July 18, 1926, SM6.

42 Alain Locke, “More of the Negro in Art,” *Opportunity* 3, 36 (Dec. 1925): 364.

43 Langston Hughes, *The Weary Blues* (New York: Knopf, 1926).

44 For a discussion of Covarrubias’s influence on the Harlem Renaissance, see Deborah Cullen, “The Allure of Harlem: Correlations between Mexicanidad and the New Negro Movements,” in *Nexus New York: Latin/American Artists in the Modern Metropolis*, ed. Cullen (New York: Museo del Barrio; New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 126–51.

45 Ken Gonzales-Day, *Lynching in the West, 1850–1935* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 3.

- 46 Other Expressionist films such as Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau's *Faust* (1926) and Paul Wegener's *Der Golem; Oder, Wie er in die Welt Kam* (1920), as well as Walther Ruttmann's visual experiments, combined shadows and silhouettes in animation sequences.
- 47 Béla Balázs, review of *Nosferatu* in *Der Tag* (Vienna), Mar. 9, 1923, reprinted in Hans Helmut Prinzler, ed., *Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau: Ein Melancholiker des Films* (Berlin: Bertz, 2003), 130.
- 48 James Weldon Johnson, *God's Trombones. Seven Negro Sermons in Verse*, with drawings by Aaron Douglas, and lettering by C. B. Falls (New York: Viking Press, 1927).
- 49 Aaron Douglas, "Aaron Douglas Chats about the Harlem Renaissance," interview with Dr. Leslie M. Collins, in *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader*, ed. David Levering Lewis (New York: Penguin Press, 1994), 123.
- 50 Romare Bearden, "The Negro Artist and Modern Art," *Opportunity* 12, 12 (Dec. 1934), reprinted in Lewis, *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader*, 139.
- 51 Romare Bearden and Harry Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists from 1792 to the Present* (New York: Pantheon, 1993), 128, 133.
- 52 Aaron Douglas, quoted in Richard J. Powell, *Black Art: A Cultural History* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1997), 45.
- 53 Amy Helene Kirschke's analysis of Aaron Douglas's mural artwork in "The Fisk Murals Revealed" emphasizes the "flat style of synthetic Cubism and Matisse" and especially "the work of the European painters Robert Delaunay and Frantisek Kupka and the American Stanton MacDonald Wright." Kirschke, "The Fisk Murals Revealed: Memories of Africa, Hope for the Future," in *Aaron Douglas: African American Modernist*, ed. Susan Earle (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 116.
- 54 Sieglinde Lemke, *Primitivist Modernism: Black Culture and the Origins of Transatlantic Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 69.
- 55 Aaron Douglas, quoted in Robert G. O'Meally, "The Flat Plane, the Jagged Edge: Aaron Douglas's Musical Art," *American Studies* 49, 1/2 (Spring/Summer 2008): 27, 29–30.
- 56 Bearden, "The Negro Artist and Modern Art," 141. Over the course of the second half of the twentieth century, silhouettes have been continually associated with jazz and other African American musical styles such as soul, rhythm and blues, and rap. Examples include Matisse's explicit juncture of poetry and black cutouts published in the 1948 book *JAZZ*; the pop art revolution in the 1960s, with Andy Warhol at the forefront; and, more recently, the street art of Jean-Michel Basquiat and the reductive explorations of graphic art in Keith Haring's particular interest in hip-hop and dance. In the medium of film, silhouettes continue to function as stylized references to African American coolness and African American self-empowerment (often alluding to the aggressive vigilante self-stylizations in the visual culture of the Black Panthers), and as visual markers of the jazz age in the collective memory of popular culture, as we can see in the artwork of Saul Bass and Maurice Binder and the video clips of Beyoncé and others.
- 57 Aaron Douglas, quoted in Powell, *Blues Aesthetic*, 24.
- 58 Kara Walker, quoted in Alexander Alberro, "Kara Walker," *Index* 1, 1 (Feb. 1996): 25. See also Kara Walker, *My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love*, organized by Philippe Vergne, Sander Gilman, Kevin Young, Thomas McEviley, Robert Storr, and Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw (Minneapolis, MN: Hatje Cantz, 2007).
- 59 See the work of scholars such as Philippe Vergne, Sander Gilman, Kevin Young, Thomas McEviley, Robert Storr, and Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw.
- 60 Toni Morrison, "On the Backs of Blacks," *Time Magazine*, Dec. 2, 1993, <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,979736,00.html>.
- 61 The image creates an inter pictorial reference to the graphic artwork Paul Colin produced in Paris when Josephine Baker became a sensation. The *New Yorker* correspondent Janet Flanner described the stunning appearance of Baker when she appeared in the nude at the opening night of *La Revue Nègre* at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in 1925. In a striking contrast, her seemingly absolute blackness in front of a white upper-class audience made her appear like

a classical statue: "She was an unforgettable female ebony statue. A scream of salutation spread through the theater. Whatever happened next was unimportant. The two specific elements had been established and were unforgettable—her magnificent dark body, a new model that to the French proved for the first time that black was beautiful, and the acute response of the white masculine public in the capital of hedonism of all Europe-Paris." Janet Flanner, *Paris Was Yesterday, 1925–1939* (New York: Popular Library, 1972), xx. The description of Baker with the reduced visual information makes her appear like a black silhouette. At the same time, the dark silhouette body gives rise to colonial fantasies of otherness and expressive sexuality. With her dance and stage performance, which evoked, as Clifton Crais and Pamela Scully explain, "an animal in heat," Baker referenced the "Hottentot Venus," a popular trope in Europe for primitivism, sexuality, and the common fascinations with hysteria. Clifton Crais and Pamela Scully, *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus: A Ghost Story and a Biography* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 146.

62 See Kara Walker, *Endless Conundrum, An African Anonymous Adventuress*, Walker Art Center, accessed Sept. 12, 2016, <http://www.walkerart.org/collections/artworks/endless-conundrum-african-anonymous-adventuress>.

63 Sabine Schultze and Ina Grätz, eds., *Apple Design* (Hamburg, Ger.: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2011).

64 Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 30.

