Preoccupied with Haiti

*The Dream of Diaspora in African American Art, 1915–1942*

Krista A. Thompson

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, Haiti was on the mind and in the imagination of many African American artists. A number of black artists and art historians, including William Edouard Scott, Aaron Douglas, and James Porter, made pilgrimages there. Others, such as Jacob Lawrence, Augusta Savage, Albert Alexander Smith, and Beauford Delaney, depicted the island in their work without physically traveling to it. These literal and fictive voyages to Haiti coincided with the U.S. military occupation of the island between 1915 and 1934 and the subsequent American supervision of Haiti’s economy until 1942. What did the muse of Haiti mean for African American artists who created paintings and sculptures of its people and locales at this historic juncture? In an era of growing pan-African awareness—when efforts were being made to link the concerns of the many people of African descent dispersed around the world—what did this black republic, newly recolonized, signify for them?

A look at the work of several of these artists, with a focus on the paintings produced by Scott (frontispiece), who resided in Haiti longer than any of the others, suggests that it was easier to sustain an African diasporic consciousness at a geographic remove. While African American artists based in the United States made Haiti a symbolic rallying point for promoting the unity and uplift of all peoples of African origin during the U.S. occupation, artists who traveled to the island often framed it in other ways. In contrast to their counterparts’ celebratory representations of the Haitian Revolution and its leadership, black American painters who actually ventured to Haiti emphasized the difference between themselves and their contemporary Caribbean subjects. They expressed an almost singular interest in “picturesque scenes” and “native types.”

The direct physical encounter with Haiti frequently awakened African American artists from the “dream” of racial solidarity, as literary scholar Michael Dash has described it, and radically transformed their representations.¹

In his book *The Practice of Diaspora*, literary theorist Brent Hayes Edwards examines the central role that locales outside the United States played in the Harlem Renaissance and in the formation of pan-Africanism or black internationalism. Blacks from the United States, Africa, and the Caribbean, for example, gathered in Paris or crossed paths there during the 1920s and 1930s, building political and cultural links across national boundaries. W. E. B. Du Bois, leader of

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the pan-African conference in Paris in 1919 and organizer of four other congresses, argued that only these kinds of African diasporic alliances could counter the global hegemony of colonialism and imperialism. Edwards, however, calls attention to some of the problems that arose in unity efforts: gaps in the translation of ideas and terminologies between blacks who spoke different languages, “misrecognition” due to lived differences, and difficulties transmuting local racial concerns into a larger, more global diasporic practice. An exploration of artistic encounters in occupied Haiti, shaped by uneven power relations between African American artists and Haitians, can enrich our understanding of the gaps, differences, and commonalities among African diasporic groups.

The Dream of Haiti

A number of scholars have investigated what Haiti meant to African Americans at different points in history. Almost since 1804, when the Haitian Revolution brought an end to slavery and to French colonial rule on the island, knowledge of the Haitian insurgency inspired thought and action in black America. Given the historic African American investment in the ideals of freedom and self-governance that the black republic represented, it is not surprising that U.S. occupation of the island in 1915 elicited strong opposition among black leaders, literary figures, and artists at home. In the 1920s Du Bois and poet James Weldon Johnson became vocal critics of American military actions in Haiti. Johnson, then field secretary for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, was instrumental in mobilizing the U.S. government to send a mission to the island in 1920 to study the social impact of America’s intervention. Through his participation in the delegation and his writings in magazines such as *Crisis* and the *Nation*, he kept the occupation at the forefront of African Americans’ political consciousness.

African American performers and playwrights also rallied around the cause of Haiti. Charles Gilpin and Paul Robeson brought the first self-proclaimed emperor of Haiti, Henri Christophe, to theatrical life in Eugene O’Neill’s play *The Emperor Jones*. The play, performed in 1920 by an all-black cast, was the first major artistic portrayal of the U.S. occupation of Haiti in the United States. In 1932 writer and poet Langston Hughes traveled to Haiti; he would write about his experiences there in his autobiography *Big Sea* (1940). In the movie *Zou Zou* (1934), Josephine Baker performed the role of a caged Haitian songbird. Swinging from the perch of her birdcage, she sang passionately about her “Beloved Haiti.”

Among the African American visual artists who turned to Haiti in their work at this time, Jacob Lawrence is perhaps the best known. In 1937–38 Lawrence,
who lived in Harlem, created his Toussaint L’Ouverture series, named after one of the leaders of the Haitian Revolution. Its forty-one panels tell the story of Haiti’s struggle to become the second republic in the Western hemisphere in his characteristic expressionistic style. In General Toussaint L’Ouverture (fig. 1), the twentieth work in the series, Lawrence rendered the leader in regal profile using flat planes of color. Critic and philosopher Alain Locke praised Lawrence’s technique for capturing so well the tropical atmosphere of the island and the emotion of the revolution. Through Lawrence’s selection of colors and use of dramatic line to convey movement and action, Haiti’s history—from Columbus’s arrival to independence—unfolded for viewers. Lengthy captions (based on the artist’s research at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in Harlem and fictional descriptions, including William Dubois’s 1938 play Haiti) served as a complement to the visual narrative, detailing through text what was abbreviated in the painted form.5

Haiti and its historical past also resonated with other African American artists and their patrons working in the United States. In 1928 the young sculptor Richmond Barthé was commissioned by the Lake County Children’s Home in Gary, Indiana, to make a bust of L’Ouverture (fig. 2). The bust, modeled nearly two decades before the artist would actually travel to Haiti, shows the former ruler with his head held high, dressed in French military attire. W. E. Braxton and Beauford Delaney also captured likenesses of L’Ouverture in a painting and in pencil sketches respectively, while Albert Alexander Smith made an etching. Sculptress Augusta Savage paid homage to Haiti with her small bronze La Citadelle—Freedom, which presented a more allegorical and feminized approach to the subject (fig. 3). Savage’s work portrays a female figure with one arm stretched skyward and a leg uplifted,
as if taking flight. The sculpture, which takes its name from the mountain fortress built by Henri Christophe, also invoked through its title themes of black male leadership and emancipation. In imaging the leadership of Haiti’s popular revolution, Lawrence, Barthé, and Savage not only commemorated the liberty of the Haitian people but also highlighted the freedom dreams embraced by populations across the African diaspora.6

Haiti and its revolutionary past served symbolic purposes within both the domestic landscape of the United States and the growing pan-Africanist movement. First, the African American identification with Haiti stemmed in part from artists and political pundits seeing their own national racial dramas played out in another setting. For some U.S. blacks, the occupation seemed like an externalized manifestation of the politics of white racism at home. Historian Mary Renda points out that Johnson, after he went to Haiti in 1920, increasingly saw events on the island as intimately linked to the domestic racism he was determined to challenge. The same political rationalizations that fueled a long history of racism in the United States governed the official logic for the occupation of Haiti—that blacks, being racially inferior, were incapable of governing themselves. In other words, as Michael Dash argues, black Americans and Haitians were similarly “racially and culturally defined within a framework of biological determinism and moral disapproval,” and this rhetoric served to justify white America’s prejudicial treatment of both groups.7

That African American interest in Haiti was connected to concerns about racism on the home front is supported by historian Brenda Plummer’s findings; she concludes that criticism of the occupation was voiced only after racial conflicts within the United States reached their height in the “Bloody Summers” of 1918–19, when riots broke out in at least twenty-three U.S. cities.8 Before these conflicts, even critics of the American takeover in Haiti like Johnson had not publicly expressed their opposition.

The island also became a central focus of an increasingly well-organized pan-African movement. For these internationalists, Haiti’s revolutionary past served as a powerful means through which blacks throughout the African diaspora could reinscribe and, most importantly, imagine a self-determined end to their contemporary racial and colonial predicaments. The U.S. occupation flew in the face of Haiti as a symbol of black possibility, achievement, nationhood, and self-governance. As Dash has said, African Americans and people of African descent in the Americas were “dreaming the same dream” through Haiti’s past; they were direct diasporic heirs to the ideals embodied in the revolution. Johnson clearly articulated this investment in seeing Haiti decolonized in his 1920 essay “The Truth about Haiti,” declaring, “The colored people of the United States should be interested in seeing that this [U.S. withdrawal] is done, for Haiti is the one best chance that the Negro has in the world to prove that he is capable of the highest self-government.” For leaders seeking black uplift, Haiti became a key example of “racial geist, invoked by many black intellectuals of the New Negro Movement.”9

African American artists who focused exclusively on Haiti’s revolution and its leaders in their work encouraged black audiences at home to imagine themselves and their possibilities through this past. This is evident in Lawrence’s comments on his LOuverture series: “I didn’t do it just as a historical thing, but because I believe these things tie up with the Negro today. We don’t have physical slavery, but an economic slavery. If these people [black slaves in Haiti], who were so much worse off than the people today, could conquer their slavery, we certainly can do the same thing.” His statement suggests that he too wished to influence his contemporaries through visualizations of
Haiti’s revolutionary history. This “thematic volleying” between the revolutionary moment in Haiti and contemporary black America, as art historian Richard Powell has described it, was not lost on African American audiences. When the L’Ouverture series was unveiled in Baltimore in 1939, many commentators remarked on the “clear and unapologetic allusions to black agency,” to quote Powell, in the work. Lawrence’s own admonishments about his series and its interpretation suggest that allusions to the Haitian Revolution in art came to signify the revolutionary potential of all African diasporic populations. Nonetheless, the artist also spoke of the limits of Haiti’s violent revolution as a model for black America. “Today we can’t go about it in the same way,” he said. “Any leadership would have to be the type of [abolitionist] Frederick Douglass."

Four block prints by Aaron Douglas, one of the most visible artists within the Harlem Renaissance, point further to the complexity of African American identification with Haiti. Douglas was inspired by O’Neill’s play to create his Emperor Jones series. His images accompanied an article on the production published in Theatre Arts Monthly in 1926; they also illustrated writings on black theater in Opportunity magazine in 1928. The play and Douglas’s prints, based on the legend of Henri Christophe and Guillaume Sam (Haiti’s ruler before the U.S. occupation), chronicled the exploits of a fictional African American character named Brutus Jones, who through deception ascended to the throne in Haiti. One of Douglas’s block prints (fig. 4) portrays Jones dressed in the accoutrements of his newfound authority. Through the compression of space, Douglas depicts him as precariously balanced on his throne, forecasting his fall from power. In other works in the series, the artist used his signature silhouetted, angular style to document the emperor’s eventual demise. In the play, a local uprising ultimately causes Jones to flee for his life on a journey haunted by the victims of his past misdeeds, a moment Douglas captures in another print (fig. 5).

The prints and play offered a complicated commentary on the U.S. occupation, particularly for black audiences. Brutus Jones, an American imposter, had obvious correlations with the
nation’s military takeover of the island. Significantly, O’Neill pointedly described this embodiment of the U.S. presence in Haiti as “a full-blooded Negro.” Thus, in *The Emperor Jones* African Americans confronted a black character playing the role of colonizer. Renda contends that O’Neill, a white playwright, likely made Jones’s character black in an attempt to distance himself (and white audiences) from the military actions in Haiti. More fundamentally, O’Neill’s racial ventriloquism also may have been a means of stabilizing some of the definitions of self and other, colonizer and colonized, that the occupation had thrown into question. In the United States, the numerous media accounts and popular books about white soldiers who had “gone native” while serving in Haiti had blurred these distinctions.12

If O’Neill made the symbol of U.S. colonization “a full-blooded Negro” to put distance between the U.S. military in Haiti and the colonized, his choice took away the luxury of separation for many African American viewers. At a time when many of them were renouncing the actions of the United States and viewing Haitians as diasporic allies in the war against white domination, *The Emperor Jones* pit an African American against Haitians. The protagonist forced an uncomfortable recognition for some U.S. blacks of the Americaness of their identity, despite pan-African allegiances. If colonial encounters are governed in part by the desire to maintain boundaries between self and other, Brutus Jones vexed or collapsed these distinctions for many African Americans. Viewing the exploits of Brutus Jones on stage or in print, they experienced the colonial encounter both as arbitrator and victim. At the very moment Haiti mobilized “racial geist” across the boundaries of nation, the nature of the occupation threw into relief the profound differences, ambivalences, and ambiguities within the experience of diaspora.

**Dreaming with Your Eyes Open**

William E. Scott (1884–1964; fig. 6) was one of the first African American artists to travel to Haiti during the occupation. In 1931 Scott, a midwesterner who had attended the School of the Chicago Art Institute and spent two years studying art in France, received a Julius Rosenwald fellowship to go to the French-speaking Caribbean island. His experience abroad and his fluency in the French language likely influenced his decision to work in Haiti. The award allowed him to spend more than a year in Port-au-Prince, where he set up a studio. He produced, by his own estimation, 144 oil paintings, watercolors, and pencil sketches during his trip, a body of work he called “the best I have ever done.”13

Traveling to the island caused Scott and other artists who followed his path to meditate further on the distance between their positions as African Americans and the ideal of African diasporic alliances to Haiti. Unlike the artists who traveled to Haiti only in their imaginations—having gleaned information about the island and its revolutionary history from theatrical productions or library books (as Lawrence did)—they made art that reflected their firsthand observations.

When asked to describe why he traveled to Haiti, Scott stated that he wanted to study “the types, customs and culture of the self-governing negroes who (although distinctly influenced by the French and Spanish) have retained much of their African beliefs, customs and superstitions.” Early on, he talked of seeking out (and setting up stations in) parts of the island where he felt “the natives here have changed but very little from the time their forefathers were brought from Africa.”14 His professed interest in tracing a resilient Africanness may have been a by-product of the growing interest in pan-Africanism. Haiti was, of course, not Africa. But he tried to access Africa to some degree through this
closer geographical substitute—to testify precisely to the presence and survival of African cultural forms in the Americas. Despite this attraction, the final inventory of his artistic production on the island suggests that he ultimately adopted visual priorities other than self-governance or traces of Africa—priorities prompted by his experiences in Haiti. In a letter to the Rosenwald Fund, Scott listed the following works, primarily representations of Haitians going about their daily work, leisure, or religious activities and depictions of their “customs”:

70 Water colour and pencil sketches of market figures; old buildings, and pack donkeys and details for Mural Work.
20 Oil paintings size 8 by 10, landscape backgrounds with small action figures in fore-ground.
22 Oil paintings 12 by 16 of Types about the wharf; market place and fishing boats including study of costumes implements and home life.
18 Oil portrait [sic] 18 by 22 of distinct types.
12 Oil paintings 18 by 22 moonlight peasant dances, roadside scenes of peasants carrying vegetables to market, and general story telling pictures of native peasant life.
1 Mural Sketch. Christophe builds Citadel [sic]
1 Mural sketch Toussant [sic] leads slaves to victory
5 Oil Paintings 30 by 40 peasant home life. . .
2 Oil paintings of more educated Haitian types.¹⁵

In his art and in his letters to the foundation during his trip, Scott expressed a fascination with “Haitian types,” particularly occupational types (“Types about the wharf; market place and fishing boats”). In the tradition of costumbrista representations, he created visual synopses of the appearance, labor activities, and work environment of Haiti’s peasant class. He found the markets to be particularly fertile ground for his project because, as he explained in a letter, “almost every type [of Haitian] is there.” Scott frequently ventured there with sketch pad in hand to “steal little pencil sketches” of market women and would later “work them up” into paintings in his studio. The Turkey Market, also called The Haitian Turkey Vendor (see frontispiece), is an example of his occupational taxonomy. It seems a pastiche of visual details that represent not a specific turkey vendor but a generalized type. The market woman to the right is the commanding presence in the composition. While her face seems distinctive and perhaps drawn directly from Scott’s on-site sketches, the background details appear “worked up.” The figures at the far left, the other traders, appear to be included to add visual texture to the representation of the turkey vendor—to situate her type. The turkeys on her head and in her arms add descriptive details. The sun-washed wall and the ironwork provide the final touches. Scott spoke of the importance of situating each type against a representative backdrop. It was imperative, he wrote, “[i]n each portrait . . . to put in a back-ground, the type of which would be found
with that type of head.” The women, the fowl, and the outdoor setting all function as visual accessories in the artist’s portrayal of the turkey vendor type.

A similar visual strategy seems to operate in Cockfight (fig. 7), which makes reference to what Scott described as a popular Sunday afternoon sport among Haiti’s peasant class. A barefoot man in tattered clothes is centrally positioned in this painting; he is responsible for rubbing down the birds between rounds.

7 William E. Scott, Cockfight, n.d. Oil on wood panel, 22 x 18 in. Collection of Byron and Frances Minor
Like the female turkey vendor, he stands with the subject of his work, a rooster, in hand. A group of other men, huddled like the three women in *Turkey Vendor*, occupy the left background, seemingly preoccupied with an ongoing match. While the title refers to the fight, the painting’s visual commitment is to occupational type. The rest of the image serves as a pictorial backdrop for the activity of the male worker.

Scott’s interests are further evident in the works he classified “as portraits of distinct types,” a series of fifty half-length images of Haitian peasants. In *Kenskoff*, *Haiti* (fig. 8), for example, Scott depicted a dark-skinned black man with gray hair. While the man’s three-quarter pose and the darkened lower part of the canvas suggest a studio environment, the top of the work situates the figure outdoors against a sunstruck building surrounded by sheep. Perhaps the man, following the visual logic of *Turkey Vendor* or *Cockfight*, worked with animals occupationally. Again Scott located the sitter against “a backdrop that would be found with type of head.” By reproducing this half-length format, the artist set out to create a Haitian archive of “50 distinct Negro types, a collection to be preserved permanently for historic value.”

The practice of representing racial typologies had been a part of artistic production since the early eighteenth century, especially in the Americas, where mixed races threatened to destabilize racial definitions and hierarchies. *Casta* paintings in Mexico, which attempted to visualize, hierarchize, and order racial mixture, are perhaps most indicative of these early imperatives to represent an archive of New World types. In addition to categorizing racial types, *casta* painters (especially in the mid-eighteenth century) were concerned with visualizing status (*calidad*) and lineage (*raza*) through details of dress, trade, and location. In the mid- to late nineteenth century, the availability of photography and the development of pseudoscientific practices like phrenology systematized the representation and classification of racial difference. Proponents of phrenology, most notably Francis Galton in Britain, used the camera to create visual archives of types from around the world. Unlike *casta* painters, photographers typically decontextualized native subjects by placing them against blank backgrounds or grids, and captured them in profile and frontal views. By amassing a collection of these individual photographs, phrenologists hoped to distill composite types and hierarchize them on a pictorial evolutionary scale.
Scott's desire to create a collection of “Negro types” for “historic value” must also be placed, however, in the context of a number of contemporaneous attempts to appropriate the visual language of phrenology for “more positive” images of Negro types. W. E. B. Du Bois, for example, commissioned albums of “photographs of typical Negro faces” for the Paris Universal Exposition in 1900 (figs. 9, 10). These albums featured unnamed middle-class and mixed-race African Americans. In parts of the albums he organized profile and frontal views of blacks of all complexions, creating a collection that mirrored the visual conventions of phrenologists. By including mixed-race light-skinned blacks, however, Du Bois perhaps aimed to disrupt the visual imagining of racial typologies. Archibald Motley, one of Scott’s peers in Chicago, was also concerned with painting racial types. In the 1920s and 1930s Motley created what he called his octoroon and mulatto paintings of Chicago’s black middle classes in which he paid careful attention to the skin color, physiognomy, and domestic setting of his sitters. A year before Scott’s trip to Haiti, Motley made a series of types focusing on people of French Caribbean descent. In addition, Austrian artist Winold Reiss, whose representations illustrated Alain Locke’s book *The New Negro*, had delineated dignified Negro types in his drawings. It is no coincidence that Scott’s planned work in Haiti was favorably compared to Reiss’s representations in one recommendation letter supporting his application for the Rosenwald fellowship. While Du Bois, Motley, and to a lesser extent Reiss may have wanted to create representations of blacks that “hardly square[d] with conventional American ideas,” to quote Du Bois, their replication of the visual language (and visualization) of racial types offered little challenge to the epistemological frameworks that codified racial difference.  

In the final analysis, Scott appears to have borrowed from, yet ultimately parted ways with, the visual typecasting evident in *casta* paintings, scientific photographs, and African American renderings of racial type. Most notably, he said he wanted to create “portraits of racial types.” The word “portraits” typically denotes the representation of individuals and seems at odds with the notion of picturing general types. Several characteristics of Scott’s work delineate the subtle distinction the artist may have sought to make between “types” and “portraits of types.” Scott individualized his sitters by portraying them in a three-quarter pose, a view associated more with European or Anglo-American bourgeois portraiture than with phrenological or ethnographic conventions. His attention to setting located his subjects within the context of Haiti rather than against a blank ethnographic background. In contrast to the obsession with the visualization of mixed race evident in *casta* paintings and African American portrayals of the black middle class, Scott’s visual archive documented the appearance, occupation, social station, and “Africanness” of Haiti’s peasant class. That only two of his 144 paintings focused on “more educated
Haitians,” as Scott described the upper class, seems to reflect his particular interest in “folk” types.21

Scott’s careful delineation and formulation of an archive of Haitian types, based in part on observation and imagination, may have complicated his ability to see his Haitian subjects as individuals and as part of an extended African diasporic community. This is evident in his titles’ avoidance of personal names. Even though Scott once described one of his models in a letter as a former “captain in the Army and about 82 years old, he is a beggar now but he can tell some interesting tales about Haiti’s history,” for example, traces of the sitter’s personhood and history were eradicated in the title *The Old Man.*22 On other occasions, representations of a single person carried the name of a town or city in Haiti, such as the painting of the elderly Haitian man entitled *Kenskoff, Haiti,* a district on the outskirts of Port-au-Prince (see fig. 8). Scott’s stated interest in creating portraits as types points to some of the complexities and paradoxes surrounding his approach to Haiti and the island’s inhabitants. Although pan-African discourses prevalent in the United States stressed homologies between African diasporic cultures, his mission to record “types of Haitian Negroes” erected boundaries between him and his Haitian sitters. One could argue that rather than identifying with and valorizing Haitian subject matter, he objectified these sitters in his paintings and visual taxonomy.

Scott’s project also took place within an environment of unequal power relationships between the American painter and his Caribbean sitters. The language he used to characterize the process of acquiring subjects for his pictures points to these dynamics: he wrote about the difficulty of “hunting through the mountains for types and getting them to pose for me.” In addition to notions of the imbalanced relations between pursuer and prey, his hunting analogy summoned up the rhetoric of adventure common to colonial and travelers’ narratives of experiences in foreign lands. “It has been one tough job,” Scott once explained with regard to finding models, “but a very interesting one and the experiences I have had have been almost ‘the kind you read about.’” In the context of the American occupation, Scott’s comment may have referred to the numerous popular adventures of U.S. soldiers in Haiti. Indeed, in the spirit of these narratives, Scott also professed to have gone native. He claimed at one point to have undergone initiation at a Vodun ceremony in order to persuade Haitians to pose for him: “I got on exceedingly well with the people to such an extent that I was initiated into one of their voodoo [sic] dances. Hav’nt had any more trouble getting models from that neighborhood.” Yet his descriptions of “stealing sketches” (without permission) and hunting types suggest the reluctance of many Haitians to be visually captured. Scott’s tale of going native, in essence becoming the other, is particularly interesting given the boundaries he erected between himself and Haitians in his representations of native types. These experiences of kinship and cultural immersion, simultaneous with his artistic process of distancing and categorizing Haitians, underscored the painter’s ambivalent relationship to Haiti.23

Given the popularity of the Haitian Revolution as a subject for African American artists working in the United States, it is curious that Scott created only two images pertaining to Haiti’s history: sketches entitled *Christophe Builds the Citadel* and *Toussaint Leads the Slaves to Victory.* If he carried out the plans he discussed in a letter to his sponsor, Scott likely produced the latter sketch on the plantation site where Toussaint had been a slave.24 Later he turned it into an oil painting (fig. 11).

In the painting, Scott depicted Toussaint charging forward with arm
raised, much like the image of Liberty in French artist Eugène Delacroix’s well-known *Liberty Leading the People, July 28, 1830* (an allegory of the July Revolution in France), to represent Toussaint’s earlier fight for Haitian liberation from France. Here the buildings of Delacroix’s cityscape are replaced by monuments of the tropical landscape, coconut trees and sugarcans. The sugarcane fields from which Toussaint triumphantly emerges had been the site of black enslavement. In foregrounding the general, the painting seems in line with many African American depictions of the Haitian Revolution that portray its leaders.

**Scott’s Work in the “Haitian Mind”**

Scott had two exhibitions in Haiti, which made his representations of peasant scenes and types publicly accessible and subject to local commentary. Haitian President Sténio Vincent invited the artist to exhibit his paintings in 1931. The president’s brother Benjamin Vincent, formerly the Haitian consul in New York, considered the “peintre noir” (as local papers described Scott) his guest and secured the Military Club in Port-au-Prince, “the oldest and most aristocratic club in Haiti,” for the show. Scott was justifiably nervous about how Haiti’s (U.S.-backed) leadership and upper classes, the group conspicuously absent from his paintings, would receive his portrayals of the peasant class. The artist confided in a letter to his sponsor, “I was doubtful at first as to how it [the art display] would be accepted.” He recognized that his works would be “the first exhibit of paintings of local types and scenes that have ever been held in Haiti.”

Scott’s exhibition, much to his surprise, was warmly received and drew between two hundred and four hundred viewers a day to the elite club. Due to the favorable reception, a second exhibition opened in a local school. The artist marveled at the interest in and patronage of his work, saying, “I hardly thought the upper classes would care to have pictures of their lower class in their homes. It simply shows how little a foreigner understands the Haitian mind.” The local interest may have related to the indigenist art movement that started in Haiti in the 1920s. The indigenists—led by Haiti’s creole elite—sought to preserve, define, and indeed create the unique qualities of Haitian culture in the face of the U.S. occupation. In the 1930s visual artists associated with this primarily literary movement (following the lead of indigenist poets and writers) started to look at the cultural value of the peasant class. Like national art movements in other parts of the Americas, the cultural expressions of “the folk” would become the source material for a national culture developed by the elite. Scott’s “first exhibition of local types” would, therefore, resonate with the aims of the nascent visual arts community. Petion Savain, a leading indigenist writer and artist, reportedly started to accompany Scott on his sojourns throughout Port-au-Prince after the show. The American artist’s peasant types would, ironically, provide a visual template for the development of an art movement catalyzed by opposition to U.S. occupation.

While Scott’s exhibition at the club apparently garnered unexpected patronage from some Haitians, the artist’s focus on peasants and lack of interest in the island’s revolutionary past did spark some criticism. In a letter to Scott written on presidential stationery and dated September 29, 1931, the artist’s choice of subject matter was pointedly questioned:

Why, dear Mr. Scott, do you not decide to settle down to work at a higher scope? Doesn’t our history make you want to produce more powerful subjects? Our colonial miseries, our fight for liberty and independence, our efforts, very much misunderstood,
toward intellectual development, moral and economic, for our dear country, isn’t there something here for you to take up your paint brush and make your own?

Although the signature is illegible, the stationery suggests that President Vincent authored these words. Written during the occupation, the reference to Haiti’s battle against colonial miseries was likely not only a historical one but also an allusion to the current conflict. While African American artists in the United States frequently depicted the Haitian Revolution to stimulate contemporary pan-African and anticolonial alliances, this writer searched in vain to find such diasporic connections in the work by Scott, an artist who claimed to have visited the very plantation where Toussaint once worked as a slave. In fact, the questions posed to the “peintre noir” addressed precisely the absence of any homologies with Haiti and its past—the failure to make the lessons of Haiti “his own.”

It seems paradoxical that works inspired by the revolution and exhibited at a geographic distance (such as Lawrence’s Toussaint L’Ouverture series) could more successfully evoke racial communitas—a sense of solidarity and equality—for black Americans and Haitian officials than the work of an artist resident in Haiti. If Scott’s trip lessened the physical distance between members of African diasporic groups, it seems to have simultaneously widened the gap of the imagined pan-African community. The author of the letter recognized this disconnect.

Despite Scott’s lack of interest in Haiti’s “fight for liberty and independence,” attempts have been made in art-historical scholarship to read his work as invested in its political history. Curator Harriet Warkel, for instance, suggested that The Citadel, Haiti (fig. 12) be interpreted as a “symbol of independence and a reminder of the country’s past.” In the painting Scott depicts the Citadel at the top of a mountain range with figures (perhaps wharf workers) rendered through broad brushstrokes of color at lower right.

Although Scott called attention to the Citadel in the painting’s title, the huge building is marginalized in the work. Scott classified the image in his list to the Rosenwald Fund as a “landscape painting with action figures,” not as one of his historical paintings. The canvas recalls French impressionist Paul Cézanne’s representations of Mont Sainte-Victoire in the south of France more than a symbol of Haitian independence. The artist remained silent on the issue of American colonialism in both his correspondence and paintings. His artistic gaze never rested on the U.S. presence on the island.

A number of literary and art-theory scholars, such as Mary Louise Pratt in Imperial Eyes and W. J. T. Mitchell in Landscape and Power, have pointed out that travelers and colonists often erase the presence of the colonizer in their depictions of place. Art historian Linda Nochlin has agreed that so-called picturesque representations created under the circumstances of imperialism and colonization typically have one abiding feature: the colonial or touristic presence within the landscape is never visualized; it is a “presence that is always an absence.” Nochlin noted that such pictures seldom convey a sense of history but instead seek to preserve through representation the qualities of native life that are being transformed through colonial contact. In fact, one of Scott’s supporters, Mary Brady, saw his archive of types as doing the work of preservation in a radically changing, American-occupied Haitian society. Scott’s aim, she said, was to “paint some of the fast disappearing types of Negro life in one of the islands of the Carribean [sic].”

This is not to suggest that Scott was blindly following in the visual path of colonizers. Rather, these theories complicate any assertion that Scott’s painting of the Citadel or any other Haitian scene should be seen as statements about or against the occupation.
Applying the analysis of colonial representations in other geographic contexts to African American artists in occupied Haiti also has its limits, precisely because African American identification with the colonizing power of the United States was fraught with tensions. This said, the analyses of Pratt, Mitchell, and Nochlin may be useful here. Some of the visual devices Scott employed in Haiti—his classification of the local population into types and organization of the island into picturesque views—have been variously described by scholars as strategies for ordering difference, for placing the foreign and the unknown within familiar and comprehensible frameworks. Did the process of viewing or considering foreign locales as “other,” common to many travelers, transform Scott’s vision of the island, complicating diasporic identification with occupied Haiti? Is there an irresolvable relationship between filtering a landscape through the distancing lens of the traveler’s gaze (or imperial eye), and viewing and conceptualizing it as part of the framework of diasporic sameness? 

The Visual Disconnect

The connection, or disconnection, as the case may be, between visuality (how one experiences the world visually) and pan-Africanist identification is evident in the artwork and writings of other African Americans who traveled to Haiti. Significantly, even James Weldon Johnson, the most ardent opponent of U.S. occupation and advocate of African American and Haitian alliances, broke with his rhetoric of shared diasporic origins in his vivid writings about Haiti’s landscape and its inhabitants after he traveled there in 1920. Johnson described at length, for example, how picturesque and aesthetically pleasing he found the island’s population. He was visually seduced by Haitian market women and wrote a detailed description of their appearance “as they file along the country roads by scores and by hundreds on their way to town markets with white or colored turbanned heads, gold-loop-ringed ears, they stride along straight and lithe, almost haughtily, carrying themselves like so many Queens of Sheba.” More generally, Johnson concluded that Haiti’s peasant communities provided “an aesthetic touch” to the landscape, which made them “more justifiable than the great slums of civilization’s centers—London or New York which were totally without aesthetic redemption.” Although Johnson deemed the market economy in which they participated inefficient, Haiti’s poor were aesthetically redeemed, as Mary Renda put it, by “their value as objects to be admired. . . . Their worth resided, in part, in the visual pleasure they offered to the visitor.” These picturesque interludes interspersed through Johnson’s otherwise critical engagement with stereotypes of Haiti seem a textual counterpart to Scott’s visual snapshots of Haiti.31

Johnson’s visual appraisals are significant because they are not in keeping with his larger project of mobilizing African American support for and identification with Haiti. That even Johnson would change his rhetoric after seeing the island firsthand, that his analytical blind spot came at a moment of aesthetic contemplation, lends credence to the idea that actually seeing Haiti led to the (at least temporary) suspension of any preordained pan-Africanist vision of the country. This is reminiscent of earlier adventurers’ experiences in the island. Historian Stephen Greenblatt has recounted how many early travelers’ sense of “wonder” at the “radical difference” of the New World led them to suspend their own beliefs, expectations, and cultural frameworks. Wonder, he said, “resists recuperation, containment, ideological incorporation.”32 What African Americans saw in the marvelous new world of Haiti resisted or exceeded its containment within pan-Africanist ideologies, resisted the diasporic uses of the symbol of Haiti.

The seemingly incompatible agendas of African diasporic identification and the representation of the picturesque are also evident in the work of Aaron Douglas (fig. 13) when he visited Haiti in 1938 as another recipient of the Julius Rosenwald fellowship. In his grant application, Douglas stated that he hoped his tenure there would allow him to “record on canvas . . . people of all classes with an eye to revealing racial, social and economic patterns; and pictures of scenes and landmarks, old and new.”33 As an artist who had a decade earlier devoted part of his oeuvre to the fictional Emperor Jones, Douglas produced work on the island that opens itself to further examination of how the process of physical travel transformed the vision of Haiti for African American artists.

While Douglas’s paintings, murals, and prints devoted to various “aspects of Negro life” (the title of his 1934 murals for the New York Public Library) in the United States have been widely discussed, comparatively little is known about his artistic production in Haiti. The artist did hold, by his own account, two exhibitions
of his Haitian work on the island, one at the Cercle Port au Princien, a club in Port-au-Prince, and another that he simply described as an “informal exhibition.” Upon his return, Douglas showed the works from the club exhibition at the ACA Gallery in New York in April 1939. A description of Douglas’s Haitian paintings in the ACA exhibition pamphlet gives some sense of the range and focus of his artistic production there. The small catalogue characterized the “fruit of Mr. Douglas’ travels” as “Haitian scenes and portraits of Negro types.” The titles of the twelve paintings included in the show reveal more specific details of who and what Douglas depicted in Haiti: Harbor Port au Prince, Champs de Mars, Courtyard, Ex-slave, Going to Market, Haitian Cathedral Scene, Kenskoff, Mango Tree, Mountains in Haiti, Shadowed Courtyard, The Street Urchin, and Waterfront Park. The half-length painting of a young boy, The Street Urchin (fig. 14), is reproduced in the exhibition catalogue, providing an example of the style in which his Haiti-inspired paintings were executed. The painting portrays the youth sitting in a three-quarter pose that recalls Scott’s Kenskoff. The sitter assumes a deliberate posture in front of the artist, as if the painter had instructed him to occupy the chair and remove his hat. Although the title of the work refers to the boy’s occupation (or lack thereof), the painting itself, which is set indoors, offers

13 Aaron Douglas. Undated photograph, courtesy of the John Hope and Aurelia Elizabeth Franklin Library, Fisk University Library, Nashville, Tennessee

14 Exhibition pamphlet showing Aaron Douglas’s The Street Urchin, 1939. The Julius Rosenwald Fund Archive, Archival and Manuscript Collection, John Hope and Aurelia Elizabeth Franklin Library, Fisk University Library, Nashville, Tennessee
only hints of the boy's status through his tattered clothing and the hat he proffers in his hand. While the title and practically empty background cast the boy as a type, the sensitivity paid to his facial features and mannerisms offers a glimpse of his personality.\textsuperscript{34} This dual attention to occupational set and individual recalls Scott's interest in "portraits of Negro types." More generally, Douglas's representational focus on the activities of Haiti's peasant class, market women, mountains, harbor, and waterfront echoes Scott's visual idealization of the island. The catalogue description of his "scenes and portraits of Negro types" also seems in keeping with Scott's artistic project.

Douglas also shied away from any references to Haiti's past, even though he had frequently painted historical subjects and had created the series of block prints on the Emperor Jones almost a decade before his trip. One would expect him to continue this interest in Haiti's history when he ventured to the island; it was, after all, the same year that Lawrence completed his widely acclaimed Toussaint L'Ouverture series. Douglas did travel to the Citadel while in Haiti, but no evidence of that excursion is found in the titles of the works showcased in his exhibition.\textsuperscript{35} Of course, multiple factors influence the creative process, but the absence of any reference to the Haitian Revolution seems significant.

Even more notable than Douglas's avoidance of revolutionary subject matter is the artist's use of a naturalistic style of painting to render his island types and scenes. Douglas rendered the boy in \textit{The Street Urchin} and his landscapes in an academic, more illusionistic, mode of painting, unlike his characteristic flat, modernistic style of representation. Although Douglas had painted in a realistic style before, his return to this mode in Haiti suggests that for him it best translated and offered representational validity in his effort to render an unfamiliar, foreign place.

Contemporary viewers remarked on Douglas's stylistic shift. Alain Locke, who was a frequent supporter of Douglas's work, for example, criticized these paintings as a "retreat from his bold earlier style to mild local color impressionism, which though technically competent, gives little distinctively new or forceful either in his Negro type studies or his series of Haitian landscapes." In contrast to Locke's praise of Lawrence's expressionistic style, which he felt nicely translated the atmosphere of Haiti, the art critic found Douglas's choice of a representational style wanting. A \textit{New York Times} review similarly characterized the paintings as "conventional" and "frankly picturesque work."\textsuperscript{36} It would seem that the process of travel to the island had neutralized the bold spirit of Douglas's earlier work in favor of scenic representations and picturesque views.

The notion that the vision of Haiti articulated by African American artists did not easily coincide with the diasporic ideal imagined in the United States is also supported in the canvases and writings of painter and art historian James Porter (1905–1970). Porter (fig. 15) traveled to
Haiti in August 1945, after U.S. administration of the island ended. He created works while on the island and after his trip that were realistic in style and reminiscent in subject matter of Scott’s and Douglas’s work: Market Women (fig. 16), The Bay of Port-au-Prince, Calabash Merchant, Haitian Donkey Driver, Haitian Girl, and Peasants Resting. Porter too trained his eye on Haiti’s peasant class and picturesque bays. His Market Women, for instance, returns to the subject matter and style that so fascinated Scott. Three barefooted market women command the center of the painting, forming a pyramidal shape. They stare, seemingly arrested by the presence of the artist, directly out at the viewer. In contrast to Scott’s careful inclusion of appropriate landscapes with his market types, the trinity of women in Porter’s picture seem to form the landmass. This human mountain range appears surrounded, but unmoved, by the raging wind and building clouds. Details of their environment, a single tree to the left of the canvas and distant hills,
are minimized. The low perspective gives the women a larger-than-life, statuesque quality. While Porter's paintings and titles mirror Scott's vision and description of the island in some respects, he monumentalized the picturesque action figures or types who inhabited Scott's canvases.

Porter's different artistic translation of Haiti is evident in his writing as well as his painting. In 1946, on the heels of his trip, he authored an article entitled “Picturesque Haiti,” whose goal was to disrupt a touristic visual consumption of the island. The article, which appeared in *Opportunity* magazine, is a countertravelogue that chronicles the typical journey of first-time travelers to Haiti from plane to hotel. It describes tourists' fascination with the scenes they immediately encounter: the “welcoming arms” of nature, the “tumble down shacks,” and the “peasant merchants,” especially market women, which all seem “[a]t first glance an impressionist painting by Monet come to three-dimensional life.” Given the prevalence of a “mild impressionism” (to echo Locke) in the pictures by Scott and Douglas, Porter's metaphoric use of a Claude Monet tableau come to life seems prescient. The essay warned *Opportunity*’s African American readership not to be seduced by these impressions: “It is altogether too easy to make the aesthetic blunder so easily made in the presence of the new and the strange, that is, to say of Haitian life or landscape, ‘Oh, how picturesque!’”

Porter advocated an alternative way of envisioning Haiti and its peasantry “from the inside.” From this perspective, he said, “Haitian life is fascinating but not picturesque.” He went on to describe the “physical and economic limitations of the country.” His attention to the factors that structured the lives of the peasants may explain the comparatively barren (perhaps already exploited) landscape and garbage strewn in the foreground in *Market Women*. The figures in the work are surrounded not by the stereotypical signs of abundance in a tropical landscape—they possess no poultry or colorful fruit—but by urban debris. In other words, even as he filled his canvases with the stock characters that also populated Scott’s and Douglas’s work, Porter foregrounded, literally, the socioeconomic factors that had not been represented or acknowledged by previous travelers and visiting artists. His essay is especially provocative in that it provides a rare documented occasion when an African American artist turned his attention to his own presence as a viewing subject in Haiti and voiced a critical awareness of the limited parameters of his own gaze.

**Conclusion**

The visions of Haiti offered by Porter and his predecessors provide an alternative perspective on the island’s symbolic utility, its value in the practice of diaspora and in African American art during the Harlem Renaissance and interwar period. While scholarship to date has focused on African American artists’ presentation of Haiti as the site of black revolution, and especially on Lawrence’s Toussaint L’Ouverture series, it is clear that artists such as Scott, Douglas, and Porter who traveled to the island approached it primarily as a touristic and exotic site. These artists typically viewed Haiti through the lens of the picturesque, frequently depicting anonymous peasant types instead of historical protagonists. Different formulations can, of course, be discerned in work produced by U.S. artists; there were also internal variations within these genres and even contradictions within a single painter’s work (Scott’s creation of “portrait types,” for example, or Lawrence’s simultaneous affinity with and distance from the narrative of Toussaint L’Ouverture).

In other words, the dream of Haiti was not singular within the imagination of individual artists. This exploration of the concurrent revolutionary and picturesque ways of representing Haiti does not imply
that one way of imaging the island was more legitimate than the other. Rather, this essay raises questions still open for investigation about what the dramatically different visions of Haiti may tell us. How do visual images, visuality, and specific representational languages facilitate and/or hinder the formation of, and translation between, African diasporic communities? While travel is frequently viewed as integral to the formation of the black Atlantic, can it also destabilize imagined pan-African alliances? Do other, perhaps less recognizable diasporic connections (such as Scott’s influence on the Haitian indigenist visual arts movement) happen in the spaces of misrecognition?

While numerous social, national, personal, and professional factors influence artists’ work, African American artists were able to construct a visual narrative of African diasporic solidarity only from a distance, be it a geographic distance or the distance of history. The process of travel, which closed physical distance, however, compelled artists to experience the complexity of their African American, American, and African diasporic subjectivities outside the ideological frames prevalent in black America and the pan-Africanist movement. While black artists in the United States sought to create a visual language capable of communicating with populations across the African diaspora (and motivating African Americans to see themselves as members of the diaspora), artists who came into direct contact with diverse and distant communities called attention to the provincial nature of this language of pan-Africanism. When practiced outside the United States amid lived differences, it was unsustainable.

Forced to confront this disjuncture within the African diaspora, artists embraced strategies long employed by traveler artists to process alterity, be they the objectifying lens of the picturesque or the essentializing paradigms of phrenologists. They also relied on the language of realism to reproduce faithfully what they saw on the island, unlike the “symbolic” visual narratives, as in Lawrence’s series, which better facilitated appropriation within the pan-Africanist cause. The fraught efforts even to create artwork further threw into relief the power differentials experienced within African diasporic groups. While no single text or visual image can transparently translate the aims of pan-Africanism—the objectives of which were in any event neither uniform nor one-dimensional—the bodily experience of travel within the African diaspora and its representation through visual means presented unique challenges to the formation of the African diaspora and testify to what may be described as the problem of the visual in the practice of diaspora: the difficulty of dreaming with one’s eyes wide open, the complexity of recognizing and representing radical difference while imaging and inspiring collective diasporic freedom dreams.39

Notes

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The term “African diaspora” describes symbolic and political communities of people of African descent who share an attachment to homeland, the experience of dispersal, and/or racial oppression.


10 Lawrence, quoted in Ellen Harkins Wheat, *Jacob Lawrence, American Painter* (Seattle: Univ. of Washington Press, 1986), 40. In addition to praise for Lawrence’s *Toussaint L’Ouverture* series in African American circles, the Haitian ambassador to the United States expressed a desire to purchase the series for display in the Haitian Pavilion of the 1939 World’s Fair in New York and in a museum in Port-au-Prince; see Wheat, *Jacob Lawrence, American Painter*, 40. For more on Lawrence and his interest in Haiti, consult Powell, “Re/Birth of a Nation,” 32 for the Powell quotes.


12 For Renda’s consideration of the play, see her *Taking Haiti*, 198–212. Most infamously, U.S. Marine Captain John Houston Craig had installed himself as king of an island off the coast of Haiti. He wrote about his adventures in *Black Bagdad* (New York: Minton, Balch, 1933) and *Cannibal Cousin* (New York: Minton, Balch & Co., 1934). For a discussion of these texts, see *Taking Haiti*, 246–55.

13 Scott was born in Indianapolis. In 1904 he moved to Chicago, where he attended the School of the Art Institute and received training in drawing and painting. Scott studied for two years in Paris and Trouville, where he was mentored by Henry Ossawa Tanner before returning to Chicago. In 1931, some fifteen years after his Pari- sian trip and on the heels of an artistic sojourn to Alabama, Scott received a Julius Rosenwald fellowship to study in the French-speaking Caribbean island. The Rosenwald fellowship, headed by the former president of Sears Roebuck and Company, was established in 1917 to redress inequalities in educational opportunities for African American and Jewish populations; see Stacy Morgan, *Rethinking Social Realism: African American Art and Literature, 1930–1953* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 2004), 26. For the “best” quote, see Scott to George Arthur, May 20, 1931, Julius Rosenwald Fund Archives, John Hope and Aurelia E. Franklin Library, Fisk University, Nashville, Tenn. (hereafter Rosenwald Archives).

14 For the first quote, Scott in Rosenwald Fund review questionnaire, March 1938; for the second, Scott to George Arthur, September 15, 1931, Rosenwald Archives.

15 Scott to George Arthur, August 1931, Rosenwald Archives.

16 *Costumbrista* paintings frequently depicted local peoples engaged in different trades (*costumbrista* is derived from the Spanish word for popular custom). For Scott’s discussion of his artistic adventures in the market, see Scott to George Arthur, May 20, 1931, Rosenwald Archives.

17 Scott to George Arthur, August 1931, Rosenwald Archives.


20 See Amy Mooney, “Representing Race: Disjunctures in the Work of Archibald J.
Scott’s attention to the Haitian peasantry also may have been in keeping with a growing interest among the younger generation of African American writers and artists of the Harlem Renaissance. Poets and novelists, like Langston Hughes, increasingly turned their focus to “black folk,”—black populations in rural communities—as a source of inspiration. See Hughes, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” Nation 122, no. 23 (June 23, 1926): 692–94, and on folk in Haiti, Hughes, “People without Shoes: The Haitian Masses,” in Negro: An Anthology, ed. Nancy Cunard (New York: Frederick Unger Publishing Co., 1934), 288–90. More generally, see Dash, Haiti and the United States, 52.

For all Scott quotes in this paragraph, see Scott to George Arthur, October 12, 1931, Rosenwald Archives.

For for “informal exhibition,” see Douglas to George Reynolds, April 5, 1939, Rosenwald Archives. For the exhibition catalogue, see Aaron Douglas: Exhibition of Haitian Paintings (New York: ACA Gallery, 1939). The background of The Street Urchin is so ambiguous that the subject could be located anywhere. Indeed, Douglas could have created the image on his trip to Nashville or New Orleans in 1937 before his southern migration to Haiti. The image does appear, however, as the lead image in the ACA catalogue.

For “landscape painting” quote, see Scott to Mary Brady, Harmon Foundation, January 6, 1932, Rosenwald Archives.