

Introduction

Claiming Middle Ground

In 1939, Lois Mailou Jones (1905–1998) painted a gray-wash watercolor entitled *Under the Influence of the Masters* (fig. 1). Poised in front of a canvas with the sleeves of her smock pushed up past her elbows, paintbrush and palette in hand, an androgynous and anonymous artist stands at a creative crossroads. The names of canonical Western artists—Picasso, Corot, Cézanne among them—swirl around her, fanning out like the branches of a tree. Michelangelo, the Renaissance master, floats directly above her head with his

hand raised as if anointing the unnamed artist with artistic genius. At her feet references to African art—Egyptian hieroglyphs and cave drawings of hunters and animals—spread out like roots. Four frieze sections filled with the names of key African American artists from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries flank the central panel.

The artist in *Under the Influence of the Masters* claims the middle ground amid the names and images of four artistic traditions—European, American, African, and African American. The

THE NEGRO HISTORY BULLETIN

Published Monthly

Vol. II, No. 7

WASHINGTON, D. C.

April, 1939

Distinguished Painters Inspire Those of African Blood

PAINTING and sculpture, as we understand these arts, grew out of architecture. In the beginning, however, these forms were not life-like or real, but the Greeks began to make their art realistic. As Morey once wrote, "The artists' skill in representing actual things is illustrated in the story often told of the great painters Zeuxis and Parrhasius. They were rivals, and agreed to make a test of their relative skill. Zeuxis painted a cluster of grapes that deceived the birds, which came and pecked at them. He reported his success to Parrhasius, who told him that his own work could be seen behind a curtain. Zeuxis attempted to draw this aside, and found it was only a painted curtain. And so while Zeuxis had deceived the birds, Parrhasius had deceived the rival painter himself."

Today we think of painting mainly as the work of an individual in his art studio with his canvas on his easel, his brush in one hand and the palette for his colors in the other. We see him mixing his colors, touching his canvas with his delicate brush, while watching the development of the painting as each touch brings it nearer and nearer to the design originally worked out in his mind. We are acquainted also with painting in its other aspects, but this is the picture which the name of this art generally suggests to the average mind.

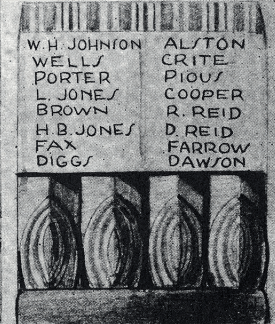
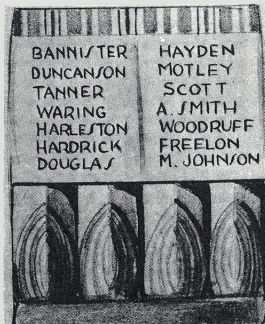
The world has made much progress in reaching this stage of modern painting. Painting attained a high position in the life of the Greeks and the Romans who added something to pass this and other arts on to the nations which arose thereafter, but not much could be done to advance art during the dark age which followed the destruction of the Roman Empire. In the East, in Africa and Asia, however, the people were making some progress in raising higher standards which Europeans learned later to follow. The monks of Europe did a little

to keep the light of civilization burning while they were shut in their monasteries to seclude themselves from the wicked world of the middle ages. In copying manuscripts, the monks decorated them with artistic monograms and ornamental figures. By and by when the darkness of the middle ages tended to pass away and men became more enlightened by contact with the East, artists began to build and decorate as had done the Egyptians, the Greeks and the Romans. The one thing in which most European people could be interested at

that time was religion, and artists came forward to beautify the churches with statues and statuettes, with frescoes and murals. This was a part of the movement called the Renaissance, which turned people toward doing things as they had been done so much better ages before.

In the Renaissance the Negro himself figured in Europe. In Spain, to which Africans were brought in larger numbers than elsewhere on that continent the evidences were very frequent. Juan de Pareja, born a slave in Granada, in 1606, was liberated by Velasquez and taught the technique of painting. He left to his credit "The Calling of St. Matthew," "Santa Catalina," "The Baptism of Christ," "The Presentation of the Child of God," "Provincial of the Capuchin Order," "St. John the Evangelist," "San Oronico," and "Our Lady of Guadeloupe." It is said that J. Herbert Watson, of Brooklyn, New York, owns another of his paintings, "The Annunciation."

Sebastian Gomez sustained to Murillo the same relation as did Juan de Pareja to Velasquez in having been Murillo's slave and then elevated to the dignity of his student and coworker. He produced by the time of his death in 1682 such precious productions as "Christ bound to the Column with St. Peter Kneeling," "St. Joseph," "St. Anne," and



UNDER THE INFLUENCE OF THE MASTERS

Copyright 1939, by the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, Inc.

Sample Chapter | PSU Press

Negro History Bulletin published the illustration on the front page of its April 1939 issue. The accompanying article, “Distinguished Painters Inspire Those of African Blood,” discusses the influence of canonical Western artists on those of African descent.¹ Yet in the paired illustration, African aesthetics, which are alluded to in the lower half of the composition, are posited as another potential root from which African American artistic production stems.

A year later, Jones painted a self-portrait in which she pictured herself in a similar smock and collared shirt and with the same short hairstyle as the anonymous painter, suggesting that she had depicted herself in the earlier watercolor (fig. 2). Jones bore more than a physical resemblance to the artist. She, too, was forging a path that required negotiating those same four traditions while explicitly staking her own ground in the history of modern African American art. *Under the Influence of the Masters* poses questions about the roots and routes of nineteenth- and twentieth-century African American artists and, as such, serves as a point of entry and departure for this manuscript’s examination of Jones’s own roots and routes. In time, Jones would become a master in her own right and, indeed, a master to subsequent generations of African American artists.

Under the Influence of the Masters appeared at a moment when the mainstream art world was debating the genealogies of modern art. For

example, in 1936 the director of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), Alfred Barr Jr., traced the origins of modernism in art in an oft-reproduced diagram. Using bright red arrows, Barr plotted the influence of outside elements on the key modernist movements. At the top of left corner of the chart, arrows indicate connections from Japanese woodblock prints to both Paul Gauguin’s late nineteenth-century synthetism and to fauvism in the early twentieth century. Shorter lines connect the category of “Negro Sculpture” to fauvism and cubism. In 1933, *Vanity Fair* published Mexican illustrator Miguel Covarrubias’s *The Tree of Modern Art—Planted 60 Years Ago*, a diagram of a leafy tree whose twisted branches represented various movements of modern art (fig. 3). The roots of modern art, according to Covarrubias, include the work of late eighteenth- to mid-nineteenth-century painters Eugène Delacroix, Jacques-Louis David, Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, and Gustave Courbet. The trunk or core of modern art came from the late nineteenth-century impressionist and postimpressionist movements. The tree’s intertwined branches have labels that include cubism, surrealism, and dada. Green leaves with the names of major white, male artists sprout from all of the tree’s surfaces. To the left of the tree, past, sits an African sculpture and the head of a classical marble sculpture. On the right, in the shade of the tree, a white man lays supine, holding an empty gilt frame in his hands, looking toward the future. These visuals sought to reductively chart the advancement of modern art by looking at its influences, its development, and its art-historically acclaimed practitioners. Significantly, in both of these examples, the pioneering

Fig. 1 Loïs Mailou Jones, *Under the Influence of the Masters*, 1939. Watercolor. Published in the *Negro History Bulletin* II, no. 7 (April 1939), cover. Courtesy Library of Congress and Loïs Mailou Jones Pierre-Noël Trust.

Lois
M
Jones



M. Jones

Fig. 2 Loïs Mailou Jones, *Self-Portrait*, 1940. Casein on board, 17 ½ × 14 ½ in. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C., 2006.24.2. Bequest of the artist. Courtesy Loïs Mailou Jones Pierre-Noël Trust.

Fig. 3 Miguel Covarrubias, *The Tree of Modern Art—Planted 60 Years Ago*. In *Vanity Fair* 40, no. 3 (May 1933): 36. Courtesy Miguel Covarrubias Estate / Maria Elena Rico Covarrubias.



navigators of modern art are overwhelmingly white, male, and European.

In *Under the Influence of the Masters*, Jones proposes a potential genealogy of African American art in which a black woman claims the center. Jones seeks to chart not only the larger development of African American art but also her own specific path. Moreover, Jones does not offer a chronological mapping but rather a self-conscious

revealing of her own influences and sources of inspiration. Jones’s picturing of herself occupying the central position gains significance given how frequently African American women artists are sidelined in histories of art, museum exhibitions, and gallery shows. The paucity of Jones’s female contemporaries is reflected in the fact that only two other women are listed in the cadre of names in the panels that border the main illustration.

Under the Influence of the Masters draws attention literally and figuratively to expressions of identity and race in art, the perceived role of African art to African American artists, and the marginalization of women artists—particularly women artists of color—who remained pushed to the fringes of art history.

Artistic roots are the points of origin—the starting point or foundation from which artists forge their practice and the cognizance of the artistic legacies to which they are heirs. For many artists, outside factors dictate the construction of these artistic foundations—their geographic locale, their exposure to art, their access to artistic training, their socioeconomic status, and their race and gender. A route is a path or direction taken over the course of their career.² Where the root grounds, the route moves. As this overview of Jones’s career trajectory will demonstrate, barriers—institutional and otherwise—at times impede these routes. In 1983, Jones explained, “Women artists, white or black, have had it hard and it was doubly hard for the black woman. I know I have had to work twice as hard to make it because of that barrier.”³ A hurdle authors face when working on single-artist studies is the frequent desire for comparisons to showcase the artist’s contributions. African American women artists working in the first half of the twentieth century had more male contemporaries than female. Because I do not want to read Jones’s praxis through that of her male colleagues, this manuscript privileges Jones’s voice and focuses on her art, her career, and her development while acknowledging the obstacles outside forces placed in her way.

Designing a New Tradition: Lois Mailou Jones and the Aesthetics of Blackness positions Jones as a

central figure through which to explore facets of African American artistic identity in the twentieth century. Scrutinizing Jones’s roots and routes illuminates the institutional and systemic challenges that she adroitly negotiated by taking mediatory positions. Her artistic choices reveal the complexities of being a black artist in the twentieth century. Despite a prolific career that spanned the 1920s through the 1990s and an almost fifty-year tenure at Howard University, where she trained a number of prominent African American artists, art historians have thus far overlooked Jones’s vanguard position in twentieth-century American art; they have often relegated her to the middle or back of the pack. Jones’s very “middle-ness”—her middle-of-the-road politics, her middle-class upbringing, and her aesthetic position that straddled avant-garde experimentation and conservative academicism—has resulted in her contributions to the field being cursorily cited and not fully or critically explored. What would the history of African American art look like if we considered those who are in the middle rather than just the avant-garde or the naïve?

To guide this close reading of Jones’s art and career, I weave together two threads of inquiry—the role that Jones’s gender, race, and class position played in the development of her art and career and her long-standing artistic engagement with the African diaspora. Jones’s ongoing use of African and Afrodiasporic symbolic content was one way in which she was able to make a name for herself. In many cases, Jones was not on the margins but rather, as we shall see, in the middle of the action.

Throughout her career Jones sought institutional recognition. At the age of ninety, the Studio

Museum in Harlem named Jones as their 1996 Artist of the Year. Accepting the award, Jones boldly told the audience, “My friend Dorothy West tells people she’s the last surviving writer from the Harlem Renaissance. Well, I’m the last artist.”⁴ Two years later, Jones died of a heart attack in her Washington, D.C., home. In her obituary, *New York Times* art-critic Holland Cotter described her as “an iconic figure and an important historic link in a path-breaking generation of black artists.”⁵ Cotter wrote of Jones’s “eclectic, academic work . . . [that] ranged from impressionistic landscapes to political allegories, and from cubistic depictions of African sculptures to realistic portraits.”⁶ What Cotter does not explain, however, is that the diversity of Jones’s artwork—evinced in both subjects and styles—stemmed from a series of transformative experiences, including her early stint as a textile designer in the late 1920s, her 1937 Parisian sabbatical, her extensive travels to Haiti at midcentury, her tenure at Howard, and her trips to Africa in the 1970s.

I outline three phases of Jones’s career, roughly 1920–50, 1950–70, and 1970–90, which not only bore witness to dramatic changes in the production and reception of African American art but also coincided with larger discursive shifts in cultural conceptions of blackness and associated definitions of what constitutes black art. Jones was well aware of how the labels “black art” and “black artist” served different ideological aims over the course of her career. The power of these terms is manifest in the United States–based Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s that saw the emergence of the all-black group exhibition and the call to produce positive representations of blackness. The Harlem Renaissance was followed by the

Négritude movement birthed in Paris in the 1940s that promoted transnational racial solidarity, the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, and the Black Arts and Pan-Africanist movements of the 1960s and 1970s, with their concurrent, more politicized calls for black art. Through it all, Jones established her own position; while at times she incorporated some of the newer thinking, she did not automatically fall in line with or subscribe to the definition du jour. Examining Jones’s life and art reveals new dimensions in the history of women artists, particularly women of color, nuances in the history of African American modernism, and innovative ways to see connections across cultures and places.

Biographical Sketch

Jones was born in 1905 into an upper-middle-class African American family in Boston that summered on Martha’s Vineyard, where she rubbed shoulders with members of the black elite. Given the small African American population of Boston in the first decades of the twentieth century, Jones became adept at navigating predominantly white academic institutions. She attended the mixed-race, all-girls High School of the Practical Arts before becoming the first black graduate of the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (SMFA) in 1927. It is not surprising that Jones achieved this distinction, given that she came from a family of trailblazers. In 1915 at the age of forty-one, her father, Thomas Vreeland Jones, was the first black graduate of Suffolk Law School.⁷ Meanwhile her mother, Carolyn Dorinda Jones, maintained a successful cosmetology business in Boston and on Martha’s Vineyard. Jones’s

maternal grandmother, Phoebe Moseley Adams Ballou, had been one of the Vineyard's first black summer residents.⁸

After her 1927 SMFA graduation, Jones briefly pursued work as a textile designer before seeking employment at her alma mater. With no positions available, her former instructors told her to “go South to help her people.”⁹ Jones, consequently, headed below the Mason-Dixon line and spent two years teaching art in Sedalia, North Carolina, at the Palmer Memorial Institute. In 1930, she joined the art department at Howard University, where she remained until her 1977 retirement. During her tenure at Howard, the university was the center of black intellectualism in the United States. Her association with the school and its faculty placed her in the middle of major cultural debates. Along with her colleagues James A. Porter (1905–1970) and James Lesesne Wells (1902–1993), Jones trained multiple generations of African American artists, several of whom went on to have illustrious careers as artists and art historians, such as Akili Ron Anderson, Tritobia Benjamin, Starmanda Bullock, Elizabeth Catlett, David Driskell, Malkia Roberts, and Sylvia Snowden, to name just a few. As a longtime professor at Howard and with a presence on the national art scene, Jones helped carve a path for younger black women artists.

Travel played an important part in Jones's artistic development. She returned to her beloved Martha's Vineyard frequently throughout her life but also explored Europe, the Caribbean, and various African countries, indicating her desire to understand the black experience abroad and at home in the United States. During the 1937 to 1938 academic year, Jones traveled to France

with the support of a General Education Board fellowship. In Paris, Jones painted her best-known work, *Les Fétiches* (1938; see fig. 33), which, with its African mask subject matter and loose brushstrokes, combined her growing interest in African art with her recent adoption of the impressionist style. After her 1953 marriage to Haitian graphic designer Louis Verginaud Pierre-Noël (1911–1982), Jones spent significant amounts of time in Haiti. Although Africanist themes had been present in her art since the 1920s, it was not until 1970 that Jones would travel to eleven countries in West Africa as part an ongoing, Howard-funded research project. She would visit Africa again in 1972 as the faculty host for a Howard alumni tour and yet again in 1976 when she served on Howard's delegation to the symposium celebrating Senegalese president Léopold Senghor's birthday. In 1977 Jones participated in and exhibited her work at the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC), held in Lagos, Nigeria. These four African trips made a lasting impression on her art.

Jones's experience with the African diaspora was not limited to Haiti and France. At the start of the 1960s, Jones was involved in a series of events at African embassies in Washington, D.C., and her activities (artistic and otherwise) implicated her in an expanding cross-cultural network of African, Afrodiasporic, and African American intellectuals, artists, and politicians. As the 1960s and 1970s progressed, Jones continued to make her mark both as an artist and as a budding art historian. She lectured widely on the African influence in Afro-American artistic production, and she initiated several art-historical research projects that centered on the black visual artist and, in

particular, black women artists in Caribbean, North American, and African contexts.

Throughout her life, Jones faced obstacles due to the intersectionality of her identity, and she frequently found herself as one of a few women artists in a sea of male contemporaries. During the later stages of her career, the black feminist art movement began to formalize, and Jones became a vocal member within it. She participated in the 1972 Corcoran Gallery Conference on Women in the Visual Arts and exhibited in a host of feminist exhibitions both in New York and in Washington, D.C. For instance, in 1975 fellow artist Faith Ringgold included Jones's work in the *11 in New York* exhibition held at the Women's Interart Center.¹⁰

Gaining visibility in the mainstream art world was challenging. Throughout her lengthy and prolific career, Jones never had significant representation by a private gallery, a fact that she attributed to starkly disparate factors: her lack of critical recognition and her comfortable class position, which granted her financial security. Jones was right: her race and her gender hindered her widespread acknowledgment in the art world, and it was only in the twilight of her career that institutional recognition came her way. In the 1970s, Jones was offered several opportunities to preserve her legacy. In 1973 the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, mounted a retrospective of her work (the first solo show given to an African American female artist at an American museum). In 1977 historians associated with the Schlesinger Library at Harvard University interviewed Jones as part of the Black Women Oral History Project. In 1979, after the success of a recent exhibition of Jones's art at the Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C., the Library of Congress invited the artist to

deposit her papers in the renowned institution's manuscript division.¹¹ Ultimately, Jones's papers were archived at Howard University, where she had taught for so long.

On April 2, 1980, President Jimmy Carter presented Jones with the Award for Outstanding Achievement in the Visual Arts at a White House ceremony. Jones was in good company: fellow African American artists Richmond Barthé, Romare Bearden, Margaret T. Burroughs, Jacob Lawrence, Archibald Motley, James Lesesne Wells, Charles White, and Hale Woodruff were also honored.¹² Carter introduced Jones as “a painter, a designer, an illustrator, and also an educator [who has] mixed Haitian emphasis with the black experience.”¹³ Thus at the age of seventy-five, Jones finally received the national acknowledgment she had long sought.

The event marked a turning point in her career. Jones would spend the next few years on a victory lap, traveling the country to give lectures, attending exhibition openings, and networking. Not even the heart attack she suffered on the morning of her eighty-fourth birthday, in November 1989, slowed her down. In January 1990 a solo retrospective, *The World of Lois Mailou Jones*, opened in Washington, D.C. The exhibition traveled to sixteen other venues across the country where Jones gave lectures.¹⁴ The following year, she returned to Boston where she served as a visiting professor at Harvard University and Radcliffe College. In the summer of 1993, President Bill Clinton and First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton met Jones on her beloved Martha's Vineyard and chose her seascape *Breezy Day at Gay Head* to hang in the White House. The next year the Corcoran celebrated Jones's birthday while

hosting her traveling retrospective. During the festivities, the institution offered Jones a belated apology for their racist behavior in the 1930s and 1940s when Jones was barred from participating in their exhibitions and competitions due to her race.¹⁵ Jones died four years later, on June 9, 1998.

Critical Interventions

In recent years, scholars have called for publications that move beyond reclamations of artistic biographies and introduce critical and theoretical approaches to African American art.¹⁶ As a result there has been a move away from single-artist monographs in favor of more thematic texts. As *Designing a New Tradition* demonstrates, however, it is possible to both restore a marginalized artist's biography and critically engage with her art. In what follows, rather than utilize a top-down approach in which a conceptual overlay is applied to the objects at hand, I leverage close readings and contextual analysis to illuminate the theoretical implications of Jones's practice.

The way in which Jones inserts her own body as a central yet unnamed focus in her own illustration mirrors how African American and American art histories have treated her—she is cited but not explained. Such an interpretation of her self-portrait reflects my methodology, which looks at the social life of objects infused with formalism—combining the social history of Jones's art with close readings of it. I aim to elucidate how her art is not simply a reflection of her biography by showing how any examination of her artistic production must be refracted through the intersectional lens of contemporary issues related to race, gender, class, and geography.

Jones foregrounded her significance to the history of African American art by placing herself literally in the middle, surrounded by a cast of contemporaries who are relegated to the sidelines. *Designing a New Tradition* is a single-artist study that, like others of its kind, must strike a balance between analyzing the art and the life of one artist.¹⁷ My reading of the illustration *Under the Influence of the Masters* as a self-portrait underscores the various ways the watercolor manifests the composite identities present in Jones's body of work and biography.

I am indebted to the prior scholarship on Jones by her former student Tritobia Benjamin published in 1994.¹⁸ Benjamin's *The Life and Art of Loïs Mailou Jones* laid essential groundwork in its overview of Jones's biography and artistic career. A 2009 retrospective of her work, *Loïs Mailou Jones: A Life in Vibrant Color*, traveled to several major art museums in the United States and showcased Jones's diverse aesthetics and her prolific production.¹⁹ Expanding significantly on Benjamin's scholarship, which has been until now the only extant monograph on Jones, I argue that the artist served an important role as mediator of visual aesthetics and artistic traditions. I highlight how her race, gender, and class position all influenced the direction of her career, the reception of her work, and her place in institutionalized histories of art, African American or otherwise. A consideration of the whole of Jones's artistic production reveals that she created work in a variety of genres—notably, landscapes, portraits, and still lifes.

The chapters of this book investigate the correlation between the development of Jones's modernist aesthetic and the artist's encounters with African art objects, the southern United

States, Afro-Caribbean religious traditions, the interwar Afrodiasporic cultural community in France, and ultimately the African continent. I track Jones's interest in Afrodiasporic themes as they took myriad forms in her work—African masks, abstract design motifs, Caribbean market scenes, and portraits—enabling her to adopt a new composite visual language to capture the changing definitions of black identity over the course of the twentieth century. This book thus provides an important recovery of Jones's artistic contributions while also incorporating the artist into larger critical debates concerning blackness and the African diaspora in the twentieth century.

While part of this book traces Jones's access to Africa and African aesthetics, I am not interested in proving an intrinsic or heritage-based link between Africa and African Americans.²⁰ Nor is this book a theoretical intervention into the African American artist's relationship to Africa. However, the black artist's imaginary embrace of Africa plays a large role in a number of twentieth-century definitions of black art. The positing of African American artists as heirs to the cultural heritage of "Africa" worked to counter the assumption that, as art historian John Bowles notes, the "European tradition is the subject and African Americans are the objects on which it acts."²¹ One way for African American artists to move from object to subject was by introducing classical Africa as a site of artistic heritage. This shift can also happen when we study black artists' lives. We have to understand them as people, as actors, as agents, and, of course, as artists in order to retrieve their place in the history of modernism. Jones herself formed part of the forefront of black artists who, beginning in the

1920s, sought a deeper understanding of Africa. Frequently the "Africa" these artists explored corresponded to a monolithic geography that existed in their imaginations rather than in the realities of the continent, with its multitude of cultural and ethnic groups and their associated traditions. African American artists, like their white counterparts, were subsumed with what Valentin Mudimbe terms "the idea of Africa."²² Based in reality or not, artistic engagement with Africa took on increased political meaning as the twentieth century progressed. Such heightened consciousness was due in part to the black world's interest in the struggles for independence and the celebrations of the postcolonial era. As I will explain, Jones's continued return to Afrodiasporic themes and subjects over her longer career suggests that the role Africa played in twentieth-century black art needs to be reevaluated and reexamined by artists and art historians alike. Art historian Richard Powell advises, "Rather than be intellectually bound by the perceived race or nationality of the creator . . . look to the art object itself, its multiple words of meaning and its place in the social production of black identities."²³

As such, this book engages in a series of close readings of Jones's art that emphasize her willful utilization of African and Afrodiasporic sources in the form of African objects, motifs, peoples, geographies, and their diasporic complements as part of her modernist practice. It is Jones's ongoing exploration of African, African American, and Afrodiasporic themes and subjects that allowed her to visualize the changing contours of black identity while also continually reinventing her artistic self. Such concentrated focus on Jones's oeuvre reveals how she grappled with the burden

of representation in her work at each stage of her career.

Jones's diverse engagements with ideas about objects and people from locations throughout the continent of Africa likewise enable us to use her experiences and artwork to study the evolving nexus of Africa, its diaspora, and African American art with modernism, which she illustrated in *Under the Influence of the Masters*. Ultimately, the ramifications of these historic encounters and Jones's aesthetic solutions raise critical questions not only about African American artistic engagements with Africa but also about definitions of African American and black art as well as art history's relationship to African American art as a whole.

The theoretical underpinnings for this project can be found in the scholarship on diasporic art history produced by art historians Kobena Mercer and Krista Thompson along with that of literary scholars Paul Gilroy and Brent Hayes Edwards on the internationalization of black modernity. Gilroy envisions the African diaspora as a series of dual-sided interchanges between Africa, the United States, and Europe. He posits that these interchanges function as vehicles through which modernist cultural production can be analyzed. Jones's travel from the United States to France, Haiti, the Caribbean, and Africa implicate her as a participant in the Black Atlantic and as an individual who experienced a number of different cultural exchanges.²⁴ As I argue, Jones's many Atlantic crossings are central to her artistic formation, and Gilroy's model of the Black Atlantic resonates. Gilroy also rightly calls into question the belief that African Americans possessed an essentialist relationship to Africa. He contends, as

do I, that modern black identities are fluid and influenced by social and cultural milieus.²⁵ Gilroy considered Jones's 1932 painting *The Ascent of Ethiopia* for the cover of his now-foundational study, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, although he ultimately chose a painting by Jones's contemporary Aaron Douglas. I will later analyze how *The Ascent of Ethiopia* is a critical step in Jones's ongoing project of visualizing a modern black identity and exploring the aesthetics of blackness.

More recently, Brent Hayes Edwards examines acts of black cultural and literary translation during the interwar period, providing another model for investigating Jones's work that is grounded in the diaspora.²⁶ Edwards traces acts of intercultural exchange but also of cultural and visual translation between figures active in the United States, Paris, the Caribbean, and the African continent; in doing so, he highlights the transnationality of diasporic modernism. With her Atlantic crossings, Jones is a figure of the Black Atlantic in Gilroy's terms; with her ongoing depiction of her African diasporic experiences, she is a participant in and visual interlocutor of the transatlantic diasporic modernism Edwards describes and theorizes.

While the term *diaspora* is frequently understood as the forced dispersal of individuals, beginning in the mid-twentieth century, the term, particularly when applied to the African diaspora, began to expand and include the movement, dislocation, and relocation not only of bodies but also of objects and ideas.²⁷ As artworks are objects and aesthetics are philosophical ideas concerning the visual, extending the definitions of *diaspora* beyond bodies to visual culture results in a

consideration of what constitutes African diasporic or black aesthetics.

As Jones's career progresses and her aesthetic evolves, I chart her increasingly diasporic praxis. To explicate her developments in style and subject matter, I introduce two distinct yet related concepts: "blackness in triplicate" and "diasporic grammar." Blackness in triplicate is a trope that emerges in Jones's art in the 1940s as she begins to explore the many facets of black identity and the black experience at home and abroad. It demonstrates the nonbinariness of black and white racial structures and identities, creating a triangle or triad that also speaks to the navigation and/or negotiation of traditions and cultural spheres that Jones encountered throughout her career. The triad might at times be applied to three geographic locales—the African continent, the North American mainland, and the African diaspora in Central and South America.²⁸ It also connects different chronological eras in which the discourse of blackness dominated. The paradigm operated in Jones's post-1937 oeuvre in a variety of ways—at times she grouped three black bodies, three material objects prominent in cultures belonging to the African diaspora, or the assemblage of three "signs" of blackness. With her triplicate motif, Jones created a way in which to explore multiple meanings and differing incarnations, be they complementary or contradictory versions of a given idea, image, or object.

In Jones's art from the late 1950s and 1960s, I locate another aesthetic intervention I dub diasporic grammar to name the additional processes she used to visualize her experiences outside of the United States. Diasporic grammar refers to the syntaxes or compositional innovations

artists develop after exposure to visual languages utilized within Afrodiasporic communities. Diasporic grammar functions as a transmutation of an extant grammar. The inherent cultural mixing in the language of Haitian Creole is a linguistic example of what I describe. As a set of rules governing structure and composition, grammar is often considered in linguistic rather than visual terms. Once cognizant of how visual vocabularies are deployed in situ, artists like Jones utilize a diasporic grammar when they draw from their newly acquired visual languages and mix and deploy such forms in ways that retain vestiges of their original use. Such diasporic artworks, which at times pull from a range of diasporic visual languages, respond to the combinatory nature of black culture—which, in a North American context, has always involved piecing together elements from both a black and an American experience to create distinctly modernist forms.

Yet how does diasporic grammar manifest visually? In Jones's case, it involves her manipulation of the symbolic grammar of Haitian Vodou coupled with her use of collage that renders the material legible to multiple audiences with various levels of cultural comprehension and allows the work to operate on multiple planes. In her study of Harlem Renaissance-era literature, Rachel Farebrother deploys a metaphor of collage "with its crossing geographical and disciplinary boundaries, [putting] cultural exchange at the heart" to explain the mixing that occurs in the African American culture of the period.²⁹ Collage emerges as a solution for dealing with such cultural exchanges. The deliberate refashioning of a visual grammar in a diasporic context is necessary, in part, because, as art

historian Nicholas Mirezoff reminds us, diaspora “cannot be represented from the viewpoint of one-point perspective.”³⁰ The diasporic visual image requires “multiple viewpoints.”³¹ Diasporic grammar and blackness in triplicate become vehicles through which Jones’s art expresses these compound perspectives.

Jones’s exposure to diasporic visual languages occurred in a variety of places and cultures both at home in the United States and abroad: Paris at the end of the 1930s, Port-au-Prince in the late 1950s and 1960s, and various West African countries during the 1970s. In Paris, Jones became aware of this diasporic visual vocabulary through European modernist aesthetic trends and African art she encountered in Parisian galleries. Years later while in Haiti, Jones learned another “visual vocabulary.” Her experimentation with diasporic grammar is manifest most clearly in her Haitian collages from the late 1950s and early 1960s that derived from the multilayered ceremonial practices of Haitian Vodou. Jones combined her new visual vocabulary associated with the religion and her understanding of the rituals themselves in her experiments with collage techniques. Her use of collage stems directly from her exploration of Afrodiasporic visual vocabularies and associated syntaxes. First assembling collages using cut papers, paint, and other materials, she later developed a painted collage aesthetic that she deployed to articulate the composite aesthetics of blackness.

Organization

This book consists of four chapters that show the imbricated relationship Jones identified between Haiti, Africa, and black America by using the

biological and ecological language of roots, ties, and links. As Cotter’s aforementioned obituary reminds us, Jones herself was a crucial link in the development of modern African American art. In the four chapters that follow, I trace Jones’s footsteps and brushstrokes to reveal her roots, ties, and links first to Boston and North Carolina in the 1920s, then to Howard University and Paris in the 1930s and 1940s, then to Haiti during the midcentury, and ultimately to Africa in the 1970s. The book is thus organized chronologically in order to elucidate how her biography and art intersect with her formation of blackness in triplicate and diasporic grammar.

The first chapter begins in Boston, Jones’s birthplace, by situating her within New England’s black bourgeoisie and positioning her early art production within the context of the social and cultural expectations of an upper-middle-class black woman. Jones came of age during the first two decades of the twentieth century, which bore witness to the ongoing migration of Southern African Americans to Northern industrial enclaves, as well as the start of the Harlem Renaissance and the emergence of new expressive modes in African American culture.³² During the first phase of her career, Jones’s drive to succeed and her adaptability, both socially and professionally, made it possible for her to chart a path to professional success first in North Carolina and then at Howard University in Washington, D.C. Notably, Jones did not foreground race as a common subject in her art of this period. When Jones did pursue African American subjects, her paintings captured the distance (both psychological and physical) that she as a Northerner felt from the rural African American culture she encountered down South.

In the second chapter, I explore Jones's continued negotiations of her black identity in the 1930s and 1940s soon after she began work at Howard University. After a brief discussion of Jones's first years at Howard in the early 1930s as the lone female faculty member in the department of art, I turn to her 1937–38 sabbatical in Paris, which I consider fundamental to her identity and exploration of transatlantic blackness. The year abroad played a pivotal role in altering Jones's interactions with Africa as both a geographic place and an imagined homeland. While in France, Jones encountered African art objects and Afrodiasporic peoples. In contrast to her time in the American South, in Paris Jones felt comfortable within the Afrodiasporic artistic and intellectual community. Her Parisian coterie included the key postimpressionist artist Émile Bernard and Afrodiasporic intellectuals such as Paulette and Jane Nardal, the Martinican sisters responsible for publishing the literary and cultural journal *La Revue du monde noir*. In this chapter, I explicate how Jones celebrated diasporic subjecthood in her portraits from the late 1930s and 1940s, rendering visible the possibility of multiple black identities.

Chapter 3 focuses on Jones's transformative experiences in Haiti in the 1950s and 1960s. Soon after her 1953 marriage to the Haitian graphic designer Louis Verginaud Pierre-Noël, Jones began spending school breaks in Port-au-Prince. Between 1954 and 1968, she also returned frequently to France and toured Europe with Howard University students and alumni. Tracing the evolution of her aesthetic in her Haitian-themed art works, this chapter argues that a new visual vocabulary of Vodou appears in Jones's work between 1954 and 1964. Comprising

figural representations of Vodou deities, ceremonial performances, three-dimensional assemblages of ritual offerings, and emblematic drawings known as *vèvès*, the visual language of Vodou propelled Jones's aesthetic move from representational forms to increasing abstraction. Haitian visual culture also stimulated her adoption of a "highly-keyed color palette," while her "special study" of Vodou symbolism ultimately led her to experiment in a different manner with collage.³³ Jones's turn to collage, heretofore unexamined, is connected to a multilayered diasporic literacy and a diasporic grammar first acquired through her interactions with the cosmopolitan artistic and intellectual circles at Howard University, in Paris during her 1937 sabbatical, and then in Haiti. Jones's subsequent adoption of mixed media in her Haitian and politically charged American artworks raises a larger set of questions about how one might connect the production of collage to conceptions of African American and diasporic identity, artistic or otherwise. Her travel and increased exposure to African diasporic cultures provided another route for an African American artist to reach the roots of African culture.

In the fourth chapter, attention turns to Jones's navigation of the changing political climate on Howard's campus and her travels to the African continent. While Jones was not overtly political, the research project she developed at the end of the 1960s on black visual art in African, Haitian, and African American contexts addressed the rising student demands at Howard University for a black-centered curriculum. The research project also exposed Jones's interest in delineating the contours of contemporary

black art in a global context. When tasked with making sense of her ideas about Africa after her travels through the continent, Jones turned to pastiche and collage as aesthetic responses to her many African and Afrodiasporic experiences and encounters. The visual language of collage facilitated her understanding of the layers of experiences she had over the course of her career while also speaking to the presence of multiple black identities at the end of the twentieth century. Despite a desire among some art historians to see African American artists reconcile Africa seamlessly in their work or to discover an innate kinship with African peoples and aesthetic traditions, I argue that Jones's choice to pursue a collage or composite aesthetic reflected the multilayered nature of her experiences as well as the multifaceted nature of blackness itself. Jones's paintings from the 1980s, which are characterized by their visible seams stitching together diverse black motifs, construct late twentieth-century conceptions of black identity.

Rejoining the themes of composite aesthetics and identities in twentieth-century African American art, the conclusion considers Jones's mid-career addition of a tréma accent to her first name, transforming it from Lois to Loïs. The name change resonates with Jones's own composite identity as well as her ongoing self-reinvention. I analyze the insertion of this diacritical mark, typically used to keep adjacent vowels separate,

in light of her design sensibilities, her interest in French culture, and her marriage to Pierre-Noël. Exploring Jones's self-naming invites a discussion of naming practices within twentieth-century African American art history more generally.

Jones's *Under the Influence of the Masters* mirrors the composite artistic and personal identities that the artist cultivated. The following chapters detail how Jones negotiated these diverse identities and traditions in her artistic career to understand the complex dialogues she and her contemporaries had between African, American, and European sources and ideals. She employed African and Haitian aesthetics to create her distinct version of modernist artistic practices that addressed blackness in triplicate and notions of diasporic aesthetics. I argue that in her African and Afrodiasporic-themed paintings, which proliferate in her oeuvre, Jones negotiated these various artistic traditions and designed a new composite tradition that not only reflects her own medial position but also mirrors the increasingly fragmented nature of black identity and diasporic experiences. Jones's middle-of-the-road position should not be understood as a compromise: one can occupy the middle ground and still innovate.