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The Book That Launched the Harlem Renaissance

*Alain Locke's 1925 text *The New Negro* offered the world the first comprehensive look at literary and cultural achievements of blacks as seen through the eyes of African Americans.*

by Arnold Rampersad

TO MANY SCHOLARS and critics of the movement known as the Harlem Renaissance — that dramatic upsurge of creativity in literature, music, and art within black America that reached its zenith in the second half of the 1920s — *The New Negro* is its definitive text, its Bible. Most of the participants in the movement probably held the book in similar regard. Conceived and edited by Alain Locke, illustrated by Winold Reiss and Aaron Douglas, and published by the then prominent firm of Albert and Charles Boni, *The New Negro* alerted the world in 1925 that something approaching a cultural revolution was taking place among blacks in New York, as well as elsewhere in the United States and perhaps around the world. The book also attempted in a fairly ambitious, expansive way to offer a definition of this cultural movement.

The story of the making of *The New Negro* is complicated and, in certain aspects, paradoxical. The book, an anthology, represents the triumph of its compiler's vision of a community and a nation changing before his eyes. And yet this man, Alain Locke, never lived in Harlem and was not himself either an artist or an editor.

The book emphasized achievements by blacks in the arts, but it had its origins in a magazine that had no special interest whatsoever in writing, painting, or music. Virtually from the moment it appeared in 1925, *The New Negro* was widely hailed as a definitive anthology; yet it also immediately drew fire from certain of its contributors and was soon in effect, if not in words, repudiated in crucial ways by others. Prophetic of the future of black America in

Arnold Rampersad is Sara Hart Kimball Professor in the Humanities at Stanford University. This article is adapted from his introduction to *The New Negro* edited by Alain Locke. Copyright © 1992 Macmillan Publishing Company. Reprinted with permission of Scribner, an imprint of Simon & Schuster Adult Publishing Group.

some aspects, it has also proved to have been decidedly misleading in others.

Subsequent generations have continued to see Locke in this central role in the Harlem Renaissance. "Locke's editing of and contribution to this volume," the historian Nathan I. Huggins has written in his landmark volume *The Harlem Renaissance* (1971), "and his energetic championing of the intellectual achievement of Negroes in the 1920s made him the father of the New Negro and the so-called Harlem Renaissance." However, a contemporary observer in a better position to know, Langston Hughes, described Locke only as one of the three "midwives" of the movement, along with Charles S. Johnson and the literary editor of *The Crisis* magazine, Jessie Fauset. Other observers were less praising of Locke's performance in this respect. Indeed, for various reasons, Locke was an improbable though by no means illogical choice as "dean" of the movement, or as editor of a volume designed to define its spirit.

Thirty-nine years old in 1924, and an assistant professor of philosophy at historically black Howard University in Washington, D.C., Locke was a graduate of Harvard and Oxford, to which he had gone in 1907 on a Rhodes scholarship. There and at the University of Berlin and the College de France in Paris, he had studied philosophy, Greek, and modern literature. He was also devoted to the study of German culture and philosophy. Joining the faculty at Howard in 1912, he eventually moved from teaching English to teaching philosophy, but was prevented from teaching a subject of increasing importance to him — race, and especially the interaction of races affected by what is called the African diaspora. Blocking Locke's efforts here were not only the reactionary university trustees but also the fact that he had

He was an energetic champion of the intellectual achievements of Negroes



Alain LeRoy Locke

published little on the subject. In fact, by the time of the Civic Club dinner in 1924, Locke had published little on any subject. In a way, in spite of his fine education and intellectual gifts, he was drifting until he found the Harlem Renaissance — or until the Harlem Renaissance found him.

Locke vs. Du Bois

A comparison with an older figure, W.E.B. Du Bois, who had also studied at Harvard and Berlin, is instructive. Admiring German culture, both men saw a similarity between black America and Germany in their struggles to achieve unity and power. They deeply respected the German intellectual tradition, notably the work of Herder on the transcendent power of folk culture and Fichte in his nationalistic *Addresses to the German Nation*. But Locke did not have Du Bois' background in rigorously empirical sociology, and had never lived or taught in the South, where the overwhelming majority of black Americans lived at the turn of the century; his sense of the folk was mainly theoretical. He had nothing approaching Du Bois' almost obsessive determination to be a force in the shaping of their people's future. By Locke's age in 1924, Du Bois had already published three major books and edited over a dozen studies. He had also quit the university in 1910 for the job of crusading editor of *The Crisis* magazine, the organ of the aggressive new civil rights organization, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Locke, on the other hand, although unhappy with the Howard administration, had done almost nothing to foment change except to read and reflect on the question of the meaning of race in the twentieth century.

"The New Negro alerted the world in 1925 that something approaching a cultural revolution was taking place among blacks in New York."

A frequent visitor to New York, he knew virtually all the older black writers and intellectuals, such as Du Bois and James Weldon Johnson. And Locke let neither difference in age nor social or professional standing keep him from making friends with artists such as Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes, who were almost 20 years his junior. He would go virtually anywhere to meet anyone who might have anything to contribute. Learned on a variety of topics,

he was as persistent in seeking friendships and professional contacts as he was in pursuing knowledge. Eventually, several of the contributors to *The New Negro* broke with Locke. Before doing so, however, they surrendered to his charm and rare intelligence, and helped to make the volume that followed a landmark in African-American cultural history.

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Liberal and cosmopolitan in his views, Locke made sure that his list of contributors included men and women, blacks and whites, young and old. Outnumbered by male writers, six women are represented in *The New Negro*; however, only two offered essays — Jessie Fauset on drama, and Elise Johnson McDougald on "The Task of Negro Womanhood." The whites were Albert C. Barnes, the eccentric millionaire art collector from Pennsylvania, who would eventually leave his extraordinary collection in the control of predominantly black Lincoln University; Paul Kellogg of *Survey* magazine; and Melville J. Herskovits, one of the leading students and associates of the renowned anthropologist Franz Boas of Columbia University and future author of *The Myth of the Negro Past* (1941). Several of the poets, including Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, and Bruce Nugent, were under 25 years of age; men like Du Bois and Kelly Miller were close to or just past 60. Locke brought them all together.

Notable Absentee

His contributors amounted almost to a Who's Who among black American artists, intellectuals, and scholars. Perhaps the only notable absentee was the independent historian Carter G. Woodson, founder of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and Culture in Washington, D.C. Among the younger writers Locke missed virtually no one who had published with any distinction thus far, and virtually all of those selected went on to achieve a measure of fame. He was too early for Arna Bontemps, Wallace Thurman, and Nella Larsen, but just in time for the fledgling Zora Neale Hurston. Among the older writers he included virtually everyone of the old guard, from William Stanley Braithwaite, the poet, critic, and anthologist; James Wel-

don Johnson, poet, novelist, lyricist; the educator Kelly Miller; and the renowned Du Bois, whose accomplishments as historian, sociologist, novelist, biographer, and crusading editor made him almost without question the preeminent African-American intellectual of his age — or perhaps any age. Du Bois' presence was important. In many respects, *The New Negro* was the first literary attempt to revise the collective portrait of black America painted by him in his own epochal collection *The Souls of Black Folk* in 1903.

Uniting these men and women was their growing sense of certainty that black America was on the verge of something like a second Emancipation — this time not by government mandate but by the will and accomplishments of the people, especially the artists and intellectuals. The migration away from the hated South, with its bitter legacy of slavery and segregation, to the greatest city in the nation, and the settlement of blacks in an excellently located district that boasted the finest housing stock that blacks had ever been allowed to inhabit (according to James Weldon Johnson), seemed to augur a new day for African Americans. Sharing in the prosperity of the nation as a whole, and enjoying many of the freedoms of the era that followed World War I, blacks responded with a new confidence in themselves and their abilities. As reflected in magazines and newspapers, as well as on the stage and in nightclubs, literature, music, and the other arts began to flourish virtually as never before. The national success on Broadway of the all-black musical play *Shuffle Along* in 1921 brought black song and dance into a new prominence. In 1923 came the first novel (if Jean Toomer's blend of fiction, poetry, and drama in *Cane* can be called a novel) by an African American to appear from a major publishing

house in over 10 years. Efforts by organizations such as the NAACP and the National Urban League underscored the

quest for a degree of progress that would transform the situation of blacks in the United States.

It is fair to say that, in the face of racial "science," most of the contributors to the volume accepted the notion of black racial and cultural inferiority compared to the highest standards of European civilization. Most also believed, however, that the African race was on the move forward, that politically, economically, and culturally, peoples of African descent around the world were engaged in the first stages of a transformation that would eventually lead to independence from Europe. Africa, now colonized by Europe, would eventually be free. Blacks in the United States and the Caribbean, the major centers of the African diaspora, would liberate themselves from the consequences of centuries of slavery and quasi-slavery. Liberal whites would aid in this movement.

Whites were probably the major target of *The New Negro* and efforts like it. Through the display of black sensitivity, intelligence, and artistic versatility, it was believed, whites would come to a new understanding of the humanity of African Americans and help to accelerate social change.

Accordingly, Locke's central aim was to produce a book, as he says in his "Foreword," that would be "of" rather than "about" the Negro. Thus he decided to concentrate not on

statistics of sociology or treatises on history but on "self-expression and the forces and motives of self-determination. So far as he is culturally articulate, we shall let the Negro speak for himself."

As carefully produced and as influential as *The New Negro* was, the volume is in no way exempt from criticism. In recent years, several of Locke's editorial decisions and pre-

He was dean of the movement and editor of the volume that defined its spirit.



Alain Locke
1886-1954

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dispositions, not to say prejudices, have been called into question by critics and scholars. In his highly regarded study of the Harlem Renaissance *When Harlem Was In Vogue* (1981), David Levering Lewis has challenged not only the idea of Locke's centrality to the movement but also the general wisdom of what Lewis identifies as Locke's key assumption — that the race's "more immediate hope rests in the reevaluation by white and black alike of the Negro in terms of his artistic endowments and cultural contributions, past and prospective." Calling this idea "irresponsibly delusional," Lewis traces its impact on Locke's design. "Eurocentric to the tip of his cane," he sums up, "Locke sought to graft abstractions from German, Irish, Italian, Jewish, and Slovakian nationalisms to Afro-America. . . . It was heady stuff, but the times were intoxicated with optimism."

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The decision to emphasize the arts at the expense of sociology and history remains controversial. The book that resulted certainly gained in a certain way by its emphasis on literature and painting; however, it probably forfeited at once, for the same reason, its implied claims to speak definitively about African-American culture, its past, present, and future. A sense of the economic underpinnings of society is lacking, as is a sense of history as being in large part economic history. Du Bois is allowed to raise this point in his essay "The Negro Mind Reaches Out," where he remarks that the major problem of the century was not race, as he had once claimed, but "what we call Labor, the problem of allocating work and income in the tremendous and increasingly intricate world-embracing industrial machine that our civilization built."

But this point of view is seldom seen elsewhere in *The New Negro*. In spite of its successes, the volume did not prepare its readers for the Crash of 1929 and the ensuing Depression, which effectively destroyed the Harlem Renaissance.

The New Negro exudes a sense of racial pride and yet also ignores the most important mass movement in black America of the 1920s, which was led by Marcus Garvey. How one could write about a new spirit of Negro assertiveness

in the 1920s without extended reference to Garvey is a puzzle. But one could not imagine Garvey and Du Bois, bitter public antagonists, coexisting in the same book; and Locke's loyalties, such as they were, lay with the NAACP, with its integrated but largely white leadership at that time, and not with the defiantly black Universal Negro Improvement Association of Garvey, with its Back-to-Africa slogan.

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Radical socialism, too, is given short shrift in *The New Negro*. A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen, for example, who had edited the monthly magazine *The Messenger* since 1917, and who certainly had helped to get the new movement started by publishing poetry and fiction remarkably like that in *The Crisis* and *Opportunity*, were also not included. As David Lewis has written, "Harlem was turning its back on Garveyism and socialism to gawk in perplexed admiration at Phi Beta Kappa poets [a reference to Countee Cullen], university-trained painters [such as Aaron Douglas], concertizing musicians [Paul Robeson and Roland Hayes], and novel-writing civil rights officials [Walter White]." *The New Negro* helped Harlem turn its back even more firmly on radical social movements.

Important, too, is the process of smoothening required to make all these artists and intellectuals conform to Locke's perception of a new breed of Negroes in a brave new world of Negro-ness. In many ways, the avant-garde Jean Toomer was out of place in *The New Negro* — certainly Toomer himself thought so, having already protested to a number of people that (despite his black ancestry) he was not a Negro and resented being referred to as one. Bruce Nugent was far more concerned with his gay identity than with his sense of race or ethnicity; but the question of homosexuality is never raised in this text — the age would not have permitted it. And the definition of New Negroism that would include both Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen would have to be elastic. In 1925, Cullen, conservative in this techniques and a conscious imitator of British romantic poets, had already formed the basic antipathy that would lead him to question the achievement of Hughes' jazz and blues poems in *The Weary Blues* (1926). In turn, in June 1926, Hughes would open his most powerful essay,

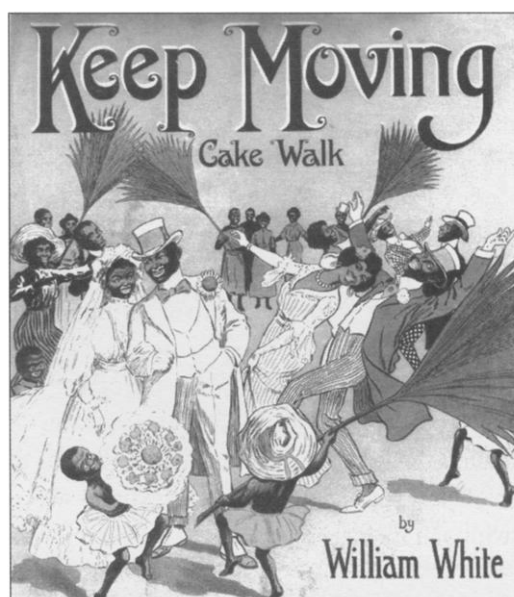
“The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” with a thinly veiled attack on Cullen for wishing to be known as a poet who happened to be Negro, rather than a Negro poet.

Locke’s editing practices and his craftiness infuriated some of his contributors. Jean Toomer would write that Locke “tricked and misused me” in making the book. Claude McKay declared that the editor’s treatment of him “destroyed every vestige of intellectual and fraternal understanding” between them. (McKay was incensed, for example, when Locke timidly, and without permission, changed the title of his poem “The White House” to “White Houses” in order to avoid possible repercussions.) Perhaps the most aggrieved contributor was Jessie Fauset. The pivotal Civic Club dinner in 1924 had been arranged to mark the publication of her first novel, *There Is Confusion*. However, she had seen her achievement glossed over, and Locke hailed as the dean of the movement although she had done far more, as literary editor of *The Crisis*, than he to discover and nurture the younger writers.

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In spite of its shortcomings, however, the achievement of *The New Negro* was real. In this way it reflects the mixed record of the Harlem Renaissance itself. In spite of the fact that the movement was short lived, and many of its works and talents of less than stellar quality, the Renaissance succeeded in laying the foundations for all subsequent depictions in poetry, fiction, and drama of the modern African-American experience; and the same claim can be made even more strongly of its music, in the compositions and performances of artists such as Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, and Bessie Smith. The central success of the anthology is its creation of a noble but credible portrait of black America just as black America was entering the modern world. The energy and joy in *The New Negro* have political purposes; they are subversive, and thus come tinged with a quality not unlike a thrilling psychological neuroticism, which serves to authenticate the modernist identity of the New Negro. Whatever one may say of the book, one does not find it antiquarian, or a period piece. Even today, it remains a reliable index to the black American sensibility at that point where art and politics meet, as well as to the events in Harlem and elsewhere among blacks in the 1920s. JBBHE

Ralph Ellison on Duke Ellington’s Cake Walk



The cake walk became a national phenomenon in the late 1800s. These were the faddish and daffy years when whites in blackface performed the dance in the popular minstrel shows that mocked the life of Negroes in the plantation South.

But the original cake walk was in fact a parody in which black people poked fun at the pretentious and dandified style of white society. Blacks who were known as “walkers” would strut about in their best clothes with pails of water on their heads so that their upper bodies would remain absolutely rigid. The winner was the dancer who spilled the least amount of water. Often ignorant of the fact that they were the objects of ridicule, whites wagered on the outcome of the cake walk competition.

In 1969 it was widely expected that Duke Ellington would be awarded the Pulitzer Prize in music. When he was denied the award, Ellington responded, “Fate is being kind to me. Fate doesn’t want me to be too famous too young.”

When Ralph Ellison heard of the Duke’s reply, he remarked that Ellington’s quip was “as mocking of our double standards, hypocrisies, and pretensions as the dancing of those slaves who, looking through the windows of a plantation manor house from the yard, imitated the steps so gravely performed by their masters within and then added to them their own special flair, burlesquing the white folks and then going on to force the steps into a choreography uniquely their own.

“The whites, looking out at the activity in the yard, thought that they were being flattered by imitation and were amused at the incongruity of tattered blacks dancing courtly steps, while missing completely the fact that before their eyes a European cultural form was becoming Americanized, undergoing a metamorphosis through the mocking activity of people partially sprung from Africa.

“So blissfully unaware, the whites laughed while the blacks danced out their mocking reply.”

God Sends Sunday was the last book of the Harlem Renaissance. It was published in 1931 by one of New York's major publishers. It appeared in bookstores more than a decade after the start of the concentrated upsurge in artistic creation by African Americans, centered in Harlem, that came to be known as the Harlem Renaissance. He began teaching at the Harlem Academy, and he put himself into the middle of Harlem's artistic tumult through friendships with other writers and a string of prizes that he won for his poetry in 1926 and 1927. But the stock market collapsed in late 1929, and the economic disorder that evolved into the Great Depression began to spread. Bontemps continued teaching while he was writing what would become God Sends Sunday. The Harlem Renaissance ushered in a time of many renewed firsts for African Americans in publishing: Langston Hughes, a central figure of the movement, published his first poem, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," in the June 1921 of *The Crisis*; two years later, Jean Toomer's *Cane* was the first book of fiction (though it is more accurate to deem it a hybrid). In his book, Cullen discussed his own and the collective African-American identity. Some of his strongest poems question the benevolence of a creator who has bestowed a race with such mixed blessings. His book was soon followed by Hughes's *The Weary Blues*, a lyrical text whose sounds and cadences moved with the rhythms of the jazz and blues he was exposed to in his daily life in Harlem.