Foreword to *The New Negro, An Interpretation*

1. This volume aims to document the New Negro culturally and socially,—to register the transformations of the inner and outer life of the Negro in America that have so significantly taken place in the last few years. There is ample evidence of a New Negro in the latest phases of social change and progress, but still more in the internal world of the Negro mind and spirit. Here in the very heart of the folk-spirit are the essential forces, and folk interpretation is truly vital and representative only in terms of these. Of all the voluminous literature on the Negro, so much is mere external view and commentary that we may warrantably say that nine-tenths of it is about the Negro rather than of him, so that it is the Negro problem rather than the Negro that is known and mooted in the general mind. We turn therefore in the other direction to the elements of truest social portraiture, and discover in the artistic self-expression of the Negro to-day a new figure on the national canvas and a new force in the foreground of affairs. Whoever wishes to see the Negro in his essential traits, must seek the enlightenment of that self-portraiture which the present developments of Negro culture are offering. In these pages, without ignoring either the fact that there are important interactions between the national and the race life, or that the attitude of America toward the Negro is as important a factor as the attitude of the Negro toward America, we have nevertheless concentrated upon 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.

2. Yet the New Negro must be seen in the perspective of a New World, and especially of a New America. Europe seething in a dozen centers with emergent nationalities, Palestine full of a renascent Judaism-these are no more alive with the progressive forces of our era than the quickened centers of the lives of black folk. America seeking a new spiritual expansion and artistic maturity, trying to found an American literature, a national art, and a national music implies a Negro-American culture seeking the same satisfactions and objectives. Separate as it may be in color and substance, the culture of the Negro is of a pattern integral with the times and with its cultural setting. The achievements of the present generation have eventually made this apparent. Liberal minds to-day cannot be asked to peer with sympathetic curiosity into the darkened Ghetto of a segregated race life. That was yesterday. Nor must they expect to find a mind and soul bizarre and alien as the mind of a savage, or even as naive and refreshing as the mind of the peasant or the child. That too was yesterday, and the day before. Now that there is cultural adolescence
3. Until recently, except talent here and there, the main stream of this development has run in the special channels of "race literature" and "race journalism." Particularly as a literary movement, it has gradually gathered momentum in the effort and output of such progressive race periodicals as the Crisis under the editorship of Dr. Du Bois and more lately, through the quickening encouragement of Charles Johnson, in the brilliant pages of Opportunity, a Journal of Negro Life. But more and more the creative talents of the race have been taken up into the general journalistic, literary and artistic agencies, as the wide range of the acknowledgments of the material here collected will in itself be sufficient to demonstrate. Recently in a project of The Survey Graphic, whose Harlem Number of March, 1925, has been taken by kind permission as the nucleus of this book, the whole movement was presented as it is epitomized in the progressive Negro community of the American metropolis. Enlarging this stage we are now presenting the New Negro in a national and even international scope. Although there are few centers that can be pointed out approximating Harlem's significance, the full significance of that even is a racial awakening on a national and perhaps even a world scale.

4. That is why our comparison is taken with those nascent movements of folk-expression and self-determination which are playing a creative part in the world today. The galvanizing shocks and reactions of the last few years are making by subtle processes of internal reorganization a race out of its own disunited and apathetic elements. A race experience penetrated in this way invariably flowers. As in India, in China, in Egypt, Ireland, Russia, Bohemia, Palestine and Mexico, we are witnessing the resurgence of a people: it has aptly been said,—"For all who read the signs aright, such a dramatic flowering of a new race-spirit is taking place close at home-among American Negroes."

5. Negro life is not only establishing new contacts and founding new centers, it is finding a new soul. There is a fresh spiritual and cultural focusing. We have, as the heralding sign, an unusual outburst of creative expression. There is a renewed race-spirit that consciously and proudly sets itself apart. Justifiably then, we speak of the offerings of this book embodying these ripening forces as culled from the first fruits of the Negro Renaissance.

ALAIN LOCKE.

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Alain LeRoy Locke

Alain LeRoy Locke is heralded as the “Father of the Harlem Renaissance” for his publication in 1925 of *The New Negro*—an anthology of poetry, essays, plays, music and portraiture by white and black artists. Locke is best known as a theorist, critic, and interpreter of African-American literature and art. He was also a creative and systematic philosopher who developed theories of value, pluralism and cultural relativism that informed and were reinforced by his work on aesthetics. Locke saw black aesthetics quite differently than some of the leading Negro intellectuals of his day; most notably W. E. B. Du Bois, with whom he disagreed about the appropriate social function of Negro artistic pursuits. Du Bois thought it was a role and responsibility of the Negro artist to offer a representation of the Negro and black experience which might help in the quest for social uplift. Locke criticized this as “propaganda” (AOP 12) and argued that the primary responsibility and function of the artist is to express his own individuality, and in doing that to communicate something of universal human appeal.

Locke was a distinguished scholar and educator and during his lifetime an important philosopher of race and culture. Principal among his contributions in these areas was the development of the notion of “ethnic race”, Locke’s conception of race as primarily a matter of social and cultural, rather than biological, heredity. Locke was in contemporary parlance a racial revisionist, and held the somewhat controversial and paradoxical view that it was often in the interests of groups to think and act as members of a “race” even while they consciously worked for the destruction or alteration of pernicious racial categories. Racial designations were for Locke incomprehensible apart from an understanding of the specific cultural and historical contexts in which they grew up. A great deal of Locke’s philosophical thinking and writing in the areas of pluralism, relativism and democracy are aimed at offering a more lucid understanding of cultural or racial differences and prospects for more functional methods of navigating contacts between different races and cultures.