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## The Philosophy of Alain Locke

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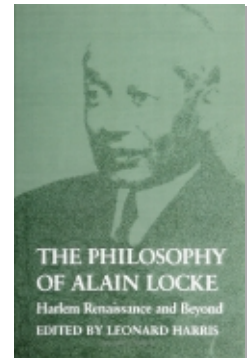
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## 19. Frontiers of Culture

A draft of this article was presented at the thirty-fifth annual conclave of Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity on December 28, 1949, at Rankin Memorial Chapel, Howard University. Locke's conception of culture is a set of idioms, styles, forms, and temperaments that are open to adoption but are likely to be developed and sustained by a given group. An integrationist, and not an assimilationist, Locke provides in this short article a critique of the New Negro movement and an offering for the future. That offering relies on a "democratic" rather than "aristocratic" notion of culture. In brief form, Locke presents his view on the relationship of social race, culture, identity, and democracy.

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## Frontiers of Culture

I appreciate deeply the very kind introduction and tribute; I also appreciate the opportunity of appearing on this well-planned and inspiring cultural session of the Thirty-fifth Anniversary Conclave of the *Fraternity*. The excellent musical program has provided pure and inspiring pleasure; my own remarks cannot hope to be so unalloyed.

My assigned topic, *The Frontiers of Culture*, was doubtless supposed to tie in appropriately and harmoniously. I hope it may but I warn you that I shall have to set my own key and I am not so sure how harmonious that will be. Certainly it will not be in the traditional close harmony of "barber-shop" tonality so characteristic of old-fashioned fraternal reunions. Neither in time nor place are we assembled tonight "by the fire, by the fire; let it glow, let it glow" with its associated atmosphere of smug self-praise and sentimental satisfaction. The cup of fellowship comes on later; so there is no excuse for mawkishness at this hour. It was suggested that I discuss some of the vistas of modern art in relation to culture. I shall try in doing so to speak my own mind soberly and truthfully; yet certainly with no unusual sense of authority or finality.

### WHAT IS CULTURE?

First a word or so about culture itself. It was once a favorite theme-song word with me. Now I wince at its mention and frankly would like to keep silent on the subject—so great have the misconceptions and misuses been. I recall how focal the world culture was for many movements I have been interested and involved in. In fact, I may have had something to do with its appearance in this *Fraternity's* motto: "Culture for Service, Service for Humanity" (I refuse to recall how responsible). We may have thought we knew what it all meant. God knows there was little enough culture either locally or nationally in those distant days; there is still far too little now, as I shall try later to explain. Do not be unduly alarmed: I haven't a tub or a lantern backstage, though as I warned you, I cannot be too pleasant at the expense of the truth as I see it.

Fortunately, one can live without culture, which accounts for the survival of so much both in the past and the present. But I do be-

lieve that, though not vital, culture is nevertheless an essential. In fact, after its achievement, it always had and always will rank first; though I am commonsense enough to admit readily the basic importance of bread, with or without butter. I, too, confess that at one time of my life I may have been guilty of thinking of culture as cake contrasted with bread. Now I know better. Real, essential culture is baked into our daily bread or else it isn't truly culture. In short, I am willing to stand firmly on the side of the democratic rather than the aristocratic notion of culture and have so stood for many years, without having gotten full credit, however. I realize the inevitability of such misunderstanding; what price Harvard and Oxford and their traditional snobisms! Culture is so precious that it is worth even this price, if we can have it only at the high cost of nurturing and conserving it on the upper levels of caste and privilege. But one should not have to pay that exorbitant price for it.

Accordingly, when the "culture clause" was incorporated in the motto of this *Fraternity*, there was the ambition to propagate the culture democratically, to help it permeate ordinary living, to root it in the soil of the group life, to profess it as a folk rather than a class inheritance. It was a daring notion—this of trying to carry culture to the people and have it leaven the lump with the yeast and richness of humane and gracious living. Behind this aim there was necessarily the hope and expectation that a title of leadership could be induced to dedicate itself to the services of the masses and that their richer insight and vision would thus be multiplied a thousand-fold throughout the land.

#### THE NEW NEGRO NOW

In the context of the life of the Negro there was also the ambitious prospect of developing in areas of lessened competition and handicap, superiorities meriting and capable of winning effective and lasting recognition both for the group and the individual exponents of culture. You will pardon passing mention of the movement that a decade or so after the founding of this *Fraternity* became known, a little too well known, as "The New Negro." Far be it from me to disclaim or disparage a brain child. But in my view, if a "New Negro" is not born and reborn every half generation or so, some-

thing is radically wrong, not only with the society in which we live but with us also. According to this calendar, we should have had at least two "New Negroes" since 1925. Be that as it may, the one of 1925 that I am both proud and ashamed of having had something to do with, failed to accomplish all that it could and should have realized. This does not mean that it accomplished nothing. It does mean, however, that because of a false conception of culture it fell short of its potentialities. This is why I bring this matter up this evening. Having signed that "New Negro's" birth certificate, I assume some right to participate in the post-mortem findings. In sum and substance, that generation of cultural effort and self-expression died of a fatal misconception of the true nature of culture.

Both the creative talent of that day and its audience were infected with sound and abortive attitudes: they made culture a market-place commodity and out of this shallow and sordid misunderstanding did it to death prematurely. Two childish maladies of the spirit—exhibitionism and racial chauvinism—analogues one may say of St. Vitus dance and whooping cough, became epidemic and the basic health of the movement was thereby sapped. Permit me to say that both these attitudes, fatal to any soundness in culture, were disavowed by most of the responsible leaders but to no avail. Once the movement took on public momentum and offered that irresistible American lure of a vogue of success, a ready means of quick recognition, an easy, cheap road to vicarious compensation, this dangerous infection was on. True, it was a typically American misapprehension, a characteristic American popular abuse but it brought about lamentably a Negro-American tragedy of the first magnitude. Permit me to say, further, that it need not have been. From the beginning racial chauvinism was supposed to be ruled out; five of the collaborators of *The New Negro* were whites whose readily accepted passport was competent understanding of the cultural objectives of the movement and creative participation in them. The substance of Negro life was emphasized, not its complexion. Similarly, it was not promulgated as a movement for cliques and coteries or for the parasitic elite but a movement for folk culture and folk representation, eventually even for folk participation. Ultimately, it was hoped, it would be for, by and of the people. It was democratically open to all who might be interested on the basis of collaboration and mutual understand-

ing. Some of the most effective and welcomed spokesmen were not Negro. Negro self-expression, moreover, was expected to include the saving salt of self-criticism. It was never intended that so vital a movement should be plagued with profiteering parasites almost to the point of losing decent public presentability. And above all, it was realized that no considerable creative advance could carry the dead weight of those hangers-on whose participation was merely in terms of keeping up with the cultural Joneses.

I say these things, however, in a constructive mood, since my emphasis from now on is not to be on the somewhat wasted past but on the vital present and the promiscuous future. One important characteristic of the frontiers of culture is that they are always moving (not necessarily forward but at least always moving). I welcome an opportunity to apply the principle of the criticism I have just made as constructively as I can to that present and to the future. It is no new principle, as I hope I have made clear; but it does have a new chance of test and application.

#### GHETTO CULTURE

Let us take for granted, if it hasn't been conclusively proven, that culture has no color, that although Negro life and experience should have and are having increased and increasingly effective expression, there is no monopoly, no special proprietary rights, no peculiar credit and no particular needs or benefits about culture.

(In my definition of culture I would include science as well as the arts.) On that basis, then, all we should be sanely concerned about is freer participation and fuller collaboration in the varied activities of the cultural life and that with regard both to the consumer and the producer roles of cultural creation. Democracy in culture means equally wide-scale appreciation and production of the things of the spirit.

Doubtless you will grant these cardinal principles in principle; with even, I dare say, a certain amount of ready acceptance. But follow the corollaries and wince, as well we all may, at their consistent consequences. I shall point out only a few of them. The most obvious, as well as the most important, is that there is no room for any consciously maintained racialism in matters cultural. The gen-

eration to which I belong had to do more than its normal share of defensive, promotive propaganda for the Negro but it is my greatest pride that I have never written or edited a book on a chauvinistically racist basis. Seldom has farsighted Negro scholarship or artistry proceeded on such a basis and today racialism cannot and should not be tolerated. We can afford to be culturally patriotic but never culturally jingoistic.

Moreover, situations are changing fast; movement after movement in its progressive vanguard takes on not even the working principle of the interracial but the aegis of full integration. Let us ask boldly and bravely, what then are the justifications of separate Negro churches, of separate Negro fraternities, schools, colleges? One of the wisest and best statements that I have read recently is that from a colleague and former student—Professor E. Franklin Frazier—who in speaking of Howard, his alma mater, said in effect that its best future goal might well be to “lose its racial identity and become simply a great university.” The logic of increasing integration demands, of course, active cooperation and action on our part; we must of necessity do our share in the liquidation of segregation and all forms of separatism. (I was not aware until after this was written of the very recent action on the part of the Conclave to declare *Phi Beta Sigma* open to all without regard to race. Congratulations!)

All this is not going to be easy, for it means restaking considerable vested interests and devaluating considerable double-standard currency. But this is as right as it is inevitable. Competition will be harder and swifter but healthier and fairer for all that. Fraternity will be more rational and be based on commonalities of interest. Attitudes must comparably become more objective, less partisan. Counter-bias must be canceled out and psychologically neutralized.

#### NEW FILMS

Now in a final page or so I come to what I presume the program chairman had in mind when he gave me the assignment: *Frontiers of Culture*. This is the new frontier and *integration* is its best single caption. Its conquest means collaboration and fraternization, at a considerable present cost and effort but at eventual gain and enlightenment. Had I more time at my disposal I could document more specifically from personal experiences both its costs and its long-

term rewards. Suffice it to point out some present-day instances and vindications of cultural integration. The National Board of Review of Motion Pictures recently announced its 1948 citations. Of nine selections on an international basis, three were films of Negro life and situation, *The Quiet One*, *Intruder in the Dust* and *Home of the Brave*. The first came out of an essentially Negro situation, what was once a corrective school for Negro juvenile delinquents, which fortunately had recently been broadened out to an interracial clientele. This made all the more human and significant the star role of the Negro lad who was the protagonist. *Intruder in the Dust* emerges through Hollywood from Oxford, Mississippi, where at the wise insistence of the author, William Faulkner, and the brave good sense of the director, it was filmed by a mixed cast, with local crowd and bit-part recruits. Here is a truly new horizon and a portentous conquest of a new psychological cultural frontier. And *Home of the Brave*, I hope you have noticed, was not a pro-Negro undertaking at all, despite its hero, but basically an anti-prejudice polemic. Time being short, I make a particular point of these symbolic examples of the new trends I am discussing and trying to vindicate though they are self-vindicating to any open-minded observer. Note that these are films and, therefore, in the most democratic mass medium we have, short of radio. When film and radio begin to change, we can have some realistic hope of a changed American public mind.

When the mass media begin to show signs of social enlightenment and cultural integrity, I repeat, there is a new light on the horizon. First, because they go so far with their message and their reformatory influence. But close second to that, they are so accessible to all. Even in the dark zones of segregated living, if enlightened leadership will only take upon itself to praise, support and circulate them. The cultural move of prime importance today is to turn these great and almost limitless resources to the mass media of radio, films and television to the ends of truer, more objective, mutual understanding and let that become the leaven of a people's culture. The breadth of participation which they make possible happily carries along also that high quality of art and insight which befits true culture. I am, of course, not ignoring the force or role of the more traditional arts, where, as a matter of fact, the new values and attitudes must first experimentally express themselves. *Intruder in the Dust*, for example, was an ultra-literary novel before it became a Hollywood



film. However, if work of fresh insight and great artistry is to remain within such limited confines, the hope of a high democratic culture would be indefinitely below the horizon of our time.

#### CULTURAL DEMOCRACY

But I cannot end on too optimistic a note, even though I believe firmly that a people's culture of high grade will eventually come about somehow, sometime, somewhere. Under conditions that permit it, it does not necessarily follow that a culture with breadth and depth will automatically or inevitably realize itself. Where Town Hall and Senator Claghorn, Jack Armstrong and Quiz Kids, Hill-billy and the Philharmonic simultaneously crowd the ether and are to be had just for the turn of the switch and the dial, it doesn't follow that the average selectivity will be right. But fortunately that issue is a matter of education and the general public taste rather than a mere question of racial condition or conditioning. There is, however, that special enemy, ghetto-mindedness, which may well give us more than momentary concern. So we still have two arch enemies of mass culture to fight and conquer—Phillistinism and prejudice—class bias and group bias.

I know this discussion has not been altogether pleasant going but prose must be conceded its utilitarian uses and obligations. As serious-minded Americans we must all be thinking gravely and rigorously about the present state of the national culture and mindful of the special and yet unrealized demands of culture in a democratic setting. Perhaps it is truism but it is worth repeating that a few present liberal trends with the radical changes of popular attitude potentially involved are projecting helpful incentives toward a more democratic American culture. So far is the emancipation of the public mind from prejudice and group stereotypes, this may be properly regarded as, in large part, a new Negro contribution to the broadening of the nation's culture. But for us as Negroes, it is even more important to realize how necessary it is to share understandingly and participate creatively in these promising enlargements of the common mind and spirit. To be democratic is as important as it is to be treated democratically; democracy is a two-way process and accomplishment.