

THE NEGRO RENAISSANCE AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE

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There is a double presumptuousness about this presentation: It is not only a sort of history, constructed in large part from memory; but it is presented as history in the presence of rigid and exacting historians who regard the proper and unchallengeable enlightenment of future generations as their sacred trust.

There are, however, some compensating factors for this boldness: We are, in a sense, memorializing Alain Locke, an important maker of history who is himself inadequately recorded. And while some of the fragments of memory and experience may be compounded with a prejudiced aura of friendship, this fact itself from a collateral contemporary may have some value.

As a sociologist rather than an historian, it is expected that particular events would be viewed in the light of broader social processes, thus offering greater illumination to what has come to be recognized as a dramatic period in our national history.

American Negroes in the 1920's were just a little more than a half century on their rugged course to citizenship. This period was the comet's tail of a great cultural ferment in the nation, the "melting pot" era, a period of the ascendancy of unbridled free enterprise, of the open beginnings of class struggle and new and feeble mutterings of self-conscious labor; of muckrakers and social settlements, of the open and unabashed acceptance of "inferior and superior races and civilizations." Likewise, the era just preceding the 1920's was a period of the sullen and frustrated gropings of the agrarian and culturally sterile South, in its "colonial" dependence upon the industrial North. It had been left in indifference to settle its problem of democracy in its own way.

In the wake of Reconstruction in the South there had been "for the Negro, almost total political disfranchisement, economic disinheritorance, denial of, or rigid limitation of, educational opportunity, complete racial segregation, with a gaudy racial philosophy to defend it, cultural isolation with its bitter fruit of inner personal poison, followed by mass migrations and revolt, and the tortuous struggle to slough off the heavy handicaps in order to achieve more completely a new freedom.

These were a part of the backdrop of what we have called the "Negro Renaissance," that sudden and altogether phenomenal outburst of emotional expression, unmatched by any comparable period in American or Negro American history.

It is well to point out that this was not a crisis and trauma affecting only the Negroes. It was fundamentally and initially a national problem.

James Weldon Johnson, who, with W. E. B. Du Bois emerged in the period just preceding the epochal 1920's, recognized this relationship and said this:

A good part of white America frequently asks the question, "What shall we do with the Negro?" In asking the question it completely ignores the fact that the Negro is doing something with himself, and also the equally important fact that the Negro all the while is doing something with America.

Before Johnson there had been only a few Negroes capable of articulating the inner emotional turmoil of the race in full consciousness of its role in a nation that was itself in great stress.

Frederick Douglass had been a powerful oratorical force for the abolition of slavery, convincing to a sector of the nation in his own superiority as a person. Booker T. Washington had been a social strategist, speaking to the nation from the heavy racial miasma of the deep South, with wise words of economic counsel and even wiser words of tactical racial strategy. He parried the blows of the skeptical ones and the demagogues, who spoke hopelessly and menacingly of the destiny of the millions of ex-slaves in the South, still very largely unlettered and sought the armistice of tolerance during a vital period of regional gestation, as he negotiated with the industrial strength and benevolence of the North that was in being and the industrial dreams of the South, as yet unrealized.

W. E. B. Du Bois, brilliant, highly cultured, and racially sensitive, wrote with such bitter contempt for the American racial system that his flaming truths were invariably regarded as incendiary. He got attention but scant acceptance. And there was the poet Paul Laurence Dunbar who, like Booker T. Washington, came at a dark period, when with the release of the white working classes the independent struggle of Negroes for existence had become almost overwhelming in its severity. Dunbar caught the picture of the Negro in his pathetic and contagiously humorous moods and invested him with a new humanity. He embellished a stereotype and made likeable, in a homely way, the simple, joyous creature that was the mass Southern Negro, with the soft musical dialect and infectious rhythm. William Dean Howells, in an article in *Harper's Magazine*, hailed Dunbar as the first Negro to feel Negro life esthetically and express it lyrically. But in his candid moments, Dunbar confessed to Johnson that he resorted to dialect verse to gain a hearing and then nothing but his dialect verse would be accepted. He never got to the things he really wanted to do.

The acceptability of Dunbar's verse inspired many followers, including, for a brief spell, Johnson himself. The period of Johnson, however, was one that permitted bolder exploration and he turned forthrightly to poetry of race-consciousness. They were poems both of revelation and of protest. William Stanley Braithwaite was able to say of him that he brought the first intellectual substance to the context of poetry by Negroes, and a craftsmanship more precise and balanced than that of Dunbar. His Negro sermons symbolized the transition from the folk idiom to conscious artistic expression. In naive, non-dialect speech, they blend the rich imagery of the uneducated Negro minister with the finished skill of a cultured Negro poet. In a curiously fascinating way both style and content bespoke the meeting and parting of the old and new in Negro life in America.

The commentators even farther removed from today will be able to define more clearly the influence of these social and economic forces shortly after World War I, moving beneath the new mind of Negroes, which burst forth with freshness and vigor in an artistic "awakening." The first startlingly authentic note was sounded by Claude McKay, a Jamaican Negro living in America. If his was

a note of protest it came clear and unquivering. But it was more than a protest note; it was one of stoical defiance which held behind it a spirit magnificent and glowing. One poem, "If We Must Die," written at the most acute point of the industrialization of Negroes when sudden mass contact in the Northern states was flaming into riots, voiced for Negroes, where it did not itself create, a mood of stubborn defiance. It was reprinted in practically every Negro newspaper, and quoted wherever its audacious lines could be remembered. But McKay could also write lyrics utterly divorced from these singing daggers. "Spring in New Hampshire" is one of them. He discovered Harlem and found a language of beauty for his own world of color.

Her voice was like the sound of blended flutes
Blown by black players on a picnic day.

Jean Toomer flashed like a meteor across the sky, then sank from view. But in the brilliant moment of his flight he illuminated the forefield of this new Negro literature. *Cane*, a collection of verse and stories, appeared about two years ahead of its sustaining public mood. It was significantly a return of the son to the Southland, to the stark, natural beauties of its life and soil, a life deep and strong, and a virgin soil.

More than artist, he was an experimentalist, and this last quality carried him away from what was, perhaps, the most astonishingly brilliant beginning of any Negro writer of his generation.

With Countee Cullen came a new generation of Negro singers. Claude McKay had brought a strange geographical background to the American scene which enabled him to escape a measure of the peculiar social heritage of the American Negro which similarly lacked the impedimenta of an inhibiting tradition. He relied upon nothing but his own sure competence and art; one month found three literary magazines carrying his verse simultaneously, a distinction not to be spurned by any young poet. Then came his first volume, *Color*. He brought an uncannily sudden maturity and classic sweep, a swift grace and an inescapable beauty of style and meaning. The spirit of the transplanted African moved through his music to a new definition—relating itself boldly to its past and present.

Lord, not for what I saw in flesh or bone
Of fairer men; not raised on faith alone;
Lord, I will live persuaded by mine own.
I cannot play the recalcitrant to these;
My spirit has come home, that sailed the doubtful seas.

He spoke, not for himself alone, but for the confident generation out of which he came. White gods were put aside and in their place arose the graces of a race he knew.

Her walk is like the replica
Of some barbaric dance
Wherein the soul of Africa
Is winged with arrogance.

and again:

That brown girl's swagger gives a twitch
To beauty like a queen.

No brief quotations can describe this power, this questioning of life and even God; the swift arrow thrusts of irony curiously mingled with admiration; the self-reliance and bold pride of race; the thorough repudiation of the double standard of literary judgment. He may have marvelled "at this curious thing to make a poet black and bid him sing," but in his *Heritage* he voiced the half-religious, half-challenging spirit of an awakened generation. "He will be remembered," said the *Manchester Guardian*, "as one who contributed to his age some of its loveliest lyric poetry."

Langston Hughes, at twenty-four, had published two volumes of verse. No Negro writer so completely symbolizes the new emancipation of the Negro mind. His was a poetry of gorgeous colors, of restless brooding, of melancholy, of disillusionment:

We should have a land of sun
Of gorgeous sun,
And a land of fragrant water
Where the twilight
Is a soft bandana handkerchief
And not this land where life is cold.

Always there is, in his writing, a wistful undertone, a quiet sadness. That is why, perhaps, he could speak so tenderly of the broken lives of prostitutes, the inner weariness of painted "jazz-hounds" and the tragic emptiness beneath the glamour and noise of Harlem cabarets. His first volume, *The Weary Blues*, contained many moods; the second, *Fine Clothes to the Jew*, marked a final frank turning to the folk life of the Negro, a striving to catch and give back to the world the strange music of the unlettered Negro—his "Blues." If Cullen gave a classic beauty to the emotions of the race, Hughes gave a warm glow of meaning to their lives.

I return again more comfortably to my role as a sociologist in recording this period following the deep and disrupting crisis of a world war, with its uprooting of customs and people in which there developed two movements with clashing ideologies. There was reassertion with vigor of the old and shaken racial theories, with "racial purity clubs," intelligence tests "proving" the unchangeable inferiority of the Negro and other darker peoples, Congressional restrictions of immigration according to rigid racial formulas, race riots, dark foreboding prophecies of the over-running of the white race by the dark and unenlightened hordes from Asia and Africa, in Lothrop Stoddard's *Rising Tide of Color*.

These were only reflections of the new forces set loose in the world and finding expression in such mutterings as "India for the Indians," "A Free Ireland," self-determination for the smaller countries of the world.

For the just-emerging Negro who had freed himself geographically at least, there was much frustration. Perhaps the most dramatic phase of this was the

Garvey movement. Here were hundreds of thousands of Negroes who had reached the promised land of the North and found it a bitter Canaan. Having nowhere else to seek haven in America their dreams turned to Africa under the powerful stimulation of the master dream-maker from the West Indies, Marcus Garvey. They would find haven in their ancestral homeland, and be free from the insults and restrictions of this nation and England, on their chance for greatness. Provisionally there were created Dukes of the Nile, Princesses of Ethiopia, Lords of the Sudan, for the weary and frustrated people whose phantom freedom in the North was as empty as their explicit subordination in the South.

Of this desperate and pathetic mass fantasy I find an editorial note in *Opportunity Magazine* in 1923 in a mood of brooding concern for the present and apprehension for the future:

It is a symbol, a symptom, and another name for the new psychology of the American Negro peasantry—for the surge of race consciousness felt by Negroes throughout the world, the intelligent as well as the ignorant.

It is a black version of that same one hundred per cent mania that now afflicts white America, that emboldens the prophets of a Nordic blood renaissance, that picked up and carried the cry of self-determination for all people, India for the Indians, A Free Ireland.

The sources of this discontent must be remedied effectively and now, or the accumulating energy and unrest, blocked off from its dreams, will take another direction. Perhaps this also will be harmless, but who knows.

To this note of 1923 might be added the observation of what is happening in the Asian-African Conference in Bandung in 1955; what happened in this long interval to make it possible for twenty-nine nations that in 1923 were only muttering against colonial imperialism and now are speaking as free and independent nations collectively to preserve the peace and security of the world.

It was out of forces of such magnitude that the voices of the Negro Renaissance made themselves heard and felt. It was a period, not only of the quivering search for freedom but of a cultural, if not a social and racial emancipation. It was unabashedly self-conscious and race-conscious. But it was race-consciousness with an extraordinary facet in that it had virtues that could be incorporated into the cultural bloodstream of the nation.

This was the period of the discovery by these culturally emancipated Negroes of the unique esthetic values of African art, of beauty in things dark, a period of harkening for the whispers of greatness from a remote African past. This was the period of Kelly Miller's Sanhedrin to reassess the lost values and build upon newly-found strengths. It was the period of the reaching out of arms for other dark arms of the same ancestry from other parts of the world in a Pan-African Conference.

Significantly, Dr. W. E. B. Du Bois made his first talk after returning from the Pan-African Conference of 1923 at the first *Opportunity Magazine* dinner, sponsoring the fledgling writers of the new and lively generation of the 1920's.

The person recognized as the Dean of this youthful group was Alain Locke. A brilliant analyst trained in philosophy, and an esthete with a flair for art as

well as letters, he gave encouragement and guidance to these young writers as an older practitioner too sure of his craft to be discouraged by failure of full acceptance in the publishing media of the period.

Perhaps this is the point at which to add a previously unwritten note to the history of the period. The importance of the *Crisis Magazine* and *Opportunity Magazine* was that of providing an outlet for young Negro writers and scholars whose work was not acceptable to other established media because it could not be believed to be of standard quality despite the superior quality of much of it. What was necessary was a revolution and a revelation sufficient in intensity to disturb the age-old customary cynicisms. This function became associated with *Opportunity Magazine*.

Alain Locke recognized the role and possibility of this organ for creating such a revolution and associated himself with it, first as a reviewer and appraiser of various literary and sociological efforts and later as a contributor of major articles. As a by-product of his acquaintance with France, England and Germany through frequent visits, he wrote articles on current issues affecting Negroes from the perspective of Europe: "The Black Watch on the Rhine" (1921), "Apropos of Africa" (1924) and "Back Stage on European Imperialism" (1925). These articles were of such mature sophistication and insight that *Opportunity* offered to share their publication with the *Survey Magazine* to get a larger reading public. This magazine not only published the articles jointly with *Opportunity* but requested special ones for the *Survey* readers. Thus began an important relationship with the editor of the *Survey* and *Survey Graphic*.

The first *Opportunity* contest had Alain Locke's enthusiastic support and assistance. It was a dual venture in faith: faith in the creative potential of this generation in its new cultural freedom; and faith in the confidence of the nation's superior mentalities and literary creators. Both were justified. Locke's mellow maturity and esthetic sophistication were the warrant of confidence in the possibilities of these youth as well as the concrete evidence of accomplishment. The American scholars and writers who stretched out their arms to welcome these youthful aspirants to cultural equality were, without exception, the intellectual and spiritual leaders of the nation's cultural life and aspirations. They served as judges in these contests and in this role gave priceless assistance to this first and vital step in cultural integration. They were such great figures of American literary history as Van Wyck Brooks, Carl Van Doren, Eugene O'Neill, James Weldon Johnson, Paul Kellogg, Fannie Hurst, Robert Benchley, Zona Gale, Dorothy Canfield Fisher, Witter Bynner, W. E. B. Du Bois, Alexander Woolcott, John Macy, John Dewey, Carl Van Vechten, John Farrar and others.

They not only judged the poetry, essays, short stories and plays, but lent a supporting hand to their development in the best literary traditions.

At the first *Opportunity* dinner at the Civic Club in New York, Alain Locke was as a matter of course and appropriateness, moderator. It happens that this was one of the most significant and dramatic of the announcements of the renaissance. It marked the first public appearance of young creative writers in the

company of the greatest of the nation's creative writers and philosophers. Out of this meeting came some of the first publications in the best publication tradition.

I cannot refrain from quoting briefly a poem read at this dinner by Gwen-dolyn Bennett:

TO USWARD

And some of us have songs to sing
Of purple heat and fires
And some of us are solemn grown
With pitiful desires;
And there are those who feel the pull
Of seas beneath the skies;
And some there be who want to croon
Of Negro lullabies.
We claim no part with racial death
We want to sing the songs of birth.
And so we stand like ginger jars,
Like ginger jars bound round
With dust and age;
Like jars of ginger we are sealed
By nature's heritage.
But let us break the seal of years
With pungent thrusts of song
For there is joy in long dried tears
For whetted passions of a throng.

For specific identification, it should be noted that Frederick Allen of *Harper's Magazine* made a bid for Countee Cullen's poems for publication as soon as he had finished reading them at this *Opportunity* dinner; and Paul Kellogg of the *Survey* sought to carry the entire evening's readings in an issue of the magazine. This fumbling idea lead to the standard volume of the period, *The New Negro*.

Winold Reiss, a German artist of extraordinary skill in pictorial interpretation had just completed some drawings for the *Survey* of Sea Island Negroes. The publishers Boni and Boni who were interested in a book of Winold Reiss' drawings decided to carry the literary content along with the pictures. This literary content had been carried first in the *Survey Graphic* in a special issue under the editorship of Alain Locke. As a book it became *The New Negro*, also edited by Locke, and expanded from the special issue of the *Survey Graphic* to the proportions that now make brilliant history.

The impetus to publication backed by the first recognition of creative work in the best literary tradition, swept in many if not most of the budding writers of this period, in a fever of history-making expression.

Removed by two generations from slavery and in a new cultural environment, these Negro writers were less self-conscious and less interested in proving that they were just like white people; in their excursions into the fields of letters and art, they seemed to care less about what white people thought, or were likely to think, than about themselves and what they had to say. Relief from the stifling consciousness of being a problem had brought a certain superiority to

it. There was more candor, even in discussions of themselves about weaknesses, and on the very sound reasoning that unless you are truthful about your faults, you will not be believed when you speak about your virtues. The emancipation of these writers gave them freedom to return to the dynamic folk motives.

Carl Van Doren, in commenting upon this material said:

If the reality of Negro life is itself dramatic there are, of course, still other elements, particularly the emotional power, with which Negroes live—or at least to me they seem to live. What American literature needs at this moment is color, music, gusto, the free expression of gay, or desperate moods. If the Negroes are not in a position to contribute these items, I do not know which Americans are.

As a rough cultural yardstick of the continuing repercussions of the period called the Renaissance, I have looked up the record of the youthful writers and commentators of this period for evidences of their effect upon the present state of the American culture.

An anthology called *Ebony and Topaz* carried about twenty young Negro writers, previously unknown to the great and critical public. Of those still living Langston Hughes and Sterling Brown are established poets, Arna Bontemps is a major novelist, having left his poetry with his youth; Aaron Douglas is one of the country's best-known artists; Zora Neale Hurston is a writer-anthropologist; Allison Davis is a distinguished psychologist and Abram Harris an equally distinguished economist, and both are on the faculty of the University of Chicago. Ira Reid heads the Department of Sociology at Haverford; Frank Horne is a national housing official. E. Franklin Frazier is one of the nation's most notable sociologists and a former president of the American Sociological Society, George Schuyler is a well-known columnist and John P. Davis is publisher of *Our World Magazine*.

There are others, of course, but the important thing is to show some end result of the striving.

As master of ceremonies for the first *Opportunity* dinner Alain Locke had this to say about these young spirits being launched on their careers: "They sense within their group—a spiritual wealth which if they can properly expound, will be ample for a new judgment and re-appraisal of the race."

Whether or not there has been a reappraisal of the race over these past thirty years rests with our estimates of the contributions of those who began their careers in the 1920's. It is my opinion that the great fire and enthusiasm of the earlier period, and the creative dynamism of self-conscious racial expression are no longer present. They have faded with the changed status of Negroes in American life.

With the disappearance of many of the barriers to participation in the general culture the intense race-consciousness has been translated into contributions within the accepted national standards of the special professional fields.

One of Goethe's commentators referred to his literary art as the practice of living and pointed out that his life was as much worth studying as his work. Goethe in one of his diaries said:

People who are always harping on the value of experience tend to forget that experience is only the one-half of experience. The secret of creative living consists in relating the rough and tumble of our contact with the world outside ourselves to the work which our minds put in on this stuff of experience. The full value of experience is in seeing the significance of what has happened. Without this awareness we do not really live. Life lives us.

This, it seems to me, is the essence of the shift in Negro life and Negro appraisals of life.

The infectious race-conscious movement of the period of the "Renaissance" has been transmitted into less race-conscious scholarship. The historical research of John Hope Franklin, Benjamin Quarles and Rayford Logan appears as aspects of American history even though the subject matter may be Negroes. Similarly the sociological writing of E. Franklin Frazier, Ira de A. Reid, and Oliver Cox is in the broader context of the American society. Frank Yerby's romantic novels are best sellers and deal only incidentally with Negroes, if at all.

The most recent books by Negro authors, interestingly enough, are travel studies of other lands and people. Saunders Redding and Carl Rowan have written about India, Richard Wright and Era Belle Thompson about Africa. Meanwhile the kind of writing done by American Negroes in the 1920's is reflected in the books today by Peter Abrahams of South Africa and George Lamming of Trinidad, in the British West Indies.

In 1923 Franklin Frazier who was one of the first *Opportunity* prize winners with a bold essay on "Social Equality and the Negro" had this to say:

The accomplishment of a consciously built-up culture will depend upon leaders with a vision and understanding of cultural processes. Nevertheless, spiritual and intellectual emancipation of the Negro awaits the building of a Negro university, supported by Negro educators, who have imbibed the best that civilization can offer, where its savants can add to human knowledge and promulgate those values which are to inspire and motivate Negroes as a cultural group.

We have in this present period, and out of the matrix of the Renaissance period, scholars who know the cultural process, and savants who have imbibed the best that civilization can offer and can and are aiding human knowledge, within the context, not of a special culture group, but of the national society and world civilization.