

ALAIN LOCKE: CULTURE AND THE
PLURALITY OF BLACK LIFE

A Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School

Of Cornell University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

By

Michelle Renée Smith

August 2009

© 2009 Michelle Renée Smith

ALAIN LOCKE: CULTURE AND THE
PLURALITY OF BLACK LIFE

Michelle Renée Smith, Ph.D.

Cornell University 2009

Better representation of 'the black' and of 'black life' in 'public' and recognition of black culture are often assumed to be necessary parts of any political project on behalf of black people. Major black artists and black artistic movements are, therefore, commonly understood to re-represent black identity and, through their renovation of 'blackness,' to justify black participation in public life. This dissertation investigates the writings of the black philosopher and cultural critic Alain Locke. In a series of inter-related essays that both situate Locke in a particular context (by examining his relationships to his contemporaries) and bring his work into conversation with current debates in political theory (by comparing/contrasting his theorizations of race and culture with those of contemporary theorists), I suggest that Locke's critical approach to 'black' artwork was novel because it refused to demand that artwork renovate black life or reduce its variety to a black identity worthy of recognition. While Locke's refusal to pursue better representations of blackness has been, in some circles, called 'naïve' and 'a-political,' I argue that Locke's criticism of art is informed by a rich and subtle theorization of 'race' as an identity-producing center of meaning and of 'race thinking' as a particular form of 'dogmatism,' which prevents both intellectual and political democracy.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Michelle Renée Smith was born in Cleveland, OH in 1974, the eldest daughter of Cathy and George and sister of April. She has (thus far) lived in eight, mostly northeastern states and Berlin, Germany. Michelle majored in Africana Studies and minored in Political Science at Rutgers College. Her undergraduate honors thesis was entitled “(Re)defining Black Identity: Reading Zora Neale Hurston.” After receiving her B.A. degree in 1997, Michelle worked for The Princeton Review, Prudential, Microsoft and Amazon.com before deciding to pursue graduate study in Political Theory. She received her M.A. in Government from Cornell University in 2006. Michelle taught college level courses at Auburn Prison, Auburn, NY and is a founding member of the Cornell Prison Education Board. Beginning in Fall 2009, Michelle will be an Assistant Professor of Political Theory at University of Florida.

*For my spring 2009 students at Auburn Prison,
Nafis, Un, Kenneth, Mesiah, Kalico, L.Z., Jamey, T.S., Born, Café, Shakem, Jihad,
Sky, Equality, Jamel, Reese and K.C.*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my committee, Professors Isaac Kramnick, Richard Bense, Jason Frank, Susan Buck-Morss and Anna Marie Smith for their thoughtful advice and encouragement, Professor Mary Katzenstein for inviting me to teach in and learn about Auburn Prison, my parents Cathy and George Smith and my sister April Smith for their love and support, and my many friends at Cornell and in Ithaca and from my Microsoft and Princeton Review days, who have buoyed my spirit along the way.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Biographical Sketch	iii
Dedication	iv
Acknowledgments	v
Chapter 1. Introduction	1
I. Biography of Alain Locke	6
II. Self-expression, Culture and the Politics of Recognition	13
III. Harlem and the Harlem Renaissance	21
IV. Chapter Breakdown	28
Chapter 2. All That's Solid: Difference, Race, and 'the Political'	39
I. Race Contacts and Interracial Relations	46
II. Race and Modernity	59
III. 'The Racial' as 'the Political'	66
Chapter 3. Culture and the Poetry of 'Negro' Life	74
I. Locke, Identity and Recognition	78
II. Social Culture/Cultivation	84
III. Simmel and Locke: Synthesis and the Poetry of 'Negro' Life	93
Chapter 4. Modern ('Negro') Poetry	110
I. Black Modernity: Internationalism and the 'Practice of Diaspora'	112
II. "Really Vital Modernism"	119
III. "The Travail and Destiny of an Age"	133
Chapter 5. "[We] Are Not a Race Problem"	145
I. The Great Debate	149
II. In Pursuit of Proselytes, In Pursuit of Art: Du Bois and Locke on the Function of Art	156
III. Representation or Expressiveness: The Drama of Negro Life	171
Chapter 6. "To Usward"	184
I. "To Usward"	187
II. "Jingo, Counter-Jingo and Us"	199
Chapter 7. Conclusion	205
I. Future Directions	211

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: ALAIN LOCKE, THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE AND THE PLURALITY OF BLACK LIFE

Something beyond the watch and guard of statistics has happened in the life of the American Negro and the three Norns¹ [the Sociologist, the Philanthropist, the Race-leader] who have traditionally presided over the Negro problem have a changeling in their laps.... the new spirit is awake in the masses, and under the very eyes of the professional observers is transforming what has been a perennial problem into the progressive phases of contemporary Negro life... But while the minds of most of us, black and white, have thus burrowed in the trenches of the Civil War and Reconstruction, the actual march of development has simply flanked these positions, necessitating a sudden reorientation of view. We have not been watching in the right direction; set North and South on a sectional axis, we have not noticed the East till the sun has us blinking.²

I. Scope and Objectives

This dissertation examines how Alain Locke, the philosopher and art critic best known as the chief interpreter of the Harlem Renaissance literary movement and editor of its preeminent text, *The New Negro: an Interpretation*, articulated the plurality of black life in his art and literary criticism. Locke argued that ‘race’ and ‘race-thinking’ had ascribed a false identity to black people, which foreclosed the recognition of black plurality. He saw in “modernity” hints that black people were abandoning this falsely ascribed identity in favor of self-expressiveness and argued that the artistic products of self-expression would enter the cosmopolitan realm of culture, where they

¹ Norns are goddesses who rule the fates in Norse mythology. Locke’s use of “Norns” here is interesting, for it suggests that until the advent of the Harlem Renaissance, certain modes of thinking and practice—the ‘knowledge’ of black life provided by the social sciences, the (perhaps questionable) patronage of white philanthropists and political leadership based on the racial identification of the group—had determined the circumstances of black people. During the Harlem Renaissance period, Locke suggests, something new was afoot that even the best science, the most generous gifts and the most familiar political practices failed to adequately understand or benefit from. Artwork, Locke makes clear in the essays he wrote for the *New Negro: an Interpretation*, captured these changes.

² Alain Locke, *The New Negro: an Interpretation* (New York: Albert and Charles Boni, 1925)

would serve as sources of self-cultivation for all people. I want to suggest that Locke's primary significance to (black) political thought is that he envisioned the "black imagination" freed of the misrepresentations of the past without imposing what I see as a new constraint— a reconstituted black identity that was to arise from black art. In part, this is because though Locke recognized the negative impact of racism and 'race thinking' on the black imagination, he did not suggest that these effects could be repaired by recourse to a new identity or by public recognition of black culture. Rather, with time, new forms of group relations arise. The constellation of developments, events and ideas that was 'modernity' would usher in the possibility of 'expression' in black Americans and the influence of 'race theory and thinking' would wane.

Locke suggested that black artists were becoming liberated from externally imposed expectations of black art and, just as important, from the social and political duty to represent 'the race.' Against W.E.B. Du Bois among others, Locke insisted that black artists (and for that matter, white artists who depicted black life) should neither serve political objectives in artwork, nor be forced to portray black people positively. Writing about and on behalf of black artists, Locke refused the responsibilities and limits of politics in artwork in favor of 'expression.' He argued that the purpose of black artwork was not to correct white supremacist misrepresentations of black life or history or to 'demonstrate' that black people were, in fact, worthy of social and political inclusion. (That he took for granted, just as he should have.) Rather, Locke thought that (black) artwork should be "expressive of" 'Negro life,' in all its variety and vitality. Expressiveness was for Locke the mark of the most successful modern art.

But Locke did not 'demand' autonomy for black artists. Rather he observed its expression in contemporary black artwork and exhorted black artists to pursue it. Several indicators attracted Locke's attention: in poetry, writers turned from argument and exhortation to (self and group) representativeness, taking advantage of modern developments in poetic form:

From the bathos of sentimental appeal and the postures of moralizing protest, Negro poets have risen to the dignity and poise of self-expression. Freed from the limitations of dialect that made the technique of the nursery rhyme tolerable, they have not only achieved a modernism of expression, but are attempting to develop new characteristic idioms of style.³

No longer forced to 'protest,' engage in moral argument or to write in black dialect, black poets could express themselves as they wished. A (new) 'Negro' poetry was born. Though black poets found themselves freed of representative responsibilities and thereby able to produce authentic 'Negro' poetry, there was "...no unity of style or school [but rather] a unity of spirit and sense of tradition..."⁴ If unity of style was to arise (and Locke certainly does not call for it), it would derive from both a modernist spirit (open to various styles) and a sense of the past, vis-à-vis modern interpretations of 'Negro' folk art. In painting, the 'Negro' subject was being seen and represented anew by black and white artists alike. Referring to Austrian painter Winold Reiss's⁵ "Harlem types," Locke wrote,

³ Alain Locke, "The Negro Poets of the United States," in *The Critical Temper of Alain Locke: A Selection of His Essays on Art and Culture*, ed. Jeffrey C. Stewart, vol. 8, Critical Studies on Black Life and Culture (New York and London: Garland Publishing Inc.), 43 - 49.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Winold Reiss, an Austrian painter, provided the artwork for "Harlem," a special edition of *Survey Graphic* magazine, published in March, 1925, dedicated to 'black life' in Harlem. Alain Locke edited this issue, which became the basis for *The New Negro: an Interpretation*. Reiss's artwork appeared in *The New Negro* along with Aaron Douglas's.

...Winold Reiss presents us a graphic interpretation of Negro life, freshly conceived after its own patterns. [He] has aimed to portray the soul and spirit of a people. And by the simple but rare process of not setting up petty canons in the face of nature's own creative artistry, Winold Reiss has achieved what amounts to a revealing discovery of the significance, human and artistic, of one of the great dialects of human physiognomy, of some of the little understood but powerful idioms of nature's speech.⁶

Not only were black poets 'freed' up to be self-expressive, but the black subject was also receiving better treatment in painting. Winold Reiss revealed the variety of black life (multiple "patterns") by allowing his subject to suggest his style. Instead of confronting black life with new (or for that matter already established schools of painting), by Locke's reading, Reiss presented it as it was (one of many results of 'nature's creativity.')

The new variety of black artwork (in terms of theme, form, voice and style) reflects two developments that were significant for Locke: first, black artists (and by extension the black imagination) were becoming unbound from externally imposed imperatives and second, the black subject was beginning to receive new and better treatment, which reflected the variety and particularity of black life. For Locke, this meant that black artists achieved autonomy from earlier representational demands and standards and that the black subject was freed from its one-sided representation as "caricature."⁷ New representations of black life became possible. I am interested in exploring the political theoretical significance of Locke's account of these new representations.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Locke wrote, "[caricature] has put upon the countenance of the Negro the mask of the comic and the grotesque, whereas in deeper truth and comprehension, nature or experience have put there the stamp of the very opposite, the serious, the tragic, the wistful." Ibid. 18

This dissertation is by no means a full, intellectual history of Alain Locke's life, interests or intellectual development (indeed, I focus almost solely on his Harlem Renaissance era writings and earlier texts that I believe influence his art criticism). While I characterize the "great debate" between Locke and W.E.B. Du Bois over the function of artwork, I do not attempt to situate Locke in the "black intellectual tradition." And though I compare/contrast Locke's theorization of culture/cultivation to that of the German sociologist Georg Simmel, one of his teachers, I do not exhaustively trace the rich and varied intellectual traditions—American Pragmatism, Austrian Gestalt Psychology, German Sociology and the Bahá'í faith among others—that inform Locke's work on race, culture and artwork. Locke is an incredibly rich subject, no doubt worthy of each of the projects I have described. Instead, I suggest that Locke's articulation of black plurality, though synthesized from various intellectual traditions, can best be grasped in view of contemporary theories of recognition and difference/identity. As "midwife" to the Harlem Renaissance and the chief representative of its artists and artworks, Locke sought to articulate the Renaissance's 'future' impact: intellectual and political democracy made possible by pluralistic thinking. As I see it, Locke is a useful partner in today's political theoretical accounts of the relationship between personal identity and democratic politics. As I read Locke, he is interesting because he offers a critical theoretical account of 'race thinking' as a form of identity-thinking, which influences an understandable, if not defensible "counter-jingoism" among "submerged groups," while at the same time recognizing that "counter-jingoism" (i.e.: defensive parochialism) is just as much a danger to democracy as is the 'race thinking' that elicits it.

I thus take Locke's 1942 warning against "absolutisms" to include both 'race thinking' and oppositional "race pride."

[We] do not always realize the extent to which these modern Frankensteins ["new secular absolutisms"] are the spawn of older absolutistic breeds, or the degree to which they are inherent strains, so to speak, in the germ plasm of our culture. ... [In] the zeal of culture defense, in the effort to bring about the rapprochement of a united front, we do not always stop to envisage the danger and inconsistency of a fresh crisis uniformitarianism of our own. A sounder and more permanent alternative [is] the possibility of a type of agreement such as may stem from a pluralistic base. [This would] provide a flexible, more democratic nexus, a unity in diversity rather than another counter uniformitarianism.⁸

I. Biography of Alain Locke

Before further clarifying the theoretical scope and purpose of the project, I turn to Alain Locke's biography. It is, of course, not exhaustive. It outlines his life and work, with a particular focus on his influences and activity on behalf of black artwork.

Alain Leroy Locke was born in 1885 to Pliny and Mary Hawkins Locke in Philadelphia, PA. Both teachers, his parents inspired a lifelong love of learning in Locke. He graduated from Central High School in Philadelphia and attended Harvard University, where he took part in courses taught by Josiah Royce, George Herbert Palmer and Ralph Barton Perry.⁹

Locke graduated magna cum laude from Harvard in 1907 after just three years of study. He was the first black to receive the Rhodes Scholarship. Several Oxford colleges refused to admit Locke because of his race but he was

⁸ Alain Locke and Leonard Harris, *The Philosophy of Alain Locke: Harlem Renaissance and Beyond* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1989), p. 51

⁹ Ibid. 3 Harris includes Hugo Muensterberg among Locke's Harvard philosophers and Muensterberg did teach at Harvard. Nevertheless, records show that Locke did coursework with Muensterberg at Berlin Universitaet during his year of study there.

finally accepted by Hertford College. At Hertford, he studied Classics and philosophy but never completed his MA degree. In 1910, Locke moved to Germany and became a (non-matriculated) student at University of Berlin. There, Locke studied modern continental philosophy. He did course work on epistemology, philosophy of the 19th century, an introductory course on the philosophy of aesthetics, a reading course on Kantian Idealism, a seminar on Kant's Antinomies, foundations of science, modern culture and a psychology course on the will. Among his professors in Berlin was philosopher and social theorist Georg Simmel, who, as I will argue in Chapter Three profoundly affected Locke's thinking on culture and modernity.

In 1911, Locke attended the Universal Races Congress in London. It was a truly remarkable event. It brought together the very best minds from the physical and social sciences, with important contributions from the relatively new fields of anthropology and sociology. The purpose of the Congress was to:

...discuss, in light of science and modern conscience, the general relations subsisting between the peoples of the West and those of the East, between so-called white and so-called coloured peoples, with a view to encouraging between them a fuller understanding, the most friendly feelings, and a heartier co-operation.¹⁰

Some of the best-known sociologists and anthropologists attended. Generally agreeing on the "biological unity and racial intermixture" of mankind, scholars presented papers describing the meaning of race from an anthropological and sociological standpoint, theorized differences among racial groups, described the governments and peoples of "other civilizations"

¹⁰ Gustav Spiller, *Interracial Problems* (London: P.S. King and Son, 1911), p. xiii

including China, Japan, Turkey, Persia, Russia and Egypt, related the possibility of "peaceful contact between civilizations" to the work of private associations, characterized "the modern conscience in relation to racial questions, " and differentiated the basic "modern conscience" in relation to the 'Negro' and American Indians. The conference closed with several sessions on "promoting interracial friendliness." Inspired by the new approaches suggested at the conference, Locke returned to the United States in late 1911, ready to introduce a new field of study to the world: *Race Contacts*.¹¹

Locke took an assistant professorship in English at Howard University in 1912. At Howard, Locke hoped to establish a course—and later an institute—dedicated to the study of race contacts and interracial relationships. He was unsuccessful in this attempt but eventually allowed, after much struggle, to offer a series of lectures on the topic.¹² These lectures, to which I turn in Chapter Two, treat race as a "center of meaning" and not, as was common during this period, a biological category. In 1916, Locke took a leave of absence from his teaching duties at Howard and completed his dissertation, "Problems of Classification in the Theory of Value," with Ralph

¹¹ Locke opened the first of the race contacts lectures with the following: "Ladies and Gentlemen, ever since the possibility of a comparative study of races dawned upon me at the Race Congress in London in 1911, I have had the courage of a very optimistic and steadfast belief that in the scientific approach to the race question, there was the possibility of a redemption for those false attitudes of mind which have, unfortunately, so complicated the idea and conception of race that there are a great many people who fancy that the best thing that can possibly be done, if possible at all, is to throw race out of the category of human thinking." Alain Leroy Locke and Jeffrey C. Stewart, *Race Contacts and Interracial Relations* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1992), p. 1

¹² Locke was very active during his early years at Howard. Historian Jeffrey Stewart has written, "After Jesse Moorland had donated his enormous collection of books and manuscripts of Afro-Americana to Howard University in December 1914, Locke had proposed that Howard inaugurate a research project to produce a bibliography of the collection and other works of "Negro Americana." That request was not approved. Then in the summer of 1915, the board of trustees denied Locke's request to give his lectures as part of the regular curriculum. Reportedly, the Board felt that Howard should avoid potentially controversial subject such as race relations and confine itself to the teaching of basic knowledge required to create teachers, doctors, and other professionals." *Ibid.* xx

Barton Perry as his advisor. In the dissertation, Locke explored whether "...classifications actually picture objective reality or do classifications arbitrarily shape our picture of reality?"¹³ As Locke's biographer, Leonard Harris points out, "[theories] of classification differ over whether classifying can be best explained by logical structures, rather than, say, psychological dispositions."¹⁴ Locke takes neither side. Foreshadowing his later (and life-long) interest in artwork, Locke calls into question those philosophical approaches, which suggest "...aesthetic values... [to] have a psychological rather than a logical [ground.]"¹⁵ According to Harris, Locke's questioning "frees the way for esthetic judgment to have more cognitive force."¹⁶ Harris argues that Locke therefore saw 'art' as the means by which to condition better 'judgments' – re-evaluation – of black people. I take this argument up in Chapter Five.

Locke traveled extensively—to Europe and Africa— after completing his dissertation,¹⁷ and published several articles about culture. While maintaining a busy teaching schedule at Howard, Locke also offered lectures outside of the university.

In 1921 he spoke on the "The Problem of Race and Culture" in front of the Negro Academy in Washington... Locke returned in 1922 to speak on "The American Literary Tradition and the Negro," and in the following year on "Notes Made at Luxor, Egypt." In early 1924 the Society for Ethical Culture sponsored a three day public conference on "Interracial Harmony and Peace." Locke chaired a session there... Later that year Locke spoke at the Fifteenth Annual Conference of the NAACP in Philadelphia, addressing the question of educational theory as

¹³ Leonard Harris and Charles Molesworth, *Alain Locke: The Biography of a Philosopher.*, 131

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ qtd. in Harris and Molesworth, 131

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ For an excellent account of Locke's pre-Renaissance travels, see chapter five, "Howard and Beyond," pp. 142 – 178, Harris and Molesworth, *Alain Locke: The Biography of a Philosopher.*

applied to the race problem.... Locke [also] served as the secretary of the [Sanhedrin] conference.¹⁸

The primary subject of this dissertation is Locke's work during the 1920s – 30s, as the "dean" of the Harlem Renaissance movement. It was during this period, that Locke edited and published the work for which he is best known, *The New Negro: an Interpretation*. Locke thought of himself as the "midwife" to the Harlem Renaissance; he worked to see famous authors—Countee Cullen, Claude McKay, Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston among others—published. Locke's own output during the period was extraordinary. He wrote about or critiqued nearly every novel, poem, play or painting produced by a black person during the period because, for Locke, each production was indicative of positive socio-political developments on the horizon. But Locke's relationship with 'his' artists was not always easy. He tried to convince Langston Hughes to acquire a "...sense of European culture and high estheticism...," wrote such a critical review of Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* that she later told James Weldon Johnson that Locke was "...a malicious, spiteful little snot that thinks he ought to be the leading Negro because of his degrees,"¹⁹ and in a scathing review of Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem*, accused the author of "spiritual truancy." Wallace Thurman parodied Locke as the elitist and effete Dr. Parkes²⁰ in *Infants of the Spring* and W.E.B. Du Bois took Locke to task for ignoring the socio-political purposes of art.

¹⁸ Ibid. 151 Sanhedrin gathered together that best black minds to set objectives for and serve as an umbrella organization for other black organizations.

¹⁹ Robert Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston: a Literary Biography*, (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1977), p. 40

²⁰ "He was a mother hen clucking at her chicks. Small, dapper, with sensitive features, graying hair, a dominating head, and restless hands and feet, he smiled benevolently at his brood. Then in his best continental manner, which he had acquired during four years at European universities, he began to speak." Wallace Thurman and Amrijit Singh, *Infants of the Spring*, (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1992), p. 233

Locke's Harlem Renaissance art criticism reflects his sincere belief in the possibilities of artwork to express the variety of black life. Though he later tempered his faith in effects of artwork on social consciousness, he never abandoned his commitment to black artwork.

As the articulate voices of an oppressed minority, one would naturally expect the work of Negro poets to reflect a strongly emphasized social consciousness. That is the case, if gauged by their preoccupation with the theme of race...The gradual conversion of race consciousness from a negative sense of social wrong and injustice to a positive note of race loyalty and pride in racial tradition came as a difficult and rather belated development of spiritual maturity...I would not recant my 1925 estimation of this, either as symptom of cultural maturity or as a sign of a significant development in the Negro folk consciousness. However, I would not confuse this upsurging of race consciousness with a parallel maturing of social consciousness...²¹

After the Harlem Renaissance came to a close, Locke wrote an extensive review of each year's black publications, which appeared in *Opportunity Magazine* (house organ of the Urban League) from 1929 – 1942 and in *Phylon* (Howard University literary magazine) from 1946 – 1953. He continued, furthermore, to promote black art in every arena and to influence the development of “democratic attitudes” among all people.

He pursued these objectives on a number of fronts. As a member of the Ba'há'í faith, which I do not address in the dissertation, Locke traveled to its headquarters in Haifa, offered a number of lectures on various topics, and published articles in *Ba'há'í World*. According to Harris,

The Ba'há'í offered a wide array of spiritual comfort, such as a belief in the co-fraternity of humanity across lines. Their

²¹ “Alain Locke, “Propaganda-- or Poetry?,” in *The Critical Temper of Alain Locke: A Selection of His Essays on Art and Culture*, ed. Jeffrey C. Stewart (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1983), 55 - 56.

acceptance of all racial groups, their consideration of racism as a religious sin, their integration of cultures as 'reciprocal' sources of value, and their democratic governance all were a welcome reprieve from the racially segregated world of black-white Christianity and its accompanying chauvinism and bigotry.²²

Later in his life, he participated in a number of academic conferences, including "The Conference on Science, Philosophy and Religion and Their Relation to the Democratic Way of Life" (in 1941, 1943 and 1950). At the 1941 conference, Locke presented the paper I mentioned above, "Pluralism and Intellectual Democracy," in which he assessed the effects of and suggested the "cure for...calcified scientific or religious views..."²³ that would negatively affect democratic practice. In 1942, Locke and the sociologist Bernhard Stern, edited *When Peoples Meet*, a collection of essays theorizing inter-cultural contact. The book contains essays by well known intellectuals and activists including, "...Randolph Bourne, Margaret Mead, Arnold Toynbee, Charles S. Johnson...and E. Franklin Frazier."²⁴

Always committed to the possibilities of education, Locke became a respected and sought after teacher. He taught as a guest professor at the New School for Social Research, City University and at University of Wisconsin. He taught courses on the Philosophy of Democracy, the Philosophy of Art, Minority Group Relations and the Negro's Contribution to American Culture.²⁵

²² Harris and Molesworth, *Alain Locke: The Biography of a Philosopher*, 401n8 Christopher Buck examines the influence of Locke's Ba'há'í faith in *Alain Locke: Faith and Philosophy* (Los Angeles, Kalimat Press, 2005) Buck emphasizes the effects of Ba'há'í on Locke's theorization of democracy.

²³ See Chapter Ten, "Theorizing Democracy," pp. 328 – 357, Harris and Molesworth, *Alain Locke: The Biography of a Philosopher*.

²⁴ Ibid. 341

²⁵ Alain Locke Papers, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Howard University Catalogue, 1947, box 164 – 164, folders 16, 17, 18.

Locke remained committed to black artwork and the cultivation of intellectual democracy to the end of his life. He died in New York City on June 9, 1954 just a month after the Supreme Court decided *Brown v. Board of Education*. W.E.B. Du Bois spoke of Locke's legacy at his funeral.

Alain Locke was a man who deliberately chose the intellectual life; not as a desirable relief from reality, but as a vocation compared with which all else is of little account. In a land like America and among a group as inexperienced as American Negroes this was simply not understandable... [In] truth Alain Locke stood singular in a stupid land as a rare soul.²⁶

II. Self-expression, Culture and the Politics of Recognition

Since Locke both wrote about 'race' and worked to see black artwork and culture publicized, it may seem obvious that he thought artwork might somehow mitigate the effects of racism. On this view, the negative effects of racism—a depreciatory image of self and group—could be repaired by recognition of the 'true' worth of black people and culture. Thus, it could be argued that Locke publicized black artwork and culture because they demonstrated that black people were worthy of recognition and value. Locke could, therefore, be seen to foreshadow the insights of contemporary theorists and defenders of 'recognition.' I disagree with this interpretation of Locke's approach to artwork and culture. First, as I mentioned above, Locke thought that artwork should not serve a political function. That artwork did not serve merely political purposes opened the possibility that it was 'merely' expressive of black life. Locke did think that black people had been 'misrecognized' but not (only) as an undeserving or despised group. Rather,

²⁶ Qtd in Leonard Harris and Charles Molesworth, *Alain L. Locke: The Biography of a Philosopher* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), p. 380

black people had been misrecognized as belonging (either naturally or by virtue of their status as a 'problem') to an identity. Locke named this identity "old Negro."

...[The] Old Negro had long become more of a myth than a man... a creature of moral debate and historical controversy. His has been a stock figure perpetuated as an historical fiction partly in innocent sentimentalism partly in deliberate reactionism.... [For] generations the Negro has been more of a formula than a human being—a something to be argued about, condemned or defended, to be kept down or in his place or helped up, to be worried with or worried over, harassed or patronized, a social bogey or a social burden.²⁷

For Locke, the 'new Negro' is new, not because he is now seen as worthy of respect because of its particularity, but instead because he has *escaped* or is in the process of escaping his identity as a social burden. That is the new spirit "awake in the masses." I argue that Locke did *not* see in artwork the source of a new, more worthy identity, secured by proper cultural recognition.

To begin to articulate the case against the recognition interpretation, I shall briefly characterize the best-known defense of 'multiculturalism' and 'the politics of recognition,' Charles Taylor's 1994 essay, "The Politics of Recognition" and contrast Locke's thinking about culture and self-hood from it. To be clear, my purpose here is not to criticize 'recognition' as Taylor understands it²⁸ but instead to delineate the significant differences in his

²⁷ Alain Locke, "Enter the New Negro," in *The Critical Temper of Alain Locke: A Selection of His Essays on Art and Culture*, ed. Jeffrey C. Stewart, vol. 8, Critical Studies on Black Life and Culture (New York and London: Garland Publishing Inc., 1983), 7 - 12., p. 7

²⁸ For an excellent critique of Taylor's "The Politics of Recognition," see ch. 2, "The Distinguishing Mark: Taylor, Herder and Sovereignty," in Patchen Markell, *Bound by Recognition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), pp. 39 - 61. Markell traces two "senses" of recognition in Taylor, "a cognitive sense" of recognition in which one is 'seen as one is' and a second, "constructive sense," in which the act of recognition constitutes the "identities to whom it is addressed." (40 - 41) Markell argues that these two forms of

thinking from Locke's about the modern sources of identity and culture. Emphasis here is on the modern, for as I will argue in Chapter Two, the modern moment is very significant to Locke.

While Taylor theorizes the 'ideal' of modern self-hood as "authentic identity," sees culture as representing the unique, authentic identity of a particular 'folk,' and "...proposes that many contemporary social and political movements can be understood as struggles for recognition—that is, as attempts to secure forms of respect and esteem that are grounded in and expressive of the accurate knowledge of... particular identities,"²⁹ Locke identifies in the work of Harlem Renaissance authors hints of a newfound "self-expressiveness" that is born of modern developments and experiences and sees culture as a cosmopolitan realm of contact in which the products of black artistic "self-expressiveness" become one of many sources for the self-cultivation of *all* people.

According to Taylor, contemporary demands for recognition derive from modern political and philosophical developments whereby a "...new understanding of individualized identity...emerges at the end of the eighteenth century."³⁰ Taylor characterizes "individualized identity" as "authenticity," the idea that each individual has a "voice within..."³¹ and

recognition are exist "uneasily" together and treats the tension between the two as a point of departure. He demonstrates that while Taylor claims the politics of recognition "...is supposed to break with the aspiration of sovereignty," it ultimately fails to do so. (53) This is because ultimately, the "cognition sense" of recognition "...helps Taylor explain what it means for intersubjective action to go well or go poorly...[Injustice] on the terrain of identity and difference is to be understood as misrecognition...the failure to perceive people...as they really are," (59) thereby reinstating (in the form of demands for recognition) the aspiration to sovereignty.

²⁹ Ibid. 39

³⁰ Ibid. 28

³¹ Taylor argues that the original notion of authenticity derives from the idea that "human beings are endowed with a moral sense, an intuitive feeling for what is right and wrong... The idea was that understanding right and wrong was not a matter of dry calculation, but was anchored in our feelings." Taylor suggests further, that the "...notion of identity develops out

“...that each of us has an original way of being human.”³² Significantly for Taylor’s account of recognition, individualized or authentic identity requires “others.”

We become full human agents, capable of understanding ourselves, and hence of defining our identity, through our acquisition of rich human languages of expression. For my purposes here, I want to take *language* in the broad sense, covering not only the words we speak, but also other modes of expression whereby we define ourselves, including the “languages” of art, of gesture, of love and the like. But we learn these modes of expression through exchanges with others.³³

Because our senses of ourselves (and our human agency) depend upon dialogue with others, to be refused participation in such dialogue or to be misrecognized is profoundly damaging. We can see how in what Taylor calls the “intimate sphere,” this might be. Taylor writes, “[on the intimate level, we can see how much an original identity needs and is vulnerable to the recognition given by or withheld by significant others. It is not surprising that...relationships are seen as the key loci of self-discovery and self-affirmation.”³⁴ But how does misrecognition come to constitute a *political* injustice?

Though political demands for recognition are legitimate because misrecognition can result in real harm, Taylor argues that the source of contemporary recognition demands can be found in the modern period, which he argues begins in the 18th century with the decline of social hierarchy, the rise of democracy, the concomitant displacement of ‘honor’ with the notion of

of a displacement of the moral accent of idea,” in favor of the idea that one has “intimate contact with oneself.” Ibid. 29 - 30

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid. 32

³⁴ Ibid. 36

equal dignity and the rise of the modern notion of individualized identity, which refers to each person's particular way of being human.³⁵ Taylor traces these developments through the philosophy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Johann Gottfried Herder among others, which I will not rehearse here. What is important to Taylor is that these ideas are "familiar" to us today and have crystallized in two competing ideals, the politics of universalism ("emphasizing the equal dignity of all citizens") and the politics of difference, which insists that "[everyone] should be recognized for his or her unique identity."³⁶ Taylor argues some groups have been misrecognized in public so that members "...have been induced to adopt a depreciatory image of themselves. They have internalized a picture of their own inferiority, so that even when some of the objective obstacles to their advancement fall away, they may be incapable of taking advantage of the new opportunities,³⁷" constituting a "form of oppression" and a grave injustice. Misrecognized groups pursue recognition to mitigate the effects—personal and political—of misrecognition.

Locke was, on the other hand, quite clear that any "sense of inferiority [black people had] had to be innerly compensated."³⁸ This was, as we will see,

³⁵ "We can distinguish two changes that together have made the modern preoccupation with identity and recognition inevitable. The first is the collapse of social hierarchies, which used to be the basis for honor...which is intrinsically linked to inequalities. For some to have honor...it is essential that not everyone have it....As against this notion of honor, we have the modern notion of dignity, now used in a universalist and egalitarian sense, where we talk of the inherent 'dignity of human beings,' or of citizen dignity. The underlying premise here is that everyone shares in it. It is obvious that this concept of dignity is the only one compatible with a democratic society." (27)

³⁶ Ibid. 38

³⁷ Ibid. 25

³⁸ Alain Locke, "Art or Propaganda," in *The Critical Temper of Alain Locke: A Selection of His Essays on Art and Culture*, ed. Jeffrey C. Stewart (New York and London: Garland Publishing Inc., 1983), 27 - 28. p. 27

only possible as a result of broad scale change. The advent of *black* modernity would make such 'inner compensation' possible.

A railroad ticket and a suitcase, like a Bagdad [sic] carpet, transport the Negro peasant from the cotton field and farm to the heart of the most complex urban civilization. Here, in the mass, he must and does survive a jump of two generations in social economy and of a century and more in civilization. Meanwhile, the Negro poet, student, artist, thinker, by the very move that normally would take him off at a tangent from the masses, finds himself in their midst, in a situation concentrating the racial side of his experience and heightening his race-consciousness.³⁹

Urbanization and migration brought black people into modern 'civilization,' where they would become 'race conscious.' For Locke, (black) modernity provides an opportunity.

As political theorist Patchen Markell has argued, for Taylor, modernity is ultimately tragic. After all, one result of the decline of hierarchy is that as old identities fall away, the certainties of recognition upon which they depended are lost, too.

...Harmonious (if inegalitarian) recognition [and] throws old, established hierarchies into question, giving rise to the ideal of "inwardly generated" identity that can come into conflict with socially ascribed roles....making misrecognition among persons possible in the same way that the wrenching apart of signifier and signified after Babel subjected the world to confusion, error, and misunderstanding.⁴⁰

Where for Taylor, early modernity brought with it a tragic break with the past so that misrecognition became a real possibility, for Locke, late (or at least *later*) modernity (early 20th century) brought about a positive change: black

³⁹ Alain Locke, "Harlem," *Survey Graphic* 53, no. 11 (March 1, 1925): 629 - 630

⁴⁰ Markell, *Bound by Recognition*, 55

people, heretofore misrepresented and misrecognized were beginning to achieve “self-expressiveness.” Crucially, ‘race’ as theory and practice produced the particular forms of exclusion, misrecognition and misrepresentation experienced by black people. “Self-expressiveness” did not depend on the recognition of ‘others’ but rather on the experience of modernity itself. Mass migration and urbanization, for example, forced inter and intra-racial assimilation/differentiation. In “Negro Youth Speaks,” one of four essays Locke penned for *The New Negro: an Interpretation*, Locke argues,

From the racial standpoint, our Harlems are themselves crucibles. Here in Manhattan is not merely the largest Negro community in the world, but the first concentration in history of so many diverse elements of Negro life. It has attracted the African, the West Indian, the Negro American; has brought together the Negro of the North and the Negro of the South; the man from the city and the man from the town and village; the peasant, the student, the business man, the professional man, artist, poet, musician, adventurer and worker, preacher and criminal exploiter and social outcast.⁴¹

Through migration into the cities, blacks had “their greatest experience [that of] finding each other.” In the cities, blacks would (finally) experience and observe their *differences*, necessitating and producing new, (black) collectivities. Formerly ‘(mis)identified’ as a single, undifferentiated people, regardless of their national origins, social class, religious beliefs, or life experiences, black people moved to the cities of the American north en masse, and by Locke’s account, began to experience the plurality of black life in new ways. Black artwork and its public reception changed in parallel with these developments. “Our poets,” wrote Locke,

⁴¹ Locke, “Enter the New Negro,” 9

...have now stopped speaking for the Negro—they speak as Negroes. Where formerly they spoke to others and tried to interpret, they now speak to their own and try to express. They have stopped posing, being nearer the attainment of poise.⁴²

“Beneath the watch and guard of statistics,” Locke explored the “New Negro’s” newfound poise and self-expressiveness, as it appeared artwork, in (the quite extraordinary number of) essays he wrote about black artwork during the Harlem Renaissance movement. We might say that for Locke, though racial violence and political exclusion continued, modern developments such as mass migration and urbanization were significant because they conditioned a form of black autonomy, defined by black people thinking of themselves and their lives in new and different ways, even if these developments and new modes of thinking failed to bring about full social and political inclusion.

Locke is quite clear that the early 1900s marked the true beginnings of modernity for black people, who by migrating to the cities, made “a deliberate flight not only from countryside to city, but from medieval America to modern.”⁴³ Artwork, far from merely serving the purpose of procuring ‘cultural’ recognition for black people as an advance strategy for political inclusion, was significant to Locke because it evinced the arrival and potential of the modern moment. For Locke, the Harlem Renaissance was a significant product and symbol of this moment. Before I turn to describing in detail how I take up the arguments that I have sketched in this introductory chapter in the rest of the dissertation, I shall turn below to Harlem and Harlem Renaissance, which serve as the backdrop to Locke’s thinking.

⁴² Alain Locke, “Negro Youth Speaks,” in *The New Negro: an Interpretation* (New York: Albert and Charles Boni, 1925), 47 - 56, p. 49

⁴³ Locke, “Enter the New Negro,” 10

III. Harlem and the Harlem Renaissance

The Harlem Renaissance and its “New Negroes” arrived, perhaps not entirely unexpected,⁴⁴ on the coattails of the Great Migration, a massive movement of some 1,000,000 blacks from the agricultural south to the industrial centers of the North, which was itself precipitated by increased labor demand and southern drought.⁴⁵ Arriving en masse in the large cities of the North—Detroit, Pittsburgh, New York, Chicago, Philadelphia—black workers took jobs vacated by whites off to fight in the Great War. If they successfully escaped persecution, Jim Crow laws and lynching in the South, they found themselves dropped rather unceremoniously into the labor wars of the North.⁴⁶ As we will see, for Locke, the gathering of so many different “elements of Negro life” in the cities of the North was an opportunity for *intra*-cultural contact and self-representation, but for the masses of migrant blacks, it was no panacea. By 1920, some 64,000 blacks were squeezed into the area between 130th and 145th streets and Fifth and Eighth Avenue. By 1930, Harlem had expanded by ten blocks and its population had grown two and half times.⁴⁷ Most were slum dwellers, under-employed and packed, family on top of family, into tenement buildings. In 1940, Claude McKay described the situation thus,

⁴⁴ Indeed, calling the Negro new was old hat. Booker T. Washington wrote a series of essay entitled *A New Negro for a New Century: His Political, Civil and Mental Status, and Related Essays* in 1900. Further, William Pickens published a book called *The New Negro* in 1916.

⁴⁵ For a full account of the Great Migration, see Henry Florette, *Black Migration: Movement North 1900 – 1920* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1975)

⁴⁶ For an account of the “red summer of 1919,” see William M. Tuttle, *Race Riot: Chicago in the Red Summer of 1919* (New York: Atheneum, 1970). For an account of the 1917 race riots in St. Louis, see Elliot M. Rudwick, *Race Riot at East St Louis, July 2, 1917* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1982).

⁴⁷ For a full account of Harlem’s massive expansion, see Cary Wintz, “Harlem,” in *Harlem Speaks: A Living History of the Harlem Renaissance* (Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks Media Fusion, 2007).

Excepting the privileged few, the majority of families up there in sweet Sugar hill are packed together like sardines. The prohibitive rent makes the unit of private family life the rarest thing. Almost all families take in lodgers. All available space must be occupied. Rooms, rooms, and more rooms to let. Adequate clothing and even vital food must be sacrificed to meet the high cost of housing. That exclusive Sugar Hill society of the white writer's imagination is simply a café society.⁴⁸

Harlem's famous cabarets were, for the most part, white-owned. As Beverly Smith wrote in *The New York Herald Tribune*, "90 per cent of the night-clubs in Harlem are owned by white people. Nearly 92 per cent of the speakeasies are operated by white racketeers downtown... nine-tenths of the work that white folks do is closed to Negroes. If the chief trades open they are taken on only after the supply of white labour is exhausted... Men who employed both races tended to fire the Negro worker first."⁴⁹ Indeed, most of the Harlem Renaissance authors themselves were under-employed. Between manuscripts and magazine proposals, Wallace Thurman and Langston Hughes worked on and off as "indoor aviators," the witty nickname given to elevator boys.

To be sure, Manhattan had been home to blacks since 1626, when the Dutch founded "New Amsterdam." Among the settler population were eleven black indentured servants. When the Dutch surrendered New Amsterdam to the English in 1664, the character of black servitude changed and the slave population grew explosively so that by 1790 there were 21, 324 slaves (and 4,654 freemen), many of whom lived in New York City.⁵⁰ In 1827, slavery was abolished in the state of New York, and a free, politically active

⁴⁸ Claude McKay, *Harlem: Negro Metropolis* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Inc., 1968)

⁴⁹ Qtd in Leonore van Notten, *Wallace Thurman's Harlem Renaissance* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1994), p. 25

⁵⁰ James Weldon Johnson, *Black Manhattan* (New York: Knopf, 1940), pp. 3 – 12.

and educated black population began to grow.⁵¹ In the late 1800s through the early 20th century most blacks lived in “Sullivan, Bleeker, Thompson, Carmine, and Grove streets, Minetta Lane, and adjacent streets.”⁵² At that time, Harlem, with its beautiful single-family homes and elegant apartment houses, as well as stately department stores and large churches, was home to the wealthy classes. But by the early 1900s, Harlem could no longer afford to be so exclusive.

By 1905, Harlem’s boom turned into a bust. Excessive speculation and overbuilding resulted in empty apartments and houses that had to be leased out to renters or subdivided into multifamily units. Desperate white developers began to sell or rent to African Americans, often at greatly discounted prices, while black real estate firms like the Afro-American Realty Company provided the customers. At this time 60,000 blacks who lived in New York were scattered through the five boroughs, including a small community in Harlem. The largest concentration inhabited the overcrowded and congested Tenderloin and San Juan Hill sections of the west side of Manhattan. When New York’s black population swelled in the twentieth century as newcomers from the South moved north and as redevelopment destroyed existing black neighborhoods, pressure for additional... housing pushed blacks northward up the west side of Manhattan into Harlem.⁵³

And Harlem became the Negro metropolis. Alongside the overpopulated and under-served tenements and the famed nightclubs, various black social and political organizations set up shop. The NAACP, the National Urban League and the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters each established national offices in Harlem. The 135th Street Branch of the New York Public Library became an important cultural center, at which a number of Harlem Renaissance artists had workspaces and performed. Though

⁵¹ Johnson offers an account of many of these institutions, including anti-slavery organizations, the African Free School, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, the Negro Dutch Reformed Church, as well as the beginnings of the black press, pp. 20 – 39.

⁵² *Ibid.* 59

⁵³ Wintz, *Harlem Speaks*, 32

horrors are apparent in any sociological account of early 20s Harlem, Harlem was in vogue and everyone knew it. Nearly all accounts remark on the vibrant, kinetic energy of Harlem's streets and its people. Claude McKay's *Harlem: Negro Metropolis*, is populated by incense peddling mediums, religious exhorters on street-side platforms, "stinking fried fish joints," speakeasies, labor union organizers, numbers runners, bohemian white hangers-on and the "Negro respectability." In Harlem, boisterousness masked the dream-deferred, and its streets, lined with shabby tenements, were clamorous with parade and protest. When the Harlem Hell Fighters (the United States 369th Infantry Regiment) returned from the Great War their success and the welcome they received made national news. And who can forget Pan-Africanist Marcus Garvey, representing his United Negro Improvement Association, with its hundreds of thousands of members, marching in full raiment down Harlem's packed streets? Amidst the noise and spectacle, writers and artists, playwrights and trumpet players, poets and painters, trickled in.

Retrospective accounts of what came to be known as the Harlem Renaissance point out that it was too concerned with the color of culture (or, perhaps, the culture of color) to have express "political" ends. Elitist in orientation, it did nothing to improve the poor living conditions affecting the vast majority of blacks living in Harlem at the time. For a movement, it didn't move much. No political platform was advanced. No demands were made. It was merely Greenwich Village bohemianism, some said, painted black. Accounts of the Harlem Renaissance generally begin with the caveat that its beginnings are impossible to define, that it was more a "spirit than a

movement,” or that generalizations will invariably fail to capture its essence⁵⁴. Still others call it a kind of psychology.⁵⁵ Even the various names given the series of events, personages, literature and artwork that have come to be known as the Harlem Renaissance highlight these difficulties, for during the 20s and 30s, it was called the Negro Renaissance, New Negro Movement or the Black Renaissance. Zora Neale Hurston jokingly called its younger participants the “Niggerati,” while dismissing the old Negro guard as “Negrotarian.”⁵⁶

The Harlem Renaissance is, at least, a convenient title to give to the unprecedented and explosive flowering of black American (and diasporan) social thought and cultural production, centered in Harlem, beginning in the late teens or early 1920s. Artists arrived in Harlem—elated and inquisitive—like everyone else. Or perhaps they were a bit more buoyant, for, after all, these *new* Negroes were, if not wealthier than, then certainly more educated—indeed, more exceptional—than the black migrant masses. Both Countee

⁵⁴ “The Harlem Renaissance was more a spirit than a movement, and because a spirit is ephemeral, generalizations about the Harlem Renaissance are either too hard or too easy. They have come easily enough to a whole generation of analysts, but the pity summaries seldom reflect the wide divisions between blacks and whites, the black intelligentsia and the black masses, black artists and their bourgeois readers, that diversified the era. Indeed, when one studies the phenomenon of what was then called the Negro Renaissance or the New Negro Renaissance, and what is now called the Harlem Renaissance, he comes away with a bewildering complex of notions, statements, affirmations and manifestos.” Robert Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1977), p. 35

⁵⁵ “The Harlem Renaissance was basically a psychology—a state of mind or an attitude shared by a number of black writers and intellectuals who centered their activities around Harlem in the late 1920s and 1930s. Cary Wintz, *Black Culture and the Harlem Renaissance* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 1996). 2 But in the Series Introduction to *The Harlem Renaissance, 1920 – 1940*, Wintz writes, “...the Harlem Renaissance may best be conceptualized as a group of black writers and poets, orbiting erratically around a group of black intellectuals positioned in the N.A.A.C.P., The Urban League and other African American political and educational institutions. These older intellectuals supported the movement, criticized it, attempted with varying success to define it and served as liaison between the writers and the white publishers, patrons and critics who dominated the business of literature in the United States in the 1920s.” Cary Wintz, *The Harlem Renaissance 1920 - 1940: Remembering the Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1996). p. viii

⁵⁶ Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography*, p. 43

Cullen and Langston Hughes published their first poems as high school students. In *The Harlem Renaissance Remembered*, Arna Bontemps remarks that he can recall the dates of these early publications in 1921—Hughes for “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” and Cullen for “I Have a Rendezvous with Life (with apologies to Alan Seeger)” —because

...1921 was the year where, half-hidden near the back of a large freshman English class at a small college in northern California, I peeped over the shoulder of the students in front of me and saw an approving smile on the face of the teacher as he read a paper I had submitted in response to the current assignment. I was more embarrassed than flattered by the attention it drew, but the teacher’s smile lingered, and I came to regard that expression as the semaphore that flagged me toward New York City three years later.⁵⁷

New York City also called Zora Neale Hurston, who had already attended high school college preparatory classes at Morgan Academy in Baltimore, and college at Howard University, where she was a member of the campus literary club, Stylus, which was facilitated by Alain Locke. After earning an Associates degree from Howard, Hurston was admitted to Barnard College (the women’s division at Columbia University), where she studied anthropology under the tutelage of Franz Boas. Within a year of arriving in Harlem, Hurston had published two short stories, “Drenched in Light,” and “Spunk,” as well as a play, “Color Struck” for which she won two literary awards. She had clearly followed her late mother’s command to “jump at de sun.”⁵⁸ Wallace Thurman— author of the satirical novel *Infants in the Spring* and chief agitator of the young bohemians, who longed to take the reigns of the Harlem Renaissance— was “proprietor” of what he would call the

⁵⁷ Arna Bontemps, *The Harlem Renaissance Remembered* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1972). p. 4

⁵⁸ “Jump at de sun,” her mother was reported to have said in Hurston’s autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road*, “We might not land on the sun, but at least we would get off the ground.”

“Niggerati Manor,” where he and Bruce Nugent lived, giving prodigious parties and a place to sleep to various artists and hangers-on—arrived in Harlem from his hometown of Salt Lake City, via journalism training at the University of Southern California. Jessie Redmon Fausset, a graduate of Cornell University and the first of Cornell’s black students to graduate Phi Beta Kappa, was literary editor of the NAACP organ *Crisis*, from 1919 – 1926.

New Negro artists arrived in Harlem and in print. And so, plays, short stories and poems were produced, en masse. New magazines were founded, including the famous but short-lived *Fire* by Wallace Thurman, Zora Hurston and Langston Hughes and *Harlem* by Wallace Thurman. The most prestigious black journals—*Opportunity*, *The Crisis*, *Negro World*, *the Crusader*, *the Emancipator*, *the Voice of the Negro* and *the Chicago Defender* —published more literature and offered awards. Novels, short stories and poetry collections were published—*Cane* by Jean Toomer, *Flight* by Walter White, *The Weary Blues* and *Fine Clothes to the Jew* by Langston Hughes, *Passing* and *Quicksand* by Nella Larsen, *Color*, *Copper Sun*, and *The Ballad of the Brown Girl* by Countee Cullen, *Dark Princess* by W.E.B. Du Bois, *Home to Harlem* by Claude McKay, *There is Confusion* and *Plum Bun: A Novel without a Moral*, among many, many others.

These are just a few—less than a representative sample— of the gifted writers and artists who would create and, only briefly, sustain what we now know as the Harlem Renaissance. This account, even of the lives of the very artists I mention leaves many important details un-reported, of course. Because the Harlem Renaissance defies easy explanation, I only hope to suggest it, to create, if you will, a Romare Bearden style pastiche, in which rat infested tenements, street preachers, fruit kiosk operators and rent parties

occupy the same conceptual—and more important, urban— space. This collage ought not be too romantic because the contrast between the persons and lives of the Harlem Renaissance literati and their black migrant counterparts, living atop each other in the tenements of Harlem ought to be clear even from the short summary I offered above.

Harlem's Renaissance leapt beyond the bounds of Harlem because its audience was not limited to New York. The "new" Harlem Renaissance publications, such as *Fire, Harlem*, and *Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro* did not have an enormous audience but were disseminated widely even— and this is important— internationally. Its artist "participants" not only came to Harlem from places far and wide but also traveled, in person and through the exchange and translation of their writings.

IV. Chapter Breakdown

The central and general claim that I see this dissertation defending exceeds its subject.⁵⁹ I think of Alain Locke's project, and the writings and as pursuing democratic ends. It works toward the realization of democratic principles by examining the ways in which 'race' in theory and practice prevent the possibility of true democracy. It examines the effects of 'race' on our thinking and refuses to allow the black political imaginary to be fully captured by the devastating effects of the history of slavery and the practice of 'race' and racism. This is why I argue against interpreting Alain Locke's work through the lens of 'identity,' multiculturalism or the "politics of recognition." Each approach, in my opinion, sees renovated black identities and/or the appreciation of black culture as the primary political objective of Locke's

⁵⁹ My thinking on the subject in black political thought in general owes much to several conversations on the topic with Desmond Jagmohan.

thought. Locke was a subtle thinker who understood why and how easily black thought and culture could itself be captivated by 'race' and 'race thinking' and insisted that there was more to the black imaginary than the continued 'problem' of race.

Consider Locke's 1944 commencement address at Hampton Institute.⁶⁰ It expresses Locke's keen insight into the effects of 'race' on social relations and democracy and his adamant defense against the temptations of "racial chauvinism." Locke warned the "persecuted minority" against "...the acute and sometimes morbid social consciousness."⁶¹ Though it was natural to develop such a consciousness, the 'Negro' ought not to be tempted either by "reactionary, subservient inter-racialism of the traditional sort [or] by narrow chauvinistic racialism."⁶² It was instead, "...high time...to stretch our social minds and achieve thereby a new dynamic as well as new alliances in the common fight for human justice and freedom of which our minority cause is a vital but nonetheless only a fractional part."⁶³ By "inter-racialism of the traditional sort," Locke meant the very Hampton/Tuskegee model the older members of his audience advanced. Those treated the 'Negro' only as a problem, rooted as they were in the "...philosophy of racial work and race relations." Ever sensitive to the real effects of 'race' on the political and social imaginary, Locke saw "militant and chauvinistic racialism" as the "inevitable sequel and antidote" to this traditional form of inter-racialism. He

⁶⁰ Hampton Institute was founded in 1868 as Hampton Normal and Agriculture Institute, was "one of the first colleges for African Americans and a pioneer in educating Native Americans." Booker T. Washington was an alumnus. "The original mandate of the Hampton Institute was to "...educate African Americans in moral virtues and in crafts and trades that would assure them gainful employment." Alain Locke, "Stretching Our Social Mind," ed. Christopher Buck and Betty J. Fisher, *World Order* 38, no. 3 (2008): 28 - 32.p. 28

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

nevertheless insisted that “chauvinistic racialism” was a “...dangerous limitation on a sound and progressive social outlook.”

Eventually, however, just as world-mindedness must dominate and remould [sic] nation-mindedness, so we must transform eventually race-mindedness into human mindedness. Today it is possible and necessary for Negroes to conceive their special disabilities as flaws in the general democratic structure. The intelligent and effective righting of our racial wrongs and handicaps involves pleading and righting the cause to any and all oppressed minorities. In making common cause with all such broader issues, we shall find that we strengthen, both morally and practically, our own. Indeed, we must learn and use this new strategy and further regard such new motivations as a contribution we have it in our power to make to the general welfare and social democracy at large.⁶⁴

Remarkably, given its interracial makeup, Locke considers even the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People as racially chauvinist. He argues, in fact, that as “vital and useful it had been as a militant Negro defense organization,” the NAACP should shift its objectives and change its name to the “National Association for the Advancement of American Democracy.” He insists that the work of the NAACP be “taken up into the substance of a general program and struggle for common human advance.”⁶⁵ Locke’s advice to the NAACP is neither pragmatic nor strategic. He does not mean that to most effectively pursue the ‘Negro’ cause, the NAACP should join up with other movements. I would argue that, as he had so often done before, Locke identifies in the particular context a new transformative potentiality, in which old modes of collective action and political imagination informed by an-up-to-this-point authoritative model of ‘race thinking’ could be traded for new ones. We must be ever attentive to ‘race thinking’ but inspired by a broadened

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Locke, “Stretching Our Social Mind,” 32

social mind. We must always be engaged in rethinking our collective purposes. “This includes all minority problems and situations, the religious and cultural as well as the strictly racial; and it will be the basis in the near future of most of the efforts of progressive educators to teach understanding, tolerance and cultural democracy.”⁶⁶ I suspect that Locke, had he the chance to read Charles Taylor and other defenders of identity and recognition politics, would have argued that such approaches belonged to a particular time—one past or passing.

The dissertation takes shape as a series of inter-related essays exploring Locke’s writings about ‘race,’ culture, modernity and artwork, which feature staged encounters between Locke and number of thinkers, whose primary interests, as often as not, differ from Locke’s. In Chapter Two, “All that’s solid: Difference, Race, and ‘the Political,’ I attend to Locke’s careful theorization of ‘race’ as political practice and as theory. In this chapter, I interpret Locke’s 1916 lectures on ‘race’ and interracial relations (published in 1992 as *Race Contacts and Interracial Relations*⁶⁷). I argue that for Locke, *difference* (among groups) is a defining characteristic of life, which takes on political significance when identifiably different groups confront each other. Faced with unassimilable difference, some groups will subjugate others thereby becoming “political groups” and more important, producing historical accounts, discourses and even social sciences committed to demonstrating and shoring up their superiority and resulting in ‘race’ as we have come to know it. Such ‘race practice’ is politics for Locke and it results in

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Alain Locke and Jeffrey Stewart, *Race Contacts and Interracial Relations*, (Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1992)

a body of thought (race theory) and in racialized identities, characterized by their inferiority or superiority.

A number of contemporary democratic theorists, who like me worry about the effects of identity and identity thinking on democracy, have drawn our attention to the ways in which identities depend upon accounts of difference and see theoretical attempts to ‘recognize’ or protect them as sharply limiting the inherently conflictual practice of democracy. Though Locke was not concerned to see democratic conflict rescued from the democracy-reducing tendencies of proceduralism and deliberative democracy, I argue that he does share with these thinkers a concern for the conditions that best facilitate democracy, and an intuition—that like ‘race thinking,’ identity thinking may foreclose democratic practice. Indeed, for Locke, ‘race thinking’ is the primary and most damaging form of identity-thinking. In this chapter, after characterizing Locke’s ‘race’ lectures, I stage a conversation between him and a rather unlikely partner, Carl Schmitt. I suggest that Locke’s thinking about ‘the political,’ like Schmitt’s, derives from a ‘friend-enemy distinction’ of his own.

As I argue in Chapter Two, Locke offers an historical account of the development of ‘race thinking’ and practice and proposes that in the modern period (early 20th century) one ‘new’ articulation of race would be in the form of “secondary race consciousness” that would forge new group solidarities. Nevertheless, this was not to be the end stage of the development of ‘race thinking and practice,’ nor Locke’s last word on the subject. In Chapter Three, “Culture and the Poetry of ‘Negro’ Life,” I argue that Locke offers at least two accounts of ‘culture:’ the first, ‘social race,’ derived and departed in crucial ways from the older and most pernicious form. From the perspectives of

anthropology and sociology, Locke argued that there were durable cultural traits worthy of study, but only if that study that could identify—and then refuse—the dangerous temptations of biological ‘race thinking.’ At the same time ‘culture’ was a cosmopolitan realm of varied cultural objects, which would serve the self-cultivation of all comers. I examine these accounts of culture by pursuing continuities and discontinuities between his thought and that of German philosopher and social theorist, Georg Simmel, with whom Locke studied at University of Berlin. I close the chapter by ‘reading’ the 1926 essay, “The Negro Poets in the United States,” in which Locke describes the modern transformation of black poetry to a body of work defined by the racial status of its authors to artwork(s) that “objectified ‘Negro’ life,” thereby introducing black life in all its vitality into the realm of culture and the “pure plane of art,” where it could become a source of self-cultivation for all.

This development was a particularly ‘modern’ event for Locke. It was conditioned by what Locke characterized as modernity’s “reverent vandalism” of the past and the ‘cosmopolitan’ style (and potential) of modern poetry. Literary theorist Brent Hayes Edwards argues that Locke is one of many ‘internationalist’ black actors who sought together to articulate the ‘fact’ of blackness. I agree with Edwards that Locke was an ‘internationalist.’ But I suggest in Chapter Four, “Modern (Negro) Poetry,” that ‘internationalism’ does not fully capture his critical enterprise. Instead, drawing on a little known essay about the Belgian modernist poet Emile Verhaeren, which Locke wrote in 1917, I argue that Locke expected from New Negro poets precisely what he celebrated in Verhaeren, a cosmopolitan style cohering from engagement with *particular* subjects. This, I argue in the chapter, is apparent from the multiple frames he requires to address the New Negro and his

artwork (no less than twenty-two essays ‘introducing’ black artwork and social development in *The New Negro: an Interpretation*) and the similarities between Locke’s critical appreciation of Verhaeren and his demands of New Negro artists.

I pursue this argument further by exploring how Locke characterized the ‘function’ of artwork. Following philosopher and Alain Locke scholar Leonard Harris,⁶⁸ in Chapter Five, “[We] are not a race problem.” I examine Locke’s debate with W.E.B. Du Bois over the functions of artwork. While I agree with Harris that it is remarkable that both authors have attributed to artistic expression great salience for the project of emancipation, I disagree with how he assesses the way in which the two authors engage art for politics. Emphasis on superficial similarities between Du Bois and Locke conceals where the two part ways: Du Bois’ take on art is instrumental; he suggested that black artistic production matters only as propaganda. For Locke, art had no function except to “express” ‘Negro life.’ I suggest further that some of Locke’s essays, most particularly those that attend to ‘Negro’ drama begin to push ‘Negro’ artwork out of the bounds of ‘representation’ itself toward the potential of ‘performativity.’

In the admittedly (and perhaps dangerously) experimental Chapter Six, “To Usward” I leave Locke’s art criticism behind to examine a poem, “To Usward,” by the Harlem Renaissance poet Gwendolyn Bennett. I ‘read’ this poem as ‘performing’ the difficult transformation from identification to ‘self-expressiveness,’ which I argue Locke saw as part and parcel of the modern moment for black people. I stage an encounter between my own Lockean interpretation of Bennett’s poem (which is itself drawn from Locke’s approach

⁶⁸ Leonard Harris (Philosophia Africana: Vol. 7, Issue 1, March 2004) 15 - 39

to art criticism) as 'performing' black autonomy in its constitutive moment and Jacques Derrida's theorization of the Declaration of Independence. Though the different genres of these texts— poem and public document— would seem to defy comparison, by my reading Locke interpreted black poetry and artwork of the period as claiming independence from the identity (as problem) previously ascribed to black people.

Finally, in Chapter Seven, the Conclusion, I close by reflecting on Locke, difference and identity and suggest future directions for the project.

WORKS CITED

- Alain Locke. 2008. "Stretching Our Social Mind" eds. Christopher Buck and Betty J. Fisher. *World Order* 38(3): 28 - 32.
- Bontemps, Arna. 1972. *The Harlem Renaissance Remembered*. New York: Dodd, Mead and Co.
- Buck, Christopher. 2005. *Alain Locke: Faith and Philosophy*. Los Angeles, CA: Kalimat Press.
- Harris, Leonard, and Charles Molesworth. 2008. *Alain L. Locke: The Biography of a Philosopher*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Harris, Leonard. 2004. "The Great Debate: W.E.B. Du Bois vs. Alain Locke on the Aesthetic." *Philosophia Africana* 7(1): 15 - 39.
- Hemenway, Robert. 1977. *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Johnson, James Weldon. 1940. *Black Manhattan*. New York: Knopf.
- Locke, Alain Leroy, and Jeffrey C. Stewart. 1992. *Race Contacts and Interracial Relations*. Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press.
- Locke, Alain Leroy, and Jeffrey C. Stewart. 1992. *Race Contacts and Interracial Relations*. Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press.
- Locke, Alain, ed. 1925. *The New Negro: an Interpretation*. New York: Albert and Charles Boni.
- Locke, Alain. "The Negro Poets of the United States." In *The Critical Temper of Alain Locke: A Selection of His Essays on Art and Culture*, Critical Studies on Black Life and Culture, ed. Jeffrey C. Stewart. New York and London: Garland Publishing Inc., p. 43 - 49.
- Locke, Alain. 1925. "Negro Youth Speaks." In *The New Negro: an Interpretation*, New York: Albert and Charles Boni, p. 47 - 56.

- Locke, Alain. 1983. "Art or Propaganda." In *The Critical Temper of Alain Locke: A Selection of His Essays on Art and Culture*, ed. Jeffrey C. Stewart. New York and London: Garland Publishing Inc., p. 27 - 28.
- Locke, Alain. 1983. "Enter the New Negro." In *The Critical Temper of Alain Locke: A Selection of His Essays on Art and Culture*, Critical Studies on Black Life and Culture, ed. Jeffrey C. Stewart. New York and London: Garland Publishing Inc., p. 7 - 12.
- Locke, Alain. 1983. "Harlem Types." In *The Critical Temper of Alain Locke: A Selection of His Essays on Art and Culture*, ed. Jeffrey Stewart. New York and London: Garland Publishing Inc., p. 17 - 20.
- Locke, Alain. 1983. "Harlem." In *The Critical Temper of Alain Locke: A Selection of His Essays on Art and Culture*, New York and London: Garland Publishing Inc., p. 5 - 7.
- Locke, Alain. 1989. *The Philosophy of Alain Locke: The Harlem Renaissance and Beyond*. ed. Leonard Harris. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- McKay, Claude. 1940. *Harlem: Negro Metropolis*, New York: E.P. Dutton.
- Markell, Patchen. 2003. *Bound by Recognition*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Spiller, Gustav. 1911. *Interracial Problems*. London: P.S. King and Son.
- Taylor, Charles. 1994. "The Politics of Recognition." In *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of America*, ed. Amy Gutmann. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Thurman, Wallace. 1992. *Infants of the Spring*. Boston: Northeastern University Press.
- Tuttle, William M. 1996. *Race Riot: Chicago in the Red Summer 1919*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.

van Notten, Leonore. 1994. *Wallace Thurman's Harlem Renaissance*. Amsterdam: Rodopi.

Wintz, Cary. 1996. *Black Culture and the Harlem Renaissance*. College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press.

Wintz, Cary. 1996. *The Harlem Renaissance 1920 - 1940: Remembering the Harlem Renaissance*. New York: Garland Publishing Inc.

Wintz, Cary. 2007. "Harlem." In *Harlem Speaks: A Living History of the Harlem Renaissance*, Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks Media Fusion.

CHAPTER 2

ALL THAT'S SOLID: DIFFERENCE, RACE AND 'THE POLITICAL'

Historian David Levering Lewis has pointed out that W.E.B. Du Bois pursued “virtually every possible solution to the problem of twentieth-century racism.” In his scholarship, fiction, essays and autobiography, and in his political activism in the NAACP and later as a separatist and Marxist, W.E.B. Du Bois was dedicated to the eradication of “the problem of the color line.” In his biography of Du Bois, Lewis describes a confident life lived in service of black people and of American democracy; a life lived in pursuit every available possible fix to the problem of racism: political, social and cultural. Du Bois worked hard on behalf of black people and in pursuit of equality. But the need for this work and the experience of living his life as a problem had profound effects, both on Du Bois’s own consciousness and that of black people in general. Du Bois wrote in the opening chapter of the *Souls of Black Folk*.

Between me and the other world there is ever an unasked question: unasked by some through feelings of delicacy; by others through the difficulty of rightly framing it...How does it feel to be a problem? I answer seldom a word... And yet, being a problem is a strange experience—peculiar for one who has never been anything else...It dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others; or like, mayhap in heart and life and longing, but shut out from their world by a vast veil...After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil and gifted with second sight in this American world, --a world that yields him no true self-consciousness but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others...One ever feels his two-ness, --an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two

warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.¹

Du Bois moves deftly back and forth between his own experience of being *recognized* as a problem (“They approach me in a half-hesitant sort of way...asking How does it feel to be a problem” “...I was different...shut out by a veil”) and that of the ‘Negro’ (“a sort of seventh son, born with a veil”), who is afforded “no true self-consciousness” because he “ever feels his two-ness.” In Du Bois’s telling, Black people strive to “be...co-worker[s] in the kingdom of culture”² but find their talents nevertheless “...strangely wasted, dispersed, or forgotten.”³ Blacks find their “strengths” misrecognized as weakness, “to seem like absence of power.” Thus, the “black artisan,” “Negro minister or doctor,” and “black savant” confronts “double aims.” The black artisan must escape “white contempt” while at the same time, “...plough[ing] and nail[ing] and dig[ging] for a poverty stricken horde.”⁴ The black artist faces a particularly impossible challenge:

The innate love of harmony and beauty that set the ruder souls of his people a-dancing and a-singing raised but confusion and doubt in the soul of the black artist; for the beauty revealed to him was the soul-beauty of a race which his larger audience despised, and he could not articulate the message of another people.⁵

Like the “Negro doctor or minister,” who is pushed by the “criticism of the other world...toward ideals that made him ashamed of his lowly tasks,” the black artist cannot represent the ‘soul beauty of race,’ its “singing and its

¹ W.E.B. Du Bois, “Souls of Black Folk,” in *Du Bois: Writings*, ed. Nathan Huggins (New York, NY: The Library of America, 1986), 357 - 548.

² Ibid. 365

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid. 366

dancing” because he must ever concern himself with the problem of misrecognition by the white audience. Under these conditions, to borrow Alain Locke’s language, the black artist cannot be “self-expressive.” Ever pursuing “double aims,” the black artist cannot articulate the plurality and vitality of black life. “Race,” what Du Bois famously in “The Forethought” of *Souls*, called the “problem of the Twentieth Century,”⁶ results in misrecognition, thereby necessitating “double aims” that foreclose the possibility of “self-expressiveness.” What was the black artist to do? I will argue in Chapter Five that for Du Bois, in contrast to Locke, the black artist had a duty to propagate truths about ‘the race’ to counter white misrepresentations. In this chapter, I pursue one source of their disagreement: their thinking about ‘race’ as a body of ideas and practice.

As political scientist Joel Olson⁷ has rightly pointed out, Du Bois’s thinking about what he called the ‘race concept’ evolved over the course of his long life. His early work in *Souls* and the essay, “The Conservation of Races,” treats race as a “scientific and world historical category.” Later, Du Bois explains ‘race’ by invoking culture and geography.⁸ In his later life, Du Bois abandoned culture and geography as sources for ‘race,’ arguing instead that ‘race’ is an historical and political category, a result Olson argues, of the “social heritage of slavery.” According to Olson, a number of historical events shaped the evolution of Du Bois’s thinking. Olson argues, nevertheless, that Du Bois was a “propagandist and a scientist in that order.”⁹ Thus, Du Bois’s is best considered a “scholar and activist.”

⁶ Ibid. 359

⁷ Joel Olson, “W.E.B. Du Bois and the Race Concept,” *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society* 7, no. 3 - 4 (Summer 2005): 118 - 129.

⁸ Olson cites Du Bois’s 1915 *The Negro* as representative of this thinking.

⁹ Ibid. 118

One way to think about the differences between Locke's and Du Bois's thinking about 'race' is that Locke was not an activist in the manner of Du Bois. That is, it is not clear that Locke saw "objective research [serving] a normative function"¹⁰ in the manner that Olson convincingly argues that Du Bois did. In this regard, Locke's approach to 'race' as a category worthy of study is similar to his approach to artwork. As I argue in Chapter Five, to Locke, artwork did not serve a normative function. Its only function was to be 'expressive.' Furthermore, I would argue that though Du Bois's thinking about the 'race concept' evolved over the course of his life, his thinking about the political purposes of artwork remained tied to repairing the damage done to black people by misrecognition/misrepresentation, in a way that it did not for Locke.

Locke agreed with Du Bois that 'race' was the "problem of the Twentieth Century." But for Locke, 'race' not only affected the misrecognition of black people and other despised groups, thereby curtailing their participation in the kingdom of culture, it had a deep history of its own *as* political practice. What I mean by this is that though—as Olson convincingly argues—it is best to think of Du Bois's activist-social scientific approach to the 'race concept' as having evolved from biological/world historical category to one resulting from historical and political occurrences, for Locke, 'race' as a center of meaning, was always (and forever remained) a "world historical concept," which resulted from the political (what Locke called the subjugating) practice of 'race.' By this I mean to highlight less an academic debate Du Bois and Locke might have engaged in over the sources of 'race' in theory, practice and politics but rather that Locke, who claimed no "double

¹⁰ Ibid. 118

consciousness” conditioned by “double aims,” refused to abandon the notion of ‘race’ as a ‘world historical concept,’ thereby allowing himself to “live in the key of paradox” and to publicize and celebrate black people for doing so. We might say that the stages of Du Bois’s life-long exploration of ‘race’ and its sources were for Locke *world-historical* stages in the development of ‘race’ as theory and practice.

We can see this difference in a lengthy quotation from Du Bois’s 1940 autobiography *Dust of Dawn*, which Olson cites to characterize Du Bois’s “final, mature, conception of race.”¹¹ Du Bois asks “What is it between us [himself and Africa] that constitutes a tie which I can feel better than I can explain?” In raising this question, Du Bois acknowledges that neither biological/world historical nor social constructivist accounts can adequately grasp his personal experience of connectedness to Africa, its people and other despised ‘races.’

But one thing is sure and that is the fact that since the fifteenth century these ancestors of mine and their other descendents have had a common history; have suffered a common disaster and have one long memory. The actual ties of heritage between the individuals of this group vary with the ancestors that they have in common and many others: Europeans and Semites, perhaps Mongolians, certainly American Indians. But the physical bond is less and the badge of color relatively unimportant save as a badge; the real essence of this kinship is its social heritage of slavery; the discrimination and insult; and this heritage binds us together not simply the children of Africa, but extends through yellow Asia and into the South Seas. It is this unity that draws me to Africa.¹²

According to Olson, this indicates Du Bois’s mature understanding of race as “socially constructed,” since Du Bois dismisses ties of heritage, biology and

¹¹ Ibid. 121 - 122

¹² Qtd. in Ibid. from W.E.B. Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1995). p. 67

'color,' and identifies instead the shared experience of "slavery, discrimination and insult" as the foundation for his deep connection to Africa. To me, it also demonstrates a profoundly personal sense of kinship, defined by the common experience of political exclusion. The subtitle, "An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept," illuminates the deeply personal nature of 'race' to Du Bois: though race was a 'concept,' whose source Du Bois accounted for in different ways over the course of his life, even as a 'concept' it exerted profound enough effects over Du Bois's own autobiography that his report of his life could not be divorced from it. I hasten to add that Locke (who never published an autobiography) also suffered profoundly from the effects of exclusion.¹³ I do not wish to compare Du Bois's and Locke's "suffering," of course. But I do want to suggest that for Locke, 'race' had to be understood first and foremost in the abstract and not (only) as a life experience: 'race' was a meaning-producing concept and practice with an ever changing history. This understanding freed Locke up to attend (in his accounts of black artwork) to the plurality of black life.

Nevertheless, in this chapter though I do not offer a sustained comparison between Du Bois's evolving conceptualization of 'race' and Locke's 'world historical' one, differences between them will become clear. For Locke, 'race' arose "naturally" from perceived differences among people

¹³ As his biographers Leonard Harris and Charles Molesworth point out, Locke was hurt by his exclusion from social events during his time at Oxford. They record a letter from Horace Kallen (one of Locke's teachers) in which Kallen wrote, "I had a Negro student named Alain Locke, a very remarkable young man—very sensitive, very easily hurt—who insisted that he was a human being and that his color ought not to make any difference...Two years later when I went to Oxford on a fellowship he was there as a Rhodes scholar, and we had a race problem because the Rhodes scholars from the South were bastards. So they had a Thanksgiving dinner which I refused to attend because they refused to have Locke. And he said, "I am a human being," just as I had said it earlier. What difference does difference make? We are all alike Americans." Qtd in Harris and Molesworth, *Alain L. Locke: The Biography of a Philosopher.*, 69

and became political when one group was subjugated to another. 'Race theory' was ultimately false and 'race practice' often odious. 'Race' was, in fact, a corrupted (and political) version of and response to 'difference,' which Locke considered a 'fact' of human life. Because it defined the history of social thought and practice, 'race' could not be easily abandoned, even by sustained analysis and critique. But the early 20th century moment was significant to Locke; though 'race' continued to influence social relations, modern processes (most particularly assimilation) would shape (and deform) its development and effects. Black people could take advantage of these new developments and achieve what he called "secondary race consciousness." But this new form of 'consciousness' was the result of broader sociological development and *not* an effect of demanding (and receiving) 'recognition' of 'true' black culture.

In this chapter, I take up Locke's theorization of 'race,' as he delivered it in the 1916 lecture series, published in 1992 as *Race Contacts and Interracial Relations*. I first offer a general overview of the *Race Contacts* lectures, paying particular attention to Locke's political theorization of 'race' as difference-corrupted and its continued pernicious influences. Second, I examine in closer detail, what I will call Locke's theorization of 'the political,' by comparing/contrasting it to that of Carl Schmitt since both thinkers, at least initially define 'the political' in terms of an originary "friend-enemy" distinction. Third, I suggest that Locke's *Race Contacts* lectures can be fruitfully understood to both identify the political uses to which 'race' can and has been put by "superior" races *and* attends to the fundamental role that difference plays in shaping our social world.

I. Race Contacts and Interracial Relations

By 1916, Locke had been teaching at Howard University for four years as an assistant professor in the Teacher's College, responsible for courses in Philosophy and English among other topics. In 1914, he proposed to offer a series of lectures on the "question of race." After some struggle with Howard's University's administration,¹⁴ who thought the topic too controversial, he was permitted to offer the five lectures over the course of five weeks at Howard University. Inspired in part by the 1911 First Universal Races Congress,¹⁵ Locke gave the lectures in 1916, sponsored by the Howard chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the Teachers and Commercial College, and the Social Science Club.¹⁶

The lectures reflect Locke's grasp of sociology and anthropology, as well as a commitment to uncovering the signs in social thought that the influence of biological race thinking was on the wane. They also reveal the influence of German social theorist and philosopher Georg Simmel on Locke's characterization of 'race' as a social form. In retrospect, Locke's lectures are bold in scope and not just because the topic was controversial. Locke did not

¹⁴ For a full account of Locke's struggle to offer these lectures, see Harris and Leonard, *Alain Locke: Biography of a Philosopher*, 119 - 127

¹⁵ The Universal Race Congress of 1911 was a truly remarkable event. It brought together the very best minds from the physical and social sciences, with important contributions from the fields of anthropology and sociology. The purpose of the Congress was to "...discuss, in light of science and modern conscience, the general relations subsisting between the peoples of the West and those of the East, between so-called white and so-called coloured peoples, with a view to encouraging between them a fuller understanding, the most friendly feelings, and a heartier co-operation." In attendance were, among others, Franz Boas, Max Weber, Werner Sombert, Ferdinand Toennies, Emile Durkheim, Jane Adams, Georg Simmel, Gustav Spiller, Felix von Luschan, W.E.B. Du Bois, Alain Locke, anti-imperialist Duse Mohammed Ali and feminist Charlotte Despard. Generally agreeing on the "biological unity and racial intermixture of mankind," scholars presented papers describing the meaning of 'race' from an anthropological and sociological standpoint, theorized differences among racial groups, described the governments and peoples of non-Western nations, and commanded the possibility of "peaceful contact between civilizations" to the work of private associations, and characterized the "modern conscience in relation to the Negro and American Indians."

¹⁶ Harris and Molesworth, *Alain Locke: Biography of a Philosopher*, 123

defend his dissertation thesis until two years later in 1918. The *Race Contacts* lectures reveal a young scholar first articulating a concern— contact among the ‘races’—that was to become in his life’s work. The lectures are thus difficult to characterize! Locke turned to sociology because it was, in his view, the only field adequate to the task at hand. Sometimes, the lectures read as a program: here is how we ought to study ‘race,’ if we are to study it all. Otherwise, the text offers an historical account of race. But in the last lecture in particular, it reads as a series of speculations about future developments.

Lost for decades in Howard University’s Locke archive until 1992 when historian Jeffrey Stewart edited Locke’s notes and published them as *Race Contacts and Interracial Relations*, the text remains relatively unknown, especially compared to Locke’s Harlem Renaissance art criticism. This makes for the greatest challenge to the political theorist open to its possibilities: *Race Contacts* is a little-known text that ought to be familiar already so that it can be deconstructed for its productive subtleties.

Because Locke insists that ‘race’ in all of its variety is ultimately a ‘social form,’ he tends to universalize the concept, applying it not only in all historical eras and to groups that might, in anthropological terms, be thought of as ‘ethnicities’ or ‘cultures,’ but also to all forms of social distinction, even to groups that are more typically thought of as classes. Locke’s argument is further complicated by his insistence that though it is a universally useful concept for understanding group relationships, it is ultimately ‘arbitrary.’ Locke does not mean that ‘races’ mark random characteristics or categorizations. Rather, ‘race’ is arbitrary in the sense that it is not biologically heritable but is instead attributed to particular human groupings by

circumstance. I offer here an overview of the five lectures, treating them in totality and not in the precise order that they were given.¹⁷

Locke argues that the social sciences ought to understand 'race' as a "center of meaning," and not merely to consider it as a "dynamical entity," as had earlier race theorists, who believed that 'race' was best understood as a marker of permanent characteristics, passed along through evolutionary processes. Locke contends that the science (theory) of race from de Gobineau¹⁸ to the modern period was based on a fallacy. Race science conflated the descriptive enterprises of anthropology with the normative project of classifying races in terms of superiority and inferiority. Though many second-generation anthropologists abandoned the white superiority project, substituting the more scientifically defensible idea of 'race difference' for 'race superiority,' they did so only in defense of the discipline and did not go far enough.

...there has been an extraordinary reaction in purely scientific circles for purely scientific reasons...[the] French and German anthropologists have protested against any carrying of the descriptive classifications into classes of humanity, into concepts of race superiority and inferiority. Through the anthropological and ethnological research, they have tried to illustrate the limits of anthropological observation in order to protect their scientific method.¹⁹

¹⁷ The lectures were delivered in the following order: First, in the "Theoretical and Scientific Conceptions of Race," Locke argues that 'race' does not refer to heritable characteristics and suggests that it should thus be studied as a center of meaning. Second, in "The Political and practical Conceptions of Race," he 'traces the history of the practices of race,' describing how 'difference' conditions political conflict and produces 'race' as a body of ideas, beliefs and practices. Third, in "The Phenomenon and Law of Race Contacts," Locke examines 'race' as a social phenomenon, examining the effects of 'contact' among distinct (either racially, ethnically or socio-economically) groups of people. Fourth, in "Modern Race Creeds and Their Fallacies," he "surveys contemporary problems and situations in matters of race...[to] explain and condemn the false practices of race that are so prevalent." Fifth, in "Racial Progress and Race Adjustment," Locke examines how 'race' will change in the modern era through the development and practice of 'better' modes of 'difference' in society.

¹⁸ Refers to Arthur Comte de Gobineau, a French aristocrat and amateur scientist who developed the theory of Aryan supremacy in the 1853 essay *An Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races*.

¹⁹ Locke and Stewart, *Race Contacts and Interracial Relations*, 5

Locke defends a shift that was to remove 'race' from the universe of physical biology and ethnic anthropology and integrate it into that of sociology. For a sociological study of 'race' would, instead of continuing in the ultimately useless exercises in comparing head forms, gaits, and the diameter of pelvises, investigate the uses to which 'race' is put in the world of political and social practice. Locke indicates the necessarily narrower margins within which scientific anthropology had to contain itself when it abandoned its normative ambitions encouraged "more enlightened scholars" to turn to ethno-psychology. But that science too was limited by the notion of 'race' already monopolizing the interests of anthropologists. Only the social sciences could answer the most important questions: what is race? (How) is it still useful?

Locke interrogates 'race' from social and political perspectives, examining its meaning by characterizing its practices and effects. Locke argues that the practice of race was "world old" and that it was only the theory that was distinctly modern. "The world very often begins to practice a thing long before it begins to speculate about it, and the world as been at work in terms of race long before it has ever come to anything like a conception of race in the scientific sense."²⁰ By this, Locke means that before 'race' became scientifically authoritative and political useful, it was 'practiced.' It seems strange to think of a "practice of race." Locke refers to the processes of distinction/assimilation that he claims constitute all groups. Those practices, as we will see, only become political in certain contexts. But the biological notion of 'race' (i.e.: that racial groups are made up of members who share

²⁰ Ibid. 20

heritable physical and psychological characteristics) can only result from political practice.

To clarify this point, Locke speculates that in ancient times, most groups (what he calls tribes) defined themselves by a collective sense of kinship, which bound each tribe to itself and set it apart from other tribes. When confronted with recognizable 'others,' a tribe could either adopt new members (through marriage or elaborate rituals to establish blood relations) or, if that were impossible, it could attempt to subjugate them. Crucially, according to Locke, relations among tribes took on a political cast when domination was chosen over incorporation.

So dominance then, is the other side of the coin...So that really the history of successful contacts not only breeds what we might call 'dominant' races, but the 'dominant' race becomes the 'political' race, the politically powerful people who can mold contacts their way. Whereas the people who are lacking in this sense will not only be lacking in the capacities of this kind of racial or political dominance, but they will come under the more forceful control of what are political or dominant groups. Now the conception of 'inferior' races or 'backward' races and of 'advanced' races or 'superior' races largely comes from the political fortunes and political capacity of peoples.²¹

Importantly, for Locke, politics is subjugation. If a tribe chooses to subjugate another group instead of incorporating it, it has selected a political solution to the 'problem' of difference. As Locke sees it, assimilation/differentiation are natural processes that produce groups. What is important is the *form* this process takes. Group relations only become political when the form of contact is subjugating. Politics is the only form of contact that objectifies peoples as 'races,' 'nations' bound together neither by

²¹ Ibid. 22

ethnic (nor civic) foundations but instead by relations of superordination/subordination with dominant groups.

Not surprisingly, Locke has the early 20th century United States in mind when he characterizes politics in terms of domination. Locke argues that the U.S. is a bi-racial nation,²² organized to keep 'superior' and 'subject' races separate. 'Race thinking' results in a view of racial hierarchy that has itself achieved such authority in the U.S. American context, that it has become the very "code of practical modern statesmanship."

The fallacy of race ascendancy is the most practical fallacy of all... The most significant manifestation of it is the feeling in modern society that society ought to be reorganized on a bi-racial system and that a race group should duplicate the social organization within itself and keep to itself, maintaining its solidarity with the rest of society only through the merest sort of economic cooperation which seems necessary for the functioning of society. Now this is the code of practical modern statesmanship, realizing that we are acquainted with it as it has been practiced, for example, by advocates of white supremacy in this country.²³

The U.S. is a bi-racial nation whose bi-racial status is maintained by its members, who "keep to themselves," thereby further shoring up the nation's bi-raciality. Locke implies, furthermore, that though white and black Americans are 'American,' the relations between white and black are closer to those between imperial powers and their subject nations than those between 'citizens' of a single nation. But this modern form of (imperial) relations is nothing like the ancient sort on two counts. First, to describe modern imperial power, Locke differentiates between 'ancient' and 'modern' forms, arguing

²²The bi-racial organization of the U.S. results from a 'race fallacy,' that of assuming because there 'are' ascendant races, society 'should' be organized (bi)racially. Ibid. 76 – 78

²³ Ibid. 76

that ancient empires allowed subject groups to remain 'alien' and whole, in the sense that though subjugated, they were permitted to practice their particular customs. In the early 20th century U.S., black people's ties to African cultures had been destroyed by slavery, meaning that the question of 'allowance' to custom was not an issue in the sense that Locke means. Thus, black and white alike "keep to themselves," retaining only economic relations.

'International' relations between subject 'races' and imperial powers are similar to that Locke describes in the U.S. American setting. Locke argues (perhaps naively) that 'modern' empire is fundamentally different from the 'ancient' sort since 'ancient' empires allowed subjects to remain 'alien' in the sense that they continued to practice their particular customs. In the modern period, empire is fundamentally transformed. Modern empires "...attempt quite the opposite thing. There is the belief that there could only be one civilization, instead of the ancient belief that there could only be one empire."²⁴ Locke argues that modern empires see the people they subjugate not only as inferior but also (merely) as consumers and not as citizens. "The fundamental reason why Great Britain wants India to adopt English institutions is because they want Indians to adopt Birmingham cloth and London woolen goods..."²⁵ The *modern* practice of empire is pernicious to Locke because it results in the complete political, social, economic and cultural subjugation of so-called inferior groups. It does that, in part, by relying on 'race' as a legitimating body of thought and practice. In the American case, the results of imperial practice are clear to Locke: bi-racial organization shores up 'race' categories, fully defining political relations in the U.S. 'Race thinking and practice' thus represent not just scientific error but also limits to

²⁴ Ibid. 25

²⁵ Ibid.

democracy. 'Race thinking' can only envision political groupings, even within one nation, constituted in racial terms.

Yet, though Locke argues modern group relations results from and is defined by 'race thinking,' itself a result of the most pernicious political practices, the pre-political state to which I referred above was quite significant to Locke. Subjugation originates in 'conflict' over difference. What if the 'fact' of difference did not result in 'conflict' and 'subjugation?' Locke does not explore this possibility in the 'race lectures.' I want to suggest the significance of Locke's discussion of the pre-political state, whose defining characteristic was the presence of 'difference' among groups. Further, I argue that this pre-political condition—in which difference is a fact of life—is precisely what Locke hopes to see restored, once 'race thinking' is on the wane. This, I suggest, is what animates his attention to modern, 'Negro' art. I take this claim up in a later chapter.

In any case, while 'race' and 'race thinking' are results of subjugation, as the quote above makes clear, groups "duplicate" race practice, on the ground, as it were, as everyday practice. Moreover, for Locke, 'race' also denotes 'kinship sense,' the perception of one's membership in one group and non-membership in others. Locke is thus not content only to theorize the imperial sources of 'race,' for he also understands groups to result from 'kinship sense.'

In passing to the phenomena and laws of race contacts, we pass to that phase of the subject which confronts us with conditions as they are. In this lecture, we shall now endeavor to turn our attention to those conditions which are now working today, even though they may be centuries old. We want to try to record those forces that are invariable phenomena of racial contacts and

we want also to see if it in investigating these phenomena, we can catch their drift or tendency.²⁶

This is why, to Locke, sociology offers the best methods by which to understand 'race' both as an autonomous structure, whose political sources and uses I have already described, and as it arises and reconstitutes itself in everyday practice.

The history of race contacts is history, and we should never confuse history as an account of social reactions, with that more scientific approach to it, which we have today in the so-called economic and sociological sciences. We wish to study race relations so that we may know how it is that one group in society reacts in a certain way toward another group.²⁷

Upon closer observation, it becomes clear that every social grouping, from the perspective of a larger whole, has "contradictory elements,' themselves either a result of or condition for differentiating/ assimilative practices

...[We] can see what we would call group feeling prevailing, and within groups—even within societies—that from the point of view of government, from the point of view of culture, from the point of view really of all the essential larger structures, the society was one. So that we see no social unit so small that it hasn't itself subdivisions, that it hasn't its classes, that it hasn't its groups, that it hasn't within itself some more or less contradictory elements.²⁸

'Race' is both an everyday practice of "contradictory elements" and in its most pernicious form is a useful concept that legitimates subjugation by positing inferior and superior races.

...wherever we find groups amalgamating in society, we must expect to find groups differentiating and separating out. It is

²⁶ Ibid. 41

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid. 45

really, after all, one side of the same tendency; and I think the thing which separates people into groups is functionally, in human society, the same thing which brings them together in groups. If the consciousness of kind unites, the consciousness of kind must separate. There is a sort of logic to human society. There is sociological logic...which seems to necessitate this action and reaction, this thesis and antithesis, this contrary result of the same principle or tendency.²⁹

Differentiation and assimilation are fundamental social processes, without which social organization could not exist. Political subjugation, we might say, is one form that differentiation can take; it is pernicious because it forecloses the full logic of social groupings by attempting to prevent assimilative tendencies. The political form of distinction generates biological 'race' as we know it in the modern age, which itself legitimates further subjugation. It is nevertheless clear that for Locke, 'differentiation' itself is innocent. "The distinctions are not harmful in themselves, but harmful only as they are unjustly perpetuated or irrationally practiced."³⁰ The problem with the political form of distinction is that it prevents more robust forms of collectivity by attempting to exercise complete control over particulars, thereby corrupting the 'natural' processes of distinction/assimilation Locke holds as crucial to society.

Why classify all manifestations of distinction as varieties of 'race' whether theory, practice or sensibility? One reason, I suspect, is that he was influenced by Georg Simmel's articulation of social 'form' as distinct from 'content.' For Simmel, social content was human behavior.

Social forms gain autonomy from the momentary impulses and pressing demands of the life process in two ways. They become combined and hypostasized into larger, institutional structures,

²⁹ Ibid. 45

³⁰ Ibid. 47

military organizations, communities... The other mode by which social forms become autonomous corresponds precisely to the transformation of accumulated protoculture into the pure forms of objective culture... That is, there emerge certain forms of interaction that are realized not for some practical purpose but for the sake of the forms themselves.³¹

'Race' for Locke is both protoform of interaction (differentiation/assimilation) and a fully autonomous body of ideas (the theory of biological race), which although a science, assumes what it sets out to prove: that there is a hierarchy of races—resulting from political practice. Thus, it is possible that as protoform, 'race' might not generate problems.

Race problems...constitute themselves largely out of the groupings, the larger social groupings, which seem caused by racial differences or what we would say is the ethnic sense of one group as contrasted with the ethnic sense of another group. We somehow regard race feeling and the kind of group relationship and feeling which we call 'racial' or 'ethnic' as different in kind from the same kind of group feeling which prevails in what we know as social classes. I fancy that this is the fundamental mistake, because however extreme they may be..., race feelings (group sense that moves along racial lines) is only different in degree...and not in kind from class sense and class feeling.³²

Locke attempts here to carefully distinguish the pernicious results of 'race' thinking (race problems) from group feeling. Both are 'natural.' This passage makes clear that while 'race thinking' results from subjugation, what we might call "everyday" race problems have a different source: "group feeling."

Locke distinguishes between the social and the political here in an interesting fashion. Difference is a 'natural' force/process—both creative

³¹ Donald N. Levine, "Introduction," in *George Simmel: On Individuality and Social Forms*, The Heritage of Sociology (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1971), ix - lxxv.

³² *Ibid.* 44

(assimilative) and destructive (dissimilative) –that conditions social coherence. Some ‘race problems’—say discriminatory and exclusionary behavior on the part of the members of one group against another—result from it. At the same time, ‘difference’ conditions the very possibility of politics. By characterizing each of these manifestations of and responses to difference ‘race,’ Locke complicates the possibility of political ‘solutions’ the problem of ‘race.’ ‘Difference’ is the constitutive element of group unity, and ‘race,’ in its most autonomous, politicized form, is understood as a concomitant of the practice of subjugation.

Race problems take a variety of forms, the most damaging of which is ‘race’ as creed, a system of beliefs that reduces the dynamic, productive forms of human interaction to mere behavior and further solidifies the ‘meaning’ of one’s membership in a particular ‘race.’

The emergence of creed in race is one of the most difficult elements. It has not always been connected with the practice of race. Although there can be no very definite decision, I fancy that the older practices of race were different from our modern practices on this very point—that they weren’t reinforced by a doctrine of race at all. They were merely instinctive practices and not the rather iniquitous kind of reinforcement of irrational positions that we confront when we confront anything like a modern race creed.³³

By attending to the multiple connotations of the word ‘practice,’ Locke’s intuition can best be grasped. The practice of race means the ‘exercise’ of distinction. What Locke called group sense was a result of a spontaneous response to difference. Social institutions both just and unjust emerge from those responses. Under modern political conditions, as Locke indicates with

³³ Ibid. 63

reference to U.S. America's bi-raciality, the exercise of distinction can no longer be spontaneous; it is instead a habit, which converts what had been 'arbitrary' distinctions into 'creeds,' fallacious beliefs that thoroughly shaped how people understand and act in the world.

These 'creeds' are not the same as theoretical conceptions of race: they are less scientific ideas about race than 'articles of faith' about *particular* races. Those 'faiths' are expressed both in scholarship (as Locke argues in the first lecture) and in the form of particular "race prejudices." According to Locke, the source of race theory as 'doctrine' is 19th century German thought.

This is a doctrine which is a peculiar blight of the nineteenth-century's thought and scholarship. The root of it, I am sorry to say, is the root of some of the most fruitful scholarship of the whole era. About the middle of the nineteenth century... a great discovery was made in Germany which at the time was invented for the purpose of explaining a new interpretation of history.... It sprang up in connection with the language studies of certain German scholars, particularly Grimm... And it was Grimm who invented the fiction of the Indo-Germanic peoples... [and also] translated the notion of Aryan languages into the notion of the Aryan peoples—a broad classification of Caucasian groups, which had never been thought of before...³⁴

This scholarly move, which conflates shared language with shared blood, has pernicious results, particularly when its political usefulness was uncovered. "Good science [biology and anthropology] [simply] ...came to the rescue and support of bad...theory." "...[Practically], there is an imaginary line running around the globe dividing politically and socially, the darker, or the non-Aryan, from the so-called Aryan peoples."³⁵

³⁴ Ibid. 73

³⁵ Ibid.

Five “fallacies” define the ‘creed’ that there existed a ‘natural’ divide between Aryan and non-Aryan people. Those are 1) the biological fallacy that “... predicates a physical race for every practical social grouping that it finds necessary...;” 2) the fallacy of the masses, which takes the measure of ‘peoples’ in terms of aggregates;³⁶ 3) the fallacy of permanency of race types;³⁷ 4) the fallacy of race ascendancy, which is “...the feeling in modern society that society ought to be reorganized on a bi-racial system and that a race group should duplicate the social organization within itself and keep to itself, maintaining its solidarity with the rest of society only through the merest sort of economic cooperation...”³⁸ and 5) the fallacy of automatic adjustment. This fallacy assumes that ‘race’ relations are automatic and not “subject to remedial measures.” In *toto*, these fallacies have real effects on behavior both institutional and practical, ensuring continued segregation, ‘misunderstanding’ and much worse.

II. Race and Modernity

‘Race’ and ‘race thinking’ prove so damaging, it thus seems perplexing that Locke insists that ‘race’ be redeemed. Having tracked the functions of the

³⁶ This fallacy fails to recognize what the ‘real’ measure of a particular group, the distribution of characteristics among that group. Locke writes, “Consequently, for example, historians will describe a brilliant group in the age of Pericles whose achievements will make the Greeks the glory of civilization, without reference, perhaps to how many or how few Greeks were actually included within the narrow scope of that social culture.” p. 75

³⁷ Here Locke does not speak to biological race but rather to the “permanency” or lack thereof of a particular ‘race’s’ cultural practices and their ‘relative success’ as members of a particular society. The point is that although a ‘race’ may be named inferior, no ‘race’ is ever actually inferior in the aggregate forever. “The way, for example, in which under pressure certain classes of Jews and certain classes of the Negro have quickly qualified for a certain standard of living as well as a certain standard of civilization type, really the social culture of modern America, proves that race types change under environmental adaptation. But social privileges are still bestowed absolutely based on the lower standard of the group aggregate and are not representing it themselves proves that there is no such thing even as permanency of a cardinal race type.” p. 76

³⁸ Ibid.

different modes of 'race--' the ultimately false (biological) or potentially pernicious (political), as a phenomenon of interracial contact, Locke nevertheless predicts positive developments in modernity. On the one hand, Locke insists that "race as a unit of social thought is of permanent significance,"³⁹ and on the other, that modern society is nevertheless defined by its profound capacity for assimilation. If modern societies are profoundly assimilative (suggesting that racial and ethnic difference will disappear), why does Locke insist that 'race' remains significant? What 'form' will 'race' take under modern conditions?

Locke insists that one form of 'race' is on the wane: scholarly understandings of 'race' as biological category. Race can now *only* be studied as a unit of social thought and as a center of meaning. We also know that 'race' as an 'on the ground phenomenon' has two sources: political subjugation, on the one hand, and a 'natural' sense of kinship/difference, which Locke argues, causes groups to cohere. Modern societies, we will see, are so profoundly assimilative that these old processes are destabilized. Nevertheless, Locke insists that group unity in *any age* requires the assimilation/differentiation. Locke argues that in modern societies, 'race theory' is in decline and assimilation on the rise. Contact among the 'races' is ever increasing and results as often as not in 'racial antagonism.' Though modern societies are profoundly assimilative, 'race' does not disappear. Rather, the 'modern system' itself is re-imagined as a 'civilization type,' with common "standards of living." Thus, what ought to defeat 'race' in thinking and in practice produces 'race' in a new form: 'race' as non-conformity to the modern civilization type. Just as important, because modern societies are

³⁹ Ibid. 86

profoundly assimilative—even without the problem of ‘race’—modern societies are in danger of falling apart because they are *too* assimilative. ‘Race’ thus remains significant in yet another way, as what Locke calls “secondary race consciousness.” For my purposes, “secondary race consciousness” is the most important form of modern ‘race.’ For as I will argue in Chapter Three, “secondary race consciousness” (as well as Locke’s work on behalf of black artists) can be easily mistaken either for a ‘social’ or ‘cultural’ form of race or as the source of a ‘new’ group identity, worthy of recognition.

Locke argues that in the contemporary period, a new civilization type would rise, to replace the old social order that invested so much in ‘arbitrary’ distinctions. This would result, in part, from developments in the “modern industrial and economic order.”

As long as we have an industrial order which is competitive (an order which seems to be spreading over the face of the globe), we shall be able to regard caste as something which will be economically contradicted because, as you can see, a competitive industrial order means that one generation rarely occupies the same social position as the generation immediately before or after. In which case there must be not only change but there must be a constant process of transition in society, by which, according to a man’s success, he promotes or demotes himself from one class to another. Since that process is vitally necessary to [modern] society, such a society is only going to maintain the caste spirit to the extent that such a system does not actually contradict the successful functioning of the society.⁴⁰

Under modern economic conditions, the practice of distinction/assimilation, which as I have argued constitutes social groupings of every sort, would develop in new directions. All distinctions are necessarily slippery under conditions of “constant transition,” in which people can more easily move

⁴⁰ Ibid. 88

from one 'class' to another. Locke suggests that where ancient groupings valorized a *particular* set of cultural practices, modern societies do not, in part because people can so easily move from one social system or class to another. Instead, modern societies value the 'common.' Under conditions of *constant* change and assimilation/differentiation, 'commonality' seems less an imposition than a shared project. Yet, the 'common' does not mean that the assimilative/dissimilative processes that fundamentally structure societies are no longer necessary. Those processes simply appear in new forms, in part since, although all people attempt to conform to the modern civilization type, the group that can most identify itself culturally with the modern civilization type will nevertheless react negatively when other members of modern societies try.

...the conformity which, it seems, modern society must exact is ... conformity of civilization type. There are very few shibboleths for this conformity other than those of race... Go into any American community as an immigrant group...and challenge what they call the 'standard of living' and see what happens.... There would be an explosion, the same kind of an explosion that happened in medieval society when men of other faiths either invaded or cropped out to spoil the homogeneity of the orthodox religion...⁴¹

The point Locke makes here is somewhat difficult to grasp. All ancient cultures require conformity. Modern societies, characterized as they are by constant change and social mobility would seem to weaken this demand. Yet, modern society bears the marks of 'race,' which becomes a catchphrase ('catchpractice?') offering 'membership' in contemporary 'civilization' to some 'races' and not others. In this context, the 'standard of living,' which by right

⁴¹ Ibid. 92

ought to simply refer to modern lifestyles, marks a *particular* way of living, a measure some groups cannot meet.

Still, Locke evinces a great deal of faith in the distinctive conditions of modernity. Modern societies are profoundly assimilative, implying that that groups heretofore identified and segregated as inferior races could expect, eventually, to be included. Yet, as Locke's remarks about the "shibboleth of race" indicate, it is clear that the constant flux of modernity does not result in the dissipation of corrupted forms of social cohesion. Moreover, Locke argues that even 'positive' forms of cohesion require difference.

What form will/should 'difference' take in an increasingly assimilative age? Locke tells us that ...[S]ocial assimilation in progress [requires] some counter-theory or rather, some counter doctrine. This counter-doctrine one finds in racial solidarity and culture. The stimulation of a secondary race consciousness within a group does seem necessary."⁴² In modern societies, because one part of the process (assimilation/ differentiation) that allows groups of any type to cohere is amplified. On the other hand, though modern societies allow for greater social mobility, while we might expect that the 'common' would necessarily be shared (or at least imagined as always-in-production), and 'differences' (ethnic, racial or otherwise) expunged, Locke suggests that modern society still imposes 'arbitrary' standards over its members.

...You call America the melting pot. You ought to call America the baking oven, where your molten material is taken and absolutely baked into the most arbitrary forms....[In the] back of the modern type of assimilation was a certain arbitrary conformity to type and that America, for example, for all its boasted absorption of type, absorbs the only to re-make them or re-cast them into a national mold; and the essential basis of America's adoption is the re-working of the material into the

⁴² Ibid. 96

type of American citizen.... To live in modern society means such an orthodoxy of living, as well as such an orthodoxy of social belief, that it seems, to threaten the freedom, the mental and moral freedom of people.

First and foremost, “secondary race consciousness” will result in the *refusal* of assimilation into a “national mold” or “orthodox” forms of living, thereby producing national unity through ‘difference.’ Second, for this generation (early 20th century) of black people,

secondary race consciousness...will be a counter-doctrine [of] racial solidarity and culture...necessary [because]...the group needs...to get a right conception of itself... Yet...the very stimulation to collective activity which race pride or racial self-respect may give will issue into the qualification test and the aim to meet that qualification test, which of course must be in terms of the common standard. So that through a doctrine of race solidarity and culture, you really accelerate and stimulate the alien group to a rather more rapid assimilation of the social culture, the general social culture, than would be otherwise possible.⁴³

‘Secondary race consciousness’ will produce “racial self respect” and new forms of unity. Such ‘race consciousness’ is also not the ultimate objective, it is an historical stage through which black people must travel and will result in “more rapid assimilation.”⁴⁴

Importantly social assimilation produces positive results other than ‘race consciousness.’ It introduces a “disposition to share our race problems and make them the common problems of society.”⁴⁵ That is, the ‘race problem’ becomes a common burden.

There used to be talk of the ‘white man’s burden,’ and now there is considerable talk of the black man’s burden. I fancy... a few

⁴³ Ibid. 97

⁴⁴ In later years, Locke turns away from this endorsement of cultural assimilation, favoring instead intellectual and political democracy.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

years will see a readjustment of that position—it is a common burden, a burden so common that perhaps only in a shifting of the issues can there be any really progressive adjustment. The concerns which the dominant groups have undertaken are concerns which they may...cede to the...submerged groups or the minority groups; and the attempts which we are trying to solve are not our problems at all but the projected problem of the troubled social issues and the social distinctions of the dominant group.⁴⁶

When “submerged groups” address ‘race problems,’ they must no longer do so from the perspective of ‘being a problem,’ but rather as people who realize that ‘race problems’ result from the behavior of the dominant group.

Ultimately, however, ‘race problems’ must become a common burden. For this to occur, Locke argues that black people need to restore themselves to a sense of kinship that is different from that inspired by being conscious of oneself only as problem.

I have emphasized the complexity of Locke’s theorization of ‘race’ as a social form that results from and then (re)conditions interactions among human beings in my reading of the *Race Contacts* lectures. Difference has been the focal point of my interpretation because I want to suggest that it is ‘difference,’ and not identity, which Locke sees both as the principle social ‘fact’ that conditions the development of all social forms as well as the possibilities afforded by the cultivation of ‘selves,’ the topic which Locke took up in his later Harlem Renaissance cultural criticism. There, as I will argue in the next chapter, Locke sees “Negro life” freed from the ‘racial identity’ that had been forced on black people through the processes, practices and idealizations of race. Below, I examine the political form of race, suggesting that for Locke, ‘race thinking,’ its creeds and practices, reduces human

⁴⁶ Ibid. 96

interaction among all groups to one possibility, that defined by superordination/subordination.

III. "The Racial" as "The Political"

In this section, I turn again to Locke's political theorization of 'race' as a response to difference. I argue that Locke's political theorization of 'race' describes more than the process by which 'races' come to be considered 'races,' with innate, heritable characteristics that mark them as inferior or superior. That is, Locke theorizes 'race' as more than an empirical effect of real political practices. 'Race' has its own abstract logic; that is to say, 'race' is more than its effects on our participation in what Du Bois called "the kingdom of culture;" it exceeds our attempts to justify or explain our membership in certain communities.

In what follows, I stage an encounter between Alain Locke's political theorization of what we might helpfully call 'the racial' and German social theorist Carl Schmitt's theorization of 'the political' in *The Concept of the Political*. This is, I grant, an unexpected pairing particularly since, as I have characterized him, Locke attended so carefully to the social sources and effects of race and not 'the political,' as such. Moreover, Schmitt and Locke do not have the same objectives. In *The Concept of the Political*, Schmitt criticizes liberalism's basis in individual right, which is certainly not Locke's concern. As Tracy Strong points out in the Foreward,

The intense and renewed attention to the work of Carl Schmitt...is due to the fact that he sits at the intersection of three central questions which any contemporary political theorist must consider. The first is the relationship between liberalism and democracy. The second is the relation between politics and ethics. The third is the importance of what Schmitt called "enemies" for state legitimation and the

implication of that importance for the relation between domestic and international politics.⁴⁷

My own limited interest in Schmitt hews most closely to the third reason for Schmitt's renewed importance. I treat Locke's political theorization of 'race' as something like Schmitt's treatment of "enemies" as a "source for legitimation" since 'race theory' according to Locke, legitimates the subjugation of so-called "inferior" races. Yet, as I stated above, Locke also offers a political theorization of 'race' that can be read as a 'stand-alone' political theory, which reveals not just the odious effects of 'race' but also his account of the fundamental nature of politics. The encounter reveals that Schmitt and Locke largely agree about the essence of politics. For Schmitt and Locke, at its heart, 'the political' cannot be fully characterized as institutionalized practice. Schmitt, for example, opposes the political to the state.⁴⁸ The political, he insists, is unlike and not comparable to any other domain (whether moral, religious, aesthetic or economic). For Schmitt, 'the political' is specific form of distinction, reducible to that which inheres between friend and enemy. It "...denotes an utmost degree of intensity of a union or separation, of an association or dissociation. It can exist theoretically and practically, without having simultaneously to draw upon all those moral, aesthetic, economic or other distinctions."⁴⁹ And though Locke argues that 'race theory' and 'race creed' can serve imperial ends, justifying colonialism and slavery for example, ultimately, 'the political' (what Locke calls

⁴⁷ Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2007). xiii

⁴⁸ "In one way or another, "the political" is generally juxtaposed to the "state" or at least is brought into relation to it. The state thus appears as something political, the political as something pertaining to the state—obviously an unsatisfactory circle....The equation state = politics becomes erroneous and deceptive at exactly the moment when state and society penetrate each other." Ibid. 20 - 22

⁴⁹ Ibid. 27

subjugation) is an existential response to 'Others.' A key difference between Locke and Schmitt (other than their objectives, of course) is that for Locke, what is most significant and requires continued attention is that, once realized, "the political" influences all other domains in the form of 'race' as theory, practice and creed.

In the second *Race Contacts* lecture, "The Political and Practical Conceptions of Race," Locke asserts that

The sense of race really almost antedates anything in its name, in the etymology of it, because just as long as you have groups of people knit together by kinship feeling and who realize that different practices operate in their society from those which operate in other societies and therefore determine their treatment of other groups, then you really have what is the germ of race sense.⁵⁰

'Race' here identifies a sense of kinship, which because 'ethnic tribes' to Locke are also necessarily fictional,⁵¹ depends upon the recognition of 'difference' of Others. This sense of kinship/race is not itself evil and is necessary for the coherence of tribes, just as it is for every other social formation.

The race sense, as you see, is something which is not vicious in itself but which may become so if invidious social practices are based upon it... We find in the earliest race sense where people feel that there is something in kinship relations which makes a great difference and makes one code prevail among them and another code prevail among their neighbors—or those who really in a sense are not yet their neighbors, because the concept of neighbor is a relatively advanced concept and to be outside of the group in primitive terms means itself to be an enemy.⁵²

⁵⁰ Locke and Stewart, *Race Contacts and Interracial Relations*.

⁵¹ Locke insists that ethnic tribes are 'arbitrary' units in the sense that they, too, do not mark biological groupings. They are united by circumstance and perception, which themselves initiate blood kinships.

⁵² *Ibid.* 21

At this stage in Locke's logic, the distinction between one group and the next serves to shore up the group's 'sense of itself.' Recognition of difference is not itself evil, though pernicious social practices may arise from it. Nor is the mere recognition of difference yet political in the sense that Schmitt would recognize. But "...in the era of tribal warfare puts a premium upon blood kinship because any set of people who come into touch with the primitive tribe without gaining a blood kinship with it must come into their territory at peril of extinction subordination."⁵³ The absolutely political form of distinction takes shape as an intensification of the recognition of difference to conflict.

It happens that, as long as groups are in a position to annex other peoples, they do so under the idea that either the peoples must come into relationship with them through blood kinship or else they must remain alien...Whether they are a part of a nation is largely determined whether or not they qualify under this fundamental instinct and social requirement of blood relationship. They are happily adopt it if they can claim it and substantiate it, and they are dominated and made slaves if they cannot...⁵⁴

Locke argues here that the primitive tribe must make something of its difference from an encroaching Other. Through intermarriage or other ceremonies, relations of blood can mitigate difference. If not, the difference loses its innocence and intensifies into political distinction. The political takes shape as "forceful subjugation," resulting in the "molding of contact" not vis-à-vis blood contact but instead via "dominance" and "forceful control." The political form of distinction results in identity: "the dominant race becomes

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid. 22

the political race... [and the] conception of 'inferior' races or 'backward' races comes from the political fortunes of" those involved in political conflict.

In *The Concept of the Political*, Schmitt differentiates between the political form of distinction and others, such as the moral form of distinction between good and evil or the aesthetic form of distinction between beauty and turpitude. He points out that any similarity between the distinctions that constitute these domains (political, moral, aesthetic) is purely correlative. "Insofar as it is not derived from other criteria, the antithesis of friend and enemy corresponds to the relatively independent criteria of other antitheses... In any event, it is independent, not in the sense of a distinct new domain, but in that it can neither be based on any one antithesis or any combination of other antitheses, nor can it be traced to these."⁵⁵ This deduction leads Schmitt to conclude that the "political enemy need not be morally evil or aesthetically ugly; he need not appear as an economic competitor...[but] he is, nevertheless, the other, the stranger; and it is sufficient for his nature that he is, in an especially intense way, existentially something different and alien..."⁵⁶ Though the enemy is 'real' and present, he is considered an enemy not because of a judgment about his moral or aesthetic qualities, he is considered alien because he is an existential threat. "Only the actual participants can correctly recognize, understand and judge the concrete situation and settle the extreme case of conflict. Each participant is in a position to judge whether the adversary intends to negate his opponent's way of life and therefore must be repulsed or fought..."⁵⁷ The "concrete situation," and not the moral or aesthetic status of the Other, calls for judging. Is the 'Other' so alien, so

⁵⁵ Ibid. 56

⁵⁶ Ibid. 27

⁵⁷ Ibid.

distinct, that he places 'us' in risk of our 'way of life?' If so, he is not merely an 'Other,' he is an enemy. The intense (existential) threat of conflict gives priority to the friend/enemy distinction, so that difference between groups becomes an antagonism.

Importantly, (at least for the encounter I stage here between Schmitt and Locke), for Schmitt, antagonism between the parties does not depend upon recognition of the 'Other' as lacking in some specific sense. "The political is the most intense and extreme antagonism, and every concrete antagonism becomes that much more political the closer it approaches the extreme point, that of the friend-enemy distinction."⁵⁸ For Schmitt, the extreme threat of conflict prioritizes the friend-enemy distinction above all others. For Locke, on the other hand, extreme forms of 'Other-ness' as a quality of competitor tribes mobilizes political action—subjugation—and results in the fixing of identities: though the original conflict has ended, its parties are now identifiable—the defeated become the 'backward races' and the winners, 'the advanced, political races.'

Locke contends that recognition of 'Otherness' is a necessary precondition of political subjugation. But "the racial" inheres not in the recognition of the other's absolute 'alien-ness;' it arises instead from the political response to Otherness. Thus for Locke, the decision to adopt an 'Other' and to welcome him into tribal membership cannot be an instance of 'the political.' For Locke, as is apparent in his characterization of ancient and modern empires, 'the political' is always a kind of subjugating practice, which results in the simultaneous creation of a inequality between groups and the deprivation of defeated groups of positive identities. On the other hand,

⁵⁸ Ibid. 67

assimilation, as we have seen for Locke, is always a *social* process that itself produced new inequalities and new forms of distinction. As Locke described them, interracial contact and conditions 'on the ground' in the early 20th century had deep political sources (i.e.: colonialism, imperialism, slavery) but as a matter of lived experience were explicitly social phenomena. Locke mined modern social developments for new forms of distinction, which would not see difference in the ordinary political terms that had produced false and mythical identities. This does not, of course, mean that Locke did hope for or see his work as serving the purposes of political inclusion. Far from it. But for this to occur—that is for intellectual and political democracy to ensue, difference required rescue from the foul practice and theory of 'race.' This rescue, I will argue, would not come in the form of 'recognition' of the true value of black people and black culture, but rather vis-à-vis the cosmopolitan social relations provided in the domain of culture.

WORKS CITED

Du Bois, W.E.B. 1986. "Souls of Black Folk." In *Du Bois: Writings*, ed. Nathan Huggins. New York, NY: The Library of America, p. 357 - 548.

Harris, Leonard, and Charles Molesworth. 2008. *Alain L. Locke: The Biography of a Philosopher*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Levine, Donald N. 1971. "Introduction." In *George Simmel: On Individuality and Social Forms, The Heritage of Sociology*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, p. ix - lxv.

Locke, Alain Leroy, and Jeffrey C. Stewart. 1992. *Race Contacts and Interracial Relations*. Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press.

Olson, Joel. 2005. "W.E.B. Du Bois and the Race Concept." *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society* 7(3 - 4): 118 - 129.

Schmitt, Carl. 2007. *The Concept of the Political*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.

CHAPTER 3

CULTURE AND THE POETRY OF NEGRO LIFE

*...to be cultivated becomes a task of infinite dimensions, since the number of objects a subject can make its own is inexhaustible.*¹

In 1928, twelve years after he delivered the *Race Contacts* lectures and three years after the publication of *The New Negro: An Interpretation*, the collection of poems, dramatic works, sketches and essays that christened the Harlem Renaissance movement, Locke took critics to task for "...confounding the artistic quality which Negro life is contributing with the Negro artists..." The critics, he argued, had missed the true meaning of the Renaissance: "Negro artists are just by-products of the Negro Renaissance; its main accomplishment will be to infuse a new essence into the general stream of culture."² The purpose of the Renaissance was not to see black artists or culture recognized anew. The Renaissance should not be understood, therefore, as the proving ground for black artist's talents or the worth of black culture. The Negro Renaissance, he insisted, must be seen as an "integral phase of contemporary American art and literature," and de-linked from "propaganda and politics." Critics who were anxious to determine the quality of 'Negro' artwork had therefore reduced the Renaissance's great potential to the merit of its artists. "According to that [standard], the Grand Renaissance should have stopped at the Alps and ought to have effected [sic] the unification of Italy instead of the revival of Humanism."³ In a few deft lines,

¹ Georg Simmel, "On the Concept and Tragedy of Culture," in *The Conflict in Modern Culture and Other Essays*, ed. K. Peter Etkorn (New York: Teachers College Press, 1968), 27 - 46. p. 38

² Alain Locke, "Our Little Renaissance," in *The Critical Temper of Alain Locke: A Selection of His Essays on Art and Culture*, ed. Jeffrey C. Stewart, vol. 8, Critical Studies on Black Life and Culture (New York and London: Garland Publishing Inc., 1983), 21 - 22, p. 21

³ Ibid.

Locke elucidated the objectives of the Harlem Renaissance: it ought to aspire to more than artistic perfection, seeking instead to animate culture-in-general with its artwork; it ought to free 'Negro' artwork and its artists from the limits imposed by politics; it ought not consolidate a 'Negro nation' of artists, artworks or otherwise but instead revivify—indeed, put in to practice—the exaltation of all people. These were high aspirations. Yet, Locke saw in the appropriation of 'Negro material' by white artists the telltale signs of the Renaissance's success.

To claim the material that Negro life and idiom have contributed to American art through the medium of the white artist may seem at first unfair and ungracious; may even be open to the imputation of trying to bolster up with reinforcements a 'wavering thin line of talent.' But what is the issue—sociology or art—a quality of spirit or complexions?⁴

Black life had been freed even from the bounds of 'Negro' subjectivity, opening itself up for elevation to "the plane of pure art." What was at stake was not the quality of the artist – and certainly not his membership in a particular race ('sociology or art')—but was instead the 'representativeness' of his artwork. Whether the artist was black or white, did his artwork capture 'Negro life and idiom?' To produce exceptional art drawn from the 'material of Negro life,' even black artists had to become "less rhetorical" and to take "race [instead] instinctively for granted" in their artwork. 'Race'—and here I interpret Locke to use 'race' as difference/kinship sense, just as he had in the *Race Contacts* lectures—could be articulated from any subject position (even through the 'medium of the white artist'). Moreover, persuasion need no longer be the only 'mood' with which black life was expressed.

⁴ Ibid.

Locke brought to the concept of culture the same insight he brought to modern artwork. Just as 'Negro life, idiom and materials,' did not belong solely to black artists, even the continued negative effects of 'race thinking' and practice did not imply that blacks retained a proprietary relationship with 'their' culture. Black culture, like all culture, was open to all comers. That said, Locke did not deny that 'race' bore some relationship to culture. Indeed, as I argued in Chapter Two, Locke suggested in the *Race Contacts* lectures that "submerged groups" cultivate cultures to nourish "race pride." Yet, as I will argue in this chapter, just as sociologists and anthropologists had to refuse the explanatory temptations of 'biological race' when they attempted to explain durable features of extant cultures, "submerged groups" could not appeal to essentialist accounts of culture when attempting to inspire "race pride." Modern developments made this move impossible for Locke. As I will argue in this chapter, Locke's theorization of culture and his insights into the development of modern black art were influenced by one of his instructors at University of Berlin, the German philosopher and social theorist, Georg Simmel. In fact, Jürgen Habermas's thoughtful characterization of Simmel's culture essays might just as easily be applied to Locke's:

Simmel's [thinking about culture] was characterized by a sensitive awareness of the attractions typical of his times; of aesthetic innovations; of spiritual shifts of disposition and changes of orientation in the metropolitan attitudes to life; and of subpolitical transformations of inclination and barely tangible, diffuse, but treacherous phenomena of the everyday. In short, for Simmel the membranes of the spirit of the age were wide open.⁵

⁵ Jürgen Habermas, Georg Simmel on Philosophy and Culture: Postscript to a Collection of Essays" (*Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 22, No. 3, Spring 1996), 403 – 414, p. 405

Locke's attention to "aesthetic innovations...spiritual shifts...and changes in orientation in the metropolitan attitudes of life" tend to weaken the claims of contemporary theorists who insist that Locke was an essentialist, a multiculturalist or an early defender of cultural recognition as a political demand. Instead, Locke offered a complex account of culture as both a marker of durable characteristics and traditions and the source of 'self-cultivation.'

In this chapter, I first characterize three recent accounts of how Locke thought about culture. The first, Leonard Harris's "Identity: Alain Locke's Atavism,"⁶ suggests that Locke is best understood to offer a weakly atavistic account of identity and sees African and black American culture as a source for reconstituted identity. The second, Everett Akam's *Transnational America: Cultural Pluralist Thought in the Twentieth Century*,⁷ sees Locke as one of a number of cultural pluralist who "foreshadowed Charles Taylor's insights into the relationship between identity and culture," treating Locke as an early advocate of multiculturalism and cultural recognition. The third, Nancy Fraser's "Another Pragmatism: Alain Locke, Critical 'Race' Theory and the Politics of Culture," sees Locke as a strategic essentialist who, in lieu of pursuing expressly political solutions to the problems of oppression and seclusion, saw in cultural production potential sources of "white respect" and "race pride." I disagree with these readings. Ultimately, each sees Locke as either an early practitioner of identity politics or cultural recognition, suggesting that Locke sought forms of cultural recognition that would constitute and shore up a new form of authentic black identity. I contrast

⁶ Leonard Harris, "Identity: Alain Locke's Atavism," *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* XXVI:1 (Winter 1988): 65 - 84.

⁷ Everett Helmut Akam, *Transnational America: Cultural Pluralist Thought in the Twentieth Century* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2002)

these interpretations from my own by drawing on two of Locke's essays about culture and 'reading' them alongside two of Simmel's culture essays. Like Simmel, Locke was a "philosophical diagnostician of the times with a social-scientific bent" whose art and literary criticism revealed just as much attention to "the times" as to the durable content of black culture. Locke, like Simmel, differentiated between culture as the source of 'self-cultivation' and culture as a realm of durable objects, produced by modern life processes. Finally, I suggest that Locke recognized the advent of black modernity in black artwork since, freed from the responsibilities of representing the race, they could turn to producing what he took to be 'modern' in all modern art: the objectification of life.

I. Locke, Identity and Recognition

Some have argued that by critiquing and publicizing these new representations of black life, Locke sought 'recognition' of 'true' black culture and black identity. I argue in this that though Locke sometimes did refer to the 'spirit' of the race and to 'folk consciousness,' as sources for artwork, he did not seek 'recognition' to of 'folk consciousness' to shore up black identity or, for that matter see what we now call 'recognition' as the purpose of artwork. That is, Locke did not suggest that artwork should serve the political function of securing recognition of black identity or culture. To clarify, I will take up three different versions of this line of thought here.

In "Identity: Alain Locke's Atavism," philosopher Leonard Harris argues that Locke was, in effect, a polemicist on behalf of a renovated black culture. He argues that,

[Locke] held a weak or naturalistic atavistic view, namely, that historically given habits and always changing social interchanges between races are explainable and should be recognized for the role they play in shaping our sense of self identity and self respect. The family of traits that were... representative of a culture or race were definitive of its essence.⁸

Because black identity had been misrepresented and debased, Harris argues that Locke and “Lockeans of the New Negro movement” drew upon cultural “carryovers” from Africa to construct a racial identity that would serve as the “basic framework of resistance to racial domination,”⁹ a position made possible by Locke’s atavism. But since Locke never insisted that there was quintessential black subject born of an essential black culture, unbroken by internal difference, Harris argues that only a weak form of atavism can account for the “complexities, discontinuities and possibilities of new vistas [Locke] anticipated within the world of black expression”¹⁰ as well as the necessary work of identifying “...the rise of black cultural characteristics warranting merit...”¹¹

I take issue with Harris’s argument for two reasons: First, while Locke does argue that from the perspective of anthropology and sociology, culture captures and articulates durable traits, he also insists that from the perspective of modern persons, ‘culture’ is a cosmopolitan realm of contact that would condition self-cultivation. Thus, though Locke did understand “interchanges between the races” and “historically given habits” as “explainable,” and understood that these “interchanges” affected self identity, Locke did not indicate that black artwork should serve to better these interchanges for the purpose of producing better identities. Though Locke thought African art was

⁸ Ibid. 67

⁹ Ibid. 69

¹⁰ Ibid. 73

¹¹ Ibid. 68

useful source material for modern black art, the use of this source material informed a new and distinctly modern and experimental form of self-expressiveness, whereby black and non-black artists alike translated black life into new forms of expression.

In *Transnational America: Cultural Pluralist Thought in the 20th Century*, Everett Akam proposes that Locke was one of several early 20th century cultural pluralists. According to Akam,

...Alain Locke achieved a brilliant synthesis between the claims of the particular and the universal. His cosmopolitanism offered hope for a merger without fusion on the ground of democratic culture...[Culture] formed the playground in which each of American's ethnic and racial groups could simultaneously develop its unique character and traditions as well as join with others in the creation of a pluralistic America.¹²

By this account, for Locke "culture, combining both subjective and objective dimensions, simultaneously separated and united all."¹³ Locke sought a foundation for a common ground, "premised on shared values," but welcoming to and dependent upon recognition of diverse cultures. Properly valued, these cultures could then serve "the creation of democratic culture devoted to social justice."¹⁴ Harlem Renaissance artwork then created a 'rooted' black culture through "artistic particularism" that would "lead to the discovery of a universality premised on shared oppression."¹⁵ This particularism was necessitated by "the need for roots upon which selfhood depended" and "found expression in the unique cultural forms of the African

¹² Everett Helmut Akam, *Transnational America: Cultural Pluralist Thought in the Twentieth Century* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2002), p. 139

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid. 195

¹⁵ Ibid. 148

American folk.”¹⁶ Culture captured and provided these ‘roots,’ which in turn helped to provide the “power...of identity.”

Akam’s characterization of Locke is a helpful corrective to what he calls the “tireless misrepresentations of [Nathan] Huggins, David Levering Lewis” and others who have seen the Harlem Renaissance to “[belie] a slavish devotion to white forms and standards” because it correctly identifies in Locke’s art criticism attention to the ‘transfiguring imagination’ of black expression. Moreover, Akam rightly argues that Locke sought “...a democratic culture based on cosmopolitanism.”¹⁷ Yet, Akam argues that in Locke’s 1923 speech to freshman at Howard University, he was “crippled” by a “genteel notion of culture,” consisting “essentially in being cultured.” This thinking, to Akam, is flawed because it did not tend to “...the interplay between notions of the good and techniques of achieving the possible.”¹⁸ This, I think, is a misreading not just of that speech but also of the potential of self-cultivation as Locke characterized it for as I will argue below, ‘self-cultivation’ *preceded* artwork by producing the best audiences for it. Moreover, I disagree with Akam’s characterization of Locke as a “cosmopolitan pluralist.” In my view, Locke’s insistence that ‘Negro life’ be lifted to the “plane of pure art” allowed ‘Negro life’ as artwork to become the source of cultivation for all people, regardless of their races. Akam argues instead that Locke’s insistence that art not be propaganda (an argument I take up in detail in Chapter Five) meant that Locke saw “culture, both folk and formal... as a medium of mutual recognition by moral agents newly aware of their dignity and agency.”¹⁹ My disagreement with Akam is largely one of emphasis: I suggest that Locke is

¹⁶ Ibid. 149

¹⁷ Ibid. 153

¹⁸ Ibid. 146

¹⁹ Ibid. 148

open to an interpretation that emphasizes the plurality of black subjects over 'identity,' and culture as the medium and indicator of plural, self-expressiveness over rooted, self-contained cultures and culture.

Just as convinced of Locke's atavism (and the centrality of 'identity' to any account of Locke's art criticism and culture work) as Leonard Harris, political theorist Nancy Fraser argues that Locke thought artwork could generate a new 'race consciousness' among black people to mitigate the effects of 'race thinking' and practice.²⁰ According to Fraser, Locke sought a new 'race consciousness' that would "forge solidarity" among black people and "win respect" from white Americans. Fraser argues that while Locke knew that there was no essential black subject, his attempt to secure 'respect' for and 'solidarity' among black people through artistic means because at the time, "...prospects were dim for Negro Civil Rights..."²¹ Denied the possibility of pursuing political solutions to the problems of exclusion and inequality, Locke is best considered a "strategic essentialist," who pursued cultural recognition for black people. She suggests that Locke proposed a "cultural remedy" for a political problem because he believed that cultural recognition would usher in an era of political inclusion. That said, while Fraser's argument is not unconvincing, I do not think it captures the full, political theoretical potential of Locke's arguments. I disagree first and foremost that the political value of artwork and 'culture' (as Locke understands it) subsists in its capacity to produce cultural identity as "a weapon of struggle against oppression."²² I

²⁰ Nancy Fraser, "Another Pragmatism: Alain Locke, Critical 'Race' Theory, and the Politics of Culture," in *The Critical Pragmatism of Alain Locke: A Reader on Value Theory, Aesthetics, Community, Culture, Race and Education*, ed. Leonard Harris (Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc.), 3 - 20.

²¹ Ibid. 16

²² Ibid. 18

want to suggest instead that Locke was attentive to *difference* as a fact of life and saw 'self-expressiveness' as a marker of modern black autonomy.

Harris, Akam and Fraser treat Locke chiefly as a thinker for whom 'black identity' and/or 'cultural recognition' is the legitimate end of artwork and cultural production because each sees reconstituted identity as a necessary step along the path to full participation in American democracy. While these arguments are defensible, I suggest their emphasis is misplaced. I agree with Harris, Fraser and Akam that Locke sought in his work to see the full possibilities of democracy realized. But I disagree with their thinking about how he did this. Attentive to and critical of 'race theory' and its political practice in his social theory, in his art criticism, Locke envisioned autonomy (for the black imagination) in and through artwork. That is, I want to suggest that for Locke, black autonomy did not depend upon 'identity' (strategic or otherwise) and self-contained cultures but *instead* on modernity's receptivity to difference and its expression. Locke refused a 'political' (propagandistic) function for artwork precisely because he associated propagandistic artwork with an earlier historical moment, in which black artists, misidentified as a single 'people' under what he called the 'Old Negro' sign, had no choice but to pursue political and/or moral objectives –to be representative of the 'race'— through their artwork and culture, instead of expressing themselves. Locke's refusal of politics in artwork,²³ furthermore, is precisely what makes his writing on artwork compelling to the political theorist. I interpret Locke's

²³ That said, I do think Akam gets Locke's refusal of propaganda partially right when he argues, "Locke attacked the subordination of art to the demands of a foreign political theory heavily influenced by positivism... For generations black poetry had 'pivoted on a painfully negative and melodramatic sense of race.' Conditioned by the power of racism, 'self-pity and its corrective of rhetorical bombast' subsequently failed to develop an affirmative sense of identity." Ibid. 153 I want that Locke ought not to be read to seek an affirmative identity since one of the effects of race thinking that so concerned him was its tendency to ascribe identities.

insistence that artwork be autonomous—that it be freed of its service to particular causes—and that artists be self-expressive—that they not be required to act as spokespersons on behalf of ‘the race’— as a repudiation, *both* of the Old Negro identity that demanded spokesmanship *and* of the contemporary politics with which Locke has been associated—that of identity and ‘recognition.’ I argue that Locke is open to an interpretation that recognizes the dangers of identity, even of an affirmative sort. I would argue further that ‘recognition’ cannot adequately apprehend or nourish the plurality of (black) life, which was for Locke a significant barometer of (black) autonomy.

II. Social Culture/Cultivation

In June 1924, nine months before the ‘Harlem’ issue of *Survey Graphic* magazine, which was to become the basis for *The New Negro: An Interpretation*, was published, Locke wrote “The Concept of Race as Applied to Social Culture, for the *Howard Review*. In it, Locke argues that while both ‘race’ and ‘social culture’ have highly variable meanings,” the sciences conspired to settle their meanings by fixing the relationship between the two “organically” such that they are understood to be causally connected. Locke does not “deny that race stands for significant social characters and culture-traits or represents in given historical contexts characteristic differentiations of culture-type.”²⁴ He anticipates, in fact, “continued...if restricted use of these terms” in the sciences, thinking them necessary. He nevertheless sets out, in the essay, “to [safe-guard their] continued use so as not to give further currency to invalidated assumptions concerning them.”²⁵ The source of the easy linkage

²⁴ Locke, “Concept of Race,” 188

²⁵ *Ibid.* 189

of race to culture was to be found in classical social evolutionism. De Gobineau had argued that race was “the determining factor of culture.” Once articulated, that position had then been justified “with doctrines of the strictly evolutionary interpretation of culture.” Locke points out that a few theorists saw in this discrepancy the grounds to dismiss any connection between race and culture. This dismissal, he argues, was not yet justifiable since it left “an open question as to the association of certain ethnic groups with definite culture-traits and culture types under circumstances where there is evidently a greater persistence of certain strains and characteristics in their culture than of other factors....”²⁶ How could theory account for the endurance of certain features among particular groups of people while maintaining that biological race was not its source? How does Locke’s argument in “The Concept of Race as Applied to Social Culture” affect Locke’s art criticism?

Locke calls for “a reversal of emphasis... instead of [biological] race explaining the cultural condition, the cultural conditions must explain the race traits..., [thus] the newer scientific approach demands that we deal with concrete cultural types which as often as not are composite [biological] racially speaking, and have only an artificial ethnic unity of historical derivation and manufacture.”²⁷ The much-vaunted stability of some cultural traits is ‘artificial’ because it results, not from biological heredity, but from circumstance. The persistence of these traits is, nevertheless, of interest. Further, while one might be tempted to “substitute for the term *race* the term *culture group*,”

²⁶ Ibid. 190

²⁷ Ibid. 194

...what has become absolutely disqualified for the explanation of culture groups taken as totalities becomes in a much more scientific and verifiable way a main factor of explanation of its various cultural components. Race accounts for a great many of the specific elements of the cultural heredity, and the sense of race may itself be regarded as one of the operative factors in culture since it determines the stressed values which become the conscious symbols and tradition of the culture.²⁸

Here, Locke (re)introduces the conceptualization of originary 'race' as 'difference from' he provided in the *Race Contacts* lectures: 'race' is not only an indicator of stable characteristics, it is also a readily available term for a group's sense of itself, as 'different' from other groups. The origins of a 'race type' were "accidental or fortuitous combinations of historical circumstances," but the "sense of race as perhaps the most intense of the feelings of commonality... is self-perpetuating..."²⁹ 'Race' could thus, from an ethnological perspective at least, be described in functionalist terms. "Race operates as tradition...[and] seems to lie in that peculiar selective preference for certain culture-traits and resistance to certain others which is characteristic of all types and levels of social organization..." Contact among 'race types' results in the "accentuation of racial stresses" such that "...even when a fusion [between competing types] eventuates, it takes place under conditions determined by the resistance developed and the relative strength of several of the cultural components."³⁰

Yet, Locke points out that "...cultures [are] highly composite... [And] in a large majority of cases the culture is only to be explained as the result of the meeting and reciprocal cultural strains, several ethnic contributions." From this, Locke draws the conclusion that one cannot "...[interpret] culture

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid. 195

³⁰ Ibid.

in terms of the intrinsic rather than the fusion values of its various constituent elements...," indicating that while an identifiable group shares at least some relatively 'long-lived' traits, its 'culture' is not derived from the [biological] 'race' of its members. Nor is it a set of unchanging characteristics.

I am interested here in the political theoretical significance of Locke's full turn to culture and, just as important, in his insistent and continued use of the term 'race.' Locke argues that

...this newer view insists upon the disassociation of the claims of political dominance and cultural productivity, and combat the traditional view that all or even the best elements of culture are the contribution of the ethnic group which in a mixed culture has political dominance and is in dynastic control. Already a number of such politically proprietary claims have been disallowed and disestablished by the more intensive and objectively comparative study of culture-traits.³¹

Importantly, Locke points again to the problem of 'political dominance' and insists that 'the best of culture' does not belong to politically dominant groups. On the one hand, we might interpret this statement to open up the possibility that members of all ethnic groups can produce 'the best of culture,' and see the Harlem Renaissance as attempting to see the best of black culture produced and made public. But it is important to note that Locke "disallows" politically proprietary claims over culture in general, in line with his insistence, I suggest, that art not serve propagandistic ends.

Moreover, Locke's attention to culture is part and parcel of the next 'historical' stage in the development of 'race' as an idea. Enough research had been done on the topic to debunk the 'biological' sources of 'race' that the possibility of a more objective social science had been established. Yet that

³¹ Ibid.

science—the comparison of apparently stable characteristics of one cultural grouping to the other—is itself at risk: it might remain linked to biological race, if it failed to sufficiently explain the stability of traits that had heretofore been linked to heredity.

Theorists of Locke's work on behalf of the Harlem Renaissance have often argued that Locke simply replaces 'race' with 'culture,' seeing all black people, whatever their national or ethnic backgrounds as members of the same tribe.³² Nevertheless, such a reading cannot account for Locke's insistence in "The Concept of Race as Applied to Social Culture" that proprietary culture was a proven impossibility nor, as I argued at the beginning of this chapter, that "Negro life" is available to all artists. Moreover, African art is not readily available to all black artists. One could, for example, only "hope" that "African art" might "exert upon the artistic development of the American Negro the influence that it has already had upon modern European artists."³³ While there was an historical connection between American blacks and African people, just as American blacks could not rely on their 'Negro identity' to access 'Negro life' for their artworks, "African art"³⁴ is only as available to American blacks as it is to the early 20th

³² See, for example, Leonard Harris, "Identity: Alain Locke's Atavism," *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, Vol. 24, Issue 1, 1988. Rightly critical of those scholars who accuse Locke of relying on a strongly atavistic account of self-formation which sees "specific racial or national identities [playing] some role in the progression of universal consciousness," Harris argues that, in fact, had a "weak or naturalistic atavistic view, namely that historically given habits and always changing social interchanges between races are explainable and should be recognized for the role they play in shaping our sense of self identity and self respect. The family of traits that were, or could arguably be representative of a culture or race were definitive of its essence. On this view, races and cultures play different roles in the formation and progression of civilization..." p. 67 Because of this, Locke's Harlem Renaissance Era work is therefore best understood as "polemicism" on behalf of "New Negro" culture.

³³ Alain Locke, "The Art of the Ancestors," in *The Critical Temper of Alain Locke: A Selection of His Essays on Art and Culture*, ed. Jeffrey C. Stewart, vol. 8, Critical Studies on Black Life and Culture (New York and London, 1986), 15 - 16, p. 15

³⁴ A more defensible claim re: Locke's perceived 'essentialism' and African art is that Locke advanced "aesthetic essentialist" claims about African art and its availability to European and 'Negro' artists. Jane Duran and Earl Stewart argue, "Locke's work is important because of

century European artists who had found in it the inspiration for modernist art. While there are stable elements to be found in African art,³⁵ which could serve as inspiration to any artist, culture is more than sum of its most persistent parts. Peoples and cultures do not fully correspond, suggesting that culture is just as much mode as category. 'Sense of difference' resulted in the *durability* of cultures but, as we will see below, culture was much more than staying power. The effects of culture are ostensible not only as enduring characteristics of identifiable groups but also as singular attributes of individual persons. And yet, one's membership in a particular 'social culture' does not designate individual culture.

In 1923, Locke gave a speech to the entering freshman class of Howard University, later published as the "Ethics of Culture" in the *Howard University Record*. Locke argued that

...to be sure of culture, the average student should elect some of the cultural studies; and, more important still, in his outside diversions, should cultivate a steady and active interest in one of the arts, aiming thereby to bring his mind under the quickening influence of cultural ideas and values... [and] cultivate an intelligent appreciation of at least one of the great human arts, literature, painting, sculpture, music or what not."³⁶

what we might term his aesthetic essentialism. The use of the term 'essentialism' in the present context pertains to his claim that properties of the artistic works of a given cultural...group are essentially, or universally, related to members of that group. Locke claims in particular that Blacks possess, as a group, decided artistic strengths, and the 'Negro Spirituals' essay goes on to make the claim that many of these strengths are musical." Jane Duran and Earl L. Stewart, "Alain Locke, Essentialism, and the Notion of a Black Aesthetic," in *The Critical Pragmatism of Alain Locke: A Reader on Value Theory, Aesthetics, Community, Culture, Race and Education* (New York and Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1999), 111 - 126, p. 111 Locke's aesthetic essentialism, I suggest, is best explained by his recognition of 'durable' traits and traditions that define particular 'social cultures.'

³⁵ Abstractness in African plastic arts was, to Locke, a case in point.

³⁶ Alain Locke, "The Ethics of Culture," in *The Philosophy of Alain Locke: The Harlem Renaissance and Beyond*, ed. Leonard Harris (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 176 - 185, p. 176

As Akam would have it, this speech appeals to an Arnoldian notion of culture that is ultimately useless, since it a “rival elite of cultured ‘aliens.’³⁷ Such self-cultivation generates effects beyond the individual, Locke said. “...[In] any community, in any nation, in any group, the level of cultural productiveness cannot rise much higher than the level of cultural consumption, cannot much outdistance the prevalent limits of taste...,”³⁸ suggesting that one positive effect of self-cultivation would be a better body of ‘Negro’ artwork. Not only is personal culture independent of one’s ‘social culture,’ one does not cultivate oneself out of a sense of duty to one’s tribe. Indeed, to Locke, the only duty implied by cultivation is to oneself: an obligation to avoid the ‘pull of the crowd.” “Cultural productiveness” is, furthermore, only a secondary effect of self-cultivation. And while cultivation was the defining aspect and mark of education, to be achieved (in part) through an appreciation of the arts, Locke insists that the arts-in-general—*all* cultural products and not just those of one’s ‘social culture’—is the experiential substance and (self) productive realm of culture.

Locke told the students that the “highest intellectual duty [was] the duty to be cultured.” But the duty to be cultured is a peculiar one, for unlike a typical obligation, it is not imposed by any outside authority.

There is, or ought to be, a story of a lad to whom some rather abstract duty was being interpreted who is said to have said, ‘If I only owe it to myself, why then I really don’t owe it at all.’ Not only do I admit that culture is a duty of this sort, but I claim that this is its chief appeal and justification.³⁹

³⁷ Akam, *Transnational America: Cultural Pluralist Thought in the Twentieth Century*, 146

³⁸ Locke, “The Ethics of Culture,” 182

³⁹ *Ibid.*

Culture is an obligation one experiences as a duty to oneself but which, although it is a benchmark established by oneself for oneself, requires more than individual achievement. Most important, while the cultivation of the self is necessarily self-referential, it is also, crucially, worldly:

Culture has been variously and beautifully defined. But I cannot accept for the purpose I have in view even that famous definition of Matthew Arnold's. 'Culture is the best that has been thought and known in the world,' since it emphasizes the external rather than the internal factors of culture. Rather, it is the capacity for understanding the best and most representative forms of human expression, and of expressing oneself, if not in similar creativeness, at least in appreciative reactions and in progressively responsive refinement of tastes and interests. *Culture proceeds from personality to personality....* It is that, and only that, which can be inwardly assimilated... [Like] wisdom it is that which cannot be taught, but can only be learned.⁴⁰ [my emphasis]

Cultivating oneself requires external reference. But even an already-existing body of superlative cultural products cannot, in itself, cultivate a self. Rather, cultivation results in and arises from seeking out representative others and 'expressing oneself' to and along side those others. Cultivation affects (one's) point of view by linking one to others and "[safeguarding the educative process]" at the level of experience.

Not merely a matter of refined taste, the impulse to culture is a constitutive element of the self, more important even than "the mind."

[Without] a refinement of the channels through which our experience reaches us, the mind cannot reach its highest development. We too often expect our senses to serve us and render nothing back to them in exchange. As a result, they do not serve us half so well as they might: course channels make for sluggish response, hampered impetus, wastage of effort... The

⁴⁰ Ibid. 177

stamp of culture is... no conventional pattern, and has no stock value: it is the mold and die of a refined and completely developed personality. It is the art medallion and not the common coin.⁴¹

To be cultured ultimately indicates that one is worldly and has become so through contact with others (“personality to personality”) and with objects of culture. Culture is, at the individual level, unsubstantial, indicating instead both refined tastes and a ‘cosmopolitan’ sensibility. (On the other hand, at the level of society, culture is perdurable enough that ethnologists and anthropologists could study it. Culture is *both* immaterial *and* long lasting.)

That Locke so carefully set individual culture/cultivation apart from ‘race’/‘social culture’ by insisting that cultivation is inherently worldly leads me to disagree about Akam’s interpretation of Locke’s Harlem Renaissance project: that this early speech represents a failure because it merely results in the production of new elites who “...are intent on parodying the white amateur arts of self-expression.” As Akam would have it, Locke later becomes a *cosmopolitan* because he becomes a cultural pluralist. On this view, Locke endorses a conception of culture as ‘rooted,’ drawn on local traditions, which produces a reconstituted self that is then enabled to pursue “liberation and social justice.” His cosmopolitanism is displaced to the realm of “participatory democracy,” which ‘now’ constituted by selves rooted in various cultures, is itself cosmopolitan. I suggest instead that Locke retains the insight of the 1923 speech, that culture is itself cosmopolitan, the space for contact from “personality to personality” and I would add from ‘personality to artwork,’ confirming his argument that in the modern period, ‘race’s’ influence over

⁴¹ Ibid. 178

both the study and the actual formation of cultures as well as the 'practice' of inter-group/personal contact would wane. One source of this insight, I suggest, is Georg Simmel, with whom Locke studied during his year at University of Berlin.

III. Simmel and Locke: Synthesis and the Poetry of 'Negro' Life

Georg Simmel was an early 20th century German philosopher and social theorist. One of the founders of modern sociology, "he charted a new field for the discovery...[through] such distinctive conceptions of contemporary sociology as social distance, marginality, urbanism as a way of life, role playing, social behavior as exchange, conflict as an integrating process, dyadic encounter, circular interaction, reference groups as perspectives, and sociological ambivalence."⁴² Simmel was most interested in the effects of the Industrial Revolution, its technological development and its 'culture' on the individual, a topic he explored most famously in his 1900 treatise on economic exchange, *The Philosophy of Money*. Born in 1858, he grew up in and studied in Berlin, completing a dissertation on Kant in 1881. He took a *Privatdozent* position at the University of Berlin after the publication of his dissertation and remained there until 1914. A gifted lecturer, Simmel was among the most popular instructors at the University of Berlin in the early 20th century. He finally received a full professorship at the University of Strasbourg, where he remained until his death in 1918.

Simmel's influence on Locke has been noted in Harris and Molesworth's recent biography, *Alain Locke: Biography of a Philosopher*.⁴³ Harris and Molesworth point out that during his (1910-1911) at the University of

⁴² Levine, "Introduction," ix

⁴³ Harris and Molesworth, *Alain L. Locke: The Biography of a Philosopher*.

Berlin, Locke “enrolled for two courses—one each semester—with George Simmel, who was then in the process of redefining modern sociology.”⁴⁴ Actually, Locke took at least three courses with Simmel, *Analysen des Gruendbegriff der Wissenschaften*, *Probleme der moderne Kultur*, and *Philosophie des letzten Jahrhunderts*.⁴⁵ In any case, Harris and Molesworth note that “[some] important aspects of Simmel’s thought are reflected in Locke’s ...work. Perhaps chief among these is Simmel’s claim that social formations had abstract structures that could be separated from the content of social interaction and independently studied.”⁴⁶ I explore these influences in this chapter and argue that by tracing Simmel’s influence on Locke, we attend to a key difference that scholars who insist that Locke was an atavist or early defender of recognition politics miss: that between identity and synthesis.

When Locke wrote in “Our Little Renaissance” that the chief effect of the Harlem Renaissance was not new Negro artists (or I might add, ‘new Negroes’) but rather the infusing of “Negro life” into the “general stream of culture,” he alluded to the synthesizing force of culture. By analogizing the Harlem Renaissance to the “Grand Renaissance,” Locke predicted that the Harlem Renaissance would become much more than its elements—‘Negro life,’ artists, poetry, music, drama and the plastic arts—; it would reach out to all subjects and objects to reshape the world of relations.

⁴⁴ Harris and Molesworth, *Alain Locke: Biography of a Philosopher*, 93

⁴⁵ Locke’s transcript is kept in the Alain Locke Archive at Howard University. The official names of all of the courses and their instructors are as follows: *Logik (Elementaer und Methodenlehre)*, Prof. Erdmann; *Logik und Erkenntnistheorie*, Prof. Lasson; *Philosophie des letzten Jahrhunderts*, Prof. Simmel; *Einfuehrung in die Aesthetik*, Prof. Dessoir; *Idealistische Weltanschauung*, Prof. Muensterberg; *Geschichte der Philosophie: Kant und Idealismus*, Prof. Riehl; *Seminar: Kantschen Antinomie*, Prof. Riehl; *Gruendprobleme der Philosophie*, Prof. Lasson; *Uebungen: Analysen des Gruendbegriff der Wissenschaften*, Prof. Simmel; *Probleme der moderne Kultur*: Prof. Simmel; *Willenshandlung*, Prof. Muensterberg. *Alain Locke Papers*, Moorland-Spangarn Research Center, Howard University, Howard University Catalogue, 1911, box 164 – 162, folders 3, 4

⁴⁶ Harris and Molesworth, *Alain Locke: Biography of a Philosopher*, 93

I will begin by briefly sketching what was most significant in Simmel's general theory of culture: it arises from and results in a dialectic tension between vital, dynamic life and the fixed forms that life produces. For Locke, culture's capacity for objectifying life is ultimately tragic. I then characterize what may have been appealing to Locke about Simmel's account. I turn to Locke's 1926 essay, "The Negro Poets of the United States," to suggest how Locke may have creatively appropriated Simmelian theory.

From the late 19th century until his death in 1918, Georg Simmel articulated a systematic theory of culture while assessing the effects of modernity on 'subjective life,' examining "...the tensions and contradictions that become increasingly apparent in the culture of industrial civilization..."⁴⁷ Although Simmel was motivated by "...the intention of illustrating the *modern* subject's inner response to the external, humanly created world of material culture, [my emphasis]"⁴⁸ he offered a general theory of culture which saw culture arising from the dualism (conflict) between "subjective life, which is restless but finite in time, and its contents, which, once they are created, are fixed but timelessly valid."⁴⁹ Culture is the "path of the soul to itself" and more. Subjective life, pursuing the path of the soul to itself, "engendered innumerable structures which keep on existing with peculiar autonomy

⁴⁷ Lawrence Scaff, "Georg Simmel's Theory of Culture," in *Georg Simmel and Contemporary Sociology*, ed. Michael Kaern, Bernard Phillips, and Robert Cohen, vol. 119, Boston Studies in the Philosophy of Science (Dordrecht, Boston and London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1990), 283 - 296, p. 284. Scaff points out that Simmel's account of culture and his assessment of modernity are fundamentally linked, suggesting that Simmel's assessment "...consists of a connected series of analyses of alternative types of responses to culture—especially modern 'objective' culture—and a demarcation of Simmel's own intellectual bearing with respect to the problems posed by culture as a whole." Scaff finds the fullest articulation of these effects in Simmel's very famous work, *The Philosophy of Money*, which considers money's 'effects upon the inner world...of the vitality of individuals.'" This is far outside the bounds of my interests. Here, I will focus on two shorter essays, "On the Concept and the Tragedy of Culture" and "The Conflict in Modern Culture."

⁴⁸ Scaff, *Georg Simmel's Theory of Culture*, 284

⁴⁹ Simmel, "On the Concept and Tragedy of Culture," 27

independent of the soul that has created them, as well as of any other that accepts or rejects them..." If conceptually, culture can be understood to mediate between subjective life and its objects, while providing the path of soul from "folded unity...to unfolded multiplicity... to unfolded unity...",⁵⁰ producing (we might say in Lockean terms) 'self-expressiveness,' its great tragedy is that the 'unfolded multiplicity' through which the soul traveled to its perfected self, leaves a remainder of 'objective spirits.' Man thus finds himself confronting those multiple, but autonomous forms—"...art as well as law, religion as well as technology, science as well as custom---"⁵¹ as alien.

Once certain themes...[of culture] have been created—even if they have been created by the most individual and innermost spontaneity—we cannot control the direction in which they will develop...They must follow the guidelines of their own inner necessity, which is no more concerned with our individuality than are physical forces and their laws."⁵²

The result is that the subject finds itself unexpectedly dominated by the "innumerable structures" the spirit creates but "which keep on existing." The spirit—subjective life—cannot escape the processes of objectification. Indeed, that is precisely the tragedy of culture: though "life itself is formless, [it] incessantly generates forms for itself."⁵³ Culture inhabits the caesura between 'life' and 'form,' not with substantive content (for such content— work, art, law, morality, religion becomes *form*) but instead through synthesis. The "decisive factors in life are united in culture."⁵⁴ But this 'unity' is of a peculiar

⁵⁰ Ibid. 29

⁵¹ Ibid. 27

⁵² Ibid. 39

⁵³ Simmel, "The Conflict in Modern Culture," 11

⁵⁴ Simmel, "On the Concept and the Tragedy of Culture," 35

sort, permanent but always newly produced. “Culture as we have demonstrated is always a synthesis.”⁵⁵

For Locke, an ‘extant’ culture is just such a synthesis. This is what he means when he argues that all cultures are “composites.” Yet, in his criticism of cultural objects, most particularly of ‘Negro’ poetry, it is clear that Locke has in view less synthesis at a standstill—“social culture”—than the transvaluative process of synthesis itself. If for Simmel, culture-as-synthesis results in objectification and ‘tragedy’ for the subject, Locke finds in culture’s synthesizing powers an opportunity, *not for the (‘Negro’) subject but rather for “Negro life” itself*. “Negro life” can be reckoned with anew, as poetry. “Negro life” can be poetized, *objectified* in culture.

Where for Simmel, modern culture is essentially tragic, for Locke, it was rife with potential. This is because Locke saw in modern culture hints that black life was being ‘poetized,’ turned into cultural objects for the self-cultivation of all people. I turn to Locke’s 1926 essay “The Negro Poets of the United States” to outline what Locke meant by the ‘poetization’ of black life. I imagine here an encounter between Locke and Simmel, which takes its cue from Locke’s faith in culture’s potential instead of from Simmel’s pessimism about its modern form(s). The primary appeal of Simmel’s theorization of culture to Locke is precisely what generates tragic effects to Simmel: objectification. That ‘Negro life’ might be “objectified” in poetic form indicates a new freedom for ‘Negro’ artists and subjects: their artwork would no longer be wedded to a ‘Negro identity’ dictated thoroughly by external circumstance.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ This is, in part, what I take Locke to mean when he writes in “Enter the New Negro,” the introductory essay of *Survey Graphic* 53, no. 11, “...the Old Negro...was a creature of moral debate and historical controversy. His has been a stock figure perpetuated as an historical

As Simmel defines it, culture is not peripheral to the subject. Instead, it is “lodged in the middle of the dualism... between subjective life...and its contents.”⁵⁷ As concept, “ [it is] based on a situation which in its totality can only be expressed opaquely, though an analogy, as the path of the soul to itself.”⁵⁸ Culture takes this path via “spiritual movements like will, duty, hope, the calling [which represent] the psychic expressions of the fundamental destiny of life: to contain its future in its present in a special form which exists only in the life process.”⁵⁹ Locke sees in the ‘Negro’ poetry of the period the “...discarding [of] dialect and the hectic rhetorical assertion of race,”⁶⁰ which he associated with earlier ‘Negro’ poets who, by circumstance, produced work that appealed on behalf of the ‘Negro’ cause or was merely “hortatory.” Locke discerns this exciting development not because ‘Negro’ poetry had adopted new content but rather because its ‘mood’ had changed. ‘Negro’ poetry’s new temper is doubly significant: the relationship between ‘Negro’ poetry and its material (life) had developed in new directions, so that ‘Negro life’ need no longer submit itself to appropriation on behalf of ‘Negro’ causes; moreover, although the “poetry of protest and social analysis still continued... contemporary Negro poetry... achieved the dignity of self-esteem and the poise of self-confidence... [so that] Negro poets... [find] joy and inspiration not in the escape from handicaps, but in the mastery of experience.”⁶¹ ‘Negro’

fiction partly in innocent sentimentalism, partly in deliberate reactionism. The Negro himself has contributed his share to this through a sort of protective social mimicry forced upon him by the adverse circumstances of dependence. So for generations in the mind of America, the Negro has been more of a formal than a human being—a something to be argued about, condemned or defended, to be ‘kept down,’ or ‘in his place,’ or ‘helped up,’ to be worried with or worried over, harassed or patronized, a social bogey or a social burden.” Locke, “Enter the New Negro.” 7

⁵⁷ Simmel, “On the Concept and Tragedy of Culture,” 27

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Locke, “The Negro Poets of the United States.” 44

⁶¹ Ibid.

poetry in its variety could attend to 'Negro life' and not (merely) the external handicaps that had, in the past, resulted in the poet's neglect of 'life,' to his giving voice instead to the 'Negro cause,' via the propagandistic or hortatory voice. We might say that, by virtue of the variety of its modes, this new 'Negro' poetry "contained its future in its present in a special [new] form," that of poly-vocality, thereby constituting a new 'path' for the (black) poet.

Simmel writes further that "[the] personality as a whole and a unit carried within itself an image, traced as if with invisible lines. The image is its potentiality, to free the image in it would be to attain its full actuality."⁶² Here, Simmel envisions the subject/soul as a potentiality, characterizing a function for culture that would seem quite appealing to Locke. But for Locke—and this is a central difference between Simmel's theory of culture and Locke's appropriation of it—'Negro poetry,' itself what Simmel would call a 'form,' is emancipated from its earlier purposes (as propaganda or exhortation), freeing not an 'image' of self but instead the multivalent character of 'Negro life.'

Simmel argues that 'culture' involves more than individual self-perfection. Cultivation fulfills a "...transcendent promise that should be fulfilled [such that] all individual expressions should appear only as a multitude of ways by which the spiritual life comes to itself..."⁶³ I want to suggest that for Locke, cultivation fulfills just such a promise and furthermore that 'Negro' poetry would become one of the ways by which "the spiritual life comes to itself.

For Locke, the poetic treatment of 'Negro' life indicates that culture now references it. The 'Negro' subject remains as yet fully embedded in 'life.'

⁶² Simmel, "On the Concept and Tragedy of Culture," 27

⁶³ Ibid.

'Negro' life's new availability to culture as potential cultural object in the modern context means something different for Locke than the seemingly unfortunate availability of 'life' to modern culture as Simmel portrays it. Lawrence Scaff's account of Simmel's general theory of culture is instructive here. Scaff points out that for Simmel, 'life's' centrality to culture is a relatively recent development. I will quote Scaff at length here.

[In] Simmel's view,... a brief history of cultural development will show that at the center of culture, from antiquity to modernity, has been a movement of assumed 'unity of being' (Greek philosophy), to 'god' (Christianity), 'nature' (the Renaissance), the 'self' (the Enlightenment), 'society' (the nineteenth century), and finally 'life' (modernity)... Simmel's modern culture has surrendered the delusion of unitary meaning. For Western thought to move from Kant to Nietzsche has meant precisely to replace the universal individuality of a transcendental ego, situated in a single and generalizable world of mechanistic properties, with the unique individuality of a determinate subject, dispersed into multiple and particularizing worlds of qualitative variation.⁶⁴

No longer 'generalizable,' life is dispersed into "multiple and particularizing worlds." For Locke, 'Negro life,' hidden as it was under the (dis)guise of old Negro identity, had heretofore not been revealed in its "unique individuality" as 'life.' (We might say that "Negro life" was only particular by virtue of the modifier 'Negro,' and not because of the capacity for modern culture to produce "multiple and particularizing worlds of qualitative variation.") In the Simmelian view, modern culture is "tragic" precisely because the promise of "unique individuality" as a result of "dispersal into multiple and particularizing worlds" is denied by the cultural forms (work, art, religion, law, morality) that the "soul" begets on its way to itself. For Locke, the

⁶⁴ Scaff, "Simmel's Theory of Culture," 291

poetization of “Negro life,” one indication of the ‘work’ of modern culture, is promising expressly because it indicates that “Negro life” has been elevated to the “pure plane of art,” where it would become part and parcel of every “soul’s path to itself.”

According to Locke, “Negro life” only began to be represented in ‘Negro’ poetry with the advent of the Harlem Renaissance. Thus, in “The Negro Poets of the United States,” Locke traces the historical development of “Negro” poetry, beginning with the “Negro” poet, who has little access to ‘life.’

Negro poets and Negro poetry are two quite different things. Of the one, since Phyllis Wheatley, we have had a century and a half; of the other, since Dunbar, scarcely a generation. But the significance of the work of Negro poets will more and more be seen and valued retrospectively as the medium through which a poetry of Negro life and experience has gradually become possible... Therefore, I maintain that the work of Negro poets in the past has its chief significance in what it has led up to; through work of admittedly minor and secondary significance and power a folk-consciousness has slowly come into being and a folk-tradition has been started on the way to independent expression and development...⁶⁵

The arrival ‘Negro’ poetry represents a break from the past. Still through the work of earlier poets a “folk consciousness and a folk tradition” was substantiated. This “consciousness” is akin to Simmelian “spirit.” “Spirit” according to Simmel, results from man’s “tearing himself loose...from the naturally given order of the world.” “From this first great dualism springs the never-ending contest between subject and object, which finds its second round within the realm of spirit itself.”⁶⁶ In the “Negro Poets” essay, Locke traces, in the progressive development of “Negro poetry,” the tearing loose of

⁶⁵ Alain Locke and Jeffrey Stewart, “The Negro Poets of the United States,” (*The Critical Temper of Alain Locke*, New York, NY: Garland Publishing Inc, 1983), p. 43

⁶⁶ Simmel, “On the Concept and Tragedy of Culture,” 27

'spirit' ('folk consciousness'), not from 'nature,' but instead from the peculiar circumstances that had identified 'Negro' poets as mere advocates for a cause, isolating them in effect from 'life,' their best material. Phillis Wheatley's poetry, in effect, had little 'life' content. She was merely a "controversial prodigy," an imitator.

She was race-conscious but not race minded. And later when for two generations or more Negro poets rhymed out their 'moral numbers' and pleaded for freedom, sometimes in creditable, sometimes in puerile quatrains that echoed Whittier and Mrs. Hemans, although the acceptance of race as passionate, it was abstract and rhetorical. Theirs was the opposite excess of being so race-minded that they were race-bound.⁶⁷

The next generations advanced but were, nevertheless, still "preoccupied with the topics of freedom and the notes of sentimental appeal and moral protest."⁶⁸ They represented, "[t]he second step up Parnassus [which] had simply been from the foothold by Negroes to the half-way lodging of a poetry about the Negro cause and question."⁶⁹ Even the political freedom afforded by the Emancipation Proclamation to this "half-way" generation failed to produce the conditions conducive to the "poetry of Negro life." Before late 19th century poet Paul Laurence Dunbar, whose work represented a significant development, the 'Negro' poetic style is almost entirely dominated by "rhetoric," which Locke associates with "moralism" and persuasive appeals on behalf of the race. Dunbar's significance, according to Locke, is threefold,

The first was to have brought the work of a Negro in poetry to general public attention and acceptance; and thus to have emancipated the Negro artist from his special reading clientele

⁶⁷ Locke, "Negro Poets," 43

⁶⁸ Ibid. 44

⁶⁹ Ibid.

of pet friends and sympathizers. His second was to have established the idea of folk expression; a priceless boon even at the great cost of having shackled Negro poets... to the limitations and handicaps of dialect. The third accomplishment was to give fresh impetus of lyric singing.⁷⁰

How could “Negro” poets be both “emancipated” and “shackled” by dialect? Extracting spirit from circumstance was no easy task. Freed first from imitation and then from clientelism, through dialect the ‘Negro’ poet had drawn closer to the poet’s best object—life. But just as dialect enacted ‘folk consciousness,’ it ghettoized, cultivating ‘Negro life’ but preventing its ‘fusion’ with the “general stream of culture.” Worse, ‘dialect’ could not affect the prevailing ‘mood’ of ‘Negro poets.’ “They were as handicapped as their predecessors, though in a different way. They plead in dialect; the peasant becomes a moral stalking-horse for their generation just as for the previous generation.”⁷¹ Put another way, turning to dialect is, for Locke, a beginning that is immediately forestalled. The poet remains a *Negro poet*, a tester of moral concepts or a representative, writing ever on behalf of causes. The ‘Negro’ poet stays petitioner, who, always beseeching, is cut off from the expressive possibilities of life and spirit. Nevertheless, Locke identifies in the works produced after this period of renewal/retreat the hallmarks of a “universal” Negro poetry.

“Universal Negro poetry” seems like a contradiction in terms. Yet for Locke, once Negro ‘life’ is disarticulated from propaganda and Negro poets freed from the duty to spokesmanship, ‘Negro’ poetry

...was linked up with the main stream and tradition of English poetry, and on an esthetic rather than a moral basis began to attain universality and by right to claim general attention...

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

Negro poetry became at one and the same time more universal and more racial, finding a strange peace and ease in what had given it the most inquietude. For in becoming less self-conscious, it became more naively and beautifully expressive, like music.⁷²

“Negro poetry” makes its entrance as dialect and moral argument leave the stage, or at least, begin to play bit parts in the history of the development of “Negro poetry.” “Negro poetry” appeals then to a superior form of universality, in Locke’s view (aesthetic and not moral) whose source, ‘Negro life’ is particular, invoking a “beauty that is born of long suffering, truth that is derived from mass emotion and founded on collective vision.”⁷³ Locke finds in the aestheticization of (‘Negro) life itself, a universalizing form of representation that harmonizes ‘Negro life’s’ expression in all its great variety. This did not mean that artists would no longer address social issues, just that their work would not be forced into the two modes of address—exhortation and argument—that had heretofore defined ‘Negro’ artwork, opening up a new experience of and response to ‘Negro life’ in artwork for its audience. Locke describes “Negro” poetry as containing “protest and social analysis,” but also “the dignity of self esteem and the poise of self-confidence,” shaped by “varied affiliations with the richly differentiated technique of the modern schools of poetry.”⁷⁴ The critic could locate in the writings of one poet multiple themes, moods and techniques.

In place of the persistent and oppressive race consciousness, they have in part acquired the dignity of race spokespersonship and in part re-achieved the enviable naiveté of the slave singers. More than all else, especially in its promise for the future, they have

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Locke, “Negro Poets,” 47

⁷⁴ Ibid. 45

won that artistic acceptance of life which makes great art possible.⁷⁵

The 'Negro' poet does not, say, "become a race spokesman," rather he begins ("in part") to gain the standing one might associate with being able to represent life and thus, is able to "return," in an incomplete fashion, complicated by the advent of modernity, to the slave singer's artlessness. Note again the language: the Negro poet has "*achieved... naivety*," an incongruous phrase. We can contrast poetic "naivety" with the decadent modernism that Locke associates with "the coteries," those modern artistic cliques for whom the production of artwork was an end in and of itself, instead of the poetic realization of 'Negro life.' (I take this theme up in Chapter Four). The modern poet does not recover slave singing as if there were some essential "Negro" artistic quality that (only) new "Negro" poets could access. In return for seeing 'Negro life' freed up for its reception in the general stream of culture, 'Negro poets' receive a new temper, which Locke calls "artistic acceptance of life."

Simmel, it seems, could not imagine the modern subject arriving at an "artistic acceptance of life." After all, the tragedy of modern culture was that the modern subject experienced objective culture and its products as simultaneously freeing, alienating and overwhelming. But the correspondences between Locke and Simmel are deeper, more pervasive and fruitful than the difference between their dispositions toward modernity—hopeful and ambivalent—would suggest. Both Locke and Simmel suggest that culture functions as a mediator between subjectivity and objectivity. As cultural structures emerge, they immediately limit the universe of alternative ways of behaving and acting practically available to a range narrower than

⁷⁵ Ibid.

what would be possible logically. Locke's exegesis of 'race' in the *Race Contacts* lectures attends to how 'race,' its creeds and practices structure social scientific interpretations of group characteristics and, most important, affect 'interracial relations' as a matter of practice. In the "Negro Poets" essay, Locke attempts to explain how 'Negro' poetry—black life objectified and poetized—might structure new relations. As a practitioner of culture (in his work as a culture critic on behalf of the Harlem Renaissance movement), we might say that Locke applies a notion of culture that is profoundly influenced by his understanding of the structuring power of culture and ideas and inspired by the possibility of change under the condition of modernity. He locates in the aesthetic realm the best conditions for change in both intra- and inter-cultural relations.

Locke is, furthermore, aware of the differentiating functions of various social 'forms' that so concern Simmel, most particularly, the differentiating function of the metropolis.⁷⁶ Where Simmel focuses on 'modern life,' Locke attends to 'Negro life. But the meaning of this disagreement (if it can be framed thus) is revealed in how Locke and Simmel theorize 'value/valuation' in the context of modernity. For Simmel, the hallmark of modernity is that through objectification (most particularly because of the money economy), cultural objects are devalued. For Locke, on the other hand, both because he sees one autonomous 'object'—'race thinking' and its creeds—on the wane

⁷⁶ This is, in part what I understand him to mean when writing about 1920s Harlem, he points out, "[Harlem] has attracted the African, the West Indian, the Negro American; has brought together the Negro of the North and the Negro of the South; the man from the city and the man from the town and village; the peasant, the student, the business man, the professional man, artist, poet, musician, adventurer and worker, preacher and criminal, exploiter and social outcast. Each group has come with its own separate motives and for its own special ends, but their greatest experience has been binding to one another. Proscription and prejudice have brought these dissimilar elements into a common area of contact and interaction." Alain Locke, "Harlem," in *The Critical Temper of Alain Locke: A Selection of His Essays on Art and Culture* (New York and London: Garland Publishing Inc., 1983), 5 - 7, p. 6

and because he theorizes valuation as a primarily subjective process, the telltale sign of modernity *for black people* was the exaltation of 'life' as such. This is an effect of the transvaluation of values that Locke saw as part and parcel of modernity.

It seems clear from Locke's life-long commitment to art and literary that Locke sees in the realm of aesthetics and art production the greatest possibility for change. But Locke insists in "The Negro Poets of the United States," that "...Negro poetry has achieved the dignity of self-esteem and the poise of self-confidence" and argues in the essay "Youth Speaks," that "[Negro poets] have stopped posing, being nearer the attainment of poise," and not merely his affection for artwork and literature that gives the final clue. The influence of 'race thinking' and its creeds was on the wane, at least in the realm of aesthetics. 'Negro life' was being freed of the 'race thinking' and 'race creeds' that had trapped the poet and his artwork in a 'Negro' shell and 'Negro' poets would find not simple 'identity' with an always-already and available 'culture,' but rather acceptance into the field of culture and through the production and expression of their art to all comers.

That said, Locke had strong opinions about how the transvaluative powers of aesthetics could be harnessed and released, which are revealed in the cultural criticism he wrote throughout and after the Harlem Renaissance years. Artists were (merely) a medium for the release of those powers and late modernity its backdrop. In the next chapter, I explore both how Locke characterized the work of the modern artist and how Locke conceived of the transvaluative powers of modernity by examining one of Locke's earliest forays into the field of modern art, the 1917 essay, "Emile Verhaeren."

WORKS CITED

Akam, Everett. *Transnational America; Cultural Pluralist Thought in the Twentieth Century*.

Fraser, Nancy. "Another Pragmatism: Alain Locke, Critical 'Race' Theory, and the Politics of Culture." In *The Critical Pragmatism of Alain Locke: A Reader on Value Theory, Aesthetics, Community, Culture, Race and Education*, ed. Leonard Harris. Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., p. 3 - 20.

Habermas, Jürgen. 1996. "Georg Simmel on Philosophy and Culture: Postscript to a Collection of Essays." *Critical Inquiry* 22(No. 3): 403 - 414.

Harris, Leonard, and Charles Molesworth. 2008. *Alain L. Locke: The Biography of a Philosopher*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Harris, Leonard. 1988. "Identity: Alain Locke's Atavism." *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* XXVI:1: 65 - 84.

Locke, Alain. "The Negro Poets of the United States." In *The Critical Temper of Alain Locke: A Selection of His Essays on Art and Culture*, Critical Studies on Black Life and Culture, ed. Jeffrey C. Stewart. New York and London: Garland Publishing Inc., p. 43 - 49.

Locke, Alain. 1983. "Enter the New Negro." In *The Critical Temper of Alain Locke: A Selection of His Essays on Art and Culture*, Critical Studies on Black Life and Culture, ed. Jeffrey C. Stewart. New York and London: Garland Publishing Inc., p. 7 - 12.

Locke, Alain. 1983. "Harlem." In *The Critical Temper of Alain Locke: A Selection of His Essays on Art and Culture*, New York and London: Garland Publishing Inc., p. 5 - 7.

Locke, Alain. 1983. "Our Little Renaissance." In *The Critical Temper of Alain Locke: A Selection of His Essays on Art and Culture*, Critical Studies on Black Life

- and Culture, ed. Jeffrey C. Stewart. New York and London: Garland Publishing Inc., p. 21 - 22.
- Locke, Alain. 1989. "The Concept of Race as Applied to Social Culture." In *The Philosophy of Alain Locke: Harlem Renaissance and Beyond*, ed. Leonard Harris. Philadelphia, p. 187 - 200.
- Locke, Alain. 1989. "The Ethics of Culture." In *The Philosophy of Alain Locke: The Harlem Renaissance and Beyond*, ed. Leonard Harris. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, p. 176 - 185.
- Scaff, Lawrence. 1990. "Georg Simmel's Theory of Culture." In *Georg Simmel and Contemporary Sociology*, Boston Studies in the Philosophy of Science, eds. Michael Kaern, Bernard Phillips, and Robert Cohen. Dordrecht, Boston and London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, p. 283 - 296.
- Simmel, Georg. 1968. "On the Concept and Tragedy of Culture." In *The Conflict in Modern Culture and Other Essays*, ed. K. Peter Etkorn. New York: Teachers College Press, p. 27 - 46.
- Simmel, Georg. 1968. "The Conflict in Modern Culture." In *The Conflict in Modern Culture and Other Essays*, ed. K. Peter Etkorn. New York: Teachers College Press, p. 11 - 26.

CHAPTER 4
MODERN ('NEGRO') POETRY

Writing some years after the end of the Harlem Renaissance, Alain Locke observed “[the] increased and increasing knowledge about human cultures which has come to us in modern times has unfortunately not led to any very general improvement in the common understanding of the nature of civilization, or the nature of culture itself.”¹ The problem, according to Locke, was that the “...expected enlightened social understanding had and intercultural appreciation”² had yet to occur. Even the ‘objective’ social sciences “reverted frequently to the traditional cultural provincialisms.” Indeed, the “...contemporary welter of group rivalries...” that ought to necessitate and encourage the social sciences to draw more objective conclusions about “...the nature of civilization,” encouraged an “...increased resort to theorizing about the nature of culture [vis-à-vis] the mere rationalization of the claims and counterclaims of various national and racial groups seeking partisan vindication and glory.”³ As late as 1946, the year *When Peoples Meet: A Study in Race and Culture Contacts*— the edited volume within which these observations appeared, Locke was (still) fighting against the “cultural propaganda” that the modern age ought to have defeated. That is, since the world historical period of biological race was coming to a close, social science and anthropology ought ‘then’ to have been able to “...properly [understand] civilization...[as] the setting of world culture...”⁴

In *When Peoples Meet*, Locke’s concern again was theoretical: in the

¹Alain Locke and Stern, Bernhard J., ed, *When Peoples Meet: A Study in Race and Culture Contacts* (New York: Hinds, Hayden and Eldredge, Inc., 1946), p. 3

² Ibid.

³ Ibid. 4

⁴ Ibid. 3

domain of ideas, the influence of race thinking continued to be powerful. But Locke had initiated the defense against cultural propaganda in the 1930s, when he insisted that black artwork serve no 'political' function and be left to 'express itself.' As I have argued, one reason Locke avowed that black artwork should refuse political function was that 'modern' developments made cultural or racial propaganda increasingly unnecessary. 'Self-expressiveness' was a (new) quality of black artwork, revealing the 'plurality' black life just as (and because) the black artist was 'freed' of the responsibility to exhort or persuade on behalf of causes in black artwork. This chapter examines what to Locke, in addition to its 'self-expressive' quality, was 'modern' about modern, black artwork. I will suggest that for Locke, black modernist style (like what for him was successful modernism in general) *expressed* the artistic subject (whether it was, as we will see, Flemish folk life, life in modern cities or "the Negro's quite matchless folk art") by allowing the best 'style' for the subject to suggest itself. Such 'artistic mirroring' could, by my reading, then reveal black life in all its multiplicity and reconstitute an artist's relationship to traditional materials.

By my reading, the 'new' in the New Negro Movement and what was renascent in black art was both 'self-expressiveness' and the variety of representations of black life. In contrast, literary theorist Brent Hayes Edward's has recently focused on another important aspect of 'novelty' in the early 20th century world of black letters. He suggests that the Harlem Renaissance was a world-wide phenomenon best understood to refer to the 'new' black internationalism the movement articulated. In what follows, I will examine Edward's argument, paying particular attention to how he characterizes modern black plurality as both problem and possibility. Second,

I turn to an unexpected source, Locke's 1917 essay, "Emile Verhaeren," in which Locke memorializes the now forgotten Belgian poet as a modernist *par excellence*. I uncover in this pre-Renaissance essay, the outline of several themes to which Locke returned in his later critiques of 'Negro' artwork. In particular, I highlight how Locke understands modernity as a 'difference' freeing force and characterize Locke's expectations of artists confronted both with modernity's dynamic character and the temptations of 'root sources.' I suggest that for Locke, the new Negro artists were just as much defined by their modernism as by their 'Negro-ness.'

Like that of Emile Verhaeren, 'New Negro' artwork "...incorporates a world-view and reflects the spirit of its time."⁵ Finally, drawing on the three essays that Locke wrote first for the March 1924 "Harlem" issue of the *Survey Graphic* and included in *The New Negro: an Interpretation*, "The New Negro," "Negro Youth Speaks" and "The Legacy of Ancestral Arts," I examine how Locke portrays 'Negro' artwork as "reflecting the spirit of its time" because of the mode by which it appropriated 'Negro life' and African art. According to Locke, the experience of modernity would, in fact, alienate ('Negro') artists from 'Negro life' but re-position them to best see 'Negro life' objectified in the "pure plane of high art."

I. Black Modernity: Internationalism and the Practice of Diaspora

In *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation and the Rise of Black Internationalism*, Brent Hayes Edwards suggests

To note that the "New Negro" Movement is at the same time a

⁵ Alain Locke, "Emile Verhaeren," in *The Critical Temper of Alain Locke: A Selection of His Essays on Art and Culture*, ed. Jeffrey C. Stewart, Critical Studies on Black Life and Culture (New York and London, 1983), 35 - 38, p. 35

“new” black internationalism is to move against the grain of much of the scholarship on African American culture in the 1920s, which has tended to emphasize U.S. bound themes of cultural nationalism, civil rights protest, and uplift in the literary culture of the “Harlem Renaissance.” [*The Practice of Diaspora*] is an attempt to come to terms with the reminders of a handful of scholars... that ‘the Renaissance was international in scale both in terms of where its contributors come from and in terms of its being merely the North American component of something larger and grander.’⁶

Edwards examines the correspondence and collaboration among black activists, scholars and artists in the 1920s and 1930s, uncovering there the stirrings of a new black internationalism. He argues that black activists grappled with black plurality by “practicing diaspora” and imagining blackness “beyond the boundaries of nation and language.” Black internationalists took the misrepresentation of black people as a starting point, pursuing better, workable articulations of the ‘fact’ of blackness. The movement found itself immediately confronted with a problem: ‘black’ was a signifier whose signified refused easy capture.

Edwards treats blackness as an ever-moving target, which was realized through what he calls the “practice of diaspora.” The plurality of black life, articulated by differently-situated black activists was revealed in an international print culture. He “...[unearths and articulates]...

archive, in the sense not so much of a site or mode of preservation of a national, institutional or individual past, but instead of a “generative system”: in other words, a discursive system that governs the possibilities, forms, appearance, and regularity of particular statements, objects, and practices—or on the simplest level that determines “what can and cannot be said.”⁷

⁶ Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2003) , p. 2

⁷ Ibid. 7

Edwards reveals black plurality as it was under construction, by examining letters, newsletters and the (mis)translated texts written by black intellectuals and artists in New York and in Paris.⁸ He suggests that these artist-scholar-activists “practiced” diaspora to uncover a singular, but always coalescent “fact of blackness,” from the plurality of black life. This work was intended to counter earlier aesthetic claims about blackness. Though ‘blackness’ had ‘already’ been (mis)framed, the internationalist actors attempting to reclaim the ‘fact of blackness’ engaged in communicative practices and therefore confronted black plurality as both predicament and opportunity. Differently-situated black actors were forced to address their differences, in light of a common goal: to see blackness reframed.

Diasporic practice can be read both in the intentions of its articulators and, more significant for Edwards, in their failures. Its practitioners— a diverse group of American, African, French and Caribbean activists, scholars and artists— did not seek identity so much as birthed a blackness that exceeded national settings of its ‘midwives.’ This project, nevertheless, was part and parcel various political struggles, whose particular purposes may have been focused on a particular setting, but whose horizons encompassed an international black public.

Though focused on the particular political, social and economic problems facing blacks around the world, these actors grappled with the question of blackness itself, which refused to be defined in a singular fashion. ‘Internal’ differences meant that the category ‘black’ was immediately unstable. Nevertheless, characterizing ‘blackness’ achieved the same status

⁸ Edwards examines, for example, the communications between Alain Locke and French novelist René Maran as well as the nascent feminism of French writer Paulette Nardal, Claude McKay’s “Vagabond Bolshevism,” and “Black Marxism” of George Padmore and Tiemeko Garan Kouyate.

as solving the specifically socio-political problems these activists hoped to address, whatever their differences over ‘policy.’ Blackness needed to be usefully ‘framed.’

Edwards argues that the concern with blackness is revealed in “semantic shifts in [the] bilingual flood of racial appellations and adjectives”⁹ and by characterizing the work of prefaces in various anthologies of “Negro” writing.

Claiming the term *négre*, investing it with particular signifying content and then deploying it as a link to another context (using it to translate Negro, for instance) are clearly practices with implications that go beyond the simply linguistic. In a larger sense, these are all framing gestures. The divergent interventions... do not just *define* the word *négre*. They also frame it: positioning, delimiting or extending its range of application; articulating it in relation to a discursive field, to a variety of derived or opposed signifiers; fleshing out its history of use; and imagining its scope of application, its uses, its “future.”¹⁰

Black internationalists claimed the term ‘*négre*’ and others, attempting to capture and define its future uses. Moreover, the prefaces of various black anthologies, like *The New Negro: an Interpretation*, served as framing gestures as well to mark the appearance of a new force—international blackness by Edwards’ account—on the scene. Edwards rightly relates the work of articulation to the problematic depiction of blackness in the literary and public spheres. Further, Edwards’ account usefully illuminates the work of these scholars, artists and activists as social practice emphasizing the intention and agency of international Harlem Renaissance actors, while attending to their failures. The ‘fact’ of blackness required articulation over and against prior

⁹ Ibid. 20

¹⁰ Ibid. 38

misrecognitions and mischaracterizations from black source materials that themselves defied easy classification. For Edwards, articulating blackness was the central, though not sole, objective of the international Harlem Renaissance. The translations of texts from English to French and vice-versa as well as the exchange of letters between black activists and artists round the world that Edwards divulges that what Locke calls the 'Negro's' "greatest experience"—the process of "binding together." Edwards makes clear that just how difficult it was to 'bind together' such a motley group was. More improvisation than course, objectives were difficult to define and, furthermore, rife with the risk of misunderstanding.

A vision of internationalism, perhaps, though not exactly 'worldwide black unity': in these transnational circuits, black modern expression takes form not as a single thread, but through the often uneasy encounters of peoples of African descent with each other. The cultures of black internationalism are formed only within...paradoxes..., with the result that—as much as they allow new and unforeseen alliances and interventions on a global stage—they are also characterized by unavoidable misapprehension and misreadings, persistent blindnesses and solipsisms, self defeating and abortive collaborations, a failure to translate even a basic grammar of blackness.¹¹

In pursuit of black unity, Locke too was guilty of his share of misreading. Edwards carefully reconstructs one particularly unfortunate encounter between Locke and the French colonial context. In "The Black Watch on the Rhine," a short essay in which Locke described his visit to see

¹¹ Edwards, *Practice of Diaspora*, 5. As an example, Edwards points out that the comparatively positive treatment that many black Americans received from the French meant that they misunderstood, or worse, ignored how the French colonial system mistreated its African and French African subjects.

“French African troops guarding the border with Germany after World War I.”¹²

My title is no misnomer... [the] first troops I saw on entering the occupied territory, and the last I saw on leaving, were colored—and a very impartial observer, let us say the traditional martian [sic], would have jotted down in his diary what a polyglot, polyracial African nation had in alliance with France conquered Germany... [Mere] social miracle it may seem to the Anglo-Saxon eye, they are not merely French soldiers, they are French citizens, comrades not only in arms but in all the basic human relationships... The instinctive social logicity of the French mind has made a clean sweep of the whole field [of prejudice], and in spite of its handicaps of militarism and colonial imperialism, France has here worked out a practical technique of human relationships which may very possibly earn for her world-mastery....¹³

Locke went on, Edwards points out, to extrapolate from his observation of France’s colonial subject-soldiers “on the Rhine” an account of “French civilization” as more egalitarian and accepting of difference than the Anglo-Saxon. “Instead of imposing her civilization and culture France superimposes them.” Not surprisingly, Locke’s proclamations about the multiethnic glories of “French civilization” did not go without notice. Rene Maran, the French-Guyanese poet, novelist and frequent contributor to *Les Continents*, with whom Locke carried on a lengthy correspondence, responded to “Black Watch on the Rhine” in an “Open Letter to Professor Alain Leroy Locke,” which was published in *Opportunity* magazine. Maran remarks that

[the] benevolence of France toward subject races is a matter of theory and official pretence. It is little more than a subterfuge... You [should] understand that the black, brown and yellow

¹² Ibid. 105

¹³ Quoted in *The Practice of Diaspora*, 105

soldiers did not come to the French colors as the little children come to Jesus... [In] certain of the colonies government officials under one pretext or other of recruiting actually engaged in seizure and man hunting.”¹⁴

But Locke was adamant! He defended his position by admitting “narrow motives,” insisting, “I was not discussing French policy in Africa, but merely the French treatment of her Negro soldiers in Europe...I was primarily concerned with contrasting this treatment of the man of color in the armies of France with that of our own American army.”¹⁵ The details here are less significant than what can be made of them. Edwards reports that Maran was able to intervene by calling Locke to the carpet for his provincialism and, in doing so, reconfigures Locke’s vanguardism, insisting that “...black internationalism [is] reciprocity...” “Reciprocity” he writes, “is less an originating appeal that is answered than the structure of mutual answerability: articulation of diaspora in tension and in dissonance, without necessary resolution or synthesis.”¹⁶

Edwards treats Locke’s error generously as a part of a reciprocal whole, which read retroactively in the archive of communications that Edwards constructs, is a moment in the “articulation of diaspora.” In this chapter, I want to suggest that while Locke failed sometimes in his own communications to accurately characterize the situation of blacks outside the U.S., he accounts, in part, for the modernism of black artwork by suggesting that for it to be successful (truly modern), the artist had a responsibility to his subject. His artwork should express black life by allowing its form to emanate from the subject. This, and not the stylistic formalism of the modernist “coteries,”

¹⁴ Quoted in *The Practice of Diaspora*, 106 - 107

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid. 108

indicated its modernism. As I shall argue below in my 'reading' of Locke's "Emile Verhaeren" essay, *all* good modern artwork (and not only black modern artwork) should be animated by this reciprocal relationship between artist and his subject.

The New Negro: an Interpretation itself contains multiple 'frames' (no less than twenty two written by different artists, art critics, social scientists and interested observers) for its subject. Locke sought to reveal the 'spirit of the age' as captured by black artwork. Moreover, black artists were not the only source of the spirit so animating black artwork. Locke celebrated (and chose as the cover illustration for *The New Negro: an Interpretation*) the sketches and paintings of Austrian artist Winold Reiss as fine examples 'Negro' art.¹⁷ I attribute Locke's attention to Reiss as well as his expectations of black artwork in general to his thinking about 'modernity.' From this perspective, we can see Locke not just as an internationalist collaborator but also as a critic who gave voice to the culture of modernity itself by illuminating the differentiating (function) that modernity might serve and seeing New Negro artists as its medium.

II. "Really Vital Modernism"

*Not as a picture merely, but as a constant devotee throughout all the other changes in his art, Verhaeren, so lately and lamentably gone, is to be accounted the great exponent of modernism in poetry. In so styling him, we rate as the really vital modernism in the art, not the cult of sheer modernity of form and mood,--the ultra-modernism in which the poetic youth exults, but that more difficult modernity of substance which has as its aim to make poetry incorporate a world-view and reflect the spirit of its time.*¹⁸

¹⁷ Locke defended his choice in an article that appeared in the *Survey Graphic* magazine, *Harlem*, along side Reiss's drawings. See "Harlem Types," (*Survey Graphic* 53, no. 11, March 1, 1925)

¹⁸ Locke, "Emile Verhaeren," 35

Locke revealed his expectations of modern artistic expression in the 1917 essay, "Emile Verhaeren," a remembrance of the now forgotten Belgian modernist poet. Locke celebrates Verhaeren because of his 'vital' modernism. To Locke, Verhaeren's modernism was substantive because it captured the 'past' just as it was abandoned in favor of the extraordinary transformation of the new age, while refusing the excessive subjectivism that modern experience inspired in some artists. Locke saw in Verhaeren's work a "reverent vandalism," which remembered the past while setting it aside for the new, the modern and the vital. Like the new 'Negro' poet, whose novelty was revealed in his refusal of representative responsibilities in favor of a "vital Negro poetry," Verhaeren inhabited a transitional and transformational period in the arts, "the doubting period in poetry, when poets were sure of nothing but their own inner experiences, and of these, in a morbidly subjective way"¹⁹ but nevertheless resisted the temptations of 'subjectivism,' turning instead to the worldliness of the modern city.

Emile Verhaeren was born May 21, 1855, in Saint Amand lez-Puers, Belgium and died in 1916. Although quite famous in Europe during his lifetime, he has since been forgotten. He wrote some 30 collections of poetry, remarkable for variety of subject and his extraordinary formal range. Critics described Verhaeren's first book, *Les Flammandes* [The Flemish] (1883), as "strong, vivid, brutal... violent, as course, as full of animal spirits, as the pictures of Breugel the Elder, Teniers, or Jan Steen."²⁰ Concern for social problems and the effects of the modern urban environment animated much of

¹⁹ Ibid. 35

²⁰ Amy Lowell, *Six French Poets: Studies in Contemporary Literature* (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1967).

his later work. A 1915 New York Times review of Stephan Zweig's *Verhaeren* put it thus:

...M. Verhaeren is modern in every sense of the abused word. What his fellow-countryman, Constantin Meunier, has done in clay and bronze, he has achieved in words. Emile Verhaeren is the poet of new and ugly cities, of crowded places of factories, steamships, telephones and all the newest wonders of science and mechanical skill. He cannot tarry long in Florence; it is pale, old and meagre. But London, alive and smoky, Flanders, rollicking Berlin, Paris—these hold him... he rides up and down the streets for hours at a time on the top of the buses, watching the crowds and listening to the clamor. The noise of industry becomes the music of his verse...²¹

For the reviewer, Verhaeren is a medium of the modern, his poetic voice captures the cacophony and hullabaloo of the modern city. Fascinated by every experience of modernity, Verhaeren mirrors them in his words.

The anonymous reviewer of Zweig's book on Verhaeren is not the first to see him as modernity's voice. Writing in 1915, the critic Amy Lowell²² characterizes Verhaeren as a modern "prophet," who gives voice to modernity and revels in it, whatever its chaos, cacophony and ill effects. Lowell writes, "A brooding Northerner, Verhaeren sees the sorrow, the travail, the sordidness, going on all about him, and loves the world just the same, and wildly believes in a future in which it shall somehow grind itself back to beauty."²³

²¹ Author unknown, "Verhaeren: Stephan Zweig's Appreciation of Belgium's Post Philosopher," *The New York Times*, January 3, 1915.

²² "(born Feb. 9, 1874, Brookline, Mass., U.S. — died May 12, 1925, Brookline) U.S. critic and poet. Born into the prominent Lowell family of Boston, she devoted herself to poetry at age 28 but published nothing until 1910. Her first volume, *A Dome of Many-Coloured Glass* (1912), was succeeded by *Sword Blades and Poppy Seed* (1914), which included her first poems in free verse and what she called "polyphonic prose." She became a leader of Imagism and was noted for her vivid and powerful personality and her scorn of conventional behavior. Her other works include *Six French Poets* (1915), *Tendencies in Modern American Poetry* (1917), and *John Keats*, 2 vol. (1925)." <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/349816/Amy-Lowell>

²³ Lowell, *Six French Poets*, 38

Locke concurs with these critics about Verhaeren's modernism. But Locke insists that it is not fascinated by the 'new' to be neatly divorced from the "dead past." Locke de-emphasizes Verhaeren's role as a founder of Symbolism in modern poetry, taking the substance of Verhaeren's poetry, instead of its formal, Symbolist attributes, as the source of its modernism. Locke argues that Verhaeren's is a "...modernity of substance... [of] getting the real world into the microcosm of art without shattering either one or the other..."²⁴ According to Locke, Verhaeren largely achieves this in his first book *Les Flammandes* [The Flemish]. Indeed, "...Verhaeren's modernism was wrested from the fin-de-siècle aestheticism of...decadence..."²⁵ which Locke associates with solipsistic formalism.

Lowell and other critics suggest that in his second book of poems, *Les Moines* [The Monks], Verhaeren *retreats* from modernism. But Locke sees yet another expression of it. Lowell dismisses *Les Moines*, calling it "...a sad book, a faded book. The monasteries are here, but bathed in the light of a pale sunset... There is nothing in *Les Moines* to detain us..."²⁶ Nevertheless, according to Locke and contra Lowell, Verhaeren's turn toward the cloister did not represent a "recantation of modernism" I will quote Locke extensively here:

A reaction from realism [*The Monks*] undoubtedly was, but it is to Verhaeren's credit that he never confounded modernity with a particular technique or a particular type of subject. *The Monks* is as modernistic as *Les Flammandes*. His familiarity and sympathy for what he is dealing with conceals the iconoclasm; his is a reverent vandalism. 'Dwellers, long before death in a

²⁴ Alain Locke, "Emile Verhaeren," in Stewart, Jeffrey ed., *The Critical Temper of Alain Locke: A Selection of His Essays on Art and Culture*, (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1983), 35 – 38, p. 35

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Lowell, *Six French Poets*, 16

mystic and extra human world' and 'You who alone still hold, upright, your dead God over the modern world' are written not in the mood of retreat, but of recall. Trailing humanity as ever, Verhaeren cathecizes it in the heart of the cloister, and chides it there for solving the problems of life in an artificial, selfish and futile way. Having disdained aestheticism, he rejects asceticism too. The place of poetry he says in the splendid apostrophe *Aux Moines* is in its own temple in the midst of life and not with

'Men of a dead and distant day,-- men
Broken but living still,--poets, too.
Who cannot bear with us the common lot.'

Reverently, Verhaeren shuts the door to the Middle Ages.²⁷

Les Moines represents something of a parting shot from 'realism,' against which Symbolism was proposed. Nevertheless, to Locke, the true mark of Verhaeren's modernism is that he refuses to only see it enacted through formalism. Further, for Locke, modern poetry need not only give voice to the transformative experience of modern, urban life. Locke argues that in *Les Moines*, Verhaeren refuses to abandon what seems to some critics to be 'old-fashioned' or non-modern content. Instead, Verhaeren occupies the modern moment as a moment of transition whose function is to condition how particular content be apprehended and expressed. Ultra-modernist formalism will not do for it confounds "technique" with spirit, itself according to Locke (and Georg Simmel) to be uncovered in objectification of 'life' in the modern world, as I argued in Chapter Three. And yet, Locke finds in Verhaeren's cloister, in this distinctly pre-modern symbol, in this anachronism, 'humanism,' what he sees as a definitively modern ethic. Note here the nicely rhymed parallel between excessive aestheticism and asceticism. The 'cloister' does not befit humanism, which by implication, ought to seek sources beyond the self. Verhaeren "cathecizes" humanism in the cloister, while, at the same time, "chiding" it there, suggesting that humanism is "preserved" in the

²⁷ Ibid. 35 - 36

cloister, at the same moment it is foresworn by its context, whose ascetic setting is too self-referential for the 'humanism' that Locke desires. Thus, Locke does not understand Verhaeren to redeem the past (as symbolized by the cloister), but to raze it. And yet Verhaeren's "vandalism" does not signify a complete rejection of the past and its particularity. "His is a reverent vandalism," implying that Verhaeren has at one and the same time a duty to respect the past, especially the humanity in it, while clearing space for a new, and as we will see, distinctly modern form of humanism.

Speculating that Verhaeren may have written *Les Moines* to "prove to the world that he could do things that were not violent,"²⁸ Lowell dismisses *Les Moines*. Verhaeren may have, as Lowell, writes, "[hurled] along upon [modernity] in a whirlwind of extraordinary poetry,"²⁹ but for Locke this is only one, and perhaps not the most compelling aspect of his modernism. 'Life,' and the 'humanism' it demands cannot properly be attended to ascetically (or, as we have seen, through aesthetic formalism).

That Locke illustrates this "moment" of suspension in Verhaeren's *oeuvre*, in which he pauses between eras to take stock, before closing the door on the past, is significant. But transition is more than its moment. "The trials and labors of this course [shutting the door to the Middle Ages], Verhaeren seems to have realized, in anticipation; then later in painful actuality. The temple of modern art was to be sought in an immense and towering chaos. And being the universe itself, the problem was not to find a place for it, but to find a place in it for the poet."³⁰ Accordingly, in *Les Moines* can be found just an inkling of the thorny work of the poet who straddles the border between

²⁸ Lowell, *Six French Poets*, 6

²⁹ *Ibid.* 44

³⁰ Locke, "Emile Verhaeren," 36

past and present. The modern poet, who has “shut the door to the past,” and by extension his own materials, must find his place amidst an all-consuming and “towering chaos,” while refusing the temptations of ultra-modernism and its dangerous subjectivism.

Locke treats Verhaeren’s next publications, *Les Soirs* (1887) and *Les Débâcles* (1888) as records of the “personal struggle” attending this aesthetic one. Verhaeren, unlike other modernists, grapples successfully with the “...doubting period in poetry, when poets were sure of nothing but their own inner experiences...,”³¹ ultimately avoiding subjectivism. I quote Locke at length here:

No depth or variety of this experience did Verhaeren leave unexplored.—
‘I, too, would have my crown of thorns
Each thought a thorn upon the brow.’
But while the symbolists reveled in their subjectivity, Verhaeren strove mightily against it as the besetting solipsism he must escape to reach a vitally modern art... [for] he found no satisfaction in a phantom or an exiled beauty of the inner world... Groping towards what is real and vital in the world at large, he says of himself, ‘I have been a coward and have fled the world of futile egoism.’ Out of a polar darkness of this experience, like Henley, Verhaeren saw a new vision, not Henley’s indomitable self however but the redeeming World.”³²

According to Locke, the symbol of this achievement—Verhaeren’s finding of himself in the “redeeming World”—is the “place of the City in [his] poetry.” Thus, against those critics who would see in Verhaeren’s city mere cacophony and chaos to be lifted to poetic language through onomatopoeia and

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

technique,³³ Locke insists that Verhaeren's city is neither an unadulterated source for modern form nor of the "indomitable self." The city provides Verhaeren the perspective with which to engage subjects both the present and past. The city

[symbolizes] modern life... it stands for an attitude and treatment of his subject which he carries throughout his art. The light source of his vision, it determines all the values of his art: we find it by the shadows it casts even when it is out of the picture, as in the depiction of what he not equivocally calls Illusory Villages and Ghostly Countrysides,—since they too must be keyed to his standard of art,—the real, the throbbingly actual,—which first revealed itself to him as an artistic criterion in the life of the Tentacular Cities. *It is obviously not the city as such,—indeed Verhaeren never quite escaped his old preoccupation with peasant folk and country life in all their Flemish provinciality,—but the city as a symbol, as a point of view, behind which we glimpse Verhaeren's real gods, Humanity and Force.*³⁴ [my emphasis]

According to Lowell, the city is the wellspring of Verhaeren's formal modernism. It is a place full of action and energy, steam and vibration, sounds Verhaeren records in a language that corresponds to it. For Locke, the city is not place but perspective: it represents an attitude that refuses self-absorption and provides a frame of reference from which to poetize 'life,' in its past and present forms. The city provides not sound as Lowell suggests, but shining light: so bright as to cloak the country's provincialism but stand the remainder—"the real, the throbbingly actual"—a standard for modern art and conversely the perspective that ordains Verhaeren's "preoccupation with peasant folk"—in sharp relief. The city, furthermore, reveals Verhaeren to

³³I should mention that to Lowell, Verhaeren was a master of such formal devices. She writes, "No matter how onomatopoeic he becomes, no matter how much he alliterates, or whatever other devices he makes use of, he never becomes claptrap." P. 39 Still, what is important to Lowell here is Verhaeren's poetic mastery and is quite different from the achievement Locke attributes to him.

³⁴Locke, "Emile Verhaeren," 36

Verhaeren as distanced from his subject matter, while nevertheless making possible the proximity to this material the poet would require to convert it to content for his work.

Locke finds the substance and source of Lowell's observation that Verhaeren "[hurled] along upon [modernity] in a whirlwind of extraordinary poetry." Locke characterizes Verhaeren's 'pilot' as 'Force,' as the 'infinite energy' of modern life. According to Locke, 'Force' is the real 'hero' of Verhaeren's poetry: "an infinite energy...carrying life with or without its will to destiny: the divinity of the world is its moving energy, and the divinity in man the cosmic enthusiasm of it all."³⁵ So extraordinary is this modern force that all things—"nature and man, city and country, emotion and fact" become "manifestations of it."³⁶ Thus, "realism in fact never attained a completer triumph than in these depictions, genre pictures in themselves but set in an epical series and moving with an epical force." Verhaeren's realism (contrasted against the ultra-modern poetic form) reveals itself in how he represents the modernity that actualizes 'genre pictures' by vitalizing them—making them 'visible' in new ways. Locke is quick to point out that if Verhaeren romanticizes anything in these poems, "he idealizes the force...but never the subject," suggesting that Verhaeren attends to the subject, the 'genre picture,' by vivifying their particularity instead reconfiguring them as 'symbols' or 'concepts.'

That Verhaeren pays attention to particularity by refusing the modern impulse to symbolize it (from a necessarily super-subjective position) constitutes, at least in part, the humanism of his poetry. "The humanism that is the counterpart of this world-view is indeed a rare emotion. Verhaeren only

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

at times achieves it. His style records a perilous quest for it."³⁷ We might note here the parallel in Locke's assessment between Verhaeren's personal struggle to avoid both ultra-modernism and Henleyan super-subjectivity and his life-long aesthetic endeavor to reveal the particularity of his subjects. Both are made possible in and by modernity. In each case, the 'self' is decentered, opening up the possibility of a distinctly modern temper, which understands the 'self' to be of the "redeeming World" along side other particulars.

To clarify, returning again to Verhaeren's rejection of 'ultra-modernism,' a poetic fad that so tempted, by Locke's account, other modernist poets. While other poets "reveled in their subjectivity," which itself is demanded by modernity's destruction of 'past' objects for poetic expression, Verhaeren refuses the temptations of high symbolism and sacrifices, at the same time, the appealing possibility of Henleyan super-subjectivity.

Out of the...darkness of this experience, like [W.E.] Henley,³⁸ Verhaeren saw a new vision, not Henley's indomitable self, however, but the redeeming world. Like Henley's though, Verhaeren's discovery was made in the heart of the metropolis, where the necessity of finding an excuse for life is if anywhere imperative. In life as it showed itself there, most crude and common, but most real, Verhaeren grasped a new objective, that was not merely the release he desired from subjectivism, but a new world for poetry to conquer.³⁹

Verhaeren's choice, though manifest in his poetry and taking place with modernity as a backdrop, is a result of a real personal struggle. Verhaeren rejects the comforts of the 'self,' electing instead to attend to the world, in its dynamic variety, in his poetry. When compared to other critics, particularly Lowell, Locke de-emphasizes Verhaeren's identity as a 'modern poet,'

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ William Ernest Henley was a well-known late Victorian period poet. "Invictus" is his best-known work.

³⁹ Ibid.

drawing the reader's attention instead to the objects of Verhaeren's attention: the Flemish, "Ghostly Country-Sides," "Illusory Villages," the extraordinary Force that characterizes and inhabits the modern moment. Verhaeren the poet, like the new 'Negro' poets with whom Locke concerns himself later, becomes a 'medium,' whose instrument—poetry—reveals the 'fact' of modernity, the effects of its Force and the Humanism it may inspire on 'life.' Still, that Verhaeren the poet struggles personally to articulate a 'self' oriented to the world reveals that for Locke, Verhaeren is not only a medium whose poetry reveals the 'fact' of modernity but also a person, like other persons, shaped by the dynamic flux of modern life. Though Locke does not directly quote Henley's well-known poem, *Invictus*, it does seem that when he compares Verhaeren's struggle to that of Henley, he has *Invictus* in mind. Verhaeren refuses to become the poet who retreats into self from the world:

"The world itself is most disdained of all,
And hands that hope to seize the light
Stretch toward the vague and unattainable."

Confronted with the same choice, Locke understands Henley to turn not to the temptations of ultra-modern form but instead to the comforts of the self.

"Invictus"

Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the Pit from pole to pole,
I think whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.
In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeoning of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.
Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the Horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds, and shall find, me unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.⁴⁰

Verhaeren, unlike Henley, seeks not to shore up his soul; to move “beyond this place of wrath and tears” and to achieve captainship over his identity. Rather, he reaches out into a “vague and unattainable world.”

In Locke’s view, Verhaeren *must* reject the guarantees of the ‘self’ to achieve “Humanism.” There is, if we extrapolate from Locke’s reading of Verhaeren, no self-identity to be sought *beyond* or outside of the world. “Humanity” and expressiveness must be achieved in it. That Locke arrives at his portrayal of Verhaeren’s poetic objective by comparing not just style but two accounts of self-identity in poetry is suggestive. Here, I want to suggest, we see the makings of what later became the “self-expressiveness” Locke attributes to New Negro artists, not self-identity shored up against the external forces of misrepresentation and misrecognition but the bringing to being of ‘self’ deeply embedded in the modern context.

Verhaeren articulates modernity and reveals that to Locke, artwork attends to ‘life,’ seeing it particularized in the realm of aesthetics, as I argued in Chapter Three. Verhaeren does not always achieve the humanist attention to ‘life’ in his poetry that Locke celebrates. “On this score,” Locke argues, “he is not to be judged by the style of his earlier or even of his middle period. In the one, he dehumanized man in a cold relentless portraiture...in the other, he over animated nature... and seems to have put into inanimate life all he took out of the human subject.”⁴¹ By associating humanism so strongly with Verhaeren’s stylistic choices, Locke indicates that it is an ethic that exceeds

⁴⁰ qtd. in Jerome Hamilton Buckley, *William Ernest Henley: A Study in the ‘Counter-Decadence’ of the Nineties*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1945), p. 65

⁴¹ Locke, “Emile Verhaeren,” 36

one's individual psychology by taking into consideration the particularity of the aesthetic subject. Locke fails to directly clarify—at least in “Emile Verhaeren—whether “humanism” in poetry affects “humanism” in the world of actual relations. This is apparent where Locke's refers to the relationship between form and content in Verhaeren's work.

Style for Verhaeren was...the corollary of his content and message. His periods of style follow his philosophy, and the form, determined as Zweig so aptly says by “inner necessity” is the genuine idiom of his thought. Whether traditional or free in metre, symbolist or realistic in his imagery, Verhaeren, unlike so many modern poets, is never exploiting a technique or form merely. His style is dictated by the idea.⁴²

On the one hand, the poet attends to his subject by letting its content offer up the most sensible form. On the other, Verhaeren has his own “philosophy,” and his “idea” dictates the appearance of the subject to the poet. It is nevertheless clear that to Locke, Verhaeren achieves excellence—“really vital modernism” by allowing his poetry to “incorporate a world view” instead of simply applying a “vision,” in the form of ‘form,’ to the subjects of his poetry.

Locke does not describe a fully “reciprocal” relationship between the poet and his subjects as, to borrow again from Edwards, “an originating appeal that is answered [but instead] the structure of mutual answerability,” between the poet and his subjects. Thus, there is no collaboration between the poet and his subjects in this account. And yet, I suggest that we can find here a proposal about the domain of relations among modern poets and their subjects. These relations are “reciprocal” because the successful modern poet turns to the subject for its own definition vis-à-vis form. I argued above that Locke associates ultra-modern form—solipsism and self-reference—with self-

⁴² Ibid. 37

identity and “humanism” with an outward-reaching self. I want to propose here preliminarily that we can see in this, one of Locke’s early works of literary criticism, the makings of a kind of aesthetic reciprocity or cosmopolitanism, in which the poet attends to a subject by articulating its particularity and complexity vis-à-vis his application of most referential and expressive form.

Still, in the final section of “Emile Verhaeren,” Locke extrapolates from Verhaeren’s aesthetic reciprocity some ‘real world’ objectives, that Verhaeren, through not fault of his own, is ultimately unable to achieve.

Practically, as it seems now, Verhaeren has been robbed by circumstance of his greatest triumph, the achievement of Europeanism. Coming into French literature, with an essentially Teutonic temperament, he mediated much of what was common to these two cultures, and to the time and the larger aspects of modern life. There is no hedging the fact that racial difference made possible his achievement... Ideally... there has been a fusion of notions,—the definition of Force and Change, essentially Teutonic, with the humanitarian and cosmic scope so typical of the Gallic conception. Verhaeren was one of the great Europeans, who did much to fuse alien cultures in terms of their common problems...

Locke applies here the precursor to his later understanding of culture as marking durable traditions (‘Teutonic’ Force and Change, Gallic Humanitarianism) and difference as one half of the modern social dialectic (differentiation/assimilation). Here, durable traditions inhere in difference that itself makes possible what for Locke is extraordinary about Verhaeren’s work: it “fuses” two different ‘traditions’ into a greater whole. But because of “circumstance,” Verhaeren is unable to see achieved the best potential ‘result’—Europeanism—of his poetic endeavors. If we take seriously the idea that Locke’s assessment reveals Verhaeren to be a cosmopolitan poet, because

of the 'structure of reciprocity' that defines his most successful work, we can see at least in this early work, Locke attempts to see substantiated in artwork the cosmopolitan imperative that all humans be assumed to belong to the same community. Here, Locke seems to suggest that 'circumstances,' including Verhaeren's reception by the public, hypostasizes difference and falls short of the fusion that Locke sought.

In any case, Locke took some critics to task because they "reversed Verhaeren's values, making the laureate of Belgium... greater than Verhaeren, apostle of Europeanism," an argument he echoes later when he chides critics of the Harlem Renaissance for focusing too much on the subjectivity of 'Negro' poets instead of the 'work' in the "general stream of culture," he saw their artwork performing. "[Properly] speaking, cosmopolitanism of culture goes with the cosmic scope of his philosophy. Because of its deep humanitarianism, [however] his nationalism is as big of his cosmopolitanism."⁴³ Here, Locke seems to argue that Verhaeren's cosmopolitan impulse is suggested, not by 'worldliness' but instead by Europeanism, thereby seeing some differences toppled—those nation and language—and insisting on others (Europeanism against the rest of the world). Verhaeren's humanism is just as much an element of his attention to the particular (an expression of a 'vibrant nationalism') as it is of the cosmopolitan impulse. Verhaeren's poetry reveals a decidedly humanist practice, opening his subject in its particularity up to a broader reception.

As I argued in Chapters Two and Three, Locke insists that the evolution of difference and the social forms it begets is an historical process: different ages reveal new articulations of older concepts and practices.

⁴³ Ibid.

Verhaeren's function, in this modern moment, was to see national particulars fused under the banner of Europeanism. Who could predict, based on this argument, what the future might bring? Thus, at this moment in 1917, critics and their publics ought to have recognized Verhaeren as a Europeanist because he fused two (national) particulars so that they no longer belong in toto to the national cultures that, by Locke's account, generated them.

III. "The Travail and Destiny of an Age:"

Locke remarks obtusely at the end of "Emile Verhaeren," that

[modernists] of all stripes could not foresee that the 'transvaluation of values' they were clamoring for was not the work of philosophy or art but the travail and destiny of an age. Perhaps Verhaeren's superlative claim is this representativeness he has gained by incorporating in his poetry the issues of the age; but if it should prove that through war men can attain a unity of which they could only dream in peace, then the prophet in Verhaeren will contest the poet's fame.⁴⁴

Verhaeren is worthy of celebration for a number of reasons. He "incorporated in his poetry" the social issues of the place (Belgium) and articulates the spirit of the modern age. Locke's objective in the essay is to articulate how Verhaeren, a *modern poet, ought* to be received. "[As] either, [Verhaeren of Tout la Flandre or Verhaeren, apostle of Europeanism], he would be, as he says of his countrymen in *Ceux de Liege*, 'secure beyond all praise... It is [nevertheless] to be pitied that in the last stage war broke the serenity of mood in which he could see and say that, 'life goes on its cyclic way, and though man suffers, Nature seems to be carving a new face for her eternity.'⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

Circumstance reduces the reception and 'modernist' meaning of Verhaeren's poetry, encouraging critics to ignore or at least underestimate what, in Locke's view, is the true work of Verhaeren, the modern poet: to express "the spirit of the age." Verhaeren, we learn from Locke's remembrance, is the 'true' modernist, among all others ("modernists of all stripes") because he is a medium of the transformative spirit of the age.

"Emile Verhaeren" is a precursor to Locke's later cultural criticism on behalf of the Harlem Renaissance and its "New Negro" artists. We can see here the hallmarks of Locke's criticism. Like most critics, Locke elucidates how an artist or work of art ought to be received. Locke situates Verhaeren in a particular moment—the modern. Verhaeren is a modern poet not because of the formal technique of his art but because he occupies the modern as a transitional and transformative period that produces new perspectives from which and through which to attend to the past as passing as in *Les Moines*, to his various subjects and finally to the modern experience itself as in the later collections. His particular brand of modernism is also 'humanist' because by refusing the temptations of super-subjectivity, Verhaeren is able instead to fully attend to his subjects in all their particularity. Verhaeren thereby participates in the 'work' of the age: 'the exaltation of *all* life' under modernity's 'transvaluing of all values.'

Locke sees the same modernism animating the work of New Negro poets in the early 20th century. To make that case, I turn here to *The New Negro: an Interpretation*, the 1925 anthology for which Locke is best known. I begin by comparing and contrasting "Emile Verhaeren" to "Negro Youth Speaks," an essay in the *The New Negro: an Interpretation*, in which Locke

“registers the transformation of the inner and outer life” of the New Negro by characterizing the “younger generation” and its artwork.

Like Verhaeren, the “younger generation” of ‘Negro’ artists also occupies a transitional period in artwork, in which black artwork is freed of the propagandistic impulse and allowed to emanate instead from black life. That they capture “folk life” from their subjects, as did Verhaeren from the monks or the Flemish, does not detract from their modernism. Of Verhaeren, Locke writes “[by] welding his figures to their background, like Rodin scarcely freeing them from the rock, he gains his essential purpose, which is to exhibit in an art free from conventional illusion and sentimental overemphasis, the underlying vitalism of the universe.”⁴⁶ Verhaeren ‘frees’ his folk subjects from ‘conventional illusion’—romanticized narration—and himself from ultra-modernistic solipsism, and thereby ably portrays “the real, the throbbingly actual.” New Negro poets ‘free’ their subjects from propagandistic treatment, exhortation and sentimentalism while freeing themselves from the duty to “be representative,” to speak on behalf of ‘Negro’ causes or portray ‘Negro’ life positively.

Racial expression as a conscious motive, it is true, is fading out of our latest art, but as surely the age of truer, finer group expression is coming in—for race expression does not need to be deliberate to be vital. Indeed, at best it never is. This was the case with our instinctive and quite matchless folk art, and begins to be the same again as we approach cultural maturity in a phase of art that promises now to be fully representative. The interval between has been an awkward age, where from the anxious desire an attempt to be representative much that was really unrepresentative has come; we have lately had

⁴⁶ Ibid.

an art that was stiltedly self-conscious and racially rhetorical rather than racially expressive.⁴⁷

Like Verhaeren, who occupies his own “awkward age”—“the doubting period in poetry,” New Negro artists are situated in a transitional period, up to which point the possibilities of their poetry have been limited. Verhaeren rejects (ultra) modernist form and Henleyan super-subjectivity for a modernist perspective as symbolized by the city, while New Negro artists abandon ‘false’ self-consciousness and ‘now’ living in and contextualized by the city, produce artwork that ‘exalts in Negro life.’ The mature art which is to follow the awkward age expresses a “quite matchless folk art” but only because just as Locke argues modern (“culturally mature”) art can, “folk art” discloses life as it is lived.

The younger generation has thus achieved an objective attitude toward life. Race for them is but an idiom of experience, a sort of added enriching adventure and discipline, giving subtler overtones to life, making it more beautiful and interesting, even if more poignantly so... ..[They] have shaken themselves free from the minstrel tradition and the following nets of dialect, and through acquiring ease and simplicity in serious expression, have carried the folk-gift to the altitudes of art.⁴⁸

The “younger generation’s” artwork is artwork precisely because it refuses to represent a people by simply rendering ‘dialect’ while at the same time refusing to simply entertain. Like Verhaeren, ‘Negro’ artists are of the modern moment, Verhaeren “reverently...closes the door to the Middle Ages.” New Negro poets, too, “reverently close the door” to the past recover from the past a ‘folk gift.’

Here for the enrichment of American and modern art, among our contemporaries, in a people who still have the ancient key, are some of the things we thought culture had forever lost. Art

⁴⁷ Locke, “Negro Youth Speaks.” 47

⁴⁸ Ibid.

cannot disdain the gift of a natural irony, of a transfiguring imagination, of rhapsodic Biblical speech, of dynamic musical swing, of cosmic emotion such as only the gifted pagans knew, of a return to nature, not by way of the forced and worn Romanticism, but through the closeness of an imagination that has never broken kinship with nature.⁴⁹

Locke associate 'Negro' life with the ancient past by expounding upon its primitivism, much it would seem like non-black artists and hangers-on who hoped to recover an ameliorative primitivism (a salve against the demands of the modern age) in the so-called "Negro Vogue." But Locke suggests more complex work for New Negro artists. This passage follows a brief description of Harlem Renaissance artists in all their variety.⁵⁰ Locke pithily elucidates how each artist (Miles Fisher, Langston Hughes, Roland Hayes and Countee Cullen) informed and inspired by the "emotional endowment" of 'Negro' life, weaves 'Negro life's' 'folk art' bequest with and within 'other' artistic forms ("the social novel," "lyric thought," "satire," "free verse," etc.), thereby producing a distinctly modern art. "Natural irony, transfiguring imagination..." are not essential characteristics of black people but of black life as expressed in 'folk art,' which itself is taken up by modern, black artists. Locke argues, nevertheless, that modern black artists approach and reveal it from a modern perspective. This is what I understand him to mean when in a later essay, "Beauty Instead of Ashes," published in April 18, 1928 issue of *The Nation*, he argues,

⁴⁹ Ibid. 14

⁵⁰ Locke writes, "[Jean] Toomer gives a folk-lilt and ecstasy to the prose of the American modernists. [Claude] McKay adds Aesop and irony to the social novel and a peasant clarity and naiveté to lyric thought, [Miles Mark] Fisher adds Uncle Remus to the art of Maupassant and O. Henry. [Langston] Hughes puts the Biblical fervor into free verse, [Roland] Hayes carries the gush and depth of folk-song to the old masters, [Countee] Cullen blends the simple with the sophisticated and puts the vineyards themselves into his crystal goblets. There is in all the marriage of a fresh emotional endowment with the finest niceties of art." Ibid

The modern recoil from the machine has deepened the appreciation of hitherto despised qualities in the Negro temperament, its hedonism, its nonchalance, its spontaneity; the reaction against oversophistication has opened our eyes to the values of the primitive...and finally the revolt against conventionality, against Puritanism...With this established reciprocity, there is every reason for the Negro artist to be more of a modernist than, on the average, than he yet is, but with each younger artistic generation the alignment with modernism becomes closer...The Negro schools have as yet no formulated aesthetic, but they will more and more profess, the new realism, the new paganism, and the new vitalism of contemporary art.⁵¹

Black artists, on this account, are already modern because they appropriate black life. Yet at the same time, black artists modern because they will articulate the “new realism, the new paganism, and the new vitalism of contemporary art.” They are modern precisely because they alienate art from black life and treat it (increasingly blithely) as though they have it to hand.

It would thus seem that unlike Verhaeren, who “reverently” closes the door to the past, that New Negro artists refuse to give it up. But this, it seems to me, is not entirely the case. Like Verhaeren attending to “the monks,” black artist do not attempt to recover traditions intact from a glorious past. Though they vitalize ‘Negro life’ and its ‘folk art,’ they do so, as I have argued, from a distinctly modern perspective.

The series of essays that frame ‘Negro’ artwork in *The New Negro: an Interpretation* characterize this modernism from a variety of perspectives. Locke’s stated purpose in *The New Negro* is “...to document the New Negro culturally and socially,-- to register the transformation of the inner and outer life of the Negro in America...” Yet, the transformation cannot be fully reckoned with in the sociological terms that have been Locke’s bailiwick up to

⁵¹ Alain Locke, “Beauty Instead of Ashes,” in *The Critical Temper of Alain Locke: A Selection of His Essays on Art and Culture*, ed. Jeffrey C. Stewart, Critical Studies on Black Life and Culture (New York and London: Garland Publishing Inc.), 23 - 24. 24

this point. Black artwork is animated by this transformation, which is so extraordinary that its effects are "...beyond the watch and guard of statistics... [so that] the three norms [the Sociologist, the Philanthropist, and the Race-leader] who have traditionally presided over the Negro problem have a changeling in their laps."⁵² Like the 'Negro' poet freed of the 'duty' to "be representative," one mark of black modernity is that the "New Negro" is freed from the "Old Negro myth" in which he was forced to participate as "...more of a formula than a human being—a something to be argued about, condemned or defended, to be 'kept down,' or 'in his place' or 'helped up,' to be worried with or worried over, harassed or patronized, a social bogey or a social burden..."⁵³ Arriving on the "...tide of Negro migration, northward and city-ward..."⁵⁴ the transformation whose full meaning evades sociological study, philanthropy and politics, is a "surge of feeling" that is expressed vis-à-vis artwork.

No less than *twenty-two* essays (including Locke's "Enter the New Negro," "Youth Speaks," "The Legacy of Ancestral Art," and "the Negro Spirituals"), divided under two headings *The Negro Renaissance* and *The New Negro in a New World*, frame the comparatively rather short sections of prose, poetry, and drama. The essays not only characterize the "New Negro" by differentiating him from his old "mythical" identity,⁵⁵ they explore his situation in a variety of settings,⁵⁶ while suggesting how these settings

⁵² Locke, "Enter the New Negro." 7

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid. 9

⁵⁵ "The New Negro" and "Negro Youth Speaks" in Alain Locke, ed., *The New Negro: an Interpretation* (New York: Albert and Charles Boni, 1925).

⁵⁶ James Weldon Johnson, "Harlem: The Culture Capital," in *The New Negro: an Interpretation*, ed. Alain Locke (New York: Albert and Charles Boni, 1925), 301 - 311., Kelly Miller, "Howard: The National Negro University," in *The New Negro: an Interpretation*, ed. Alain Locke (New York: Albert and Charles Boni, 1925), 312 - 322., Robert R Moton, "Hampton-Tuskegee:

condition his relationship to the 'Negro' past⁵⁷ and insisting upon his relationship to the "American Tradition."⁵⁸ It is not necessary to explore all of these essays in detail. I do wish to note, however, the multiplicity of voices and perspectives that Locke selected both to contextualize 'Negro' art as distinctly modern and the 'Negro' as peculiarly "new."

Two elements of black modernism stand out in "Enter the New Negro" as particularly important to Locke: first, as I mentioned in Chapter One, modern processes, such as industrialization and the Great Migration, bring differently situated black people (whose variety had previously been subsumed in the 'Old Negro' myth) together in the North's urban centers and thereby makes immediately tangible that these communities are not homogenous, but characterized by diversity and internal differentiation, conditioning a kind of 'intra-racial' reciprocity and not just of the international sort that Edwards sees "practice" in the international setting.

Here in Manhattan is not merely the largest Negro community in the world, but the first concentration in history of so many diverse elements of Negro life...Each... has come with its own separate motives and for its own special ends, but their greatest experience has been the finding of one another. Proscription and prejudice have thrown these dissimilar elements into a common area of contact and interaction. Within this area, race sympathy and unity have determined a further fusing of sentiment.⁵⁹

Missioners of the Mass," in *The New Negro: an Interpretation*, ed. Alain Locke (New York: Albert and Charles Boni, 1925), 323 - 333.

⁵⁷ Arthur Schomburg, "The Negro Digs Up His Past," in *The New Negro: an Interpretation*, ed. Alain Locke (New York: Albert and Charles Boni, 1925), 231 - 237., Locke, "The Art of the Ancestors."

⁵⁸ Melville Herskovitz, "The Negro's Americanism," in *The New Negro: an Interpretation*, ed. Alain Locke (New York: Albert and Charles Boni, 1925), 353 - 360., Charles S. Johnson, "The New Frontage on American Life," in *The New Negro: an Interpretation*, ed. Alain Locke (New York: Albert and Charles Boni, 1925), 278 - 300.

⁵⁹ Locke, "Enter the New Negro."

The city, just as it was for Verhaeren, is source of an aesthetic “point of view,” that of the city as a space of potential for the migrating masses. Harlem is a “common area of contact and interaction” that (should) facilitate a “fusing of sentiment.” The “fusing of sentiment” arises from differentiation a clear advantage of modern developments. As I suggested above, this modern constellation conditions in black artists a cosmopolitan attention to black life and ‘the folk tradition’ that mirrors Verhaeren’s relationship to the past.

There are interesting similarities between what Locke celebrates in Verhaeren’s poetry—its humanism, refusal of subjectivism, and “reverent vandalism of the past”—and his characterization of the work of “Negro” poetry—its vitalism, self-expressiveness, and attention to black life. The emerging expressiveness and sturdy vitalism that Locke sees in “Negro” poetry, lead Locke to reject a political function for artwork. In the next chapter, I compare Locke’s account of the ‘purpose’ of artwork to that of W.E.B. Du Bois. While Locke refuses to see artwork serve a propagandistic function, W.E.B. Du Bois insists that it should, claiming that all black artwork should serve a social function—that of directly confronting and disproving misrepresentations of black people in the public sphere.

WORKS CITED

- Edwards, Brent Hayes. 2003. *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism*. Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press.
- Herskovitz, Melville. 1925. "The Negro's Americanism." In *The New Negro: an Interpretation*, ed. Alain Locke. New York: Albert and Charles Boni, p. 353 - 360.
- Johnson, Charles S. 1925. "The New Frontage on American Life." In *The New Negro: an Interpretation*, ed. Alain Locke. New York: Albert and Charles Boni, p. 278 - 300.
- Johnson, James Weldon. 1925. "Harlem: The Culture Capital." In *The New Negro: an Interpretation*, ed. Alain Locke. New York: Albert and Charles Boni, p. 301 - 311.
- Locke, Alain, and Bernhard Stern, eds. 1946. *When Peoples Meet: A Study in Race and Culture Contacts*. New York: Hayden and Elderedge.
- Locke, Alain. "Beauty Instead of Ashes." In *The Critical Temper of Alain Locke: A Selection of His Essays on Art and Culture, Critical Studies on Black Life and Culture*, ed. Jeffrey C. Stewart. New York and London: Garland Publishing Inc., p. 23 - 24.
- Locke, Alain. 1925. "Negro Youth Speaks." In *The New Negro: an Interpretation*, New York: Albert and Charles Boni, p. 47 - 56.
- Locke, Alain. 1983. "Emile Verhaeren." In *The Critical Temper of Alain Locke: A Selection of His Essays on Art and Culture*, ed. Jeffrey C. Stewart. , p. 35 - 38.
- Locke, Alain. 1983. "Enter the New Negro." In *The Critical Temper of Alain Locke: A Selection of His Essays on Art and Culture, Critical Studies on Black Life*

and Culture, ed. Jeffrey C. Stewart. New York and London: Garland Publishing Inc., p. 7 - 12.

Lowell, Amy. 1967. *Six French Poets: Studies in Contemporary Literature*. New York: Garland Publishing Inc.

Miller, Kelly. 1925. "Howard: The National Negro University." In *The New Negro: an Interpretation*, ed. Alain Locke. New York: Albert and Charles Boni, p. 312 - 322.

Moton, Robert R. 1925. "Hampton-Tuskegee: Missioners of the Mass." In *The New Negro: an Interpretation*, ed. Alain Locke. New York: Albert and Charles Boni, p. 323 - 333.

Schomburg, Arthur. 1925. "The Negro Digs Up His Past." In *The New Negro: an Interpretation*, ed. Alain Locke. New York: Albert and Charles Boni, p. 231 - 237.

CHAPTER 5

“[WE] ARE NOT A RACE PROBLEM.”

*The creative genius possesses such original unity of the subjective and objective, which has first to be divided so that it can be resuscitated in synthetic form in the process of cultivation. This is why man's interest in culture does not lie on the same level with pure self-development of the subjective spirit or with pure dedication to a cause; instead cultural interests are attached to a cause, occasionally as something secondary, reflex-like, as an abstract generality which reach beyond the innermost and immediate value impulses of the soul.*¹

It has become something of a commonplace that articles about Alain Locke open with a reference to the better-known W.E.B. Du Bois. So it is with Ross Posnock's recent (and excellent) review of *Alain Locke: Biography of a Philosopher*.² Posnock situates Locke with reference to the central conundrum facing the black intellectual in the 20th century, which Du Bois so beautifully evokes in *The Souls of Black Folk*, as “the ‘strange experience’ of “how it feels to be a problem.” Drawing from the single work of fiction in *Souls*, “Of the Coming of John,” “...the most vivid and pained portrait of the ‘problem of being a black intellectual,” Posnock writes

...in a displaced, symbolic autobiography, Du Bois meets the challenge of representing a newly emergent social type who seemed to affront every way of making sense of black identity in Jim Crow America. Attending a provincial college, John Jones grows from rowdy frat boy to becoming intoxicated with ‘the world of thought.’ To represent, in 1903, a black man thinking pushed the perversity of intellection to an extreme. John's capacity for becoming lost in thought becomes the tale's motif: listening to *Lohengrin* at the Metropolitan Opera, he is lost in aesthetic bliss, and the final scene of Du Bois's story finds him humming Wagner's music, barely aware of the onrushing

¹ Simmel, “On the Concept and Tragedy of Culture.” p. 36

² Ross Posnock, “Black is Brilliant,” *The New Republic*, April 15, 2009, http://www.tnr.com/story_print.html?id=e9d5f5c3-16b0-4506-ac08-2911400f4ad4.

lynching party that descends upon him... Eerily indifferent to his imminent demise, John in his trancelike absorption becomes unintelligible, a status that registers the black intellectual's historical reality in that era: stranded in a no-man's-land, seeming neither to know his place or to have a place, hence synonymous with enigma.³

Du Bois, of course, was by no means so absorbed in 'culture' and the "world of thought" as to be reduced to inertia against the white racism that he skillfully depicts in "On the Coming of John." There is no need to rehearse Du Bois's extraordinary intellectual, cultural and political achievements here. Nevertheless, as Posnock points out, "[for] all his accomplishments, Du Bois always believed that white racism... 'has made me far less rounded as a human being than I should like to have been.'"⁴ In the *Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois symbolized the experience of restriction by and because of 'race' as a "veil," which limited the "spiritual strivings" of black folk, while necessarily spurring them to action. Du Bois was the first to capture the tragic dimensions of this "problem" but "...later writers' incarnations of the black intellectual, even when imbued with mordant wit and gallows humor, by and large remained garbed in tragedy for much of the century, as if born with a birthright of existential anguish."⁵

Against this intellectual backdrop, Locke is a singular figure. As Posnock reminds us, "[he] declined the cloak of tragedy: 'I am not a race problem. [He wrote upon his admission to Oxford University] I am Alain Leroy Locke.'" He therefore "led a life in the key of paradox" occupying seemingly contradictory roles, that of 'race man' and 'aesthete.' But Locke's refusal to be a problem was not merely a matter of his own extraordinary self-confidence. Locke's entire corpus—the political theorization of 'race,' the

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

careful examination of the effects of race on culture, the accompanying insistence that culture nevertheless consists in apparently durable features and traditions that can be disarticulated from ‘race thinking,’ the astonishing output of cultural criticism of ‘Negro’ artwork— asserts fearlessly not just that “I am not a problem” but also that “we are not a problem.” This is no stance to be taken up on one side of the ‘argument’ about the problem of race as it had countless times been articulated. In light of the extraordinary context in which he lived—he was born in 1885 as Reconstruction failed and died in 1954 before the Civil Rights Movement would gain its footing—the statement can best be understood as an *act*. I want to suggest that we can uncover throughout his *oeuvre* of philosophical, socio-theoretical and critical texts, the performance of this statement as fact in plural form—*we* are not a problem—if we conceive of it as a series of acts, which enact not just in speech but in cosmopolitan practice, “a political culture beyond the color line,” to quote Paul Gilroy. The extraordinariness of Locke’s life-long *refusal* to play his assigned part—‘tortured by exclusion’— in the great tragedy of ‘race,’ of his paradoxical inhabitation of a cosmopolitan culture that did not yet exist cannot be underestimated, for he enacted this culture at the same time that he theorized the political, intellectual, social, and cultural conditions that had made it ‘impossible’ in the first place. As I have argued, Locke reveals biological race and ‘race thinking’ as the corruptions of ‘life’ that they are, while insisting that ‘science’ and theory remain committed to attending to their effects: ‘race thinking’ not only reduced black people to ‘problems,’ it conditioned ‘group relations’ and if not defeated, would perennially prevent people from achieving “...better channels of group living.”⁶ In this chapter, to

⁶ Locke, *Race Contacts*, 85

further crystallize the meaning and impact of Locke's *refusal* to see 'Negro life' objectified only as the "problem of the 20th century," I examine what Leonard Harris has aptly named the "Great Debate" between W.E.B. Du Bois and Locke over the purposes of artwork. Drawing on Harris's *The Great Debate: W.E.B. Du Bois vs. Alain Locke on the Aesthetic*,⁷ I first briefly characterize their dispute. Harris contends that "whether literature can be the source of truth and beauty...meant considering simultaneously how it could perform the social role for creating respect for a people suffering from humiliation and self loathing,"⁸ I question how Harris characterizes the debate as primarily over "aesthetic sensibilities," which reduces the conflict between Du Bois and Locke to a dispute over the function and possibility of 'Beauty,' thereby failing to fully exemplify the cosmopolitan political theoretical potential of Locke's attention to artwork and culture. Drawing on Hannah Pitkin's *The Concept of Representation*, I suggest that if we consider how Locke and Du Bois treat representativeness / representation, a clearer picture of the differences over political culture comes into view. Second, drawing on "Criteria of Negro Art," "The Propaganda of History," and *Souls of Black Folk*, I first characterize Du Bois's approach to artwork and its relationship to politics, then treating artwork as representation, I lay out the dispute between Du Bois and Locke as a debate about the function of artwork. Third, I argue that although Du Bois and Locke do disagree over the *function* of artwork, Locke's theorization of artwork is too complex to be captured by the notion of 'function,' or for that matter, 'representation.' Drawing on several of Locke's essay about 'Negro'

⁷ Leonard Harris, "The Great Debate: W.E.B. Du Bois vs. Alain Locke on the Aesthetic," *Philosophia Africana* 7, no. 1 (March 2004): 15 - 39.

⁸ Ibid. 15

drama, "Max Reinhardt Reads the Negro's Dramatic Horoscope," "The Negro and the American Stage" and "The Drama of Negro Life."

I. The Great Debate

W.E.B. Du Bois and Alain Locke engaged in a particularly contentious debate over artwork, to which the "younger artists" of the period, like Zora Neale Hurston, responded by producing works of art designed to irritate them.⁹ Du Bois insisted, "...all art is propoganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists... I do not care a damn for art that is not propoganda,"¹⁰ while Locke argued, "[m]y chief objection to propoganda, apart from its besetting sin of monotony and disproportion is that it perpetuates the position of group inferiority even crying out against it... It is too extroverted for balance or poise or inner dignity and self-respect."¹¹

Locke's biographer, Leonard Harris, contends that Du Bois and Locke's disagreement is much more subtle than the above quotes suggest. He argues that they ultimately agreed *both* about the social and political usefulness of artwork *and* its specific purpose, that it inspire the recognition of black people as "as possessing, or capable of possessing, character and moral virtues..." Both recognize that as long as black people were nearly always portrayed in

⁹ Hurston's biographer Robert Hemenway wrote, "The manner in which these two stories ["Cordelia, the Crude," by Wallace Thurman and "Smoke, Lillies and Jade," by Bruce Nugent] came to be written was a part of the Bohemian impulse informing *Fire!!*'s proletarian esthetics. As Bruce Nugent tells the tale, after all submissions for the magazine were in and selections had been made, Thurman announced to the staff that they now had to find something that would get the issue banned in Boston—an idea Hurston endorsed. They began thinking of 'what two tings just will not take,' and Thurman decided they would write about a streetwalker and a homosexual; after flipping a coin to determine the assignment, the final two stories for the magazine were completed." *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography*, Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1977.

¹⁰ Du Bois, W.E.B., "Criteria of Negro Art," in Huggins, Nathan, ed., *Du Bois: Writings*, New York, NY: Library Classics of the United States, 1986, p. 1000.

¹¹ Locke, Alain, "Art or Propaganda," in Stewart, Jeffrey, ed., *The Critical Temper of Alain Locke: A Selection of His Essays on Art and Culture*, New York NY, Garland Publishing Inc., 1986, p. 27.

literature as inherently inferior, no individual black person, let alone the group, would likely receive honor.”¹²

While it is remarkable that both authors contend that artistic expression played an important role in the project of emancipation (years before the critical theory of Adorno and Marcuse claimed autonomous art as a last resort of freedom), I disagree with how the subsequent scholarship assesses the way in which the two authors engage art for politics. The emphasis is on similarity: both, it is said, draw a connection between beauty and recognition, i.e. that persons who are seen as beautiful are also assumed to possess good character and moral virtues. But that Locke and Du Bois might concur on this is unoriginal and unsurprising; it is simply an application of the well-worn topos of aesthetics as an outward representation of inner values. Emphasis on this superficial similarity actually conceals where the two part ways with reference to the relationship between the nature of the aesthetic and political objectives.

As Harris would have it, the “debate” between Du Bois and Locke is not so great. They agree, for example, that “an image of the black population as beautiful” is required if black people are to “receive honor.” Their primary conflict, on this reading, is over how “alternative images should be achieved.” The disagreement is thus primarily “aesthetic,” concerned with artistic methods and not with outcomes. “The conflict,” Harris writes, “between *The Crisis* and *Opportunity* magazines; Du Bois’s criticism of Locke’s literary anthology *The New Negro*; the differences between Du Bois and Locke’s attitude toward Claude McKay’s novel, *Home to Harlem*; and Locke’s noted “Art or Propaganda?” response to Du Bois’s view of propaganda, made the

¹² Harris, Leonard, “The Great Debate:” W.E.B. Du Bois vs. Alain Locke on the Aesthetic,” *Philosophia Africana*, Volume 7, Number 1, March 2004, p. 16.

conflict between their aesthetic sensibilities visible and explicit.”¹³ Insisting that both Du Bois and Locke treat we might call the “beautification” of black people as the function of artwork, Harris confines their conflict to aesthetic judgment. In fact, Harris argues “...Locke has within the corpus of his philosophy the resources to reject Du Bois’s criticism,¹⁴” thereby describing Locke’s objectives in Du Boisian terms. In effect, *both* Du Bois and Locke insist that art serve the practical ends of “racial upliftment” and “liberation.” *Both* see “racial upliftment” as a precondition for “liberation.” Harris nevertheless prefers Locke’s approach, seeing it as “more efficacious and beneficial in creating a role for literature capable of substantively contributing to the defeat of humiliation and self-loathing,”¹⁵ which apparently prefigures black autonomy.

Like Du Bois, Locke did expect New Negro artwork to have positive effects on how blacks viewed themselves; nevertheless, Harris minimizes their conflict over the function of art and exaggerates their differences over the nature of Truth. First, Harris argues that Du Bois is best understood to take a *realist* and not a *pragmatist* view of truth¹⁶ that is revealed in Du Bois’s stance on artwork, implying that Du Bois believed that “...there [were] objective and

¹³ Ibid. 16

¹⁴ “In short,” Harris writes further, “I suggest that Du Bois’s question—“what is the nature of the beautiful?” – is answered by Locke.” Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ “It was the ‘first steps toward sociology as the science of human action.’ That first step might be read as a step into a realist conception of truth, particularly the view that objectively real and discoverable objects exist. As one historian noted, ‘Du Bois’s career is a tremendously inspiring example of how the quest for effective truth has productive consequences and leads to social action.’ That search was, however, enlivened by a realist conception of truth, not a pragmatist conception. For James, ‘truth is one species of good and not, as is usually supposed, a category distinct from the good, and coordinate with it. The true is the nature of whatever proves itself to be good in the way of belief, and good, too, for definite, assignable reasons.’ James’s provisional conception of truth was held along with the view that science offered a reasoning method of use in the social sciences, but not because it would provide truth as realists understand truth: objective and discoverable facts about reality.” Ibid. 17

aesthetic facts,” that could be revealed in artwork. Thus, Harris contends, “[at] its best, art for Du Bois is based on objectively real essential properties—properties attached in a fairly direct way to beauty-making properties. There are social realities, for Du Bois, of which art, through beauty making properties and methods, is reality revealing. Arguably, a central, if not the most important truth for art to reveal is the humanity of the black.”¹⁷ There are objectively true ‘social realities’ just as there are objectively beautiful artworks. As propaganda, artwork reveals social truths and ‘objective’ qualities of beauty. I suggest that for Du Bois, propagandistic truth is truth *produced*. It ‘counters’ already existing accounts of the world and blacks’ role in it, implying that Du Bois was more pragmatic about truth than Harris suggests.

Having asserted Du Bois’s realism, in any case, Harris locates the ‘real’ source of the “great debate” between Du Bois and Locke. Essentially, according to Harris, Du Bois takes Locke to task for being unrealistic because he “has...been seized with the idea that Beauty rather than Propaganda should be the object of Negro literature and art...”¹⁸ The more defensible argument, I think, is that Du Bois criticizes Locke for not being pragmatic. In any case, Du Bois misunderstands (or at least mischaracterizes) Locke’s view of art by conflating “beauty” with “art” and dichotomizing it to propaganda. To Locke, ‘art’ does not serve a function as such, as much as it arises from a particular context—‘Negro’ life. As I argued in Chapter Three, Locke celebrates both Verhaeren’s poetry and New Negro artwork for attending to life in its particularity and capturing the spirit of the age. Harris concedes too much to Du Bois’s criticism here by ‘agreeing’ with Du Bois that Locke *ought*

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ qtd in Harris, Ibid. 19

to take a functionalist view of artwork and then interpreting *The New Negro*, as I describe below, as an instrumentalist (on behalf of “Beauty”) anthology with some “subversive” moments. According to Harris, Du Bois thought artwork was beautiful only if it were also propagandistic. On Harris’s account, the primary difference between Locke and Du Bois is that where Du Bois insists that beautiful artwork is propagandistic artwork, Locke argues that ‘Beauty’ could be revealed by all types of artwork, propagandistic or otherwise. Herein lies the second problem with Harris’s account: his treatment of Locke and Du Bois has at its core an essential ‘Negro’ about whom the ‘real’ social and aesthetic truth must be revealed. Thus, Harris insists that Locke and Du Bois simply perceive the beautiful (in the real, essential ‘Negro’) in different ways.

By my reading, Du Bois and Locke debate the function, and the attendant duties, of artwork as representation. Their conflict is not merely a matter of “aesthetic sensibility.” It is much more profound. Du Bois and Locke disagree, to draw from political theorist Hanna Pitkin, over “...the substance of the activity of representation.”¹⁹ In everyday uses of the term, ‘representation’ can signify a ‘standing in for’ or an authorization to act in someone’s name, like a legal representative or a political delegate; it also refers to the making-present of that which cannot be seen: the conjuring of an idea or a concept; an image or a mood. These everyday uses capture two accounts of political representation—the authorization view and ‘standing for’ representation—, which Pitkin explores in *The Concept of Representation*. The former refers to the formal arrangements by which a representative is

¹⁹ Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, *The Concept of Representation* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1967), p. 114

authorized to act²⁰ and the latter "...depends on the representative's characteristics, on what he *is* or is *like*, on being something rather than doing something."²¹ Standing for representation, Pitkin points out, "can be accomplished equally well with inanimate objects,"²² such as maps, flags, and works of art, and takes two different modes—descriptive, in which the representative makes present something absent by resemblance or reflection, or symbolic, "in which no resemblance or reflection is required... [and the connection between represented and representative] is of a different kind."²³ According to Pitkin while each mode of representation implies a relationship between the representative and the represented (the representative is either authorized by the represented or corresponds to it) neither the authorization nor the 'standing for' view of representation "...takes account for the substance of the activity of representation as acting for others." If as a concept, representation is articulated at the intersection of politics and aesthetics, thinking about artists *representing* images on a canvas, experiences, observations, scenes or stories in a poem or a novel suggests that we need something more: a way of thinking about representing as an action, and not as the "ownership of action" from which authorization is derived.

What is needed here is some kind of activity or way of acting that is the equivalent of the way in which pictures or maps or symbols correspond to or embody what they represent. Any number of writers tell us that there must be some connection or relationship or tie between a representative and those for whom he acts; the difficulty lies in specifying what that tie is, in trying

²⁰ "The basic features of the authorization view are these: a representative is someone who has been authorized to act. This means that he has been given a right to act which he did not have before, while the represented has become responsible for the consequences of that action as if he had done it himself." Ibid. 39

²¹ Ibid. 61

²² Ibid. 11

²³ Ibid.

to characterize it. It is spoken of... as a 'connection,' a 'contact,' a 'correspondence...' We are variously told that his actions, or his opinions, or both must correspond to or be in accord with the wishes, needs, or interests, of those for whom he acts, that he must put himself in their place, act as they would act.²⁴

By suggesting that Du Bois and Locke debated the function of artwork instead of simply having different 'tastes,' I mean that they disagreed over the substance of artwork as representation, over the constellation of "correspondences," "wishes," "needs," "actions," etc. which constitute it. Each thought of artwork (and artists) as representative (although not necessarily as *representatives*) but they debated the 'nature' of 'the represented' of which artwork was to be representative. In his criticism, Locke saw 'New Negro' art as distinctly modern, i.e. he thought of it as belonging with a larger universe of modern art, which in turn was characterized, as we have seen in the previous chapter, by its ability to capture (i.e. to represent) the fullness of modern life in all its empowering and debilitating, mobilizing and uprooting sensations. New Negro art hence was racial only insofar as the lives it represented were the lives of blacks. Du Bois, in contrast, wanted artwork to bring 'beauty' to bear on false representations of black people in artwork and 'truth' to mischaracterizations of blacks in historical accounts, i.e. he wanted it to represent 'race' and make its contribution to solving the 'race problem'.

I by no means want to imply that Locke did not have in view the 'race problem.' For Du Bois, "the problem of the 20th century" took shape in "white supremacist" propaganda and was, for black people, a matter of lived experience as a 'race problem' and the 'double consciousness' this experience produced. For Locke, the 'race problem' was displaced to the "mind of America" in which "...the Negro has been more of a formula than a human

²⁴ Ibid. 113

being—a something to be argued about, condemned or defended, to be ‘kept down,’ or ‘in his place’ or ‘helped up...’”²⁵ But as I argued at the outset, Locke refused to be seen as a “race problem.”

II. In Pursuit of Proselytes, In Pursuit of Art: Du Bois and Locke on the Function of Art

*Artistically it is the one fundamental question for us today. — Art or Propaganda. Which? Is this more the generation of the prophet or that of the poet; shall our intellectual and cultural leadership preach and exhort or sing? I believe we are at that interesting moment when the prophet becomes the poet and when prophecy becomes the expressive song, the chant of fulfillment... Art in the best sense is rooted in self expression and whether naïve or sophisticated is self-contained. In our spiritual growth, genius and talent must more and more choose the role of group expression, or even at the times the role of free individualistic expression, -- in a word, must choose art and put aside propaganda.*²⁶

For Du Bois, propaganda meant the propagation of truths to counter white supremacist treatments of black persons in history as well as artwork. This means that artwork should defend the “rights” of black persons. Artists ought to act in defense of black people. Locke more or less agreed with Du Bois about the definition of propaganda, but disliked it precisely because it “harangued, cajoled and threatened” – even if it did so on behalf of blacks or for a good purpose. That is to say, art as propaganda left the artist in the position of the politician—as a representative of blacks. According to Du Bois, art ought ultimately to serve the same objective that all activity on behalf of blacks should serve—that blacks become “Americans, full-fledged Americans, with all the rights of other American citizens.”²⁷

²⁵ Locke, “Enter the New Negro,” 8

²⁶ Locke, “Art or Propaganda,” 27

²⁷ Harris makes this point himself when he suggests that Du Bois sees racial uplift (an apparent product of Beauty) as a precondition for liberation.

Du Bois's best-known treatise on the subject of art, published as "The Criteria of Art," was first given at a speech honoring the black historian, Carter Woodson. Du Bois opens by acknowledging the unexpectedness of his subject. He imagines his audience wondering,

How is it that an organization like this, a group of radicals trying to bring new things into the world, a fighting organization which has come up out of the blood and dust of battle, struggling for the right of black men to be ordinary human beings—how is it that an organization of this kind can turn aside to talk about Art? After all, what have we who are slaves and black to do with Art? Or perhaps there are others who feel a certain relief and are saying, 'After all it is rather satisfactory after all this talk about rights and fighting to sit and dream of something which leaves a nice taste in the mouth.'²⁸

It is revealing that Du Bois feels that, speaking to activists, radicals even, he must apologize to bring up something as light, pleasant, and even frivolous as art at all. Note the antithetical series in the quote, where fighting, blood, dust, battle, struggle stand against dreaming and having a nice taste in the mouth. And the only reason Du Bois can give for talking about Art is that it is "part of the great fight." "...[So] long as you are climbing, the direction, --north, south, east and west—is of less important." Art is one of many channels for advancement. "...When gradually the vista widens and you begin to see the world at your feet and the far horizon, then it is time to know more precisely whither you are going and what you really want."²⁹ 'This' is the moment to assess direction; arriving at the proper criteria for Negro art is part of this reflection. At the same time, Du Bois widens the scope of the needed

²⁸ Ibid. 993

²⁹ Ibid.

reflection beyond the best practices to achieve the particular objective he has in mind—"...the right of black men to be ordinary human beings..."

What do we want? What is the thing we are after?... We want to be Americans, full-fledged Americans, with all the rights of other American citizens. But is that all? Do we want simply to be Americans? Once in a while through all of us there flashes some clairvoyance, some clear idea, of what America really is. WE who are dark can see America in a way that white Americans can not. And seeing our country thus, are we satisfied with its present goals and ideas?"³⁰

Du Bois does not respond to his rhetorical questions with answers. Instead, in a move to be found in so many of his texts, Du Bois tells an illustrative story, as if the full meaning of the questions could not be addressed in straightforward answers. He recalls a visit to the lake featured in a favorite poem of his, Walter Scott's "Lady of the Lake." "It was quiet. You could glimpse the deer wandering in unbroken waters...Around me fell the cadence of that poetry of my youth. I fell asleep full of the enchantment of the Scottish border. A new day broke and with it came a sudden rush of excursionists. They were mostly Americans and they were loud and strident... They tried to get everywhere all at once."³¹ The beauty of the place carries Du Bois beyond it, linking the Scottish lake to a forest of his childhood. He experiences this reverie as the rhythmic pattern of poetry. But this moment in art cannot last, for insistently the social world pushes back in—"Americans, loud and strident... [making] all sorts of incoherent noises and gestures so that the quiet home folk and visitors from other lands...gave way before them..." "They struck a note not evil but wrong. They carried, perhaps, a sense of strength and accomplishment, but their hearts had no conception of the beauty which

³⁰ Ibid. 993

³¹ Ibid. 994

pervaded this holy place.”³² In a few deft, metaphorical lines, Du Bois captures both the essential impact and the real challenge for art. It can and does arise effortlessly from “Beauty,” carries “Beauty” in it; art has its effects, carrying its devotee to other places, connecting those places in an unanticipated fashion (Scotland—home). Places it may connect, however fleetingly, but because art cannot invade “hearts [with for whatever reason] no conception of beauty,” it cannot so easily connect different people (the “loud and boisterous,” “visitors from other lands,” “the quiet home folk”).

Leaving this evocative anecdote behind, its full meaning barely grasped, Du Bois then takes yet another of his characteristic abrupt turns. The scene set, Du Bois asks “if you tonight suddenly should become full-fledged Americans,” he asks his audience, “if your color faded, or the color line here in Chicago was miraculously forgotten suppose, too, you became at the same time rich and powerful;-- what is it that you would want? What would you immediately seek? ...the most powerful of motor cars...the most elaborate estate on the North Shore? Would you become a Rotarian...of the very last degree? ...[Wear] the most striking clothes, give the richest dinners and buy the longest press notices?”³³ These questions, unlike the earlier ones, Du Bois is all too willing to answer. “Even as you visualize such ideals you know in your hearts that these things are not the things you really want.” This is because his black audience, “pushed aside as [they] have been in America,” has a “vision of what the world could be if it were really a beautiful world.” Du Bois lays out the components of the really beautiful world, “...if we had... not perfect happiness, but plenty of good hard work, the inevitable suffering that always comes with life; sacrifice and waiting, all that—but nevertheless,

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

lived in a world where men know, where men create, where they realize themselves and where they enjoy life. It is that sort of world we want to create for ourselves and for all America."³⁴ The world that evades 'our' grasp is imperfect, full of suffering, it is nevertheless a *beautiful* world. The beautiful world is a world within which "men create...and realize themselves."

Why then does Du Bois raise the questions that follow. "After all, who shall describe Beauty? What is it?,"³⁵ abruptly turning from the well-articulated account of the 'beautiful, wished-for world' he has already proffered. He offers examples of "Beauty:" "the Cathedral at Cologne," "a village of the Veys in West Africa," "the broken curves of the Venus of Milo, "a single phrase of music in the Southern South." But these, even the "single phrase of music" (he insists upon its singularity, "*utter melody*, haunting and appealing, suddenly arising out of night and eternity...), are cleanly demarcated objects, beautiful representations, that carry none of the animation, the created-ness, of the wished-for world he has already characterized. "Such is beauty," he continues. "Its variety is infinite, its possibility is endless. In normal life all may have it and have it yet again. The world is full of it; and yet today, the mass of human beings are choked away from it, and their lives distorted and made ugly." It is not (yet), Du Bois seems to imply, a 'normal world.' Yet by confining beauty to objects, to representations, Du Bois seems to foreclose the possibilities of artistry he opened up in his own characterization of the 'black imagination,' of what 'blacks' know, having been "pushed aside as [blacks] have been in America." On the other hand, like Locke, Du Bois recognizes "new stirrings" among "Negro Youth." "Who shall restore to men the glory of sunsets and the peace

³⁴ Ibid. 995

³⁵ Ibid.

of quiet sleep?"³⁶ Du Bois responds that "black folk...[who have within them] as a race new stirrings; stirrings of the beginning of a new appreciation of joy, of a new desire to create, of a new will to be..." may help restore "Beauty" to men.

The abrupt turns in the series of anecdotes and questions which open Du Bois's speech reveal his struggle: how can we take the measure of 'Negro' art in the 'new' circumstance: 'new' not just because of the "new stirrings in Negro Youth, [who] in some new way...bears this mighty prophecy on its breast," but also because "as the vista widens," "we" may take stock of our objectives and ask whether it is enough to pursue "our right... to be full-fledged Americans. Du Bois seems to ask, in this moment of change and quickened development, whether 'Negro' art can afford to turn altogether to representing "Beauty?" For Du Bois, the answer is clearly 'no.' "What has this Beauty to do with the world? What has Beauty to do with Truth and Goodness? 'Nothing,' the artists rush to answer. They may be right. I am but a humble disciple of art and cannot presume to say. I am one who tells the truth and exposes evil and seeks with Beauty and for Beauty to set the world right."³⁷ Artists, perhaps overly taken with what Locke would call the "Spirit of the age," all too hastily want to disentangle Beauty from Truth and Goodness, thereby robbing art of what Du Bois sees as its rightful purpose: "setting the world right." The 'new stirrings' ought to be set to good use, for they are accompanied by a "realization of [the] past, of which for long years we have been ashamed, for which we have apologized. We thought nothing

³⁶ Ibid. 995

³⁷ Ibid.

could come out of that past which we wanted to remember; which we wanted to hand down to our children.”³⁸

The black artist, however tempted by “Beauty,” ought to serve a function similar to that of the black historian since the black subject and his stories have been misrepresented by omission of “the kind of people you know and like and imagine.” Du Bois argues that artists have a “bounden duty” to reconstruct and re-tell “our own past.” They represent the past anew by telling of under-reported or mischaracterized experiences. It is in this sense that Du Bois held ‘Negro’ artwork should be propagandistic.

Significantly, as objects calling out for representation, Du Bois offers “stories” that would appeal to the journalist or historian as much as to the artist— a dark skinned girl not invited to her light skinned sister’s wedding commits suicide; a white woman blackmails a black lawyer by threatening to cry rape; the conquest of German East Africa (!).³⁹ “Such is the true and stirring stuff of which Romance is born,” writes Du Bois, “and from this stuff come the stirrings of men who are beginning to remember that this kind of material is theirs; and this vital life of their own kind is beckoning them on.”⁴⁰ The repeat here of the ‘stirring,’ which Du Bois identified in the hearts of

³⁸ Ibid. 996

³⁹ Du Bois writes, “Have you heard the story of the conquest of German East Africa? Listen to the untold tale: There were 40,000 black men and 4,000 white men who talked German. There were 20,000 black men and 12,000 white men who talked English. There were 10,000 black men and 400 white men who talked French. In African then where the Mountains of the Moon raised their white and snow-capped heads into the mouth of the tropic sun, where Nile and Congo rise and the Great Lakes swim, these men fought; they struggled on mountain, hill and valley, in river, lake and swamp, until in masses they sickened, crawled and died; until the 4,000 white Germans had become mostly bleached bones; until nearly all the 12,000 white Englishmen had returned to South Africa, and the 400 Frenchmen to Belgium and Heaven; all except a mere handful of the white men died; but thousands of black men from East, West, and South Africa, from Nigeria and the Valley of the Nile, and from the West Indies still struggled, fought and died. For four years they fought and won and lost German East Africa; and all you hear about it is that England and Belgium conquered German Africa for the allies.” “Criteria of Negro Art,” p. 997

⁴⁰ Ibid. 996

'Negro' in opening of the text, is telling. 'Past' and contemporary experiences heretofore unseen and unheard *stir* the reader because they are in themselves "romantic." Herein lies their 'Beauty.' Something 'new' may 'stir' the hearts of "Negro Youth," Du Bois seems to suggest, but only remembrance of "...this kind of material..." will 'stir them on to vital life.'

The material is appealing to Du Bois precisely because it reveals the real impact of white supremacy on particular black persons; in doing so, it counters white supremacy's false claims about black people. In that regard, it is propagandistic. In itself, tragic and triumphant, handled correctly "this kind of material" is an exhortation. It is the kind of writing that "cheers the weary traveler." We might say that artwork is purposively Beautiful. For Locke, as I argued in Chapter Two, the hortatory voice in artwork had had its day.

Propaganda was warranted because as Du Bois saw it, artwork should serve moral and didactic purposes.

Suppose the only Negro who survived some centuries hence was the Negro painted by white Americans in the novels and essays they have written. What would people in a hundred years say of black Americans? Now turn it around. Suppose you were to write a story and put in it the kind of people you know and like and imagine. You might get it published and you might not. And the "might not" is still far bigger than the might.... The white publishers catering to white folk would say, 'It is not interesting' to white folk, naturally not. They want Uncle Toms, Topsyies, good 'darkies' and clowns.⁴¹

Du Bois's reference to the future in this passage is analogous to that in a later essay on history. In that essay, Du Bois argues that histories, most particularly accounts of the Reconstruction period, have falsely represented the 'Negro's'

⁴¹ Ibid. 999

part in history. Du Bois opens this later essay, "The Propaganda of History," with a list of quotations from historical accounts of the Negro in the Reconstruction period. Just as in "white" artwork, the historical record presents a "typical Negro" who is almost always depicted as a failure; furthermore, important historical events have been entirely misrepresented so that

Grounded in such elementary and high school teaching, an American youth attending college today would learn from current textbooks of history that the Constitution recognized slavery; that the chance of getting rid of slavery by peaceful methods was ruined by the Abolitionists;... He would read that... Negroes were the only people to achieve emancipation with no effort on their part. That Reconstruction was a disgraceful attempt to subject white people to ignorant "Negro rule..."⁴²

Not only has the 'Negro' been represented one-sidedly so that "whenever a black head rises to historic view, it is promptly slain by an adjective—'shrewd,' 'notorious,' 'cunning,'"⁴³ but the broader context—Reconstruction—has also been misunderstood. These representations of the 'Reconstruction' and the 'Negro's' part in it are "openly and blatantly propaganda."⁴⁴

Such white supremacist propaganda *must* be countered, with truthful reports and not just because, as Harris seems to imply, black autonomy must be preceded by 'racial uplift.'

It is propaganda like this that has led men in the past to insist that history is "lies agreed" upon; and to point out the danger of such misinformation. It is indeed extremely doubtful if any permanent benefit comes to the world through such action.

⁴² W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Propaganda of History," in *Du Bois: Writings*, ed. Nathan Huggins (New York: The Library of America, 1996), 1026 - 1047, p. 1028

⁴³ *Ibid.* 1038

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

Nations reel and stagger on their way; they make hideous mistakes; they commit frightful wrongs; they do great and beautiful things. And shall we not best guide humanity by telling the truth about all this, so far as the truth is ascertainable.⁴⁵

There is, as Harris argues, an “objectively real truth” in history that must be reported. The truth that Du Bois calls for, nevertheless, counters the false “propaganda of history,” attending to truth be [by?] reconstruction. Such reconstruction is called for since “history” ought to serve as a guidepost for contemporary and future political and social behavior. Most available treatments of the Reconstruction are inaccurate, and thus cannot serve its broader purpose to present “human experience for the guidance of mankind.” History is thus analogous to artwork in a double sense: it must be truthful since, just as art ought not exist for the sake of art, history is not an end in itself. Where in addition to representing the Negro and his experiences, artwork also “stirs... the Negro to vital life” and creates Beauty in the world, history ought to “establish the Truth, on which Right in the future may be built” since it serves as a moral guide. “If history is going to be scientific, if the record of human action is going to be set down with that accuracy and faithfulness of detail which will allow its use as a measuring rod and guidepost for the future of nations, there must be set some standards of ethics in research and interpretation.”⁴⁶

We can see here that the “substance of the activity of representation as artwork” is quite similar to that as history. Artists, like historians, must counter white supremacist propaganda by bringing the experiences of black Americans to light. As artwork, experience must be “romanticized” so that it

⁴⁵ Ibid. 1030

⁴⁶ Ibid. 1029

“stirs to life” “a new desire to create... a new will to be; as though in this morning of group life we had awakened from some sleep that at once dimly mourns the past and dreams a splendid future...”⁴⁷ Du Bois’ critical concern during this period may best be considered a defense of “Truth,” not only as revealing of “objective reality” as Harris insists, but rather reports that defend against contrary and false depictions of blacks in history and the contemporary context. Art that meets its burden as propaganda is thus worthwhile Art, Art that is not reduced to ineffectual, although perhaps “beautiful,” decadence. What is represented by ‘Negro’ artwork is more or less the same as that which is represented by history: the black experience (more often as not of white supremacy). For Du Bois, the context for representation which requires that artwork act something like history is twofold: First, mischaracterizations of black experiences constitute an hegemonic discourse about blacks in history and in the world. Second, the “new stirrings” in ‘Negro youth’ present and imply an opportunity that these mischaracterizations can be righted in historical reports and art.

Still, there are moments in Du Bois’s essays that reveal the myriad and lovely forms that socio-politically effective art can take. Du Bois himself takes advantage of the possibilities of beauty captured in art, as the short anecdote about the Scottish lake, “Of the Coming of John” and the Postscript of *Darkwater* attest. Nevertheless, although he is adamant about the propagandistic form that artwork should take, Du Bois struggles not to have ‘fact’ overtaken by art.

Between sterner flights of logic, I have sought to set some little alightings of what may be poetry. They are tributes to Beauty,

⁴⁷ Du Bois, “Criteria of Negro Art,” 995

unworthy to stand alone, yet perversely, in my mind, now at the end, I know not whether I mean the Thought for the Fancy—or the Fancy for the Thought, or why the book trails off to playing, rather than standing strong on unanswering fact. But this is always—is it not?— the Riddle of Life.⁴⁸

Whence arrive these “little alightings of poetry?” Are they, should they be, ornaments, mere “playing,” compared to the “strong unanswering fact?” Or are there objectives, like the “beautiful world,” which exceed the socio-political body of thought, and necessitate a poetic imagination? Du Bois, although insisting on the social and political function of art, never fully comes to terms with the potential effects and dangerous attractions of ‘pure’ Beauty lifted to the “high plane of pure Art.”

To Locke things look very different. For his confidence in art in the modern context is so great that he refuses to see it confined to a propagandistic function. Although Locke’s chief’s objection to “...propaganda is its besetting sin of monotony and disproportion,” the real problem was that propaganda “...perpetuates the problem of group inferiority even in crying out against it. For it leaves and speaks under the shadow of a dominant majority whom it harangues, cajoles, threatens or supplicates.”⁴⁹ True art, in contrast, is “rooted in self-expression and whether naïve or sophisticated is self-contained.” Locke finds propaganda aesthetically displeasing (monotonous and disproportionate). But the real problem, the basis for Locke’s rejection, is that, whatever its intentions to the contrary, it maintains the “inferior” status of the group. As Harris interprets this passage, Locke objects to propaganda for “[failing] to accomplish its object—to change everyone’s beliefs in a predictable, definitive, and measurable way—because it

⁴⁸ W.E.B. Du Bois, *Darkwater: Voices from behind The Veil*, ed. Joe Feagin (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2003), p. 29

⁴⁹ Locke, “Art or Propaganda,” 27

cannot reframe the debate. It must accept the terms of the debate.”⁵⁰ Harris goes on to argue that “anti-racist propaganda is not morally odious, as [he] reads Locke, though it unintentionally maintains a relation that is emotively stilted within the same dynamic of action and reaction, hoping for change.” This is accurate so far as it goes. The chief thrust of Locke’s objection, however, is not that propaganda fails to do what it intends, but rather that it is fundamentally different from art. When art is asked to perform the propagandistic function, the real potential of art remains unmet. We can see this in how Locke frames the essay: “Artistically it is the one fundamental question for us today. Art—or Propaganda.” This is not merely a matter of aesthetic sensibility or choice. It is a matter of how art reflects the ‘spirit of the age.’ “Is this more the generation of the prophet or that of the poet; shall our intellectual and cultural leadership preach and exhort or sing? I believe we are at that interesting moment when the prophet becomes the poet and when prophecy becomes the expressive song, the chant of fulfillment.”⁵¹ This quote reveals the trace of the earlier assessment (1926) of ‘Negro poetry,’ that Locke provided in “The Negro Poets of the United States,” and I examined in Chapter Two. In this ‘moment,’ “prophets become poets,” not by choice but because they occupy a transitional period in which ‘Negro life’ is *freed* from artistic representation on behalf of causes (even anti-racist ones), leaving ‘Negro life’ to be ‘expressed’ in artwork. (Propaganda, on the other hand, “*leaves* and speaks under the shadow of the dominant majority...”) We can see Locke’s expression of ‘belief’ in response to the framing question as a confident expression of the modern moment’s potential. That Locke opens, however, with questions is also significant. In contrast to Du Bois, who begins

⁵⁰ Harris, “Great Debate,” 25

⁵¹ Locke, “Art or Propaganda,” 27

“Criteria of Art” by acknowledging that the subject of art is likely to be (and perhaps *should* be) seen as somewhat illegitimate. Locke assumes the essentiality of art. By asking “is this more the generation of the prophet or the poet,” Locke acknowledges the difficulty of transitioning from “prophecy” to “poetry” as a matter of art, and I want to suggest, enacts a (potential) new “we,” one where art and (political) imagination would be freed of the “dominant majority” and, I would add, ‘race thinking.’

Confident in the force of art as art, Locke nevertheless argues that art be chosen over propaganda. “In our spiritual growth genius and talent must more and more choose the role of group expression, or even at times the role of free individualistic expression,—in a word must choose art and put aside propaganda.”⁵² Art is, on the one hand, always and already reflective of the ‘self-expressive’ spirit of the age. On the other, the “substance and activity [of art] as representation” is more than seeing ‘Negro life’ freed from propaganda; more than mixing folk art forms with modern ones; more than seeing ‘Negro life’ lifted to the plane of pure art. It consists of *choosing* to free art from function, and in doing so, choosing to free the ‘Negro self’ from supplication before the ‘race problem.’ Locke does not merely make this case for ‘Negro’ freedom from the ‘race problem,’ he draws on multiple linguistic modes to enact the complexity of the modern moment as ‘Negro’ selves address the ‘race problem.’ He interweaves these different modes: description (“the literature and art of the younger generation already reflects this shift of psychology”); recommendation (“David should be its patron saint: it should confront the Phillistines [sic] with its five smooth pebbles fearlessly”); indication (“There is more strength in a confident camp than in a threatened

⁵² Ibid.

enemy”) and obligation (“The sense of inferiority must be innerly compensated, self-conviction must supplant self-justification...”).⁵³ “Art,” he acknowledges finally “cannot completely accomplish this, but I believe it can lead the way.”

Locke then addresses Du Bois indirectly, taking him to task for mischaracterizing his expectations of art as “decadence.”

Our espousal of art thus becomes no mere idle acceptance of “art for art’s sake,” of cultivation of the last decadences of the over-civilized but rather a deep realization of the fundamental purpose of art and its function as a tap root of vigorous, flourishing living.⁵⁴

The redundant phrase “mere idle acceptance” is revealing. It captures the magnitude of Locke’s disagreement with Du Bois about the function of art. Du Bois, this redundancy suggests, is absolutely wrong to demand that art perform a function—propaganda—to which it is not suited. Art, at its best, is ‘self-expressive,’ reflecting a ‘self-representative’ people. Further, it works to grow (taproot) “vigorous, flourishing living,” beyond the limits to living that ‘race thinking’ sets.

Locke acknowledges the importance of the objectives that propaganda served. “Propaganda at least nurtured some form of serious social discussion, and social discussion was necessary, is still necessary.” But it nevertheless requires a substitute since even when propaganda takes its shape in “social

⁵³ The full paragraph reads “The literature and art of the younger generation already reflects this shift of psychology, this regeneration of spirit. David should be its patron saint: it should confront the Phillistines [sic] with its five smooth pebbles fearlessly. There is more strength in a confident camp than in a threatened enemy. The sense of inferiority must be innerly compensated, self-conviction must supplant self-justification and in the dignity of this attitude a convinced minority must confront a condescending majority. Art cannot completely accomplish this, but I believe it must lead the way.” Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

discussion," it is still problematic: it is partisan, too "one-sided and often pre-judging." Here is revealed again Locke's distaste for propaganda of every sort: in artwork it is aesthetically displeasing and confines the propagandist and his very life materials to service on behalf of a cause; as a form of discussion, it is also found wanting for circumscribing the means for and possibility of communication.

In closing the essay, Locke defends the relationship between "Beauty" and "Truth," which caused Du Bois such struggle. "After Beauty," Locke writes, "let Truth come in to the Renaissance picture, -- a later cue, but a welcome one. This may be premature, but one hopes not,-- for eventually it must come and if we can accomplish that, instead of having to hang our prophets, we can silence them or change their lamentations to song with a Great Fulfillment."⁵⁵ Locke seems to say: Let us avoid in artwork the quest for truth. For truth, we have the sciences, for propaganda, politics: art trades in a different currency. Let our artists instead tap and release "vigorous, flourishing living," for such is the spirit of the age. That spirit is what New Negro poets ought to be led to express - like Emile Verhaeren had done before them, and like their fellow modern artists did, no matter whether they were black or white, and whether they were in Paris or Berlin, Vienna, Amsterdam, or Harlem.

III. Representation or Expressiveness: The Drama of Negro Life

It is more important to know how to cry, sob and laugh, stare and startle than to learn how to smile, grimace, arch and wink. And more important to know how to

⁵⁵ Ibid.

*move vigorously and with rhythmic sweep than to
pirouette and posture.*⁵⁶

Locke's insistence that 'Negro' art reflect the modern *Zeitgeist* is revealed in the peculiar dichotomy he uses so often to capture the modernist spirit: the transition, most particularly in poetry, from "rhetoric" to "expression" and to the "acceptance of race in art." When characterizing the best of 'Negro' art, Locke refers often to its "expressiveness" or its "representativeness," differentiating its dynamic, vivid qualities from that of propagandistic or 'persuasive' art forms. "Racial expression as a conscious motive, it is true, is fading out of our latest art, but just as surely the age of truer, finer group expression is coming in..."⁵⁷ Three years later, writing in *The Nation*, Locke turns from characterizing new artistic expressions to ask what might be made of "group expression."

Are we ever to have more than the simple first products and ground flow of this well-spring, and the fitful spurt of its released natural energies, or is the well-head to be drummed over and its resources conserved and refined to give us a sustained output of more mature products and by-products?⁵⁸

Locke hopes, it would seem, to see the modern outburst tamed, its capriciousness domesticated so that "more mature by-products" may be produced, suggesting that he is perhaps more concerned about quality of 'Negro' artwork, and Harris might add, how effectively (and positively) it represents 'Negro' character. But Locke, turning fully to the indicative voice in this essay, sees an *artistic* cause—his own aesthetic convictions—advanced in

⁵⁶ Alain Locke, "The Negro and The American Stage," in *The Critical Temper of Alain Locke: A Selection of His Essays on Art and Culture*, ed. Jeffrey C. Stewart, Critical Studies on Black Life and Culture (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1983), 79 - 86., p. 79

⁵⁷ Locke, "Negro Youth Speaks." 47

⁵⁸ Locke, "Beauty Instead of Ashes." 23

the new "school" of 'Negro' artwork. "To produce these second-process products is the particular *raison d'être* of a school of Negro poets and artists, and what most of our younger school really mean by an 'acceptance of race in art' is the consciousness of this as an artistic task and program."⁵⁹ Thus, 'group expression' serves less the psychological program "to innerly compensate inferiority' than an aesthetic one: "artistic revival." In "Beauty Instead of Ashes," the "art movement" merely coincides with "new stirrings in the 'Negro mind and the dawning of new social objectives." "...most Negro artists would repudiate their own art program if it were presented as a reformer's duty or a prophet's mission, and to the extent that they were true artists be quite justified. But there is an ethics of beauty itself; the urgency of the right creative moment."⁶⁰ Freed of the duty to reform and prophecy, 'Negro' artists are swept in to the "urgency of the right creative moment." Locke is quite careful not to insist that 'Negro' artists are *obligated* to beautiful representations. Rather, he characterizes how, given the transformations of the period, 'Negro' artists "accept race in art." "Race materials come to the Negro artist today as much through his being the child of his age as through his being the child of his race; it is primarily because Negro life is creatively flowing in American art at present that it is the business of the Negro artist to capitalize it in his work."⁶¹ The spirit of the age transforms the relationship between 'Negro' artists and his 'natural' materials, tendering a new relationship between the artist and his subject. That 'Negro' life is now accessible and realizable in "American" art conditions the "business" of the 'Negro' artist. The choice of "business" and not duty or obligation is telling

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

here. The reason that 'Negro' artists draw from 'Negro' materials is that 'Negro life' "[flows] into American art." The effects of this transformation do not demand that 'Negro' artists represent 'Negro' life. 'Negro' artists, like non-Negro artists, may avail themselves of new aesthetic developments. "The proof of this," Locke writes, "is the marked and unusually successful interest of the white writer and artist in Negro themes and materials, not to mention the vogue of Negro music and the conquest of the popular mind through the dance and the vaudeville stage."⁶² This notwithstanding, the 'Negro' artist retains privileged access to 'Negro' life material, which is why "[from] the Negro himself naturally we expect...the most complete and sustained effort and activity."⁶³ But Locke is "...glad that Negro life is an artistic province free to everyone." All artists with an eye for the "beauty" of Negro life may represent it.

After characterizing the context for art's capitalization on the new appeal of 'Negro' life and folk art in American art and emphasizing once more the transformative character of the age, Locke describes some interesting differences between the ways in which 'Negro' and white artists approach the representation of 'Negro life,' which further complicate the path, as Locke lays it, from representing the interests of 'the race' in light of the race problem to 'self-representativeness.' "White artists have taken, it might be expected, the descriptive approach and have opened up first the channels of drama and fiction. Negro artists, not merely because of their more intimate emotional touch but also because of temporary incapacity for the objective approach to requisite for successful drama and fiction have been more effective in

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

expressing Negro life in the more subjective terms of poetry and music.”⁶⁴ ‘Negro’ and white artists approach their subject both from different perspectives and via different forms. This argument is based in part on Locke’s judgment of the quality of ‘Negro’ artwork in the period. For Locke, (‘Negro’) artists produce the most *expressive*, and therefore the best ‘Negro’ art in the poetic form, either in poetry or music. In fiction and drama, however, the ‘Negro’-artist-in-transition faces the greatest challenge to seeing ‘Negro’ life fully “objectified” in the realm of art. How can the more descriptive arts—fiction and drama—see ‘Negro’ life expressed and poetized?

Locke thus dichotomizes poetry, on the one hand, and fiction, on the other, i.e. between the more expressive and the more descriptive arts. Poetry (along with other expressive arts, like music and painting) presents the ‘Negro’ artist with the smallest challenge. ‘Negro’ poetry fails only when it is forced to be persuasive and not expressive, or truly poetic. Drama, however, is a double-edged sword: drama writing belongs, like the writing of fiction, with the descriptive arts, while dramatic performance, its actual acting-out on stage, belongs, like poetry and music, with the expressive forms. Locke seems in danger here of “holding that black people were primarily bodies,”⁶⁵ as ‘race’ science and creed had done before, by arguing that ‘Negro’ artists are more comfortable with or better suited to the expressive than the descriptive arts. Yet Locke is careful to differentiate the ‘Negro’ actor from the substance of performing, while all the while attending to particular dangers attendant to the form—vaudeville—to which ‘Negro’ acting had heretofore been confined.

Just as the ‘Negro’ poet has, in the past, been limited by the demands of persuasion and propaganda, the ‘Negro’ actor has been confined by the

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Posnock, “Black is Brilliant”

demands of “the popular amusement stage.” But now is the time for ‘Negro’ actors to free themselves from mere entertainment and move to serious drama instead. Here, in the performance (as opposed to the writing) of serious drama (as opposed to vaudeville) is where ‘Negro’ artists can most the revitalize the theater; here, in dramatic acting, is where they can best contribute to returning the stage, which had gone stale, to expressiveness; here, the formula that Locke had used to describe the difference between old and new ‘Negro’ art in general comes to itself: the movement from ‘posing’ to ‘poise.’

In this we can see that Locke’s studied attention to expressiveness, whether enacted in poetry, by the ‘Negro’ actor, or in ‘Negro life,’ marks not just a radical departure from Du Bois’s insistence on a function (propaganda) for art, but also from the restrictive demands of representation itself—whether imposed by political necessity or artistic mandate. With reference to the “American stage,” this radical refusal of representation takes shape as an *embodied* and vigorous emotiveness and experimentality, which demands and affects a revitalized ‘stage’ for its appearance. By analogizing ‘Negro’ poetry and ‘Negro’ acting, Locke finally illuminates expressiveness, an affect that he leaves undefined when writing about ‘Negro’ poetry, except when insisting what it is definitively *not*: persuasion or propaganda. Where Du Bois seeks to see artwork propagandize on behalf of the ‘Negro’ cause by representing the ‘Negro’ experience and demanding further that it convey the ‘Negro’s’ part in history truthfully and effectively, Locke endeavors to see artwork simply express: to reveal “vigorous, flourishing living.” What would it mean for artwork to express “vigorous, flourishing, living? The subtle difference in emphasis between Locke’s criticism of ‘Negro’ poetry and ‘Negro’ drama and

his suggestion that something as complex, various, transitory and mutable as 'life' be expressed embodies Locke's struggle to push 'Negro' artwork beyond the function of representation (toward propagandistic means). Locke on the other hand attempts to see artwork (and artists) freed of representational demands. Importantly, those demands are, for the artist of 'Negro' life, particular; they are 'raced:' mandated by the signifying authority of 'race thinking' and 'race practice.'

Locke's imagines 'Negro' artwork transcending the bounds of 'racial' representation. By doing so, he attempts to see the black imagination freed of race thinking and 'group relations' reconfigured, thereby conditioning a new political imaginary. But dangers abound and Locke's attempt is therefore marked by anxiety and struggle. Locke grapples with the still present (although he hopes waning) demands of racial representation, while attempting to see the transformative potential of modernity and its art through. This is particularly apparent in the 1924 essay, "Max Rheinhardt [sic] Reads The Negro's Dramatic Horoscope,"⁶⁶ in which Locke recounts his and black publisher Charles Johnson's visit with Max Reinhardt⁶⁷ and again in "The Negro and the American Stage,"⁶⁸ His excitement at meeting Reinhardt is palpable. "Perhaps no one could have a more pronounced 'sixth sense' with respect to drama or a more dependable knack of finding new veins of dramatic possibilities. When, therefore, we learned that Director Rheinhardt [sic] had expressed keen interest in the work of the Negro actors whom he had

⁶⁶ Alain Locke, "Max Rheinhardt Reads the Negro's Dramatic Horoscope," in *The Critical Temper of Alain Locke: A Selection of His Essays on Art and Culture*, Critical Studies on Black Life and Culture (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1983), 77 - 78.

⁶⁷ Austrian stage director of Jewish descent, who provided stage direction at the *Deutsches Theater* in Berlin and *the Theater in der Josefstadt* in Vienna, who was well known for introducing experimental stage techniques. After the Nazis annexed Austria, Rheinhardt immigrated to the U.S., where he later became a Hollywood film director.

⁶⁸ Locke, "The Negro and The American Stage."

seen in his visit to New York...we were naturally most anxious to have a first hand opinion. Max Reinhardt must be interviewed."⁶⁹ Several meetings were missed, "at Salzburg; and again, by the accidents of travel, at Vienna... [and in New York because] ...there wasn't sufficient time to talk over so important a subject adequately." At last, Locke and Johnson had an audience "with this rather busy and inaccessible man" and found themselves "...in a predicament of the fishermen who catches other fish than he was fishing for." First, Reinhardt "interviewed them." ("But that is not our story.") Finally, Reinhardt offers his 'impressions' of 'Negro' theatre, sounding very much like Locke celebrating Negro artwork. "Yes, I am very interested [in 'Negro' drama]," Locke quotes Reinhardt as saying,

—it is intriguing, very intriguing, these musical comedies of yours that I have seen. But, remember, not as achievements, not as things in themselves, artistic, but in their possibilities, their tremendous artistic possibilities. They are the most modern, the most American, most expressionistic. They are highly original in spite of obvious triteness, and artistic in spite of superficial crudeness. To me, they reveal new possibilities of technique in drama, and if I should ever try to do anything American, I should build it on these things.⁷⁰

What is interesting here is how Locke recounts his immediate reaction to what ought to have sounded very familiar and all in all quite correct. "We didn't enthuse. What Negro who stands for culture with the hectic stress of a social problem weighing on the minds of an over-serious minority could enthuse? Liza, Shuffle Along, Runnin' Wild! We had come to discuss the possibilities of serious Negro drama, of the art—drama, if you please....We didn't protest, but raised brows already too elevated perhaps and shrugged the shoulder that

⁶⁹ Locke, "Max Reinhardt," 77

⁷⁰ Ibid.

carries the proverbial racial chip."⁷¹ Locke's immediate reaction mirrors the response he disdains in others (like Du Bois) who demand 'over-seriousness' and social purposes for art. Reinhardt's excitement about the potential of 'Negro' theatre leaves Locke—and Johnson—temporarily speechless, unable to speak past the representational mandates of the 'race problem.' Not only are Locke and Johnson (in fact) speechless, Locke leaves it to Reinhardt to interpret their speechlessness. Reinhardt argues that in viewing "these plays for what they are," Locke and Johnson are "right," but that because he "views them for what they will become" he is "more than right." Reinhardt describes, even in 'Negro' comedy, the "most basic aspect of drama for a new starting point," not for 'Negro' theatre as such, but for "a revival for the art." Although "prostituted to farce... the technique is there. Now it is exploited, when will it be utilized?"⁷² "Now, we understood," Locke continues. "Baronial arm chairs moved as lightly and as instinctively as ouija boards. Understanding made a circle, and the interview was ended though the conversation continued thrice as long."⁷³ Interrogation and evaluation are traded for exchange, itself personated, treated less as spoken exchange than as movement, "as light and instinctive as ouija boards." Locke records the opening salvo of this conversation: "No, not the story, not the acting in the conventional sense, not the setting, not even the music, and certainly no the silly words; but the voices, the expressive control of the whole body, the spontaneity of motion, the rhythm..."⁷⁴ Importantly, Locke does not name the speaker, leaving the reader to guess or better, to imagine a cacophony of voices, accounting for the particular expressiveness of ('Negro') art.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

Yet, the opening to embodied and active communication, shaped into a new collective—(“understanding made a circle”) so that even the over-civilized seat (“baronial”) moves to the tune of the primitive (“ouija board”)—and extended (“thrice as long”) into a convivial anticipation of (‘Negro’) expressiveness, is almost immediately occupied again by the ‘race question,’ enacting the critical challenge Locke faces in this transformational period. ‘Race’ continues to insist, to re-articulate itself in the form of the ever-present question. “But how, Mr. Rheinhardt, are we to develop these, --especially in the face of exploitation?” “You must not even try to line up to the drama of the past, to the European drama. That is why there is no American drama... I would gladly help...but I would have to saturate myself with the folk spirit, and really this requires the Negro dramatist eventually.” “Eventually, why we have already many plays of Negro life...several attempts at Negro theatre...” That is most interesting...But I am afraid of that sort of thing...It is too academic....With such control of body, such pantomime, I believe I could portray emotion as it has never been portrayed...You are perhaps to near to see it.”⁷⁵ With that the interview ends. The implication (perhaps) is that ‘Negro’ critics are too tied up in the ‘race problem’ to really *see* Negro artwork and is potential. It is telling, in any case, that Locke uses ‘interview’ again here, suggesting that the series of questions and comments which begin with “But, how Mr. Rheinhardt...” returned expressions of conviviality to interview, and the substance and evaluation of ‘Negro’ theatre in representational terms. Still, the interview does not just end, for Reinhardt is “still talking, still ‘intrigued,” adumbrating the imaginative and creative

⁷⁵ Ibid.

powers of (increasingly) collective conversation, even in light of the ever-present and thorny mandates of 'race.'

Though it is clear from the Reinhardt essay that Locke was troubled, like Du Bois, by misrepresentations of black people, he nevertheless insisted that artwork was not truly artwork when it was forced to serve a propagandistic purpose. Locke describes the "artistic impediments" to 'Negro' theater, revealing his own unease, both with the "racial chip on his shoulder," and with his own dichotomy between the expressive strength and the descriptive weakness of black art. The unease is quite palpable, throughout the passage on the Reinhardt interview. Yet, we can read in the Reinhardt interview, in how Locke describes its movement between interview and conversation, between addressing "artistic impediment" and 'Negro' performance, Locke's insistence that 'Negro' artwork, even in light of impediments to its proper reception, reveal 'Negro' life. In the next chapter, I address again this back-and-forth movement, this time in the context of individual and collective becoming.

WORKS CITED

- Du Bois, W.E.B. 1996. "Criteria of Negro Art." In *Du Bois: Writings*, College Editions, ed. Nathan Huggins. New York: The Library of America, p. 993 - 1002.
- Du Bois, W.E.B. 1996. "The Propaganda of History." In *Du Bois: Writings*, ed. Nathan Huggins. New York: The Library of America, p. 1026 - 1047.
- Du Bois, W.E.B. 2003. *Darkwater: Voices from behind The Veil*. ed. Joe Feagin. Amherst, NY: Humanity Books.
- Harris, Leonard. 2004. "The Great Debate: W.E.B. Du Bois vs. Alain Locke on the Aesthetic." *Philosophia Africana* 7(1): 15 - 39.
- Hemenway, Robert. 1977. *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Locke, Alain Leroy, and Jeffrey C. Stewart. 1992. *Race Contacts and Interracial Relations*. Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press.
- Locke, Alain. "Beauty Instead of Ashes." In *The Critical Temper of Alain Locke: A Selection of His Essays on Art and Culture*, Critical Studies on Black Life and Culture, ed. Jeffrey C. Stewart. New York and London: Garland Publishing Inc., p. 23 - 24.
- Locke, Alain. 1925. "Negro Youth Speaks." In *The New Negro: an Interpretation*, New York: Albert and Charles Boni, p. 47 - 56.
- Locke, Alain. 1983. "Art or Propaganda." In *The Critical Temper of Alain Locke: A Selection of His Essays on Art and Culture*, ed. Jeffrey C. Stewart. New York and London: Garland Publishing Inc., p. 27 - 28.
- Locke, Alain. 1983. "Max Rheinhardt Reads the Negro's Dramatic Horoscope." In *The Critical Temper of Alain Locke: A Selection of His Essays on Art and Culture*,

Critical Studies on Black Life and Culture, New York: Garland Publishing Inc., p. 77 - 78.

Locke, Alain. 1983. "The Negro and The American Stage." In *The Critical Temper of Alain Locke: A Selection of His Essays on Art and Culture*, Critical Studies on Black Life and Culture, ed. Jeffrey C. Stewart. New York: Garland Publishing Inc., p. 79 – 86

Pitkin, Hanna Fenichel. 1967. *The Concept of Representation*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Pres.

Posnock, Ross. 2009. "Black is Brilliant." *The New Republic*. Available at: http://www.tnr.com/story_print.html?id=e9d5f5c3-16b0-4506-ac08-2911400f4ad4.

Simmel, Georg. 1968. "On the Concept and Tragedy of Culture." In *The Conflict in Modern Culture and Other Essays*, ed. K. Peter Etzkorn. New York: Teachers College Press, p. 27 - 46.

CHAPTER 6
"TO USWARD"

Now it isn't easy to be or live a social problem and it is far from pleasant to be an alarming symptom... Constitutional guarantees, legal and civil rights, political machinery of democratic action and control are, of course, the skeleton foundation of democracy, but you and I know that attitudes are the flesh and blood of democracy, and that without their vital reinforcement, democracy is really moribund or dead.¹

I have argued that in contrast to W.E.B. Du Bois, for whom worthy artwork served a political function, Locke insisted that the mark of good artwork was precisely that it eschewed propaganda in favor of 'expression.' Against those theorists who insist that Locke hoped artwork would provide the medium by which black people could achieve cultural recognition in advance of political inclusion, I have argued instead that Locke is better understood to celebrate and publicize black artwork for revealing the plurality of black life. Before the advent of black modernity, this always-existing variety had been obscured in artwork, both by the requirement that black artists advance moral arguments in service of solving the problem of race and by the reception of their artwork either as mere entertainment or imitation. For Locke, whatever its historical period, artwork was always a 'mirror' of existing social conditions. Thus, if black artwork was reduced to a propagandistic function, as it had been in black poetry during the post-Civil

¹ Alain Locke, "Alain Locke: Four Talks Redefining Democracy, Education and World Citizenship," ed. Christopher Buck and Betty J. Fisher, *World Order* Vol. 38, no. 3 (2008): 21 - 41.. This quote is taken from a talk called "The Preservation of the Democratic Ideal." According to Christopher Buck, "Archival records do not reveal when Alain Locke gave [this talk but internal evidence (his reference to something he 'wrote in 1935, three and a half years ago') suggests that it can be dated to 1938 or 1939. The audience, according to references in the talk, is social workers plying their profession in the tradition of settlement houses providing services directly to the poor in urban areas." p. 23

War period, it was because social conditions required it. Locke insisted that black artwork need not and should no longer only serve political purposes and illuminated the source of that change: the “new spirit in the masses” modern social developments (the Great Migration, ‘intra-cultural’ contact) had made possible. Political exclusion, racial violence and white supremacy had not ended. But by reading, for Locke the age of the *total* confinement of the black imagination to race-thinking— even as compensation for exclusion and oppression—had passed.

Locke described his role in the Harlem Renaissance as that of a midwife. But he was also the movement’s chief interpreter. In this chapter, I suggest that Locke articulated a democratically workable context for the flourishing of black artwork that we have come to call the Harlem Renaissance. Because black artwork was no longer confined to performing a purely political function, it required a new viewpoint. What could replace the old attitudes that required black artists to exhort or persuade on behalf of causes? Insisting ever that artwork was only recognizable as artwork because it was expressive, Locke did not impose a ‘new’ doctrine on black art. He was adamant however that black artwork not become “counter-jingo.”

This, I think, is among his greatest gifts to the American political imaginary. His art criticism consists not just of analysis—of artistic achievement, of new interpretations of black traditions or of the application of particular artistic forms—but also of exhortation of a particular sort. Locke, in my view, encouraged “the new spirit” he described in the black masses: to demonstrate that black artwork revealed that the black imagination—the black *political* imagination—was not bound by race thinking. It could become more than “counter-jingo.”

To pursue this intuition, I shall turn away from Locke's art criticism and culture theory and offer an interpretation of Gwendolyn Bennett's 1924 poem, "To Usward." I 'read' the poem as announcing the Harlem Renaissance moment as one of transition from 'identification' and 'race thinking' to becoming: to 'self-expressiveness' and 'self-representativeness.' I stage an encounter between the poem and an unlikely interlocutor, Jacques Derrida's *Declaration of Independence*. That I juxtapose two very different genres—a work of art, on the one hand, and a public document—on the other is no accident. Though Locke refused a political function for artwork as artwork, I want to suggest that we can read in his insistence on and exhortation to 'self-expressiveness' a political act: a declaration not of political independence (for such a statement was not yet warranted) but instead of psychological and spiritual independence from the problem of race. And yet, as I suggest in my interpretation of Bennett's poem, the times were not yet ripe for staves: I propose instead that Locke's art criticism and the artworks he most celebrated were performative. They attempted to see independence achieved in artistic utterances.

Finally, turning to a review of the year's black literature, "Jingo, Counter-Jingo and Us: a Retrospective Review of the Literature of the Negro, 1937," I authenticate what it is an admittedly experimental approach in the first section of the chapter. Locke differentiated between "jingo" (the racist attitudes of the majority) and "counter-jingo" (the defensive, counter-racist response), he argued that "counter-jingo" was, at the very least, explicable as a response to jingoism. Though racial oppression and exclusion were necessarily sources for the *content* of black 'self-expressiveness,' Locke insisted that black artwork not be overwhelmed by a "counter-jingoistic" attitude. "

I. "To Usward"

Although a number of events, persons and publications, including Roland Hayes' appearance as soloist with the Boston Symphony orchestra, the publication of James Weldon Johnson's 1922 anthology *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, or of Jean Toomer's remarkable 1923 novel *Cane* compete for designation as the Harlem Renaissance's opening salvo, the moment of its arrival as what came to be called a movement is arguably the "debut" of the younger Negro writers that *Opportunity Magazine* publisher Charles S. Johnson arranged on March 21, 1924. In attendance were Countee Cullen, Walter White, Jessie Fausset, Gwendolyn Bennett, Alain Locke and "the old Negro guard," W.E.B. Du Bois, James Weldon Johnson, and Georgia Douglas. Publishing representatives from *Century*, *Harper's*, *Scribner's*, *The World Tomorrow*, *Survey*, *Boni and Liveright Publishers* also attended. Several guests spoke at the event, including Locke, Du Bois, J.W. Johnson and Carl Van Doren, editor of *Century*². The March 21 event was a "coming out party," of sorts, whose objective was strategic. In a letter to his secretary, Charles

² *Opportunity Magazine* reported: "Although there was no formal, prearranged program, the occasion provoked a surprising spontaneity of expression both from the members of the writers' group and from the distinguished visitors present. A brief interpretation of the object of the Guild² was given by Charles S. Johnson, Editor of *Opportunity*, who introduced Alain Locke, virtual dean of the movement, who had been selected to act as Master of Ceremonies and to interpret the new currents manifest in the literature of this younger school. Alain Locke has been one of the most resolute stimulators of this group... Horace Liveright, publisher, told about the difficulties, even yet, of marketing books of admitted merit... He regarded Jean Toomer's *Cane* as one of the most interesting that he had handled, and yet, less than 500 copies had been sold... Dr. W.E.B. Du Bois made his first public appearance and address since his return to this country from Africa... Dr. Du Bois explained that the Negro writers of a few years back were of necessity pioneers, and much of their style was forced upon them by the barriers against publication of literature about Negroes of any sort. James Weldon Johnson was introduced as an anthologist of Negro verse... Walter F. White... also spoke and made reference to the passing of the stereotypes of the Negroes of fiction. .. Dr. Albert C. Barnes, art connoisseur and foremost authority in America on primitive Negro art, sketched the growing interest in this art which had had such tremendous influence on the entire modern art movement... Miss Jessie Fausset was given a place of distinction on the program..."²

Johnson wrote that:

It was a most unusual affair—a dinner meeting at the Civic Club at which all of the younger Negro writers...met and chatted with the passing generation... and with the literary personages of the city... about 100 guests and tremendously impressive speaking... [P]rincipally, it served to stimulate a market for the new stuff which these young writers are turning out. The first definite reaction came in the form of an offer of one magazine to devote an entire issue to the similar subjects as treated by representatives of the group. A big plug was bitten off. Now it's a question of living up to the reputation. Yes, I should have added, a stream of manuscripts has started into my office from other aspirants.³

The “one magazine” offering to devote an issue to Harlem and its artists was *Survey Graphic*. The “Harlem: Mecca Of the New Negro” issue was published on March 6, 1925 and became the basis for *The New Negro: An Interpretation*, which Locke edited to feature the “stream of manuscripts” Johnson mentioned in his letter. Although a number of artists read poetry, Bennett’s is the most representative and speaks most clearly, by my reading, to the objectives and potential of the Harlem Renaissance. I have excerpted the poem in its entirety.

“To Usward”

Let us be still
As ginger jars are still
Upon a Chinese shelf,
And let us be contained
By entities of Self...

Not still with lethargy and sloth,
But quiet with the pushing of our growth;
Not self-contained with smug identity,
But conscious of the strength in entity.

³ Bontemps, *Harlem Renaissance Remembered*, 11

If any have a song to sing that's different from the rest,
Oh, let him sing before the urgency of Youth's behest!

And some of us have songs to sing
Of jungle 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 dearth,
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!

The poem's title suggests both movement toward a non-destination movement and a tribute to an already existing entity, a celebratory toast of sorts. Indeed, the continual movement suggested by "to usward," which might instead have been written "toward us," thus demarcating movement in terms of its clear stopping point— is forestalled in the first line by the words, "let us be still as ginger jars are still." (Why let us be *still* like Chinese jars? Why not, if "we" are moving "usward," be animated, a "throng," as at the end of the poem?) The hortatory subjunctive phrase "let... be" first makes the implied "we" apparent since the poem's title names no "we." There is, rather, only movement "usward," suggesting both that the "us" does and yet *does not* exist. The movement toward us seems hindered "by entities of self." "We," who are on our way "usward," ought also be contained by a peculiar set of abstractions—*entities of self*. The potentially material or "real" selves are

immediately defined in terms of the *self* in abstraction— “we” are not contained by an *entity of selves* but rather by *entities* of a *singular* self. A cursory reading suggests that the plural forms are misplaced—*plural* abstractions, a *single* self— since, generally, when we speak of abstraction, we mean to abbreviate or conceptualize something more complex; to offer it, we might say, in digest form; to formalize it; to reduce complexity into simplicity. Why speak of multiple abstractions of a *singular self*? One obvious suggestion would be to read “To Usward” as prescribing an identity, particularly in light of the exhortation, “let us be.” Let us be “still” and “contained” by a *single* self. I am going to suggest that this reading of the poem would be hasty for entity itself has multiple (even contradictory) meanings (essence, quintessence, soul, personage, individual, being, spirit, substance) whose variety is further magnified by the plural form of the word.

The change in mode in the final stanza, reprinted just below, from hortatory subjunctive to indicative (We stand), and again to hortatory subjunctive (Let us break the seal of years) further complicates both the status of the un-named “we” *and* the objective of the exhortation, “let us be...”

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!

In the final stanza, the hortatory subjunctive mood's hold is *momentarily* broken, so that "*we stand like ginger jars, Like ginger jars bound round With dust and age.*" For a moment, the poem's speaker offers a *description* of "us," as those who are "bound" and "sealed," that stands, if we read it as an indicative phrase (We stand), in sharp contrast to the *containment* in the first stanza. At this moment in stanza three, a "We" is *described* as bound and sealed, but after a moment, the hortatory subjunctive voice returns: "Let us break the seal of years With pungent thrusts of song." But it is a hortatory subjunctive whose character is different from that in the first stanza; its verb, "break," is dynamic and not stative as is the "be" in the first. We might say that the final hortatory subjunctive "Let us break" has carried some of the dynamism over into it from "we stand." But has it? After all, the status of "we stand," is also unclear. Is it a declarative phrase, proclaiming an action—We stand—as we do it? Or is it an indicative, describing what we do (now). "We stand LIKE ginger jars Bound Round?" A call to action—"Let us break the seal of years"—contrasts the peculiar exhortation (even call to inaction) that we "be still like ginger jars."

Now, a clear "we" stands like ginger jars whereas before (or at least earlier in the poem) we were *called to* resemble ginger jars. Later, "we" are disassociated from our container ("Like *jars of ginger*" instead of ginger jars) only to be "immediately" described as sealed. "Like jars of ginger, we are sealed...) The status of the unnamed "we," its "action" and what it "ought to" do grows yet more un-decidable. We might turn to the poem's other presence—Youth—who appears unbidden in the second stanza. But who is this newly introduced "Youth?" The poem's speaker has implored us to be still while insisting that "our" stillness be neither "sloth," nor "smug identity,"

implying that it be reasoned and willful but demand no selfsameness. The second and third stanza seem to demonstrate that while we anchor “ourselves-” or *are revealed* as stationery and neatly rowed on shelves, “our” open, or as the last stanza indicates—newly unsealed—mouths can or are called to (again the un-decidable status—declaration or indication?) both awaken and testify to many different moods and themes. I suggest one way to “still” the poem’s variously unsettled meanings, modes, and materials to turn to the temporal to decipher it. Perhaps, the unexpected arrival of youth in the second stanza, clarifies (although fails to settle) the un-decidable status of “us” and “our” actions. Perhaps “Youth” marks *the moment at which* the balance begins to shift, when we tip forward from the old, given self—standing sealed, dusted, and aged— not toward some new, prescribed self (smug identity) but rather “to usward,” toward new entities, ever-forming, *entities of self*.

There are, of course, many potential readings of Bennett’s poem. One might focus on the evocative image (perhaps scent) of ginger in the poem. Such an interpretation might read: The third stanza suggests that we no more be still but rather *stand* open. For in this moment, we *already* stand like *jars of ginger* and not ginger jars (or, perhaps *gingerly* jars, as in the sense of reluctance) but rather jars whose material ginger (whose “brown-ness,” for ginger, too, is an adjective for brown) can finally be divulged and demarcated from the prior “self.” With “pungent thrusts of song,” (sharp with the scent of brown ginger), we might allow our material (songs of “jungle heat and fires,” “pitiful desires,” “seas beneath the skies,” “Negro lullabies”) to fill the air with scent and song. In this reading, a kind of stable, essential, “pre-existing,” self is divulged, suggesting not only the presence of an “identity” to be “freed” as a counter identity to claim. I would argue that the former

reading, in which the (un-decidable) status of “us” and the types of “actions” “we” and the speaker of the poem perform (exhortation, description) is a better, richer one because it points the poem (and the Harlem Renaissance, for which this poem, as the opening salvo of the Harlem Renaissance’s coming out party, is, in my account, a metaphor) towards a democratic politics instead of in the direction of identity politics.

For Locke black culture is meaningful because it is a significant source for self-cultivation and self-representativeness. Self-representativeness for black people, as revealed in black artwork, is only manifest under modern conditions, when black people refuse the limits to black life set by the practice of race. Self-representativeness marks a new status, enacted and assumed both by individuals and by black people as a ‘group.’ In the final section of this chapter, I return again to “To Usward,” to further explore the relationship between these two modes of ‘representativeness.’ By reading the poem along side Jacques Derrida’s “Declarations of Independence,” I sketch an account of post-racial foundations for the new collectivities I believe Locke’s sensitive and cosmopolitan criticism to imply.

Above I argued that while one might be tempted to interpret Bennett’s “To Usward” as a call to ‘identity,’ the multiple shifts in mode from exhortation to indication and back again enact the un-decidable status of a ‘we’ in formation, which attempts to ‘declare independence’ from a prior (false) identity avoiding the prescription of a new identity. To further explore and clarify my reading of this poem, I turn to Jacques Derrida’s “Declarations of Independence.”⁴ Just as my reading of Bennett’s poem explores the implications of its “discursive modalities”—description and

⁴ Jacques Derrida, “Declarations of Independence,” trans. T. Keenan and T. Pepper, *New Political Science* 15 (Summer 1986): 3 - 19.

exhortation— Derrida’s analysis of the Declaration of Independence is also attentive to a fundamental linguistic tension in it—between description and performance. Indeed, Derrida argues ultimately, that the Declaration’s “sought after effect,” what he calls a coup of right, is only possible in light of this productive tension. By my reading, the “sought after effect,” of Bennett’s “To Usward,” like Locke’s Harlem Renaissance, is to constitute a new ‘we,’ while remaining ever vigilant to the effects of prior sources of collectivity—those imposed by ‘race thinking’ and its practice.

“Declarations of Independence” asks “Who signs, and with what so-called proper name, the declarative act which founds an institution?”⁵

Derrida thus treats the Declaration not as a statement of fact but rather as a kind of action that by performative language (*We hold* these truths to be self evident...) “does what it says it does.” The question, “who signs?” cannot be answered with a list of the proper names of the “representatives.”

The “good people,” are a people not by virtue, say, of a common past or ethnicity, but rather through an act of declaration, which “dissolves” their relationship with another state⁶. They make themselves—they become—by signing “in the name of the people,” who exist only after the signature.

According to Derrida, without this “fabulous event..., this people do not exist.”⁷ The “sought after effect” of the instituting act is not the creation of a *particular* institution or a *particular* people; it is, rather, the *authorization* of a

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Derrida writes, “In this case, another state signature had to be effaced in ‘dissolving’ the links of colonial paternity or paternity.” (11)

⁷ Ibid. 10

people *to act on its own behalf* by its own signature as well as the institution of authorization *as politics per se*.⁸

“The signature of American citizen today,” Derrida writes, “depends, in fact and by right, on this indispensable confusion.” Further, “the constitution and laws of [the US] somehow guarantee the signature, as they guarantee your passport and the circulation of subjects and of seals foreign to this country.”⁹ For Derrida, the performative declaration of a “we” in the Declaration of Independence depends upon the un-decidable, discursive status of the Declaration’s language and the signature, which “captures” and authorizes this ‘we.’

What makes the Declaration of Independence “fabulous,” on Derrida’s account is that it is made by and on behalf of a people that do not yet exist.

I will have given myself a “name” and an “ability, or a “power, ” understood in the sense of power- or ability-to-sign by delegation of signature. But this future perfect, the proper tense for this coup of right... should not be declared, mentioned or taken into account. It is as though it didn’t exist.¹⁰

The act is fabulous because it summons a “fictitious” people while at the same proving an *authorization* that could continually be re-invoked, supplying the source for a (continually) regenerative politics by maintaining the un-decidable status and constitution of the ‘we,’ on whose behalf it declares independence.

I want to suggest that “Declarations” gives the clue to how one might avoid reading “smug identity,” into Bennett’s poem or the larger project of

⁸ “By this fabulous event, by this fable which implies the structure of the trace and is only in truth possible thanks to the inadequation to itself of a present, a signature gives itself a name. It opens *for itself* a line of credit, *its own credit*, for itself *to itself*.” Ibid. 10

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

Harlem Renaissance. The status of “most current we” in the Bennett poem is not, of course, fully undecided; we might say, instead, that it has already been specified, generalized, identified, “bound round,” and “ginger-jarred.” By my reading, the oscillation between indicative/declarative mood and hortatory subjunctive in the second and third stanzas (We stand... Let us break the seal of years...) (Let him sing before the urgency of Youth’s behest... Some of us have songs to sing), suggests less about the peculiarly un-decidable status of a particular phrase, as in “Declarations,” than it does about the “un-decidability” of a particular moment. This moment (Youth) demands (behest) that the *variety* of songs, the multiplicity of black life be revealed. The hortatory subjunctive that follows the moment of declaration/indication (We stand) in the third stanza seems to pull both speaker and event back from description and declaration by exhortation while (perhaps only momentarily) crystallizing the speaker/representative as one who wants nothing more than to “sing the songs of birth...” (To “speak,” only of becoming.)

As I suggested in Chapter Three, Locke associates the hortatory mood of some Negro poetry both with a particular historical moment and with a particular type of politics. He writes,

Poetry of Negro life itself...was still unattained at the time of emancipation and for at least three decades after. Later the causes of this may stand out more clearly. But this much is certainly clear; --*no such social satisfaction and stimulus came into Negro life with the emancipation as accompanies normal political freedom*; the concrete realities of reconstruction could by no means fill in and vivify the abstract Abolitionist hopes or realize the roseate anti-slavery dream. The poetic impulse was checked by steep social disillusionment, by the dint of moral momentum it plodded on in *hortatory modes and accents to “cheer the weary traveler.”*¹¹ [my emphasis]

¹¹ Locke, “The Negro Poets of the United States,” 43

Although it did free the slaves, the Emancipation *Proclamation* was a discursive act that could not “free” politics or inter/intra-cultural relations from the processes of ascription with which American politics was so bound up. The “realities of reconstruction” politics could not “vivify” those political ideals or take full advantage of the undecidable status of the ‘we,’ which Derrida illuminates in “Declarations of Independence.” The poetry of blacks from that period made this clear. By my reading, that Bennett’s poem is not *only* hortatory is significant, even augural. That Bennett’s poem cannot fully “achieve” a stable description of a newly re-constituted “Us” suggests not just selves freed from identification (indeed the oscillation may hint at the difficulties of attaining such an objective) but rather a new concept of self, *as itself plural* (“entities of self.”) The poem “says what it does” as in Derrida’s account of the Declaration of Independence, by revealing the transformational potential of its moment in its language. Its’ sought after effect, the ‘objective’ toward which it urges remains open and perhaps ever in formation: “to usward.” The title “To Usward” along with the peculiar abstraction, “entities of self” implies that the status of the un-named “we” in the poem is also, if not entirely un-decidable— it has, indeed, been identified and jarred—but is, in fact, opening itself out. “We” cannot return to this founding moment for a prescriptive “us.” But we ought mark this moment (that is the “behest” of Youth, by my reading), recognize it, for what it is, a transitory, albeit—it will turn out—not transitional one.

I want to suggest we take seriously the idea that there is a similarity between the Declaration of Independence, as Derrida understands it, and the the Harlem Renaissance, as Locke continually characterizes it, as moments of

self-constitution, each of which leaves behind useful democratic resources.

There was no signer, by right, before the text of the Declaration... By this fabulous event, by this fable, which... is only in truth possible thanks to the inadequation to itself of a present, a signature gives itself a name. It opens *for itself* a line of credit, *its own credit*, for itself *to itself*. The self surges up here in all cases (nominative, dative, accusative) as soon as a signature gives or extends credit to itself, in a single coup of force makes right, founds right or the law, gives right, brings the law to the light of day, gives both birth and day to the law.¹²

I am interested here in the *productive capacity* of the signature as Derrida describes it, not as the source of 'law' and 'right' but instead as that within which the "self surges up...in all cases." I want to suggest that for Locke, black artwork of the Harlem Renaissance period was a 'signature' of sorts, permitting black expression in its vitality and multiplicity. When Locke writes that New Negroes or New Negro poets have lately become "representative," it is because he sees a (potential) new 'we' expressed in black artwork. Black artwork reflects and signs off on the development of the new 'we.'

Locke is adamant that the Renaissance is not 'about' black artists. They are but a 'medium' of the new spirit. To return to the surprising arrival of Youth in the second stanza of Bennett's poem: I suggest that "Youth" is symbolic of moment. The poem has no 'speaker' or 'protagonist' as such. Instead, it reflects the moment at which a new 'self-expressiveness' surges up.

I take Bennett's poem, "*To Usward*" as something of a stand-in for the Harlem Renaissance and the artworks and artists which composed it. The phrase captures something essential about the Renaissance: it was not, as Locke made clear, about black artists, and therefore as I have understood

¹² Derrida, "Declarations of Independence," 11

Locke also not about “us.” The Renaissance marked a spontaneous, new, black self-expressiveness that was also its “sought after effect.”

II. “Jingo, Counter-Jingo and Us”

...minority expression has its healthy as well as its unhealthy growths, and that the same garden of which jingo and counter-jingo are the vexatious and even dangerous weeds has its wholesome grains and vegetables, its precious fruits and flowers. Selective cultivations...rather than wholesale plowing under or burning over should be the sane order of the day.¹³

But how could the “sought after effect,” “to usward,” be achieved? Throughout the Harlem Renaissance period, Locke saw black art and its reception by a broader public as reflecting contemporary developments. He exhorted artists to ‘express’ black life and suggested that the “...Negro Renaissance...must be an integral phase in American culture.”¹⁴ After the Renaissance subsided in the early to mid 1930s, Locke began to temper some of his own expectations of black art, while defending its autonomy against new patrons, who sought for black art new, socialist political objectives. How could art remain fundamentally self-expressive, while attending to the ‘broadened social mind’ that left politics implied? How could good art and “good sociology” be combined? How could black artwork continue to move ‘to usward,’ while refusing racial chauvinism? In the final section of this chapter, I turn to Locke’s 1937 retrospective review, “Jingo, Counter-Jingo and Us.” Locke responds to *Nation* critic Ben Stolberg, who in a scathing review of

¹³ Alain Locke, “Jingo, Counter-Jingo and Us,” in *The Critical Temper of Alain Locke: A Selection of His Essays on Art and Culture* (New York and London: Garland Publishing Inc., 1983), 245 - 257.

¹⁴ Locke, “Our Little Renaissance,” 23

Benjamin Brawley's¹⁵ *Negro Builders and Heroes*, accused Brawley and other "professional race men" of "minority jingoism."

Beginning in 1928, Locke wrote a lengthy 'retrospective' review of the year's black literature. 'Literature' was quite a broad category in these reviews, covering fiction, biography, 'poetry and belles lettres,' 'anthropology and Africana,' and 'sociology and race relations.' Locke critiqued books by both black and white authors. In each review, he offered a general characterization of the literature of the year, paying particular attention to how black life was portrayed in artwork and studied by sociologists and anthropologists. What reception did black life and black people receive? What did the year's developments in black literature bode for American democracy?

In 1937, Locke wrote,

...the literature of the year...still continues to be racially tinged, some of it pro, some of anti, little or none of it objective enough to be called 'neutral.' And yet some of it...is healthy and sane and true enough to be called art rather than propaganda and science rather than polemic or partisan jingo...Let's consider by way of an aperitif, jingo, counter-jingo and 'us' : meaning Negro.¹⁶ [sic]

'Jingoism' was Locke's focus in '37 because of a particularly scathing review that had appeared in the October 23 issue of *Nation*. The well-known leftist and labor journalist Benjamin Stolberg berated Brawley for engaging in "colored jingoism" instead of providing an analysis of the "...Negro's deep

¹⁵ Benjamin Brawley was a Howard University professor and author of several books recording black achievement, including *A Social History of the American Negro* (1921), *Early Negro American Writers* (1935), *Paul Laurence Dunbar: Poet of His People* (1936), and *The Negro Genius* (1937). He was also a critic of the Harlem Renaissance, who thought that the "under-class" was over represented in Harlem Renaissance art.

¹⁶ Locke, "Jingo, Counter-Jingo, and Us," 258

and complex and distorted tragedy in the class relations of American society..."¹⁷ Brawley's "colored jingoism" he wrote, "is like that of all career men in the oppressed minorities...the usual solution of racial self-pity in racial vainglory."¹⁸ Though Brawley was Stolberg's chief target, deserving of "heavy [critical] artillery," he was not the only one: W.E.B. Du Bois, the historian Carter Woodson, and the sociologist Kelly Miller, though more sophisticated in Stolberg's view, were also guilty. Their crime? Refusing the "...splendid and necessary job of teaching the black workers that their oppression is merely a highly complicated function of class exploitation...[and encouraging] every trick of 'success,' that of pseudo-assimilation to the class culture of the dominant group."¹⁹

Locke agreed with Stolberg that Brawley deserved criticism. Brawley's book displayed "...a shabby psychology of Pollyanna optimism and sentimentalism...[that was still the] meat and bread of many professional inter-racialists."²⁰ But the source of Brawley's "Pollyanna optimism" was a "majority pathology," that of the American success story, falsely applied. For Locke, the historical moment for Brawley's approach ("inevitable a generation ago") had already passed. In the present period, such work resulted in "...cultural vertigo and [a] split or dislocated social vision." According to Locke, "the root of the evil"—minority Jingo—that so offended Stolberg was "majority jingo," and not, as Stolberg would have it, "racial vainglory." Locke accused Stolberg of applying a "vicious double standard" and of not recognizing Brawley's work as "compensatory," though no longer timely, "racialism." "A Negro, or anyone, who writes...history inaccurately or in

¹⁷ Benjamin Stolberg, "Minority Jingo," *Nation*, no. October 23, 1937: 437 - 439.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Locke, "Jingo, Minority Jingo and Us," 262

distorted perspective should be scorned as a 'black chauvinist,' *but he can also be scotched as a tyro.*"²¹[my emphasis] There were "sound degrees" of racialism. Black expression had "healthy" and "unhealthy outgrowths;" the healthy forms required "selective cultivation." They could not simply be abandoned or falsely classified as "jingoism." Stolberg, in Locke's view, was guilty of "proletarian jingo," of shoring up pride in class by treating as illegitimate any form of 'group' or 'self' expression that did not valorize left-political objectives. Still, Locke insisted that Stolberg's criticism served a useful function by "...warning against...any soft tolerance of the fallacies and opiates of internal minority chauvinism at the very time we were making a point of the exposure and discrediting majority jingoism."²² Worthy group and self-expression would "aim at folk realism and the discovery of basic human and social denominators."²³

Locke's attention to the staged development of 'racialism' is apparent here. For following his acknowledgment of Stolberg's criticism, he takes the Harlem Renaissance to task for "exhibitionism and demagoguery." But the problem with the Renaissance was not, as Stolberg would have it, bad politics, but instead the fact that Harlem Renaissance artists were "...handicapped by having no internal racial support for their art."²⁴ We might say that, in retrospect, Harlem Renaissance authors, who required white patronage, could not offer the "more penetrating, even handed and less-illusioned portrayal of Negro life" that a "second generation" of artists was 'now' offering. On the other hand, we might argue that the 'internal racial support' to which Locke refers is expression itself, a renewable resource that inspires "good art."

²¹ Ibid. 258

²² Ibid. 259

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

Quoting an essay he had written a decade earlier, "Our Little Renaissance," Locke nevertheless reclaims what he had seen as the movements "original aims:" to become "an integral phase in American art and literature...to divorce [the Renaissance] from propaganda and politics."²⁵ Just as a decade before he had refused 'race' propaganda as the sole function of black artwork, in 1937, Locke refused 'class' propaganda as its new function, while acknowledging in a manner that he had not before, the importance of "a penetrating perception of the basis of the race problem."²⁶ "Let's consider," Locke insisted, "...us."

I want to emphasize here Locke's keen attention to what moves 'us' 'usward' (to borrow Bennett's insightful title). By refusing to use Stolberg's terminology—minority jingo—to describe the failures of Brawley's work, favoring instead "counter-jingo," Locke identifies the dangerous influence of 'race thinking' on black people while insisting that it can only be explained (though, importantly, not justified) as a compensatory response to "majority jingo." There is no such thing, to Locke, as "minority jingo," a race pride so thoughtless that it refuses analysis of the sources of oppression. "Counter jingo," though displaying the same evil tendencies as "majority jingo," responds to 'race thinking.' That said, for Locke, "counter jingo" was never a legitimate function of black expression; it was simply an historical stage through which black expression had to develop.

"To usward," as I demonstrated above in my interpretation of Bennett's poem and authenticated in my interpretation of Locke's response to Stolberg, is a moving target, and 'smug identity,' whether of the racial or the class sort, always a tempting but ultimately dangerous possibility.

²⁵ Ibid. 259

²⁶ Ibid.

WORKS CITED

- Bennett, Gwendolyn. 1924. "To Usward." *Opportunity* 28: 19.
- Bontemps, Arna. 1972. *The Harlem Renaissance Remembered*. New York: Dodd, Mead and Co.
- Derrida, Jacques. 1986. "Declarations of Independence." *New Political Science* 15: 3 - 19.
- Locke, Alain. "The Negro Poets of the United States." In *The Critical Temper of Alain Locke: A Selection of His Essays on Art and Culture*, Critical Studies on Black Life and Culture, ed. Jeffrey C. Stewart. New York and London: Garland Publishing Inc., p. 43 - 49.
- Locke, Alain. 1983. "Jingo, Counter-Jingo and Us." In *The Critical Temper of Alain Locke: A Selection of His Essays on Art and Culture*, New York and London: Garland Publishing Inc., p. 245 - 257.
- Stolberg, Benjamin. "Minority Jingo." *Nation* (October 23, 1937): 437 - 439.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION: THE POLITICAL VALUE OF BLACK PLURALITY

'Race thinking' and racism impose an easy order to our study of black political thinkers: any black thinker worth her salt considers the effects of racism on the black body, the black imaginary and on black politics because none can be fully understood without attention to racial oppression. Racial oppression, exclusion and violence have necessitated reconstituting 'black identity' and 'black culture,' — to provide some foundation for a politically useful 'black collective,' which could end racial oppression, violence and exclusion. Black artwork would best serve a pedagogical function: teaching blacks and non-blacks alike the truth about black experiences and history, or a transvaluative one: providing the basis for a re-evaluation of black life, experience and history. By emphasizing, in my interpretations of Locke's writings, difference over identity (Chapter Two), cultivation over culture (Chapter Three), a modernism of substance over a modernism of style (Chapter Four), expression over propaganda (Chapter Five) and the movement from "counter-jingo to usward" (Chapter Six), I have represented Locke *both* as a helpful interlocutor of the negative effects of 'race thinking' on black people *and* as a prophet of modernity, who recognizes as imminent the time when black artwork could fully commit itself to the expression of black life in all its vitality and variety. For the most part, I have not attempted to *prove* that Locke is best understood to pursue difference, cultivation, substantive modernism, and expression over identity, culture, formal modernism and propaganda by situating him in the tradition of black political thought or by providing an intellectual biography of Locke's life. Instead, I have attended to the continuities in Locke's theorizations of race and culture

and his critical writings about art, thereby recovering an early 20th century black thinker who would be able to (I think) respond to early 21st century concerns about negative effects of 'identity thinking' on democracy. I want to defend the idea that attention to plurality (of political thought, representations of culture and artistic expression) in 20th century black writing is itself politically valuable.

In *Alain Locke: Culture and the Plurality of Black Life*, I have attempted to recover from the seemingly self-evident constellation of ideas, practices and beliefs that constitute both our 'every day' and politically-strategic thinking about 'race,' 'culture,' 'identity,' the Alain Locke who, arriving at Oxford in 1908 wrote in a letter to his mother, "I am Alain Leroy Locke. I am not a race problem;" to retrieve this declaration by seeing its effects in Locke's writings on 'race,' 'culture' and 'democracy.' It is a redemptive act: since some have read in his work only a 'necessary' or 'strategic' atavism in service of the 'Negro' cause. I am, I suppose, a Locke apologist of a different sort. By my reading, Locke saw certain forms of "race consciousness, race pride, and race solidarity" as compensatory responses to 'race thinking,' whose time and effectiveness were nevertheless limited. He theorized 'race' as a political form, as an authoritative body of thought and practice and an every day set of beliefs, which shape and corrupt our social and political relations. He attempted to reclaim black life and its 'folk art' both from the clutches of the "Old Negro" myth and from the attractions of 'race-thinking.'

I am by no means the first to characterize Locke's subtle thinking by useful dichotomies. Anthony Dawahare, for example, uncovers in *The New Negro: an Interpretation*, "dual nationalisms," arguing that Locke

claimed that his black contributors stand as ideal representatives of 'the New Negro,' a postwar generation of black Americans whose cultural contributions...would strengthen democracy in America.... *The New Negro* narrowly comprises literary works that, taken as a whole, confirm Locke's own desire that the New Negro possesses a black national identity and a patriotic loyalty to American capitalism that transcends class differences and interests.¹

For Everett Akam, on the other hand, Locke is a "cosmopolitan pluralist" who sought a merger of black nation without total fusion to the American nation on the grounds of democratic culture. Literary theorist Ross Posnock calls Locke an "anti-race race man," insisting that though Locke celebrated and publicized black artwork and culture, he was a consummate cosmopolitan, who retained an anti-proprietary notion of culture.

Because of its perennial concern with the effects 'identity' on democratic politics, I want to suggest that, broadly speaking, the agonistic school of contemporary political theory is a useful interlocutor of Locke's thought, although it must be open to Locke's theorization of 'race difference' to be fruitful. In conclusion, I would like to briefly sketch some lines of contact between Locke's lectures and the work of just one agonist, the political theorist Bonnie Honig. Like Locke, Honig is sensitive to the ill effects of identity on democracy. The difference is that for Locke, the source of identity is to be found in the 'race making' powers of 'the political,' as I argued in Chapter Two, while for Honig, writing nearly a century later, 'identity' represents a problematic way of thinking about oneself in relation to the (political) world. While Locke argues that the response of social formations to 'difference'—assimilation/dissimilation are crucial to the development of modern civilization, Honig advances the case that difference and 'conflict over

¹ Anthony Dawahare, *Nationalism, Marxism, and African American Literature between the Wars: a New Pandora's Box* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2007).

difference' are fundamental to the cultivation of robust democratic practice. She insists that we must understand difference as "more than identities that are different than ours."

We must rethink difference so that

...it is not just a different identity, nor is it merely... the constitutive matter out of which identity is formed; it is also that which resists or exceeds the closures of identity. It signals not a difference *from* others but a difference that troubles identity from within its would-be economy of the same. Difference is what identity perpetually seeks (and fails) to expunge, fix, or hold in place. ... [D]ifference is a problem for identity not one of its adjectives.²

By characterizing difference thus, Honig intends to (re)theorize the "problems that 'difference' poses for democracy." According to Honig, theories that operate from a premise that conflates difference with identity not only "domesticate difference" so that "group identities and affiliations [are taken] as a starting point" for politics, thereby understanding group identities to be 'pre-political conditions' of a sort, instead of depicted as always-in-formation. Democratic theory, she insists, must move beyond "...simply orchestrating multiple conflicting group needs and toward a new responsiveness to...the propensity of [more traditional models of democratic theory] to involve democratic cultures and institutions in violent and resentful dynamics of identity / difference."³ Theorists ought to "shift from an administrative to politicizing democratic theory."⁴ Suggesting that political theory attend to difference, warning political theory against the temptations of identity and insisting that theorists not further buttress identity by offering

² Bonnie Honig, "Difference, Dilemmas and the Politics of Home," in *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 257 - 277., p. 257

³ Ibid. 258

⁴ Ibid. 273 (footnote 1)

'administrative' solutions, Honig advocates instead for a political theory of difference that "...disrupts liberal-democratic dreams of home, but... posits alternative, and perhaps broader, sites of potential empowerment. It disables certain conceptions of agency; but it enables others at the same time. It renders problematic...certain identity- and interest-based concepts of pluralism, but it also animates more coalitional varieties of social democratic organizations and affiliation."⁵ As I read Locke, he largely supports Honig's desire for "broader sites of empowerment" and "coalitional affiliation" as well as her intuition that 'attendance to difference' can broaden our political imaginary and condition new affiliations.

Nevertheless, Locke would likely be suspicious of Honig's valorization of conflict, unless assured that such thinking would take seriously the damage and continued effects of the ascriptive processes that can arise from it. Locke would wonder why should we expect difference re-theorized to clear the way to more robust coalition. Of course, Honig by no means suggests that new political theory by itself generates new coalitions. But I do think that my reading of Locke questions the ease with which Honig links the *concept* of difference and the *practice* of coalition. In contrast to Alain Locke, Honig does not attend to the meanings that particular differences acquire or how those meanings affect the production of group identities. To Honig, like Locke, difference is a *creative* force, making selves and forever redefining contextual boundaries. If, she says, we heed it; if we refuse to see even the most painful conflicts that arise from difference—religious, ethno-racial or over sexual orientation and constructions of gender— domesticated, we will have "[given] up the dream of a place called home, a place free of power, conflict, a struggle,

⁵ Ibid. 271

a place, an identity, a form of life..." For Locke, as I suggested in Chapter One, 'difference' is at once a perception of one group's particularity in contrast with an Other, and at the same time, when paired with assimilative forces, results in forms of social coherence. Yet 'race difference' is a particularly pernicious type of difference, which ascribes damaging 'identities' to particular groups of people. Locke would, I imagine, be curious about what Honig would dream up to replace the 'place called home.' As I have read Locke, he would appreciate "places, identities and forms of life" that refuse to be permanently fixed but coalesce and dissociate, rise and subside, offering a rich palette from which the political can be painted. But Locke would insist that 'difference/identity' as 'race thinking' have articulated it, is also a destructive force, generating real inequalities and antipathies, affecting profoundly the potential and function of our collectivities. Locke's version of 'the political' sees some differences converted into nearly inescapable identities. If we are to agree that our selves/identities *and* our politics are best envisioned as unstable—constituted by flux and conflict—my reading of Locke's work suggests that we attend to (black) 'difference' as (black) plurality, while keeping in view as did Locke, the profound difficulties 'race thinking' presents to its public reception. Like Locke responding to Stolberg about "minority jingo," we must keep in view those sticky, solid differences/identities, such as race, whose material effects and sources in/of the imagination refuse to easily dissipate, while pushing (black) cultural expression beyond the attractions of reconstituted identity.

I. Future Directions

I must, nevertheless, acknowledge the dangers of reading the 'past' through the lens of the present. In a review of Posnock's *Color and Culture: Black Writings and the Making of the Modern Intellectual*, historian Kevin Mumford argues that Posnock relies too much on "the accomplishment of postmodernism" (as opposed to historical context) to articulate "...the victorious release of black intellectuals from black nationalist essentialism." Mumford describes Posnock's project in a manner that might fruitfully capture my own in this dissertation: "a major goal is to demonstrate [what] allowed black writers to resist classification, elude racialism, and locate spaces so that they could engage their imaginations."⁶ The problem, as Mumford sees it, that such an approach is historically unreliable, resulting in "idiosyncratic" and potentially misrepresentative interpretations of the work of black intellectuals.

In view of this criticism of Posnock and its clear applicability to my own work, I would like to suggest what I see as the future direction of research for this project. While the project will continue to emphasize in Locke's writings the value of black expression as plural and vital instead of merely 'politically useful' in their particular context, as I see it, the next step will be to provide historical support for my objectives. First, I plan to more firmly define the context for Locke's early 20th century writings about 'race' as a center of meaning. To do this, I will offer an account of the continuities and discontinuities between Locke's theorization of 'race' and the fruitful research on 'race' and 'race thinking' of his contemporaries, including Franz Boas and

⁶ Kevin Mumford, Review *Color & Culture: Black Writers and the Making of the Modern Intellectual*, *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 86, No. 3, (Dec., 1999), pp. 1357-1358, 1357

his students. Second, the contrast that I draw between Locke's theorization of culture and his appeal to cultivation will be improved by a closer study of the multiple influences (the American pragmatic tradition and German sociology) on Locke's thinking. Third, in the dissertation, I characterize the 'great debate' between Du Bois and Locke over artwork as arising from profoundly different views over artwork. In my future research, I will likely treat their disagreement as resulting from mutual misunderstanding. Both Du Bois and Locke misunderstand and misrepresent the other's thinking about 'race' and about the social 'function' of artwork. Fourth, Locke's biographer, Leonard Harris, has suggested the influence on Locke's thought of the Austrian school of psychology (vis-à-vis Franz Brentano, Christian von Ehrenfels and Alexius Meinong). My intuition (and I must emphasize that this is, as yet, an intuition) is that this school of thought informs Locke's attention to "self-expressiveness" and "self-representativeness." I suspect that attention to this school of thought will reveal significant differences between 'self-expressiveness' and dialogic, 'authentic identity,' which as theorized by Charles Taylor, has become a profoundly influential (if not hegemonic) account of identity. Fifth, I should like to trace with greater detail, developments in Locke's thinking about the function of artwork, which I merely hinted at in Chapter Six. Locke did lose some faith in the potential effects of artwork after the Renaissance. Yet, he retained his intuition about avoiding chauvinism. I expect to trace this development in further detail by characterizing how the rising influence (in black literature) of socialism affected Locke's principled defense of artwork qua artwork.

WORKS CITED

- Dawahare, Anthony. 2007. *Nationalism, Marxism, and African American Literature between the Wars: a New Pandora's Box*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi.
- Honig, Bonnie. 1996. "Difference, Dilemmas and the Politics of Home." In *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 257 - 277.
- Mumford, Kevin, Review *Color & Culture: Black Writers and the Making of the Modern Intellectual*, *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 86, No. 3, (Dec., 1999), pp. 1357-1358, 1357