

THE NEW NEGRO FACES COVID-19

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What does it mean to work on a compendium of writings by Alain Locke on aesthetics during the current pandemic? I confess I've asked myself that question several times, with an added kicker—why does it matter? What does humanities based scholarship matter when all through the nation, Black people, once again, are dying at astronomically higher rates than whites, and nothing is being done about it? In fact, it is hard to know what one could do about it, since COVID-19 seems to be like the Devil, seeking out victims' vulnerabilities and killing our people in ways not understood by well-meaning doctors and public health professionals. But even more deeply, as if we are living out Albert Camus's *The Plague*, this pandemic seems to thrust us even deeper in the direction of Afro-pessimism. Even God seems to be against us. What then, can Locke's essays on aesthetics tell us faced with the biggest public health disaster for Black people in recent memory?

After fighting back almost inevitable despair, I have come to believe the essays and articles I am pulling together to follow my biography, *The New Negro: The Life of Alain Locke* (2018), contain a message we need to hear today in the face of disaster. It is this: the aesthetics of the Black community in America constitute an emancipatory platform

that can be used, if we dare, to launch new identities in the 21st century as it did in the third decade of the 20th. This emancipatory project can be studied, refined, and transformed to provide new solutions to the age old and still contemporary question: how do we get free?

New Negro Aesthetics constitute a manual of intellectual survival, an epistemology of recipes by which a soul can learn to survive under conditions of extreme danger, because that is what Locke and countless other Black intellectuals of his generation did through the cultivation of an aesthetic intelligence that, like this pandemic, is now world-wide. In other words, there is an intelligence in our aesthetics waiting to escape the song and enter the rest of our lives.

In 1925, when Locke's anthology, *The New Negro: An Interpretation* was published, African Americans faced a dilemma as we do today. After centuries of labor to build a nation, African Americans collectively remained the poorest, most segregated, and the least politically powerful of the various peoples who now inherit and benefit from the wealth African Americans created. This was true in Locke's time in a particular way—Blacks could not vote in much of the nation, could not hold political office in much of the nation, and could not live in the best neighborhoods of any city, because of legally binding restrictive covenants. Even if one was able to thrive and able to build a business, if it competed too much with white people's businesses, we risked being murdered, as Pulitzer Prize winning journalist Ida B. Wells pointed out in several newspaper articles. Lynching is still a reality in the routine gun assassinations we witness daily. The guilty went free as they do today.

Alain Locke, a tiny, gay, philosopher who believed himself to be Aframerican, had an idea. The key to emancipating oneself from the trap economics, trap politics, trap legal system, trap America, really, was the same in the 1920s as it is, I believe he would argue, today—*consciousness*. The only tool the Negro exited slavery with was her mind. Without using that, she, her family, her unemployed partner or husband, could be found lying in a ditch by the side of some southern road. The great accomplishment of slavery, the spirituals, sung collectively, or solo, took on special significance when in South Carolina, recently freed enslaved African Americans learned that the 40 acres and a mule promised them by Lincoln's federal government was not going to be given to the former slaves after all.

What to do? Use that song to create a “way out of no way,” perhaps the most important and enduring philosophical cliché in African American intellectual history. But how? Was it by protesting against a moral and economic travesty that every one of our allies knew to be wrong? Was it by entreating them to “help me” knowing full well that they would not risk their privileged insider position to benefit from such forms of white affirmative action as the Homestead Act to reach over and help us? Locke had grown into manhood in the early twentieth century witnessing the growth and even flourishing of the NAACP, the ascendancy of W.E.B. Du Bois to national and even international renown, the nationwide dissemination of *The Crisis* magazine throughout the United States, and the organization's relentless campaign, among others, against lynching, which ultimately failed to pass a federal antilynching bill. He witnessed the same kind of handwringing going on today in the face of this pandemic, people saying how awful it is that Black

people are dying disproportionately from COVID-19, but not taking one step to pass a universal healthcare bill that would save disproportionately the lives of the Black and the poor. What to do?

Liberation, Locke believed, started in the mind. Freedom began with choosing what is that one attends to mentally on a daily basis. With a radical riffing on Descartes, Locke believed—**I am what I think**. If I refuse to be unencumbered by racism, homophobia, colorism, sexism, anti-intellectualism—if I practice what another philosopher, Edmund Husserl recommended—an epoché, a suspension of the natural attitude others adopt towards reality and me—I can see things in a new way, from a transcendent attitude, and chart a path through this hell of a world and find agency and love. When I suspend that natural attitude, what do I hear, in my mind's ear? "On my journey now..." "Swing low, sweet chariot." "Steal Away," and on and on, song after song, poem after poem, dance after life giving dance, drama after courage inspiring drama, stylized, improvised, Africanized in new ways every day, the living archive of Black aesthetics.

What then is this thing called New Negro and what does it have to do with aesthetics? It is this: the Negro becomes new by turning her attention away from the noise of white racism, gender bias, trans violence, African imperialism, colonial violence, and meditates through aesthetics on the soul that escapes all the facticity, the material illusion of reality, and accessing the power of a nation, hidden in plain view, whose constituents are not one race, or one gender or one sexual orientation, but a nation of soul survivors seeking, over and over, again, the Promised Land—not just 40 acres but something

more—a new world a’coming whose footsteps are heard in the music, the rap, the tap, the dance, the patter, and the communion that speaks to us and through us in our aesthetics. The New Negro is that person who listens—and uses what he hears to reinvent herself just like a new song. He hears himself in the song, not on the 6 o’clock news. She finds power in the song, which turns into a dance by Pearl Primus that defies gravity, the pulling us down force of power relations in America, then and now. We hear in the performance of a Harry Belafonte how to reinvent our politics with our music, and listen like Martin Luther King, Jr., when Mahalia Jackson yelled to him, “Tell them about the Dream, Martin.” Our aesthetics embody, husband, preserve that dream until we have choreographed circumstances like Katharine Dunham to make it into a reality. The New Negro is he, she, or they who attend to these aesthetic traditions, who turn away from soul destroying arrangements of this world’s bad symphony, and improvise a new life with the power streaming from within or whispering just outside our door.

The New Negro is thus the will to change your mind. It is the willingness to stop thinking as reaction and start listening to the answer waiting to come through aesthetics as a new consciousness to you, your family, your community. The New Negro is the will to change. It is the rebirth of our ability to do something different, to translate our consciousness into a daily praxis, because the second proposition in Locke’s Cartesianism is melded with William James’s pragmatism: **you are what you do**. That means that the New Negro changes dialectically to meet new conditions with new enlightenment.

For example, given the increased incidence of death from COVID-19 among those who suffer from diabetes or who are overweight, the New Negro can use that

consciousness to ask our current community—is it time to change what we eat, how we treat our bodies and minds, what we consume, what we enjoy, what we seize upon as compensation for a life of stress and turmoil? It is time to turn away from that turmoil and the compensations it draws out of us to reconceive of ourselves anew? Is it time to turn away from a defiling consumer civilization and become something purer, cleaner, leaner, and healthier than those eating themselves to death? Is it time for our doctors to organize associations that can rationalize access to health for those who do not trust the white for-profit medical system? Is it time our teachers spawn new school systems through coffeehouses and community centers to teach our children world knowledge, not just Black or American history, to prepare our coming generation to run the world? It is time to teach self-defense but also mindfulness and self-care to people in our community to be psychologically armed for whatever comes? Is it time to innovate new collective community economies that evolve new forms of work and sustainability in the wake of COVID-19? Is it time to move on from the 19th century into a consciousness of what we accomplished in the 20th century—the translation of Black cultural production into the 4th industrial revolution that remains the most vibrant of sectors in the economy in the 21st?

I believe a New Negro is waiting to be born today. There is song lurking in this current madness beckoning us to make our communities, our consciousness, our bodies sustainable in the 21st century. Are we listening? Because the times, as that old song says, are a' changing. Are we?