Alain Locke, “The New Negro”, 1925

Introduction

In 1925 The Survey Graphic Magazine published a long essay written by Alain Locke in which he called for a new perception of African Americans. Ten years had passed since the 1915 celebration of the 50th anniversary of the abolition of slavery, and negritude still constituted a problem for US society and even black thinkers.

Alain Locke was considered not only as the father of the New Negro movement, also called Harlem Renaissance, but also as its most lucid voice. In 1925 he edited an anthology of black literature entitled *The New Negro: an interpretation*. Indeed, this erudite philosopher who had been educated in Harvard and Oxford, insisted on the central importance of culture in African Americans’ advancement, contrary to early responses to the question of blacks improvement. Indeed from the end of the 19th century to the ten first years of the 20th century two major thesis dominated people’s opinion about the question of African Americans: if Booker T. Washington proposed a blacks accommodation to white policies of Jim Crow segregation, his rival and major critic, William du Bois, founder of the NAACP movement believed in a more important black involvement in politics and in a creation of a cultivate elite who would lead the civil rights activism.

It is in the 1920’s that black culture reaches its splendor in spite of the shadow spread by the Ku Klux Klan. Harlem, the biggest black neighborhood in the world, became the epicenter of cultural activities. Plastic arts, literature, philosophy, theatre and jazz. This particular type of music was all the more important since the 1920 is also known as the Jazz age. African Americans changed the perception of themselves demonstrating that they were capable of high artistic and intellectual expressions.

To what extent could we say that what was new was actually not the so called “negro” but the perception of the “negro”? In this extract Alain Locke shows what the “new negro” is and later he tries to explain the astonishing effect produced by his new outlook. Therefore more than the birth of a “new negro” there was a shift of perception of “the negro” in the younger generations.
1. Harlem Renaissance (Survey Graphic, perhaps magazines, l.47-48
   - Survey Graphic, The Critic, opportunity
   - Cultural activities

2. New negro in younger generations (l.5,6, 36-37 spiritual emancipation,
   - A new spirit: against the nuns
   - Espíritu inquieto
   - Spiritual emancipation echoing the civil emancipation

3. The negro: a formula (l.3-4 nuns, 13-16, 19-21, 23 trad.positions, 26-27
   Civil war, Reconstruction
   - Civil War, Reconstruction and civil rights activism l26-27
   - The negro question: reflexión y estudio the three nuns 3-4se sale de lo establecido por ellas. A tal punto que el negro se volvió solo un problema una formula 13
   - El mismo negro en la misma actitud 1219-21 23

4. Pride and self respect (l.42-44, 48,49
   - The new negro is confident. He respects himself
   - Poise an certainty

5. Youth (l.5,6, 35 shake off, 36 shedding, 46, hughes’ poem, 50-57, 59
   - All what has been said is description of characteristics of youth: vitality and fraicheur
   - Ability to shaking off ans shedding old categories and traditional viewpoints
   - It is expressed in Hughes’ poem: ideal, la noche y la marcha. Juventud es reflexion y nueva percepcion para alcanzar bright.
1. Harlem Renaissance

In 1925 the magazine Survey Graphic produced an issue on *Harlem entitled Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro.*

Survey Graphic was a magazine launched in 1921 as a supplement of The Survey but from 1932 until its last volume in 1952 it was an independent publication. This magazine focused mainly on sociological and political issues both in the national and international scene. Anti-semitism, fascism, poverty union and working class were some of its most frequent topics.

The artistic and literary movement that flourished in Harlem in the 1920’s, known as The Harlem Renaissance could not pass unnoticed by the publication. The leading essay of the magazine was Alain Locke’s The New Negro, a title he would keep in his anthology of black literary works he would edit later that year.

In this piece of writing Locke pointed out at the spiritual change in the new generation of African Americans reflected in his “life-attitudes, and self-expression (...) in his poetry, his art his education and his new outlook” (l.46-47). The Harlem Renaissance was not only the expression of black hopes but also the expression of black pride. African Americans were capable of high quality artistic works: names like Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Countee Cullen or Zola Neale Hurston resounded in the literary scene of the 1920’s. Hughes, talking about black artists, even held once that: “we know we are beautiful”. Aware of this increase in self-esteem, Locke indicated that besides the flourishing of the black culture, blacks had the “additional advantage (...) of the black poise and greater certainty of knowing what it is all about” (l.48). In other words there was not only an increase in dignity but also an increase in self-understanding. Blacks were aware of their important role in the American civilization.

2. New negro in younger generations

The deducible vision of African Americans in Locke’s viewpoint is that of a black who was confident, creative and self-understanding. The younger generation of people had a new and vigorous spirit completely unpredictable by professional analysts and even race-leaders, which had a new destiny before them.
In the first paragraph of “The New Negro” Alain Locke says that the new generations of African Americans is “awake” (l.6). He talks of a “new spirit” (l.6), of a new generation that is “vibrant” and with a “new psychology” (l.5-6). There is a changeling, i.e. another child in the laps of the three norns that is even confusing intellectuals with his renewed vitality.

By the way norns were female beings in the Scandinavian mythology who ruled the destiny of humans and gods. Using this term could mean that there was a new destiny for African Americans but also as norns come from Scandinavia it could be a codified message addressed to whites’ supremacy.

In other words, the young black was so vibrant that it was out of all control and forecast. Even professionals like The Sociologist, the Philantropist and the Race-leader were “at a loss to account for him” (l.4). It is evident that Locke’s point of view was different from several race-leaders like William E. B. Dubois who was focused in giving a more important political role to African Americans as a way to achieve civil rights.

If Locke was aware that the image of the inferior black was still present in American minds, the lively spirit of the new generation epitomized in the Harlem Renaissance was the symbol of a “spiritual emancipation”(l.37) that echoed the civil emancipation that took place sixty years before.

3. The negro: a formula

Alain Locke criticized the positions of “professional observers” and even “race-leaders” that made researches in on the Civil War and The Reconstruction, in order to understand what was called the negro problem. These two periods were indeed important in African American history because between 1863 and 1870 black people were emancipated and granted the citizenship and the right to vote. However, according to Locke those observers were not “watching in the right direction” (l.29). “The actual march of development, he continues, has simply flanked these positions necessitating a reorientation of view” (l.27-28).

In other words, Locke denounced that over the years the negro had become an empty concept, a “formula” (l.16). This empty concept was “something to argue about, condemned or defended (something) 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” (16-18).
This empty formula, this problem had clouded both thinkers and civil-rights activist who were unaware or at least indifferent to what was happening for example in Harlem: blacks themselves also had been clouded by this empty formula: “The thinking negro even has been induced to share this same general attitude, to focus his attention on controversial issues, to see himself in the distorted perspective of a social problem (l.19-21)

In Locke’s opinion, it was necessary to get rid of empty concepts to change the perception. The human beings that constituted the Black American community should no longer be veiled behind an empty formula. It was necessary to look at the new generation of talented African Americans of the Harlem Renaissance.

4. Pride and self respect

A renewed self-respect and self-dependency are the two major features of the new negro according to Alain Locke (l.42). With these two features the new generation of African Americans Locke talks of “a new dynamic phase” (l.43). Through this expression he makes clear allusion to the creative period known as the Harlem Renaissance. He knew that the 1920’s is a racist decade, that the Ku Klux Klan activists harassed and terrorized hundreds of blacks. And yet the flourishing New Negro movement aroused in the black people this feeling of cheerfulness and optimism or in Locke’s words this “buoyancy from within compensating for whatever pressure there may be of conditions from without” (l.44).

Therefore in spite of adverse conditions of segregation in the United States, Locke celebrates the dignity and self-control of the new generation of blacks. Talking about the spiritual progress of black people, Locke says that there is an “additional advantage (…) of the poise and greater certainty of knowing what is all about”. In other words the new African American is conscious that he participates actively in American civilization. Locke knows that a civilization is made by the people and by their cultural activities. Blacks had a place as citizens and as culture producers.

5. Youth

The end of the extract recaps all what Locke has been talking about. And if everything had to be reduced to one word this would be Youth. As a matter of fact Locke has been giving all the characteristics of youth: freshness, vitality, critical spirit (l.35), new outlook, etc. He illustrates this discourse with a poem
written by Langston Hughes, one of the central figures of the Harlem Renaissance, precisely called Youth. The poem begins with the description of a bright future, perhaps the ideal, the gathering of all African Americans hopes. Then the past, dark, a clear allusion to African Americans sufferings, and finally the present, at dawn, when people march. The march is the new “dynamic phase” the time when a new generation of people think under a new perception and shake off old stereotypes.

Therefore Lockes invites the reader to see under this prospective what he calls the new negro. For him, the time of ridiculed and submissive negro is gone. For him also the time in which the black was only and issue of controversy is gone. The new generation plays an important role in the cultural life of the country as the Harlem Renaissance could show. In other words the new negro must be seen “through other than the dusty spectacles of past controversy” (l.59-60).