

Arthur Schomburg and Alain Locke's Response to Harlem Renaissance

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Abstract

This paper seeks to explore the role and positions of two notable scholars of the Harlem Renaissance- Arthur A. Schomburg and Alain Locke- in the evaluation of the movement. The paper will engage with the two essays: "The Negro Digs up His Past" by Arthur Schomburg and "The New Negro" by Alain Locke, published in the same volume of Survey Graphic in 1926, and analyze the participation of the two scholars in the movement with reference to the given essays.

Keywords: Harlem Renaissance, Black- consciousness, Self- determination, Cultural experiment, Self-vision

The Harlem Renaissance, a moment of unprecedented upsurge in the activity of Black American writers, scholars and artists in the early twentieth century continues to remain an important subject of exploration. The movement, however, has never been seen as a unified whole and has elicited complex and conflicted responses. One of the most comprehensive definitions of the movement has been offered by George Hutchinson who describes it as constituted of:

"...a complex and conflicted aura! People can scarcely agree on what it means. A vogue. A blossoming. A failure. A foundation. A few stars. A moment of Black self assertion against white supremacy, connected with anti colonial movements world-wide, or local phenomenon gradually co-opted and destroyed by white

voyeurs... A post invention of cultural historians, now abundantly exploited by publishers...”(Hutchinson 1)

The debate that often surrounds Harlem Renaissance is concerned with its ambiguous reception. Was it really an offshoot of the coming of age of racial consciousness or a movement constructed to promote certain vested interests? Migration to the north of USA was necessitated by the imperatives of the Post Reconstruction era and the racial segregation that intensified as a consequence. The industrial expansion in the North and its demand for labour (increasingly so during The First World War) made it lucrative for Blacks to shift to North. Harlem became an attractive option as real estate asset generation in this area had become far in excess of the demand. This, compounded by the fear of an impending economic crisis had motivated the real estate interests to do away with the exclusionary practices of segregating Blacks. Harlem thus became an inclusive space, bringing Blacks of all classes (including writers and artists) in close proximity with White Americans.

However, the internal stratification of the Black population (African American, Anglo-African, Afro-Caribbean) gave the movement a more complex character. Hutchinson seems to be quite on the mark in his evaluation of the movement as lacking cohesion, having competing visions, with overlapping social, intellectual circles, parallel developments, and yet bound together by a desire for “self-assertion” and “self-definition” in the face of white supremacy.

The large scale White patronage to the movement has raised questions about the authenticity of its African American moorings. More so, “given the imbalances of power” between Blacks and Whites and “the Whites’ inherited prejudices and blindness”. (Hutchinson 2). The scholarship during the period also had differing positions on it. While some saw the association between blacks and whites as indispensable, others were skeptical about the Whites’ involvement. Quite obviously, such a condition of production, dissemination, and reception has influenced the content of the art and literature produced in this period and the two authors in question are no exception.

An influential figure of the Harlem Renaissance, Arthur Schomburg worked most of his life towards recovering and reclaiming the global history of the Blacks in order to overcome the biases they faced and to create a lasting legacy for the future generation. In his essay “The Negro Digs up His Past”, he stresses on the need of having and preserving a sense of history especially for those who belong to a group whose history and humanity was routinely denied under slavery and segregation. The erasure of Black’s history and tradition by the dominant group led to the devaluation of their self. Schomburg emphasizes on the necessity of remaking of past in order to make the future. Debunking the constructed nature of the binary between Black and White, Schomburg disputes the notion of essential difference between the two Races. Steering away from the old apologetic stance he advocates the assertion of the black self but warns against a counter racial discourse. He promotes a modern, scientific view of history, which should involve neither biases nor counter-biases and expose the “bigotry of the civilization” by finding the true role and position of Blacks in it.

Crediting individual pioneers, of the likes of Abbe Gregoire as well as community efforts such as those made by NYPL (which he was a member of) in advancing the cause of racial advancement, he emphasizes on the growing determination among Blacks to have a well-documented history which can be widely known within race circles and act as an stimulating and inspiring tradition for the coming generations. Schomburg had himself contributed his collection of books and manuscripts on the worldwide black culture to the New York Public Library. Such libraries, he insisted, housed documents not only of the “true writing of Negro history” but also materials for the “rewriting of many important paragraphs of our common American history” (Schomburg 232). One of the important chapters of American history, which Schomburg thinks needs reconsideration, was the recognition of the role of “Black men” in initiating the Abolitionist movement. Abolition allowed better documentation by the Black scholars and brought them to international notice.

Schomburg in the essay “The Negro Digs up his Past” envisages a collective Black consciousness with an emphasis on “spiritual nourishment of the cultural past”. “The ‘negro’ has been a man without a history because he has been considered a man without a worthy culture”

(Schomburg 237). Drawing from the treasured past of African culture which would endow the blacks with a sense of racial pride, Schomburg sees the movement gradually gaining an international recognition, (the widening of the topography of Harlem to include the locations rather physically remote to it). He seems hopeful about the growing appreciation of the traditional craftsmanship of Black Americans, which he thinks contains the possibility of strengthening the rather nascent belief in the cultural achievements and potential of the African Americans.

Alain Locke's essay "The New Negro", popularly considered the manifesto of Harlem Renaissance, sets forth a charter of demands similar to those made by Schomburg; though in an overtly political way. Locke however, stresses on the building up of a cultural nationalism and the international scope of Harlem Renaissance more emphatically. He rejects the idea that Black migration is merely a result of war industry and rising social pressures. Instead he suggests that it was also occasioned by a new spirit shaping up through the interaction of the various elements of the 'dis-privileged' community. Locke states that this interaction ushers this community into a new dynamic phase, where the buoyancy from within counterweighs the pressure from without (Locke 4). A new scientific view of the contingency of race had enabled the blacks to review their self-understanding and shake off "the psychology of imitation and implied inferiority" (Locke 4). He duly underscores the contribution of the Blacks, not only in the field of art, music and literature but also "in larger, though humbler and less acknowledged ways". Emphasizing on their participation in the American civilization, he makes a case for their gradual inclusion in the American institution:-

"Democracy itself is obstructed and stagnated to the extent that any of its channels are closed... so the choice is not between one way for the 'Negro' and another way for the rest, but between American institutions frustrated on the one hand and American ideals progressively fulfilled and realized on the other" (Locke12)

The origin of the term 'The New Negro' can be traced to Booker T. Washington who had also advocated the refashioning of Black identity. However, his accommodationist approach to "cast down your bucket" didn't find favour with the racially oriented masses. Locke's conception

of a 'New Negro' discards all old stereotypes and sentimentalism. He states that the 'Negro' for generations in America had been "more of a formula than a human being..." (Locke 1). The 'Negro' had himself participated in their subjugation by conforming to the stereotypes. Jeffrey C. Stewart in his essay "The New Negro as Citizen" points out that after World War I, 'Negro', by migrating to North entered into urban and industrial voting districts. These migrating peasants, Locke demonstrates, were more forthright, direct and willing to demand citizenship rights rather than wait; or like the 'Old Negro', have them bestowed. The others as black soldiers, Stewart adds, having experienced relative freedom in Europe returned to Jim Crow's America ready to fight for their rights, further buoyed by the growing Black nationalist consciousness among the migrating masses.

Another far reaching implication of migration from South to North, Locke points out, was that the 'Negro' problem no longer remained exclusively southern and sectionalized. In addition, the segregation of Blacks "brought dissimilar elements into a common area of contact and interaction" thus reducing the class differentiation between them. "So what began in terms of segregation becomes more and more, as its elements mix and react, the laboratory of a great race-welding" (Locke 7). So far, Locke says, the Blacks had faced common condition rather than a common consciousness but in Harlem the 'Negro' life seized upon its first chances for "group expression" and "self-determination". In Locke's vision it was the rank and file who were leading and leaders who were following. "A transformed and transforming psychology permeates the masses" (Locke7). 'The New Negro', Locke avers, has broken free of the "old epoch of philanthropic guidance, sentimental appeal and protest" (Locke 11). Dispensing with social dependence and recovering from "hyper-sensitiveness" and "touchy nerves", they want to be accepted on their own terms. This new phase that called "less for charity but more justice; less help but infinitely closer understanding" was a critical phase of race relations (Locke10). He sees the failure to understand the current trend as resulting in destabilizing race relations and engendering sharper antagonism.

Locke argues that in inter-racial engagements co-operative relations must supplant philanthropy. Race relations could be facilitated by the close contacts of enlightened minorities

of both race groups. Noting the rising trend of Left radicalism among a section of the thinking minority (to whom the Soviet Union model seemed more egalitarian and committed to ending racism) , Locke downplays this shift and proposes that the ‘negro’ was radical only on race matters and conservative on all others. He aligns the emancipation of Blacks with the ideals of American institution and democracy.

The New Negro, initially published in the Survey Graphic magazine of March 1925 had its origin in a public “coming out” dinner to honour Black artists, writers and intellectuals in New York and was meant as a publicity ploy by Charles S. Johnson. The Role of liberal Whites in aiding the Renaissance movement remained crucial as well as gave rise to disputable views. The idea of cultural nationalism as espoused by Schomburg and Locke was widely contested by the likes of Langston Hughes, who was scathing about the idea even when the movement was at its peak and saw it merely as a passing phase. He famously declared that “the negro was in vogue” and that Harlem Renaissance was imposed rather a product of an evolving process. Harlem indeed had a minuscule constituency majorly led by the “talented tenth” of the African Americans. A large mass of Blacks were never aware that a movement called Harlem Renaissance existed. Hughes was a witness to the Great Depression by which time the movement had been completely demystified. The cultural experiments of Harlem Renaissance degenerated in the 1930s and self-vision and political intent was diluted.

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