

## *The New Negro: An Afrocentric Anthology Embracing Folk Culture*

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As Arthur Schomburg asserts, “The American Negro must remake his past in order to make his future” (231). For the New Negro, returning to the past can represent horror, tragedy, and destruction; however, remaking the past can reconnect them with their long-lost African heritage, affording the opportunity to claim authenticity in the fight against “the race problem.” Leonard Diepeveen emphasizes the ambivalences toward folktales of which renounced the prized traditions including, “an uneasy accommodation with the past and past literary tradition, and the campaign for desegregation, a campaign that used artistic expression as one of its main tools” (66). With Diepeveen’s emphasis on negative notions of the past and Locke’s goals of desegregation, he fails to recognize and acknowledge Locke’s commitment to the New Negro’s Afrocentric identity and pride within his anthology, *The New Negro*. Locke defiantly embraces folk culture so the New Negro can fully claim and celebrate their authentic Black identity originating from African heritage while striving for modernity during the Harlem Renaissance. Locke carefully works to rewrite the past’s racist depictions, such as Old Negro stereotypes and primitivism, by embracing folk culture as an authentic representation of the Black experience through his inclusions of folk art, literary traditions, including signifying and tricksterism, and music, such as work songs and spirituals, within his Afrocentric anthology.

Africa lies central to folk art, allowing the New Negro to gain originality and authentic outlets of expression for representing their unique Black experience through creative mediums and genuine mastery of skill. Included in Locke’s anthology, Arthur A. Schomburg in, “The Negro Digs Up His Past” dissects that “the Negro has been a man without a history because he has been considered a man without a worthy culture” (237). From the beginning of American

colonization, African culture had a wide array of racist depictions, including Old Negro stereotypes listed by Locke as, “aunties,’ ‘uncles’ and ‘mammies” and primitivism in which warranted the predominant white population to enslave, civilize and Christianize the “inferior” Black race, a concept in which they constructed. The New Negro, then, must fully embrace genuine Black folk culture from their ancestral African heritage to negate such fabricated notions of the past. Schomburg proposes “a new notion of cultural attainment and potentialities of the African stocks has recently come about...through the signal recognition which first in France and Germany, but now very generally, the astonishing art of the African sculptures has received” (237). Diepeveen argues that even so, there may not have been a uniform recognition of folk culture given the ambivalence of “an uneasy accommodation with the past” (66). Though, Locke fully commits to and embraces folk culture to rather resemble the authentic artistry and excellence of the constructed Black race.

Locke asserts within his own essay, “The Legacy of Ancestral Arts” that African art influences modern-day art which, among its discovery from the historic past, has become a central, transformative influence to the New Negro’s evolving aesthetic. Locke states, “African art has influenced modern art most considerably. It has been the most influential exotic art of our era” (258). Black folk art not only influences through its pure forms, but reflects the New Negro’s innate intellect and creativity disproving conceived notions of primitivism. He continues, “The African art object, a half generation ago the most neglected of ethnological curios, is now universally recognized as a ‘notable instance of plastic representation,’ a genuine work of art, masterful over its material in a powerful simplicity of conception, design and effect” (258). Locke concludes that in digging up the deep, historic soil, the New Negro learns the legacy of folk art while cultivating an authentic Black identity derived from their African

heritage. However, Diepeveen argues “Locke's anthology *The New Negro* is a document based on integrationist principles” (74). Diepeveen suggests that desegregation arises as an ambivalence in derived forms of folk culture because highlighting unique cultural traditions contradicts Locke’s push for integration and to share common traditions. Even so, such ambivalences Diepeveen points out, do not acknowledge or recognize Locke’s bold commitment to the New Negro’s strivings of an Afrocentric identity through original and resilient forms of folk art from the past.

Albert C. Barnes’s, “Negro Art in America,” further emphasizes the resilience of African art created by African Americans, turning their past uprootal from Africa and forced transplant to America into current extravagant expressions of folk art tracing back to their origins across the sea. Barnes points out that great art was bound to blossom given such traumatic experiences in which the constructed Black race faced. He claims, “That there should have developed a distinctively Negro art in America was natural and inevitable. A primitive race, transported into an Anglo-Saxon environment and held in subjection to that fundamentally alien influence, was bound to undergo the soul-stirring experiences which always find their expression in great art” (19). His description of “primitive race” acknowledges racist depictions previously mentioned, Old Negro stereotypes and primitivism, perhaps, perpetuating them further in the medium of folk art. Diepeveen felt Locke’s anthology highlighted ambivalences of the “uneasy accommodations of the past” including both Old Negro stereotypes and primitivism, addressed within Barnes’s essay. However, Barnes’s essay directly combats such primitive stereotypes through his presentation of redefining elements including, “tremendous emotional endowment, his luxuriant and free imagination and a truly great power of individual expression” (19). Barnes clearly recognizes the racist depictions that constructed America’s historic past; however, he transforms

history to center around Africa, based upon a new, inherent definition of primitivism; one that encapsulates ingenuity sought after by the New Negro and redirects the historical narrative to embrace folk culture as a direct representation of an accurate, authentic Black identity.

In redirecting the historical narrative, Zora Neale Hurston shines as an example of a modern-day Black writer of folk literature, who embraces Black folk rural southern culture as the core of Black creative expression essential to the New Negro's Afrocentric identity. However, Diepeveen points out a primary ambivalence that Locke further emphasized, the rural folk moving to urban city centers. "The ambivalence first comes from the fact that the New Negro and the Harlem Renaissance were both contemporary urban phenomena, while most of the earlier folktales came from the rural South. Locke emphasized this change: 'The migrant masses, shifting from countryside to city, hurdle several generations of experience at a leap, but more important, the same thing happens spiritually in the life-attitudes and self-expression of the Young Negro, in his poetry, his art, his education and his new outlook, with the additional advantage, of course, of the poise and greater certainty of knowing what it is all about.' The shift was not just temporal and geographic, but cultural" (67-68). According to Diepeveen, Locke encouraged the contradictory change in movement to urban centers, such as Harlem, from the rural south country side. Even so, Locke continually placed a greater emphasis on folk culture and literary traditions of speech, including the Black vernacular, in modernity. For example, in "Spunk," Hurston writes, "'But that's one thing Ah likes about Spunk Banks—he ain't skeered of nothin' on God's green footstool'" (105). Hurston's characters, such as Lena, celebrate Black folk culture through using Black vernacular, compiled of complex and creative language, and the signifying tradition, creative oral expressions including insults that act as a means of survival. In addition to the rich dialectic traditions within "Spunk," the inferior, Joe Kanty, returns at the end

of the story in the form of a black bobcat and gains empowerment through killing Spunk, functioning as a kind of trickster tale of which traces directly back to West African traditions, further provoking Locke's embrace of folk culture and the New Negro's return to authenticity to be victorious at last.

Locke's Afrocentric anthology entails Black folklore and authentic trickster tales directly tracing back to Africa, embracing the role of folk culture and the New Negro's African heritage in modernity. Arthur Huff Fauset in, "American Negro Folk Literature," describes the values of folklore as, "1) lack of the self-conscious element found in ordinary literature. 2) nearness to nature. 3) universal appeal" (242). He then asserts that, "Negro Folk Lore is a genuine part of world folk literature" (243). Fauset shows undeniable support of folk culture explaining that icons, such as terrapins, are included in folktales across the globe and can be accredited to African heritage. The authentic trickster tale "T'appin" told by Cugo Lewis follows Fauset's persuasive essay and directly links to Africa. Cugo Lewis was one of the last slaves to be transported across the sea from Africa on a slave ship, ancestrally connecting ancient folk traditions to the contemporary cultural age. However, Diepeveen rather warrants a break between folklore and the New Negro which is two-fold, "the race had moved on to more contemporary issues... [and] Black folklore also was peculiarly tied to the past; Black folklore contained many more references to recent (within the past seventy-five years), historically verified oppression and humiliation than did folklores of most other races and cultures" (68-69). For Diepeveen, Locke didn't include many pieces of folktales for such reasons because of their "unpleasant aspects of the cultural heritage" (69). Although, far and few folktales ancestrally tie back to Africa. Therefore, Locke's inclusion of Cugo Lewis's folktale reinforces his commitment to

Afrocentrism where the New Negro can proudly claim his authentic, ancestral roots of Africa in the modern movement.

Locke's commitment to folk culture perseveres throughout the anthology through other literary components, poetry in particular, which recenters Afrocentric values and experiences, including the Black church, set as the core of the New Negro movement. In James Weldon Johnson's poem, "The Creation," presented by Locke in his anthology, he recentered the biblical creation story to resemble an Afrocentric vision in order to rewrite and revalue Blackness in the modern discourse. Johnson's Afrocentric vision can be illustrated in the following stanza: "And as far as the eye of God could see / Darkness covered everything, / Blacker than a hundred midnights / Down in a cypress swamp" (138). Johnson's naturalistic environment within the poem works to reaffirm Blackness based on the embodied dark imagery, constructing an Afrocentric view of the beginning of the world. By writing a poem focused on religious convictions, he distinguishes the Black church as a core value of folk culture. Nonetheless, Diepeveen prevails in his case that Locke's anthology emphasizes the recurring ambivalences of the time, inferring that some of the traditional themes instilled by the Black church remain in the past as the New Negro seeks new values. "In 1923 Charles Johnson articulated a theme that was to become the hallmark of the new Black writers: 'The 'dark ages' of Negro poetry are being left behind and along with this period has gone the muddled psychology of a distracted and overwhelmed race. These voices now speaking have caught not only the inspiration of newer ideals but the new spirit of Negro life.' The later publication of Alain Locke's anthology *The New Negro* (1925) gave this concept much wider attention" (67). Thus, Diepeveen suggests that some Black church traditions preached within poetry do not fit the "newer ideals" or "new spirit of Negro life" sought after by the New Negro. For example, "She Of The Dancing Feet Sings"

by Countee Cullen further illustrates Diepeveen's claims that tensions are central to Locke's anthology, particularly between the old and new. He writes, "And how would I thrive in a perfect place / Where dancing would be sin" (131). Within Cullen's poem, he refers to the dangers of dancing, alluding to the old, traditional ideals of the Black church and insinuates modern jazz music puts those traditions at risk and in danger because it can provoke sinful actions. Yet, Locke's inclusion of contradictory poems fail to take the center of the anthology. His Afrocentric collection includes pieces from rising New Negro writers of whom wish to assert their own original objectives and intrinsic Black identity by building upon their African heritage, the central foundation of Locke's compilation.

African heritage has long-lived and endured extensive turmoil yet its triumphant music continues to resound today echoing through Locke's embrace in his Afrocentric anthology. "Negro Spirituals" by Alain Locke identifies music as an expression of an authentic, uniquely Black experience. Locke explains, "They have outlived the particular generation and the peculiar conditions which produced them; they have survived in turn of the contempt of the slave owners, the conventionalizations of formal religion, the repressions of Puritanism, the corruptions of sentimental balladry, and the neglect and disdain of second-generation respectability" (199). Spirituals transpire embrace not only for their acclaimed authenticity, but for their resiliency through adversity. He continues to describe the Black experience in which they invoke, "But underneath broken words, childish imagery, peasant simplicity, lies, as Dr. Du Bois pointed out, an epic intensity and a tragic profundity of emotional experience, for which the only historical analogy is the spiritual experience of the Jews and the only analogue, the Psalms" (200). Diepeveen points to an ambivalence as to why spirituals are so profoundly embraced by Locke, because they work directly in the campaign for desegregation and integrating cultures into one.

“[Folktales] didn't fit in with white culture as easily as spirituals, which expressed Protestant convictions” (76). Thus, Diepeveen suggests Locke expressed far more of an embrace towards spirituals rather than folktales, given the religious integration and ideals. Furthermore, the colossal calamity interwoven in harmonic notes and melodies of song produced significant strength for the entire constructed Black race to carry on and gain progress in a racist culture. Consequently, Locke fully embraces such forms of folk culture because the New Negro strives for progression in modernity and with spirituals, they can courageously express genuine emotion about their past and present experiences while similarly relating to white American culture.

Diepeveen points out that even though Locke fully embraces spirituals, other quintessential components, such as folktales, mark folk culture with ambivalences. He explains that folktales can “simply present the world as it is, without any suggestions for possible transformation” (76). He touches on the apparent lack of transformation proposed by folktales and the evolving New Negro striving for modernity seemingly contradict one another within Locke's anthology. In addition, “Since Black folktales not only had little explicit striving for justice but also dealt with Blacks who were neither wealthy nor powerful and didn't have "dignity" (a quality seen as vital to the aesthetic success of spirituals), folktales could not be easily appropriated into the Black aesthetic” (76). In regards to Diepeveen's perspective, Locke places limitations upon his embrace of folk culture and portrays ambiguous attitudes towards its major components. Though, *The New Negro*, is designed to resemble a jazz song, transforming and gaining complexity with each piece and each unique Black experience. Thus, his inclusion of all three primary forms of folk culture, show more clearly his embrace and Afrocentric vision of encapsulating the New Negro's African heritage.



Within the music section of Locke's anthology, *Jazzonia* by Langston Hughes, showcases an inspiring Afrocentric vision of music in modern pretenses originating from the New Negro's African heritage. Hughes's song reads, "Oh, singing tree! / Oh, shining rivers of the soul! / Were Eve's eyes / In the first garden / Just a bit too bold? / Was Cleopatra gorgeous / In a gown of gold?" (226). Hughes's setting placed presumably in the Garden of Eden with a singing tree suggests that music originally came from Africa, as did the beginning of creation and all human life. Locke's embrace of Hughes's lyrics reinforces folk traditions like spirituals and work songs, derived from Africa, still linger in modern day forms. Despite Locke's whole embrace of music, Diepeveen advocates the anthology's ambivalences regarding the past take over the celebratory tones. He explains, "Black writers might be using materials from their past, but in the Harlem Renaissance at least, the emphasis was on past. Blacks had progressed. Consequently, Black writers such as Langston Hughes who used a folk tradition worked with folk materials most familiar to them and their audiences, mainly urban materials like jazz and blues" (68). Thus, his argument proclaims that folk materials constituted modern forms of music rather than authentic spirituals or work songs. Nonetheless, Locke fosters authenticity and embraces folk culture even with the use of "urban materials" because jazz has distinct African origins, specifically its West African rhythms.

An urban piece written, "Nude Young Dancer" by Langston Hughes can be dissected in *The New Negro*, touching on the tensions between recurring Black church traditions and modern ideals, yet still universally embracing music as a fundamental Afrocentric cultural characteristic in which the New Negro can claim his tried-and-true identity. Hughes writes, "What jungle tree have you slept under, / Dark brown girl of the swaying hips?" (227). He creates a primitive Afrocentric vision of which a young Black girl has danced scandalously, seen in the eyes of the

Black church as risky, sinful behaviors. Although this contradiction appears, the modern movements provoked by ancient musical melodies stem from Africa, proving African music is at the heart of a true Black identity. However, Diepeveen's argument of ambivalence raises an important issue: "This selective portrayal of the race (and its results for folktales) often appeared in the issue of whether the Black artist should use clearly Black materials to show the richness of his African heritage or whether he should concentrate on the similarities between the races (77)". Consequently, when African folk culture is compared and contrasted with white American culture, racist depictions arise, such as Old Negro stereotypes and primitivism, because the foundation is based upon accentuated differences rather than acute similarities. He highlights such an ambivalence because Locke's goals promoted integration and similarity between societal constructions of an "inferior" race. Even though Hughes's primitive portrayal could perpetuate racist stereotypes, Locke embraces folk culture through Hughes's modern lyrics.

The staggering melody of the New Negro's historical past can bring up tragedy and brutality, however, remaking the past with a new spirit can reconnect the New Negro with their long-lost African heritage, advantaging an astronomical avenue to fully claim authenticity in modern society in which they are continually questioned. Leonard Diepeveen emphasizes the ambivalences toward folktales of which renounced the prized traditions including, "an uneasy accommodation with the past and past literary tradition, and the campaign for desegregation, a campaign that used artistic expression as one of its main tools" (66). Diepeveen emphasizes negative notions of the past and Locke's proposed goals of desegregation, integrating into one culture, while failing to recognize and acknowledge Locke's clear commitment to the New Negro's Afrocentric identity and true pride within *The New Negro*. Locke embraces folk culture within his collected anthology so the New Negro can fully claim and create their authentic Black

identity originating from African heritage. Locke tediously works to rewrite the past's racist depictions, such as Old Negro stereotypes and primitivism, by embracing folk culture as an avenue to create an authentic representation of the Black experience through his inclusions of folk art, literary traditions, including signifying and tricksterism, and music, such as work songs and spirituals, within his Afrocentric anthology published during the heart of the Harlem Renaissance in 1925.

## Works Cited

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