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Amir Jaima

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IN SEARCH OF BLACK ART(ISTS)

On James A. Porter's Instructive Misunderstanding of Alain L. Locke

by Amir Jaima

No Negro who has given earnest thought to the situation of his people in America has failed, at some time in life, to find himself at these cross-roads; has failed to ask himself at some time: What, after all, am I? Am I an American or am I a Negro? Can I be both? Or is it my duty to cease to be a Negro as soon as possible and be an American? If I strive as a Negro, am I not perpetuating the very cleft that threatens and separates Black and White America? Is not my only possible practical aim the subduction of all that is Negro in me to the American?

—W. E. B. Du Bois, *"Conservation of the Races"*

These questions, which have engaged so many, have troubled all of my work. How to be both free and situated; how to convert a racist house into a race-specific yet nonracist home. How to enunciate race while depriving it of its lethal cling? They are questions of concept, of language, of trajectory, of habituation, of occupation, and, although my engagement with them has been fierce, fitful, and constantly (I think) evolving, they remain in my thoughts as aesthetically and politically unresolved.

—Toni Morrison, *"Home"*

What does it mean to be a "Negro" artist? What is "Negro" art?¹ As W. E. B. Du Bois suggests above, these are permutations of questions that all thoughtful Black Americans—not only artists—who make contributions to culture and knowledge have asked themselves and their communities. And as Toni Morrison suggests, these questions are as relevant to the thoughtful and productive Black American in 1998 as they were in 1897. Consequently, it is no surprise that in the 1920s and 1930s, the Black philosopher and avid advocate of the arts, Alain Leroy Locke, proposed an answer. I will argue that his proposal remains useful today in 2018. It entails an appropriately strong anti-racist impulse in light of the historical and political context, while remaining sensitive to the freedom that artists reserve to follow their muses, and the historical fact that the Negro is, fundamentally, a culturally Western demographic.

At the time, however, Locke's proposal was sharply criticized by the notable artist and historian James Amos Porter. In short, Porter claims that Locke's proposal betrays an ignorance of both art history and artistic practice; Locke apparently overlooks relevant contributions from American art history and imposes academic restrictions on artistic subject-matter. I will argue that Porter's criticisms misunderstand and mischaracterize Locke's proposal. Nevertheless, the misunderstanding is instructive. Basically, what appears to be a criticism is more

Amir Jaima is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Texas A&M University. His primary research interests are in Aesthetics and Africana Philosophy.

a function of differing disciplinary perspectives rather than ideological incompatibilities. If we reconsider Locke's proposal and Porter's criticism in the light of their methodological orientations, we can appreciate that they are not actually disagreeing that much. With regard to Porter's ire for Locke, perhaps as an artist he resented being told what to do by a philosopher—fair enough. Yet, what Porter fails to appreciate is that Locke's proposal, while directed at artists in particular, pertains to the situation of the Negro more generally and the status of our cultural productions as a whole. Just because he is not an artist specifically does not mean that he cannot speak intelligently about the contributions of Negroes to American culture generally. As I will explain below, analogous questions emerge in Locke's disciplinary wheelhouse: what does it mean to be a Black philosopher? What is Black philosophy? Some of the most compelling answers are strikingly similar to Locke's proposal to the Negro artist.

First of all, what is Locke's proposal? Like a good American philosopher, Locke asks, how should we *define* "negro art"? What are the best criteria according to which we can identify/exclude the obvious cases, and sensibly and consistently adjudicate the ambiguous ones? In "The Negro's Contribution to American Culture" (1939), Locke asks, "What makes a work of art Negro, its theme or its idiom? What constitutes a 'Negro contribution to culture,' its authorship or its cultural base? Is there or should there be any such set of categories in our critical thinking or our creative living?" (*Works* 240). By way of an answer, Locke notes in "The Negro Takes his Place in American Art" from *The Negro and His Music: Negro Art: Past and Present* (1936) that there are "three factors involved in the relation of the Negro to art. . . . One is the promotion of the Negro artist; another, the development of Negro art; and a third is the promotion of the Negro theme and subject as a vital phase of the artistic expression of American life" (59). This programmatic trifurcation reflects a tripartite definition, and is motivated by practical, anti-racist concerns. If we hope to redress the institutional exclusion and underappreciation of Black artists and their work, then we need to know where to direct our attention.

First, Negro art consists simply of those works of art created by "Negro" artists, where "Negroes" are, as Du Bois notes, those who must "ride 'Jim Crow' in [1930s] Georgia" (*Oxford Reader* 68). Thematically this is a very broad criterion, since there is no requirement that the works of art explicitly touch upon any particular subject-matter, not to mention the "Negro subject" specifically. As Locke himself notes, "No one is today [in 1936] so foolish as to want to restrict the Negro artist to racial subject-matter or to being merely an exponent of Negro art" (*Negro and His Music* 59). Locke even praises the "notably successful Negro" artist Henry O. Tanner who, nevertheless, "never maturely touched the portrayal of the Negro subject" (*Works* 192). Second, "Negro art" describes those works of art that directly engage the idea or image of the Negro. This criterion is a double-edged sword, to which Locke is sensitive. It includes racial "propaganda," both positive and negative. Also, it compels us to include the works of some non-Negro artists. For example, quoting James Weldon Johnson's preface to *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, Locke notes that this criterion must include, lamentably, "Uncle Remus, with titular white authorship" (*Works* 240).

And third, Locke argues that Negro art describes works that convey a "representative racial style" (*Works* 133). These are works that would comprise what Locke envisioned as a "school of Negro art," which would accomplish the "double duty" of "interpreting the Negro in the American scene to America at large" and "more importantly still . . . the interpretation of the Negro to himself" (133, 159). Locke explains further that this is "Not an art artificially corrective or self-pluming, but at least one that aims to tell the whole truth, as the artist sees it, and tells it, as all good art must, with an accent of understanding or beauty, or both" (159). This Negro style, Locke concedes, is "hard to define, no doubt; but fortunately in practice,

it is easy enough to discriminate on close contact and comparison" (242). In short, while it is difficult to articulate, you know it when you see it, or in the case of music, when you hear it. Explaining further, Locke says, "Like rum in the punch, that although far from being the bulk ingredient, still dominates the mixture, the Negro elements have in most instances very typical and dominating flavors, so to speak" (242). Finally, and most importantly, Locke observes that as of the 1930s, Negro art of this third sort is a relatively new development. As early as 1925, Locke proposed that in order to develop a school of Negro art and to cultivate further this nascent American style, artists might learn from African art.

For Locke, this third definition is the most important criterion of Negro art. The first criterion—Negro authorship—is important in order to redress patterns and mechanisms of underrepresentation and under-specialization. We need to ensure that the historically excluded have adequate opportunities for technical training and the presentation of their work. These countermeasures, however, do not contest the fundamental sociogenic forces whereby we become "Niggas" in first place, meaning Negroes in the pejorative sense. Representation and inclusion are necessary Band-Aids, so to speak, but not ultimate solutions. The second criterion—Negro subject-matter—is important in order to catalog artistic statements about the Negro, both positive and negative. This presumably neutral, historiographic exercise, however, overlooks the affective and *persuasive* dimension of those statements. For example, as Locke astutely notes, one of "the cleverest *arguments* for the slave system was this misrepresentation of the Negro as happy, content and 'naturally in place' in such a romanticized presentment of the patriarchal regime of the Southern plantation" (*Works* 158; emphasis added). The fact remains that in spite of any artist's intentions to neutrality, art makes a claim about the world; consequently any depiction of the Negro says that some Negroes are like this. Again, this is not to suggest that artists should depict Black people in an "artificially corrective or self-pluming" manner. Nevertheless, to aspire to political neutrality as a Black contributor to culture in a racist society is an abdication of an aspect of one's responsibility; in other words, in spite of one's intentions, you simply cede the conceptual and rhetorical space to other political actors, perhaps even hostile ones.

Analogously in contemporary Africana philosophy, Lucius Outlaw asks the questions: what is Black philosophy? Who is a Black philosopher? Like Locke, he offers a tripartite definition. He explains: "'Africana philosophy' is the phrase I use as a 'gathering' notion under which to situate the articulations (writings, speeches, etc.) and traditions of Africans and peoples of African descent collectively, as well as the subdiscipline- or field-forming, tradition-defining or tradition-organizing reconstructive efforts, which are (to be) regarded as philosophy" (64). In short, Black philosophy consists of the thoughts produced by Black people, writings that are about Black people, *and* the various schools of thought born out of the "life-worlds" (65)—i.e. the historical, geographical, and sociological condition—of Black people. This manner of defining entails the same broad inclusions as Locke's definitions. Some "black philosophers" will attend to "non-Black" questions. Some "black philosophy" will be produced by non-African-descended peoples. But most importantly, "Africana philosophy" defined in terms of various schools of thought will reflect a somewhat coherent "discursive venture," even if it is a field constructed "*ex post facto*" (Outlaw 73). By this Outlaw means that many of the included texts and figures would not necessarily have thought of themselves as involved in "something called 'philosophy' or 'Africana philosophy'" (73). Nevertheless, as Outlaw notes, "The search for 'unity' is also a political project" (74). In other words, as long as we intuitively accept the motivation behind the first two parts of the definition, meaning that there are in fact Black people who symbolize the most vulnerable and denigrated actors in our American institutional power dynamic, then the implicit anti-racist and anti-colonial

impulse serves as the basis for the third definition, namely a coherent school of thought. This is also the case for the Black artist.

This third criterion and Locke's attendant proposal for the future cultivation of a school of Negro art led James Porter, historian and Negro artist, to pen a scathing criticism. In "The Negro Artist and Racial Bias" (1937) Porter contends, first, that Locke is ignorant of art history, since he ignores "all that had been accomplished by the Negro on American soil in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth centuries." Porter cites a "long procession of artists and writers whose work in sum represents a brilliant introduction to the Negro Renaissance." Second, Porter argues that Locke unfairly diminishes the "cultural aspirations of the first free Negroes as evidence of class privilege," suggesting that while their art and literature may not have been "racialist" in the ways that Locke might have preferred, their works "represented the conviction of truth over against a hell of prejudice" (8). Third, Locke fails to appreciate the craft arts and Negro spirituals as "aspects of culture." Porter argues that these contributions to culture indisputably convey a distinct racial style, and to ignore them is simply elitism. Fourth, Locke's suggestion that the American Negro artist might learn something from African art overlooks the fact that the "'primitive' artist, whether African or Polynesian, is at one with the forms he uses because these are dictated by the society in which he finds himself" (8). And since American Negroes are no more "African" than white Americans are "Greek," Locke's proposed stylistic adoption is a pernicious instance of cultural appropriation, and the imitative imposition of a "specious 'Africanism' upon his art" (9). Fifth, Porter argues that Locke's desire for a "distinctive contribution of the Negro artist to American culture" is "socially exclusive, racially self-conscious, formal in style and content, and politically neutral" (9). In other words, Locke's aspiration effectively segregates the Negro from other aspects of American culture, a culture of which the Negro is a part. Contrary to Locke's claim that we need a "real and vital racialism in art" (*Negro and His Music* 61), Porter argues that we should cultivate an "anti-racialist front," a collection of voices and artistic statements whose "interpretations [are] universal in value" (9). Porter continues, "These young people are impressed with the richness and the variety of life and the urgency of the material problems that they must solve. They will not cringe or be driven into a tight and unworthy little compartment of aesthetic production" (9).

A few years later, in his acclaimed *Modern Negro Art* (1943), Porter reiterates his rebuke, but adds one point. Porter characterizes Locke as an "apologist," meaning, a proponent of stereotypical depictions of the Negro, albeit positive ones, under the guise of "Negro art." Negro artists forced into Locke's Procrustean bed, "between plantation tradition and African tradition" end up producing works "offering no insight into Negro character" (100, 98). Ultimately, Porter suggests that if thinkers like Locke cannot appreciate the collective contributions of past and present Negro artists as sufficiently anti-racist, then the lack is on the part of the academic imagination, not the artistic vision of Negro artists taken as group. Porter invites us to survey the history of Negro cultural productions with a more open mind with regard to what we consider "art" and what kinds of artistic statements might function as anti-racist.

These are serious charges against Locke, levied with the indignation born of offense, and the fervor of one who defends against a foreign invader. Let us not forget that Porter was a practicing artist himself, and consequently was included among those whom Locke addresses. Nevertheless, Porter's criticisms fall short of rebuttals, much less refutations. On the face of it, Porter has constructed a strawman of Locke's proposals and interpreted his definition of Negro art without scholarly rigor or hermeneutic charity. While Locke did not actually respond to Porter directly, he has ample writings on the particular issues. In fact, when reading Locke's words, it seems as though Porter and Locke *should* be in agreement.

First, recall that Porter claims that Locke ignores Negro artists prior to “the first twenty-five years of this century” (Porter, “The Negro Artist” 8). Even a cursory survey of Locke’s writings, however, provides evidence to the contrary. Moreover, in more than one publication, Locke analyzes and praises the work of many of the *same artists* of which Porter claims Locke is ignorant.² With regard to Locke’s apparently elitist dismissal of the Negro spiritual, consider Locke’s 1925 meditation on the very topic. The opening line of “The Negro Spirituals” reads:

The Spirituals are really the most characteristic product of the race genius as yet in America. But the very elements which make them uniquely expressive of the Negro make them at the same time deeply representative of the soil that produced them. Thus, as unique spiritual products of American life, they become nationally as well as racially characteristic. (*Works* 105)

Are these the words condescension? With regard to Locke’s proposal that artists adopt a “specious ‘Africanism,’” particularly as it pertains to his apparent failure to appreciate the two related facts that, one, artists draw their inspiration and idioms from their cultural context, and two, that the Negro is fundamentally American, i.e. *Western*, not “African,” consider Locke’s own words again. In “The American Negro as Artist” (1931), Locke begins with the emphatic premise that “the American Negro as an artist is completely different from his African prototype” (*Works* 129). The reasons for this difference are, of course, historical, as Locke explains. And with regard to Locke’s alleged segregationist ethos born of his racialism, it is evident that Porter’s characterization is a caricature, not Locke’s actual view. Again from “The American Negro as Artist,” Locke explains:

But the younger generation of Negro artists since 1915 have a new social background and another art creed. For the most part, the goal of the Negro artist today projects an art that aims to express the race spirit and background as well as the individual skill and temperament of the artist. Not that all contemporary Negro artists are conscious racialists—far from it. But they all benefit, whether they choose to be racially expressive or not, from the new freedom and dignity that Negro life and materials have attained in the world of contemporary art. And, as might be expected, with the removal of the cultural stigma and burdensome artistic onus of the past, Negro artists are showing an increasing tendency toward their own racial milieu as a special province and in their general work are reflecting more racially distinctive notes and overtones. (*Works* 131)

In effect, the “real and vital racialism in art” that Locke says must be encouraged, and which Porter finds somehow objectionable, is not an academic prescription, but a *description* of the natural consequence of a growing pride among artists in our cultural and racial identity. According to Locke, racialism in art does not indicate a choice of subject; rather it describes the quality of a newly expanded artistic repertoire, the “[Negro] rum in the [American] punch.”

Furthermore, we should note that Locke is not, as Porter implies, in search of a particular kind of art work, some predetermined Negro imagery of academically-prescribed African design. Locke hopes to encourage Black people in general to adopt a new attitude and orientation vis-à-vis Blackness. Locke observes that, “Prejudice had made the Negro half-ashamed of himself” (*Negro and His Music* 61). Locke wants us to be unapologetically and unashamedly “Black,” which means to see ourselves amidst a history of denigration as possibly and probably Beautiful and Good. Locke suggests that the artist is uniquely equipped to facilitate

this general cultural awakening. In "Art or Propaganda?" (1928) Locke muses that "we are at that interesting moment when the prophet becomes the poet and when prophecy becomes the expressive song, the chant of fulfillment" (*Works* 219). Artists have insight, and given the opportunity, they might show us the "whole truth" of ourselves, both flattering and shameful, but in both cases beyond denigrating stereotype.

Shifting gears somewhat, in the 1970s, psychologist William E. Cross, Jr. articulated a useful model according to which we might understand the process that Locke hoped that artists could facilitate. As we will see, this awakening is difficult and time-consuming. Cross describes five stages in what he called the "Negro-to-Black Conversion Experience." The first stage he called the "Pre-encounter." A person in this stage has a worldview "dominated by Euro-American determinants," accepting uncritically the culturally presumed inferiority of Blackness ("Toward a Psychology" 15). In the final chapter of *The Sellout*, Hampton Fiske, the lawyer representing Paul Beatty's protagonist, provides a contemporary re-articulation of the Cross model as a way to answer the timeless question, "what is blackness?". He says, "Stage I Blackness is the Neophyte Negro . . . afraid of his own blackness. A blackness that feels inescapable, infinite, and less than . . . Michael Jordan shilling for Nike . . . Colin Powell sharing his recipe for yellowcake uranium before the United Nations General Assembly . . . [Clarence Thomas] smoking a cigar and lining up a ten-foot putt" (Beatty 275). This is the Black person in the "sunken place," the Uncle Tom, or the *nigger*.

Cross's stage two and three accompany each other. He calls stage two the "Encounter." Rather than a "stage," it is, more precisely, a moment, a "verbal or visual event, rather than an 'in-depth' intellectual experience" ("Toward a Psychology" 17). The encounter entails two steps, a jarring experience, and an act of interpretation and reflection. Cross cites the assassination of MLK as an example. Contemporary cases might include the recent public spectacle of police killings of unarmed Black people. Cross calls stage three "Immersion-Emersion . . . the person immerses himself into the world of Blackness" and the "white world, white culture, and white person are dehumanized ('honky,' 'pig,' 'white devil') and become *biologically* inferior, as the Black person and Black world are *deified*" (18). Beatty's Hampton Fiske calls this "Stage II Blackness," collapsing Cross's Encounter and Immersion. He explains that it entails a "heightened awareness of race. . . . Blackness is idealized, whiteness reviled. Emotions range from bitterness, anger, and self-destruction to waves of pro-Black euphoria and ideas of Black supremacy . . . Jesse Jackson, Sojourner Truth, Moms Mabley, Kim Kardashian" (Beatty 276). This is Blackness as, essentially, rebellion and reaction, a worldview consisting in the antithesis of whiteness. This is the image that Porter harbors of Locke and "racialists," an image that I have shown above to be fallacious.

Cross's stages four and five form a pair as well. He calls stage four "Internalization." People at this stage "achieve a feeling of inner security and are more satisfied with themselves" as a Black person ("Toward a Psychology" 21). Most characteristically, they acquire a "receptivity to discussions or plans of action; however, receptiveness is as far as it goes. The person is not committed to a plan of action. He or she becomes the 'nice' Black person with an Afro hair style and an attachment to Black things" (21). We know these people. They are relatively content and high functioning in a predominantly white space whether or not they actually live or work there; importantly, though, they don't rock the boat. Stage five, according to Cross, is "Internalization-Commitment." As the label suggests, a person at this stage has a self-image like stage four, but is "actively trying to change his community" (23). At stage four one's consciousness has shifted from "concern about how your friends see you . . . to confidence in one's personal standards of Blackness; from uncontrolled rage toward white people to controlled, felt and conscious anger toward oppressive and racist institutions" (23).

The distinguishing feature of stage five is the person's activity, specifically their involvement in anti-racist activism and their level-headed support of counter-spaces and institutions. Additionally, Cross notes that "One of the most striking qualities of many people who are into stage five is the compassion they exhibit toward folks who have not completed the process" (24). Beatty's Fiske collapses these into Stage III Blackness: "Race Transcendentalism." It is "a collective consciousness that fights oppression and seeks serenity. . . . Rosa Parks, Harriet Tubman, Sitting Bull, Cesar Chavez, Ichiro Suzuki"(Beatty 277). They are not "Black" per se, but anti-colonial. Arguably, Porter exhibits a stage four consciousness, on the Cross model, and Locke, as evidenced by his involvement in the New Negro movement, exhibits a stage five consciousness. At the very least, Porter lacks the compassion that characterizes the stage five consciousness.

By way of a conclusion, I would like to return to the leading questions: What is Black art? What does it mean to be a Black artist? I propose that the Black artist aspires to exhibit Unmitigated Blackness, following the proposal of Beatty's protagonist in *The Sellout*, Mr. Me. Beyond the Cross model, Mr. Me explains:

whatever it is, it doesn't sell. On the surface Unmitigated Blackness is a seeming unwillingness to succeed. It's Donald Goines, Chester Himes, Abbey Lincoln, Marcus Garvey, Alfre Woodard, and the serious black actor. It's Tiparillos, chitterlings, and a night in jail. It's the crossover dribble and wearing house shoes outside. It's "whereas" and "things of that nature" . . . Unmitigated Blackness is simply not giving a fuck . . . essays passing for fiction . . . the acceptance of contradiction not being a sin and a crime . . . [and] the realization that as fucked up and meaningless as it all is sometimes it's the nihilism that makes life worth living. (Beatty 277)

Art of this sort exhibits a "real and vital racialism" rather than contributing to Porter's "anti-racialist front." It aspires to tell the "whole truth" of black experiences and perspectives, as Locke proffers, but most importantly it interprets the "Negro to himself." It amends or at least contextualizes the negative stereotypes, without becoming "artificially corrective or self-pluming." Porter's proposal for an "anti-racialist front" is naïve in a society where, as Derrick Bell argues, racism is permanent.³ Just the same, art that exhibits Unmitigated Blackness still aspires to be "universal in value." It operates, like Toni Morrison's aspiration, in a "race-specific but nonracist home."

An example of art exhibiting Unmitigated Blackness is the work of Kerry James Marshall, in spite of his commercial success. He paints Black people, Black in color and Black in ethos. As he says in a 1998 interview with Charles Henry Rowell, "They are literally and rhetorically black in the same way that we describe ourselves as black people in America" (265). Sensitive to the pitfalls of such a project, Marshall notes that, "There has been a tradition of negative representation of black people and a counter-tradition to that has been a certain kind of positive image . . . But both, in a lot of ways, ended up being a kind of stereotype that denied a certain kind of complexity in the way that the black image could be represented. So I thought, well, there's got to be a way to do both . . . to find ways that operate right on the borderline" (265). He explains, "One is to take on the whole issue of negative representation that referred to it, without being it at the same time" (265). What Marshall ultimately produces is art that is "racialist" but "universal in value," Black but not *just* Black. Most importantly, however, it enables him "as a black painter" to participate in a "general dialogue about art making" but "in such a way that I don't have to leave behind that black representation" (Marshall 265).

In this brief reflection, I have sought to demonstrate that Locke's answer to these perennial questions concerning the nature of Black contributions to American culture remains insightful today. His answer is nuanced and evades overly corrective stereotypes. And it is consistent with reflections offered by contemporary artists and scholars in philosophy who have asked analogous questions. Porter's criticism of Locke, while passionate, falls woefully short of a rebuttal. Porter misrepresents Locke's ideas, a fact betrayed by a closer reading of Locke's published statements. Furthermore, a more charitable analysis betrays significant overlap in Porter's and Locke's more basic political commitments. Locke, however, harbored high ambitions for Black artists, believing that they had the ability to effect a kind of awakening in our communities. William E. Cross's psychological model of "Nigrescence," supplemented by Paul Beatty's recent rearticulation, allows us to speculate about the logistics of that awakening. And finally, the contemporary Black contributor to culture should aspire to exhibit Unmitigated Blackness, like the work of Kerry James Marshall.

NOTES

1. In this short reflection, I use "Negro" and "Black" interchangeably. The difference is historiographic. I use "Negro" when quoting texts or referring to demographics during the periods prior to the Black Power and the Black Arts Movement, after which term "Black" effectively replaced the term "Negro."
2. Most notably, consider Locke's historical survey in "The American Negro as Artist" (1931).
3. See Bell, "Racial Realism."

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