from Houston A. Baker, Jr., Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance (1987)

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A nation's emergence is always predicated on the construction of a field of meaningful sounds. Just as infants babble through a welter of phones to achieve the phonemics of a native language, so conglomerates of human beings seeking national identity engage myriad sounds in order to achieve a vocabulary of *national* possibilities. The codes, statutes, declarations, articles, amendments, and constitution of colonial America constitute, for example, what Sacvan Bercovitch calls a "logocracy." In Bercovitch's reading, the American nation as such is but an edifice and enterprise of distinctive and distinguishing words.

Similarly, efforts of turn-of-the-century black spokespersons provide tactics, strategies, and sounds that mark a field of possibilities for an emergent Afro-American *national* enterprise. This enterprise (which has been an immanent object of African desire since the Jamestown landing of "twenty negres" in 1619) can be fittingly characterized as the establishment of a mode of *sounding* reality that is identifiably and self-consciously black and empowering. Attempting to answer the question, What, then, is the Negro, this new man?—an inquiry that takes effect only through willed faith in black national possibilities and a corresponding willingness to sound such possibilities—turn-of-the-century spokespersons demonstrated amazing capacities. For they had not only to filter the absurd noises of minstrelsy but also, and at the same instant, to recall sounds of African origin in an age characterized by divided aims, betrayed hopes, and open brutalities. What was required was a

shrewd combination of formal mastery and deformative creativity.

If we turn to the Harlem Renaissance of the twenties, it is difficult in the presence of a seminal discursive act like Alain Locke's *New Negro* to conceive of that modern, Afro-American, expressive moment as other than an intensely successful act of national self-definition working itself out in a field of possibilities constructed by turn-of-the-century spokespersons. The title of the book, in its first amazing edition, was *The New Negro: An Interpretation*. This title calls to mind the response that Sterling Brown made to Robert Penn Warren's poetic line, "Nigger, your breed ain't metaphysical." Brown's response: "Cracker, your breed ain't exegetical." Exegesis, hermeneutics, the offices of *interpretation* and fitting analysis vis-à-vis Afro-America, according to Locke's title, are now the project of the black spokesperson him- or herself.

Further, *The New Negro's* dedication to "the younger generation" signals a realization of *change* qualified by *traditional* expressive possibilities. The prose of the dedication is immediately followed by the notation and score of an Afro-American spiritual: "O, rise, shine for Thy Light is a' coming." It is possible to assert, I think, that Locke's editorial work constitutes his song of a new generation, his attempt to provide a singing book of (and for) a new era in Afro-American expressive history.

Surely the space between *The Souls of Black Folk* and *The New Negro*—given the bar from "O, rise, shine for Thy Light is a' coming"—can be thought of as bridged by spiritual sound. It is Locke himself who writes most eloquently of the spirituals in his collection:

> Thematically rich, in idiom of rhythm and harmony richer still, in potentialities of new musical forms and new technical traditions so deep as to be accessible only to genius, they have the respect of the connoisseur even while still under the sentimental and condescending patronage of the amateur.[55]

His most important gesture in regard to the spirituals, however, was his inclusion at virtually the midpoint of his anthology of two songs in their full notation and text. Thus at the center of *The New Negro* one hears the classical sound of Afro-America. And this sounding gesture of national significance is not isolated in the context of the collection as a whole. For Locke's entire project is rife with graphic gestures that produce an *interpretation* of the Afro-American unlike any that had preceded *The New Negro* in Afro-American discursive history.

We witness, for example, the illustrations of Winold Reiss and Aaron Douglas that exploit African motifs (masks in particular) to serve as "ancestral" and culturally specific leitmotivs. The work of Reiss and Douglas serves in fact as a kind of graphic, African presence qualifying and surrounding all prose, poetry, and drama in the volume. In addition, we see Reiss's magnificent color portraits of figures such as Locke, Paul Robeson, Jean Toomer, Countee Cullen, Claude McKay, as well as his genre studies in color and black and white of figures such as the "Brown Madonna," "Negro Teachers," and the "Negro Librarian." We also behold in Locke's essay on the "ancestral arts" photographs of African masks and statues from Bushongo, Sudan-Niger, the Ivory Coast, Dahomey, and Congo. There are, as well, reproductions of title pages from rare and venerable books by Africans in the New World and transcriptions (including musical notations) of the actual *telling* of Afro-American lore recorded by Arthur Huff Fauset.

If DuBois's *Souls* is a diorama of the folk conceived in terms of a "problem," Locke's *New Negro* is surely something more extensive. It is, I believe, a broadening and enlargement of the field of traditional Afro-American discursive possibilities. The work has, in effect, the character of a panorama's "unlimited" view, summoning concerns not of a problematical "folk" but rather those of a newly emergent "race" or "nation"—a *national culture*. Locke's effort is no less performative than DuBois's, and it manages to provide

a visual, auditory, and, indeed, almost tactile field that offers new national modes of sounding, interpreting, and speaking "the Negro."

This nationalistic mode sounds in the foreword:

> The New Negro must be seen in the perspective of a New World, and especially of a New America. Europe seething in a dozen centers with emergent nationalities, Palestine full of a renascent Judaism—these are no more alive with the progressive forces of our era than the quickened centers of the lives of black folk. America seeking a new spiritual expansion and artistic maturity, trying to found an American literature, a national art, and a national music implies a Negro-American culture seeking the same *satisfactions* and objectives. [Pp. xv–xvi]

The world envisioned by *The New Negro,* then, is not one of southern country districts, nor "darkened ghetto[s] of a segregated race life" (p. xvi). Nor does it remotely resemble the universe of minstrel nonsense.

Indeed, the world projected by Locke's collection is a nation comprised of self-consciously aspiring individuals who view their efforts as coextensive with global strivings for self-determination and national cultural expression. One of the strongest statements of this projection occurs in the work's introduction:

> Hitherto, it must be admitted that American Negroes have been a race more in name than in fact, or to be exact, more in sentiment than in experience. The chief bond between them has been that of a common condition rather than a common consciousness; a problem in common rather than a life in common. In Harlem, Negro life is seizing upon its first chances for group expression and self-determination. It is—or promises at least to be—a race capital. That is why our compar*ison* is taken with those nascent centers of folk-expression and self-determination which are playing a creative part in the world today. Without pretense to their political significance, Harlem has the same role to play for the New Negro as Dublin has had for the New Ireland or Prague for the New Czechoslovakia. [P. 7]

Not a "problem" but a NATION—this is indeed what might be considered the extraordinary departure. In an American era populated by Tom Buchanans in the upper echelon, Theodore Bilbo and Woodrow Wilson in local and national politics, Lothrop Stoddard and William Graham Sumner in scholarship, Octavus Roy Cohen in popular media, and Snopeses everywhere, Locke's discursive act was veritably one of *extreme deformation*—of what I want to call here (and explain fully in a moment) *radical marronage*. We need but listen to the historian C. Vann Woodward describing the postwar years in order to gain a reasoned perspective on the enormous magnitude of *The New Negro's* flight from the common racialist ground of its era. Woodward writes:

> In the postwar era there were new indications that the Southern Way was spreading as the American Way in race relations. The great migration of Negroes into the residential slum areas and the industrial plants of the big Northern cities increased tension between races. Northern labor was jealous of its status and resentful of the competition of Negroes, who were excluded from unions. Negroes were pushed out of the more desirable jobs in industries that they had succeeded in invading during the manpower shortage of the war years. They were squeezed out of federal employment more and more. Negro postmen began to disappear from the old routes, as Negro policemen did from their old beats. They began to lose their grip upon crafts such as that of the barbers, which had once been a virtual monopoly in the South.[56]

The historian J. Saunders Redding also offers a bleak picture of the black situation during the first three decades of the twentieth century in *They Came in Chains,* noting that some two million blacks fled the South's disfranchisement, lynchings, crop failures, and general miseries in a mere five

years during the second decade.[57] It is difficult to conceive of the horribleness of the American scene for black people during the era in which Locke produced his classic collection. But it seems fair to say that patent nonsense and murderous exclusion (lynching statistics rose significantly in an atmosphere of racist, postwar hysteria) were the two most common responses in a United States that adopted Jim Crow, either de facto or de jure, as the law of the land.

I want to suggest that what Locke's declaration of a *nation* amounted to was a gesture commensurate with what Richard Price describes in the introduction to *Maroon Societies* as "marronage on the grand scale."[58] Price defines such marronage as "the banding together [of individual fugitives] to create independent communities of their own, [communities] that struck directly at the foundations of the plantation system, presenting military and economic threats that often taxed the colonists to their very limits" (p. 3). Maroon societies as standard features of the American landscape are noted by Herbert Aptheker in "Maroons Within the Present Limits of the United States":

> An ever-present feature of antebellum southern life was the existence of camps of runaway Negro slaves, often called maroons, when they all but established themselves independently on the frontier. These were seriously annoying, for they were sources of insubordination. They offered havens for fugitives, served as bases for marauding expeditions against nearby plantations and, at times, supplied the nucleus of leadership for planned uprisings. [Quoted in Price, p. 151]

The most astute image of the maroon comes from Price's introduction where the figure is characterized as a person not only possessed of the skills and knowledge of a "master culture" but also motivated by a firm understanding of African modes of existence (p. 20). Price's image captures my own sense of the overall effect and ambience of Locke's *New Negro* as a discursive project:

> Maroon men [and women] throughout the hemisphere developed extraordinary skills in guerrilla warfare. To the bewilderment of their European enemies, whose rigid and conventional tactics were learned on the open battlefields of Europe, these highly adaptable and mobile warriors took maximum advantage of local environments, striking and withdrawing with great rapidity, making extensive use of ambushes to catch their adversaries in crossfire, fighting only when and where they chose, depending on reliable intelligence networks among nonmaroons (both slave and white settlers), and often communicating by horns. [Pp. 7–8]

The world of *The New Negro* represents a unified community of national interests set in direct opposition to the general economic, political, and theological tenets of a racist land. The work is, in itself, a *communal* project, drawing on resources, talents, sounds, images, rhythms of a marooned society or nation existing on the frontiers or margins of *all* American promise, profit, and modes of production. It thus seeks its inspiration in the very flight, or marronage, to the urban North of millions of black folk.

The Afro-American masses may feel, in Locke's phrase, "only a strange relief and a new vague urge" (p. 4). They may not be "articulate as yet" (p. 7). Moreover, their current condition may compel them to entrust their expressive potential to black spokespersons of a younger generation. Yet Locke is acutely aware that it is the masses—those millions of blacks leaving, departing, engaged in marronage *on a grand scale*—who are at the forefront of what he conceives as a black national emergence: "The clergyman following his errant flock, the physician or lawyer trailing his clients, supply the true clues. In a real sense it is the rank and file who are leading, and the leaders who are following. A transformed and transforming psychology permeates the masses" (p. 7). The "transforming psychology" which Locke extrapolates from the marronage of Afro-American masses has little to do with frightened and unthinking retreat. Rather:

A Maroon Warrior. An illustration from J. G. Stedman's *Narrative of a Five-Years' Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam* (London, 1796).

> The wash and rush of this human tide on the beach line of the northern city centers is to be explained primarily in terms of a new vision of opportunity, of social and economic freedom, of a spirit to seize, even in the face of an extortionate and heavy toll, a chance for the improvement of conditions. With each successive wave of it, the movement of the Negro becomes more and more a mass movement toward the larger and the more democratic chance—in the Negro's case a deliberate flight not only from countryside to city, but from medieval America to modern. [P. 6]

I think one can say without overstatement that Locke's formative propositions in *The New Negro* are essentially deformative in intent. For they remove the Afro-American decisively from "country districts" of the South and cast a black mass movement in terms that sound like the formulations of nineteenth-century Victorian sages. Locke—like a proud Jeremy Bentham or a confident John Stuart Mill—welcomes "Harlem" and its new masses as a sign of an irreversible shift from the medieval to the modern.

Marronage, masses, and modernism come together in a striking, even an aggressive manner in *The New Negro*. For Locke quickly concedes that the *outer* objectives of the life of Afro-America are coextensive with general American ideals. But he also forcefully notes that the *inner* objectives of the Afro-American nation—located in "the very heart of the folk-spirit" (p. xv)—are still in the process of uneasy formation. What these inner objectives constitute is represented, I think, by the drive and force implied by the graphics of the collection with its African masks, and transcribed spirituals, and the energized portrait of a madonna who gives life to succeeding generations as its frontispiece. Simply stated, the inner objective is to found a nation of Afro-Americans on the basis of RACE.

In a world of murderous exclusion, the mass spirit—articulated through the voices of a younger, expressive generation—demands an inversion that converts "a defensive into an offensive position, a handicap into an incentive" (p.

11). In short, the discourse of lordship and bondage, controlled by the master, will be taken up and transmuted—deformed, as it were—by the maroon. "You have confined me to the language of RACE," Locke's mass spirit seems to say, "and I shall convert it into a weapon and creative instrument of massed, *national*, racial will." Relegated by a na-

The Brown Madonna. A genre study by Winold Reiss, which serves as frontispiece for *The New Negro* (1925).

tional white consensus to marginality, a position resonant only with *different* expressive possibilities ("and often communicating by horns"), the *New Negro* seeks community and self-consciously pursues democratic advantage through the medium of race.

Words of Richard Wright's narrator in *Black Boy* come to mind: "I did not embrace insurgency through open choice." Similarly, Locke refers to the New Negro's racial/expressive strategy as "forced"; it is a desperate attempt to build "Americanism" on race values (p. 12). But even with its racialistically compelled character, it is *still* insurgency. And Locke knows that only the articulate elite can channel such racially constrained energies in "constructive" ways. He talks of the threat, the danger, the radicalism of the masses represented by such leadership and following as that of Marcus Garvey. Such radicalism can destroy America if a black talented tenth is not allowed to bring about a revaluation of Afro-American expressive culture and communicate with advanced sectors of the white community. The principal metaphor of *The New Negro*'s introduction heightens dramatically one's sense of the work as a deformative act. For that metaphor is of a dammed, blocked, unjustly constrained black current ready to overflow and flood calm plantations beyond marronage. Only a radical change in American polity can forestall this disaster.

The urban masses have thus entered the Afro-American field of possibilities, carrying both leadership force and energetic potential. While Locke's vision is not of a full merger of a formerly distinctive class and mass in Afro-America, it does suggest that the only worthwhile expressive project available to *class* is a national, racial expressivity that takes form and draws heart *only* from the "awakened" Afro-American mass. Further, it suggests that any Afro-American expressive project must find its ultimate validity in a global community—the world, black masses, as it were—of Africans, both continental, and diasporic. Locke knew that guerrilla warfare is always a function of mass and massive support.

9

The radically advanced aspect of *The New Negro* is its inscription of Afro-American modernity in mass, urban, national, and international terms. To achieve this inscription the work appropriates sounding strategies brought to resonant potentiality by turn-of-the-century spokespersons. The collection is in a sense a kind of community of accomplished discursive possibilities. Just as Harlem appears in the work as a sign of marronage and deformation, so Durham, described eloquently by the sociologist E. Franklin Frazier, appears as a sign of formal mastery. If Harlem is, indeed, the "progressive Negro community of the American metropolis" (Locke's phrase, p. xvi) and the veritable national seat of Afro-American intellectual and artistic leadership, then Durham is, in Frazier's piquant phrase, the "Capital of the Black Middle Class" (p. 333). Both city names—one northern, the other southern—stand as tangible emblems, as representations of sounding practices that give birth to Afro-American modernity. Taken together, they give locational form to the projections found at the close of Locke's introduction:

> But whatever the general effect, the present generation will have added the motives of self-expression and spiritual development [Harlem] to the old and still unfinished task of making material headway and progress [Durham]. No one who understandingly faces the situation with its substantial accomplishment or views the *new scene with its still more abundant promise* can be entirely without hope. [Pp. 15–16]

Indeed, Locke's volume itself provides substantial discursive grounds for hope. His compendium virtually collects, organizes, and gives form to the fullest extensions of a field of sounding possibilities; it serves as both the speaking manual *and* the singing book of a pioneering civilization freed from the burden of nonsensically and polemically constrained expression. Both Paul Kellogg in his essay "Negro Pioneers" and Charles S. Johnson in "The New Frontage on American Life" project a vision of Afro-American settlers bringing into existence what a participant in a seminar I recently conducted called a new American "folk hero"—the "New Negro."[59] Kellogg (a white contributor) sounds this pioneering note as follows:

> In the northward movement of the Negroes in the last ten years, we have another folk migration which in human significance can be compared only with this pushing back of the Western frontier in the first half of the last century or with the waves of immigration which have swept in from overseas in the last half. Indeed, though numerically far smaller than either of these, this folk movement is unique. For this time we have a people singing as they come—breaking through to cultural expression and economic freedom together. [P. 271]

The description of a collective body of people—conjoined in national sentiment and determination—making their way to both the headlands of material success and the peaks of expressive creativity in a single trek is inspiring in the extreme. And what might be called the *institutional* character of their dual achievement (expressive-intellectual as well as material) is projected by Kelly Miller's and Robert R. Moton's respective essays on "Howard: The National Negro University" and "Hampton-Tuskegee: Missioners of the Mass." Like Harlem and Durham, Howard and Hampton-Tuskegee stand as signs of an achieved extension of discursive possibilities first brought forth by DuBois's siting of the *black university* and Washington's delineation of a *black skills center.*

The New Negro, like the valued documents from which we grasp iconic images and pictorial myths of a colonial or frontier America, is perhaps our first *national* book, offering not only a description of streams of tendency in our collective lives but also an actual construction within its pages of the sounds, songs, images, and signs of a nation. The collection's combination of phaneric display and formal mastery can come as no surprise to the person who has followed the lines of Afro-American development through an extensive discursive field. For though the enabling conditions for Locke's collection are found in marronage, there is no gainsaying the work's quite canny presentation, utilization, and praise of formal mastery. Witness, for example, the high evaluation of Countee Cullen's poetry, poetry that is meant to imitate with astute fidelity the efforts of British romanticism. Or turn to Claude McKay's "The White House," a poem whose title Locke changed to "White Houses," and you find an English, or modified Shakespearean, sonnet. Again, most of the short fiction and, certainly, the single drama presented in *The New Negro* scarcely escape initial recognition as formally *standard* works.

? and ...
Souls

The present discussion is hardly the place to explore fully the Afro-American cultural dimensions and significances of McKay's or Cullen's *standard* artistic postures. But one can contextualize such efforts by saying that McKay's "sonnet," like Cullen's "ballads," are just as much mastered *masks* as the minstrel manipulations of Booker T. Washington and Charles Chesnutt are. The trick of McKay and Cullen was what one of my colleagues calls the denigration of form—a necessary ("forced," as it were) adoption of the standard that results in an effective *blackening.*[60] Locke was never of the opinion that Western *standards* in art were anything other than adequate goals for high Afro-American cultural achievement. And the revaluation of the Afro-American based on artistic accomplishment for which he calls mandated, in his view, a willingness on the part of black spokespersons to aspire toward such standards. Hence, one would

have to present *recognizably* standard forms and get what black mileage one could out of subtle, or, by contrast, straining (like McKay's rebellious cries) variations and deepenings of these forms. If the younger generation was to proffer "artistic" gifts, such gifts had first to be recognizable as "artistic" by Western, formal standards and not simply as unadorned or primitive *folk* creations.

Now Locke—and, indeed, the entire Harlem movement—has often been criticized severely for its advocacy of the standard. Yet it seems that such criticism proceeds somewhat in ignorance of the full discursive field marking Afro-American national possibilities. For we may not enjoy or find courageous models of derring-do in the masking that characterizes formal mastery, but we certainly cannot minimize its significant and strategic presence in our history. Furthermore, such masking carries subtle resonances and effects that cannot even be perceived (much less evaluated) by the person who begins with the notion that recognizably *standard* form automatically disqualifies a work as an authentic and valuable Afro-American national production. Analysis is in fact foreclosed by a first assumption of failure. Certainly Countee Cullen, for example, served a national need in a time of "forced" institution building and national projection. He gained white *American* recognition for "Negro poetry" at a moment when there was little encouraging recognition in the United States for *anything* Negro. And Cullen gained such recognition by means of a mastery of form pleasing *to Afro-Americans* as well as Anglo-Americans. It seems inconceivable that, in the first flush of pioneering urbanity and heady self-consciousness, the congregation of Reverend Frederick Cullen's well-attended Salem Methodist Episcopal Church in Harlem would have responded positively if, after the father's announcement of his son's accomplishments as *a poet,* the young Countee had produced sounds such as: "April is the cruellest month, breeding / Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing / Memory and desire, stirring / Dull roots with spring rain." The deliv-

ery of such lines would probably have caused consternation akin to the congregation's reaction to John in DuBois's classic story "Of the Coming of John": "Little had they understood of what he said, for he spoke an unknown tongue." Not only was the "tongue" of such collaged allusiveness as Eliot's *unknown* to a congregation like Reverend Cullen's; it was also unnecessary, unneeded, of little use in a world bent on recognizable (rhyme, meter, form, etc.) artistic "contributions." One has only to peruse the 1913 issue of *Poetry* in which Ezra Pound's famous imagist manifesto appeared to see that "cruellest months" and breeding lilacs were the exception rather than the American rule in Cullen's day.

There is no real need to enter apologetics for *The New Negros'* presentation and use of formal mastery, however, since this strategy takes its significance from the entire sounding field of our nation; it is, moreover, dramatically complemented or even *out-sounded* by the deformative iconography and syllables of the collection. This deformation finds resonance in Jean Toomer's intensely lyrical prose-songs of Southern black women and in Cugo Lewis's rendition of the etiological "T'appin." It takes effect in Jessie Fauset's keen signifying on Joel Chandler Harris and all white spokesmen who would make the Negro merely the "funny man" of American life. It expresses itself in the call for a National Black Theatre (Montgomery Gregory), a National Black University (Kelly Miller), and a National School of Negro Art (Locke). But most important, the deformative rhythms, signs, and images of *The New Negro* find their proper curve in the movement of Locke's collection from a reasoned, if heady, statement of Afro-American national ideals to an impassioned delineation by a venerable and formidable Afro-American scholar of the global significance and mission implicit in the achievement of such ideals.

One might say in fact that *The New Negro*—commencing with the figure of 175,000 men and women of color in Harlem—ends with a vision of the mission of Harlem vis-à-vis a global community of Africans 150 million in number.

Alain Locke. Portrait by Winold Reiss, which appeared in *The New Negro* (1925).

For the collection concludes with W. E. B. DuBois's "The Negro Mind Reaches Out."

DuBois's work analyzes world colonialism as a function of the bizarre and unfortunate alliance of exploitative capital and derogated labor, suggesting that a murderous white exclusion is the enabling condition for this alliance. Surely, DuBois's is a phaneric voice when he writes:

> The attitude of the white laborer toward colored folk is largely a matter of long continued propaganda and gossip. The white laborers can read and write, but beyond this their education and experience are limited and they live in a world of color prejudice. The curious, most childish propaganda dominates us, by which good, earnest, even intelligent men have come by millions to believe almost religiously that white folk are a peculiar and chosen people whose one great accomplishment is civilization and that civilization must be protected from the rest of the world by cheating, stealing, lying, and murder. [P. 407]

Hope for the future lies in the political reeducation of white workers and in effective leadership for global black masses who suffer the effects of an industrial imperialism unchecked in its greed and brutality. DuBois, of course, designates the seat of leadership for the black masses as the United States:

> This hundred and fifty millions of people are gaining slowly an intelligent thoughtful leadership. The main seat of their leadership is to-day the United States. [For] in the United States there are certain unheralded indications of development in the Negro problem. One is the fact that for the first time in America, the American Negro is to-day universally recognized as capable of speaking for himself. [P. 411]

("And often communicating by horns," "and often communicating by horns . . .") The *sound* of DuBois is a challenge to those celebrated at the beginning of *The New Negro*—the younger generation. The collection is not only a national sounding field but also the sounding of an international mission bestowed by venerability upon youth. The maroon community of "Harlem," conceived as the *modern* capital of those "capable of speaking" for themselves, is thus source (of insubordination)—haven (for fugitives)—base (for marauding expeditions)—and nucleus (of leadership for planned uprisings).