

Jacoby Adeshei Carter: *African American Contributions to the Americas' Cultures: A Critical Edition of Lectures by Alain Locke (African American Philosophy and the African Diaspora)*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. Pp. 184, hardcover \$90. ISBN: 978-1137525185

by Michael Monahan

In 1943 Alain Leroy Locke served as Inter-American Exchange Professor to Haiti, where he delivered a series of lectures on the theme of “The Negro’s Contribution to the Culture of the Americas (Carter 2016, 1).” Jacoby Carter’s *African American Contributions to the Americas’ Cultures* offers all six of Locke’s previously unpublished 1943 lectures, along with a substantial critical essay by Professor Carter. In bringing this volume to print, Carter has done a tremendous service to African-American intellectual history, and to the study and practice of American Philosophy. I intend “American Philosophy” to be a richly ambiguous term here in a way that is fitting to Locke’s position within the history of the discipline. It picks out, on the one hand, the dominant understanding of “American Philosophy” that sees it as coextensive with early twentieth-century Pragmatist thought. At the same time, it refers to the history of philosophy as a discipline in the United States, and even more broadly, to the history of philosophy in the Americas broadly (and properly) construed. The power of *African American Contributions to the Americas’ Cultures* lies precisely in the way in which it further demonstrates the significance of Locke’s thought for American Philosophy in all of these senses. While it certainly deserves and rewards careful study in its own right, Carter’s text stands, above all, as an invitation take up Locke’s work, and demonstrates quite clearly the untapped potential of that work for illuminating perennial challenges, especially those relating to the realization of democratic ideals, that thinkers in and of the Americas have faced and that remain pressing (disturbingly so, in fact).

Locke’s lectures themselves are an effort to build a composite account of the significance and scope of the cultural impact on the Americas by people of African descent. Thus, while he will focus on introducing his Haitian hosts to North American culture and the “American Negro’s” contribution to it, he is also keen “to show how importantly and strategically this Negro and originally African segment of culture exists as a common denominator, little known but quite historic and fundamental, between some of the most important national cultures of the Americas (Carter 2016, 10-11).” It is in this way a profoundly *inter-American* endeavor aiming at once to highlight the particularities of North American culture as well as the commonalities between it and the other cultures of the Americas, especially as they are directly and indirectly related through African Diasporic communities.

The bulk of the lectures deal with an overview of African-American contributions to literature, poetry, painting, music, dance, education, and science, as well as an account of the social standing of African-Americans in the U.S. at the time. To this end, Locke offers a set of lectures on African-American figures and movements in science and art that is encyclopedic in its breadth and scope, spanning from the colonial and antebellum eras, but lingering, understandably, on the early twentieth century. Positioned as he was, as a kind of center of gravity for the Harlem Renaissance, there were few thinkers of his time (or ours, for that matter) better equipped to provide this kind of "introduction" to his hosts (and to posterity). The sheer scope of Locke's discussion makes this aspect of his lectures worthy of contemporary attention. In addition to this masterful crash-course in African-American intellectual history, however, Locke develops two interrelated themes that warrant particular attention, not only because of their significant theoretical implications, but also because of their profound resonance with our contemporary context. Locke reveals in these lectures a prescience that is quite striking.

The first of these themes has to do with the development of national cultures in the Americas. Specifically, Locke takes pains to point out the ways in which the norm for processes of cultural development here is one of hybridity and mixture, as opposed to purity and homogeneity. The Americas are a place in which vastly different peoples have been brought together, some voluntarily, many through coercion and violence, and been, one way or the other, compelled to find a way to live together for generations. The result is a clear cultural hybridity, *mestizaje*, or *creolité*, which, though often disavowed, is a common and characteristic feature throughout the Western Hemisphere. Throughout his lectures he draws upon art, language, and music in particular to make his emphatic case for the significance of cultural creolization,[1] arguing that, "political conventions to the contrary, we have few if any monotype cultures in the Western hemisphere: it is not the typical or predominant American pattern (Carter 2106, 14)."

His point about "political conventions" references one clear moment in which his efforts to address the global political climate of his own time (the rise of fascism and jingoistic nationalism in particular) bears directly on our present conditions in crucial ways. There is a tendency, Locke tells us early on in his lectures, to understand national cultures as pure manifestations of the true or authentic (dominant) representatives of the population. His diagnosis of the problem is worth quoting at length:

Strange but true, that as our world has enlarged and our intercommunications immeasurably improved, our conception of culture and human solidarity has narrowed and shrunk. Yet just so has nationalism, in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, beclouded our view of the true facts of culture history and excluded from all but a few more scientifically minded among us, the wider and more human notions of human kinship. Let us not chide the Nazi or Japanese racialists with the blame for the totalitarian concept of culture and nationality and the master-race interpretation of history. For we, too, have subconsciously at times openly held modified forms of the same characteristic notions. We too, have believed that culture and race were somehow organically related and that

civilization was both the sole product and property of those classes, nations or ethnic groups that have sat in the seat of political and economic power (12).

It requires little in the way of mental gymnastics to see how Locke's warning here applies equally well to the early-twenty-first century. This "aristocratic notion" of the (racially) pure national culture, in its turn, poses a threat to the realization of our democratic and egalitarian ideals, and Locke's discussion of this threat leads to the second important theme of his lectures – the role of such non-dominant, and particularly African-American,[2] cultural contributions to the realization of genuine democracy in the Americas.

Despite this long-standing commitment to a kind of cultural purity, informing as it has in the U.S. various strands of "nativist" anti-immigrant sentiment, nationalism, and white-supremacy, such a view of culture is, Locke reminds us, mythical. "Some of the richest growths of culture," he points out, "have been transplanted crops not native to the land in which they flowered; some of the finest idioms of the arts, music, dance and folklore especially, have come from lowly peasant stocks, often alien peasant-folk at that: a great deal of what is best in culture derives not from pure but from crossed and hybrid strains which seem to be enriched by this process of cultural cross-fertilization (12)." Across the Americas, any serious scrutiny of our cultural innovations and particularities reveal an underlying hybridity that belies any pretense to homogeneity. This is perhaps most readily apparent in music, where the archetypical musical styles from the U.S. to Cuba to Brazil are all creolized productions of African, European, and Indigenous influences.[3] Thus, even when there is a dominant group politically and economically, and even when that group maintains a firm grip on that dominance within those spheres, the larger culture is in a constant ferment of cross-fertilizing processes of creolizing innovation.

Crucially, Locke points out, this cultural hybridity always operates reciprocally. Even the case of chattel slavery, another historical feature whose legacy binds American cultures together, illustrates this:

[In the Americas], slavery did two peculiar and significant things which have determined the course of American history and influenced the character of American civilization: first, American Slavery, since it was of the domestic variety, planted the Negro in the very core of the dominant white civilization, permitting not only its rapid assimilation by the Negro but its being, in turn, deeply and continuously counter-influenced culturally by the Negro; and second, it also planted the Negro – and that holds true for today as well as for the past, at the moral and political core of a basically democratic society, so that around him and his condition wherever there are undemocratic inconsistencies, must center the whole society's struggle for the full and continuous development of freedom (Carter 2016, 94).

What all of this shows, for Locke, is that "our culture [has] been more democratic than we ourselves have been," and that when we realize the significance of these ongoing

processes of cultural creolization, “democracy will be more than a political formula; it will be a living faith and spirit of human brotherhood; a firm creed and conviction of human interdependence (13).” The realization of the egalitarian aspects of the democratic ideal, in other words, demands the repudiation of the myth of cultural purity, and the recognition of the historical and ongoing contributions of those on the ‘underside’ of the social fabric to the national character.

Put differently, the claim here is that the idea that “we” represent the true or authentic nation, that “we” are representatives of a constant and pure cultural essence, and that “you” may participate in the nation only to the extent that you conform to or at least approximate that pure and authentic essence is fundamentally undemocratic. “We” are in fact a hybridized product of generations of reciprocal interaction, and realizing the political ideal of full democratic participation in the public life of the nation demands that we come to grips with the fact that “outsiders” have not only been shaped by the dominant culture, but the dominant culture has been in turn shaped by them, and in this sense it is ultimately *ours*. So long as the dominant forces actively disavow those “outside” cultural influences and marginalize outsiders from full political and economic citizenship (which marginalization is, of course, often justified in part by alleged cultural deficiencies), true democracy remains out of reach. The lessons Locke is offering here quite clearly, and unfortunately, remain as critical for the future of democracy now as they were in 1943.

On the strength of the significance of Locke’s lectures alone this volume would be a significant contribution to (Inter)American Philosophy, but fortunately, Carter provides a very rich and provocative essay of his own that helps to situate and flesh-out the content of Locke’s lectures. In his essay, Carter takes on two major tasks. The first is to situate Locke’s lecture within the pragmatist tradition. His point here is significant: “Chief among Locke’s philosophical insights on this matter is his recognition that focusing on North America resulted in at best a myopic view of all the Americas, or at worst a complete blindness to large portions of the Americas. On this particular point, his contribution is most pioneering, representing as it does, a nearly six-decade advance on current Pragmatist and American philosophical scholarship (Carter 2016, 110).” Carter goes on to elaborate on Locke’s contributions to a genuinely Inter-American philosophy, focusing on the legacy of slavery, the significance of race, and the ideal of democracy. His discussion of these topics not only helps to illuminate Locke’s lectures, but serves as a rallying cry for contemporary philosophers in and of the Americas to both secure for Locke his warranted place in the American philosophical canon, and also to follow in his footsteps methodologically.

This is important work with which I am deeply sympathetic, but for the sake of brevity, I would like to focus the remainder of this review on the second of Carter’s thematic foci – Locke’s conception of race and its relation to culture. Locke’s aim in the lectures given in Haiti is, in part, to account for the specifically *cultural* contributions of the *Negro* people to the Americas. His theory of race, however, is not explicitly offered in the lectures, and so Carter devotes a significant portion of his own essay to the

explication of Locke's theorization of race, drawing from several different primary sources.

Carter's analysis of Locke's writings on race lead him to conclude that, rather than racial groups giving rise to cultural practices specific or particular to those groups, culture is prior to race. That is, it is cultural practices that give rise to races, not as "anthropological" or "biological" kinds, but as social kinds. In Carter's words:

Locke held that race was in point of fact a social and cultural category rather than a biological one. For this reason, he developed the notion of ethnic race or culture group. By ethnic race, I take Locke to mean a peculiar set of psychological and affective responsive dispositions, expressed or manifested as cultural traits, socially inherited and able to be attributed through historical contextualization to a specifiable group of people...Race is no longer, on this view, thought to be a progenitor of culture; instead, race in the social and ethnic sense is understood to be a concrete culture-type; the result of subcultural variation...In other words, race is a matter of distinctive variations within culture transmitted across generations (Carter 2016, 128-9).

Culture, in effect, becomes the bedrock upon which racial groups are founded, not biological differentiation or ancestral links to a geographical point of origin.

In the case of the Americas, it is the modern invention of *race creeds* that gave rise to the particular racial landscapes of the Western Hemisphere. As Carter understands him, "Locke means by race creed, an action guiding set of concepts, beliefs, or aims concerning racial differentiation and practice that are held by a social group and usually transmitted across generations, or imposed by a dominant social group. Race creeds originate, motivate, and reinforce race practices (Carter 2016 132)." In the aftermath of 1492, the Americas saw an influx of peoples from across the globe, with different morphologies, different religious traditions, different languages, different artistic traditions, and of course different intellectual/philosophical traditions. In the crucible of the European colonies, the race creeds taken up (either willingly or at bayonet point) by these populations initiated the formation of the distinct racial groups Locke discusses in his lectures. Their cultural development was thus from its inception a creolizing process of drawing together these disparate peoples, under the force of a *racial creed*, into different groups, which groups in turn made their own contributions to the constantly evolving national cultures in yet a further process of creolization.

Most significantly, as Locke is at pains to make clear, these various processes of creolization are profoundly *reciprocal*, if not always recognized or acknowledged as such. The mythology of the white-supremacist racial creed that, in various forms, dominated (and dominates, to different degrees and in different ways) the Americas, would have it that the white race in particular is a pure product of a pure point of origin that stands over and against those "lesser" races (which are often also understood to be in significant ways *impure* or mongrelized biologically and culturally). Locke, however,

has laid out his case for the fallaciousness of this view. Not only are these cultures/races hybrid, but their influence is *mutual*. As Carter summarizes the point:

Cultural and ethnoracial influence is often a two-way process. The socially, politically, and economically disadvantaged groups in a society are not always the passive receivers of the dominant group culture. Groups that hold social, political, or economic advantage can also be influenced by the groups relative to whom they hold a dominant position. More so is this understood when one grasps Locke's position that supposed racial superiority is, in fact, the result of imperial success on the part of an ethnic race, and not the manifestation of any innate superiority (Carter 2016, 144).

The reciprocal influence of the various populations arriving in the Americas, under the sway of the various "race creeds" that constituted their larger environment, thus brought about both the existence of these racial groups (*qua* racial groups) and their respective cultures, as well as the larger cultures of their respective nations, none of which are "pure" or the sole provenance of any single group or nation. Genuine pursuit of democratic ideals, therefore, will require a direct and sustained engagement with the histories, legacies, and present practices of violence and domination that thwart the processes of reciprocal influence in the political realm and disavow them in the cultural realm. This aspect of Locke's analysis of our past and present challenges is both a significant contribution to ongoing debates about the ontology of race, as well as an invaluable contribution to our ongoing efforts toward realizing the democratic ideals that purport to animate our political life.

As a final thought, I would like to return to Carter's discussion of Locke's theory of race. What struck me in particular as I was reading this was the way in which Locke's account of cultures as linked to particular peoples and passed down from generation to generation seemed akin to certain aspects of contemporary approaches to *epigenetic inheritance*. Epigenetics refers to systems of inheritance that "have little to do with DNA sequence differences (Jablonka and Lamb 2007, 357)." There are various systems of epigenetic inheritance (Jablonka and Lamb identify four) that mutually influence each other, yet are relatively independent. Crucially, they are influenced by our environment (both material and cultural) and can be *inherited*. This means that a profound psychological trauma, for example, can, and often does, influence one's epigenetic systems in ways that will be expressed in and inherited by one's offspring, such that they will bear the marks, so to speak, of that trauma even though they did not themselves experience it, and can even pass those marks on to their own offspring. I offer this brief account because I take it to support, to a large extent, Locke's theory of race and its link to culture. We might see the "race creed" and the social ecology of the Americas as having a profound effect upon the epigenetic inheritance of those present within it in ways that will be heritable, and over time, can become population-specific. This means that Locke's account of races as emerging out of cultural differentiation (rather than causing it) might well have a strong source of support in contemporary evolutionary biology. It provides a way of talking about races without taking on Platonic biological essences, though insofar as this would mean that races have some

empirical biological impact and expression, it may require one to question Locke's hard distinction between "cultural" and "biological" accounts of race. That particular debate, however, is beyond the purview of this review.

In conclusion, Jacoby Carter, in offering us both Locke's lectures and his own critical essay, has produced a truly significant contribution to the philosophy of race, to the study of Alain Locke, and to American Philosophy. Locke's lectures are provocative and timely, and Carter's essay provides crucial background and analysis that will at once orient newcomers to Locke and stimulate those more familiar with his work already. Both pieces deserve careful study individually and as a whole.

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Notes

[1] This is not Locke's terminology, but I would argue that the phenomenon Locke is describing here is precisely the processes of creolization that I have discussed in my own work.

[2] I mean "African-American" here to be understood in the broad sense of "American" that includes all peoples of the Americas of African descent.

[3] With respect to the richness of the Negro influence in music, Locke opines that this is "not because [the Negro] was any more musically endowed, but because here is a field too close and intimate to be blocked by any prejudice and too direct in its appeal to be stopped by any man-made barriers (75)."