

Chonita, Conchita's older sister. Although their story had the potential of becoming a romantic tale, they were not able to deal with the hardships of making a living and pursuing a long-distance love affair on the two sides of the international border. In chapter 4 we follow the decline of José Chavez's father, the family patriarch. With his sons in the United States and his health weakening, he lost control over the family and lived in poverty. His daughter, influenced perhaps by the modern lifestyle associated with the United States, married a man the father did not approve of, Rogelio, a family friend of whose life we learn in chapter 5, was unable to realize his American dream of becoming a wealthy immigrant from Mexico. Like so many Mexican young people who tried their luck in the borderlands, he suffered from emotional instability and economic insecurity.

Frequently both written and read in silence and in solitude, letters sent across the U.S. – Mexico border represent attempts to bridge distances between people living in the two neighboring yet very different countries. The epistolary form has been used before to seek connections between Mexico and the United States. In 1918 the daily newspaper *El Paso del Norte* published a collection of letters by Olga Beatriz Torres, a young Mexican girl who, together with her family, fled from the revolution in her home country. The Torres family settled in El Paso, Texas, and Olga corresponded with her aunt who remained in Mexico to look after the family estate. Her letters, written in Spanish, appeared in a collection entitled *Memorias de mi viaje*; many years later, in 1994, they were translated into English and brought out as *Recollections of My Trip*. In 1986 Ana Castillo, a Chicana writer, published an epistolary novel, *The Mixquiahuala Letters*, in which her protagonist is reflecting on her travels in Mexico in search of the Chicana identity. Both Torres's and Castillo's letters, similarly to those discussed by Miroslava Chávez-García's in her newly published book, are meant to alleviate the sense of alienation and the grief of absence by creating moments of intimacy, however illusory, between the senders and the addressees.

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**Jeffrey C. Stewart, *The New Negro. The Life of Alain Locke*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. 932 pages. ISBN: 978-0-1950-8957-8.**

The history of African-American intellectuals in the United States during the era of federally sanctioned segregation 1896-1954 has been dominated

by one name. W.E.B. Du Bois's central position has even caused historian Carol Anderson to call for a Copernican de-centration. One person has been able to challenge Du Bois's stature to some extent, although he was a strikingly short man: Du Bois's fellow Harvard alumnus, philosopher Alain Locke (1885-1954). The two scholars and spokesmen for their "race" were aware of this competitive relationship. Their sense of rivalry has tempted later observers to exaggerate the tension, and to underestimate the shared frames of reference and consonance of goals. But in contrast to Du Bois, most images of Locke have been narrow, reducing him to the main voice of the Harlem Renaissance – the black literature and art movement of the 1920s – as the editor of its major manifesto, *The New Negro* from 1925. The literature on Locke remains limited, whereas books on Du Bois have recently been published at a remarkably high pace. This cascade is partly due to an excellent launch pad: David Levering Lewis's biography in two heavy volumes. Now an almost 1000-page, close printed take on Locke's life is available. Its author, Jeffrey Stewart, has apparently been working a long time on the project. Since the 1980s he has edited three volumes with texts by Locke.

So, is Stewart's *The New Negro* a counterpart of Lewis's interpretation of the life and times of Du Bois? Not quite. The general reader, interested in Locke as a thinker, should probably still start with Harris & Molesworth's *Alain L. Locke: The Biography of a Philosopher* (2008). One reason is that its renditions of Locke's central ideas make it easier to see why Locke actually *deserves* a twice as long biography. Stewart is eager not to idealize his main character, which is laudable. But the detail in which less flattering aspects of Locke's behavior are accounted for, and the descriptions of intrigues surrounding important texts, are not really balanced with careful contextual analyses of what Locke's positions in different issues were, and why he chose to intervene in specific debates, stating and defending those standpoints. Instead, Stewart tends to balance harsh treatments of Locke as a private person with outbursts of praise for his ideas, not necessarily supported by any clear rendering of what his arguments were.

Occasionally it is hard to distinguish between what Locke in fact claimed, and opinions Stewart apparently wants Locke to have had. Sometimes a real analysis of what Locke actually said (which was practically always thought-provoking) is replaced with arbitrary imported labels. One such case is when Locke's remarkable Haiti lectures in 1943, on the black populations' cultural contributions in the three Americas (recently published in a critical edition by Jacoby Adeshei Carter), are lost in an exposition on the African "diaspora". This problem is related to another. The broader intel-

lectual contexts Locke acted within do not seem to interest Stewart. It is easy to imagine questions the book would have been improved by asking. For example, what did Locke's early engagement in the social settlement movement mean for his lifelong friendship with fellow settlement activist Horace Kallen, and their shared ideas of "cultural pluralism"? What did a backdrop of militant, segregationist black nationalism – Garveyism – mean when Locke stated an early version of *Black is Beautiful* from the opposite end of an intellectual spectrum? Stewart seems to avoid literature concerning such potentially relevant contexts. He even avoids discussing Lewis's interpretations of the complex Locke-Du Bois interactions. For such a bulky book, the literature references are remarkably meager. This appears to be compensated by an abundance of psychological explanations. Undeniably, the material sometimes invites such arguments in a forceful way. The major example is Locke's symbiotic relationship with his mother until her death in 1922, and his subsequent strange attachment to the elderly white patron of the arts, Charlotte Mason – using her as a surrogate mother, while passing her money on to creative protégées such as Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston. But there are far too many amateur psychological expositions filling pages which could easily have been used for better purposes.

But having said all this, it is fair to establish: Stewart's book is an indispensable addition to an extremely interesting and significant field of research. Mainly by using Locke's correspondence, Stewart follows his journey through different worlds and depicts a life in dramatic tension between interests and forces. Two examples may suffice as teasers. On one hand, Locke the aesthete, formed by educated black middle-class Philadelphia, did adore European culture. He would spend parts of most of his years in Europe, relishing traditions of high art which America had only borrowed from. On the other hand, when Locke turned art into a weapon for demanding rights, self-respect and agency for black people, he would celebrate an African heritage that he would think in a complex, and gradually changing way about. The other example is Stewart's effort to follow, in detail, Locke's experiences as a homosexual black man, living a public life. To exist in a doubly submerged position, with one dimension of oppression visible in one's face, while keeping the other as secret as possible, was not an easy path to tread. To be a "race leader" in a black macho world, a moral philosopher with strong convictions about values, and a sexually active gay man, exploring opportunities in for example Oxford college life and in Weimar Era Berlin, posed many challenges. Through his examination of such

experiences and issues, Stewart also illuminates the homoerotic themes and relationships within the Harlem Renaissance. Stewart's analyses do not always convince. His book is not a single launch pad for further explorations. But a hopefully growing literature on Locke will have abundant use for the insights Stewart's work has brought to light.

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