

# THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE

Aesthetics, Politics

Alain Locke, W.E.B. Du Bois alongside Nella Larsen's *Passing*

# WEEK 2

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# AGENDA

## Art or Propaganda

- W.E.B. DuBois and Black Radicalism at the Turn of the Century
- Alain Locke's Aesthetic Decadence

## Nella Larsen's *Passing*

- Politics in Practice: Colorism, Repression, and Updating the "Tragic Mulatto"

# W.E.B. DUBOIS AND BLACK RADICALISM AT THE TURN OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

- The Atlanta Compromise of 1895: Booker T. Washington's unofficial compromise with Southern white government leaders that while Black Americans in the (mostly rural) South would accept conditions of Jim Crow, the North, for their part of the deal, had to invest in Black educational charities and institutions.
  - Washington and DuBois were very much in agreement on most things, but disagreed in this compromise and their approach to education access for Black men (DuBois favored liberal arts education in order to create and sustain an elite, which he theorized as 'the Talented Tenth' while Washington favored industrial or mechanical education in order to prepare for the jobs available to rural southern Black men)
  - As each grew older, Washington much DuBois's senior, they became more divergent in their beliefs. DuBois became much more radicalized as he grew older (mostly because of the proliferation and normalization of violent extrajudicial lynchings and police violence against Black people throughout the country) while Washington became more conservative in his outlook, believing that Black people should accept that they cannot change their lot and so should instead live separately from white people as best they could. This has been seen largely as a generational difference between the two as well as a political difference (DuBois becomes an active member of the CPUSA)
- 1900 Paris Exposition: *The Exhibit of the American Negro* used 363 photographs of Black Americans in an attempt to refute accepted stereotypes of Blackness, including those promoted by minstrelsy (Sambo, Saphire, Mammy) and by imperialism ('noble savage')

# W.E.B. DUBOIS AND BLACK RADICALISM AT THE TURN OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY: THE SOULS OF BLACK FOLK (1903)

- *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) famously declares "the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line" and espouses cultural parity between white and Black cultures in America. It becomes of huge importance to the literate Black population (~60-70% of the total Black populace at the time)
- It is in *The Souls of Black Folk* the DuBois introduces 'double consciousness' — the theory that Black people under colonization have to reckon with two identities, first their own (a true identity) and second the one that is thrust upon them by the colonized hegemony
- 1903 is also the year when the essay collection of black intellectuals and activists entitled *The Negro Problem* was published, in which DuBois's essay "The Talented Tenth" appears where he introduces this concept, first created by White Northern philanthropists, which theorizes one-in-ten Black men who have been able to get a college education, publish widely, and become leaders for social change in the community. (Worth noting: the Twentieth Century sees the realization of this theory of talented tenth, which DuBois argued would stifle segregation by adding African-Americans into government positions and business ventures. Unfortunately, it has not yet done these things to the extent it set out to do).
  - Marxist theory blurb: Similar to what Vladimir Lenin proposes in *What is to be done?* (1902) as the 'vanguard party,' this select group of leaders would be able to 1) protect the values of the movement toward justice and 2) lead the uneducated masses, where uneducated means those who had not reached 'class consciousness.'
  - As DuBois grew older and became more politically radical, he readjusted this theory into what he called the "gilding hundredth" — setting out to make coalitions such that not only education, which had been proven to be access through economic class, would be the means through which leadership was established. In other terms, this theory expanded the population of leaders from just those who were wealthy enough to receive education to those who had proven to be leaders through a variety of ways connected most significantly to morality.

# W.E.B. DUBOIS AND BLACK RADICALISM AT THE TURN OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY: AGAINST THE ATLANTA COMPROMISE

- In 1905, what later became known as the Niagara Movement met for a conference of Black intellectuals, including DuBois, to draft a statement against The Atlanta Compromise. Speaking a year later at its second conference, Christian Socialist and civil rights advocate Reverdy C. Ransom spoke: "Today, two classes of Negroes are standing at the parting of the ways. The one counsels patient submission to our present humiliations and degradations; The other class believe that it should not submit to being humiliated, degraded, and remanded to an inferior place—it does not believe in bartering its manhood for the sake of gain."
- In 1906, DuBois in writing about the riots that broke out in Atlanta as a result of a public lynching of a Black man accused of flirting with a white woman argues
  - first that Black Americans should leave the Republican Party (to which they had been committed since Lincoln) because Teddy Roosevelt and William Taft proved to be insufficiently aligned with civil rights for the Black population
  - second that the riots in Atlanta as well as the continuous proliferation of public lynchings throughout the country have proven Washington's accommodationism, proposed in The Atlanta Compromise, had failed.
- In 1909, DuBois is the first African-American invited to speak at the American Historical Associations annual conference and he gives a talk entitled "Reconstruction and Its Benefits," which was seen as extremely controversial as it opposed the contemporary understanding that reconstruction had failed due to Black people's ineptitude when in government (a belief engineered and propagated by conservative scholars at Columbia University under the tenure of William Archibald Dunning). This later became the basis for his 700-page academic monograph *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880* (1935)
- In Spring 1910, the NAACP is founded by dozens of civil rights activists, black and white, with a mostly white executive board

# W.E.B. DUBOIS AND BLACK RADICALISM AT THE TURN OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY: THE CRISIS

- In 1910, the NAACP asked DuBois to be the Director of Publicity and Research for the organization. DuBois resigned from his teaching position at Atlanta University and moved to New York upon accepting the offer. He named *The Crisis* the NAACP's monthly magazine and published editorials for years
  - He would regularly criticize the presidency of Taft, promote anti-lynching federal legislation and labor unionization efforts as well as the tenants of the Socialist Party of America, of which he was briefly a member; however, he also regularly criticized leaders on the left who were racist and labor union leaders who had systemically banned Black people from joining
  - DuBois regularly supported the women's rights movement, although he found it difficult when the women's suffragist movement would not endorse racial justice (which the movement avoided in order to keep its membership of southern suffragettes)
- Throughout his life, DuBois was followed and surveilled by the U.S. government in attempts to find him doing treasonous acts so as to embarrass him or put him in jail.
- At the start of The Harlem Renaissance, DuBois was well on-board with the movement. He publicly supported what he saw as a rejuvenation of Black artistic creation; however, as the movement continued, he became disillusioned by its lack of political messaging and his belief that most white people visited Harlem not because they believed in the political and moral equality of Black people but because they were voyeurs. He therefore began to speak out against art for art's sake and instead promote artists he believed were committed to a political project of integration and equity.

# REMINDER FROM LAST WEEK...

## "Introduction" of The New Negro: Readings on Race, Representation, and African American Culture, 1892-1938



- "The admirable participation of African American soldiers in an international struggle on behalf of America and its European allies against the German military, according to Du Bois's testimony, could not alleviate the soldiers' concerns that their home country 'represents and gloats in lynching, disenfranchisement, caste, brutality, and devilish insult' of the dark-skinned race. Consequently, African Americans did not desire just to 'return from fighting,' but to 'return fighting' on behalf of 'Democracy.'"
- According to Barbara Foley's *Spectres of 1919: Class and Nation in the Making of the New Negro* (2003), "'In the revolutionary crucible of 1919, the term New Negro signified a fighter against both racism and capitalism; to be a political moderate did not preclude endorsement of at least some aspects of a class analysis of racism or sympathy with at least some goals of the Bolshevik Revolution.' In periodicals ranging from Call, Liberator, and Worker's Monthly to Negro World, Messenger, and Crusader, antiracist discourse portrayed the New Negro, through a class frame of analysis, as a political activist of both national and international stature."

# W.E.B. DUBOIS, "CRITERIA OF NEGRO ART" (1926)

- "I will say that there are today a surprising number of white people who are getting great satisfaction out of these younger Negro writers because they think it is going to stop agitation of the Negro question. They say, 'What is the use of your fighting and complaining; do the great thing and the reward is there.' And many colored people are all too eager to follow this advice; especially those who weary of the eternal struggle along the color line, who are afraid to fight and to whom the money of philanthropists and the alluring publicity are subtle and deadly bribes. They say, 'What is the use of fighting? Why not show simply what we deserve and let the reward come to us?'"
- "We can go on the stage; we can be just as funny as white Americans wish us to be; we can play all the sordid parts that America likes to assign to Negroes; but for anything else there is still small place for us."
- "[If we wrote what we could and not what is expected of us] The white publishers catering to white folk would say, 'It is not interesting'— to white folk, naturally not. They want Uncle Toms, Topsies, good 'darkies' and clowns."
- "Thus all art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists. I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy. I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda."
- "In other words, the white public today demands from its artists, literary and pictorial, racial pre-judgment which deliberately distorts truth and justice, as far as colored races are concerned, and it will pay for no other."

# ALAIN LEROY LOCKE, ED. THE NEW NEGRO: AN INTERPRETATION (1925)

- Alain Locke had become the chair of the Department of Philosophy at Howard University after completing his dissertation at Harvard in 1918. Well-known as the 'Dean' of the Harlem Renaissance, it was his edited collection that was seen as *the* totem of the movement. Much of his own academic writing was inaccessible to a public audience, but he remained not only a public essay writer for the movement from Washington, D.C. but a mentor to writers, including Zora Neale Hurston and especially other homosexual writers of the movement.
- Locke wrote extensively about several topics related to Black culture in the early 20th century, including jazz and blues music and visual art.
  - It was Alain Locke who said that the Jazz age was the "spiritual coming-of-age" of Black Americans. Locke theorizes that it is through Jazz and the Blues that Black artists access self-determination and social mobility promised to all Americans in theory but which had up until then never been accessible for Black people
- Most important to the theory of the 'New Negro' was that because migration had meant the Black artist was able to 'start over' so to speak because s/he was not consigned to live in a location that had, for centuries, required they live under the tutelage of other (white) people. This, according to Locke, meant that the 'New Negro' had the time and space (emotionally) for self-realization and self-expression.
  - In other terms, the spatial significance of Harlem (and other Harlems across the country, including and especially the South Side in Chicago and Washington, D.C.) was that, since Black artists were surrounded by confident, self-realized Black people, they were able to create art that was a necessarily fuller expression of Black identity and culture—not one that relied on the 'Old Negro' stereotypes.

# LOCKE VS. DUBOIS

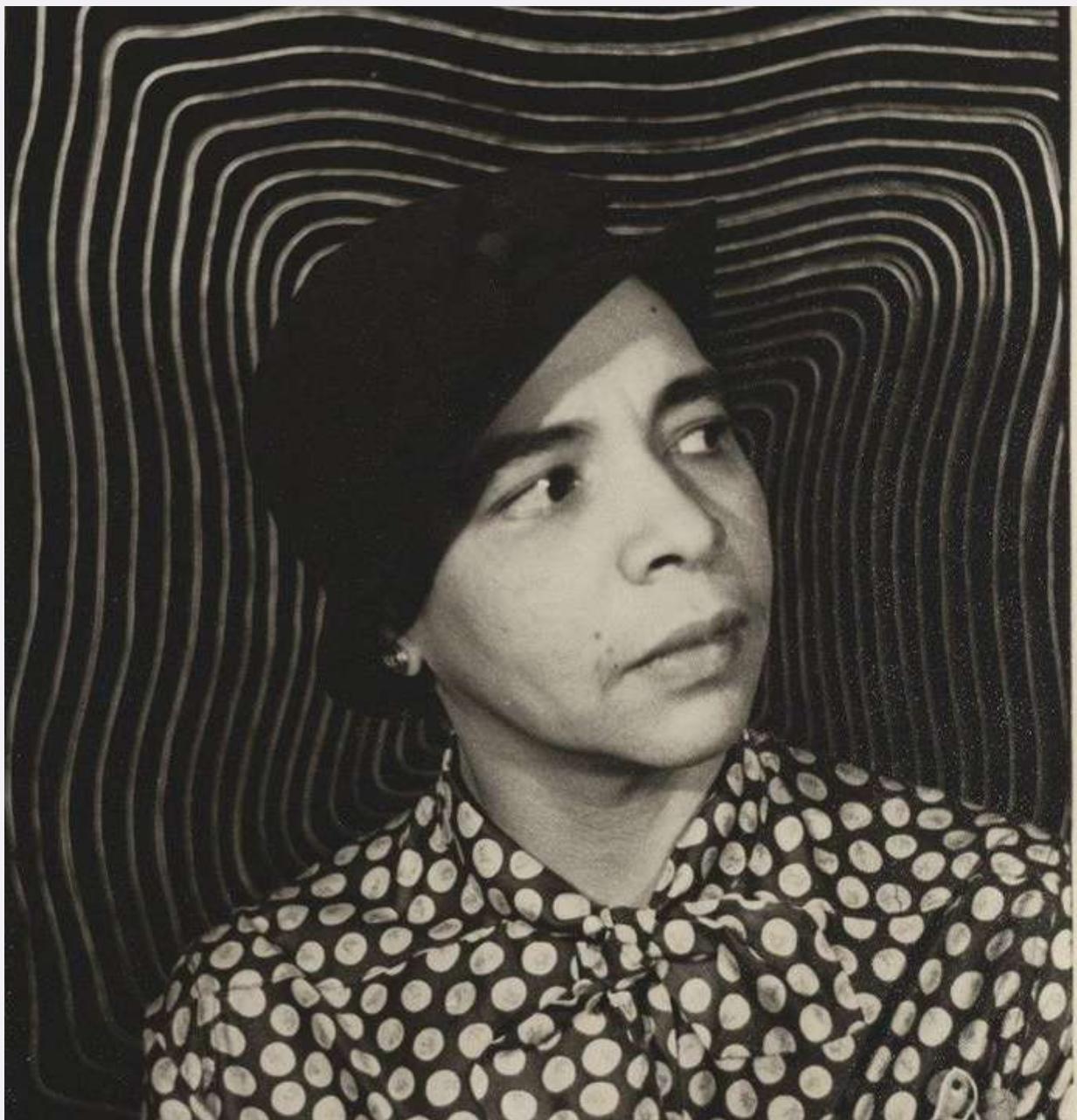
- In "Renewl and Rebirth," (*The New Negro*), Locke argues that the Black community was shedding the chrysalis of 'the Negro problem' in order to achieve spiritual emancipation. Often a promoter of Black spirituals and a lifelong Christian, Locke finds in the movement the ability for Black populations to shed their obligation to be politically-minded toward efforts of integration and racial justice, instead preferring the ability to joy in the Blackness of oneself and one's culture and community.
- This, of course, stands in stark contrast to DuBois's belief that all art *is*, whether we like it or not, propaganda—it can, according to this view, either be propaganda that helps or propaganda that hurts the movement toward racial justice. Instead of merely investing in the expression of self and joy that Locke sees the movement doing, DuBois finds this sort of navel-gazing unbecoming of a population that is still largely oppressed by the powers that be.
- Worth noting here is the religious difference between DuBois and Locke: Locke was a Bahai'i practitioner in private and publicly a lifelong Christian. DuBois, on the other hand, was attracted to Marxism precisely because of Marx's disdain for religion (Marx famously calls religion the 'opiate of the masses). In line with Marxian thought, DuBois believes the cultural investment in the Black church by the community has numbed the minds and politics of the community, resulting in a community that (according to DuBois) content with its lot.
  - However, as we see from the Claude McKay reading from today, DuBois was not the only one who felt this way. McKay, also religious—though sparsely so—also believed that art without politics was futile and self-serving

# CLAUDE MCKAY, "THE NEW NEGRO IN PARIS" (1937)



- "My idea of a renaissance was one of talented persons of an ethnic or national group working individually or collectively in a common purpose and creating things that would be typical of their group. I was surprised when I discovered that many of the talented Negroes regarded their renaissance more as an uplift organization and a vehicle to accelerate the pace and progress of smart Negro society."
- "Also among much of the Negro artists there was much of that Uncle Tom attitude which works like Satan against the idea of a coherent and purposeful Negro group. Each one wanted to be the first Negro, the one Negro, and the only Negro *for the white* instead of for their group. Because an unusual number of them were receiving grants to do creative work, they actually and naïvely believed that Negro artists as a group would always be treated differently from white artists and be protected by powerful patrons."
- "They were nearly all Harlem-conscious, in a curious synthetic way, it seemed to me—not because they were aware of Harlems' intrinsic values as a unique and popular Negro quarter, but apparently because white folks had discovered black magic there. I understood more clearly why there had been so much genteel-Negro hostility to my *Home to Harlem* and to Langston Hughes's primitive Negro

# NELLA LARSEN, PASSING



- Nella Larsen, who was known by friends and family as "Nellie," was the descendant of a mixed-race Danish West Indies mother and Afro-Caribbean father. Throughout her childhood, she visited Denmark to see her mother's family.
- Her mother felt she would become a well-to-do Negro woman were she to get a college education, she attended Fisk but was expelled for violation of the strict code of conduct for female students. She went to nursing school afterward in New York City and then later worked at the Tuskegee Institute.
- When she returned New York City, she worked for the city in the Bronx during the 1918 flu pandemic.
- She married renowned physicist Elmer Holmes. She took a sabbatical from work and began her career as an author in the Harlem Renaissance
- She became friends with Carl van Vichten and later published two largely autobiographical, *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929)
- She received a Guggenheim Fellowship, becoming the first African-American woman to do so, and left to Europe, where she eventually found out of her husband's affair with another woman. Upon returning, they divorced.
- She later returned to nursing, which she did until she was 70, never returning to literary writing.

# FOR NEXT CLASS

Harlem in the South: Zora Neale Hurston and Jean Toomer

