Negotiating the Aims of African American Adult Education: Race and Liberalism in the Harlem Experiment, 1931–1935

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This paper examines an “experimental” program in African American adult education that took place at the Harlem branch of the New York Public Library in the early 1930s. The program, called the Harlem Experiment, brought together a group of white funders (the Carnegie Corporation and the American Association for Adult Education)—who believed in the value of liberal adult education for democratic citizenship—and several prominent black reformers who led the program. I argue that the program represented a negotiation between these two groups over whether the black culture, politics, and protest that had developed in 1920s Harlem could be deradicalized and incorporated within the funder’s “elite liberalism”—an approach to philanthropy that emphasized ideological neutrality, scholarly professionalism, and political gradualism. In his role as the official evaluator, African American philosopher Alain Locke insisted that it could, arguing that the program, and its occasionally Afrocentric curriculum, aligned with elite liberal ideals and demonstrated the capacity for a broader definition of (historically white) liberal citizenship. While the program was ultimately abandoned in the mid-1930s, the efforts of Locke and other black reformers helped pave the way for a future instantiation of racial incorporation: the intercultural education movement of the mid-twentieth century.

In the late fall of 1938, Morse Cartwright found himself in an unfamiliar environment. A white liberal and the director of the American Association for Adult Education (AAAE), Cartwright had traveled to the Hampton Institute (now Hampton University) to deliver the opening keynote for the First Annual Conference on Adult Education and the Negro. Standing in front of an audience of African American educators and scholars, Cartwright chose the occasion to defend the idea of

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liberal adult education. “Since the World War twenty years ago,” Cartwright told the audience, “there has been an assault on democracy … from [a group] … I shall term the ultra-democratic left.” With little concern for the distinctions between left-wing and right-wing populism, Cartwright continued by tracing the history of the “ultra-democratic left”—first “in the form of … Bolshevism,” then in the form of Mussolini’s Italy and, more recently, at home in the form of the New Deal and “those who have learned to like relief and whose initiative is destroyed.” In the culmination of his speech, Cartwright argued that it was in the context of a surging ultra-democratic left that the value of more liberal-moderate adult education became clear:

The development of the education and understanding of the individual through free exercise of his will and his intellectual attainment form the cornerstone upon which democratic government is based. It is the belief of [a] certain of us that if we start with the education of the adult … we may safely build free democracies soundly and strongly enough so that they may withstand authoritarian and totalitarian attacks. … It is to this larger task of liberal education that the American movement for adult education is dedicated.¹

Cartwright hoped his audience of black leaders and educators at Hampton would join him in his cause.

There was more at stake in Cartwright’s speech than recruiting black educators or even defending the values of liberalism. By the mid-1930s the Carnegie Corporation had invested millions of dollars, through the AAEE, to build up the field of adult education, funding everything from research on adult learning to experimental programs for adults to discuss civic and political issues of the day. Indeed, the so-called “American movement for adult education” that Cartwright referenced was in fact the Carnegie-AAEE-driven movement for liberal adult education. At the time of Cartwright’s speech, the Works Progress Administration had emerged as the first to challenge Carnegie’s influence over the direction of adult education by offering all manner of new programming for adults. Cartwright did not want to lose ground to federal interventions. As historians of education have noted, when the Carnegie Corporation decided to make its entry into adult education in the mid-1920s, it was a small and relatively unorganized field and few programs adopted the label of “adult education.” While university extension, night schools, workers education programs, and library services were popular forms of education for

adults that had long preceded the Corporation’s interest in the area, Carnegie funds helped transform the education of adults into a “self-conscious” field of study and programming.  

At the helm of the Corporation’s entry into adult education was Frederick P. Keppel, the Corporation’s president for most of the interwar period (1923–1941). Far from simply promoting interest in the nascent field, Keppel saw adult education as a vehicle for developing liberal democratic citizens. Specifically, Keppel’s approach to adult education was driven by an ideology I call “elite liberalism,” grounded in three key values: (1) a scientific approach to grant-making for adult education that emphasized independent experts, experimental programs, and the presumed ideological neutrality of those involved; (2) an emphasis on liberal arts and deliberative discussion throughout the curriculum; and (3) a belief in political moderation and gradual social change. To aid in his effort, the Corporation under Keppel’s leadership established the AAAE in 1926, and Keppel placed his former assistant, Morse Cartwright, in charge of the organization.

The purpose of this article is not to evaluate the success or failure of the Carnegie–AAAE adult education movement—a topic that has already received significant treatment. The aim, rather, is to offer a case study of a specific program funded under the auspices of this movement. In the early 1930s, the AAAE briefly supported two African American adult education programs, one in Harlem and the other in Atlanta. Operating from 1931 to 1935, both took place at local public libraries and emphasized subjects that grew out of the “New Negro” Renaissance. To this end, the programs incorporated classes in the arts, drama, and music that highlighted the artistic contributions of people from the African diaspora and were often taught by luminaries in the black arts movement. Further, the programs


incorporated an explicit focus on race largely, though not exclusively, through deliberation of racial issues in local discussion forums. And, in Harlem, the program also drew upon contemporary and racially progressive debates on black history, politics, and culture that pervaded the neighborhood—on street corners, in churches, and in the black press—and helped to bolster the area’s reputation as the “Mecca of the New Negro.” The focus of this paper is the Harlem Experiment, as the Carnegie-sponsored program in Harlem was often called.

Despite having roots in radical forms of black expression that had been popularized in 1920s Harlem, the Carnegie-funded program represented something else: a far-reaching negotiation over whether black culture, politics, and protest could be incorporated in a broader paradigm of elite liberalism that had developed in the interwar era. At the center of this negotiation was a pair of black liberal reformers, Eugene Kinckle Jones and Alain Locke, as well as the progressive white librarian Ernestine Rose, who helped to manage the Harlem Experiment. These individuals functioned as intermediaries between the program’s elite funders and its local participants. In particular, African American philosopher Locke—who served as the program’s official evaluator—went to great lengths to argue that the Harlem Experiment was not a challenge to Keppel and Cartwright’s belief in adult education for liberal democratic citizenship but rather a logical extension of it. In making his argument, Locke hoped to decouple the Harlem Experiment’s occasionally Afrocentric curriculum from the more radical forms of grassroots black politics that had developed throughout the neighborhood and, in the process, align it with the pursuit of liberal citizenship and political moderation that its funders advocated. Keppel, for his part, seemed open to this possibility, expressing an interest in African and African American cultural traditions and believing that artists of the Harlem Renaissance and scholars such as famous Afro-Puerto Rican bibliophile Arthur Schomburg had much to offer liberal education and citizenship for African Americans. Yet, what was at stake in the Harlem Experiment was not just a move away from New Negro radicalism toward political moderation but the very contours (and limits) of mid-century American liberalism. At stake was elite liberalism’s capacity to accommodate racial particularities (or diversity) within a broader definition of (historically white) liberal

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citizenship. Insofar as elite liberals construed racially specific curricula, and the racial consciousness that followed, as “radical” or politically destabilizing, the compatibility of black adult education and liberal citizenship was called into question. Ultimately, I conclude that while the Harlem Experiment did not succeed in expanding the boundaries of elite liberalism, the efforts of Locke and other black reformers in the program helped pave the way for a future instantiation of racial incorporation: the intercultural education movement of the mid-twentieth century.

This study contributes to a number of scholarly literatures. For one, it recasts figures like Locke and Jones, who have often been uncritically associated with the cultural and political radicalism of 1920s Harlem. In contrast, I argue that their social position and political views align with historian Karen Ferguson’s idea of a “black reform elite”—a group that she describes as a “tiny group of literate spokespeople who negotiated on behalf of the black community with white elites.” Further, in arguing that the Harlem Experiment represented a negotiation over the meaning of liberalism and its ability (or inability) to incorporate forms of New Negro radicalism, this article reevaluates the periodization of liberal incorporation of black protest and politics. While many scholars have looked to the post-World War II period for examples of institutional realignment to incorporate and defuse black radicalism, this study locates the interwar roots of this effort. It also contributes to the vast literature on white philanthropy and African

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7Karen Ferguson, Black Politics in New Deal Atlanta (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002). Ferguson highlights that black reformers often embraced respectability politics—policing African American’s moral and behavioral standards—as a means of “proving the citizenship of black people.” With the Harlem Experiment, Locke shifted respectability politics from the behavioral to the scholarly, emphasizing that black art and scholarship could live up to the standards of elite liberalism and that African Americans were worthy of inclusion within the concept of liberal citizenship.

American educational reform. It does so not only by shifting to an understudied period in the relationship between the two groups but also by complicating the motivations of black reformers and white liberals. With limited mainstream avenues to advance African Americans’ social status in 1930s America, the Harlem Experiment presented black reformers with a novel solution: legitimize black aspiration and expression by pushing for its incorporation within the historically white world view of elite liberalism—a process Locke believed could help African Americans gain greater social recognition. And while white liberals involved in the program remained tentatively open to a more expansive conception of liberalism—one that legitimized black cultural achievements—they continued to be committed to forms of political neutrality and scholarly objectivity that African Americans were often assumed to lack. The Harlem Experiment thus served as a point of convergence, where the two groups sought to test the possibility of participating in a joint experiment that would include, but also deradicalize, aspects of African American life within the cultural, political, and ideological system of elite liberalism.

The Carnegie Corporation and Adult Education

In the early 1920s, the Carnegie Corporation, based in New York, developed an interest in funding adult education programs. Its president, Frederick Keppel, took over in the fall of 1923 with a vision of adult education as a form of liberal education that stressed both the Victorian values of good character and taste as well as democratic ideals of freedom of thought and deliberative reasoning. The oldest son of Irish immigrants, Keppel grew up in a household that cherished Victorian art and literature. In 1910, he was appointed dean of Columbia College in New York and was beloved by students for his personable and informal style. At the outset of World War I, however, he left Columbia to work in the War Department under Secretary of War Newton Baker. He followed this job with a brief stint as overseas


director of operations at the American Red Cross before becoming president of the Carnegie Corporation, a post he held for nineteen years.

With Keppel as president, the Carnegie Corporation began to place heavy emphasis on cultural education. The new president hoped to combat the growing marketplace of mass consumption and cheap entertainment in 1920s America. To this end, he focused on developing the fields of arts and library education (in addition to liberal adult education), partnering with organizations he felt were scholarly and independent but also could serve as a natural point of coordination (and influence) in their respective fields. Unsatisfied with the existing options in adult education, Keppel, through the Carnegie Corporation, established the AAAE in 1926. Though ostensibly independent, in practice the organization functioned as an “adjunct of the Carnegie Corporation,” with the majority of its expenses (including the entirety of its administrative costs) paid by the Corporation. Keppel hoped the AAAE and its new director, Morse Cartwright, would provide the “guidance and control” needed for a “whole vast movement” of adult education. Between 1926 and 1941, Cartwright and the AAAE’s executive committee served as gatekeepers for the millions of dollars of adult education grants that flowed from the Corporation.

The creation of the AAAE in 1926 was the practical outcome of Keppel’s belief in the need for expert guidance in philanthropic grant-making. The organization’s executive committee was occupied largely by men with whom Keppel and Cartwright had close working relationships. It reviewed, selected, and distributed funding for most of the Carnegie Corporation’s adult education grants. It published studies the Corporation funded and established the Journal of Adult Education, which promoted the “culturalist,” or liberal, approach to adult education that Keppel favored. The dissemination of adult education grants through the AAAE also shielded the Corporation from charges of political involvement, or private “influence,” in the field of adult education. Eager to avoid any criticism for bias or social engineering, the Carnegie Corporation relied on quasi-independent organizations like the AAAE to bolster its reputation for scientifically detached and politically impartial decision-making.

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12 Ibid., 106.
14 Keppel noted in the mid-1930s that the Corporation was “in consultation with no fewer than 68 national scholarly organizations” to “provide a check and balance …
Another important component of elite liberalism that the AAAE supported was an endorsement of moderate political liberalism. This approach stood in contrast to more radical conceptions of education’s role in society in the 1920s and 1930s. Writing in his official capacity as executive director of the AAAE, Cartwright explicitly endorsed political moderation, arguing that adult education, in its ideal form, was a “liberal” enterprise, aligned with “the recurrent testimony of history to the gradualness of permanent social change.” He admitted that people like Columbia professor George Counts—and the so-called “social reconstructionists”—had successfully popularized “talk of revolution” in educational circles, but he felt such talk was antithetical to education’s core democratic values. In his 1937 presidential report, Keppel approvingly quoted the liberal philosopher Everett Martin Dean, who lamented the rise of “the language of dialectical materialism” and insisted that if the masses were “not taught good philosophies, they [were] pretty sure to turn to bad ones.” Working together, Keppel and Cartwright hoped that they could go back to the “serious business” of educating adults by “improving the diffusion of knowledge and understanding.”

Keppel and the Spectrum of White Racial Liberalism

Following World War I, the ideological tenets of elite liberalism gained popularity among foundation leaders. A growing belief that social scientific methods could be applied to societal ills was embraced not only by university professors but by funders as well. But far from simply adopting a neutral or apolitical approach, elite liberal philanthropies applied their principles to the changing political—and racial—context, especially in northern cities. Despite broad ideological overlap among foundation leaders, their response to African Americans’ political and cultural aspirations was hardly a matter of consensus. On the more conservative end of the elite liberal paradigm was Thomas Jesse Jones, a longtime advocate of Booker


18 For an overview of elite whites’ response to Black migration into northern cities, see Karen R. Miller, Managing Inequality: Northern Racial Liberalism in Interwar Detroit (New York: NYU Press, 2015); and Leah N. Gordon, From Power to Prejudice:
T. Washington’s model of industrial education and the educational director of the Phelps-Stokes Fund during the interwar period. In contrast to Jones, one of the most progressive elite liberals on matters of race was Edwin Embree, president of the Rosenwald Fund between 1928 and 1948. Taken together, the two represented a spectrum of philanthropic responses to the so-called “Negro problem.” Further, as outspoken advocates for black education in one form or another, the two men help situate Keppel and Cartwright, who were less outspoken on the issue of race in American philanthropy.

Jones is best known for his ardent support of Washington’s model of industrial schooling and his paternalistic approach to black education. Born and raised in Wales, Jones began his career teaching at Hampton Institute in Virginia in the early 1900s. Later, as the educational director of the Phelps-Stokes Fund, he fashioned himself into an “expert” on black education with the publication of his two-volume report *Negro Education* (1917), which famously called for foundations to take a more unified approach by supporting only a handful of prominent industrial schools for African Americans in the South. Jones’s early experience at Hampton had a strong influence on his belief in manual training for African American adults. In the 1920s and 1930s, after the fervor for black industrial education had died down, Jones began to explore a new avenue for industrial training, leading a movement to export the Hampton-Tuskegee model to British colonial Africa.

While Jones’s advocacy for industrial education would seem to place him outside the spectrum of elite liberalism, much about his approach to black education aligned with its principles. *Negro Education*, for example, reflected the growing interest among universities and major foundations in applying the nascent tools of social science to African American life. Filled with graphs and statistical analysis, his report repackaged Washington’s agenda as a “quantitative evaluation” of black secondary and postsecondary education. Moreover, Jones embraced political gradualism. For example, writing on the growing number of African American teachers, Jones did not

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reject the trend but questioned “the rapidity and universality of the change” and the impact it could have separating African Americans “from the aid, influence, and standards of white people.”22 “It is the emphatic conclusion of the study,” he wrote, that “schools for colored people … [require] white management and white teachers.”23 While deliberating over the design of the Harlem Experiment, Keppel and Cartwright would come to a similar conclusion about the importance of white oversight.

Much like Jones, Embree’s early life mixed southern and northern culture. His childhood was spent on the campus of Berea College in Kentucky, an integrated liberal arts college founded by Embree’s abolitionist grandfather, John Fee. For college, Embree moved north: first to Yale University, then to the Rockefeller Foundation in New York City, and finally to become president of the Rosenwald Fund in Chicago in 1928. Despite similarities in their backgrounds, Embree’s and Jones’s approaches to African American education had little in common. Embree dismissed vocational education, calling it a “contradiction in terms” since education, by definition, differed from the specialized training of industrial schooling.24 “The special function of the school,” he wrote in a draft of his 1931 President’s Report, “is to pass on the great intellectual tools on which modern civilization is built to assist the growing child in his attempts to use these tools. … This theory of education applies to Negroes quite as much as to any other group.”25 Yet more than simply “modern civilization,” Embree believed in the value of culturally specific education. “In the non-industrial countries,” he explained, “children should … give their chief attention … to learning the customs and habits of life which characterize the given people, [including] gaining rich knowledge of the folk lore, the history and traditions … of the group.”26 Indeed, Embree opposed colonial education, calling it a form of “racial arrogance.”27

While historian Carter G. Woodson declared that Jones was “detested by ninety-five percent of all Negroes,” Embree was generally well liked among black elites.28 In 1931, Embree published Brown

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22 Ibid., vol. 1, 4.
23 Ibid., 7.
25 Ibid., 4.
27 Ibid., 2.
America: The Story of a New Race, his most famous treatment of race in America. The book received a ringing endorsement in the black press. Opportunity Magazine, the official publication of the National Urban League (NUL), devoted an entire issue to Brown America, with laudatory evaluations of the book by prominent African American scholars and literary figures such as James Weldon Johnson, Sterling Brown, Charles Johnson, and Eugene Kinckle Jones. In one of the more perceptive reviews, however, the writer George Schuyler highlighted the limits of Embree’s progressive attitudes on race. He criticized Embree not for his analysis of racism, which deviated from most other white liberals in stressing the importance of economic opportunity, but rather for his optimistic conclusions. Schuyler mocked Brown America’s conclusion that “somehow, someway everything will be ok in the long run.” He argued, “If we follow the logic of the facts and the present social and economic trends, the Negro group is headed not to heaven but to hell.” What Embree failed to see—and what white elite liberals were unable to reconcile even as they developed more sympathetic views of African Americans—was that only structural changes (a “new social order” in Schuyler’s words) could bring an end to racial discrimination.²⁹

Unlike Jones and Embree, Keppel was relatively silent about his views on race. One rare exception was a passing reference to Harlem Renaissance artists in his 1933 book The Arts in American Life (published a year before John Dewey’s Art as Experience). In his brief discussion of the black arts movement, he expressed admiration for some of its cultural products, writing, “The popular success enjoyed by Negro actors in ‘Emperor Jones,’ ‘Porgy’ and ‘The Green Pastures’; the popularity of Negro singers and musicians; the rise of such outstanding figures as Countee Cullen among poets, Claude McKay among writers of fiction, and Roland Hayes and Paul Robeson among singers, indicates the ability of the Negro to compete successfully with other races in the field of the arts, and … [develop] his own … aesthetics.”³⁰ While he leaned on cultural critic Matthew Arnold’s Victorian conception of culture —“the best which has been thought and said”— that was no doubt Eurocentric, the Harlem Renaissance had helped Keppel come to embrace a select group of black artists and leaders as well as their works.³¹

²⁹George S. Schuyler, “Mr. Embree Discovers a New Race,” Opportunity: Journal of Negro Life 10, no. 6 (June 1932), 175–76.

³⁰Keppel and Duffus, The Arts in American Life, 32.

In the late 1920s, Keppel also had a growing interest in Africa. Indeed, between 1928 and 1931 the Corporation gave over $200,000 to support Jones’s project to export industrial education to British colonies in Africa.\(^{32}\) However, the source of Keppel’s interest in the project seemed to differ from Jones’s, as Cartwright hinted during his oral history. “Here’s a peach,” Cartwright quipped as he roamed through the Corporation’s files, “Introduction to the Phonology of the Bantu Languages. … It’s listed here under the heading ‘useful publications.’” Cartwright continued, “Keppel was always talking about Africa, but I don’t think he knew much about it. Nobody did.”\(^{33}\) As with his appreciation of African American art and culture, Keppel was fascinated by African cultures. In 1935, for example, the Carnegie Corporation—“through the courtesy of Dr. Frederick P. Keppel”—paid for an exhibit of handcrafted items made by students of an Anna T. Jeannes school in Harare, Zimbabwe, to travel throughout the United States. On hearing about the exhibit, Keppel personally contacted the organizers to see if they could “send … some samples” and wrote to Schomburg to help bring the exhibit to “Fisk, Atlanta and Dillard Universities.” An advertisement for the exhibit noted that Keppel felt that “these colorful, interesting, useful and suggestive objects [would be of] interest [to] the people of America in [demonstrating] the resourcefulness and creative mind of our African brothers.”\(^{34}\)

When it came to questions of race—and, specifically, the relationship between race, culture, and education—white elite liberals were not a monolith. They represented a wide range of views on the aims of education (including industrial education, liberal education, and adult education) and they were variously attentive to the views of non-whites. These differences shaped the way elite liberals like Keppel and Cartwright conceived of the purpose of their “experiment” in adult education in Harlem.


\(^{34}\)Frederick P. Keppel to Arthur Schomburg, Jan. 8, 1936, box 4, folder 28, Arthur Alfonso Schomburg papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library.
Harlem—the Mecca

By the 1930s, Harlem was widely known as the “mecca” of African American life and culture. By the 1930s, Harlem’s development into the unofficial capital of black America coincided with an unprecedented migration of African Americans from the South. In 1910, Harlem was a relatively integrated community, with African Americans living primarily between 125th Street and 142nd Street and making up less than a fifth of the population in that area. By 1930, African Americans made up well over 90 percent of the residents living between 125th and 142nd Street and had increased their numbers by 700 percent (from roughly 28,000 to approximately 204,000). As the writer James Weldon Johnson observed in 1930, “Thousands of Negroes [were] pouring into Harlem month by month.”

Cultural and political changes accompanied demographic shifts in Harlem. The neighborhood became a locus for black intellectuals who wanted to participate in the era’s proliferation of black literature, poetry, art, and music. The “Harlem Renaissance,” as it came to be called, produced works by, for, and about blacks and their experience in America. At the same time, political organizations associated with varieties of socialism, black nationalism, Pan-Africanism, and left-wing liberalism were spreading throughout the neighborhood. Two of the most prominent were Marcus Garvey’s nationalist Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) and W. E. B. Du Bois’s liberal National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, but they were far from the only ones. Cyril Briggs’s African Blood Brotherhood and A. Philip Randolph’s Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters combined black nationalism and socialism and wove together racial liberation and class solidarity in their organizational platforms. So, too, did Harlem Renaissance artists take up the political implications of their art. A young Langston Hughes expressed this attitude in his famous essay “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” writing, “We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our

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37 Johnson, *Black Manhattan*, 151.
individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn’t matter.”

Yet this image of Harlem as the mecca of black cultural and political radicalism overlooks the role of a rising black reform elite in this movement. Figures like Alain Locke, Eugene Kinckle Jones, Charles Johnson (editor of *Opportunity*), and W. E. B. Du Bois often positioned themselves as “race managers,” helping to mediate black aspirations with the interests of white elites. In one famous example, Du Bois flip-flopped on his opposition to World War I in a 1918 *Crisis* editorial, “Close Ranks, Let Us Forget Our Grievance” and advocated that African Americans forgo their demands for greater civil rights during a time of war. Still, compared with a previous generation of black reform elite, led by Booker T. Washington and other racial accommodationists, Harlem’s new reform elite did not draw as fine a line between themselves and left-wing black politics.

As a participant in the Harlem Experiment, Eugene Kinckle Jones deserves special attention. Jones, raised by two college-educated parents in Richmond, Virginia, earned a master’s degree from Cornell in 1908 and started working with the newly established NUL in 1911, becoming its executive secretary in 1916. Jones quickly became the face of the NUL and proving the organization’s “worth … to various philanthropic societies” became his main responsibility. Like the NUL itself, Jones’s views on racial uplift were relatively conservative. Adopting the gradualism of elite liberals, he viewed “the colored race’s progress as an evolutionary thing.” Speaking at the same Hampton conference in which Cartwright participated in 1938, Jones described the “Negro masses” as desperately in need of education and enlightenment. “Their ignorance of their real condition and of their potentialities is pathetic,” he complained. They had little “idea of achievement.” Their only hope, he believed, was education guided by

“those who constitute the trusted leadership within the group.” Inspired by Du Bois’s “Talented Tenth,” Jones envisioned himself and other “trusted leaders” guiding the future of black education.

The diverse, and often radical, politics of Harlem during the 1920s and 1930s created a vibrant civic culture where political discussions were commonplace on street corners, in churches, and at the meetings of local institutions like the UNIA. But while Harlem provided ample opportunities for civic and cultural education, participants and organizers rarely viewed such activities as “adult education.” As black reformers and liberal whites like Keppel and Cartwright turned their attention to the Harlem Experiment, it remained an open question whether the Experiment could negotiate the political diversity (and tensions) of the New Negro movement, and if it did, how it might reshape the broader contours of elite liberalism in the process.

Designing the Harlem Adult Education Experiment

In 1926, Eugene Kinckle Jones approached Keppel about creating a national program in African American adult education that would be administered by local NUL branches. While Keppel affirmed the Corporation’s interest in the project, he guided Jones toward Cartwright and the newly formed AAAE. (He also may have suggested that Jones reduce his ambitions—before meeting with Cartwright, Jones scaled back his proposal to setting up “experiments in a number of cities” as a point of entry into the area of adult education among African Americans.)

Despite some interest from Cartwright, Jones was ultimately turned down. According to Elizabeth Bennett, whose 1932 master’s thesis provides a detailed account of the first year of the Harlem Experiment, Jones’s original proposal was rejected for a number of reasons—most stemming from the AAAE’s commitment to elite racial liberalism. First, the AAAE’s executive committee did not want to limit their work to “special groups.” Second, in what was likely Cartwright’s foremost concern, the AAAE worried that the NUL, as a black institution, was too biased to carry out such a program. As Bennett noted, somewhat obliquely:

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46 Ibid.
A ... deterrent factor which affected the decision made by the Association at that time was the partisanship of a plan which Mr. Jones presented. ... It seemed to the Association’s executives that the interest of the group to be served might be controversial at the outset if it were presented by one strong faction of that group.47

For the AAAE and the Carnegie Corporation, black institutions were driven by ideological “functions” and therefore lacked neutrality when it came to matters of race.

These concerns did not go away, but four years later, in 1930, the Corporation and the AAAE revisited the idea of an adult education program in Harlem and convinced themselves that the time was right for a venture with “one of the neglected groups.”48 In 1931, the Rosenwald Fund joined the project, agreeing to contribute $5,000 a year to establish an Atlanta program. Selected for being a “typical” southern city with a relatively large black community, Atlanta had a reputation as a city that practiced “interracial tolerance” and represented the New South.49 Furthermore, Cartwright noted, “The locations for the experiments were chosen ... in order that the educational needs of the northern Negro might serve as a check upon those of the southern [Negro], and vice versa.”50 In keeping with the Corporation’s interest in scientific grant-making, the addition of Atlanta was an attempt to “control for” regional differences. In an overarching evaluation of the two projects, no significant differences were found between the two populations of black adults, although the quality of Atlanta’s adult education program was notably lower than Harlem’s due to staff shortages and limited resources.51

Harlem’s program received considerably more attention. The choice of the 135th Street Branch Library (now the Countee Cullen Branch) as the location of the Harlem program was made by the funders, and it reflected their commitment to political neutrality. Led by white librarian Ernestine Rose, the 135th Street Branch Library was considered racially and politically neutral. As one commentator

48Ibid.
49Ibid., 7. While this reputation certainly made Atlanta far from typical in the South, the reality of Atlanta’s racial politics did not conform to its image. See Kevin M. Kruse, White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).
noted, “The library was undoubtedly neutral and public enough as an institution to avoid the disadvantages of a more racial agency. In this way adult education [at the library] might steer clear of racial … sectarianism.”

The design of the adult education “experiment” included advisory committees in both Harlem and Atlanta. Made up of local black community leaders, the committees were charged with “interpreting the community needs.” For the Harlem Adult Education Committee, Jones was asked to serve as chairman, and, with Rose, went to work selecting the fifteen committee members from the neighborhood’s black elite. The committee included Elise Ayer (vice chair), the only African American principal of a New York City public school; James Watson, a municipal court judge; and Schomburg, whose collection of materials by and about people of African descent the library purchased in 1926. The group also included two white “consultants”: Franklin Hopper, director of circulation for the New York Public Library (NYPL), and Eduard Lindeman, a philosopher of adult education at the New School for Social Research and a member of the AAAE’s executive committee. All were well respected and most held moderate political beliefs.

In theory, the Harlem Adult Education Committee was in charge of decisions related to programming and curriculum, but in practice it lacked any real authority. As Bennett observed in her 1932 study, Rose paid little attention to the advisory committee. For Rose, the committee was unwieldy and was “not working very hard,” and thus only got in the way of program implementation. However, for the committee members, Rose’s disregard for its input was symbolic of a problem that even Harlem’s professional class felt, namely, white control over African American institutions and opportunities for self-determination. Despite these concerns, Jones showed little resistance to Rose’s leadership. Bennett speculated that Jones’s “supine response to Miss Rose’s domination … which he clearly regards with dissatisfaction, seems due to his wish to maintain goodwill with the Association.”

As Jones well knew, to be viewed as a troublemaker by the AAAE,

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56 Ibid., 46. Meeting minutes for the Harlem Adult Education Experiment show it was rare for more than five members to attend the monthly meetings.
or any major funder, could have grave consequences for the program and the NUL, which relied heavily on white philanthropic support.

The Experiment—Culture and Race

In early 1932, a report in the *Dunbar News*, a Harlem community newspaper, stated the purpose of the newly formed Harlem Experiment. The program, it claimed, was designed to support “the stimulation of adult minds to a greater desire for knowledge and the appreciation of the value of culture.” After Rose took over in 1920, the Harlem Public Library launched a series of community arts programs that grew out of the Harlem Renaissance; created community outreach projects that included educational forums on politics, race, and labor; and added a Division of Negro History and Literature (largely composed of Schomburg’s collection). The AAAE’s grant did not drastically change the implementation of these programs at the library; rather, the grant provided a new way for Rose to interpret the library’s work, namely as “adult education” for liberal citizenship. In reports to funders, Rose listed public forums, classes on African American history, and black arts programs as forms of cultural education for adults. Yet, insofar as Rose defined black culture and politics as legitimate forms of cultural education, she also pushed the definitional boundaries of elite liberalism.

Many of the courses in the Harlem Experiment were openly characterized as committed to “racial interests.” Among them were several courses and study groups on black history offered in 1933 and 1934, often led by Schomburg himself. In addition, a failed attempt was made to design a course for teachers “showing how the Negro’s part in American history may be taught in public school.” Later, in 1934, the library partnered with Teachers College at Columbia to offer a course on Changing Race Attitudes taught by Rachel Davis DuBois. DuBois, a white Quaker from New Jersey, had gained prominence in the 1920s for developing a program of intercultural education that she conducted during school assemblies at Woodbury High School. Over the fifteen-week course, DuBois lectured to a group of teachers and

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59 Ibid., 56.
60 “Report to Mr. Cartwright for the Quarter,” 1933, box 7, folder 7, 135th Street Branch Records, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, The New York Public Library (hereafter 135th Street Branch Records).
social workers on the nature of prejudice, the educator’s role in teaching tolerance, and the contributions of the various races to American life.61

DuBois’s course aligned nicely with the way many elite liberals understood the process of racial change in America. Premised on the idea that racism was a problem of individual attitudes, and that education and information could gradually fix the problem, courses like DuBois’s seemed to present an answer to growing racial tension in northern cities. Yet, for the most part, Rose and the members of the Harlem Adult Education Committee were less focused on overcoming racist attitudes than on highlighting black cultural expression. For instance, a community choir that began at the library in 1932 gained widespread popularity through its performances of Negro spirituals and was one of the few ventures to last beyond 1935. The choir included over one hundred Harlem community members, who, according to Rose, had little formal musical training. By 1933, one reviewer from the New York Age dubbed their performance of “Negro Spirituals and music by Negro composers” a “musical treat” and particularly applauded the choir’s performance of “Steal Away to Jesus,” which enthralled audiences.62

The Harlem Experiment’s program of arts education embraced the Harlem Renaissance as its guiding inspiration. Indeed, the library employed a number of artists who had made a name for themselves during the 1920s. Two summer art classes, offered in 1933 and 1934, were taught by James Lesesne Wells, an art instructor at Howard University who had gained critical acclaim for his representations (and subversion) of African primitivism, most famously in his 1929 painting Primitive Girl. The culmination of Wells’s art classes was an exhibition that garnered serious reviews in both the black and white press. In 1933, a reviewer for the New York Tribune noted, “Among the most striking objects in the exhibit are the colored paper mache masks.” Seemingly both attracted and repulsed by the African influence, the reviewer continued, “In these lurid and occasionally grotesque productions can be seen influence of the African primitive. Some bear a striking resemblance to the masks of voodoo doctors, grinning prognathous face ornamented with fur and tufts of feathers.”63 Wells’s class was also reviewed by more sympathetic commentators. Writing in Opportunity, Alon Bement, a white artist, noted, “The

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61“Course on Human Relations,” box 7, folder 8, 135th Street Branch Records.
drawings and the paintings are good, but the designs are splendid and would hold their place in fast company."\(^{64}\)

**Forums and Race**

The primary method for including race-specific content in the Harlem Experiment was the use of educational forums. Each forum consisted of a speaker followed by audience questions and discussion. This approach to adult education had gained popularity in Harlem well before the Depression, particularly as a venue for radical education. In the early 1920s, Richard B. Moore, a West Indian affiliated with the African Blood Brotherhood and the Communist party, helped to organize the People’s Educational Forum (PEF) in Harlem.\(^{65}\) Originally formed as a Marxist study group in 1917, the PEF drew sizable crowds to its weekly meeting at Lafayette Theater on Seventh Avenue and 131st Street, with speakers that included Hubert Harrison, an Afro-Caribbean socialist and atheist considered Harlem’s most famous orator during the 1920s.\(^{66}\) According to one confidential informant for the Bureau of Investigation (a precursor to the FBI), the PEF was “the greatest school [for] … the teaching of Bolshevism among Negroes.”\(^{67}\) Indeed, for Moore and other members of the PEF, the format of the forum—particularly the inclusion of audience discussion—symbolized the group’s radical commitments. Rejecting the perceived elitism of lectures, organizers proclaimed that “the proceedings of the PEF [were] absolutely democratic.”\(^{68}\) By the time the Harlem Experiment began in 1931, Rose noted, “Harlem [was] famous for its forums.”\(^{69}\)

In 1932, Ira DeA. Reid, a black sociologist who at the time was the director of research at the NUL, coordinated the Harlem Experiment's


\(^{69}\)Ernestine Rose, “Advising Readers in Harlem,” box 6, folder 8, 135th Street Branch Records, 3.
first forum series. Reid called the five-part series “A New World Order” and selected speakers largely from Harlem’s intelligentsia to discuss a range of topics on race, economics, and the global politics of the Great Depression. In the summer of 1932, an audience in the Harlem Public Library’s auditorium watched as W. A. Domingo, a Jamaican socialist; Charles Alexander, a high-ranking black communist; Walter Polakov, a Russian-American Marxist who had helped the Soviet Union adopt a system of scientific management in the late 1920s; and Bruce Bliven, the editor of the liberal New Republic, discussed “Russia’s way out” of the Depression. The same year, Schomburg devised a regular forum called “The Negro in the New World.” Unlike Reid’s forum, which focused on contemporary economic and racial issues, Schomburg’s forum focused on black history. Schomburg invited Dantès Bellegarde, the Haitian ambassador to the United States, to speak on the history of his country. In the auditorium of the 135th Street Branch Library, Bellegarde delivered his speech in front of a crowd the Atlanta Daily World called “a small [group of] … white and colored literati of New York City.” Speaking in French with an English translator, he told the audience that “because she is of African descent … [Haitian] history has been unjustly described as an uninterrupted series of bloody [conflicts].” On the contrary, Bellegarde contended, “All of the efforts made by the Haitians, firstly to break the chains of slavery, afterwards to build upon the ruins of the colonial regime an independent, stable, and orderly state are the most eloquent answer to that arbitrary condemnation.” Throughout his speech, Bellegarde evoked a spirit of Pan-Africanism, noting that knowledge of Haiti’s achievements “facilitates a wider and more sympathetic knowledge of the black man’s soul.” He urged his audience to dispel prejudicial views of Haiti through research and good information, which, he noted, could be found in the “Haitian section of this public library.”

While Bellegarde’s talk pushed the boundaries of elite liberalism in its call for Pan-African solidarity, the discussion forum featuring Albon Holsey in 1932 boldly took elite liberalism as its target. Holsey, then president of the Colored Merchants’ Association, spoke on the subject of black unemployment. Reflecting the economic nationalism promoted by the UNIA and the “Don’t Buy Where You Can’t Work” campaign, Holsey argued that the key to ameliorating black unemployment was a radical “co-operative effort [by] the
Negro ... to ... wield his purchasing power ... [and] demand his economic recognition.” In the discussion that followed, the New York Amsterdam News reported that the audience was split on the issue. While some agreed with Holsey’s position that the only way to remedy black unemployment was to develop “Negro business as a separate racial entity,” others argued that boycotting white businesses was impossible in a modern industrial economy. Despite engaging the audience, Holsey’s speech broke with the elite liberal ideal of political moderation and value-neutral expertise in its open call for political action. Still, in a summary of the forums, Reid claimed that he helped the audience keep an open and critical mind by “point[ing] out the strengths and fallacies of the arguments presented in last week’s program.”

The most widely reported forum series in the Harlem Experiment was a two-day labor conference in July 1934. The conference brought together a group of national black and white leaders to discuss whether the National Recovery Administration (NRA) discriminated against black labor. Held at the 135th Street Branch Library and sponsored jointly by the Harlem Adult Education Committee, A. Philip Randolph’s Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, and Spencer Miller’s AAAE-funded Workers Education Bureau of America, the conference consisted of afternoon and evening panels with talks that included Ira DeA. Reid’s “The Economic Consequences of the NRA on the Race,” followed by general discussion with the audience. The climax of the conference was a controversial talk by white Georgia native Clark Foreman, who, at thirty-one years old, had been appointed Adviser on the Economic Status of the Negroes by President Roosevelt, despite strong opposition from black leaders.

Between 1931 and 1935, the Harlem Branch of the NYPL hosted well over a hundred forums, often organized around topics on race. While participants in the Harlem Experiment seem to be largely middle class, a memo from Rose to Harlem Adult Education Committee members in 1934 argued that, over the three years of the program’s life, forums had proven to be among the more successful approaches to reaching working-class and unemployed Harlemites. Indeed, with

73Reid, Adult Education Among Negroes, 55. Other than a single statement by Reid, there is little evidence that this happened.
75Rose, “Advising Readers in Harlem.”
the backing of the federal government, a movement for forum-based adult education had spread throughout the United States. For many white liberals, forums offered a counterpoint to the increased radicalism that emerged on the Depression-era lecture circuit. As United States Commissioner of Education John Studebaker contended, “American socialists … seeking changes in our economic system” should focus on “democratic processes like public discussion” rather than listen to propagandistic harangues on the subject of revolution.

While Cartwright had originally embraced the forum movement—even funding an experiment run by Studebaker (then superintendent of the Des Moines public schools) to conduct a citywide discussion forum—by the mid-1930s, as the Harlem Experiment unfolded, he began to cool on the movement. Writing in his ten-year review of the AAAE’s work (1935), Cartwright expressed his dismay with the one-sided nature of some—perhaps even most—discussion forums. Educational forums, he wrote, “have acquired the reputation of being centers of radical thinking.” He continued:

Those in charge of forums, in the main liberals of a fine type, have on the whole erred on the side of extremism in their zeal to see every side of public questions discussed. … Little effort has been made to present the conservative point of view … that represents in the main the bulk of public thinking in the American democracy today.

The problem was not that “extremist” speakers and political ideologies were overly represented, but that they were included at all. “The forum leaders … have resorted too often to extremist speakers more interested in arousing emotional enthusiasm or righteous indignation in their hearers than in inducing a calm, deliberative understanding of current issues,” Cartwright remarked. In keeping with the tenets of elite liberalism, Cartwright believed that forums needed to train participants to adopt a more detached approach to social, political, and economic issues.

Rose, for her part, appeared to be cautious in her descriptions of the library forums. While she did not hide the more radical aspects of the forums, she opted for more general descriptions, often avoiding references to speakers, their views, or the audience’s response. Eager to align herself with the AAAE, Rose highlighted the “experts in

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77 Ibid., 3.
Alain Locke and Evaluating the Harlem Experiment

The AAAE hired Locke in 1933 to evaluate the Harlem and Atlanta adult education programs. The choice of Locke was not surprising. Locke, a philosophy professor at Howard University, was a respected black intellectual and a vocal proponent of African and African American aesthetic expression. For Keppel and Cartwright, Locke came with another advantage: compared to many of his peers, Locke generally favored a liberal-gradualist approach to racial progress. His moderate views on racial change, often expressed with an air of scholarly detachment, had led Keppel to feel that Locke was a “safe Negro,” as he explained to a South African colleague in 1929.80 For the funders, Locke’s perceived racial conservatism was also an asset to adult education. As Cartwright explained in a letter to Keppel, “Conservative, high-minded Negro leaders like Locke” were important to “the adult education movement among Negroes.”81

Locke’s politics, however, were a far cry from the conservatism of Washington’s accommodation, having grappled with questions of race and culture for most of his philosophical career. He spent more than two years studying race as a social construction at the University of Berlin, research that was eventually turned into a lecture series at Howard.82 In his forties, by his own account, he became the “philosophical midwife to [the] generation of younger poets” who formed

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81Morse Cartwright to Frederick Keppel, memo, April 18, 1939, series III, box 13, folder 19, Carnegie Corporation Records.
the Harlem Renaissance.\textsuperscript{83} He would come to call the artistic movement during that time the “New Negro Renaissance,” a name that referenced his influential essay, “Enter the New Negro,” published in \textit{Survey Graphic} in 1925.\textsuperscript{84} The New Negro attitude, Locke claimed, rejected the limitations of whites’ racist stereotypes and embraced black racial identity and the art that followed from it. For Locke, the cultural production of African Americans was to be viewed as aesthetically and intellectually on par with that of their white counterparts and as a contribution to a diverse and liberal American democracy.

Locke’s interest in adult education had been growing throughout the Harlem Renaissance. The value of adult education, he believed, was not only that it could foster the development of liberally educated and engaged citizens, but that it seemed to provide a pathway for the New Negro Renaissance, and black cultural expression more generally, to move into the American mainstream. To do this, Locke encouraged elite liberals to embrace “the principle … of keeping the racial situation out of the shallow and dangerous backwaters and safely in the mainstream of educational efforts and progress.”\textsuperscript{85} He also seemed to believe that for black history and culture to move into the mainstream (alongside the Anglo-Saxon classics) a more inclusive definition of liberalism and liberal education would be required.

In his evaluations, Locke portrayed the Harlem Experiment as remarkably successful. Listing the “most obviously successful” parts of the program, he cited its summer art classes and workshops, its discussion forums, its community choruses, its lectures in the park (led by a young Ella Baker), and its courses and lectures on black history.\textsuperscript{86} Locke explained that the activities on black history had generated particular interest “largely because of the commanding appeal of the Schomburg Collection’s materials and the tireless services of Schomburg himself as guide and lecturer.”\textsuperscript{87} Due in part to the presence of the Schomburg Collection, Locke felt the 135th Street Branch Library was “the ideal laboratory” for the Harlem Experiment.\textsuperscript{88}

\textsuperscript{83}Horace Kallen, “Alain Locke and Cultural Pluralism” \textit{Journal of Philosophy} 54, no. 5 (Feb. 1957), 122.
\textsuperscript{84}Alain Locke, “Enter the New Negro,” \textit{Survey Graphic} 53, no. 11 (March 1925), 631.
\textsuperscript{86}Fitchue, “Situating the Contributions of Alain Leroy Locke,” 289–90.
\textsuperscript{87}Locke, “Report on Negro Adult Education Projects,” 3.
\textsuperscript{88}Ibid., 2.
The focus of Locke’s reports, however, was not just on evaluating the program but on explaining and justifying its focus on race. Despite Keppel’s interest in African and African American culture, Locke sensed the need to provide an interpretation of the Harlem Experiment—an interpretation that would convince the funders that there was nothing illiberal about teaching African American culture and history to black adults or even the prospect of blacks themselves leading this effort. The particular ways in which Locke chose to make this case were telling. In his reports to Keppel and in writings published in the AAAE’s *Journal of Adult Education*, Locke endorsed the view that black adult education should be based upon “universal” values and that, in this respect, it was no different than adult education for whites. However, Locke also argued that the use of race-specific programming in Harlem was justified as a motivational tool. He noted that the Harlem Experiment showed that “the study of racial and group history … [has] been found to be magnets of interest and galvanizers of the adult education program with Negro groups.”

To justify this approach to white academic readers of the *Journal of Adult Education*, he argued that if teaching about race motivated African Americans to participate in adult education and, ultimately, democratic life, then it should be used as the first step toward teaching black adults a more general liberal curriculum. As he put it:

> The conclusion that the racial interest approach is more effective carries some important educational implications; it confirms our belief, derived from previous experience, that the adults must be met on the plane of living interests, even if they are *parochial and one-sided*, and from these as a starting point must be gradually led out into *broader and deeper interests* [emphasis added].


90 Alain Locke, “The Harlem Experiment,” *Journal of Adult Education* 5, no. 3 (June 1933), 303.

If the funders wanted to reach the broadest audience possible in the black community, Locke claimed, a focus on the black experience was the place to start.

Acknowledging that African Americans’ interest in race could potentially be “parochial and one-sided,” Locke signaled his alignment with elite liberalism and its commitment to political moderation. Insofar as African Americans were seen as being invested in radical change, many whites felt that they were inherently “biased”—that is, they were emotional, rather than rational, in their response to racism. At the same time, Locke’s argument that “racial interest” could lead to
“broader and deeper interests” was also likely an outgrowth of his own deeply held cultural pluralism. As a philosopher, Locke embraced the idea of discovering universal values through the anthropological study of diverse traditions and the observation of overlapping cultural norms. Influenced by his close friendship with Horace Kallen—whom Locke first met as an undergraduate at Harvard in 1907—he believed the study of black culture by African Americans was the first step in a longer journey to understanding humanity in general.91

As early as 1911, Locke had begun to grapple with justifications for African Americans’ embrace of black culture and history. He claimed that African Americans’ interest in their own experience did not “interfere with full equality any more than being loyal to Anglo-Saxon civilization impedes American patriotism.” To that end, he argued the United States stood for “common ownership of the utilities of civilization—not amalgamation of cultures.”92 But the experience of the Harlem Experiment had helped Locke refine the focus of his question. By the 1930s, he was asking whether teaching black culture and history—and the politics of the New Negro movement—in a formalized adult education program was a help or hindrance to liberal citizenship. More than twenty years later, his answer remained the same: it was a help—perhaps even a necessity.

In a final summary of the Harlem program, written for Keppel and Cartwright in 1934, Locke stressed the program’s alignment with the core tenets of elite liberalism. He characteristically framed “racial interest and problems” incorporated in the programming as an effective motivator for black participation. He went on, however, to add an additional argument that seemed to be directed at easing Keppel and Cartwright’s potential concerns. He suggested that what distinguished the Harlem Experiment from other forums for adult education in Harlem was that race was taught in a “nonpropagandist character.” On this point, it is worth quoting Locke’s final report at length:

It is amazing to discover how seldom these natural and inevitable interests are entered to for Negro adults upon the intellectual and informational plane; since the general tone of the press, pulpit and informal discussion is yet so lamentably emotional and propagandist. The outstanding result of the experiences in these projects in my judgment has been the demonstration of an eager and appreciative response among all elements of the adult Negro population in racial information and discussion of an intellectual, informative and nonpropagandist character. Evidently here is a medium of major importance and effect for correcting the warped bias

and relieving the morbid tension that handicap and social injustice have
inflicted on the average Negro mind and spirit.93

While Cartwright never responded directly to Locke’s report, he
included these arguments, almost verbatim, in his 1934 AAAE direc-
tor’s report.94

A close reading of Locke’s writing on race and adult education
highlights his complicated relationship with elite liberalism and his
views on race in the curriculum. By the mid-1930s, Locke not only
framed “racial themes” as a motivational tool to get African
Americans to accept liberal adult education, but also as part of
African Americans’ intellectual development and as a means of provid-
ing “compensatory pride and self-respect.”95 In other writings, Locke
took issue with liberals’ near-universal embrace of gradualism regard-
ing race relations. For example, in a 1934 article, he expressed his dis-
may with a new book by George Arthur, “of the Y.M.C.A. and the
Rosenwald Fund,” writing, “No new light on the nature of the [race]
question or of possible new attacks and approaches need be expected.
… Gradualism and good-will are the dogmatic commitments of this
school of … thought—and that’s that.”96 At the same time, he
embraced some aspects of elite liberalism, even outside of written
reports to funders or writings on adult education. For example,
Locke argued for a “representative and responsible elite” to guide
the “black masses,” rather than “a frustrated group of malcontents
[who would] hurl these masses at society in desperate strike.”97 For
better or for worse, Locke’s position as a member of the black reform
elite had led him to adopt aspects of both Harlem’s New Negro atti-
tude and the kind of elite liberalism he shared with Keppel and
Cartwright.

The End of the Harlem Experiment

In the final evaluation in 1934, Locke recommended continued sup-
port of the Harlem and Atlanta Experiments and implied that it
would be valuable to expand beyond these two cities. He further

95 Alain Locke, “Objectives of Adult Education,” box 164–167, folder 8, Alain
Locke Papers, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University (hereafter
Locke Papers).
96 Alain Locke, “The Eleventh Hour of Nordicism, Part II,” in The Critical Tem-
per of Alain Locke: A Selection of his Essays on Art and Culture, ed. Jeffrey C. Stewart
suggested that the Corporation fund the development of a center led by “a young Negro man or woman” that, modeled after the AAAE, would coordinate “the promotion of the cause of adult education among the Negroes.” Finally, he advised that the Carnegie Corporation support the development of several course syllabi based on the Harlem and Atlanta programs that could support future African American adult education programs.

Despite the potentially high cost of Locke’s recommendations, behind the scenes, Keppel and Cartwright seemed to endorse much of what he was proposing. “I’ve read Alain Locke’s report with great satisfaction,” Keppel wrote in a memo to Cartwright. “Please congratulate him upon it when you see him.” The key question for Keppel and Cartwright, however, was not the merits of the report or its recommendations but how the program would be funded in the coming years. “As [for] the financing of the plan,” Keppel continued, “I’d be inclined to try the 50/50 [split] … with Embree.” Even if Embree “makes a career out of claiming poverty,” Keppel wrote, “we have alternatives” to help fund the project. Cartwright agreed that splitting the budget with the Rosenwald Fund was a good idea and imagined under those conditions a budget as high as $20,000 for the Harlem and Atlanta programs in 1935.

Soon, however, the funders’ initial openness to supporting the Experiments fizzled. Embree declined to continue support for the program. Cartwright, unable to find another funder, negotiated a new plan with Locke, Jones, and Rose: Carnegie and the AAAE would provide a final year of “sharply decreased” funding for Harlem and Atlanta as well as $5,000 for the preparation of the education materials that Locke had recommended in his evaluation. As for Locke’s request to form an organization to coordinate “the promotion of the cause of adult education among the Negroes,” Cartwright explained in a letter to Locke that budgetary issues were not the only problem with this recommendation. In a conversation with Keppel, the two funders had concluded “that the Negro adult education experiments were yet in such early stages that to propagandize for them at the present

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99 Frederick Keppel to Mr. Cartwright, memo April 2, 1934, series III, box 10, folder 10, Carnegie Corporation Records.
100 “FPK and MAC,” memorandum of interview between Frederick Keppel and Morse Cartwright, Nov. 7, 1934, series III, box 10, folder 10, Carnegie Corporation Records.
102 Morse Cartwright to Frederick Keppel, Nov. 20, 1934, series III, box 10, folder 10, Carnegie Corporation Records.
time might be dangerous.” What kind of danger might result was never explained.

Despite the fact that the budget dominated the conversation between Keppel and Cartwright over the future of the Harlem Experiment, there seems to have been another factor at play. By the mid-1930s, the funders saw the black reform elite, rather than adult education for the African American masses, as central to their strategy of liberalizing the African American adult education movement. The money given to Locke to produce educational materials—which eventually became the Bronze Booklets series, “nine adult education booklets for Negroes”—laid the foundation for Locke’s next endeavor in adult education, the Associates in Negro Folk Education.

Like the Harlem Experiment, the Associates’ leadership included Schomburg, Eugene Jones, Mary Mcleod Bethune, and other black liberal elites. Through the Associates, the AAAE funded conferences on “Negro Adult Education” and maintained their access to an important group of reformers. Still, if the establishment of the Associates reflected Keppel and Cartwright’s interest in incorporating African American adult education—the kind that had developed out of the New Negro movement—their interest appeared lukewarm at best. In the second half the 1930s, the Associates received slightly more than $10,000 from the AAAE. By this time, Keppel had turned his attention toward a new project on race: Gunnar Myrdal’s study that resulted in An American Dilemma.

Conclusion

In the years that followed, Locke continued to explore the relationship between liberalism and race and maintained a close relationship with the AAAE; in 1946, he was elected its president. In his presidential address that year, he showed an evolution in the way he framed a race-focused liberal education, embracing intercultural education for all adults, rather than an Afrocentric education for African Americans. The problem with emphasizing the black experience to African Americans:

103 Morse Cartwright to Alain Locke, June 21, 1934, box 164–19, folder 54, Locke Papers. The final budget for the two programs was $6,000.
104 Fitchue, “Situating the Contributions of Alain Leroy Locke,” 298.
105 The Associates received roughly $12,000 in their ten years of operations (1935–1945).
106 Lagemann suggests that Keppel’s experience with the Harlem Experiment, and his relationship with Locke, may have been on his mind when he conceived of Myrdal’s study. See Lagemann, Politics of Knowledge, 129–32. For Myrdal’s study see: Gunnar Myrdal, The American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1944).
Americans, he likely recognized, was that, despite his best efforts, elite liberals associated such an education with race-conscious radicalism. In contrast, Locke now emphasized the need for “cultural literacy” of all ethnic groups, which he argued was necessary to prevent “social illiteracy” and “rampant racism” from sabotaging “liberalism and progressive movements.”

Intercultural education had another advantage: it was viewed by white elite liberals as universal, rather than specialized (or biased), in its approach. Locke, like other black reformers, had been fighting for years against the view that African Americans were a “special group” whose culture, and problems, lay at the periphery of American society. The premise of intercultural education, which Locke adopted, was that cultural knowledge facilitated greater understanding between racial and ethnic groups and, in the process, supported democracy. Thus, the burgeoning movement allowed Locke to connect the teaching of black culture to a favorite theme of elite liberals: education for democracy.

As Locke embraced intercultural education as an approach to teaching about race and culture, the growing gap between organic forms of adult education that had arisen in Harlem, on the one hand, and more mainstream forms of adult education that focused on race and culture (which had the backing of white philanthropy), on the other, became increasingly evident. In Harlem, adult education had not originated as a field of study or a safeguard against threats to liberal democracy. Rather, it had been “born of a struggle” and aimed at combating notions of black inferiority and fostering new forms of racial solidarity necessary for political action.

The impulse that had led many Harlemites to Liberty Hall to hear Marcus Garvey’s lectures on the glory of Africa’s past continued to fuel African American interest in educational opportunities such as the Harlem Experiment and lasted well beyond the 1930s.

With this political motivation as its starting point, the Harlem Experiment was truly experimental. It tested whether the radical forms of black culture and education that had developed in Harlem could be incorporated into a broader elite liberalism. And while the Harlem Experiment demonstrated liberalism’s capacity for racial and cultural inclusion of a particular type, it also demonstrated the costs of inclusion: a tethering to elite liberal ideals like ideological neutrality, scholarly professionalism, and political gradualism. In comparison with later forms of intercultural education, the Harlem

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Experiment had been much closer to types of black educational activism that were commonplace in Harlem. But, with these political associations, reformers like Locke, Rose, and Jones found themselves in an uncomfortable position. Their consistent references to key themes of elite liberalism in reports to funders—and their willingness to frame the program as standing in contrast to the more radical forms of education in Harlem—was evidence that the program’s approach was not easily or neatly incorporated into its white funders’ world view. As white liberals continued to experiment with forms of institutional incorporation in response to black protest movements during the twentieth century—and into the twenty-first—the racially contested nature of liberalism would present an enduring problem.