

Classical Elements in the Book-Plates of Three African American Intellectuals: Alain Locke (1885-1954), Charles H. Wesley (1891-1987) and Countee Cullen (1903-1946)

The study and acquisition of African American bookplates is a nascent specialty arising out of the longstanding interests of librarians, bibliophiles and book collectors of every sort. (Allen, 1894; Sisnette 1989, and Blockson, 1998) In 1994 for example the artists Seitu Jones and Kat Gilchrist-Roberts designed a book-plate for the Archie Givens, Sr. Collection of African American Literature at the University of Minnesota which featured his face and a “vibrant African themed border overlay.” (Neal, 2003: 67) Among such book-plates are some which provide meaningful evidence toward our understanding of how certain African American intellectuals identified with Graeco-Roman history and culture and inserted it into their book-plates.

This illustrated paper will examine the visual and graphic imagery found in the designs of the personal book-plates of three men who lived in the time of the Harlem Renaissance: the cultural critic and philosopher, Alain Locke (1885-1954), the historian and university president, Charles H. Wesley (1891-1987) and the poet, Countee Cullen (1903-1946). Locke’s plate was drawn in a bold contrasting design of black and white by the African American artist Aaron Douglas (1899-1979) and incorporates three words from Suetonius’s *Life of Caesar*. Wesley’s plate makes direct reference in both word and image to Herodotus, and the design of Countee Cullen’s book-plate uses visual cues from the myth of Orpheus which allude to his dark fate. For those familiar with Cullen’s work, the book-plate’s design calls to mind the closing line of one of Cullen’s most famous poems, “Yet Do I Marvel,” which reads: “Yet do I marvel at this curious thing: To make a poet black and bid him sing.”

## Works Cited

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