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René Maran and the New Negro

by CHIDI IKONNÉ

ONE OF THE items that catch the eye in Locke Archives, Moor­
land-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, is a photo­
graph with the inscription:

A mon excellent ami
Alain Leroy Locke,
Son ami
Paris, 28/8/26
René Maran.

When Mercer Cook visited René Maran for the first time, one of the
things that arrested his attention in Maran’s apartment in Paris was also
a photograph: that of Alain Locke “prominently placed in [Maran’s] home” as an evidence not only of the French West Indian writer’s “in­
terest in the race question,” but also of his personal feelings towards
the Dean of the New Negro Literary Movement. René Maran always
prized his friendship with Locke very highly. Locke’s anthology The
New Negro occupied a prominent place in his library; he did his best to
get it translated into French.

René Maran regularly received and read such Afro-American journals
as Opportunity, The Crisis, The Negro World, and Chicago Defender
which carried news (complimentary or adverse) about the New Negro.
He even got some of his own articles published in some of them, espe­
cially Opportunity. More than a passive observer of the activities of
young black American writers of the 1920’s, he was very close to the
core of the Movement. The aim of this paper, therefore, is to investigate
the genesis and patterns of this involvement.

Although he had, before leaving for Africa in 1909, published a vol­
ume of poems, La Maison du bonheur, which he followed with another
volume, La Vie intérieure (1912), although his father, Herménégilde
was so high in the French Colonial Administration that he once served
as temporary governor of a French colony in Africa, René Maran was

123. Also interview with Mercer Cook, Washington, D.C., Aug. 6, 1975.
March 1927; 23 Feb. 1928; Locke to Maran, 6 June 1928, Alain Locke Papers, Moorland-Spingarn
Research Center, Howard University.
hardly known (both by name and in person) by any Afro-American before he was, to use *The Crisis* phrase, “crowned with the Prix Goncourt” because of his first novel, *Batouala*. The moment when he would confidently say (as he did say on June 15, 1924) “our brethren in America, among whom I know my name is known,” was still in the future. Its arrival was facilitated by, among other things, the Afro-American Press, especially the organs of the N.A.A.C.P. and of the National Urban League.

*The Crisis* under W. E. B. Du Bois was not indifferent to the news about the achievement of “the Negro author.” It accompanied its echo of it with a photograph of René Maran in its issue of February, 1922. Although the English edition of *Batouala* was still several months away, Jessie Fauset reviewed the novel in its March issue, and in May it adorned its cover with a portrait of René Maran painted by Albert Smith. When Thomas Seltzer of New York finally brought out the American edition, *The Crisis* carried a one-page advertisement under the headline “The Whole World is Reading It!” in addition to the formal announcement by Jessie Fauset: “BATOUALA is Translated.” W. E. B. Du Bois himself admired the courage of the author of *Batouala*, whom he contrasted with “Candace, black West Indian deputy, an out-and-out defender of the [French] nation and more French than the French,” and with Blaise Diagne, “a Frenchman who is accidentally black.”

Meanwhile, beginning with its very first number in January, 1923, *Opportunity*, under Charles S. Johnson, had joined the ever widening circle of admirers of that “complex product of African blood and French civilization”—René Maran. The journal would still have “more” to say about *Batouala*, Maran, and the Prix Goncourt, ten months later when Alain Locke, in an insightful review, hinted at what René Maran could have readily accepted as a fair description of his work and of himself:

Maran’s real thrust is more anti-Romantic and anti-sentimentalist than anti-imperialist: it is the literary traducers whom he would annihilate. Let us have the unbiased truth and the same angle of vision for all; that is Maran’s literary creed.... With this creed, René Maran enters the lists neither of the race partisans nor of the colonial apologists and propagandists, but those of the social surgeons, the indicting idealists, if you will—the prophetic reformers.

The failure of many French literary critics and socio-political analysts to recognize this fact was at that moment causing Maran a great ennui. Its validity, as well as the refusal or inability of several important Americans to recognize it, would, as we shall see later, color Maran's participation in the Black Literary Renaissance.

Nonetheless, we do not owe the Maran-Locke lifelong friendship—a friendship which was one of the strongest links between the New Negro and René Maran—to this singular perception. On the contrary, it started as a result of what the review under discussion had practically denied—what Locke himself described as an "obvious racial concern" on the part of René Maran.

In January, 1924, Alain Locke, contrasting the French treatment of their Negro soldiers in Europe with that of the American Army, praised France for her apparent freedom from racial prejudice. But René Maran, who was still close not only to the heat of the hostility against him and the "Preface" to his Batouala, but also to the discrimination against him and his father in the French Colonial Service, saw this praise as "truth . . . misrepresented by a counterfeit," and decided "to cry out and proclaim that it is not the truth":

You may take my word as witness and spread it wherever you may choose to repeat it. We are tolerated here, it is true, as one can especially realize who considers how, on account of the decline of French man-power, they have increasing need of us. We are tolerated perhaps because, submerged in the mass, we pass almost negligibly. But that has not hindered France up to the very present from using every method to block our way to posts of prime importance.

His open letter to Locke appeared, on June 15, 1924, in Les Continents, a journal of which he was an assistant editor, and was reprinted, together with Alain Locke's reply, in the September, 1924 issue of Opportunity. In addition to this, Locke either sent him a copy of his open letter personally, or wrote him a more personal one. Whatever the case, they were obviously in touch with each other before the appearance of their "Open Letters" in Opportunity; for in a letter dated September 1, 1924 Maran replied familiarly to a note Locke had sent him from Switzerland. And again, on October 18, 1924, he sent Locke a brief note in reply to his "long and cordial letter," and promised to write him "plus longuement, et d'un peu de tout" after receiving Miss Jessie Fauset, who was to visit him a few days from then.

He had, however, already become a "friend, comrade, fellow-cru-
sader”\textsuperscript{20}—a participant in the New Negro Literary activities, who, two months later, was advertised as one of the judges of the first competition for the Amy E. Spingarn Prizes in Negro Literature and Art, which was being organized by \textit{The Crisis}.\textsuperscript{21} Along with H. G. Wells, Sinclair Lewis, Charles W. Chestnutt, and Mary White Ovington, he was assigned to the short story division, and \textit{The Crisis} obviously believed that he would be physically present in the United States for the awards since there was some talk of his visiting the United States at that time.\textsuperscript{22} But he could not be present, and had to mail his evaluation which, though late, agreed with the decision of his colleagues.\textsuperscript{23}

His endorsement of Rudolph Fisher’s realism (he called it “humanness”)\textsuperscript{24} in “High Yaller,” which won the first prize, points to the first pattern of his relationship with the New Negro writers: similarity of literary attitudes if not influence. Alain Locke obviously had this in mind when he discussed the literary reawakening, and categorically declared: “Though \textit{Batouala} is not of the American Negro either in substance or authorship, the influence of its daring realism and Latin frankness was educative and emancipating.”\textsuperscript{25}

Although René Maran speaks of “la question nègre”\textsuperscript{26} in the preface to his novel, his treatment of the Negro in the novel itself is far from that of works engaged in the “problem.” \textit{Batouala} (without its preface) does not plead for the acceptance of the Negro as “un homme pareil aux autres,” as the author’s autobiographical novel, for instance, would do later on. Thanks to its author’s adherence to what, in an interview with Lilyan Kesteloot, he described as “un procès-verbal de constat,”\textsuperscript{27} it just paints, without any emotion, the black man as the author sees him. It intends by the portrayal neither to please the white race nor to offend the black people of the world, or vice versa. Throughout his life, Maran defended the unapologetic realism of his portrayal of the black man in \textit{Batouala}: “J’ai montré les noirs tels qu’ils étaient . . . et n’ai point voulu faire de polémique!”\textsuperscript{28}

This, of course, was the stance of the most representative group of the New Negro writers—the group for whom Langston Hughes spoke when, in an article in \textit{The Nation}, he declared that:

We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn’t matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too. The tom-tom cries and the tom-
tom laughs. If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on the top of the mountain, free within ourselves.29

Yet it would be exaggeration to speak of the “educative and emancipating” influence of the “daring realism and Latin frankness” of Maran’s *Batouala* on the young black American writers of the 1920’s. Their realistic attitudes towards their Negroid material were manifestations of personalities essentially different from that of which Maran’s was the outward symbol.

Langston Hughes’s attitude towards his black self and towards Africa as a source of part of his blood, for example, was not the same as Maran’s because the authors were two different persons. They grew up and lived in different environments. They received different types of education. As a matter of fact, René Maran himself seems to point out this difference when, in his analysis of the effect of racial discrimination on black Americans, he assumes a God-I-thank-thee-that-I-am-not-as-other-men-are attitude, and goes on to make a diagnosis which, right or wrong, takes his long experience with Afro-Americans into consideration: “Il a30 malheureusement abouti, et c’est là le revers de la médaille, à ce que l’on pourrait appeler l’anthroponégrisme, type de la forme que prend le complexe d’infériorité chez les noirs, aux Etats-Unis. Cet anthroponégrisme maladif, ce complexe d’infériorité les obsèdent au point qu’ils s’enferment des l’enfrance dans leur race et ne cherchent plus à s’en évader. Ils rament tout à elle et tournent toute leur vie en elle comme un écureuil en cage.”31

Literary influences are known to have crossed racial, ideological and national boundaries. The fact that René Maran was born in Martinique and raised in France, and not in the United States of America, could not have prevented him from influencing a budding writer like Langston Hughes of the 1920’s. However, there are reasons to believe also that the young black American writers of the Jazz Age (when to identify with the “primitive” was to be “sophisticated”) could have been exposed to some other “educative and emancipating” influence.

For example, apart from the naturalism which is evident in all his novels, there are passages in *Banjo* that can be grafted on to René Maran’s preface to *Batouala*, or even on to chapter five of that famous novel, without drastically altering the appearance of the document. A good example is what the barkeeper reads in the journal, *La Race Nègre*:

Of forced conscription and young Negroes running away from their homes to escape into British African territory.

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30. “Le désir de mieux faire a tout prix, pour rompre les préjugés raciaux qui les contraignent à évoluer en race close,” See the following footnote.
Of forced native labor, because the natives preferred to live lazily their own lives, rather than labor for the miserable pittance of daily wages.
Of native women insulted and their husbands humiliated before them.
Of flagellation.
Of youths castrated for theft.
Of native chiefs punished by mutilation.
Of the scourge of depopulation . . .

Added to the paragraph that begins with “Let your voice be raised!” and ends with “I will tell you . . .”, it would not disrupt the flow and tone of Maran’s preface. Yet one cannot correctly claim in absolute terms that Claude McKay’s *Banjo* reveals René Maran’s influence.

McKay was in contact both geographically and intellectually with young African nationalists in France. For instance, in his autobiography, *A Long Way From Home*, we read of his discussion with Senghor who, like René Maran, has earlier appeared in his *Banjo*. Lamine Senghor, Ho Chi Minh’s friend and associate, was a militant nationalist. McKay could have, as easily as from *Batouala* and other books treating of the matter, garnered his facts about the oppression of Africans from the mouth of such a person, if he needed any other source to supplement his personal experience in Africa.

The same holds true in respect of the apparent echo of *Batouala* in *Nigger Heaven*, a novel by a white author, Carl Van Vechten, who played an important part in the Harlem Renaissance. Like Claude McKay’s *Banjo*, *Nigger Heaven* mentions René Maran and his novel, *Batouala*. Like *Batouala*, it has an episode of dancing in which “men and women with weary faces, faces tired of passion and pleasure” participate; where a girl “entirely nude,” like those ready for initiation in *Batouala*, “perform[s] her evil rites” amid the wailing of a distant “pipe” and “a faint reverberation of the tom-tom” reminiscent of a Banda “li’ngha.” The girl herself “was pure black, with savage African features, thick nose, thick lips, bushy hair which hovered about her face like a lanate halo, while her eyes rolled back so far that only the whites were visible.” She has a knife, phallic symbol not unlike that of Maran’s Yassigui’ndja (“an enormous painted wooden phallus”) in the initiation coda. Like *Batouala*, *Nigger Heaven* contains a home-breaker, Anatole Longfellow, “alias the Scarlet Creeper,” who, like Maran’s Bissibi’ngui, thrives on women, especially married ones. Diction apart, Ruby’s promise to Anatole (“Ah sho’ will show you some lovin’, daddy”) and Yassigui’ndja’s offer to Bissibi’ngui (“My most secret
flesh will be happy to serve as a sheath for your sword") could come from the lips of either of the two women.  

Yet one cannot correctly say in absolute terms that Carl Van Vechten owes his novel to the influence of *Batouala* since we know not only that he is being himself, but also the possible sources of influence on his novel: for example, James Weldon Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*, Paul Laurence Dunbar’s *The Sport of the Gods*, and the general quest for the primitive in the 1920’s. Besides, if he wanted a model for his Anatole Longfellow, he did not have, as Mercer Cook rightly points out, “to get his inspiration from anybody as far away as Maran.” “This has always been one of the stereotypes that was directed against the black man throughout much American Literature. This was one of the stereotypes: he was lazy; he wouldn’t work; he was immoral.”

This shows that what we are tempted to call influence here may, at least partly, be the type of phenomenon which Léon G. Damas, playing down the concept of direct influence of the Harlem Renaissance on the foundation of Negritude, described as “parallelism” of literary activities: “parallelism” based not on identical personalities, nor on intellectual contact, but on what Jean-Paul Sartre refers to as “a collective memory” possessed by black men “from one end of the earth to the other” in spite of the fact that they are separated by differences in “language, politics and the history of their colonizers.”

André Levinson’s evaluation of the impact of the 1921 Prix Goncourt on the Negro in American Literature is an effective key to understanding the nature of René Maran’s literary influence on young black American writers of the 1920’s: “On ne saurait assez apprécier l’action stimulante, sur le ‘roman noir’ d’Amérique, du prix Goncourt décerné à *Batouala*, de M. René Maran; la portée morale de ce beau geste français a été considérable.” The influence was essentially inspirational. The idea that a black man could rise to such heights in literature, and in their own days, must have been a source of encouragement to the budding writers of a period when the Negro also happened to be *à la mode*. It would be very interesting to speculate about what would have been the attitude of the black American “Talented Tenth” if *Batouala* had not been “crowned with the Prix Goncourt.”

Although it is difficult to find any open protest, by any black American in the 1920’s, against René Maran’s portrayal of the black man in his novel, there are, at least, indications that several of them “found *Batouala* disappointing.” According to Mercer Cook, who was old

37. Interview with Mercer Cook, Aug. 6, 1975.
38. Interview with Léon G. Damas, Aug. 5, 1975.
enough in the 1920's to witness the reaction, many Afro-Americans "failed to see anything uplifting in the book except the preface. . . . They resented the depiction of Batouala as a man who fits some of the stereotypes [of the black man]. . . . They resented the immorality. . . . They resented in Maran's book the same thing that they resented, in those early days, in Langston Hughes's poetry. . . . Maran felt that he was depicting the situation realistically; Langston Hughes felt that he was depicting the situation realistically as well. And we were not ready for realism."42

Alain Locke's comment on Maran's decision to revise the manuscript of his *Roman d'un Nègre*, which he, Locke, had unsuccessfully tried to place with all the publishers noted for their generosity to the black writers of the period,43 also contains a mute disapproval of an unrelied portrayal of Africa—the type we have in *Batouala*: "Show us the truth as always you will—but paint the dawn of this new idea of the resurrection of Africa in spite of plague, famine, disease and human rapacity."44 In the circumstances, it is difficult to imagine any black Americans consciously trying to copy Maran's portrayal of the black man. In fact, it is difficult to imagine any of them owing their "love for Africa" (a characteristic of the New Negro) to their reading of *Batouala*. On the contrary, the negative, or anti-African element of the ambivalence of Countée Cullen's "Heritage" may have been a manifestation of a subconscious refusal to identify with Africa which the young poet had found in *Batouala*. The cry in the speaker's "body" ("Strip! / Doff this new exuberance. / Come and dance the Lover's Dance!")45 may have been an allusion to René Maran's "dance of love."

This, however, is only a suspicion since Cullen could be alluding to another source: Pierre Loti's "upa-upa," for instance. Countée Cullen spoke, read, and taught French. It is possible he had read Loti's *Le Mariage de Loti*46 by the time he wrote his "Heritage." Nonetheless, it is safe to believe that an episode which inspired the young poet's "The Dance of Love (After reading René Maran's *Batouala*)" could have left a very strong impression on him. In this poem also we have the same ambivalence—in the speaker's way of participating in the "dance":

... love was much too much for me to wear
My leaves; the killer roared above his kill,
But you danced on; and when some star would spill
Its red and white upon you whirling there,

42. Interview with Mercer Cook, Aug. 6, 1975. Mercer Cook explained that when he said "we" he was "speaking of the people who made these criticisms . . . some of my fellow blacks."
44. Letter, Locke to Maran, May 5, 1927, Alain Locke Papers, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.
I sensed a hidden beauty in the air;  
Though you danced on, my heart and I stood still.\textsuperscript{47}

More evident than direct literary influence is the second pattern of René Maran's relationship with the New Negro writers: friendship based on mutual literary promotion. It was this pattern that pulled Maran closest to the Black American Literary Movement.

Admittedly, Maran was not the sole promoter of the Negro Renaissance in France. He was not even the main one. Josephine Baker and other black American singers, dancers and actors who either visited or lived in France, played an important part. Europe's interest in American jazz, the rediscovery of African Art, and the flowering interest in the adaptation of Negroid motifs to Modern European Art, all played indispensable roles. On a more literary plane, there were people like André Maurois and André Levinson\textsuperscript{48} who, both in books and magazine articles, tried to acquaint the French public with the activities and achievements of the young writers and performers of the Renaissance.

Even Maran's famous Friday evening reception, which helped in no small way to bring black (Afro-American and African) intellectuals into contact with other important men and women of letters from other parts of the world, were almost unknown before 1935 when the Harlem Renaissance, which hardly survived the stock market crash in 1929, was almost over. In fact, Maran's personal contact with young black American writers\textsuperscript{49} who visited or lived in France in the 1920's, requires further and more intensive research before any specific statement could be made about it. Our belief, at the moment, that he met and/or was in correspondence with some of them is based mainly on assumptions. We assume, for example, that he and Countée Cullen must have met because Cullen spent his summer vacations in France, and had some of his poems published in \textit{Les Continents}.\textsuperscript{50} We assume that he was sometime in correspondence with Langston Hughes because in the letter to Alain Locke on 1 September 1924\textsuperscript{51} he spoke of sending a book to Langston Hughes who was travelling in France at that time.\textsuperscript{52} We assume that he must have met Mr. and Mrs. Warren Logan because in the same letter we read of his readiness to receive and get acquainted with them and with Dr. and Mrs. E. P. Roberts, to whom Locke had given his office

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\textsuperscript{47} Countée Cullen, "The Dance of Love (After reading René Maran's \textit{Batouala})," \textit{Opportunity}, 1, 4 (April 1923), 30.


\textsuperscript{49} Such people as Alain Locke and Arthur Schomburg are not included in this class. The chief contact between Afro-American writers and young black students in France, before 1935, was Mademoiselle Andrée Nardal who, with Dr. Sajour (a Haitian), had founded \textit{La Revue du monde noir}. See Lilyan Kesteloot, p. 63. Mercer Cook suspects that it was through Mlle Nardal's salon that he met René Maran for the first time in 1934.

\textsuperscript{50} Maran's letter to Locke on 1 Sept. 1924 refers to Countée Cullen's poem which had been published in the September issue of \textit{Les Continents}. Alain Locke Papers, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{52} James Weldon Johnson, pp. 232-233.
\end{flushleft}
address. We assume that he and the author of *There is Confusion* knew each other because of his expectation of Jessie Fauset’s visit in October, 1924.53 His well documented conversation with Gwendolyn B. Bennett aside,54 it is only about his contact with Claude McKay that we can be positive, thanks to Léon G. Damas who lived in France in the 1930’s.55 Yet René Maran did a lot to promote the New Negro in France. For instance, in a letter to Locke on 23 February 1928, he discussed what he was doing for the black American writers, and suggested how the writers themselves could make his efforts more effective:

Je continue à m’occuper des jeunes poètes américains,—et de vous,—autant qu’il m’est possible. Vous constaterez, en parcourant la lettre que je vous communique, que mes efforts ne sont pas vains. On a en effet parlé de votre *New Negro* et de vous, au poste, de T.E.F. de la tour Eiffel. Je suis persuadé que cela n’a pas été perdu pour tout le monde. Mon action serait d’ailleurs plus efficace, si le *Crisis* et les journaux noirs américains de quelque importance,—je n’oublie pas non plus, romanciers ou poètes, les écrivains noirs sortant de la moyenne,—voulaient bien consentir à me faire le service gratuit de leurs ouvrages journaux et périodique.56

We have already referred to how he tried to get *The New Negro* translated into French. He was behind the translation of Walter White’s *Fire in the Flint* into French:

Charles S. Johnson continue à me faire le service d’*Opportunity*. J’ai lu, dans la “revue du mois” de ce tout à fait remarquable périodique, page 124 du numéro d’avril, que *The Fire in the Flint*, le beau roman de Walter White, ne tarderait pas à être traduit en français.

Je serais tout heureux que vous fissiez compléter dans un des prochains numéros d’*Opportunity*, l’écho ci-dessus de la façon suivant.

“Dans le *Survey of the Month* de no numéro du mois d’avril, nous avons dit à nos lecteurs que *The Fire in the Flint*, l’admirable roman de Walter White, ne tarderait pas à être traduit en français.

“Nous avons le grand plaisir de leur apprendre aujourd’hui que cet ouvrage paraîtra vraisemblablement en octobre prochain, dans l’une des collections éditées par la Maison Plon, vieille maison d’édition française, et qu’il sera traduit par Mlle Marguerite Humbert.

“C’est après avoir lu un article très élogieux consacré à *The Fire in the Flint* par René Maran dans le numéro d’avril (1926) de la revue française *Vient de paraître*, que l’idée est venue à Mlle Marguerite Humbert d’établir la version française de cet ouvrage, qui avait été communiqué à René Maran par Mr. William Aspenwall Bradley.

“Mademoiselle Marguerite Humbert, jeune européenne qui s’intéresse beaucoup aux questions raciales, habite: 195 rue de l’Université (Paris.-.VII).”57

Although his salon, as we have indicated, did not become active until after 1935, Maran did his best to introduce visiting black American

55. Interview with Léon G. Damas, Aug. 5, 1975.
56. Letter, Maran to Locke, 23 Feb. 1928, Alain Locke Papers, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.
57. Maran to Locke, 19 April 1927, Alain Locke Papers, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University. This letter, like the one dated May 30, 1927 and addressed to Alain Locke, echoed through Gwendolyn B. Bennett’s “The Ebony Flute,” *Opportunity*, V, 8 (Aug. 1927), 243.
intellectuals to important French men and women of letters. Thus on 24 August 1927, he gave Alain Locke a highly complimentary letter of introduction addressed to Romain Rolland.58 It was also through him that the Dean of the Renaissance met Félix Eboué who promised to send him "some art objects from Africa for a collection to be shown in Harlem," a promise which he fulfilled when he later sent him some iron knives from Oubangui-Chari. The knives would help "show our people the ancient powers of our race," Locke declared in his letter of thanks to Eboué, and added, "That is why I prefer old objects which don’t show European influence."59

Lastly, René Maran must have helped, in France, to call attention to the thoughts of Marcus Garvey, that colorful Harlem figure whose parades and international conferences in New York helped to create the atmosphere that sustained the New Negro. Not much is known yet about the relationship between these two almost unreconcilable characters. However, Léon G. Damas suspects that they knew each other.60 Besides, Maran does not seem to be very unsympathetic to the personality of "L’ancien leader du Negro World," to whom he referred as "cet obscur illuminé qu’est l’illustrissime Marcus Garvey," and went on to reveal how he, Maran, had spoken at a lecture organized by Garvey: "Sans doute vos journaux vous ont-ils appris déjà que j’y fus excessivement brillant."61

It will be difficult to list everything that Maran did in France for persons associated with the New Negro Movement in one way or the other. Other examples include his interest in Roland Hayes and his hospitality to Arthur Schomburg.

His efforts, in any case, were not lost upon the leaders of the Afro-American literary reawakening. They offered him full comradeship in the crusade to rehabilitate the Negro. Thus, in 1926, Charles S. Johnson and Alain Locke entered his novel Roman d’un Nègre (which had been translated for the purpose by Mrs. Underwood) for the Albert & Charles Boni Novel Competition.62 However, Maran was too French to let the association take this form. He politely declined the assistance: "quelle que soit la valeur du prix en question,—prix Albert and Charles Boni,—il m’est très difficile d’y prendre part. Elle amoindrirait en France ma situation littéraire, qui est très forte, malgré et en raison même des oppositions qu’on ne cesse de dresser contre moi, mais aussi ma situation morale, qui jusqu’ici est irréprochable. On me réprocherait d’être

58. The letter and the envelope that carried it are in Alain Locke Papers, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University. There is no information as to why Locke did not use it.
60. Interview with Leon G. Damas, Aug. 5, 1975.
62. Letter, Locke to Maran, 23 Dec. 1926, Alain Locke Papers, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University. The prize was $1,000, and it was formally announced in Opportunity, IV, 39 (Mar. 1926), 113.
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...racial. Et je n’aurai plus qu’à disparaître." He revealed the form he wanted the association to take: instead of the present direct involvement, Alain Locke should get the Bonis to publish his *Djouma, chien de brousse.* But unfortunately, this wish was never realized. In spite of their unyielding efforts, his friends, Charles S. Johnson, Alain Locke, and, later, Mercer Cook, could not get any of his novels, after *Batouala,* published in the United States of America.

"Maran believed," as Mercer Cook rightly points out, "and he believed firmly, that the French Government, at the time of *Batouala,* exerted pressure on the American Government to keep his books out of print—from being published in English translation." Perhaps he was right in view of the fear provoked in the Colonial Powers by the preface to his *Batouala,* and by his attack on Blaise Diagne. In fact, he was at one time secretly being regarded and watched as a communist, and his friend, Félix Eboué, had to put him on his guard. Nevertheless there are indications that after *Batouala* he had nothing to offer that publishers considered money-making in the American literary market. Mercer Cook has said as much in his *Five French Negro Authors.* This is also the impression one gets from a study of Maran’s correspondence with Locke on the issue. As a matter of fact, in order to bring the point home to Maran, Locke, at one time, defended the rejection of his manuscripts by American publishers:

Unfortunately my judgement agrees with theirs as to the unlikelihood of their going well in America in their present form.

Personally I like the Roman very much indeed, but both Boni and Knopf, think it too propagandist, it is unlikely that any of the more conservative publishers would think differently. *Djouma* has two disadvantages for American use;—the use of dog as the focus point of interest of the narrative—and the frank sex passages, especially the chapter of the dog’s courtship.

If there was indeed a conspiracy to boycott René Maran’s works, it was not evident in the publisher’s outward attitude towards the black French writer. Both Alfred A. Knopf and Albert & Charles Boni, at one time or the other, seem to have become very enthusiastic over Maran’s works. For example, Maran’s letter to Locke on January 14, 1927, implied that Alfred A. Knopf had offered to publish his “next three works”—an offer which he rejected for two reasons: “Je ne peux accepter de permettre ni à Knopf ni à person mes trois prochaines œuvres,

63. Letter, Maran to Locke, 25 July 1926, Alain Locke Papers, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.
64. Ibid.
65. Interview with Mercer Cook, Aug. 6, 1975.
66. One of Claude McKay’s characters speaks of its being banned from a French colony. *Banjo,* p. 199.
68. Ibid., pp. 106-107.
69. Mercer Cook also confirmed this in the interview of Aug. 6, 1975.
d'abord parce que je n'écris pas vite, ensuite parce qu'il se peut faire que, justement pour ces trois prochaines œuvres, je trouve en Amérique quelque éditeur qui me fasse des conditions meilleures que les siennes."

However, with increasing financial pressure on him, he, two months later, accepted an almost identical offer made to him in a letter to Alain Locke from the Bonis, on December 18, 1926:

Dr. Alain Locke
1326 R. Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C.

Dear Dr. Locke:

This will confirm our verbal communication to you to transmit our offer to Mr. René Maran for a book of his Congo experiences.

We will pay Mr. Maran on acceptance of this offer the sum of $250.00 and an additional $250.00 upon delivery of manuscript and after our acceptance of same, it is to be understood that the $250.00 payment as above is to constitute an advance on royalties at the rate of ten percent on the first five thousand copies sold,—twelve and one half on the next three thousand copies sold and fifteen percent on all copies sold thereafter.

It is to be further agreed that we are to be free to select our translator into English and that we acquire by the above payment all English rights to Mr. Maran's new book with an option to his next three works.

Thanking you for your interest, I am,

Very sincerely yours,

Albert & Charles Boni, Inc.
(Signed) Lewis S. Baer."

His reply was almost desperate:

C'est entendu. Par cette lettre, je m'engage à faire pour la Maison Boni un ouvrage Sur le Congo. Je peux même m'engager à lui en fournir un second, d'ici avril 1928, sur Les méthodes coloniales de la France en Afrique.

Mais, je vous en prie, des réception de la présente, faites-moi adresser les deux cent cinquante dollars convenus. Il me mettrait l'esprit en repos. Je pourrais travailler avec moins d'arrière-pensées."

In any case, some of the terms of the offer demonstrate the enthusiasm of the Bonis. As Locke told him, "the royalty rates of ten, twelve and a half, and then fifteen percent are a bit above the usual." This enthusiasm is further demonstrated by Alain Locke's letter of June 6, 1928 which, among other things, informed Maran that Albert Boni, head of the firm, was abroad and would be going to see the writer about the manuscript of his new novel. Aaron Douglas had already drawn a

71. Letter in Alain Locke Papers, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.
72. Letter in Alain Locke Papers, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.
73. Letter, Maran to Locke, 4 March 1927, Alain Locke Papers, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.
75. Letter in Alain Locke Papers, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.
“ravishing” decoration for the book. “The dummy has already been made up” by May 5, 1927.\textsuperscript{76}

What dampened this enthusiasm in not yet clear. However, we know that, even though Maran often gave Locke a free hand in eliminating from his works everything “qui pourrait, là-bas, passer pour shocking,”\textsuperscript{77} he was too confident of his place in French letters to accept Locke’s or anybody else’s dictates, especially when these involved a shift from a detached focus on his subject. As a result he did not make much of Locke’s suggestions which often contained details of how to revise specific novels to make them saleable in the United States of America. In fact, Locke nearly lost his temper, at one point, because Maran, who was evidently once again in dire need of money,\textsuperscript{78} would not complete a book for the Bonis because he was waiting for accurate details of African customs from Félix Eboué:

There is a great vogue for African romances at present on the New York market—a silly concocted sea captain story has just sold fifty thousand copies. Had the Bonis had your book this season, they could have made a small fortune for you. Exact details of the sort you are waiting for Eboué, would be manufactured from imagination by those shrewd business-like writers today or at best looked up from travel sketches in the library. So I do hope you will not be too conscientious. Indeed, I think the book will have more fire if you have to dash it off, and if you do not worry too much about style.\textsuperscript{79}

There is no information as to whether or not this advice was accepted. René Maran, however, had ignored such a suggestion when it was given by his friend and reader, Manoël Gahisto, at the time he was writing his first novel, \textit{Batouala}.\textsuperscript{80} Whatever the case, we still have in Locke Archives, Howard University, a bunch of typed sheets with a note, by Locke, on the binders:

\begin{quote}
Translations of René Maran’s Kongo prepared for A & C Boni but not published.\textsuperscript{81}
\end{quote}

Generally speaking, René Maran’s relationship with Afro-Americans, in the 1920’s, was excellent. Nevertheless, the association was not without frictions—frictions which, at least on one occasion, left deep wounds in his mind. His effort to sell, and Arthur Schomburg’s attempt to buy, one of his manuscripts is a case in point.

On 12 December 1926, Maran informed Locke of Arthur A. Schomburg’s application for one of his manuscripts, and how he had offered

\footnotesize
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{76} Letter, Locke to Maran, 5 May 1927, Alain Locke Papers, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University. Also see \textit{Opportunity}, V, 8 (Aug. 1927), 243.
\item \textsuperscript{77} Letters, Maran to Locke, 12 Nov. 1926; Maran to Locke, Feb. 23, 1928, Alain Locke Papers, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.
\item \textsuperscript{78} Locke sent him “a small check which,” he hoped “will be useful.” See the next footnote.
\item \textsuperscript{79} Letter, Locke to Maran, 20 April 1929, Alain Locke Papers, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.
\item \textsuperscript{80} \textit{Hommage à René Maran}, p. 132.
\item \textsuperscript{81} Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.
\end{itemize}
him his novel, *Djouma, chien de la brousse*, that very day.\(^82\) His letter of January 14, 1927, gave more details of the deal. He was asking Schomburg to pay him $12,000 to $15,000 in order to make him raise his bid to $6,000 which was the amount he actually wanted for his manuscript. On March 4, 1927, he revealed his intention to sell the manuscript for $1,500, which Schomburg had offered, if Schomburg did not want to pay $2,500 or even $2,000, which he, Maran, was demanding at that moment. “Mais alors qu’il se dépêche de m’envoyer ce qu’il m’a proposé lui-même,” he added.

Schomburg, of course, made haste; but Maran soon discovered that what he thought that the collector of rare books and manuscripts had offered him was exactly 100 times more than he had been actually offered. He could not hide his bitterness as he gave Locke the details of the transaction in a letter dated 29 March 1927:

Après-demain, je défendrai une fois de plus ma race, bien que je n’ai nullement à me louer d’elle, et en particulier de la désinvolture et de l’impolitesse de certains de mes con-génères américains.

Je me suis beaucoup étonné ces temps-ci de la façon d’agir employée par Schomburg à mon égard. Je me permets de vous l’exposer sans fard.

Un beau jour, je reçois de Mr. Arthur Schomburg une amicale lettre dans laquelle il me priait de bien vouloir lui vendre un de mes manuscrits.

Trois ans de correspondance régulière et active avec les États-Unis m’ont appris à connaître leurs méthodes de “bluff” et à les employer quand besoin est.

Je réponds donc à Mr. Schomburg, en lui demandant un prix volontairement excessif,—15,000 dollars,—car tout me donnait à penser que ce chiffre serait et devait être discuté. Je pensais même que nous serions parvenus à nous mettre d’accord sur 2,500 à 3,000 dollars.

Mr. Schomburg m’a répondu en me disant qu’il m’offrait 15 dollars. Je vous avoue que j’avais d’abord lu 1500 dollars et non 15.00, car il ne pouvait me venir à l’esprit, élevé que j’ai été à la française, que quelqu’un que j’ai reçu de mon mieux chez-moi, put se permettre de m’écrire avec une si ironique insolence.

J’apprécie pourtant cette ironie à sa valeur, et elle me servira de leçon, ma bienveillance n’allant pas jusqu’à imbécilité totale. . . . [sic]

En fin avril, je consacrerai un long et copieux article dans le *Journal du Peuple* sur votre *New Negro* et le mouvement social des noirs d’Amérique.

Je profiterai de l’occasion pour dire toute l’admiration que j’ai pour l’homme que vous êtes mon cher Locke. Mais je lancerai aussi quelque flèches à ces pseudo-leaders raciaux, qui ne sont que les mercantis de leur race.

Que voulez-vous, il a bien fallu que je me rende compte de cette vérité un peu pénible. Voila plus de trois ans que les uns et les autres s’appliquent à m’ouvrir les yeux. Et si m’avisais de dire, en France, tout ce que leurs actes m’inspirent. . . . [sic] Hélas! on n’est jamais trahi que par les siens. . . . [sic]

He returned to it two months later in another letter dated May 30, 1927:

“Je ne suis pas encore arrivé à digérer l’ironique et injurieuse proposition de Schomburg. M’offrir deux cents francs pour le manuscrit de *Djouma*, que j’ai mis plus d’un an à composer! En tout cas, qu’il ne

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\(^82\) Letter in Alain Locke Papers, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University. All the letters discussed in this section are in the above-mentioned collection.
remette jamais plus les pieds chez moi.’’ He alluded to the same affair constantly in his subsequent correspondence and discussions about Afro-Americans.

René Maran’s relationship with the New Negro of the 1920’s was essentially promotional. It was a sort of scratch-my-back-and-I-will-scratch-your-back affair. What his Afro-American friends attempted to do for him in the United States of America he also tried to do for them in France. If he appears to have done more for them than they have done for him, it is because their products were more à la mode in France than his (at least after Batouala) were in the United States. Besides, obviously knowing less than he thought he knew about Americans and their way of life, he was often open to errors of judgement—errors which, in the United States of America, negated not only his effectiveness as the foremost black writer of the period, but also the ability of his American friends to effectively promote and protect his interest. Nevertheless, he was very close to the New Negro. He studiously watched his growth; he helped to reveal his aims and achievements to the French public.

Gwendolyn B. Bennett of Opportunity must have exaggerated when she referred to her conversation with Maran about lynching, and exclaimed, ‘‘It was a beautiful thing to note the kindredship that existed in his heart because of the irradicable black of our skins.’’ René Maran was not a ‘‘race man.’’ It is significant that he also told her ‘‘that in a like manner the white Frenchmen could in no way understand the toleration of such cruelty in a civilized community.’’ Yet Miss Bennett was absolutely correct when she informed the readers of her column that ‘‘M. Maran is extremely interested in the American situation, and is constantly writing in French journals and magazines critical notes on the recent literature and cultural advance of the American Negro.’’

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