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Alain Locke

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History remembers Alain Locke as the first African American Rhodes Scholar and, more famously, as the "dean" of the Harlem Renaissance. Locke edited *The New Negro: An Interpretation* (1925), acclaimed as the "first national book" of African Americans. In this way, Locke's role is analogous to that of Martin Luther King Jr.: whereas King championed the civil rights of African Americans through nonviolent [civil disobedience](#), Locke did so through a process known as "civil rights by copyright."

In the Jim Crow era, when blacks had no effective political recourse, Locke used the arts as a strategy to win the respect of the white majority and to call to their attention the need to fully democratize democracy and Americanize America by extending full equality to all minorities. Recent scholarship has brought Locke back to life, and his philosophy of democracy, in particular, lends him renewed importance.

Alain LeRoy Locke was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania on September 13, 1886. He was sent by his mother to one of the Ethical Culture schools—a pioneering, experimental program of Froebelian pedagogy (named after Friedrich Froebel, who opened the first kindergarten). By the time he enrolled in Philadelphia's Central High School in 1898, Locke was already an accomplished pianist and violinist. In 1902, Locke attended the Philadelphia School of Pedagogy, graduating second in his class in 1904. That year, Locke entered Harvard with honors at entrance, where he was among only a precious few African American undergraduates.

Harvard, Harlem, Haifa—place names that represent Locke's special involvement in philosophy, art, and religion—are keys to understanding his life and thought. Harvard University prepared Locke for distinction as the first black Rhodes Scholar in 1907 and, in 1918, awarded Locke his PhD in philosophy, thus securing his position as chair of the Department of Philosophy at Howard University from 1927 until his retirement in 1953. New York City's Harlem was the mecca of the Harlem Renaissance, whereby Locke, as a spokesman for his race, revitalized racial solidarity and fostered group consciousness among African Americans that proved a necessary precondition of the civil rights movement. Haifa, Israel is the world center of the Bahá'í faith, the religion to which Locke converted in 1918, the same year he received his doctorate from Harvard. Until recently, this has been the least understood aspect of Locke's life. During the Jim Crow era, at a time when black people saw little possibility of interracial harmony, this new religious movement offered hope through its "race amity" efforts, which Locke was instrumental in organizing. These three spheres of activity—the academy, the art world, and spiritual society—converge to create a composite picture of Locke as an integrationist whose model was not assimilation, but rather "unity through diversity" (the title of one of his *Bahá'í World* essays).

During the "golden age of philosophy at Harvard," Locke studied at a time when Josiah Royce, William James, George Herbert Palmer, Hugo Münsterberg, and Ralph Barton Perry were member of the faculty. Elected to Phi Beta Kappa, in 1907 Locke won the Bowdoin Prize—Harvard's most prestigious academic award—for an essay he wrote, "The Literary Heritage of Tennyson." Remarkably, Locke completed his four-year undergraduate program at Harvard in only three years, graduating magna cum laude with a bachelor's degree in philosophy. Then, Locke made history and headlines in May 1907 as America's first African American Rhodes Scholar. Although his Rhodes scholarship provided for study abroad at England's Oxford University, it was no guarantee of admission. Rejected by five Oxford colleges because of his race, Locke was finally admitted to Hertford College, where he studied from 1907 to 1910.

Jewish philosopher Horace Kallen—one of Locke's lifelong friends—describes a racial incident over a Thanksgiving Day dinner hosted at the American Club at Oxford. Locke was not invited because Southern men refused to dine with him, deeply upsetting Locke. Over the course of Kallen's conversations with Locke, the phrase "cultural pluralism" was born. Although the term itself was thus coined by Kallen in this historic conversation with Locke, it was really Locke who developed the concept into a full-blown philosophical framework for the amelioration of African Americans. Distancing

himself from Kallen's purist and separatist conception of it, Locke was part of the cultural pluralist movement that flourished between the 1920s and the 1940s. Indeed, Locke has been called the "father of multiculturalism."

So acutely did the Thanksgiving Day dinner incident traumatize Locke that he left Oxford without taking a degree and spent the 1910–1911 academic year studying German philosopher Immanuel Kant at the University of Berlin and touring Eastern Europe as well. During his stay in Berlin, where he earned a Bachelor of Literature degree, Locke became conversant with the "Austrian school" of anthropology, known as philosophical anthropology, under the tutelage of Franz Brentano, Alexius von Meinong, Christian Freiherr von Ehrenfels, Paul Natorp, and others. Locke much preferred Europe to America. Indeed, there were moments when Locke resolved never to return to the United States. Reluctantly, he did so in 1911.

As an assistant professor of the teaching of English and an instructor in philosophy and education, Locke taught literature, English, education, and ethics—and later, ethics and logic—at Washington, D.C.'s Howard University, although he did not have an opportunity to teach a course on philosophy until 1915. In 1915–1916, the Howard chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Social Science Club sponsored a two-year extension course of public lectures, which Locke called, "Race Contacts and Inter-Racial Relations: A Study in the Theory and Practice of Race."

In the 1916–1917 academic year, Locke took a sabbatical from Howard University to become Austin Teaching Fellow at Harvard, where he wrote his 263-page dissertation, *The Problem of Classification in [the] Theory of Values*, evidently an extension of an earlier essay he had written at Oxford. It was Harvard philosophy professor Josiah Royce who originally inspired Locke's interest in the philosophy of value. Of all the major American pragmatists to date, only Royce had published a book dealing with racism: *Race Questions, Provincialism, and Other American Problems* (1908). In formulating his own theory of value, Locke synthesized the Austrian school of value theory (Franz Brentano, Alexius von Meinong, and later on, Rudolf Maria Holzappel) with American pragmatism (George Santayana, William James, and Josiah Royce), along with the anthropology of Franz Boas and Kant's theories of aesthetic judgment.

When awarded his PhD in philosophy from Harvard in 1918, Locke emerged as perhaps the most exquisitely educated and erudite African American of his generation. The year 1918 was another milestone in Locke's life, when he found a "spiritual home" in the Bahá'í faith, a new world religion whose gospel was the unity of the human race. The recent discovery of Locke's signed "Bahá'í Historical Record" card (1935), in which Locke fixes the date of his conversion in 1918, restores a missing dimension of Locke's life. Locke was actively involved in the early "race amity" initiatives sponsored by the Bahá'ís. "Race amity" was the Bahá'í term for ideal race relations (interracial unity). The Bahá'í "race amity" era lasted from 1921 to 1936, followed by the "race unity" period of 1939–1947, with other socially significant experiments in interracial harmony (such as "Race Unity Day") continuing to the present day. Although he studiously avoided references to the faith in his professional life, Locke's four *Bahá'í World* essays served as his public testimony of faith. But it was not until an article, "Bahá'í Faith: Only Church in World That Does Not Discriminate," appeared in the October 1952 issue of *Ebony* magazine that Locke's Bahá'í identity was ever publicized in the popular [media](#).

In 1925, the Harlem Renaissance was publicly launched. It was conceived a year earlier, when Locke was asked by the editor of the *Survey Graphic* to produce [demographics](#) on Harlem, located in northern Manhattan. That special issue, *Harlem, Mecca of the New Negro*, Locke subsequently recast as an anthology, *The New Negro: An Interpretation of Negro Life*, published in December 1925. A landmark in black literature, it was an instant success. Locke contributed five essays: the foreword, "The New Negro," "Negro Youth Speaks," "The Negro Spirituals," and "The Legacy of Ancestral Arts." *The New Negro* featured five white contributors as well, making this artistic tour de force a genuinely interracial collaboration, with much support from white patronage (not without some strings attached, however). The last essay was contributed by the legendary W. E. B. Du Bois.

Locke hoped the Harlem Renaissance would provide "an emancipating vision to America" and would advance "a new democracy in American culture." He spoke of a "race pride," "race genius," and the "race-gift." This "race pride" was to be cultivated through developing a distinctive culture, a hybrid of African and African American elements. For Locke, art ought to contribute to the improvement of life—a pragmatist aesthetic principle sometimes called "meliorism." But the Harlem Renaissance was more of an aristocratic than democratic approach to culture. Criticized by some African American contemporaries, Locke himself came to regret the Harlem Renaissance's excesses of exhibitionism as well as its elitism. Its dazzling success was short-lived.

Oddly, Locke did not publish a formal philosophical essay until he was 50. "Values and Imperatives" appeared in 1935. In fact, this was Locke's only formal philosophical work between 1925 and 1939. Apart from his dissertation, Locke published only four major articles in a philosophy journal or anthology: "Values and Imperatives" (1935), "Pluralism and Intellectual Democracy" (1942), "Cultural Relativism and Ideological Peace" (1944), and "Pluralism and Ideological

Peace" (1947).

In 1943, Locke was on leave as Inter-American Exchange Professor to Haiti under the joint auspices of the American Committee for Inter-American Artistic and Intellectual Relations and the Haitian Ministry of Education. Toward the end of his stay there, Haitian president Élie Lescot personally decorated Locke with the National Order of Honor and Merit, grade of Commandeur. There Locke wrote *Le rôle du Nègre dans la culture Américaine*, the nucleus of a grand project that Locke believed would be his magnum opus. That project, *The Negro in American Culture*, was completed in 1956 by Margaret Just Butcher, daughter of Howard colleague and close friend Ernest E. Just. It is not, however, considered to be an authentic work of Locke.

In 1944, Locke became a charter member of the Conference on Science, Philosophy and Religion, which published its annual proceedings. During the 1945–1946 academic year, Locke was a visiting professor at the University of Wisconsin, and in 1947, he was a visiting professor at the New School for Social Research in New York City. For the 1946–1947 term, Locke was elected president of the American Association for Adult Education (AAAE), as the first black president of a predominantly white institution. His reputation as a leader in adult education had already been established by the nine-volume *Bronze Booklet* series that he had edited, two volumes of which he had personally authored as well.

He moved back to New York in July 1953. For practically his entire life, Locke had sought treatment for his rheumatic heart. Locke died of heart failure on June 9, 1954, in Mount Sinai Hospital.

As a cultural pluralist, Locke may have a renewed importance as a social philosopher, particularly as a philosopher of democracy. Because Locke was not a systematic philosopher, however, it is necessary to systematize his philosophy in order to bring its deep structure into bold relief. Democracy is a process of progressive equalizing, a matter of degree. For blacks, American democracy was largely a source of oppression, not liberation. America's racial crisis was not just national—it was a problem of world-historical proportions. As a cultural pluralist, Alain Locke sought to further Americanize Americanism and further democratize democracy. In so doing, he proposed a multidimensional model of democracy that ranged from concepts of "local democracy" all the way up to "world democracy." This multidimensional typology is developed further in the penultimate chapter of Christopher Buck's *Alain Locke: Faith and Philosophy* (2005). We know that Alain Locke was important. If his philosophy of democracy has any merit, we know now that is Locke is important, especially if it is time to transform democratic values into democratic imperatives.

Christopher Buck

Further Reading

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