



Alain Locke.

Locke, Alain (1885-1954)

by Luca Prono

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Alain Locke played a crucial role in the development of African-American literature as mentor to Harlem Renaissance writers and as editor of the influential anthology *The New Negro* (1925). His homosexuality informed his plea for respect of sexual and cultural diversity, but it has often been overlooked or devalued by literary historians.

Locke's expressions of same-sex desire were never made publicly but are well-documented in private letters and autobiographical sketches. Among his contemporaries, his homosexuality was, to quote Leonard Harris's phrase, an "open secret."

Literary and cultural critics have continued to treat his homosexuality as a secret, attempting to keep it closeted and refusing to acknowledge the key role it played in shaping his aesthetic sensibility. According to Harris, this attitude went as far as hiding those documents in Locke's papers where he candidly discusses his homosexuality and his longing for male companionship.

Locke's literary activity as mentor to other (mostly male) gay or bisexual artists of the Harlem Renaissance such as Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen was also informed by desire. Although he is often referred to by others as the "Father of the Harlem Renaissance," he tellingly described himself as the "midwife" of the movement.

Locke's correspondence with Cullen is particularly focused on how the two men lived their homosexuality and on their common interest in Langston Hughes as a possible lover. Locke's conception of same-sex relationships combined Whitman's idea of comradeship with the classic Greek paradigm of a "noble friendship" between older and younger men.

He was born Arthur Locke in Philadelphia on September 3, 1885. His parents, Pliny Ishmael Locke and Mary Hawkins Locke, were freeborn African Americans who both chose careers as educators. His father alternated his teaching profession with jobs as a civil servant.

His family's commitment to education was transmitted to Locke and was partly responsible for his belief that racial differences should be considered irrelevant in the face of learning and working skills.

Locke graduated from Central High School in Philadelphia in 1902. He was admitted to Harvard University, from which he graduated with a double major in philosophy and English in 1907. His degree in philosophy was designated magna cum laude and he was elected to Phi Beta Kappa.

He was the first African-American Rhodes Scholar (and the only one until the 1960s). Although he was denied entrance to several Oxford Colleges, he finally secured admission to Hertford College, where he studied philosophy, literature, Greek, and Latin from 1907 to 1910.

He also attended the University of Berlin and the Collège de France in Paris before returning to the United

States in 1911 to accept an assistant professorship of philosophy and English at Howard University in Washington, D. C. There he became friends with W. E. B. Dubois and Carter Woodson, who greatly influenced him.

In 1916, he returned to Harvard to pursue his Ph. D. in philosophy. He received the degree in 1918, the same year that he embraced the Bahà'í faith, converting from his family's membership in the Episcopal Church.

After receipt of his doctorate, Locke returned to Howard University, where he remained as a professor and chair of the department of philosophy until his retirement in 1953.

In 1923, Locke began contributing essays to *Opportunity*, the journal of the National Urban League. These essays brought him prominence as a rising black intellectual, notable for the wide range of his interests.

Locke's anthology *The New Negro* (1925) contained essays, poetry, articles on African and African-American visual arts, and the texts of spirituals. The book represented the manifesto of the Harlem Renaissance of which it included the most prominent voices and certified the intellectual strength of black culture.

The first edition of the collection was published as a special issue of the sociological magazine *Survey Graphic* in March 1925 under the title *Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro*. The anthology expanded this special issue to include, in addition to the original pieces of W. E. B. Du Bois, Langston Hughes, Jean Toomer, Countee Cullen, Anne Spencer, and James Weldon Johnson, literary contributions by Zora Neale Hurston, Claude McKay, Angelina Grimké, and Jessie Fauset, as well as art work by Aaron Douglas and scholarly essays by William Stanley Braithwaite, Kelly Miller, I. A. Rogers, and E. Franklin Frazier.

Locke wrote the introduction to the volume in which he defined its aim as "to document the New Negro culturally and socially" and to illustrate the cultural, social, and psychological changes that have shaped African-American lives in the early twentieth century.

The New Negro revealed Locke's persuasion that education and culture could be decisive factors in solving America's racial divide. For him the "New Negroes" were a generation of educated African Americans who could defeat racial segregation and discrimination through the creation of art and literature.

As "midwife" to the Harlem Renaissance, Locke encouraged writers and artists to look to Africa for inspiration and to draw on African-American history as subjects for their work. He stressed the need to depict African-American characters and themes honestly and with an awareness of the need for "race-building."

Although Locke is best known as a literary mentor and philosopher, he was also a patron of the arts. His interest in African-American art and its relationship to black culture persisted throughout his life. He not only collected both African-American and African art, he encouraged black colleges to train more art historians and to enlarge their collections of art.

In addition, Locke also became an expert on African-American music. He was one of the earliest critics to argue the importance of African-American music for American culture as a whole. He considered black music "the closest America has to a folk music."

During his long academic career, Locke wrote and edited many volumes on African-American culture, while also publishing philosophical works that articulated ideas of cultural relativism and pluralism. His conviction that all cultures are equally acceptable and share important common traits found a clear expression in the volume *When Peoples Meet* (1942), co-edited with Bernhard Stern.

Locke died on June 9, 1954 due to heart disease that resulted from a childhood bout with rheumatic fever.

In a note dated October 1, 1949, Locke described himself as a member of three minorities: a short black homosexual. Yet, he added, he would not have been part of a sexual minority if he had been born in ancient Greece; he would not have been discriminated against because of his race if he had lived in Europe; and, finally, his stature would be above average in Japan. This intimate note reveals Locke's awareness that cultural values are constantly negotiated and must constantly be referred to the social and historical forces that produced them.

Bibliography

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About the Author

Luca Prono holds a Ph.D. in American Studies from the University of Nottingham, where he taught courses in American culture and Film Studies. He has published articles on Pier Vittorio Tondelli, Italian Neo-Realism, and American Radical Literature, as well as on contemporary representations of homosexuality in Italian films.