Alain Leroy Locke (September 13, 1885- June 9, 1954)



Photo: Housed in The Alain Locke Papers at Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

The first African American to receive the Rhodes scholarship, Alain Locke is arguably one of the most significant figures of the Harlem Renaissance. His influence as a philosopher, writer, cultural critic, and patron of the arts helped to inscribe the esthetics of this period in the history of black artistry, defining it philosophically, artistically, and politically. His guest editorship of *Survey Graphic’s* special edition on race in March of 1925, which he titled “Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro,” and which would become in an edited and extended format his anthology *The New Negro: An Interpretation of Negro Life*, articulated the social, cultural, and political mission of the movement. To this collection, Locke contributed five essays, including his most often anthologized: “The New Negro.” These essays would serve as the benchmarks of Locke’s philosophies defining the New Negro, who until this point had been, in words of Locke, “a stock figure perpetuated as historical fiction in innocent sentimentalism, partly in deliberate reactionism.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Alain Leroy Locke was born Arthur Locke on September 13, 1885 to parents, Pliny Ishmael and Mary Hawkins Locke in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Both his parents worked as schoolteachers and as missionaries in Liberia, shaping Locke’s passions for education and service. Locke’s primary and secondary education were completed at the Charles Close School and Central High School, respectively. Before entering Harvard in 1904, Locke attended the Philadelphia School of Pedagogy and Practice. Although Locke excelled as an undergraduate, he encountered difficulties continuing his education aboard, as several schools denied him admittance despite his Rhodes Scholar status. Eventually, Locke was accepted at Hertford College before going on to attend both Oxford and the University of Berlin. Upon Locke’s return to the United States in 1912, he began teaching in the English and philosophy departments at Howard University. In 1916, Locke returned to Harvard to complete a doctorate degree in philosophy. It was during his studies at Harvard that Locke discovered the philosophies of William James, whose ideas on universality Locke would continue to use as a counterpoint to his developing ideas on cultural pluralism and value theory. Locke returned to Howard after earning his PhD in 1918. It was during tenure at the university that he met and began his mentorship of Zora Neale Hurston and put her as well as Langston Hughes in contact with Charlotte Osgood Mason. It was also during this time that Locke embraced the Bahá'í faith. Though schooled as a philosopher, most of Locke’s early writing was geared toward cultural and literary criticisms. Locke did not publish his first purely philosophical article until 1935 when he was fifty years old. Locke died on June 9, 1954 not having finished what he considered to be his greatest contribution to American letters, *The Negro in American Culture*, which Margaret Just Butcher completed in 1954 based on his notes.

**References and Further Reading**

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1. Alain Locke. “The New Negro.” *The Works of Alain Locke*. Charles Molesworth. ed. (New York: Oxford UP, 2012), 442. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)