

Alain LeRoy Locke

Philosopher, Journalist, Educator, Scholar (1885–1954)

“The pulse of the Negro world has begun to beat to Harlem.”

Alain LeRoy Locke was born on September 13, 1885, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Locke graduated from Harvard University and was the first African American to win a prestigious Rhodes Scholarship. He subsequently received a doctorate in philosophy from Harvard and taught at Howard University. Locke publicized the Harlem Renaissance to a wide audience. He died in New York City on June 9, 1954. He was laid to rest in Congressional Cemetery in Washington DC.

Early Life and Education

Alain LeRoy Locke was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, on September 13, 1886, to father Pliny Ishmael and mother Mary Hawkins Locke. A gifted student, Locke graduated from Philadelphia's Central High School second in his class in 1902. He attended the Philadelphia School of Pedagogy before matriculating at Harvard University, from which he graduated in 1907 with degrees in both literature and philosophy.

Despite his intellect and clear talent, Locke faced significant barriers as an African American. Though he was selected as the first African-American Rhodes Scholar, Locke was denied admission to several colleges at the University of Oxford because of his race. He finally gained entry into Hertford College, where he studied from 1907 to 1910. Locke also studied philosophy at the University of Berlin during his years abroad.

Academic Career

Alain Locke taught English at Howard University before returning to Harvard to complete his graduate studies. He completed his dissertation, "The Problem of Classification in the Theory of Value," in 1918, graduating with a doctorate in Philosophy. Locke then returned to Howard University as chair of the school's Department of Philosophy—a position that he would hold until his retirement in 1953.

Locke died on June 9, 1954, in New York City, after suffering from heart problems for some time.

Influence on the Harlem Renaissance

Locke promoted African-American artists and writers, encouraging them to look to Africa for artistic inspiration. Author Zora Neale Hurston received significant support from Locke. He also reviewed the work of African-American scholars in the pages of the periodicals *Opportunity* and *Phylon*, and published work on African-American art, theater, poetry and music.

Much of Locke's writing focused on African and African-American identity. His collection of writing and illustrations, *The New Negro*, was published in 1925 and quickly became a classic. He also published pieces on the Harlem Renaissance, communicating the energy and potential of Harlem culture to a wide audience of both black and white readers. For his part in developing the movement, Locke has been dubbed the "Father of the Harlem Renaissance." His views on African-American intellectual and cultural life differed sharply from those of other Harlem Renaissance leaders, however, including W.E.B. Du Bois (who was also a friend of Locke's). While Du Bois believed that African-American artists should aim to uplift their race, Locke argued that the artist's responsibility was primarily to himself or herself.

Personal Beliefs

Locke declared his belief in the Baha'i Faith in 1918. His philosophical writings promoted pluralism, cultural relativism and self-expression.