

# ALAIN LOCKE



*The excerpts below are from an article on Alain Locke written by Christopher Buck published in Bahá'í Studies Review 2002. The link to the whole article is beneath this excerpt.*

Locke is arguably the most profound and important western Bahá'í philosopher to date. Gayle Morrison rightly calls him "the outstanding black intellectual"[\[4\]](#) among the early Bahá'ís ...Prior to the Harlem Renaissance, Locke had become a Bahá'í. As stated earlier, Locke embraced the Bahá'í Faith in 1918, the very same year that he received his doctorate from Harvard.

There is thus a certain synchronicity between Locke's religion and his philosophy and, as I shall argue, a

21 synergy between the two acted as a dynamic intensifier. Indeed, around the same  
 22 time as he had launched the Harlem Renaissance, **Locke had both made a**  
 23 **pilgrimage to the Bahá'í world centre in Haifa, Israel (then Palestine), and**  
 24 **travelled throughout the American South on a Bahá'í-sponsored lecture tour.**

25 **In a popular publication, *The Black 100*, Alain Locke ranks as the 36th most**  
 26 **influential African American ever, past or present.[\[6\]](#) Distinguished as the first**  
 27 **African American Rhodes Scholar, Locke was the philosophical architect —**  
 28 **indeed, the "Dean"[\[7\]](#) — of the Harlem Renaissance**, a period of cultural  
 29 efflorescence connected with the "New Negro" movement of the mid-1920s to  
 30 mid-1930s... This was a watershed period in African American history for  
 31 psychological revalorisation and race vindication. "Arguably Locke was the first  
 32 black American," writes Winston Napier, "seeking to challenge European cultural  
 33 imperialism through the formal articulation of a black aesthetics."[\[8\]](#) Among his

34 other roles, Locke was the first African American president of the American  
35 Association for Adult Education (AAAE), a predominantly white, national  
36 education association.[\[9\]](#) He helped found the prestigious Conference on Science,  
37 Philosophy and Religion, which he chaired in 1945. Locke served on the editorial  
38 board of the *American Scholar* and was a regular contributor to national journals  
39 and magazines.[\[10\]](#) By universal acclamation, Locke has achieved immortality as a  
40 great African American. Yet his identity and contributions as a Bahá'í remain  
41 relatively obscure by comparison.

42 Augmented by his fame and prestige in wider American society, his role as a  
43 contributor to the first five volumes of the *Bahá'í World* invites a closer  
44 examination of Locke's significance as a Bahá'í writer during the early years of the  
45 American Bahá'í community.

46 **Since formal enrollment procedures did not exist at that time, no archival record**  
47 **of the exact date of Locke's conversion has yet been found.** The academic and  
48 religious literature on Locke could, at best, speculate as to the date of his  
49 conversion, which had, in itself, been the source of some doubt (outside of Bahá'í  
50 circles). In the course of my research and at my request, archivist Roger Dahl,  
51 searching the National Bahá'í Archives for documents relating to Locke,  
52 discovered the evidence scholars had been looking for: Dahl found a "Bahá'í  
53 Historical Record"[\[108\]](#) card that Locke had filled out in 1935, at the request of  
54 the National spiritual assembly, which, in conducting its Bahá'í census, had mailed  
55 the forms in triplicate to all Bahá'ís through their local spiritual assemblies and  
56 other channels.[\[109\]](#)

57 **Locke was one of seven black respondents from the Washington, DC, Bahá'í**  
58 **community to complete the card.**[\[110\]](#) In "Place of acceptance of Bahá'í Faith" is  
59 entered "Washington, DC." Locke personally completed and signed the card,  
60 "Alain Leroy Locke" (in the space designated, "19. Signature"). Under item #13,  
61 **"Date of acceptance of the Bahá'í Faith," Locke entered the year "1918."**[\[111\]](#)  
62 This date is significant in that it predates previous estimates that placed Locke's  
63 conversion in the early 1920s.[\[112\]](#)

64 The discovery of Locke's Bahá'í Historical Record card confirms what was already  
65 evident from a host of other sources. (Those sources, however, failed to pinpoint  
66 the date of Locke's conversion.) The card does not, however, shed any light on the  
67 precise circumstances surrounding his conversion. **It is quite possible that Locke**  
68 **came into contact with the Faith through W. E. B. Du Bois, who had personally**  
69 **met `Abdu'l-Bahá and had lectured at Green Acre (a Bahá'í school in southern**

70 **Maine) as well. It is just as likely that Locke encountered the Faith through Louis**  
71 **Gregory, or through one of the other Bahá'ís or friends of the Faith from among**  
72 **the circle of educated African Americans in Washington, DC.** After all, 1918 was  
73 just six years after `Abdu'l-Bahá had lectured at Howard University and at the  
74 NAACP convention in Chicago. In short, the Faith was widely known among the  
75 black intelligentsia, and Locke could have been introduced to it by any number of  
76 people.[\[113\]](#)

77 Curiously, Locke's name does not appear on an October 1920 list of the  
78 Washington, DC, Bahá'ís. But his name does appear in at least twenty subsequent  
79 lists,[\[114\]](#) from March 1922 to 1951, showing a Bahá'í affiliation of at least thirty  
80 consecutive years, or thirty-four years dating back to 1918, and probably thirty-  
81 seven years, assuming Locke maintained his affiliation until his death in 1954. But  
82 the nature of his relationship to the Bahá'í Faith at the end of his life is also  
83 unknown, since in July 1953 Locke moved to New York, where there is no record  
84 of his contact with the Bahá'í community there.

85 **On a sombre note, it appears that Locke became somewhat pessimistic over the**  
86 **future prospects of interracial unity in the Washington, DC, Bahá'í community.**  
87 **In a letter dated 18 April 1935 to Horace Holley, Secretary-General of the**  
88 **national spiritual assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States and Canada,**  
89 **Locke wrote:**

90 *"Since I last saw you, I have had two occasions to meet with the local friends,*  
91 *and have very effectively renewed my contacts with them. This has also given*  
92 *me occasion to make some comparisons between the work as I knew it rather*  
93 *intimately before and as it seems to be going now. I regret to have to call your*  
94 *attention to what seems to me to be something approaching stagnation in the*  
95 *inter-racial work at Washington. This but confirms a feeling that I have had all*  
96 *along for several years that unfortunate personality influences have crept into*  
97 *the situation and decidedly hampered the development of this very important*  
98 *practical phase of the Cause. For a considerable while I thought this was my own*  
99 *personal bias concerning Mrs. Haney and Mrs. Cook who have pioneered so*  
100 *much in this field and have now for a long while exerted a control in it which*  
101 *threatens to become a monopolistic and hampering one.*

102 Mariam Haney (Mary Ida Haney [Parkhurst]) was mother of future Hand of the  
103 Cause Paul Haney. She adopted "Mariam" as her name when `Abdu'l-Bahá  
104 addressed her so in a tablet. Active for many years in the Washington, DC, Bahá'í  
105 community, she served on various national committees and was an editor of The

106 Bahá'í World. There are indications that Locke's estimate of Mariam Haney was  
107 initially positive. In a letter to Agnes Parsons, Locke writes: "I learned with great  
108 satisfaction from Mrs. Haney of the plans for the Amity Conference in New York. I  
109 shall most certainly attend, and if I can in any way be of further assistance, please  
110 feel free to call upon me."

111 Assuming that Haney was centrally involved in planning the event, Locke's  
112 enthusiasm may be construed as an oblique endorsement of her role. Coralie F.  
113 Cook was a Washingtonian Bahá'í whose husband was a professor at Howard  
114 University. In November 1926, the national spiritual assembly invited a group of  
115 black and white Bahá'ís for a special consultation on race. Mariam Haney and  
116 Coralie F. Cook and were both in that group, as was Alain Locke himself. How and  
117 why Locke became disaffected with these two mainstays of the race amity  
118 movement is not clear. Locke was critical of other leading Washingtonian Bahá'í  
119 figures as well. By 1931, Locke had complained of "the deceptive platitudes of  
120 some of our friends, including even Dr. Leslie P. Hill." This is a particularly stunning  
121 statement, as "Professor" Leslie Pickney Hill, who was the black principal of the  
122 Cheyney Institute (a teacher training school) had spoken at the Philadelphia  
123 convention of 22-23 October 1924 and was among those invited by the national  
124 spiritual assembly in November 1926 to a special consultation on race.

125 *Another dismaying development for Locke may have been the appointment of a*  
126 *predominantly white amity committee for the 1933-1934 Bahá'í year — an*  
127 *appointment that, evidently, excluded Locke himself. It was around this time that*  
128 *the race amity initiatives went into decline, as chronicled by Gayle Morrison. The*  
129 *last race amity committee was appointed in 1935-1936. In July 1936, the*  
130 *committee, in the words of Morrison, "unknowingly wrote its own epitaph" in*  
131 *stating: "The National Assembly has appointed no race amity committee this year.*  
132 *Its view is that race unity activities have sometimes resulted in emphasizing race*  
133 *differences rather than their unity and reconciliation within the Cause." With the*  
134 *demise of the race amity committees, it would seem that Locke's special services*  
135 *were no longer needed. Finally, in 1941, Locke requested that the local spiritual*  
136 *assembly should henceforth regard him as an "isolated believer," explaining:*

137 *I naturally am reluctant to sever a spiritual bond with the Bahai [sic] community,*  
138 *for I still hold to a firm belief in the truth of the Bahai principles. However, I am not*  
139 *in a position, and haven't been for years, to participate very practically or even*  
140 *with the fullest enthusiasm, in the collective activities of the local friends. One of*  
141 *my reservations is, of course, the seeming impossibility of any really crusading*

142 *attack on the practises of racial prejudice in spite of the good will and fair*  
143 *principles of the local believers. They are not to blame perhaps for their*  
144 *ineffectualness any more than we, who are in more practical movements[,] are for*  
145 *our absorption of time and energy in what we regard as more immediately*  
146 *important.*

147 Locke died on 9 June 1954, in Washington, DC. On June 11th at Benta's Chapel,  
148 Brooklyn, Locke's memorial was presided over by Dr. Channing Tobias, with  
149 cremation following at Fresh Pond Crematory in Little Village, Long Island.<sup>[115]</sup>  
150 The brief notice that appeared in the *Bahá'í News* in 1954 (No. 282, p. 11) states  
151 that: "Quotations from the Bahá'í Writings and Bahá'í Prayers were read at Dr.  
152 Locke's funeral." This shows that Locke remained a committed Bahá'í to the end  
153 of his life.

154 The brightest moments in Alain Locke's public Bahá'í life were three: (1) the first  
155 Race Amity Conference, in which Locke presided as a session chair on 20 May  
156 1921; (2) his presentation at the Racial Amity Convention in Harlem, 10 December  
157 1932; and (3) his lecture, "Democracy in Human Relations" at the Rhode Island  
158 School of Design in 1946. In his 1933 report on behalf of the National Bahá'í  
159 Committee for Racial Amity . . . [https://bahai-library.com/buck\\_alain\\_locke\\_bsr](https://bahai-library.com/buck_alain_locke_bsr)

160