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# **Alain Locke's "Beloved Community:" The Notion of Community, African and African-American Visual Art, and Locke's Political and Educational Thought**

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**Abstract:** This paper examines how the notion of community is embedded in Locke's writing on visual art and is an important aspect of Locke's political and educational thought in the context of his practice of adult and higher education.

## **Introduction to Alain Locke**

In recent years there has been a growing body of research on Alain Locke. Writers have analyzed his views on adult education, on the education of African-Americans, and most importantly, his views on culture and cultural pluralism. Lost in the discussion, is that Locke's views on culture and education are embedded with his broad conceptualization of aesthetics and art. Surprisingly, this facet of his work has received little attention. The purpose of this paper is to examine and place Locke's aesthetic philosophy, through his writing and teaching on African American art and culture in American visual arts, in the context of his practice of adult and higher education, in order to begin a discussion of this aspect of Locke's work, and the role that it plays in our current understanding of his views about adult education. This paper examines how the notion of community is embedded in Locke's writing on visual art and is an important aspect of Locke's political and educational thought.

Alain Leroy Locke was a Harvard graduate in 1907 where he studied with such luminaries as George H. Palmer and Josiah Royce. He was the first African-American Rhodes Scholar in 1907, studying at Oxford and the University of Berlin before returning to the United States. He received his doctorate in Philosophy from Harvard University in 1918. He was the founder and Chair of the Philosophy Department of Howard University where he taught for 40 years, introducing philosophy, aesthetics, and anthropology to the curriculum. He assisted in the development of the first college theater and art gallery at Howard University. He was the intellectual leader of the Harlem Renaissance, philosopher, social critic, literary critic, adult educator, and cultural pluralist. He was the president (1946-1947), and member of the American Association of Adult Educator's executive board for over 15 years (Guy, 1993).

Alain Locke was a principal interpreter of the Harlem Renaissance by virtue of his 1925 anthology, *The New Negro*, his promotional activities, and his extensive writing on black music, art, and literature. As African American philosopher and cultural critic, and author of the path breaking studies *Negro Art: Past and Present* (1936) and *The Negro in Art* (1940) during the New Negro Movement and Harlem Renaissance, Locke presided over the flourishing of self-consciously racial art movement in America and has been widely credited with providing the philosophical basis for its emergence. As a cultural theorist, Locke figures most prominently in histories of Black literary modernism and the performing arts (Calo, 2007).

Locke's contributions to the wider literature of art history are, however, far less known. His essays on the history and impact of visual culture from the African Diaspora are recognized today as among the first American publications in these respective subject areas, but the vast literature on modernist primitivism and colonialism rarely considers Locke's work, even though he wrote about both throughout his career. Locke has received insufficient attention for his

unique insight into the broad forces that shaped American modernism and cultural nationalism in the visual arts (Calo, 2007).

### **Alain Locke, New Negro Art, and the American Association of Adult Educators**

Locke attempted to anchor New Negro art in a coherent set of aesthetic ideals. But many of the early exhibition venues for African American visual art, the Harlem branches of the New York Public Library and the YWCA, the Harmon Foundation traveling shows sponsored frequently by Interracial Councils, and the Federal Art Project, had primarily social and educational agendas of which art was a small part (Calo, 2007). *Negro Art: Past and Present* was first and foremost an educational project that was created as part of the *Bronze Booklets*, published by the Associates in Negro Folk Education and funded by the Carnegie Corporation. The series grew out of the Experiment in Negro Adult Education, a project administered by the American Association of Adult Educators (AAAE), a Carnegie affiliate (Calo, 2007).

Locke was hired by the Carnegie Corporation in 1933 to monitor and assess the outcome of Negro adult educational programs being conducted by public libraries in Atlanta and Harlem. His preliminary reports to the Carnegie Corporation noted that the dearth of available materials on Negro history and culture made progress in this initiative difficult. He recommended that the AAAE underwrite publication of a set of syllabi or structured study aids to facilitate Negro adult education. As a result, AAAE agreed to support publication of a collection of texts on Negro achievement and contributions to various fields. Locke served as editor and authored texts on both art and music (Calo, 2007).

African American art was rarely seen in a professional art context, and only in the case of the Federal Art Project. It can be said that the social agenda was in effect an intrinsic art agenda. Notwithstanding Locke's elegant discussions on the subject, for the most part African American visual art in the early twentieth century was inextricable from the doctrines of racial uplift, mass public education, and progressive social reform that motivated its supporters to seek an audience (Calo, 2007).

As a cultural theorist, Locke occupied himself with the construction of a viable collective identity for African Americans that embodied a critical understanding of the relationship between race, nation, and democracy in modern America. Hutchinson defines this project as fundamental to our understanding of the Harlem Renaissance itself and the creative work that emerged in its wake. New Negro artists, he claims, appealed to Americanism, and "need to reconceptualize the meaning of American national culture in a way that takes account of the significance of racism in American history and the African American creative response to their conditions in the New World" (Hutchinson as cited in Calo, 2007, p. 63).

### **The Harlem Renaissance, The New Negro, and Beloved Community**

It is believed that there is no better introduction to the Harlem Renaissance than to read *The New Negro*. The anthology grew out of a special, March 1925 "Harlem number" of *The Survey*, a journal devoted to current social problems. Since the early 1920s, *The Survey* had run a series of annual "racial numbers" which sought to "make articulate the aspirations and social statescraft of a people" (*The Survey* as cited by Spear in Locke, 1968, p. xiv). Issues on Ireland, Russia, and Mexico had already appeared when the magazine's editor, Paul U. Kellogg, decided upon a special issue on Harlem. As his usual practice, Kellogg brought in an outside editor, choosing Alain Locke, professor of Philosophy at Howard University (Spear in Locke, 1968, p.xiv). Locke wrote towards the end of the first chapter that:

...for the present, more immediate hope rests in the revaluation by white and black alike of the Negro in terms of his artistic endowments and cultural contributions, past and prospective. It must be increasingly recognized that the Negro has already made very substantial contributions, not only in his folk-art, music especially, which has always found appreciation, but in the larger, though humbler and less acknowledged ways. For generations the Negro has been the peasant matrix of that section of America which has most undervalued him, and here he has contributed not only materially in labor and in social patience, but spiritually as well. The South has unconsciously absorbed the gift of his folk-temperament. In less than half a generation it will be easier to recognize this, but the fact remains that a leaven of humor, sentiment, imagination and tropic nonchalance has gone into the making of the South from a humble, unacknowledged source. A second crop of the Negro's gifts promises still more largely. He now becomes a conscious contributor and lays aside the status of a beneficiary and ward for that of a collaborator and participant in American civilization. The great social gain in this is the releasing of our talented group from the arid fields of controversy and debate to the productive fields of creative expression. The especially cultural recognition they win should in turn prove the key to that revaluation of the Negro which must precede or accompany any considerable further betterment of race relationships. But whatever the general effect, the present generation will have added the motives of self-expression and spiritual development to the old and still unfinished task of making material headway and progress. No one who understandingly faces the situation with its substantial accomplishment or views the new scene with its still more abundant promise can be entirely without hope. And certainly, if in our lifetime the Negro should not be able to celebrate his full initiation into American democracy, he can at least, on the warrant of these things, celebrate the attainment of a significant and satisfying new phase of group development, and with it a spiritual Coming of Age (Locke, 1925, pp. 15-16).

While Locke does not say "Beloved Community" in his essay, he described the ideals of it. Locke embraced the romantic idea that races are characterized by their spiritual and artistic gifts—an idea that remained central to Black cultural politics. Locke also embraced the historical concept of race, developing it in a more specifically political direction while retaining its connection to the idea of cultural creativity in the ideal of the Beloved Community. He had the vision of self-realization through participation in a democratic culture, a vision that inspired a range of progressive intellectuals, both Black and White, urban reformers, Young Americans, cultural pluralists, Black theorists and in later years, Martin Luther King Jr. and the civil rights movement (Smith, 2007).

### **The Concept of Beloved Community**

It was Locke's professor, Josiah Royce at Harvard, who was the first to use the term "Beloved Community." Josiah Royce had a vision of the city as a social ideal, what he called in 1913 the "Beloved Community." Following the Apostle Paul, Royce stressed that the "Beloved Community" had not yet appeared—it remained for "the faithful" to "create" it: "It has not been

my privilege to tell you where the true Church is today to be found. As a fact, I believe it still to be an invisible Church” (Royce as cited in Scruggs, 1993, p.226).

Around that key phrase developed an important school of American school of social thought, including in its first generation Van Wyck Brooks, Randolph Bourne, Lewis Mumford, Waldo Frank, Kenneth Burke, and other critics, poets, and novelists. Among those it influenced were Jean Toomer and Alain Locke in the 1920s, Richard Wright, in the 1930s and Martin Luther King, Jr. in the 1950s and 60s. King, referring to the goals of the new Southern Christian Leadership Conference, would write in 1957, that “the ultimate aim of SCLC is to foster and create the ‘Beloved Community’ in America”(King as cited in Scruggs, 1993, p.3).

What King came to see as a goal for human society in general had already been presented as a model in Alain Locke’s anthology, *The New Negro* in 1925. Locke compared two kinds of “bonds,” the bond between African Americans in the past, which Locke said had been created by the de jure and de facto condition of bondage, and those created by the new city of Harlem, which was “the laboratory of a great race welding” (Locke as cited in Scruggs, 1993, pp.3-4).

This new city within a city promised an authentic, spiritual bonding:

hitherto... the chief bond between them (Negroes) has been that of common condition rather than a common consciousness; a problem in common rather than a life in common. In Harlem, Negro life is seizing upon its first chances for group expression and self-determination. In Harlem, an invisible city (“a common consciousness... a life in common”) would replace a visible “condition (Locke as cited in Scruggs, 1993, pp.3-4).

Locke according to Scruggs (1993), found Randolph Bourne’s secularization of the Beloved Community more attractive than Royce’s Christian emphasis, because of Bourne’s sociological focus on the American city, immigrant urban culture and his view of the city as the new home of the Beloved Community. Bourne’s essay, “Trans-National America,” was first published in 1916 in the *Atlantic Monthly*, in which he proclaimed that “all our idealisms must be those of future social goals in which all can participate, the good life of personality lived in the environment of the Beloved Community” (Bourne as cited in Blake, 1990, p.124). Scruggs (1993), maintains that Locke borrowed freely from Bourne’s article. His borrowings ranged from specific phrases to the notion that the Beloved Community was a “higher ideal than the “melting pot.” (Locke as cited in Scruggs, 1993, p.226).

Smith (2007) calls it ironic that the idea of the Beloved Community stems in large part from the anti-urban discourse of the nineteenth century English social critics John Ruskin and William Morris. Ruskin and Morris helped to inspire the settlement movement. Ruskin and Morris saw the city less as the site of a reconstructed modern community than as a symptom of a civilization in crisis, they worried about the effect of industrialization and urbanization on humankind’s relationship to the natural world and on the means of maintaining vital communal life. They also thought art was central to their goal of vital, creative communities and were equally concerned with labor and how the organization of labor affects human aesthetic and spiritual relationships to nature. Ruskin and Morris responded to the rise of the industrial city by developing an ideal conception of community to be realized in a reformed version of English village life. Ruskin reasoned that England’s national character had been warped by the dominance of the profit motive in the economic and most other spheres of life, production of material goods should be guided by higher motives, by aesthetic and humane considerations.



Both Ruskin and Morris sought to reunite artistic and industrial production to revive the artistry involved in making ordinary objects in order to make manual labor more pleasurable and ennobling (Smith, 2007).

Ruskin and Morris had widespread influence in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century England and America. Many American social theorists saw in their ideas a blueprint for more humane and vital urban communities. American urban reformers however, according to Smith (2007), faced an additional challenge in the cultural diversity created by America's history of slavery and immigration. Cultural pluralism was also integral to the idea of the Beloved Community. Josiah Royce, Locke's teacher, envisioned national and international unity growing out of healthy, robust "provinces" defined as "...any one part of a national domain, which is, geographically and socially, sufficiently unified to have a true consciousness of its own unity; to feel a pride to its own ideals and customs; and to possess a sense of its own distinction from other parts of the country" (Royce as cited in Smith, 2007, p.175). Royce, according to Smith encouraged provincialism for its tendency to create cultural diversity, which supported individuality, and for its tendency to contribute to "'well-knit (social) organization'. 'National unity,' he argued, must grow together with local 'independence of spirit'" (p.175).

The Young Americans, Waldo Frank, Lewis Mumford, Randolph Bourne, and Van Wyck Brooks, applied this set of ideals specifically to the urban environment, which in their eyes represented the dominant trends shaping modern communities in general. The United States in the twentieth century, they believed would be an urban nation, so it is in the city that they hoped to find a viable model of community. Drawing on Ruskin's critique of the industrial separation of art and labor, Royce's cultural pluralism, and Dewey's pragmatic liberalism, they imagined a reformed democratic culture that would provide a common life for its inhabitants, a nation of small, tight-knit communities, like urban neighborhoods, that would provide a strong sense of place and social support for the expression of individuality, particularly through art. Like Ruskin, the Young Americans put special emphasis on the role of art in community-making. A healthy public culture, they argued, has as its end the flourishing of human personality, which ultimately takes the form of artistic expression. Art according to the Young Americans not only expresses the individual's unique perspective on the common life of the group, it also serves as a way for humans to establish a meaningful connection to the external environment (Smith, 2007).

Scruggs (1993) summarizes that Locke combined "Frederick Jackson Turner's thesis of the frontier, Josiah Royce's theory of the 'province,' and Robert Park's investigations of city life "to create an image of Harlem as a utopian home for a New Negro" (Locke as cited in Scruggs, 1993, p.226). Specifically, Locke put forward an ideal vision of a city as a place that offered African Americans a 'life in common'(Locke as cited in Smith, 2007, p.177).

Here in Harlem— Locke pointed out, was—the first concentration in history of so many diverse elements of Negro life... It has attracted the African, the West Indian, the Negro American; has brought together the Negro of the North and the Negro of the South; the man from the city and the man from the town and village; the peasant, the student, the business man, the professional man, artist, poet, musician, adventurer and worker, preacher and criminal, exploiter and social outcast... These diverse elements have been brought by proscription and prejudice into a common area of contact and interaction—the result, Lock believed— was a great race-welding... Heretofore, it must be admitted that American Negroes have been a race more in name than in fact... The chief bond between them has

been that of a common condition rather than a common consciousness, a problem in common rather than a life in common. In Harlem, Negro life is seizing upon its first chances for group expression and self-determination (Locke as cited in Smith, 2007, p.177).

This need to give meaning to the environment is precisely why Locke urged African American artists to draw on their collective memory, not to limit their themes but to begin the task of interpreting the African American experience, thus welding the African American crowd into a community. For if a community lacks the means of self-expression and the ability to preserve and pass down its cultural traditions, its members would not be able to make sense of their world. Under this view, African American art should arise out of, but also help to create racial consciousness. Locke hoped that art would produce among African Americans a “self-culture” which in turn would build community by orienting diverse individuals to a common life (Locke as cited in Smith, 2007, p.177). In theory, such expression would also create better mutual understanding between the races, leading to full participation by African Americans in American political and economic institutions.

For these reasons, because art and creativity are fundamental to the vision of Beloved Community, when we speak of Locke and all his efforts and accomplishments as the intellectual leader of the Harlem Renaissance, philosopher, social critic, literary critic, adult educator, and cultural pluralist, we cannot separate his political views from his writing on art. We study the history and philosophy of adult education to help understand practice. The question we need to ask ourselves now, is how do we bring the vision of the Beloved Community to our classrooms and our campuses?

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