Almost no one with whom I spoke knew the name Alain Leroy Locke. I had assumed the opposite and a pervasive sadness fell upon me. So, I sought confirmation of his importance, and turning to the Index of The Collected Works of John Dewey, discovered that Locke is not listed, nor is W.E.B. DuBois, nor is Booker T. Washington, nor the Harlem Renaissance, nor a variety of other significant descriptors of race and race relations in the United States. Dewey was silent. The N.A.A.C.P. was mentioned twice, however, in the Dewey Index: first, Dewey’s address to the NAACP’s Twenty-Third Annual Conference, in Washington, D.C., 19 May 1932 (Later Works, Vol. 6, pages 224-ff); the second mention was in a letter to the New York Times (Later Works, Vol. 15, page 356), in response to the Supreme Court’s refusal to hear the case concerning the sharecropper Odell Waller and his trial for the murder of the landholder, who refused to give Waller his share of the wheat crop.

As Dewey was silent on Locke, so also was the Encyclopedia of Philosophy (nor did that work include any contributions from scholars at Howard University). The Dictionary of Literary Biography, Vol. 270, American Philosophers before 1950 also proved to be silent, and no entry was included for Locke even in Tommy L. Lott’s 2002, African-American Philosophy: Selected Readings. A 1988 edition of The World Book Encyclopedia, however, did have a nine-line entry under Alain Locke’s name and the 2004 digital Deluxe Edition of World Book increased the article to fourteen lines, but failed to mention some of Locke’s most significant works. Neither Locke nor his ideas or works are readily accessible.

So, who was this less-than-renown individual? Why is so little available on this philosopher and educator? His significance is perhaps what kept him invisible. Locke worked consistently in the margins of the mainstream. As a
philosopher, he worked in education; as an educator, he worked with adult education. When remembering the debates between DuBois and Washington—the tension between the academe and the craft—, Locke consistently promoted the value of the African American culture as the beginning for developing the African American individual—so he was somewhere between DuBois and Washington, but he did not fit neatly into the simplicity of a polarization. As a Harvard doctoral graduate Locke taught at Howard University, and finally, he was indeed African American—all of which kept him on the margins at best, and invisible at worst.

Locke was born in 1886 and died in 1954, two years after Dewey and two years after Ralph Waldo Ellison’s publication of *Invisible Man*. In this 2004 text on Locke, Cain has provided a service to the academic community and the general public in making Locke more visible, however, it remains perplexing that such a person, as well as, his race can be so invisible to the macro culture in this Twenty-First Century. Locke finished his four-year program at Harvard in three years, was selected as a Rhodes Scholar (the first African American to be so honored), and was subsequently rejected by five Oxford Colleges before gaining acceptance at the “youngest and poorest” of Oxford’s colleges, Hertford College. During Thanksgiving at Oxford, the “gentlemen from Dixie” (while few in number) prevailed in excluding Locke from the American Thanksgiving celebration. Horace Kallen (who coined the phrase “cultural pluralism”) and “one or two other persons, authentically Americans, refused in consequence to attend.”

Locke finished his doctorate from Harvard in 1918, and worked throughout his career at Howard. He was a leader and mentor in the Harlem Renaissance, was the consultant and evaluator of the Harlem and the Atlanta Experiments sponsored by the American Association of Adult Education and other organizations, to promote the education of the African American adults, and was the editor of the Bronze Booklets, which celebrated aspects of the African American community in order to promote adult learning. The Atlanta Experiment was the less successful of the two experimental sites, and Cain writes of the Harlem program (p. 17):

The program, which ran for three years, was based at the 135th Street branch of the New York Public Library, the mecca for the Harlem Renaissance. Locke was the cardinal shaker and mover of this African American-centered, historical, cultural and artistic movement of the 1920s
which left an indelible legacy of African American culture and intellectual thought, and significantly helped to define and shape the African American aesthetic in what was to be conceptualized by Locke as the "New Negro."

Cain’s book is divided into five chapters: 1) an introduction providing some of the details about Locke’s life; 2) an introduction to Locke’s role in adult education; 3) the Harlem and Atlanta Experiments and other movements and conferences led by Locke; 4) "The Education Triumvirate: Washington, DuBois, and Locke," delineating the details of Locke’s involvement in the Washington-DuBois debates; and 5) Locke’s contemporary importance. Throughout Locke’s life, the descriptors that consistently defined him were: democracy, cultural pluralism, andragogy (Malcolm Knowles’ term for the adult counterpart to pedagogy), cultural pride, values, and the arts. Leonard Harris, in the “Guest Foreword” writes:

Locke’s pragmatic approach to knowledge considers learning a process. . . . From Locke’s account, “The movement for adult education among any disadvantaged group must have a dynamic and enthusiasm-compelling drive, beyond the mere literacy level, enlarging horizons and broadening human values must dominate it or the movement will stall.” The learners and the object of knowledge are entwined in a web of engagement. Literacy, technical skills, and intellectual strategies are not forms of knowing that are independent from the roles they play in our lives. How we learn as adults is as important as what we learn and why we learn.

As a philosopher, Locke’s focus was on axiology, not epistemology, so his contributions to adult education may come as a surprise. His dissertation was “The Problem of Classification in the Theory of Values,” and according to Johnny Washington (p. 4), “the most pervasive theme in [Locke’s] works is the value conflicts among individuals and groups.” Locke’s focus on value conflicts, particularly understanding the conflicts between races and the experience of the individual within those conflicts, provided the pragmatic basis that Harris suggests. Moreover, Locke’s academic training provided a comprehensive view of how to best serve the African American community as well as the macro culture. It was precisely those descriptors (democracy through andragogy to values and the arts, mentioned above) and their interrelationship that allowed Locke to understand the potential for valuing the individual and the race within a movement for improving their lot. It was this
understanding that allowed him to be the reasoned mind in the DuBois-Washington debates. It also was this understanding that integrated the Harlem Renaissance with adult education that provided greater success in Harlem than Atlanta. Locke's depth of understanding values and conflicts gave him an appreciation for the role of the arts that came later in life for John Dewey.

John Dewey wrote, in *Art as Experience* (Later Works, Vol. 10, pp. 338-9), about the concept of civilization and the role of art:

Nevertheless, when the art of another culture enters into attitudes that determine our experience genuine continuity is effected. Our own experience does not thereby lose its individuality but it takes unto itself and wedges elements that expand its significance. . . . [T]he verb "to civilize" is defined as "to instruct in the arts of life and thus to raise in the scale of civilization." Instruction in the arts of life is something other than conveying information about them. It is a matter of communication and participation in values of life by means of the imagination, and works of art are the most intimate and energetic means of aiding individuals to share in the arts of living. Civilization is uncivil because human beings are divided into non-communicating sects, races, nations, classes and cliques.

Alain Locke lived this philosophy. To promote African American adult education he realized the importance of teaching the culture that defined the people and gave value to the individuality of each culture. Locke sought to celebrate the culture of the African Americans because in that celebration he knew that his race had a place within the larger community. Today, fifty years after Locke's passing, we still do not celebrate the African American culture and we know little of its essence. Murray Milner, in a comprehensive sociological study of American teenagers published in 2004 (*Freaks, Geeks, and Cool Kids: American Teenagers, Schools, and the Culture of Consumption*), argues that there is a very prominent hierarchical social structure among teenagers, particularly at school, and race plays a role. He writes (pp. 101 & 124):

In nearly all aspects of school life, where spatial arrangements are voluntary-classrooms, hallways, parking lots, football bleachers, etc.–this same pattern emerges [about ten percent of the total population has a “mixture of black and white students”]. That is to say, the
predominant pattern is voluntary segregation by race, but significant deviations from this pattern exist. Neither the dominant pattern of segregation, nor the deviations from this seem to be of much concern to anyone. . . . In terms of theory, minority groups, and especially those that have long experienced domination and discrimination, create alternative subcultures through the adoption and elaboration of distinctive norms and styles. Minority members who have close expressive relationships with those of other races and ethnic groups or who are too preoccupied with conforming to the norms of the dominant groups are often seen as disloyal, as denying the macro identity. This is especially likely to be so for black students who "act white." Thus, the paradox is that students "have no problem with" concrete fellow students of another race or ethnicity, but they have a problem being publicly intimate with someone who does not share their own macro identity. Hence, the great paradox of pluralism is that it both reduces and increases the social distance between people.

The paradox is also that while there are obvious differences between races, there are phenomenal subtleties as well. An African American male could celebrate his race with a brightly colored shirt with a bold design, or a female with her hair in cornrows. Either could also wear the preppy style, but the white would not wear the bold shirt or the cornrowed hair. Likewise, there will be subtlety with language. A white may say that a person is "articulate" and, if the person is not known to an African American, that person will assume that the white is referencing an African American who does not speak using Ebonics, because other linguistic descriptors are typically used to refer to erudite white speech—e.g., insightful, expressive, "silver-tongued." Similarly the national, regional, social, or educational concerns for people of "color" will mean to the African American "Hispanic" or "Arab" or any other group except African American, because experience has taught that the macro culture still ignores the African American. They are still invisible.

Locke's desire for a celebration of the African American culture has not moved the macro culture to new levels of understanding as Dewey may have suggested. Eminem notwithstanding our society remains uncivil, "divided into non-communicating sects, races, nations, classes and cliques." In fact, there is such separation that the President of The Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation (Robert Weisbuch) uses it
to make a point about academics. He laments, in "The Other Presidential Non-Issue," in their Fall 2004 Newsletter, that in the presidential campaign:

Conventional wisdom tells politicians not to mention race, least they lose more votes than they gain. Hence, this nation’s longest-standing, deepest internal issue will be silenced again this fall. Another issue, not wholly unrelated, will also be silenced this fall: the decentering of the liberal arts in American education.

Clearly there were no serious discussions about race or race related issues in the 2004 campaign, and just as clearly there was no discussion about the liberal arts or the arts. Again, a major portion of our society was left invisible.

That portion of society is less invisible, however, on the surface, than we think. The data on our children easily remove us from any leadership position among industrialized nations, when we include all our children. Among industrialized nations, the United States is first in military technology, Gross Domestic Product, and the number of millionaires and billionaires, according to The State of America’s Children, the 2004 report from the Children’s Defense Fund. However, our nation is 16th in low-birth rates, 18th in percentage of children in poverty, 23rd in infant mortality, and “last in protecting our children against gun violence” (p. xxv). Continuing to peruse the data, over thirty-one percent of Black children are poor, compared to twenty-eight percent of Hispanic children and thirteen percent of white children (p. 5). An African American male has one chance in 9,900 of earning a Ph.D. in math or computer science, but the odds of being killed before the age of 25 by a gun are 1:111. His female counterpart has only a 1:15,585 chance of earning the same Ph.D. but a 1:50 chance of being incarcerated by age 30 and a 1:32 chance of attempting suicide while in high school (p. xxiv). In the opening lines of the “Foreword,” Marian Wright Edelman writes (p. xi):

Fifty years after Brown v. Board of Education ended legally sanctioned racial segregation in America’s public schools, 40 years after President Johnson declared a War on Poverty, 108 years after Plessy v. Ferguson, and 141 years after President Abraham Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation, a Black child still lacks a fair chance to live, learn, thrive, and contribute in America. The great unfinished business of our nation in this first decade of
the 21st century is to open wide the doors of equal educational and economic opportunity to every child in America.

The data for African Americans, particularly for children are appalling, but so are they for the adults of our nation (pp. 88-89):

- Only 50 percent of the American adult population ages 16 to 65 has the minimum literacy skills necessary for success in today's labor force.
- Of job applicants tested, 34.1 percent lacked the basic skills necessary to perform the jobs they sought.
- High school dropouts make up 30 percent of federal and 40 percent of state prison inmates. [The U.S. has more people incarcerated than any other nation.]

The educational data are likewise staggering for all U.S. students (p. 87)

- Of all the nation's fourth graders, 41 percent of Whites are reading at grade level compared to 15 percent of Latinos and 13 percent of Blacks.
- In math, 37 percent of White eighth graders perform at grade level compared to 12 percent of Latinos and 7 percent of Blacks.
- In writing, only 15 percent of those fourth graders eligible for free and reduced-price lunch can write at grade level compared to 42 percent of those who are not eligible.

The report continues, however, (p. 97) "Significant concerns have been raised that without improvements, NCLB [No Child Left Behind] could actually undermine many of the reform efforts it is designed to promote." Those reform efforts are the very opportunities that could provide a chance for many of today's young people.

When one reads a report such as the one compiled by the Children's Defense Fund, it becomes clear that as a nation, we do not celebrate children, nor do we celebrate the African American culture (nor any minority culture apart from the wealthy). In a day when the victors in an election with fifty-one percent of the vote can claim a mandate or even validation (which has been claimed in the days following November 2), and given the above information, the social fabric of this nation does not reflect any of the values (democracy, cultural pluralism, andragogy, cultural pride, values, or the arts) promoted by Alain Leroy Locke.
Returning to Dewey, while he was silent on so many significant issues, as is our nation, he did recognize the importance of art in communication and in promoting a pluralism where all are valued. He wrote (p. 337, Vol. 10 The Later Works):

We understand [art] in the degree in which we make it a part of our own attitudes, not just by collective information concerning the conditions under which it was produced. We accomplish this result when, to borrow a term from Bergson, we install ourselves in modes of apprehending nature that at first are strange to us. To some degree we become artists ourselves as we undertake this integration, and, by bringing it to pass, our own experience is re-oriented. Barriers are dissolved, limiting prejudices melt away, when we enter into the spirit of [cross cultural] art. This insensible melting is far more efficacious than the change effected by reasoning, because it enters directly into attitude.

In the same manner, Locke wrote (p. 65):

Cultural activities and their special appeals and incentives enhance the self-respect of the people and enable them to assert themselves in healthy fashion in their social and economic group life, urging them on toward the transformation of their social and economic conditions to constantly rising levels of security and opportunity . . .

In light of the data presented above, this short biography on Locke is the saddest book that I have read. Locke’s insights have faded and so much potential has been squandered. Weisbuch is correct that the two major issues facing this nation today have much in common—the liberal arts including its humanities, and the marginalization and segregation of a race. Cain’s little book, then, in calling attention to an integrated movement that celebrates a people and provides educational opportunities may be the most significant contribution of 2004.

References


