

# Newsletter on **Philosophy and the Black Experience**

Jesse Taylor, Editor

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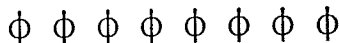
The Black Experience

## FROM THE EDITOR

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This issue of NPBE contains two articles on topics that are quite different, but nevertheless seem compatible perhaps owing to their tendency to be direct with respect to the issues they address. The first was written by Professor Sally Scholz, an Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Villanova University. Her article is entitled: "Alain Locke and the Language of World Solidarity." Scholz argues that Locke is on the right track in positioning language as the means by which the goal of world solidarity will be ushered in from a world of cultural pluralism. She adds that as he gives decided preference for language as a cultural phenomenon, his ability to acknowledge language as a political phenomenon that must be dealt with equal rigor, is skewed. Professor Thalia Coleman's article: "To Be Young Gifted and a Black female professor," editorializes the challenge confronting African American female professors in submitting to student evaluations at predominately white institutions. I suspect that many of us will identify with Coleman's observations and experiences to some extent. Professor Coleman is a Professor of Communication Disorders at Appalachian State University. In this issue as well, Professor Judith Green, Professor of Philosophy at Fordham University, has a comprehensive syllabus for her African American Philosophy course, which includes a brief but lucid introduction of that philosophy.



## ARTICLES

**Alain Locke and the Language of World Solidarity**

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### Introduction

In addition to grappling with identity, difference, cultural hegemony, and imperialism, Alain LeRoy Locke also addressed linguistic dominance in his philosophical writings. Locke's interest in cultural pluralism was aimed at achieving "unity in diversity" and world solidarity. His focus and means for doing so resided in the aesthetic. In other words, Locke turned to cultural customs, traditions, and artistic expressions, more or less abandoning political means, to locate cultural diversity and in turn to hold the promise for world solidarity.

In this paper, I use the cultural pluralism of Locke as theoretical back ground to frame what I call the language problem of his pluralism's hoped-for world solidarity. I will begin with a brief discussion of Locke's conception of cultural particularity and then discuss world solidarity within pluralism. The next section critically examines the central problems posed by linguistic particularity. In the end, as the language example illustrates, solidarity must be both cultural and political; the two are in fact inseparable.

### I. Cultural particularity

Locke claims that customs, traditions, artistic expressions, language, differences in experiences and history, all distinguish one culture from another. Commonality of physical attributes or segregated social life do not serve to support cultural particularity primarily because, according to Locke, nothing about them lends to group solidarity (Washington 1994, 15).<sup>1</sup> The uniqueness of artistic expression, histories, and vocabularies marks a culture as distinct. But it is not enough simply to examine cultures as insular units.

Cultural particularity is also about cultural conflict. Locke held that culture conflicts and tensions are a natural part of different cultures interacting. This conflict, however, should not be mistaken for incompatibility or a support for rivalry cultural separatism (Locke and Stern 1946, 5; Washington also makes this point, 1994, 98). Cultural interactions might be positive, as when diverse cultures recognize the functional parity between seemingly divergent practices. Such cultural interactions lead to growth and development.

Alternatively, cultural conflict might be negative, as when group interests conflict or when reciprocity and parity are absent. In *When Peoples Meet*, Locke claims that "culture conflict, although often associated with cultural difference, does not arise from differences of culture, but from the conflict of group interests" (Locke 1946, 123).

A third component of Locke's conception of cultural particularity is that cultures are composites; cultures are dynamic and their vicissitudes are effected in part by contact with other cultures. "In modern times and under modern conditions, as mechanisms of intercommunication are multiplied and group contacts inevitably increase, cultures tend to become increasingly hybrid and composite..." (Locke and Stern 1946, 7). This aspect of cultural particularity reminds us that "each culture...upon examination is discovered to be dynamic and constantly changing, with an increasing tendency, on the whole, to become more and more composite, in the sense of incorporating aspects of other cultures with which it comes into contact" (Locke and Stern 1946, 6). Similarly, "to be properly understood, civilization should be studied in the setting of world culture." Locke calls for "the broadest possible comparison of all types of human culture" when considering questions of culture and civilization (Locke and Stern 1946, 4).

Cultural separatism in this context is another term for group solidarity (not to be confused with world solidarity). It is the extent of groupness as indicated by sharing in group practices or individual practices informed by group traditions, customs, or histories (Washington 1994, 114).<sup>2</sup> Group consciousness/group solidarity is a precondition of reciprocity which in turn is required for world solidarity. In other words, a culture's positive identity of itself is a necessary component to its empowerment in interactions with other cultures. To this end, cultures should continuously pursue their particularity while also acknowledging parity with other cultures and engaging in cultural reciprocity. Horace Kallen explains Locke's notion of particularity as cultural affirmation in his discussion of the impact of Locke's work promoting Negro culture. Kallen says, "without the affirmation of Negro as Negro in terms of what cultural and spiritual production Negro as Negro can achieve, without the manifestation of inner strength based on self-knowledge, developing without tutelage from anybody, the Negro cannot begin to accept himself as a fact instead of a problem to himself" (Kallen 1957, 125). Thus cultural particularity means that unique cultures foster their differences while simultaneously interacting with and at times conflicting with, other cultures, thereby becoming composites. But the composite nature of cultures is not reducible to sameness or even strict unity. Rather, Locke envisions a union of the diverse cultures brought about by the artists. Which brings us to world solidarity.

## II. World Solidarity

World solidarity brings together the diverse peoples of the world in the sort of friendship that fosters equality as parity and difference as a field of exchange. Kallen explains Locke's conception of world solidarity and the distinction between unity and union in his memorial address. Notice in the following quotation, that Kallen uses "union"—not "unity"—to exemplify the goals of world solidarity. "Union" corresponds to Locke's "unity in diversity" and either concept might be used in contrast to unity as sameness.

The import of Unity is liquidation of difference and diversity, either by way of an identification of the different, or by way of a subordination and subjection of the different to the point where it makes no difference. *Per contra*, the import of Union is the team-play of the different. Union resides in the uncoerced, the voluntary commitment of the different to one another in free cooperation; and ideological peace...is a conception denoting fundamentally this free intercommunication of diversities—denoting the cultivation of those diversities for the purpose of free and fruitful intercommunication between equals (Kallen 1957, 123-34).

World solidarity is based on the mutual understanding cultures have for each other. In particular, Locke's conception of world solidarity relies on artistic cultural exchange. By gaining knowledge of other cultures we gain an understanding also of our own. Cultural exchanges reveal our diversity as well as the fallacy of assuming one's own culture is superior or otherwise the norm for value judgement. The artist is charged with this duty because, as Johnny Washington explains, he or she has the power "to change our perceptions of ourselves and of others, to inspire people of the world to become more open to one another's cultural values" (Washington 1986, 72). Locke hoped that artists could achieve the world peace or common civilization that politicians were unable to bring about, and, in the words of Eugene Holmes, "that the reciprocity and tolerance which might emerge once there was a genuine sense of value-sharing would lead to integration in a real direction" (Holmes 1957, 118). And thus, the elite and the artists create world solidarity within cultural value pluralism *incrementally* (Cf. Washington 1994, 123). For example, the elite from diverse cultural groups within the United States begin the process of coming together and gradually extend solidarity to the hemisphere and the world. Locke relied on culture rather than the social or political. Cultural tolerance and reciprocity promote world peace and thus, the political meaning of solidarity is replaced by the aesthetic: "The solidarity they [the artists] can and will achieve is not to be a doctrinal one of common interests and universalized traditions, but an integrating psychology of reciprocal exchange and mutual esteem."<sup>3</sup>

Locke argues that as we practice cultural reciprocity and tolerance, we begin to identify functional common denominators. Although he does not specify what these common denominators consist of, he does describe the role they play in world peace. As he says,

The intellectual core of the problems of the peace, should it lie in our control and leadership, will be the discovery of the necessary common denominators and the basic equivalences involved in a democratic world order or democracy on a world scale. I do not hazard to guess at them; but certain specifications may be stated which I believe they will have to meet, if they are to be successful. A reasonable democratic peace (like other peace before it) must integrate victors and vanquished alike, and justly. With no shadow of cultural superiority, it must respectfully protect the cultural values and institutional forms and traditions of a

vast congeries of peoples and races—European, Asiatic, African, American, Australasian. Somehow cultural pluralism may yield a touchstone for such thinking. Direct participational representation of all considerable groups must be provided for, although how imperialism is to concede this is almost beyond immediate imagining (Locke 1989, 61-62; see also 69-78 and Locke and Stern 1946, 4).

And again he says, "In looking for cultural agreements on a world scale, we shall probably have to content ourselves with agreement of the common-denominator type and with 'unity in diversity' discovered in the search for unities of a functional rather than a content character, and therefore of a pragmatic rather than an ideological sort" (Locke 1989, 75, see also 56).

The primary process used in searching for functional common denominators and achieving a unity in diversity is tolerance within a system of cultural relativism. And the first step in cultural tolerance is "disestablishing the use of one's own culture as a contrast norm for other cultures, [thereby leading] through the appreciation of the functional significance of other values in their respective cultures to the eventual discovery and recognition of certain functional common denominators" (Locke 1989, 77; see also 98, 15; and Locke 1946, 93).

Throughout his discussion of cultural conflict, positive group identity, and even world solidarity, Locke appeals to a distinction between social life and cultural life. The distinction marks the differences between the political, economic, and legal on one hand, and customs, language, and traditions on the other. Attempts to achieve cultural self-determination do not conflict with participation in the social and political institutions of the larger society (Washington 1994, 16; see also Locke 1925, 6-7). For instance, the growth of Negro drama signals cultural development more than social development (Locke and Gregory 1927). Locke rests his hope for world solidarity on the cultural.

While Locke's conception of world solidarity has many strengths and can, in part, be seen coming to fruition within today's globalized communications and with the intricacies of the internet, there is also a significant problem that arises when his thoughts on language and linguistic particularity are combined with his split of the cultural and the social within his clarion call for world solidarity. Locke's thoughts on language clearly indicate a recognition of the politics of language and yet he addresses these oppressive political institutions through appeals to culture. Cultural reciprocity assumes equal power relations (Lott 1994, 116; see also Locke and Gregory 1927, xviii) and parity in communications. Tommy Lee Lott touches on the problem of keeping language, with all its political import, in the cultural realm. Depending on the interpretation one takes of Locke's dichotomy between the cultural and the social or political, the effects might be a cultural world solidarity but a dominant political body drawing on a single linguistic culture (in other words, a bifurcated existence), or perhaps an elaborate cultural-linguistic stance that requires political implementation of multilingual institutions. Lott's solution is something of a compromise. He says that Locke's pluralism might bring about social equality for a "small group of artists and intellectuals" but that the masses will have to achieve social equality "through political struggle" (Lott 1994, 117).

The following section discusses Locke's thoughts on language as both a political tool and a cultural symbol. Ultimately, I think it is a mistake for Locke to appeal to the aesthetic, leaving the political behind, in his theory of world solidarity.

### III. Language and cultural particularity

Language is one of the many symbols of culture groups. It functions in cultural solidarity by uniting individuals from the same linguistic group. But, as with many cultural symbols, there is a risk that linguistic cultural solidarity will somehow legitimate the dominant culture's practice of prejudicial segregation. Locke describes this phenomenon in relation to the situation of racial segregation in the United States. He says,

Language is another differential of importance in a review of group discrimination and culture conflict. No more accurate than the other arbitrary symbols, language is one of the most frequently used devices both for symbolizing and propagating cultural solidarity and in reverse use, for symbolizing group exclusion and hostility (Locke 1946, 241; see also 650).

In other words, the very same cultural symbol that distinguishes a group and facilitates their self-determination might be used as a marker for their exclusion. To explicate this paradox, Locke introduced the distinction between "involuntary segregation" and "voluntary exclusiveness." As Washington explains, "Involuntary segregation is the result of certain practices and policies, usually maliciously imposed by the dominant group on its minority group, to oppress members of the minority group. Voluntary exclusiveness was nothing more than an expression of cultural solidarity" (Washington 1994, 117 citing Locke "Culture" *unpublished*, 16; see also Kallen 1957, 124).

When externally threatened, a solidary group undergoes a "Crisis-patriotism" which functions to solidify an historic group, thereby strengthening the bonds of cultural solidarity (Locke 1946, 125). Crisis patriotism is particularly evident when language is the target of the external threat. Insofar as its language is threatened with extinction, the linguistic group fears for the survival of its customs and traditions. If, as in the case of political nationalism, linguistic cultures are linked to the political power of the state, then minority cultures fear for their rights, economic viability, and indeed, their very legal existence in the state. Locke also calls for participation in meaning especially for those who are oppressed by a dominant culture (prior to cultural parity). He explains the problem thus:

The minority groups...take refuge in the common bond of their native language and tradition, and, after an interval of cultural reassertion and nationalism, develop ambitions for political independence or irredentist reunion with some larger political group of like language, tradition and culture. These political ambitions accentuate the clash with the dominant state, and repressive measures and a characteristic minority situation ensue. Cultural survivals and nationalist traditions which were tolerated in the initial stages of minority subordination are, then, rigidly suppressed, often by legal enactment (Locke 1946, 651).

Language serves as a "symbol of political allegiance and group solidarity in the contemporary world;" it is a myth, that, like the race myth, takes its place in conflict situations. Locke says language is seized upon as a convenient and obvious mark of cultural difference. The dominant group tries to suppress the minority group language, often by prohibition of its use for official and educational activities, and tries to hinder its revival after suppression. Thus in most of the European minority situations, language has come to play the role of the preferred nationality symbol, and as a result, with cultural hostilities provoked, many common institutional affiliations between the two groups are consequently ignored. (Locke 1946, 651)

Part of the problem is that language misleadingly construes solidarity as parochial and limited (cf. Walzer 1998, 51). The interaction between cultures and the commonality of cultural institutions which would give rise to cultural reciprocity become obscured by the seeming insularity of linguistic practices. Throughout his career, Locke advocated a notion of cultures as composites, borrowing from one another in a dynamic progression toward world solidarity (Locke 1989, 206). If differences in language lead us to believe cultures are insular, then the functional common denominators will remain hidden.

Conversely, one need not look far to discover that in fact language perhaps better than most symbols reveals the composite nature of cultures. Different cultures may have different language systems but those systems are dynamic—they change as they are affected by other cultures, alter according to varying historical experiences, and adjust to ever new social conditions. Locke says that "in the large majority of cases the culture is only to be explained as the resultant of the meeting and reciprocal influence of several culture strains..." (Locke 1989, 195) Language, too, can be explained as the meeting of "several culture strains."

Locke further argues that focusing on language obscures the "common institutional affiliations" that different language groups do share (Locke 1946, 651). Although different cultures may have different linguistic systems, all cultures share in common the institution of language. The key, he says, is to separate the cultural from the political (Locke 1946, 654). Locke held that social movements ought to be composed inter-culturally in order to achieve national unity and world solidarity. Given that political states do not necessarily correspond to culture groups, and thus also language groups, in order to be composed inter-culturally, social life would require either (a) a common language or (b) a multi-lingual system with a well developed system of translation. A common language, however, would, according to Locke, most likely identify the language of the dominant cultural group with the common language. Yet, as he asserts, "The identification of the cultural tradition with the political unity and entity of the 'nation' has caused serious minority repression and oppression" (Locke 1946, 650). And further, "Language and blood are held to be basic bonds of social unity instead of common institutions, and this leads in their logic to the justification of the expulsion or extermination of all alien minorities. But a nation could only consistently be mono-racial on the basis of ethnic solidarity and non-expansionist program..." (Locke 1946, 653) Neither of these conditions holds in the modern world.

On the other hand, a multi-lingual system and a theory of translation premised on the understanding that language

differentiates cultures but may also unite them, might allow for the possibility of communication or mutual understanding of meaning across differences.<sup>4</sup> While a system of translation will obviate some of the problems that arise when opting for a common language in which to conduct economic, political, and legal affairs of state, it also continues some and adds others.

We must be willing to settle for a cross cultural communication that incorporates subjective and communal attitudes, social-political commitments, and norms. That is, translation takes on the additional task of relaying specific cultural, social, and subjective commitments. In other words, this latter proposal would require a confirmation of world solidarity as political as well as cultural.

### Conclusion

As we saw above, language functions, in part, to cement cultural differences; cultural differences, in turn, become "interpreted as cultural inferiority, and the appreciation of cultural interaction and indebtedness becomes almost completely obscured" (Locke 1946, 9). While Locke does not sanction a "uniformitarian theory or criterion of culture" (1946, 11), he does argue for a view of cultures as composites, with interchangeable cultural elements (1946, 9 and 30-38). His goal is to challenge what he calls the "fallacy of cultural separatism—the belief that in being distinctive cultures are separate and water-tight units of civilization" (Locke 1946, 9; see also Washington 1994, ch. 7).

In order to achieve this goal as well as the superordinate goal of world solidarity, Locke would have to reassess his distinction between the cultural and the political. If language is any indication, the cultural is political and politics is culture. And, although he tried to advance art for art's sake, politics becomes the subject matter. As he noted in 1940: "Much of our contemporary art is rightly an art of social analysis and criticism, touching the vital problems of religion, labor, housing, lynching, unemployment, social reconstruction, and the like. For today's beauty cannot afford to be merely pretty with sentiment and local color; it must be solid and instructive with an enlightening truth" (Locke 1940, 10).

What I have presented here is a summary of Locke's cultural pluralism/world solidarity position. I have also tried to show that his use of a distinction between the cultural and the social is counter productive to the politics of language and the engaged artistic endeavors that might indeed inspire peoples to mutual cultural understanding, ideological peace, and world solidarity.

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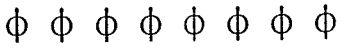
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**Notes**

1. Indeed, Locke viewed his own primary role as a sort of midwife for the burgeoning cultural expression of the New Negro. His collections of plays, paintings, poems and stories illustrate the distinctive cultural accomplishments of a generation of American artists.
2. The three essays Washington discusses he calls "Cultural Separatism or Fusion," "The Social Price of Racial Dilemmas," and "The Quest for National Unity" (Washington 1994, ch.9).
3. Alain Locke, "Internationalism: Friend or Foe of Art?" *The World Tomorrow*, 8 (March 1925): 75 cited in Washington 1986, 72.
4. Rehgh discusses this potential of language ensuring both unity and cultural diversity in relation to discourse ethics (1994, 152).



**To Be Young, Gifted, and A Black Female Professor**

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Let's face it. Race matters. It is almost always a factor when people who are "different" are involved in any type of interaction. I have believed and experienced that for years. Many have tried to convince me over the past few years that things are different now. In some ways, they are, but in general I think very little has actually changed during my lifetime, at least not in ways that really count. That is a sad reality that has been demonstrated vividly in the media over the last month or so. I am painfully aware that it has often been a factor when evaluations are made of my work and of my worth. I think it is also painful for a lot of mainstream people to accept the pervasiveness of racism in our society. At the risk of making some readers uncomfortable, I feel very strongly that I must address the race issue as it relates to student evaluations of my teaching effectiveness. Although my colleagues and former students consider my teaching to be outstanding, that would not appear to be evident if you look at the composite rating I have received here at Appalachian State University. The purpose of this paper is to address the mediocre evaluations and suggest that there are reasons other than my performance that have resulted in those ratings.

We Americans have not handled our racial differences well. In view of the changing demographics of our society, we must now deal with issues of diversity. We can not close our eyes and pretend problems do not exist. Covert racism is the most pervasive form of racism in higher education. Where 'covert' denotes a form of racism that originates from the spirit of "standard racism," but gets transformed so as to manifest itself as non-racist. Because of its elusive nature, however, it is often ignored by those who have never experienced it and denied by those who contribute to it. As Ellis (1994) concluded, the challenge to Americans today is to recognize the differences among us and to determine how to manage these differences in a way that will effectively yield productivity. Perhaps no where is it more important for us to do that than in academia. According to the Chronicle of Higher Education (August 4, 1995), the Prejudice Institute of the Center for the Applied Study of Ethnoviolence has found that group conflict attributable to growing diversity on college campuses is on the rise. Several other studies support that finding (Allen & Niss, 1990; Daufin, 1995; de la Luz Reyes & Halcon, 1988; De Veaux, 1995; Elfin & Burke, 1993; Levine & McDevitt). Unfortunately, this sad situation must be addressed as we consider student evaluations of faculty of color. That is especially true when we analyze the impact that the ratings of a few racist students in a class may have on the overall ratings for that class. When a professor of color enters a classroom he/she faces expectations of performance based on stereotypical beliefs held by the students in that class. The professor is often considered to be incompetent until proven otherwise.

1990 survey conducted by the University of Chicago National Opinion Research Center, found that 53% of non-blacks believe African Americans are less intelligent than Whites. The publication of *The Bell Curve* and its long