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Alain LeRoy Locke on The Social Construction of Race

M. Anthony Fitchue

Long Island University, South Hampton, NY

“This paper will illustrate that Locke’s work in art and culture in the early years of the Harlem Renaissance grew out of an unusual analysis of race as transmogrified phrenology juxtaposed against the structured privileges of a pseudo species called white people. The process of naming whiteness, thus, becomes a political act which defines the nature of structured privilege in a color-bound society.”

Alain LeRoy Locke, the Harvard Phi Beta Kappa and the first African American Rhodes Scholar, delivered a series of groundbreaking lectures in 1915 and again in the Spring of 1916 on "Race Contacts and Interracial Relations: Lectures on the Theory and Practice of Race." These lectures were remarkable for their time, examining the notion of race and the practice of racism through the utilization of a unique formula which analyzed race and ethnic conflict while repudiating the biological basis of race and all in the changing context of shifts in the economic and political circumstances of society. Professor Locke, thus, disavowed the biological reality of race as a compelling sort of social voodoo, while proposing that the American shibboleth of race could also be used as a cultural stratagem for group improvement and positive group definition, especially for people of color. Locke's claim that race is a social construction was not meant to deny the obvious differences in skin color and physical characteristics that people normally manifest. It simply meant that these physical differences should be perceived as an assortment of differences on a continuum of diverse physical possibilities rather than as reflecting the presence of innate genetic differences among people.

This paper will illustrate that Locke's work in art and culture in the early years of the Harlem Renaissance grew out of an unusual analysis of race as transmogrified phrenology juxtaposed against the structured privileges of a pseudo species called white people. The process of *naming* whiteness, thus, becomes a *political act* which defines the nature of structured privilege in a color-bound society. Moreover, this paper will examine the implications and subtext of a historically constructed notion of race and draw upon Locke's early articulation of anthropologist Franz Boas's theory of race as a purely social creation with political and economic consequences. These concepts are presented within a broader context that represents a significant intellectual departure from other more pedestrian views on race in Locke's day. Locke's insight into the practice of racism as a response to what he termed economic and social imperialism still resonates as relevant to contemporary society.

PRESENTER

M. Anthony Fitchue is Director of the Office of Multicultural Programs and The Study Center at Southampton College, Long Island University, in Southampton, New York. He has a doctorate in adult education from Columbia University and three master's degrees (that include social policy of education from Harvard; adult education and journalism from Columbia).

His more than twenty years of service in education includes a stint in the 1980's as a Foreign Service Officer in the American Diplomatic Corp as Cultural Attache in Mali, West Africa and Madras, South India. He has taught at Le Moyne College in Syracuse, N.Y.; The Borough of Manhattan Community College; Medgar Evers College in Brooklyn; State University of New York Cortland and the College of New Rochelle. He served for eight years as the director of Multicultural Affairs at Le Moyne College and recently returned from Morocco where he laid the initial groundwork for an academic exchange between the Universite Ibnou Zohr in Agadir, Morocco and Southampton College. He has published articles on race and education in "Ocotillo: "The Journal of Adult Learning," "The Journal of Blacks In Higher Education" and "Black Issues In Higher Education."