

Requiem for a Garden: Terraces of the Shrine of the Báb or Revisiting Alain Locke's "Impressions of Haifa" 1923 (Palestine) in 2023 (Israel)

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Louis Gregory, who first introduced Alain Locke to the Bahá'í faith in 1912, succeeded in convincing him to chair the first racial Amity Convention in 1921 in Washington, DC. Locke published annual reports of this committee in the *Bahá'í News Letter* until late in his life. The Racial Amity Committee, of which Locke was a lifelong member, promoted racial amity and racial eliminativism through dialogue, personal example, interracial marriage, and cultural exchange. In 1924, Locke's "Impressions of Haifa" described his 1923 visit to Haifa and meeting—via an invitation likely arranged by Louis Gregory—the Guardian of the Faith, Shoghi Effendi, the great-grandson of Bahá'u'lláh, founder of the faith, who received revelations from God.¹

Why would a 38-year-old African American Harvard PhD in Philosophy (1918), former Oxford University Rhodes Scholar (1907–1910), University of Berlin student (1911), and English- and French-speaking scholar versed in Romance language literature and Greek philosophy seek the grace of the Guardian of the Faith? Why would he travel to Haifa, a place that required a circuitous route to reach, and meet, in 1923, a little-known shy Guardian of the Faith? He traveled from Vienna by train on 4 October to Trieste, then Greece, and then took a steamer to Alexandria, Egypt, for a few days before taking off on another steamer to the islands of Piraeus, Lesbos, and Chanak, and arrived in the ancient Byzantine capital of Constantinople (Istanbul), Turkey, on 14 October. After two days in the ancient capital, he was off again by steamer and train to Haifa, remaining there as a guest of the Guardian of the Faith until early November.

Christopher Buck has consistently argued that Locke was a faithful Bahá'í, meaning that Locke was a doctrinaire believer that Bahá'u'lláh was the last messenger of God, as foretold by the Báb, Ali Muhammad. Buck has effectively described Locke's views via re-published core articles by Locke on

democracy, commentaries on Bahá'í ideas, and pictures of Locke with Bahá'í members at Bahá'í events. Buck has authored, among other works, *Alain Locke: Faith and Philosophy* (2005); "Alain Locke in His Own Words" (2005); "Alain Locke: Race Leader, Social Philosopher, Bahá'í Pluralist" (2005); "Alain Locke: Dean of the Harlem Renaissance and Bahá'í Race-Amity Leader" (2005); and "Alain Locke: Four Talks Redefining Democracy, Education, and World Citizenship" (2006/2007). Buck contends that a "Bahá'í Historical Record"—which Locke completed and signed in 1935—proves that Locke was a Bahá'í. Note Item #13: "Date of acceptance of the Bahá'í Faith": Locke answered: "1918." Under Item #14: "Place of acceptance of the Bahá'í Faith": Locke wrote: "Washington, D.C." (Buck, "Race Amity & the Bahai Faith" 5).² At the January 1927 National Spiritual Assembly, Locke—along with Agnes Parsons, Louis Gregory, and others—was appointed to the membership committee.

I have argued that Locke was a participant in the Bahá'í community, but evidence that he was a doctrinaire religious believer is lacking. As a pragmatist, Locke was steadfastly against metaphysical absolutism (that a particular belief is true beyond reasonable doubt) and foundationalism (that a First principle is the basis of truth); he favored "truth" as a sort of value, and thereby, a plurality of possible "faiths" could make sense. Locke authored critical pragmatism because he promoted the value of aesthetic virtues and rejected the classical pragmatist reliance on the scientific method to guide our preferences. That is, Locke cannot be a fallibilist and a value relativist while (at the same time) committing himself to one true approach to salvation, one true value ultimate, or one true/foundational divinity. I have co-authored *Alain L. Locke: Biography of a Philosopher* (2010), one anthology of Locke's philosophic works (1999), and two anthologies of articles about Locke's philosophy (1989, 2010). In each publication, I have assumed that philosophic commitments define what type of faith is acceptable. Are Locke's philosophic commitments and his commitments to Bahá'í principles or faith incompatible? Buck and I cannot both be right. If Buck is right, what point about his philosophy have I missed?³

By 1941, the race amity effort by the Bahá'í National Assembly received less attention. No new members were appointed by the National Assembly to the National Racial Amity Committee, and there were conflicts among local Washington, DC, members. Although Locke became less involved, he confirmed his commitment to the Bahá'í community and linked his sense of spirituality to principles: "I naturally am reluctant to sever a spiritual bond with the Bahá'í community, for I still hold to a firm belief in the truth of

the Bahá'í principles. However, I am not in a position, and haven't been for years, to participate very practically or even with the fullest enthusiasm, in the collective activities of the local friends."⁴ The Bahá'í principles of racial amity, co-fraternity of humanity, democratic governance, and celebration of pluralist modes of spirituality were embedded in the practices of all racial amity committees. It is certain that Locke's value theory, with its emphasis on such principles as tolerance and cultural reciprocity are coterminous with Bahá'í principles; thus, considering Locke a "Bahá'í Philosopher" is warranted by Buck, but not sufficient.⁵ Following principles is not the same as holding a doctrinaire belief that a particular person revealed the word of God.

It is not unusual for a member of an Abrahamic faith to believe that revelation is not completely understandable—due to humanity's limited reasoning powers—but matches a transcendently situated and inaccessible truth.⁶ In "Moral Imperatives for World Order," Locke contends:

We must in the third place consider religion as having many ways leading to salvation. The idea that there is only one true way of salvation with all other ways leading to damnation is a tragic limitation [of] Christianity, which professes the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man. How foolish in the eyes of foreigners are our competitive blind, sectarian missionaries! If the Confucian expression of a Commandment means the same as the Christian expression, then it is the truth also and should so be recognized. (20)

Principles, for Locke, not doctrinaire beliefs, should be accepted as truths and *eo ipso* guide.

As a thought experiment, imagine that Buck is right, and at the same time, that Locke is philosophically anti-foundationalist and rejects salvation through only one religion's route. He then does not have to give us a coherent rational matrix, offer any opinion about disembodied consciousness continuing after death, or confirm doctrinaire views. He had a Bahá'í spirit in either Buck's or my interpretation. His way of living bespoke his love of humanity; he lived most of his adult life dedicated to a community that was not reducible to individuals with identical beliefs. Even if a person does not abide by all the tenets of a revealed Abrahamic faith, including one or another of its core doctrines, it is false that they cannot be a member in spirit. Locke was a Bahá'í even if Buck's textual evidence fails to confirm that he held doctrinaire beliefs. He was a Bahá'í even if my interpretation fails to defeat the view that his philosophy is incompatible with any doctrinaire faith. It's his spirit that I have not sufficiently appreciated. I missed the point.

One way to understand why Buck and I could be both wrong and Locke would still be a Bahá'í is to consider this logical concept: There is an asymmetry between all particulars and their composite. All the students in my Introduction to Philosophy class that meets at 9:00 a.m. on Tuesday morning form "the class." If one of the students is absent on Tuesday morning, there is still the same "class." Analogously, no one act of piety is identical to "piety." That is why Socrates told Euthyphro, in the ancient dialogue between the two over the meaning of "piety," that Euthyphro's example of bringing his father to court for brutalizing a slave and allowing him to die from neglect did not tell Socrates the nature of piety. No single example of a pious act will tell us what piety means so that we know the composite nature of piety and are able to know other actions that count as a pious act. One student from my class could be absent, and we still have the same class. Analogously, Locke can fail to have a particular doctrinaire belief and still be a Bahá'í. To think otherwise is to commit the fallacy of composition. Locke's Bahá'í spirit does not require belief in a single doctrine of Bahá'í faith, and his philosophy of critical pragmatism does not require that he lacks a spiritual sensibility.

My high regard for Buck's pioneering work leads me to believe that our disagreement misses something that the disagreement itself could not allow us to see. The first sentence of Locke's "Impressions of Haifa" states: "Whether Bahá'í or non-Bahá'í, Haifa makes pilgrims of all who visit her. The place itself makes mystics of us all" (125). A mystic does not pretend to know a set of true propositions and the meaning of all revealed faith. Mystics accept the limitations of reason and what we can infer from empirical facts. Neither a signed "Bahá'í Historical Record" nor philosophic arguments in "Values and Imperatives" (a 1935 article by Locke telling us that values are fundamentally relative, but we make moral decisions and treat them as imperatives) allow us to treat Locke's spirituality and his reasoning approach as intrinsically conflictual (Locke, "Values and Imperatives" 313). But even if it is, he is still both Bahá'í and a critical pragmatist. We missed the point.

If I use as an always-present feature of Bahá'í faith "One who loves humanity," and if I, like Locke, reject the idea that we are just reasoning machines, but are, instead, agents with values in flux, it makes perfect sense for Locke to have found a spiritual home with the Bahá'í and to travel to Haifa for the grace of the Guardian of the Faith. To reduce the faithful to just one kind of person or require that each accept without remainder doctrinaire beliefs may not be auspicious.

A sense of the "spiritual" as awe, wonder, majesty, unknown, mystery, and a contrite appreciation of fortuitous luck and undeserved well-being

never forms a coherent rational system of beliefs. It may not be a universe of symmetry, coherency, consistency, permanency, and confirmable realities by scientific evidential procedures, nor a universe of unabashed chaos. However, it also need not be a universe of queer properties like disembodied consciousness or objectively existing moral principles woven into the fabric of the universe waiting to be discovered through intuition or reason. Locke can be agnostic about the nature of the universe given that he is a value relativist, and discoveries of every form are subject to revisions and transvaluations.

An atheist, an agnostic, and a theist can have a spiritual journey in the sense that I mean “spiritual.” As Locke said in “Impressions of Haifa,” “[t]he place itself makes mystics of us all” (125). Maybe there is something special that even revealed sacred texts cannot make plain to our limited reasoning abilities: that is due awe, wonder, and reverence—a reverence for humanity that is sequestered in a vast universe. There has been no greater guardian of this reverence than the Bahá’í, promoting amity between religions, ethnic groups, races, and nations, and I speculate, none even until the death of the gardens that flow on the Terraces of the Shrine of the Báb.

On the morning of 5 May 2023, I met Zarrin Munisamy, Visitor Services Officer, Bahá’í Cultural Center, at 61 Yefe Nof, at the top of the garden Terraces of the Shrine of the Báb. We walked on the same grounds as Locke, who said of this first view of the Shrine on Mt. Carmel from the street below: “Mount Carmel, already casting shadows, was like a dark green curtain behind us and opposite was a gorgeous crescent of hills so glowing with color—gold, sapphire, amethyst as the sunset colors changed—and in between the mottled emerald of the sea, and the gray-toned house-roofs of Haifa” (“Impressions of Haifa” 125). Looking down at the terrace, I saw petunias, asters, geraniums, roses, and the drought-tolerant echium lavender and rosemary. Palestinian sunbirds, finches, doves, bulbuls, and jays make the reds, yellows, and purples sing. Dr. Ariane Sabet, Deputy Secretary General, Bahá’í International Community, met us at the Welcome Center at the bottom of the terrace. By then, I was already in a minor trance from the stunning grace of the garden Terraces of the Shrine of the Báb and the informative talk with Zarrin. While touring the Culture Center, learning, among other things, about Tahirih, the pure-of-heart martyr for the Bahá’í principle of equality for women, I saw there, on the wall, near a picture of Shoghi Effendi and other luminaries, a picture of Louis Gregory. In my heart, I said hello to Locke.

I visited next the shrine chambers of the Báb, a similarly adorned holy space visited by Locke, and resonated with his words from 1924: “The shrine chambers of the Báb and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá are both impressive, but in a unique

and almost modern way: richly carpeted, but with austere undecorated walls and ceilings, and flooded with light, the ante-chambers are simply the means of taking away the melancholy and gruesomeness of death and substituting for them the thought of memory, responsibility and reverence” (“Impressions of Haifa” 126). I walked with Dr. Sabet to view the World Centre of the Bahá’í, a UNESCO World Heritage site. It is, to use poetic license, a building that stands as testament to democratic governance cloaked in spiritual sanguinity, shining in the rainbow colors of the human community.⁷

I then walked out past the Cultural Center and onto the street. I turned around and looked back at Mt. Carmel toward the top of the Terrance and away from Bahá’í structures. When Locke looked at Mt. Carmel toward the top of the Terrance and away from Bahá’í structures, he saw an empty landscape dotted with brick buildings surrounded by the gray houses and bright roofs of Palestinians; I saw a concrete, glass, and steel jungle. I caught a cab at 80 Hatzionut Avenue, outside the Cultural Center.

Prior to visiting the Terraces of the Shrine of the Báb, in my travels around Israel, I saw where Palestinians, Muslims, and Christians once lived, their spaces now occupied by Jewish settlements, segregated Christian and Muslim enclaves, destroyed Palestinian homes and schools. I humbly visited mosques damaged by gunfire and mosques like the al-Aqsa Mosque, just outside in the old city walls of Jerusalem, where its ancient stained glass windows are burdened with a gaping hole where tear gas canisters shattered its colors to release gas, which choked worshipers. I passed the demolished ancient Muslim Al-Yusufiye Cemetery. The Jerusalem Municipality engineering vehicles that destroyed gravesites helped erase the history of Islam and any places for solace. I walked in the old walled city of Jerusalem, well-trodden pathways ringed with security cameras tracking tourists and others. Segregation by religion and ethnic identity everywhere; police and paramilitary were in no short supply. Whether Syriac Christians, Roman Catholics, or Palestinians, all of the “Others” in quiet resignation, like corpses lying in a casket, waiting to be interred.

There is no action taken by UNESCO, the United Nations, or any major Western nation to end the demise of Muslim and Christian-owned land, holy sites, and businesses. As a theocracy, no member of non-Jewish faiths can hold any high public office. So much for democracy as a system that gives a voice to all. No covenant has prevented the slow removal of Palestinians and the physical segregation by religion and ethnicity of all non-Jewish populations. No formal agreements of any kind have been honored in a way that stops

the slow onslaught, or to put it succinctly, slow genocide of the community of the “Other.”

A population constantly guarded, under surveillance and debased by stereotypes, treated as if each and every person of a kind is an irredeemable, degraded moral being, suffers social humiliation. Eventually, there is an array of deleterious responses—self-harms and irrational rages. This is no mystery. When two populations demonize one another, there can be no convivial relationship. To show care for the “Other” is, *eo ipso*, to fail to show care for the population considered pristine or at least not stigmatized as demonic. Caring for the garden Terraces of the Shrine of the Báb, consequently, risks entrapment in this caravan of demonization, charade of killing, and usurpation of land. In a cauldron of segregation, demonization, and irreconcilable conflict over land, comparing miseries and brutalities fails to provide a value judgment that does not appear pejorative. It is not, then, a utilitarian, instrumentalist, or deontologically arrived upon moral position that gives us an uncontroversial and a clear conclusion identifying who is the worst killer, despite knowing, for example, how many children and persons in hospitals have been killed by the “Other” in their violent conflicts. When we apply one or the other moral theory, we slide down a reasoning ladder to avoid being a genocide denialist, a justifier of terrorism, or a pejorative third-person observer. Unlike a math problem, there is no untainted and sacrosanct objectively true resultant moral position.

No matter who is at fault, death and segregation abound.

I, unlike Locke, am not burdened with disdain for America’s world of racial segregation, or feeling that the Western tradition had surreptitiously excluded its black population by vicious racial hierarchies that placed Africans and their descendants on the lowest rank and their culture outside civilization’s reach. And, unlike Locke, I am not struggling with a warring soul, torn with trying to find solace because it is saddened by the madness of a world in strife, and needing the type of sanctity we gain when we imagine a universe of transcendental eternity.

I do not have the spirit of the Bahá’í. I lack the kind of compassion for humanity as a natural kind that is one hallmark of Bahá’í life and faith. Humanity, for me, is just a fascinating species in an approximately 13.7-billion-year-old universe certainly full of other fascinating species, including the untold millions that have become extinct elsewhere and in the Earth’s own history. Once I strip humanity as a species with a sacred aura or endowed with a special mission in a non-moral universe, contemporary human health,

life, amity, and well-being really matter. I resonate with the belligerent spirit of slave abolitionists and ethical insurrectionists seeking the abolition of prisons by any means necessary. I neither demonize the “Other,” nor cherish their humanity in a way that would prevent a slave having no moral emotions about the demise of the slave master due to their misfortune of losing me as private property; escaping the servitude and brutality of slavery and its masters is a runaway slave’s focus.

If the gardens that form the Terraces of the Shrine of the Báb are plowed over to make room for a Hasidic Jewish settlement, I will remember them fondly. Destroying the garden Terraces of the Shrine of the Báb would automatically destroy a wellspring for the spirit, secular or holy. Tragedy exists—understood as events and conditions in a non-moral universe that are irredeemable, irreconcilable, and without recompense. Even if it is a moral universe, there are mountains of destroyed religiously holy sites that no one mourns or remembers. If it is a non-moral universe, neither evolution nor library archives provide assured sanctuary or a recorded memory for mountains of extinct species, languages, sacred garden wellsprings for the spirit, theocracies, or holy monuments. It is the atheist, realist, tragedian, and historian in me that I take to funerals.

The garden Terraces of the Shrine of the Báb were a spiritually healthy visit for me in May of 2023, although the social environment was deleterious. I have walked in Locke’s footsteps, appreciated his description of Mt. Carmel as cosmopolitan, and have come to love the Bahá’í spirit in a way I never thought imaginable. I, too, have been made a mystic.

NOTES

1. Locke, “Impressions of Haifa” 125–28; see Stewart 380–81; Harris and Molesworth 391–92.

2. Also see Buck, *Alain Locke: Faith*; Buck, “Alain Locke in His Own Words” 37–48; Buck, “Alain Locke: Race Leader”; Buck, “Alain Locke: Dean” 7–36; Buck, “Alain Locke: Four Talks” 21–41.

3. Harris, *Philosophy of Alain Locke*; Harris, *Critical Pragmatism*; Harris and Molesworth; Harris and Carter. Also see Stewart; Molesworth.

4. Alain Locke Papers. Moorland-Spingarn Library, Howard University, Washington, DC. “Mariam Haney.” Box 164-33, Folder 49.

5. See Buck, “Alain Locke: Bahá’í Philosopher” 7–49. Also see Locke, “Orientation of Hope” 527–28.

6. It is not unusual for pragmatism to favor some form of religious pluralism. See, for example, William James, “The Will to Believe: An Address to the Philosophical Clubs of Yale and Brown Universities,” *New World*, June 1896.

7. See, for Locke's concept of cosmopolitanism, Corey Barnes, *Alain Locke on the Theoretical Foundations for a Just and Successful Peace* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2023); Buck, "Alain Locke: Four Talks" 21–41.

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