

## Alain Locke Monologue

### Commemoration of Abdu'l-Bahá's 1912 visit to Howard University \*

Washington, D.C.

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I was born in 1885 to Pliny Locke and Mary Hawkins. My father had received a law degree and my mother was a teacher. I was the only child and when I was six years old my father died. At a very young age I had rheumatic fever so I spent much of my early childhood reading and playing the piano and violin. My mother was a profoundly important influence of me.

I received a PhD in philosophy from Harvard in 1918, and I was the first African-American Rhodes Scholar; many say I played a major role in the development of the Harlem Renaissance, which shaped & inspired many artists like Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston and Louis Armstrong.

However, I am known most for *The New Negro*, an anthology I published in 1925 of writings by African American authors that articulated the artistic, social, and philosophical contributions of African Americans to American society. I became somewhat of a spokesman for African-Americans. [Pause]

Mmmm, the New Negro. I didn't really fix the identity of the New Negro; I simply announced it; I wanted each Black American to re-invent himself or herself, to recognize African art as a source of inspiration for Black artists, to realize their legacy, and to have the freedom to define ourselves, no longer hemmed in by others' perceptions of us.

If we are a race we must have a race tradition, and if we are to have a race tradition we must keep and cherish it as a priceless – yes as a holy thing- and above all not be ashamed to wear the badge of our tribe. And I do not refer

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\* See [bahai-library.com/various\\_monologues\\_bicentenary\\_howard](http://bahai-library.com/various_monologues_bicentenary_howard)

so much to any outward manifestation or aggressiveness. I do not think we are Negroes because we are of varying degrees of black, brown and yellow, nor do I think it is because we do or should all act alike. We are a race because we have a common race tradition and each man of us becomes such just in proportion as he recognized knows and reveres that tradition.

I lived most of my life in the Jim Crow era where laws throughout the United States gave blacks no effective legal or political recourse to gross injustice, so I used the arts to express myself, to become a voice for black people, to win the respect of the nation, and to call attention to the country's need for full democracy and full equality to all minorities.

Three places exerted a profound influence on me – Harvard [pause], Harlem [pause] and Haifa [look up with a deeply joyful face]. Harvard prepared me for my Rhodes Scholarship, my doctorate which secured my position as the chair of the Department of Philosophy at Howard from 1927 – 1953.

Harlem the Mecca of black renaissance was where I was able to work to revitalize racial solidarity.

In Haifa, I learned about the unity of God, His Messengers and their connection to humanity. Perhaps that's the least recognized part of my life.

You see, in 1918 I accepted the Baha'i Faith in this city – Washington, DC. My mother was receptive and cordial about the Faith. She wished that I identify myself more closely with it. I was honored to be part of this **movement for human brotherhood** [say this slowly].

Only one year later in 1919 came Red Summer, the bloody race riots that occurred in every major city of the country and tore our nation apart. To respond and promote healing in the nation, I became actively involved in the Baha'i efforts to organize *Race Amity Conferences* in Washington, DC, New York, and Philadelphia. My dear friend Louis Gregory and the entire Baha'i community were working very hard to organize these conferences, gatherings which. They had been inspired by the vision of Abdul Baha when He called the blacks and whites to **unite in perfect harmony** [read the last four words slowly for effect].

And it was through Louis Gregory that I received an invitation to visit the Baha'i Shrines in Haifa. It was a long journey with many stops along the way.

I shall never forget my first view of Mount Carmel from the terraces of the Shrine. Mount Carmel already casting shadows like a dark green curtain behind us and opposite was a gorgeous crescent of hills so glowing with color - gold, sapphire, amethyst. As the sun set the colors changes in between the mottled emerald of the sea, and the grey toned house roofs of Haifa. Almost immediately opposite and picking up the sun's reflection like polished metal were the ramparts of Akka, transformed for a few moments from it shabby decay into a citadel of light and beauty. Most shrines concentrate the view upon themselves – this one turns itself into a panorama of inspired loveliness. [pause] A fine symbol for a Faith that wished to reconcile the supernatural with the natural, beauty and joy with mortality.

Oh, Haifa! [pause and look into a distance] “Whether Baha'i or not, Haifa makes pilgrims of all who visit her. The place makes mystics out of us all. I cannot describe it except to say that its influence lacks the mustiness of asceticism and blends the joy and naturalness of a nature cult with the ethical seriousness and purpose of a spiritual religion.

And there, I spent many a day walking with the young Shoghi Effendi, Abdul Baha's grandson and appointed Guardian of the Baha'i Faith.

I felt I could be myself with him.

In Haifa, I was neither the representative of a race, nor solely an artist, but a seeker of the meaning of life. He accompanied me to the Shrines.

The shrine chambers of the Bab and Abdul Baha were both so impressive. But in a unique and almost modern way the antechambers are simply the means of taking away the melancholy and gruesomeness of death and substituting for them the thought of memory, responsibility and reverence. The death of the greatest teachers is the release of their spirit in the world. Moral ideas find their immortality through the deaths of their founders.

The Baha'i Faith and its young Guardian Shoghi Effendi, demonstrated to me the Oneness of Humanity – the pivot around which all of Baha'u'llah's teachings revolved. And that was vision was a healing balm to my soul.