

has written about. He would write just as well, just as poignantly, just as transmutingly, about the peasants of Russia, or the peasants of Ireland, had experience but given him the knowledge of

their existence. It is a book of gold and bronze, of dusk and flame of ecstasy and pain, and Jean Toomer is a bright morning star of a new day of the Race in literature!

A SYMPOSIUM

The Negro in Art: How Shall He Be Portrayed (1926)

A Questionnaire

There has long been controversy within and without the Negro race as to just how the Negro should be treated in art—how he should be pictured by writers and portrayed by artists. Most writers have said naturally that any portrayal of any kind of Negro was permissible so long as the work was pleasing and the artist sincere. But the Negro has objected vehemently—first in general to the conventional Negro in American literature; then in specific cases: to the Negro portrayed in *Birth of a Nation*; in MacFall's *Woings of Jezebel Pettyfer* and in Stribling's *Birthright*; in Octavius Roy Cohen's monstrosities. In general they have contended that while the individual portrait may be true and artistic, the net result to American literature to date is to picture twelve million Americans as prostitutes, thieves and fools and that such "freedom" in art is miserably unfair.

This attitude is natural but as Carl Van Vechten writes us: "It is the kind of thing, indeed, which might be effective in preventing many excellent Negro writers from speaking any truth which might be considered unpleasant. There are plenty of unpleasant truths to be spoken about any race. The true artist speaks out fearlessly. The critic judges the artistic result; nor should he be concerned with anything else."

In order to place this matter clearly before the thinking element of Negro Americans and especially before young authors, *The Crisis* is asking several authors to write their opinions on the following matters:

1. When the artist, black or white, portrays Negro characters is he under any obligations or

limitations as to the sort of character he will portray?

2. Can any author be criticized for painting the worst or the best characters of a group?

3. Can publishers be criticized for refusing to handle novels that portray Negroes of education and accomplishment, on the ground that these characters are no different from white folk and therefore not interesting?

4. What are Negroes to do when they are continually painted at their worst and judged by the public as they are painted?

5. Does the situation of the educated Negro in America with its pathos, humiliation and tragedy call for artistic treatment at least as sincere and sympathetic as *Porgy* received?

6. Is not the continual portrayal of the sordid, foolish and criminal among Negroes convincing the world that this and this alone is really and essentially Negroid, and preventing white artists from knowing any other types and preventing black artists from daring to paint them?

7. Is there not a real danger that young colored writers will be tempted to follow the popular trend in portraying Negro character in the underworld rather than seeking to paint the truth about themselves and their own social class?

We have already received comments on these questions from Sinclair Lewis. Carl Van Vechten, *Major Haldane MacFall* and others. We shall publish these and other letters in a series of articles. Meantime let our readers remember our contest for \$600 in prizes and send in their manuscripts no matter what attitude they take in regard to this controversy. Manuscripts, etc., will be received until May 1, 1926.

Carl Van Vechten

I am fully aware of the reasons why Negroes are sensitive in regard to fiction which attempts to picture the lower strata of the race. The point is that this is an attitude completely inimical to art. It has caused, sometimes quite unconsciously, more than one Negro of my acquaintance to refrain from using valuable material. Thank God, it has not yet harmed Rudolph Fisher! But the other point I raise is just as important. Plenty of colored folk deplore the fact that Fisher has written stories like "Ringtail" and "High Yaller." If a white man had written them he would be called a Negro hater. Now these stories would be just as good if a white man had written them, but the sensitive Negro—and heaven knows he has reason enough to feel sensitive—would see propaganda therein.

You speak of "this side of the Negro's life having been overdone." That is quite true and will doubtless continue to be true for some time, for a very excellent reason. The squalor of Negro life, the vice of Negro life, offer a wealth of novel, exotic, picturesque material to the artist. On the other hand, there is very little difference if any between the life of a wealthy or cultured Negro and that of a white man of the same class. The question is: Are Negro writers going to write about this exotic material while it is still fresh or will they continue to make a free gift of it to white authors who will exploit it until not a drop of vitality remains?

H. L. Mencken

1. The artist is under no obligations or limitations whatsoever. He should be free to depict things exactly as he sees them.

2. No, so long as his portrait is reasonably accurate.

3. I know of no publisher who sets up any such doctrine. The objection is to Negro characters who are really only white men, i.e., Negro characters who are false.

4. The remedy of a Negro novelist is to depict the white man at his worst. Walter white has already done it, and very effectively interesting.

5. This question is simply rhetorical. Who denies the fact?

6. The sound artist pays no attention to bad art. Why should he?

7. If they are bad artists, yes. If they are good, no.

It seems to me that in objecting to such things as the stories of Mr. Cohen the Negro shows a dreadful lack of humor. They are really very amusing. Are they exaggerations? Of course they are. Nevertheless they always keep some sort of contact with the truth. Is it argued that a white man, looking at Negroes, must always see them as Negroes see themselves? Then what is argued is nonsense. If he departs too far from plausibility and probability his own people will cease to read him. They dislike palpable falsifications. Everyone does. But they enjoy caricatures, recognizing them as such.

The remedy of the Negro is not to bellow for justice—that is, not to try to apply scientific criteria to works of art. His remedy is to make works of art that pay off the white man in his own coin. The white man, it seems to me, is extremely ridiculous. He looks ridiculous even to me, a white man myself. To a Negro he must be an hilarious spectacle, indeed. Why isn't that spectacle better described? Let the Negro sculptors spit on their hands! What a chance!

DuBose Heyward

No. 1. If the author's object is the creation of a piece of art I feel that he should not be limited as to the sort of character he portrays. He should attempt that which moves him most deeply.

No. 2. If he is a sincere artist, no.

No. 3. Yes. On the grounds of bad business judgment, if nothing else. I feel that there is a growing public everywhere in America for literature dealing sincerely with any aspect of Negro life. The educated and artistic Negro, if presented with skill and insight, will find his public waiting for him when the publishers are willing to take the chance.

No. 4. Educated Negroes are rapidly arriving at a point where they are their own best refutation of this type of portrayal. They should, and

doubtless will, soon be producing their own authentic literature.

No. 5. Emphatically yes. The point is that it must be treated *artistically*. It destroys itself as soon as it is made a vehicle for propaganda. If it carries a moral or a lesson they should be subordinated to the *artistic* aim.

6, 7. I cannot say. I think the young colored writer in America need not be afraid to portray any aspect of his racial life. And I may say further that I feel convinced that he alone will produce the ultimate and authentic record of his own people. What I have done in *Porgy* owes what social value it has to its revelation of *my* feeling toward my subject. A real subjective literature must spring from the race itself.

Mary W. Ovington

In a recent number of *Harper's*, J. B. Priestley discusses the American novel and describes a snag that has caught many an American writer. Our country contains so much variety in its background that our writers forget that this background is of comparatively little importance and think over-much of local color. They thus create fixed types. But the important thing, Priestley emphasizes, is to note "the immense difference between your neighbors."

With this in mind I can quickly answer a number of your questions. A novel isn't made up of all good or all bad, of all buffoons or all wise men. When a book overemphasizes one type, whether it be the buffoon, the villain or the heroically good young man, it isn't a true book and will soon be forgotten. What publishers, at least the best, want today is art, not propaganda. They don't want to know what the writer thinks on the Negro question, they want to know about Negroes.

Publishers will take books dealing with the educated Negro if he can be written of without our continually seeing his diploma sticking out of his pocket. Just as soon as the writer can believe that his reader knows there are educated Negroes, and doesn't have to be told that they live in pleasant homes and don't eat with their

knives, he can begin seriously to write about them. Surely it is unimportant whether a book deals with the rich or the poor. *Porgy* and *Crown* and *Bess* are great figures in a powerful love story. John is a strong figure in Waldo Frank's *Holiday*. So is Bob in Walter White's *Fire in the Flint*.

Question six speaks of the "continual portrayal of the sordid, foolish and criminal among Negroes." This has not been true within the past few years. White artists are beginning to see the true Negro and colored writers are beginning to drop their propaganda and are painting reality.

Question seven, the danger of the Negro writer's following the popular trend, is a question every writer has to face. It has nothing to do with color. Are you so poor that you yield to the temptation to copy the trivial success? If you do you'll have plenty of company in this world of cheap popular magazines.

Langston Hughes

I think like this: What's the use of saying anything—the true literary artist is going to write about what he chooses anyway regardless of outside opinions. You write about the intelligent Negroes; Fisher about the unintelligent. Both of you are right. Walpool pictures the better-class Englishman; Thomas Burke the sailors in Limehouse. And both are worth reading. It's the way people look at things, not what they look at, that needs to be changed.

J. E. Spingarn

Are white publishers justified in rejecting novels dealing with the lives of cultivated colored people? If they publish mediocre white novels and reject mediocre colored novels, it is hard on a few colored writers, but should not the rest of us thank our stars that we are spared at least some of the poor books of the world? For surely, whatever the subject of the novel, it should be rejected if it is a mediocre book, and will not

be rejected if it is really a powerful one; we may be sure that in the end a work of genius will find some form of publication.

This is the obvious answer to the crucial question in the questionnaire of *The Crisis*—indeed, an answer too obvious to be satisfactory. Complex problems cannot be solved in this airy way. For a novel, and in fact every other kind of book, is two things: It may be considered a contribution to the *literature* of the world or as a contribution to the *culture* of a race. The problems are so different that *The Crisis* questionnaire would demand a totally different set of answers in each case. From the standpoint of the critic, there is only one answer to the question as to what should be done with a mediocre book; but from the standpoint of Negro culture it may be important that some writers should get a hearing, even if their books are comparatively poor. The culture of a race must have a beginning, however simple; and imperfect books are infinitely better than a long era of silence. If the white publisher hesitates, on the ground that it is his business to be a publisher and not a champion of Negro culture, colored brains should create colored periodicals. The world will not close its ears to the voice of a great writer merely because of the imprint on the title-page.

The tendency today is to overestimate rather than underestimate colored books because of their subject, their delightfully exotic material. Their writers are valued by some people, as Dr. Johnson said of the first women preachers, not because they preached well but because of the surprise that they could preach at all. This will soon pass away; nothing disappears so quickly as a fashion in the subject of books. Great books may be made out of any subject under the sun; and colored writers will more and more have to depend not on their subjects but on their own excellence. In the meanwhile they should realize that all of the complex problems of literature can not be magically solved by a childish formula like that of "art versus propaganda." They must understand that a book may be of high value to a race's culture without being of high rank in the world's literature,

just as a man may be a very useful citizen yet a rather mediocre dentist. The Negro race should not sniff at the *Uncle Tom's Cabins* and the *Jungles* of its own writers, which are instruments of progress as real as the ballot-box, the school-house, or a stick of dynamite.

Walter White

It is unfortunate, it seems to me, that at the very time when Negro writers are beginning to be heard there should arise a division of opinion as to what or what not he should write about. Such a conflict, however, is, I suppose, to be expected. There are those who say that the only interesting material in Negro lives is in the lives of the lower or lowest classes—that upper-class Negro life is in no wise different from white life and is therefore uninteresting.

I venture to question the truth of this statement. Like all other people who have struggled against odds, upper class Negroes have through that very struggle sharpened their sensitiveness to the intense drama of race life in the United States. They never come into contact with the outside world but there is potential drama, whether of comedy or tragedy, in each of those contacts. By this I do not mean simply unpleasant aspects of the lives of these people. This sensitiveness to pain and insult and tragedy has its compensation in a keener awareness and appreciation of the rhythmic beauty and color and joyousness which is so valuable a part of Negro life.

The lives of so-called upper-class Negroes have advantages as literary material, judged even by the most arbitrary standards. "Babbitt" or "Jean Christophe" or any other novel is interesting in direct proportion to the ability of the writer to depict impingement of events and experiences, trivial or great, on the more or less sensitive photographic plates which are the minds of the characters. Life for any Negro in America has so many different aspects that there is unlimited material for the novelist or short story writer. For the reasons I have already given, there is no lack of this material

among upper-class Negroes if one only has the eye to see it.

Suppose we carry this objection to the utilization of experiences of educated Negroes to its logical conclusion. Would not the result be this: Negro writers should not write, the young Negro is told, of educated Negroes because their lives paralleling white lives are uninteresting. If this be true, then it seems just as reasonable to say that all writers, white or colored, should abandon all sources of material save that of lower-class Negro life. Manifestly this is absurd. It makes no difference, it seems to me, what field a writer chooses if he has the gift of perception, of dramatic and human material and the ability to write about it.

Those who would limit Negro writers to depiction of lower-class Negro life justify their contention by saying, "The artist must have the right to choose his material where he will; and the critic can judge him only by the artistic result." These same persons often nullify or negative their contention for freedom by following this assertion immediately with insistence that the Negro writer confine himself to one field. The Negro writer, just like any other writer, should be allowed to write of whatever interests him whether it be of lower or middle, or upper-class Negro life in America; or of white—or Malay—or Chinese—or Hottentot characters and should be judged not by the color of the writer's skin but solely by the story he produces.

I, myself, have not as yet written extensively of prostitutes or gamblers or cabaret habitués. Fortunately, or unfortunately, my life thus far has not given me as intimate a knowledge of these classes as I feel would be necessary for me to write about them. I am not boasting of this innocence, if one chooses to call it that. I am merely stating it as a fact. An honest craftsman, in my opinion, can only pour his knowledge and experience, real or imagined, through the alembic of his own mind and let the creations of his subjective or objective self stand or fall by whatever literary standards are current at the time. I do not mean that Zola or Flaubert had to live as "Nana" or "Emma Bovary" did to achieve subjective treatment of these characters—such

obviously being a physical impossibility. But Zola *did* find himself drawn to write of the experiences of his character "Nana," as did Flaubert to the luckless "Emma." Certainly we could not have condemned either Zola or Flaubert if they had chosen instead to depict women less carnal minded.

To summarize specifically, it seems to me that:

1. The artist should be allowed full freedom in the choice of his characters and material.
 2. An artist can rightly be criticized if he portrays only the worst or only the best characters of any group. (I, myself, was lambasted most enthusiastically by the South because Kenneth Harper in *The Fire in the Flint* seemed to me much more intelligent and decent than any of his white fellow townsmen.)
 3. Publishers can and should be criticized for refusing to handle manuscripts, *provided they have merit*, that portray Negroes of superior talent because the lives of these Negroes do not vary from white people's.
 4. When Negroes are painted only at their worst and judged accordingly by the public, Negroes must write stories revealing the other side and make these stories of such excellence that they command attention. (This is not an advertisement but in this same connection more Negroes must buy books by Negro writers for then sales will cause publishers actively to seek Negro writers of ability.)
 5. The situation of the Negro in America is pregnant enough in drama and color and beauty to make of him a subject for artistic treatment.
 6. Continual portrayal of any type to the exclusion of all others is not only harmful but bad art.
 7. If young Negro writers can be saved or, better, save themselves from too hostile or too friendly critics, editors, publishers or public, from spending all their time and energy in restricted areas, they can have the freedom to explore whatever fields to which their fancy or inclination draws them.
- In brief, sycophants and weaklings will follow whatever trend is mapped out for them; genuine artists will write or paint or sing or sculpt whatever they please.

Alfred A. Knopf

I have yours of January 22 and will try to answer your questions promptly and briefly.

1. No.
2. No.
3. This question seems to me to be senseless.
4. To write books—fiction and non-fiction—to supply the deficiency.
5. Yes.
6. I doubt it.
7. I doubt it.

John Farrar

I feel that the Negro should be treated by himself and by others who write about him with just as little self-consciousness as possible. Realizing how untrue Octavius Roy Cohen's stories may be, they have amused me immensely, nor do they mean to me any very great libel on the Negro—any more than an amusing story about the Yankee would seem to me a libel on myself.

On the other hand, I have always thought that Walter White's novel was a trifle one-sided, although I realize that I speak as one who does not truly know conditions in the South.

It therefore seems to me that although I realize it is inevitable under the circumstances that this discussion should arise you will have Negroes writing about the Negro as the Jews have written about the Jews in *Potash and Perlmutter* and other such things, and that racial characteristics are bound to be presented in burlesque as well as real drama; and that, as Mr. Van Vechten has pointed out, the creative spirit, even though it may not be classed as art, will always disregard moral issues such as these.

William Lyon Phelps

1. The only obligation or limitation that an artist should recognize is the truth.
2. He cannot be criticized unless he takes the worst as typical.

3. If a publisher takes the ground mentioned in this question, it would be absurd.

4. The Negroes must protest in print and must hope that by setting a good example in their lives they can correct the false impression.

5. Of course it calls for artistic treatment, sincere and sympathetic, but I have not read *Porgy*.

6. There is a certain danger of this.

7. I think there might be a danger also here.

Vachel Lindsay

1. Neither the black nor the white artist should be under obligations or limitations as to the sort of character he will portray. His own experience and his inmost perception of truth and beauty, in its severest interpretation, should be his only criteria.

2. An author can be criticized for painting the worst or best characters of a group if his portrayal thereby becomes artistically false; he should be free to choose his characters according to his desire and purpose.

3. Publishers assuredly may be criticized for refusing to handle novels portraying Negroes of education and accomplishment, on the ground that these characters are no different from white folk and therefore not interesting. The Negro of this type has an artistic as well as a social right to speak for himself; and what he has to say is all too interesting, as a rule.

4. The work of such magazines as *The Crisis* and *Opportunity* suggests a possible way out. Through his songs, through drama, poetry, and fiction, the Negro should make every effort to put before the public a true picture of the race, in totality; and white folk of sufficient intelligence and courage to recognize the issue as it stands should be enlisted as an auxiliary force to the same end.

5. The situation of the educated Negro in America surely merits all possible sincere and artistic treatment. If such enterprises seem doomed to failure in this country, they should be taken to Canada or England, or to the continental countries, and so finally reach the United States public with their prestige already established.

6. The portrayal of sordid, foolish, and criminal types among Negroes is not convincing the world that such groups alone comprise the essentially Negroid, but it surely is doing a great deal to foster that opinion in the United States, where there are many anxious to believe it. The portrayal of such types by no means damns a race; look at the long line of English, French, Spanish, and Russian novels and plays dealing with such characters; nor does one need to confine the list to those countries exclusively. Such portrayals have their place and deep significance artistically; but they at once become false and evil if used for propagandist purposes, or with ulterior racial motives.

7. Such a danger can scarcely be stated as a general phenomenon. The average young colored writer, if he be honest as an artist, will write the thing that is in his heart to write regardless of so-called "popular trends." Any artist who speaks the truth as he sees it and refuses to compromise with Mammon has none too easy a time; it is not a question of color, it is a question of courage. One has no reason to believe that the sincere black artist will be more easily daunted than a sincere white or brown or yellow artist. The one difficulty that does seem to exist, in the light of a thoughtful reading of recent Negro novels and poems, is that many times an ingrained bitterness tinges work otherwise clearly and beautifully carried out. For that the Negro is not to blame, nor can one state the solution of the problem back of it. The only way out is up; and that seems to be the way which the younger Negro artists, singers and writers have chosen for themselves and for their people. More power to them.

Sinclair Lewis

After reading your letter it suddenly occurred to me that just possibly *all* of the astounding and extraordinarily interesting Negro fiction which is now appearing may be entirely off on the wrong foot. All of you, or very nearly all, are primarily absorbed in the economic and social problems of the colored race. Complicated

though these problems are in detail, yet inevitably they fall into a few general themes; so that there is the greatest danger that all of your novels will be fundamentally alike.

For example, this problem of going over and passing for white must be one which will appeal to all of you. It must needs be much the same in your book or in Walter White's.

Ordinarily I hate committees, conferences, and organizations like the very devil. But I wonder if there isn't a problem here which demands a real and serious conference? Should American Negroes write as Americans or Negroes? Should they follow the pattern of the Jewish authors who are quite as likely to write about Nordics as about fellow Jews; or that of Zangwill, who is of importance only when he is writing about Jews? Should there be a Negro publishing house so that the Negro author can tell all of the ordinary publishing houses to go to the devil? Should there be a club—a comfortable small hotel in Paris to which the American Negroes can go and be more than welcome?

These and a thousand like topics suggest themselves to me as they have, of course, suggested themselves to Dr. Du Bois and yourself. Their very complexity makes me feel that it is impossible to give any definite answer to them. Of this alone I am sure—you cannot, all of you, go on repeating the same novel (however important, however poignant, however magnificently dramatic) about the well-bred, literate, and delightful Negro intellectual finding himself or herself blocked by the groundless and infuriating manner of superiority assumed by white men frequently less white than people technically known as Negroes.

Sherwood Anderson

Naturally I think it a great mistake for Negroes to become too sensitive. If, as a race, you were the ideal people sentimentalists sometimes try to make you how uninteresting you would be.

Why not quit thinking of Negro art? If the individual creating the art happens to be a Negro and some one wants to call it Negro Art let them.

As to Negroes always being painted at their worst I think it isn't true. Suppose I were to grow indignant every time a white man or woman were badly or cheaply done in the theatre or in books. I might spend my life being indignant.

I have lived a good deal in my youth among common Negro laborers. I have found them about the sweetest people I know. I have said so sometimes in my books.

I do not believe the Negroes have much more to complain of than the whites in this matter of their treatment in the arts.

Jessie Fauset

1. No.

2. No. Unless in a long series of articles he invariably chooses the worst types and paints them, even though truthfully, with evident malice.

3. I should think so. And what is more, it seems to me that white people should be the first to voice this criticism. Aren't *they* supposed to be interesting?

4. They must protest strongly and get their protestations before the public. But more than that they must learn to write with a humor, a pathos, a sincerity so evident and a delineation so fine and distinctive that their portraits, even of the "best Negroes," those presumably most like "white folks," will be acceptable to publisher and reader alike.

But above all colored people must be the buyers of these books for which they clamor. When they buy 50,000 copies of a good novel about colored people by a colored author, publishers will produce books, even those that depict the Negro as an angel on earth,—and the public in general will buy 50,000 copies more to find out what it's all about. Most best sellers are not born,—they're made.

5. I should say so.

6. I think this is true. And here I blame the publisher for not being a "better sport." Most of them seem to have an *idée fixe*. They, even more than the public, I do believe, persist in considering only certain types of Negroes inter-

esting and if an author presents a variant they fear that the public either won't believe in it or won't "stand for it." Whereas I have learned from an interesting and rather broad experience gleaned from speaking before white groups that many, many of these people are keenly interested in learning about the better class of colored people. They are quite willing to be shown.

7. Emphatically. This is a grave danger making for a literary insincerity both insidious and abominable.

Benjamin Brawley

1. An artist must be free; he can not be bound by any artificial restrictions. At the same time we heartily wish that so many artists would not prefer today to portray only what is vulgar. There is beauty in the world as well as ugliness, idealism as well as realism.

2. This is really covered by (1). It may be added, however, that anyone, even an artist, becomes liable to criticism when his work gives a distorted idea of truth.

3. This question seems to me involved. However, aside from their other reasons for accepting or rejecting books, publishers can hardly be criticised for refusing to bring out books that do not promise a reasonable return on the investment. They are engaged in a business and not in a missionary enterprise.

4. When Negroes feel that they are imperfectly or improperly portrayed, they should find the way to truthful portrayal through any possible channel. Any plant that is struggling in the darkness must find its way to the light as well as it can.

5. Certainly.

6. Yes.

7. Yes.

General answer: Several of the questions seem to me to suggest that the Negro wants patronage. On the whole I think American publishers will be found to be hospitable; they have certainly been hospitable to the Negro in recent years. What we need to do first of all is to

produce the really finished work of art. Sooner or later recognition will come.

Robert T. Kerlin

1. No. The artist, black or white, must be in sympathy with his creations, or creatures, be they what they may be ethically and ethnically. If he is in sympathy with them, he has nothing to fear regarding the effect of his work. His art will justify itself.

2. No, not if he observes the laws of proportion, relation and emphasis. It is the artist's business to portray not merely the typical, the average, but the ultimate.

3. Publishers can be censured only for commercial stupidity.

4. Produce first-rate artistic works with which to kill travesties, as they are beginning to do.

5. Why not? No theme, absolutely none, offers greater opportunities to the novelist and the poet, whatever their race. It is a human situation. If white artists do not discern the potencies of this material in Negro life, the supreme artists in the near future will be black.

6. Yes, to all three questions: (1) But avowed fiction has not done such dastardly damage here as the daily press; (2) the white "artist" who thus takes his material second hand must be flayed; (3) the duty of the black artist is to be a true artist and if he is such he will show the "sordid," the "foolish," and the "criminal" Negro in the environment and the conditions—of white creation, of course—which have made him what he is. Let the black artist not hesitate to show what white "civilization" is doing to both races.

7. No. The cultivated Negro is up against a world hostile to him, ignorant of him, perplexed, uncomfortable, nonplussed by the contradictions arising. No one knows this better than the cultured Negro. It affords him laughter and tears—and out of these, lit by flames of anger, love, pride, aspiration, comes art, in which both the individual and the race are somehow expressed. The Negro artist is going to continue to be mainly concerned with himself, not with any grotesque caricature of himself—though he will not despise the broken image.

Haldane MacFall

Your critic, Mr. Emmett J. Scott, Junior, has every right to pour contempt on my literary gifts; but he has none to attribute to me "sustained contempt, almost hatred, for Negroes." He is again within his rights to find my novel feeble in wit and humour—though his own writing reveals scant glint of either, which I must suppose he is holding in reserve in order to show up my "sustained contempt, almost hatred, for Negroes." At the same time he admits "flashes of ability." But then he attacks Kemble! Surely as kindly an artist as the Negro ever had to utter the exquisite humour of a greatly humorous race! . . .

When I was a youngster, I was left in command of a company of Zouaves at Port Royal in Jamaica. I was a mere boy. There was brought before me as prisoner a magnificent bronze god of a man whom they called "Long" Burke—he flits through my novel. I stood six feet high; this big fellow stood head and shoulders taller. Well—it appeared that he had knocked the stuffing out of a little black corporal, which is bad for discipline, and, being no hanging judge, I was grieved and worried when, to my relief, the corporal said he wished to add that Burke had always been a good soldier and he, the corporal, may have been over-impatient with him. I took it as a case of attempted murder with a recommendation to mercy. I talked to Burke like a father, and then told him that after what the corporal had said I would only give him a nominal punishment—changed his charge on the crime-sheet to a paltry offence—and, God forgive me, only confined him to barracks for three days. . . . When I got back to my quarters I found an orderly waiting for me to tell me that Long Burke had "gone fantee" into the cocoa-nut grove with a rifle and ten rounds of ball cartridge to shoot me, and begging me not to go near the grove until Burke had been caught. Anyway, if I hate Negroes, the Negroes did not hate *me*, since they were prepared to risk their lives to save mine from harm. To cut a long story short, they waited until sunset when Burke fell asleep, and they got him—took him to the

guard room—and reported to me. I buckled on the sword of authority and made across the square in the twilight to the guard room. There the Sergeant-major and the Sergeant of the Guard begged me not to go near Burke who was in the cells foaming at the mouth—he had torn his uniform to tatters, and was sitting on the plank bed bare as Venus, scowling and vowing vengeance. Now I knew that this great mad devil of a man could crack me like a nut if he put his mind to it; but I knew equally well that if I did not close with him there and then I should live a life of misery as long as that man lived. And a brain-wave came to me. I called to the Sergeant of the Guard that I wanted to see Burke—what was he a prisoner for?—told him to throw open the door of the “clink,” which he did most reluctantly,—and taking off my sword with a melodramatic air I handed it—in a majestic bluff and a gorgeous funk—to the Sergeant—walked boldly up to Burke who sat as naked as when born, a huge bronze god of sullen wrath on the plank bed—sat down beside him, laying my hand on his shoulder, and said: “Burke, they tell me that you wanted to shoot me—It’s a shabby lie.” I noticed that the Sergeant of the guard was “taking a bead” through the small window in the twilight on poor Burke—and he was a deadly sure shot!

The fellow said never a word; and the thought of that giant taking me by the throat made me feel about as small as I have ever felt. I turned to the open door:

“Sergeant,” I called,—“it’s all too damsilly about Burke. Send for his kit and let him go back to his barrack-room, and tell the men it was only Burke’s joke. Good Lord! if it gets to the ears of the General that I only gave him three days confined to barracks for hitting my corporal, I shall have to leave the army.” . . .

“Burke,” said I,—“you would not see me punished for letting you off penal servitude, would you? Come, old man, get into your trousers, and be a man and a soldier! Damme, I’ve got you down for lance-corporal! Don’t make me look a fool!”

I strolled out of the place, hoping to God he would not jump on my back . . .

Long Burke became the most devoted friend to me for the rest of my service—and he maintained a discipline in my company such as I have never seen bettered. And it was not because of my contempt and hatred for Negroes. . . .

Georgia Douglas Johnson

When it is fully realized that “a man’s a man,”—the problems of this sort will cease. Peoples long subjected to travail, depressing and repressing environment, and the long list of handicaps common to men of color, naturally find it difficult to reach the high levels *en masse*. It would be strange, miraculous if they did. The few who do break thru the hell-crust of prevalent conditions to high ground should be crowned, extolled and emulated.

This is the work of the artist. Paint, write, let the submerged man and the world see those who have proven stronger than the iron grip of circumstance.

Let the artist cease to capitalize the frailties of the struggling or apathetic mass—and portray the best that offers. This is naturally unpopular, and why? The thinker knows! To the ignorant it does not matter—yet. Depict the best, with or without approbation and renown.

Countée Cullen

This question of what material the Negro writer should draw upon, and how he should use it, is no simon pure problem with a sure, mathematical conclusion; it has innumerable ramifications, and almost all arguments can be met with a dissenting *but* equally as strong. Opinions will probably be as various as the writers’ several constitutions; moreover, it is a question of whether the work is the *thing*, or its moral, social and educational effect.

I should be the last person to vote for any infringement of the author’s right to tell a story, to delineate a character, or transcribe an emotion in his own way, and in the light of truth as he sees it. That in the one inalienable right into which the Negro author ought to be admitted

with all other authors, as a slight compensation for other rights so described in which does not share. I do believe, however, that the Negro has not yet built up a large enough body of sound, healthy race literature to permit him to speculate in abortion and aberrations which other people are all too prone to accept as truly legitimate. There can be no doubt that there is a fictional type of Negro, an ignorant, burly, bestial person, changing somewhat today though not for the better, to the sensual habitue of dives and loose living, who represents to the mass of white readers the by—all and end—all of what constitutes a Negro. What would be taken as a type in other literatures is, where it touches us, seized upon as representative so long as it adheres to this old pattern. For Negroes to raise a great hue and cry against such misrepresentations without attempting through their artists, to reconstruct the situation seems futile as well as foolish. Negro artists have a definite duty to perform in this matter, one which should supersede their individual prerogative without denying those rights. We must create types that are truly representative of us as a people, nor do I feel that such a move is necessarily a genuflection away from true art.

As far as I am concerned the white writer is totally out of the scene. He will write as he pleases, though it offend; and when he does offend, he can always plead the extenuation of a particular incident and of particular characters that appeal to him because of their novelty. He is not under the same obligations to us that we are to ourselves. Nor can he, as a member of a group with a vast heritage of sound literature behind it, quite rise to an understanding of what seems to him an oversensitiveness on our part; he cannot quite understand our disinclination as a people toward our racial defamation, even for art's sake.

I do not feel that we can so severely criticize publishers who reject our work on the score that it will not appeal to their readers. Publishers, in general, are caterers, not martyrs and philanthropists. But if they reject a treatment of educated and accomplished Negroes for the avowed reason that these do not differ from white folk of the same sort, they should reject

those about lower class Negroes for the reason that they do not differ essentially from white folk of the same sort; unless they feel that difference or no difference the only time a Negro is interesting is when he is at his worst. This does not mean that the Negro writer has either to capitulate or turn away from his calling. Even among publishers there are those rare eccentrics who will judge a work on its merits.

The danger to the young Negro writer is not that he will find his aspiration in the Negro slums; I dare say there are as fine characters and as bright dream material there as in the best strata of Negro society, and that is as it should be. Let the young Negro writer, like any artist, find his treasure where his heart lies. If the unfortunate and less favored find an affinity in him, let him surrender himself; only let him not pander to the popular trend of seeing no cleanliness in their squalor, no nobleness in their meanness and no commonsense in their ignorance. A white man and a Southerner gave us *Porgy*, the merits of which few will deny, nor wish away because the story deals with illiterate Negroes. Mr. Heyward gave us a group of men and women; the Negro writer can in strict justice to himself attempt no less than this, whether he writes of Negroes or of a larger world.

J. Herbert Engbeck

Salt Lake City, Utah

I am a bit excited about your magazine. There is in it stimulation for the darker races as well as a prod, a fetching good dig in the ribs, for the pale of face. There is perhaps one thing that needs stress and that is the proposition to forget race. Lay that old bogey man. And now may I give to you just an ordinary, average man's opinion in answer to your questionnaire? I know that my opinion is unsolicited but I wish to let you know that even an ordinary man may think upon the things you ask and to good advantage.

1. The inarticulate artist in me cries out that no man can be judged an artist by his race or creed. Paul Robeson is an artist first and a

Negro next. When I have heard him sing I never think "What a wonderful Negro voice." I forget the qualification of race. The obligation of the artist is not to his race but to his talent.

2. An author can be criticized only when he deliberately falsifies with malice aforethought.

3. Such a publisher is missing his main chance. An absorbing tale can surely be written about Negroes of good education and refinement. A publisher who cannot see that is not on to his onions.

4. Bring out the supreme spectacle of the Nordic's obverse side. That ought to be a good tonic for all races.

5. No one but a numskull could treat him otherwise.

6. No. Wiley and Cohen are hardly artists. They are authors. Perhaps the latter is becoming one. He will I think some day write a real story of the Negro and do it with understanding. There is a false notion among a great number of peoples that the sordid-foolish-criminal side is all there is to the Negro. The Negro will have to fight that down as the Jew has had to fight down the same impression by proving the contrary.

7. The young author may have a tendency to pick-up easy money by writing only of the underworld but the compelling urge of a real artist, be he Negro or some other tint, will not allow mere facetiousness to mar his canvas. Things as he sees them—he paints.

Luck to your mission.

Julia Peterkin

Please excuse my delay in answering your letter of Feb. 24th and the questionnaire which you submitted to me. Many incidental circumstances have intervened and these, along with the exigencies of my own work and the need for careful reflection regarding your inquiries, have prevented an earlier reply.

Let me say at the outset that I am not a propagandist for or against the Negro; that for the most part I have small sympathy with propagandists of any kind or color. In my opinion, the minute any one becomes an advocate he

ceases to be an artist. Propagandists may be able and admirable persons and, on occasion, be actuated by most worthy purposes; but, broadly speaking, it seems to me that special pleading is not conducive to the development of a judicial view-point.

I believe that the crying need among Negroes is a development in them of racial pride; and a cessation on their own part as well as on the part of other races, who attempt to portray their character, to estimate their worth according to their success in imitating their white brethren.

The Negro is racially different in many essential particulars from his fellow mortals of another color. But this certainly does not prove that he has not racial qualifications of inestimable value without the free and full development of which a perfected humanity will never be achieved.

Racial antagonisms are not necessarily a matter of color. Religion has produced and still perpetuates them in a most accentuated form. But pride of race has enabled the Hebrew to maintain himself against an age-old proscription; and it establishes him to-day as a recognized leader among the peoples of the earth.

So far as your complaint at the variety of derogatory portrayals of Negro life, character and self-expression, does it occur to an Irishman or a Jew to imagine for a moment that the cultural standing or development of their races are or could be seriously affected by the grotesqueries of "Mr. Jiggs" or "Mr. Potash?" The illiterate may feel irritated, but the Irishman or Jew who knows that his people have racially so lived and wrought and achieved that the world would be impoverished by the loss of their contribution to its civilization, laughs and is not remotely disturbed by these portrayals of Mr. McManus and Mr. Glass.

If America has produced a type more worthy of admiration and honor than the "Black Negro Mammy," I fail to have heard of it. The race that produced them has to its credit an achievement which may well be envied by any people. Without imitating anybody, often sinned against and seldom sinning, they wrote a page in human history that is not only an honor to themselves but

to the Creator of life. Yet when a proposal was made in Congress that the nation erect a monument to commemorate the splendid virtues of these devoted black women, a number of Negroes protested against it, saying that their race wished to forget the days of its bondage.

It seems to me that a man who is not proud that he belongs to a race that produced the Negro Mammy of the South is not and can never be either an educated man or a gentleman.

My answer to all your queries may be summed up in my belief that the Negro must develop in himself and in his race such things as that race distinctly possesses and without which humanity and the civilization which represents it cannot permanently do.

Of course it is better for Mr. DuBose Heyward to write of him with pitying, pathetic sympathy than for Mr. Cohen (who may himself have felt the sting of racial antipathy and ridicule) to picture him as a perpetual exponent of primitive buffoonery. And it would be better for Negro authors to demonstrate that their race has things the white race has not in equal degree and that cannot be duplicated; to magnify these things instead of minimizing them.

A true artist, black or white, will search for these tokens of racial worth and weave around them his contribution to literature.

Yet it seems futile to cavil because one man writes this way and another, that, as varying abilities and inclinations may dictate.

I write about Negroes because they represent human nature obscured by so little veneer; human nature groping among its instinctive impulses and in an environment which is tragically primitive and often unutterably pathetic. But I am no propagandist for or against any race. I devoutly hope I shall never be one. I am interested in humanity *per se* without regard to color or conditions.

Otto F. Mack

Stuttgart, Germany

I am neither an artist nor a writer, yet I have traveled much, am a graduate of the school of

hard knocks, and have thought a great deal. So I would like to say something.

1. No.

2. No.

3. Yes, because these editors show their ignorance in the race question. Every race has its own peculiar talents and abilities. The danger in the United States is not that you have too many original minds and people, but the opposite is the case. No nation or people in the world are being moulded into such a sameness as the people of the United States. And if the Negro writes about the cultured of his race I am sure that these writings will be different from those of white writers and therefore should be welcome. Although the American Negro is, I am sorry to say, being Americanized, I think there will always be a difference between the coloured and white race, even in America. Therefore I think the portrayal of educated coloured folks and their lives will be as interesting if not more so than of the whites.

4. Be true to themselves. The Negro is no worse than the white man, given equal chances. Just here is where the Negro artist and writer must try to counteract the bad influence and as I have said before show up the cultured and good people of his race. If he cannot find white publishers then he must go into the publishing business himself. If the books are well written and the painter is a real artist, painting true to nature, he need not fear for the result.

5. Yes, and more so. The world, especially the European world, should be made acquainted with the condition of the educated Negro in the United States and wherever the Anglo-Saxons rule. He has got to learn to be a fighter and to fight so hard till the conscience of the world is awakened and justice is done the coloured people.

6. I do not think so. Thinking people are beginning to see that a great, almost unspeakable injustice has been and is still being done to the coloured races, and scientists are pointing out that there are no inferior races. That those which appear backward are only so not in kind but in degree.

7. There may be some danger in that the Negro artist must not be afraid and must show

up the coloured races true to nature, the good and the bad sides. Here is where the Negro must show himself master of the situation and must be willing to make the sacrifice for the benefit of his race. Even if for a time his work may be unpopular the time will come, if he is a true artist, when he will win out.

Charles W. Chesnutt

1. The realm of art is almost the only territory in which the mind is free, and of all the arts that of creative fiction is the freest. Painting, sculpture, music, poetry, the stage, are all more or less hampered by convention—even jazz has been tamed and harnessed, and there are rules for writing free verse. The man with the pen in the field of fiction is the only freelance, with the whole world to tilt at. Within the very wide limits of the present day conception of decency, he can write what he pleases. I see no possible reason why a colored writer should not have the same freedom. We want no color line in literature.

2. It depends on how and what he writes about them. A true picture of life would include the good, the bad and the indifferent. Most people, of whatever group, belong to the third class, and are therefore not interesting subjects of fiction. A writer who made all Negroes bad and all white people good, or *vice versa*, would not be a true artist, and could justly be criticised.

3. To the publisher, the one indispensable requisite for a novel is that it should sell, and to sell, it must be interesting. No publisher wants to bring out and no reader cares to read a dull book. To be interesting, a character in a novel must have personality. It is perhaps unfortunate that so few of the many Negro or Negroid characters in current novels are admirable types; but they are interesting, and it is the privilege and the opportunity of the colored writer to make characters of a different sort equally interesting. Education and accomplishment do not of themselves necessarily make people interesting—we all know dull people who are highly cultured. The difficulty of finding

a publisher for books by Negro authors has largely disappeared—publishers are seeking such books. Whether the demand for them shall prove to be more than a mere passing fad will depend upon the quality of the product.

4. Well, what can they do except to protest, and to paint a better type of Negro?

5. The Negro race and its mixtures are scattered over most of the earth's surface, and come in contact with men of other races in countless ways. All these contacts, with their resultant reactions, are potential themes of fiction, and the writer of genius ought to be able, with this wealth of material, to find or to create interesting types. If there are no super-Negroes, make some, as Mr. Cable did in his *Bras Coupé*. Some of the men and women who have had the greatest influence on civilization have been purely creatures of the imagination. It might not be a bad idea to create a few white men who not only think they are, but who really are entirely unprejudiced in their dealings with colored folk—it is the highest privilege of art to depict the ideal. There are plenty of Negro and Negroid types which a real artist could make interesting to the general reader without making all the men archangels, or scoundrels, or weaklings, or all the women unchaste. The writer, of whatever color, with the eye to see, the heart to feel and the pen to record the real romance, the worthy ambition, the broad humanity, which exist among colored people of every class, in spite of their handicaps, will find a hearing and reap his reward.

6. I do not think so. People who read books read the newspapers, and cannot possibly conceive that crime is peculiarly Negroid. In fact, in the matter of serious crime the Negro is a mere piker compared with the white man. In South Carolina, where the Negroes outnumber the whites, the penitentiary has more white than colored inmates. Of course the propagandist, of whatever integumentary pigment, will, of purpose or unconsciously, distort the facts. My most popular novel was distorted and mangled by a colored moving picture producer to make it appeal to Negro race prejudice.

7. I think there is little danger of young colored writers writing too much about Negro

characters in the underworld, so long as they do it well. Some successful authors have specialized in crook stories, and some crooks are mighty interesting people. The colored writer of fiction should study life in all its aspects. He should not worry about his social class. Indeed, it is doubtful whether the general reading public can be interested today in a long serious novel based upon the social struggles of colored people. Good work has been done along this line with the short story, but colored society is still too inchoate to have developed the fine shades and nuances of the more sophisticated society with which the ordinary novel of manner deals. Pride of caste is hardly convincing in a people where the same family, in the same generation, may produce a bishop and a butler, a lawyer and a lackey, not as an accident or a rarity but almost as a matter of course. On the other hand it can be argued that at the hand of a master these sharp contrasts could be made highly dramatic. But there is no formula for these things, and the discerning writer will make his own rules.

The prevailing weakness of Negro writings, from the viewpoint of art, is that they are too subjective. The colored writer, generally speaking, has not yet passed the point of thinking of himself first as a Negro, burdened with the

responsibility of defending and uplifting his race. Such a frame of mind, however praiseworthy from a moral standpoint, is bad for art. Tell your story, and if it is on a vital subject, well told, with an outcome that commends itself to right-thinking people, it will, if interesting, be an effective brief for whatever cause it incidentally may postulate.

Why let Octavus Roy Cohen or Hugh Wiley have a monopoly of the humorous side of Negro life? White artists caricatured the Negro on the stage until Ernest Hogan and Bert Williams discovered that colored men could bring out the Negro's more amusing characteristics in a better and more interesting way.

Why does not some colored writer build a story around a Negro oil millionaire, and the difficulty he or she has in keeping any of his or her money? A Pullman porter who performs wonderful feats in the detection of crime has great possibilities. The Negro visionary who would change the world over night and bridge the gap between races in a decade would make an effective character in fiction. But the really epical race novel, in which love and hatred, high endeavor, success and failure, sheer comedy and stark tragedy are mingled, is yet to be written, and let us hope that a man of Negro blood may write it.

JOHN FREDERICK MATHEUS

Some Aspects of the Negro Interpreted in Contemporary American and European Literature (1934)

The destiny of the Negroes is in some degree entwined with that of the Europeans. The two races are bound one to the other, without being blended thereby. It is as difficult to separate them completely as to bring them completely together.

"The most frightful of all the evils which threaten the future of the United States rises from the presence of Negroes on their soil."

This quotation from Tocqueville's famous *Démocratie en Amérique*, written a century

ago during the turbulent generation of Andrew Jackson, is in turn taken from a study, made less than a decade ago by Professor Franck L. Schoell, of *The Color Question in the United States*.¹

Both these Frenchmen, though a hundred years apart, have sought to interpret to France, and thus to Europe, the status and life of the black population of the American Republic. Both are impartial, logical. Professor Schoell thoroughly and justly has presented statistical