

OUR NEGRO "INTELLECTUALS"

By Allison Davis

Allison Davis offers a critical analysis of black intellectuals. Davis believes that critical analysis is essential to understanding the place of blacks in America. This essay was published in August 1928.

For nearly ten years, our Negro writers have been "confessing" the distinctive sordidness and triviality of Negro life, and making an exhibition of their own unhealthy imagination, in the name of frankness and sincerity. Frankness is no virtue in itself, however, as any father will tell his son, nor is sincerity.

A dog or savage is "sincere" about his bestialities, but he is not therefore raised above them. The modern novel has been frankly and sincerely preoccupied with sex, but has not escaped an insane naturalism. It is a question, then, of the purpose for which one is being sincere. It is quite evident that the sincerity of Milton, of Fielding, and of Dr. Johnson is different in kind from the sincerity of Mr. D. H. Lawrence and Mr. James Joyce. If sincerity is to justify one in exploiting the lowest traits of human nature; and in ignoring that sense in man which Cicero says differentiates him from other animals—his sense for what is decent—then sincerity is a pander to a torpid animalism.

The plea of sincerity, of war against hypocrisy and sham, therefore, is no defense for the exhibitionism of Mr. George S. Schuyler and Mr. Eugene Gordon, nor for the sensationalism of such works as Dr. Rudolph Fisher's *HIGH YALLER* or Mr. Langston Hughes' *FINE CLOTHES TO THE JEW*. The first two writers by their coarse frivolousness and scandalmongering falsely represent that the Negro has no self-respect. A bawling

confession from the house-tops is a poor substitute for honest and discriminating self-examination, in race criticism as in religion. Mr. Schuyler and Mr. Gordon may be clever intellectual gymnasts; as such they belong with the vaudeville, and not with the men who set new currents of thought moving in Negro life. Of our Menckenes, however, more later; let us first include in our view those who ought to be termed our Van Vechtenites. Mr. Van Vechten is not responsible for the beginning of our literary effort to appear primitive, but he brought the movement to its complete fruition, and gave it the distinction of his patronage.

Our writers started almost ten years ago to capitalize the sensational and sordid in Negro life, notably in Harlem, by making it appear that Negro life is distinctive for its flaming "color," its crude and primitive emotion. This facile acceptance of the old, romantic delusion of "racial literatures," which goes back beyond Taine all the way to Mme. de Stael, was a convenient mould for the energies of writers who had no tradition to guide them in treating Negro themes. What was more to the point, it interested the sophisticated



Langston Hughes

reading public, at the height of the "jazz age" following the war, because it seemed to bring fresh and primitive forces to a jaded age.

These young writers hit upon two means of injecting primitivistic color in

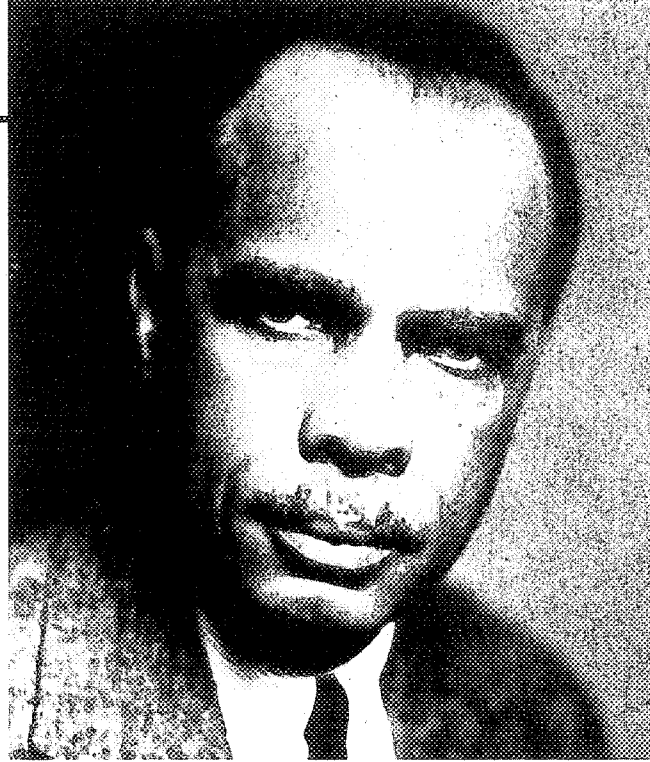
their work; one, the use of the Harlem cabaret and night life, and the other, a return to the African jungles. Since Mr. Mackay's *HARLEM DANCER*, the cabaret has been an unhealthy obsession with these youths, who in their relative naiveté imagine that there is something profoundly stirring about the degradation of its habitués. Even the best writers, Mr. McKay, Mr. Cullen, Mr. Hughes, and Dr. Fisher, as well as many of their less gifted imitators, have exploited the cabaret. The jazz band became the model which the Negro poet sought to imitate. It is particularly unfortunate that Mr. James Weldon Johnson should yield to this jazzy primitivism in choosing the title *GOD'S TROMBONES* for a work purporting to represent the Negro's religious fervor. Of course here, as always, the Negro movement must be seen in relation to the broader current of American literature. Mr. Waldo Frank, Mr. Scott Fitzgerald, and a host of other white authors were at the same time popularizing the jazz complex. In illustration, moreover, Mr. Miguel Covarrubias and Mr. Winold Reiss did more than Mr. Aaron Douglas and Mr. Richard Bruce to represent the Negro as essentially bestialized by jazz and the cabaret.

In this mad rush to make the Negro exhibit his sensational and primitivistic qualities, our young writers did not lack white support. Mr. Carl Van Doren encouraged them in this fashion: "But if the reality of Negro life is itself dramatic, there are of course still other elements, particularly the emotional power with which Negroes live—or at least to me seem to live. What American literature decidedly needs at the moment is color, music, gusto, the free expression of gay or desperate moods. If the Negroes are not in a position to contribute these items, I do not know what Americans are." Mr. Max Rheinhardt spoke of the necessity for the Negro dramatist's remaining true to the original spontaneity of his race by portraying "pure emotion, almost independent of words or setting." This myth of the spiritual and artistic virtue of spontaneous emotion in the Negro was enthusiastically supported by Mr. Carl Van Vechten. I think that the severest charge one can make against Mr. Van Vechten is that he misdirected a genuine poet, who gave promise of a power and technique exceptional in any poetry—Mr. Hughes. Mr. Van Vechten disclaims any influence upon Mr. Hughes' first book, *THE WEARY BLUES*, for which he wrote a preface

expressing undiluted primitivism. The evident reply is that the drop from the best poems of this first book to any of those in *FINE CLOTHES TO THE JEW*, which Mr. Van Vechten undoubtedly *did* influence, is the real proof of his having finally misdirected Mr. Hughes.

Now came the devastating result of the primitivism which our Negro writers had concocted and made a holy cause. *NIGGER HEAVEN* was the *telos*, the perfect flowering of the "cabaret school." By means of the same sensational primitivism and the creation of half a dozen cabarets which Harlem could never boast, Mr. Van Vechten warped Negro life into a fantastic barbarism. What was most pernicious in *NIGGER HEAVEN* was the representation that the Negro upper class is identical with the pleasure-seekers and cabaret-rounders. *NIGGER HEAVEN* was the logical outcome of the forces our "intellectuals" had championed for five years, and in a very real sense these "intellectuals" were responsible for its writing and its success. With its appearance there arose in the minds of many Negro writers and readers some doubt concerning the whole movement toward "color" and exhibitionism. The most prominent writers, however, could not evade the natural result of their own practice, and defended Mr. Van Vechten on the ground of artistic sincerity, for which they found proof chiefly in his mixing socially with Negroes. Here again the pretense of sincerity justified the most unalleviated sensationalism. In fact, the total effect of the whole movement was that Negroes are sincerely bestial.

An atavistic yearning for the African jungles, which was entirely simulated, was the second device of these poets for adding "color" to the Negro. The desire of young poets to "dance naked under palm trees," and to express themselves in jungle loves has been the favorite device for making poetry authentically Negroid. Tom-toms, love-dances, strange passions and savage urges have been the paraphernalia of almost every budding poetaster. Even Mr. Cullen made especial use of the jungle urge in his early and best known poems, *HERITAGE* and *THE SHROUD OF COLOR*. This whole primitivistic interpretation of the



James Weldon Johnson

Negro is the white man's facile point of view, and our Negro "intellectuals" wanted to appear as the white man would have them. The most important assertion of the related primitivism of cabaret and jungle is the work of a white poet, Mr. Lindsay's *CONGO*. There is nothing more foreign to the Negro's imagination than this yearning for savage Africa, and it is a false note every time it is struck by a Negro poet. The African tradition which we want to uncover and make fruitful is certainly not that of savagery, but of self-containment, fortitude, and culture.

At times the poets achieved something beautiful and significant in spite of their material and creed. Mr. McKay's poem, *HARLEM SHADOWS* touches on nobility and a higher imaginative view than most American realistic poetry ever reaches. The title poem of Mr. Hughes' *THE WEARY BLUES* created a representative symbol for the frustration and inertia into which Negro life is penned. There were poems in McKay, Cullen, and Hughes which gave evidence of a higher understanding of Negro life, but this quality of their imagination was not developed. Mr. Hughes especially chose to exploit the meretricious themes of jazz, instead of developing the powers shown in such poems as *AUNT SUE'S STORIES* and *WHEN SUE WEARS RED*. The indubitable gift of Mr. Hughes and of one or two other poets was sacrificed to a dogma, which necessitated their being atavistic and "colorful" at the expense of a full and experimental development of their imagination.

The untrammelled self-expression which the supporters of the movement claimed for it was actually freedom only to be as *primitivistic* as one liked. There was no freedom from the creed that a Negro poet ought to be barbaric.

II

Our primitivistic poets and story-tellers have been ousted from the stage lately by a rising group of young critics, writing for magazines and Negro newspapers. They are Menckenites, largely inspired by their master's attack upon Negro preachers and "misleaders," and his heralding of the self-critical Negro. Now the genuine critic is the individual who can fix upon the excellent and significant in the welter of all that is obvious and passing, and who can reveal how this seed may be made fruitful. Even though he must expose what is trivial or pernicious, he moves from a perception of what is true. Such a critic will illustrate his higher standards by the point from which he attacks false standards. His criticism, then, is vital, even in the act of denying. We do not look to him for reform and solutions, but we do expect him to give currency to real and high principles. In applying these standards with an *esprit de finesse* to the ever shifting flux of the energies which make for chaos, he will give perspective to the so-called "men of action."

A vital grasp upon standards, then, and the ability to apply them flexibly to the "gushing forth of novelties" which is the other side of life are the qualifications of the critic. Our Negro "intellectuals" have tried to substitute a display of their own and the race's eccentricities for these virtues. Mr. Schuyler and Mr. Gordon are likely to become the forerunners of a line of young critics, who will pose as the thoughtful and emancipated Negro. They will pretend to represent a positivistic and experimental attitude toward the Negro's situation, to replace the religious fatalism and inferiority complex of our older leaders. It is precisely this specious liberalism in our little Menckenites, which makes them dangerous. The Negro to-day is at a critical and strategic point of transition, where the cry of intellectual emancipation will lead him after false lights, unless he is willing to be thoroughly critical. We must avoid the recurrent, human tendency to exchange one extreme for another.

Complete trust of all that parades as intelligence, and an effort to be hypercritical are not the proper cure for an inferiority complex. Smartness and a superficial cynicism are not substitutes for reflection and vision.

Mr. Schuyler and Mr. Gordon are interested only in expressing themselves, their cleverness without taste, their radicalism without intelligence, their contempt for Negro leaders and our upper class, uninformed by serious principles. The most obvious fact concerning Mr. Schuyler's articles is their coarse flippancy which he no doubt means to be a protective hardening for the sensitiveness and race-consciousness of Negroes. But to become hardened to such terms as "smoke," "Ziggaboo," "crow," "dinge," "shine," or to take refuge in thumbing one's nose by hurling back "cracker," "peckerwood," and "hill-billy," is not to gain stoical strength, but to lose self-respect. The qualities which have kept the Negro's spirit unbroken are a gift for irony of a broader kind, and an everlasting fortitude.

Reflection and contemplation, alone, can insure the critic's virtues of perspective and balance. Reflection is made evident by one's discrimination, one's power of making vital distinctions. What Mr. Schuyler, Mr. Gordon, and their school, as well as Mr. Mencken, lack, is just this faculty of discriminating judgment. Mr. Schuyler especially reveals his lack of all standards in his frivolous and universal cynicism. In his indiscriminate jeering at all efforts to ameliorate white animosity and injustice, and at the efforts of such men as "Dr. Lampblack of the Federal Society for the Exploitation of Lynching, who will eloquently hold forth for the better part of an hour on the blackamoor's gifts to the Great Republic, and why, therefore, he should not be kept down," Mr. Schuyler betrays his own intellectual muddle.

Mr. Gordon's innocence of any standards and his intellectual confusion are illustrated by his naive theory that the tradition which the Negro wants to preserve is that of the black-face minstrel and the Stephen Foster folk. THE NEGRO'S INHIBITIONS, so far as it is at all honest and serious, is an unconscious *reductio and absurdum* of the primitivistic creed. The Negro is to treasure his eccentricities simply because they are spontaneous and differentiate him from the white man! If Mr. Gordon had any real perception he would have found ideals based upon the charac-

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READINGS FROM THE CRISIS

ter of the Negro which distinguish him from the white man in a more fundamental sense. The qualities which have moulded the Negro are not emotional crudeness and colorful spontaneity; they are fortitude, an oriental spirituality and unworldliness, and a faculty of laughing at any tendency towards self-pity, which more than anything human approaches the laughter of Mr. O'Neil's Lazarus!

Without intelligent standards, then, our Menckenites still insist upon expressing themselves. What they really set up for our improvement, in the place of standards, is their own personality. The virtue of their writing they believe to lie in the brilliance and iconoclastic smartness with which they demolish what is obviously ignorant and mean. Every man or movement treated is warped and caricatured by the necessity for displaying their own temperament. Mr. Schuyler expresses his fantastic misconception of the affluence recently acquired by Negro writers, in this fashion: "the black scribblers, along with the race orators, are now wallowing in the luxury of four-room apartments, expensive radios, Chickering pianos, Bond Street habiliments, canvas-back duck, pre-war Scotch, and high yellow mistresses." And Mr. Schuyler is "wallowing" in his own temperament! Similarly Mr. Gordon's representation that most Negroes are blind apes of everything in the white world is only a reflection of his individual desire to pose before the white public. So long as we have had romantic confessionalists, we have been acquainted with those who desire "to publish themselves," in Emerson's phrase; but when they set themselves up as serious critics, they become public dangers.

III

Our "intellectuals," then, both those in literature and those in race criticism, have capitalized the sensational aspects of Negro life, at the expense of general truth and sound judgment. Primitivism has carried the imagination of our poets and storytellers into the unhealthy and abnormal. A sterile cynicism has driven our Menckenized critics into smart coarseness. With regard to the primitivists, the first thing to be settled is whether our lives are to be interpreted with relation to the Negro race or the human race. Are there any traits peculiar to Negro character, and if



H.L. Mencken

so, are those traits especially crude emotions? It will appear, I think, that the qualities of fortitude, irony, and a relative absence of self-pity are the most important influences in the lives of Negroes, and that these qualities are the secret strength of that part of us which is one with a universal human nature. Our poets and writers of fiction have failed to interpret this broader human nature in Negroes, and found it relatively easy to disguise their lack of a higher imagination by concentrating upon immediate and crude emotions.

Our critic "intellectuals" also lack this quality of elevation. Mr. Schuyler, Mr. Gordon, and their imitators, (at two removes from Mr. Mencken!) are preoccupied with the sordid and trivial aspects of Negro life. On the whole, the facts of Negro life are sordid; they have been so for three hundred years, as a result of slavery and will very likely remain so for sometime to come. *We are going on our grit*, and it is these higher secret powers which I have indicated, (call them spiritual or chemical, as you like) which we must preserve and apply intelligently to our future development. Self-respect is vital if we are to retain our courage, and self-respect is precisely the quality which these critics lack. "Such conceits as clownage keeps in pay" are their qualifications, and the Negro has had enough clowning—from his leaders down. I have already defined the true critic as the individual who holds fast to his perception of what is excellent and real, in the midst of appearances, and who applies his standards with discrimination to the flux of actual life. The genuinely qualified critics of Negro life will fix upon the inner strength of Negro character as illustrated in the last three hundred years, and, discounting the trivial and irrelevant, will reinterpret these persistent characteristics for the new Negro to whom he will be as an eye.