

Editorial Essay

Harlem: A Forum of Negro Life, November 1928.

In the past there have been only a few sporadic and inevitably unsuccessful attempts to provide the Negro with an independent magazine of literature and thought. Those magazines which have lived throughout a period of years have been organs of some philanthropic organization whose purpose was to fight the more virulent manifestations of race prejudice. The magazines themselves have been pulpits for alarmed and angry Jeremiahs spouting fire and venom or else weeping and moaning as if they were either predestined or else unable to do anything else. For a while this seemed to be the only feasible course for Negro journalists to take. To the Negro then the most important and most tragic thing in the world was his own problem here in America. He was interested only in making white people realize what dastards they were in denying him equal economic opportunities or in lynching him upon the slightest provocation. This, as has been said, was all right for a certain period, and the journalists of that period are not to be censured for the truly daring and important work they did do. Rather, they are to be blamed for not changing their journalistic methods when time and conditions warranted such a change, and for doing nothing else but preaching and moaning until they completely lost their emotional balance and their sense of true values. Every chord on their publicist instrument had been broken save one, and they continued raucously to twang this, unaware that they were ludicrously out of tune with the other instruments in their environment.

Then came the so-called renaissance and the emergence of the so-called new (in this case meaning widely advertised) Negro. As James Weldon Johnson says in the current issue of *Harper's* magazine: "The Negro has done a great deal through his folk art creations to change the national attitudes toward him; and now the efforts of the race have been reinforced and magnified by the individual Negro artist, the conscious artist. . . . Overnight, as it were, America became aware that there were Negro artists and that they had something worthwhile to say. This awareness first manifested itself in black America, for, strange as it may seem, Negroes themselves, as a mass, had had little or no consciousness of their own individual artists."

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Naturally these new voices had to be given a place in Negro magazines and they were given space that hitherto had been devoted only to propaganda. But the artist was not satisfied to be squeezed between jeremiads or have his work thrown haphazardly upon a page where there was no effort to make it look beautiful as well as sound beautiful. He revolted against shoddy and sloppy publication methods, revolted against the patronizing attitudes his elders assumed toward him, revolted against their editorial astigmatism and their intolerance of new points of view. But revolting left him without a journalistic asylum. True, he could, and did, contribute to the white magazines, but in doing this almost exclusively he felt that he was losing touch with his own group, for he knew just how few Negroes would continually buy white magazines in order to read articles and stories by Negro authors, and he also

knew that from a sense of race pride, if nothing more, there were many Negroes who would buy a Negro magazine.

The next step then was for the artist himself to produce this new type of journal. With little money but a plethora of ideas and ambition he proceeded to produce independent art magazines of his own. In New York, *Fire!!* was the pioneer of the movement. It flamed for one issue and caused a sensation the like of which had never been known in Negro journalism before. Next came *Black Opals* in Philadelphia, a more conservative yet extremely worthwhile venture. Then came *The Quill* in Boston which was to be published whenever its sponsors felt the urge to bring forth a publication of their own works for the benefit of themselves and their friends. And there were other groups of younger Negroes in Chicago, Kansas City and Los Angeles who formed groups to bring out independent magazines which never became actualities.

This last development should have made someone realize that a new type of publication was in order. The old propagandistic journals had served their day and their generation well, but they were emotionally unprepared to serve a new day and a new generation. The art magazines, unsoundly financed as they were, could not last. It was time for someone with vision to found a wholly new type of magazine, one which would give expression to all groups, one which would take into consideration the fact that this was a new day in the history of the American Negro, that this was a new day in the history of the world and that new points of view and new approaches to old problems were necessary and inescapable.

Harlem hopes to fill this new need. It enters the field without any preconceived editorial prejudices, without intolerance, without a reformer's cudgel. It wants merely to be a forum in which all people's opinions may be presented intelligently and from which the Negro can gain some universal idea of what is going on in the world of thought and art. It wants to impress upon the literate members of the thirteen million Negroes in the United States the necessity of becoming "book conscious," the necessity of reading the newer Negro authors, the necessity of realizing that the Negro is not the only,

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nor the worst mistreated minority group in the world, the necessity of sublimating their inferiority complex and their extreme race sensitiveness and putting the energy, which they have hitherto used in moaning and groaning, into more concrete fields of action.

To this end *Harlem* will solicit articles on current events, essays of the more intimate kind, short stories and poetry from both black and white writers; the only qualification being that they have sufficient literary merit to warrant publication. *Harlem* will also promote debates on both racial and non-racial issues, giving voice to as many sides as there seem to be to the question involved. It will also be a clearing house for the newer Negro literature, striving to aid the younger writers, giving them a medium of expression and intelligent criticism. It also hopes to impress the Negro reading public with the necessity for a more concerted and well-balanced economic and political program. It believes that the commercial and political elements within the race are just as in need of clarification as the literary element and will expend just as much energy and time in the latter fields as in the former.

This is *Harlem's* program, its excuse for existence. It now remains to be seen whether the Negro public is as ready for such a publication as the editors and publishers of *Harlem* believe it to be.

