

Why So Much Ado About the Harlem Negro?

In Harlem One Finds Laughing, Dancing, Singing, Fool. There Are No restraints, No Economic Dependence or Established Social Circles. Brooklyn Different and Remote as Philadelphia.

By KELLY MILLER

That bedarkened rectangular of New York City, known as Harlem is the product of the twentieth century. Until then the New Negro made little impression on public attention except the conflict that lived in Brooklyn. Those on the west side of the East were so distributed and divided one could not find enough of in any one place to sustain worthwhile social life. We hear much of the Negroes of Washington, Philadelphia, Boston and Cleveland but never a word about New York.

Harlem is purely an immigrant community. The original New Yorker has little part and parcel. Indeed the Brooklyn colony is remote in temper and tempo from Harlem counterpart as if they were a hundred miles apart. Let us leave out Brooklyn and other boroughs which constitute no part of the social or spiritual life, Harlem had fewer Negroes in 1920 than Philadelphia, Washington, Chicago and Baltimore. And yet we hear little of the Negroes of these great cities compared with the fame of Harlem which has filled the whole country. Upon what meat has this little of Negroes fed that they have become so great?

The New Negro is a Harlem Product.

The new Negro is a Harlem product. He has been drawn there from the ends of the land and from the ends of the world and has evolved a soul peculiar to himself. No publisher dreams of risking the issuance of a book descriptive of the Washington, Baltimore, Philadelphia or Chicago Negro. But scores of volumes have rolled from the press describing of this new "Nigger Heaven."

Public seems never to tire at recounting of his inimitable antics. It is here for the first time the Negro finds himself exposed in a friendly environment which encourages him to speak out and express himself without restraint or inhibition. Boston was too Puritan and crushed out all outpouring of native Negro genius with its austerity and gloom. Washington turned him back on the poverty of his culture. Philadelphia became satisfied with being a carbon copy of the old Quaker aristocracy. Baltimore was absorbed in the old domesticities, while Chicago was busy packing pork.

Negro a Stranger to New York's Foreigners.

The Harlem Negro is not new at all. He is a same old Negro entering a new environment.

New York is the fun center of the nation. The funmakers are not natives nor Anglo-Saxons with their Puritanical notions and intolerance of race prejudice. They are Irish, Russian, Pole, South European. To him the Negro is a strange human thing, with inimitable voice, with humor and grimace. He sings a song never heard before. He dances as none else can dance. He laughs and sings and shouts in such a way that none can equal. His manner and tempo are all his own. He adds to the repertoire of song, the jazz, the jubilee and the blues.

Go to, they say, here is a source of cultural wealth which if properly exploited will bring fame to the performers and fortune to the promoters. So they take the street boys from Atlanta, Birmingham and Birmingham, give training and discipline to their native endowments and turn them back as actors, mimics and comedians to fill the fashionable houses and concert halls of the cities where they might have remained and died mute and inglorious.

New Negro is a Dancing, Singing Fool.

Harlem originates nothing, it gives development and start to what gathered from far and near. The new Negro is a what you might call a laughing, dancing, singing fool if we might borrow the phrase from Al Jolson's most famous role. It becomes ridiculous only when he begins to take himself too seriously. His excellence lies in his unconsciousness of it.

When he undertakes consciously to portray himself he usually makes a fiasco or a fizzle. His novels, poems and short stories portraying him in conscious terms are usually grotesque and bizarre. The magazines have opened wide their pages to Negro writers who would burlesque their race. The publishers, masters of the tribe of Judah, have welcomed Negro authorship after the Harlem type.

One rarely finds in such a life any deep analysis or serious reflection on the basic human relationship, but a life of froth and froth, and froth and froth.

Harlemites are Free of All Restraints.

The typical Harlem Negro is himself free from all restraints, religious, economic, political, social, even ethical. The atheist, the mystic, the radical, the Communist, the Bolshevik abound.

But after all one does not find in Harlem economic independence, industrial self sufficiency, established social circles, a body of high educated men and women of sustained positions above the level of domestic and personal service, the definite devotion to stated social ideals, which the permanence and stability of human order depends.