

Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto

NEGRO NEW YORK, 1890-1930

By Gilbert Osofsky

HARPER & ROW, PUBLISHERS



NEW YORK

TO MOM AND POP,
THE REAL SCHOLARS

HARLEM: THE MAKING OF A GHETTO. Copyright © 1963, 1965, 1966 by Gilbert Osofsky. Material which originally appeared in American Quarterly: Copyright © 1964, 1965 by the Trustees of the University of Pennsylvania. Printed in the United States of America. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information address Harper & Row, Publishers, Incorporated, 10 East 53rd Street, New York, N.Y. 10022.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOG CARD NUMBER: 66-10913

Epilogue:

Symbols of the Jazz Age— The New Negro and Harlem Discovered

"You don't know, you don't know my mind,
When you see me laughin', I'm laughin'
to keep from cryin'. . . ."

—Negro folksong

"Within the past ten years Harlem has
acquired a world-wide reputation.

. . . It is . . . known as being exotic,
colourful, and sensuous; a place
where life wakes up at night."

—James Weldon Johnson, *Black Manhattan* (1930)

I

The dominant patterns of Harlem life were largely set in the 1920's, and have remained remarkably unchanged ever since. The intensity of most Harlem social problems has gradually diminished in the last generation, but two surveys of the community in the 1960's, *Youth in the Ghetto* and *A Harlem Almanac*, depict a neighborhood strikingly similar to the ghetto of the twenties.¹ The present generation has inherited the unsolved problems of the past.

If the 1920's added anything to our knowledge of social conditions in Harlem, it presented a distorted and negative image of reality. The Negro community was "discovered" in the twenties, and its reputation was not that of a tragic slum, but a "place of laughing, swaying, and dancing"; and this image spread not only throughout the nation but throughout the world. European visitors considered a trip to Harlem a "must" on their itineraries of American sights, and European journals carried articles on the community's "exotic" night spots.² "Within the past ten years," James Weldon Johnson noted in

1930, "Harlem has acquired a world-wide reputation." It would be difficult to find a better example of the confusions, distortions, half-truths and quarter-truths that are the foundations of racial and ethnic stereotypes than the white world's image of Harlem in the 1920's.

The portrayal of Harlem that developed in the twenties was primarily a product of broader changes in American society. The 1920's, as is well known, was a remarkable age in American intellectual history. A cultural rebellion of the first order erupted from beneath the complacency and conservatism that were dominant characteristics of American society and politics then. It was the time writers, artists, scholars, aesthetes and bohemians became aware of the standardization of life that resulted from mass production and large-scale, efficient industrialization—the "Machine Civilization," that "profound national impulse [that] drives the hundred millions steadily toward uniformity."³ These intellectuals declared war on tenets of American thought and faith that had remained sacrosanct for three hundred years. As a by-product of their attack on traditional American middle-class values, which were constantly called "Puritanical," literary rebels and others discovered the Negro, America's "outcast," and created a semimythical dreamland which they came to idealize—"storied Harlem."⁴

In some part, this growing national awareness was caused by significant changes within Negro society. There seemed to be a new militancy in the Negro world during and after World War I—reflected in Harlem's well-known Silent Parade to protest the 1917 East St. Louis race riots, in the racial program and consciousness of Marcus Garvey, in A. Philip Randolph's struggling movement to found the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and Maids, in the numerous little leftist groups active in Harlem, in the national campaign to promote federal antilynching legislation. Yet American society did not really take these movements seriously in the 1920's—Garvey was considered a comical figure; an antilynching law was never enacted; riots continued; Randolph's union made little headway before the Great Depression; the leftists were largely ignored or considered crackpots.⁵

The twenties also saw the rise of a noteworthy group of Negro writers and scholars, and America gave *them* considerable recognition. Some of the novels, plays, poems, books and articles of Countée Cullen, James Weldon Johnson, George S. Schuyler, Claude McKay,

Wallace Thurman, Zora Neale Hurston, Jessie Fauset, Rudolph Fisher, Jean Toomer, Charles S. Johnson, E. Franklin Frazier and others were good enough in their own right to justify public acclaim. The poetry of Langston Hughes continues to be widely read. Harlem was the center of this "New Negro Renaissance" and, like an "ebony flute," it lured Negro writers to it: "Harlem was like a great magnet for the Negro intellectual, pulling him from everywhere," Langston Hughes wrote.⁶ Claude McKay came to Harlem from Jamaica, after two years at an agricultural college in Kansas; Jean Toomer originally came from an Alabama plantation; Langston Hughes arrived in 1921 after a sojourn in Mexico. "I can never put on paper the thrill of the underground ride to Harlem," Hughes recalled. "I went up the steps and out into the bright September sunlight. Harlem! I stood there, dropped my bags, took a deep breath and felt happy again."⁷ Wherever they wandered in the twenties, and many went to Paris or Africa for a time ("The cream of Harlem was in Paris"), the Negro literati always returned *Home to Harlem* (to use the title of a McKay novel). Little theater, art and political-discussion groups flourished in the community. Negro literary and political magazines made their appearance: *Fire*, *The Messenger*, *Voice of the Negro*, *The Negro Champion*, *Harlem*. The One Hundred and Thirty-fifth Street library became Harlem's cultural center. "The Schomburg Collection," George S. Schuyler remembered, "used to be a great gathering place for all the people of the Renaissance."⁸ In the 1920's one could hear lectures there by such prominent people as Franz Boas, W. E. B. DuBois, Carl Van Doren, James Weldon Johnson, Carter G. Woodson, Kelly Miller, Melville J. Herskovits, R. R. Moton and Arthur A. Schomburg. Harlem became what contemporaries called the "Mecca of the New Negro."⁹

Some observers, Negro and white, looked to this outburst of literary and artistic expression as a significant step toward a more general acceptance of Negroes by American society. Alain Locke, gifted writer and Howard University professor, argued that social equality would result from the recognition of the Negro as an "artist class." "It seems that the interest in the cultural expression of Negro life . . . heralds an almost revolutionary revaluation of the Negro," he wrote in 1927. It was "an augury of a new democracy in American culture."¹⁰ Heywood Broun, well-known journalist and critic, addressed the New York Urban League at a Harlem church.

He believed "a supremely great negro artist, [an artist] who could catch the imagination of the world, would do more than any other agency to remove the disabilities against which the negro race now labors." "This great artist may come at any time," Broun concluded, and he asked his audience to remain silent for ten seconds to imagine the coming of the savior-genius.¹¹ This same theme of a broad cultural acceptance evolving from the recognition of the "New Negro" as "a creator" dominates the writings of James Weldon Johnson in the twenties. Johnson and others somehow believed that American racism was a process that could be reasoned with; a phenomenon that would crumble when whites recognized that Negroes had extraordinary artistic talents. "I am coming to believe," Johnson wrote his close friend Carl Van Vechten, "that nothing can go farther to destroy race prejudice than the recognition of the Negro as a creator and contributor to American civilization."¹² "Harlemites thought the millennium had come," Langston Hughes remembered. "They thought the race problem had at last been solved though Art. . . ."¹³

There was an element of realism in the romantic hopes of Johnson, Broun and Locke. For white Americans to grant that the Negro was capable of making *any* contribution to American culture was in itself a new idea—"that the Negro is a creator as well as creature . . . a giver as well as . . . receiver."¹⁴ A new and more liberal vision of democracy developed among social scientists in the twenties. Scholars like Robert E. Park, Herbert A. Miller, Franz Boas, Melville J. Herskovits, Charles S. Johnson, Bruno Lasker, E. Franklin Frazier and Horace M. Kallen attacked traditional American attitudes toward assimilation and "Americanization." A more vital and beautiful democracy would arise, they argued, by permitting ethnic groups to maintain their individuality, rather than conceiving them as swallowed up, or melted down, in the one dominant American culture. Each group, given freedom of expression and development, would then make valuable contributions to American society. Diversity, cultural pluralism, should be fostered and encouraged, they wrote, not stifled.¹⁵

A spate of articles and books published in the twenties seriously analyzed and attempted to understand the Negro's place in the nation. The dozens of volumes about Negroes written by pseudo-scientists and racists at the turn of the century were replaced by works which attempted to cut through racial stereotypes ("general-

ized theories about racial qualities") and tried to find some viable program of "interracial cooperation." "The American Negro can no longer be dismissed as an unimportant element in the population of the United States," one man concluded. Bruno Lasker's *And Who is My Neighbor?* and *All Colors* were among the earliest serious studies of American interracial attitudes.¹⁶ *The Annals* of the American Academy of Political and Social Science printed a thick volume of studies on Negroes by the nation's leading scholars.¹⁷ *The World Tomorrow*, a fascinating Christian-Pacifist journal, devoted two full issues to similar articles in the 1920's.¹⁸ Most of the major periodicals of the decade contained many serious and important studies of Negro life. The artistic and human value of Negro spirituals, folk songs, folk legends and music was first seriously recognized in the twenties (many considered them America's most important contributions to world culture); Darius Milhaud, after listening to Negro music in Lenox Avenue cafés, composed pieces which made use of jazz rhythms and instruments; *In Abraham's Bosom*, one of Paul Green's many plays of southern Negro life, won the Pulitzer Prize in 1927; Eugene O'Neill and Robert E. Sherwood constructed plays and novels around Negro characters and themes.¹⁹ As important as this new recognition was, however, it was a minor trend in American thought. The generation that advocated cultural pluralism was also the generation that revived the Ku Klux Klan, and permanently restricted foreign immigration into the United States.

Had intellectuals like Johnson and Locke looked more critically at the stereotype of the "New Negro" that developed in the writings of most white commentators of the twenties, they would have further questioned the extent of interracial understanding that existed then. White literary rebels created a "vogue in things Negro," "an enthusiasm for Negro life and art" that bordered on being a cult.²⁰ They saw Negroes not as people but as symbols of everything America was not. The concept of the existence of a "New Negro" and the publicity given to it in the 1920's was primarily the result of this new awareness and interest in Negro society by what one writer called the "New White Man."²¹ The generation that discovered "newness" all around itself—New Humanism, New Thought, New Women, New Criticism, New Psychology, New Masses, New Poetry, New Science, New Era, New Words, New Morality and so on—also found a "New Negro"; and the concept became a cultural weapon: "Another

Bombshell Fired into the Heart of Bourgeois Culture." "Negro stock is going up," novelist Rudolph Fisher wrote, "and everybody's buying."²²

In the literature of the twenties, Negroes were conceived as "expressive" ("a singing race") in a society burdened with "unnatural inhibitions"; their lives were "primitive" and "exotic" (these two words appear repeatedly) in a "dull," "weary," and "monotonous" age; they could laugh and love freely in a "land flowing with Socony and Bryan and pristine Rotary purity." Negroes were presented as people who lived an "entire lifetime of laughs and thrills, [of] excitement and fun"—they had an "innate gayety of soul." "Ecstasy," Joseph Wood Krutch noted in *The Nation*, "seems . . . to be his [the Negro's] natural state."²³ The stereotype of the Negro that existed in American society in the nineteenth century, and which I described earlier, was largely untouched by the new interest in Negro life. It continued in such "all-talking melodramas" as "Lucky Sambo," "Hearts in Dixie," and "Hallelujah," or in the new radio hit "Amos and Andy." In the twenties, however, the ludicrous image of the Negro as "darky" became a subordinate theme, eclipsed by the conception of the Negro as sensuous and rhythmic African. Negroes were still thought to be alienated from traditional American virtues and values, as they had been since colonial times, but this was now considered a great asset. "To Americans," a perceptive contemporary wrote in 1929, "the Negro is not a human being but a concept."²⁴

II

This was the background against which white America and the world came to know Harlem: "with our eyes focused on the Harlem scene we may dramatically glimpse the New Negro." A large Negro community had gathered in Harlem prior to World War I, but aside from small numbers of dedicated social workers, American society seemed willing to overlook its existence. In the twenties, however, Harlem was made a national symbol—a symbol of the "New Negro"; a symbol of the Jazz Age. It was seen as the antithesis of Main Street, Zenith and Gopher Prairie. Whatever seemed thrilling, bizarre or sensuous about Harlem life became a part of the community's image; whatever was sad or tragic about it, ignored. "White folks discovered black magic there," Claude McKay said.²⁵

Harlem of the twenties was presented as a "great playground,"

America's answer to Paris.²⁶ The institution that best describes this aspect of Harlem's image was the white slumming party: "it became quite a rage . . . to go to night clubs in Harlem," Carl Van Vechten recalled.²⁷ Cabarets were filled nightly with handsomely dressed white slummers who danced the Charleston or Black Bottom, listened to jazz or watched risqué revues. Some night spots, like the Cotton Club (which had "the hottest show in town") and Connie's Inn (which competed for the honor), catered exclusively to whites. They were, a journalist commented, dives "where white people from downtown could be entertained by colored girls."²⁸ If one were looking "to go on moral vacation," or wished to soften "the asperities of a Puritan conscience," Harlem's cabarets promised to do the job. The following is an advertisement, written especially for "white consumption," and distributed by a man who supplied "Slumming Hostesses" to "inquisitive Nordics" (each card was said to have a suggestive picture on it):²⁹

Here in the world's greatest city it would both amuse and also interest you to see the real inside of the New Negro Race of Harlem. You have heard it discussed, but there are very few who really know. . . . I am in a position to carry you through Harlem as you would go slumming through Chinatown. My guides are honest and have been instructed to give the best service. . . . Your season is not completed with thrills until you have visited Harlem.

"White people," the *Age* commented, "are taking a morbid interest in the night life of [Harlem]."³⁰

And the interest continued to grow throughout the decade. Carl Van Vechten's novel of Harlem life, *Nigger Heaven* (1926), sold 100,000 copies "almost immediately," and brought its author a substantial fortune. It was translated into French, Swedish, Russian and Japanese.³¹ Van Vechten's book contained some interesting commentaries on the structure and problems of Negro society—the role of the middle class; "passing"; prejudice; color-consciousness—but its plot was contrived, sensationalistic and melodramatic; replete with orgies, drugs and seduction; a hodgepodge of *True Confessions* and the front pages of a tabloid. Its characters were unbelievable as people.³² "The squalor of Negro life, the vice of Negro life," Van Vechten said, "offer a wealth of novel, exotic, picturesque materials to the artist." *Nigger Heaven* was "recognized in every quarter . . . as the portrayal of contemporary life in Harlem," its publisher said

(and it undoubtedly was).³³ The white world looked curiously at the success of Marcus Garvey, whose movement basically reflected a profound Negro desire for racial pride and respect in a society that denied them, and concluded that Negroes in Harlem "have parades almost every day."³⁴ White intellectuals and bohemians knew Harlem through the cabarets, or at the famous parties in the salon of the "joy-goddess of Harlem," A'Lelia Walker's "Dark Tower": "dedicated to the aesthetes, young writers, sculptors, painters—a rendezvous where they may feel at home."³⁵ Bessie Smith, the great blues singer, toured America with her "Harlem Frolic" company. Josephine Baker ("Josephine of the Jazz Age") wowed them in Harlem as a young chorus girl, and went on to international acclaim in Europe. "From a world of stone with metal decoys/Drab stone streets and drab stone masses/New York's mold for the great middle-classes, Africa passes/With syncopated talking the Congo arouses."³⁶

White audiences, like gluttons at a feast, vicariously tasted the "high yallers," "tantalizin' tans," and "hot chocolates" that strutted around in the Blackbird Revues, or in such plays as *Lulu Belle* (1926) and *Harlem* (1928)—and made them top box-office successes. *Black Boy* and *Deep River*, dramas which emphasized a more serious side of Negro life, were failures.³⁷ "Ten years ago," one Negro reviewer of *Lulu Belle* commented, "this play would have been unprofitable. Twenty years ago it would have caused a riot."³⁸ The following is a handbill distributed to advertise the play *Harlem*, "A Thrilling Play of the Black Belt":³⁹

Harlem! . . . The City that Never Sleeps! . . .
A Strange, Exotic Island in the Heart of
New York! . . . Rent Parties! . . . Number
Runners! . . . Chippies! . . . Jazz Love! . . .
Primitive Passion!

"How soon this common theme shall reach the nauseating state," a caustic critic remarked, "is not easy to tell."⁴⁰

The Great Depression brought an abrupt end to the concept of a "New Negro" and the image of Harlem as an erotic utopia. A nation sobered by bread lines no longer searched for a dreamland inhabited by people who danced and loved and laughed for an "entire lifetime." America found the "New Negro" less enticing in the 1930's. Connie's Inn, the Lafayette Theatre and other places of entertainment went out of business. Leading figures of the Renaissance: Wallace Thur-

man, Richard B. Harrison, A'Lelia Walker, Rudolph Fisher, Charles S. Gilpin, Florence Mills and Arthur A. Schomburg died in the late twenties or thirties. Miss Walker's famous Villa Lewaro, another gathering place of the Renaissance, was sold at public auction. Most of the Negro literati, though not all, stopped writing or, if they continued to do so, found a less responsive American audience for their works.⁴¹ All the Negro literary magazines folded.

And, as the exotic vision of the twenties passed, a new image of Harlem emerged—a Harlem already known to stolid census-takers, city health officers and social workers. "The rosy enthusiasms and hopes of 1925," Alain Locke said ten years later, "were . . . cruelly deceptive mirages." The ghetto was revealed in the thirties as "a nasty, sordid corner into which black folk are herded"—"*a Harlem that the social worker knew all along but had not been able to dramatize. . . . There is no cure or saving magic in poetry and art for . . . precarious marginal employment, high mortality rates, civic neglect,*" Locke concluded.⁴² It was this Harlem, the neighborhood not visible "from the raucous interior of a smoke-filled, jazz-drunken cabaret," the Harlem hidden by the "bright surface . . . of . . . night clubs, cabaret tours and . . . arty magazines," that was devastated by the Depression; and has remained a community with an inordinate share of sorrow and deprivation ever since. "The depression brought everybody down a peg or two," Langston Hughes wrote. "And the Negroes had but few pegs to fall." The myth-world of the twenties had ended.⁴³