

ON HARLEM

Nugent wrote "On Harlem" for the Federal Writers' Project in the late thirties. Although Harlem's glamor had begun to fade, the events of the twenties were still lively, recent memories. The drawings of dancing Harlemites that accompany "On Harlem" were originally published in 1928 to illustrate Wallace Thurman's Dance Magazine article on jazz dance, "Harlem's Place in the Sun."¹

With the end of the war came the reaction. The entire country was caught in a boom of prosperity, spending, and license. The passing of the Eighteenth Amendment brought with it an entire topsy-turvy, exciting and incredible series of new industries, entertainments and pleasures. In New York, the post-war reaction reached exaggerated and glamorous heights. Money was easily acquired and freely spent. Saloons closed in fanfares of maudlin guzzling, only to be reborn as speakeasies. Greenwich Village blossomed into a mad bohemia that outdid any of those on the continent. Harlem flowered into a unique amusement center, and Broadway extended itself into the many side-streets.

Love cults, theatre groups and radical movements flourished in the "Village." That section of the city became the Mecca of practically every "struggling" artist, pseudo-artist and hanger-on in the country. At Hubert's Cafeteria on Sheridan Square, the great, near-great and nonentities of the underworld, the stage, art, literature and society rubbed elbows as they ate cheap food. In the middle of all this hectic activity, fantastic characters came to life and frequently produced worthwhile works. Washington Square, McDougal Street, West Fourth Street, Waverly Place and McDougal Alley housed and entertained these hordes. Eugene O'Neill was becoming known, as were the Provincetown Players, who had a theatre in a barn on McDougal Street. Floyd Dell, Theodore Dreiser and Claude McKay actually found time to write, despite (or because of) their thousand other activities. The



period was studded with the brilliant names of people and movements which have since become household words. *Liberator*, and later, *New Masses* came into being. The haute monde descended from Fifth and Madison Avenues, as did the equally expensive but not quite so social ladies from Park Avenue, to visit The Pepper Pot, The Pirate's Den, The Poet's Inn, Romany Marie's, The Garret, and the Mad Hatter.

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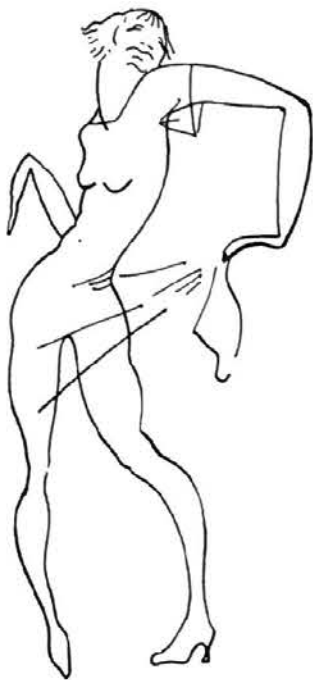
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Hundreds of honky-tonks and cabarets sprang up. The ever-growing crowds spilled into the thousands of speakeasies and gin-mills, which were already multiplying like mushrooms. Dim red or blue light glowed from the windows of apartments that seemed to rock with the shuffle of feet, as house-rent parties spewed their patrons into the adjacent hallways and side streets. Everywhere there was good feeling and impromptu jazz spirit.

Marcus Garvey exhorted the black peoples of the earth to join forces and take their place in the sun. Hubert Harrison deserted his superlative collection of erotic literature, second to none in New York, to translate his ideas about culture and the superiority of the black man into the Harlem idiom through which to harangue the man in the street from a soap box on any convenient corner. Sepia society gave lavish balls and dansants at the more properly exclusive halls in Harlem, demanding strict formal attire and guarantee of social eligibility. Paul Robeson's glorious voice was discovered hiding in the magnificent body which had carried him into the immortal ranks of the All American Team. The Negro was finding his place in the theatre, literature, music, sports and the arts. Or perhaps it was being found for him.



Ann Pennington, then with Ziegfeld's Follies, introduced the Charleston, the Black Bottom and the Mess Around—all dances which she had seen performed spontaneously while touring and fraternizing in Harlem. When the labor world wept in such impressive silence in Union Square at the murders of Sacco and Vanzetti, Negroes were conspicuous among the mourners. White comrades graciously gave their seats to Negro comrades at Labor Temple meetings. Claude McKay went to Soviet Russia. Julia Peterkin broadmindedly wrote about dear old plantation Negroes and scalawags. James Ford became a perennial candidate for the vice-presidency of the United States on the communist ticket. Paul Green dramatized black tragedy and had real live Negroes perform it. The Negro musical shows, *Shuffle Along* and *Runnin' Wild*, gave a world now warned and prepared a galaxy of tinted stars, including Florence Mills, Josephine Baker, Noble Sissle, and Miller and Lyles.

There was no "class" magazine which did not have contributions by or about Negroes. No poetry reading, literary gathering, cocktail party, underworld group, gang war, creditable business, labor organization, art gallery, religious society, physical culture sect, love cult, or Yogi philosophy school was com-

plete without having been graced by the inclusion of some member of this now strangely prevalent minority group. There was no pie in the city in which there was not a Negro thumb. The Negro in New York had come into his somewhat precarious and nebulous own.

To make a round of the cabarets and the honky-tonks that studded Harlem would have taken months. There was Small's on Fifth Avenue near 135th Street. Down a steep flight of stairs in a dimly lit cellar, a dozen or so tables surrounded a tiny dance floor on one side of which was the band—a five piece aggregation that played without the benefit of written music. None of the musicians could read music, nor did there seem to be any need for such superfluous knowledge. Other lights extinguished, a spotlight focused on a rotating mirror-chandelier which cast its million semi-bright reflections over the minute dance floor, and the band would just play. Jam session. Perhaps the clarinet would voice an unexpected, catchy riff, and pleased with the sound of it, would repeat the riff with variations. The saxophone might softly join in, feeling for harmony to the tune, and the drums would take up the improvised beat. Then the pianist would experiment with treble counterpoints, accenting the rhythm with a two-chord, gut-bucket bass and the thump of a rhythmic foot, while the bass fiddle would add its weird rhythm and monotone harmony. The patrons would be carried onto the floor on the almost physical wave of sensual sound, until there was no room left in which to move. There they would stand, belly to belly, pressed tightly one couple against the other, and shuffle their feet—"dancing on a dime." Shoulders, hips, entire bodies gyrated through all the ecstatic movements of more intimate congress as the dancers gave themselves

up to the rhythm of the band and the tune which seemed to pulsate in their loins and hips, so subtle a part of the dim glow and sensual atmosphere had it become. The "Bump" and the "Mess Around," descriptive of themselves, were the only possible means of movement. The effect was hypnotic. The erotic and sensual undertones were the entirety. There was no vulgarity in the particularly sensual and practically sexual orgy taking place on the dance floor, in the loud laughter, or even in the lewd jests bantered about so casually in the dimly-lighted cellar. Everything was completely animal and for-the-moment.

Through all this the dancing waiters threaded their incredible way. Twirling trays high above the heads of everyone, balancing them precariously on one or two fingers,

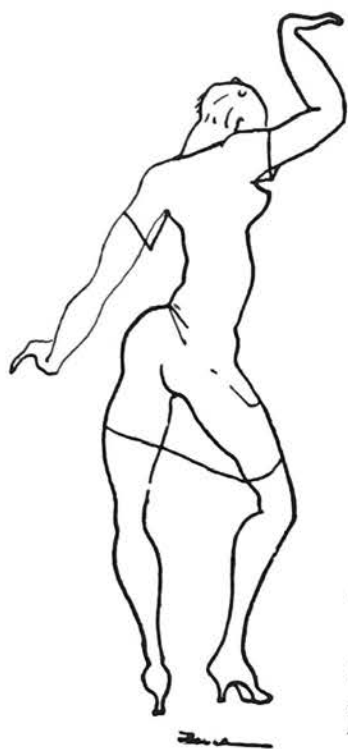


dancing between couples where paper could not have been passed, each waiter brought up his tray with a flourish and an intricate flurry of dance steps before some tiny table. Raw gin in a small pitcher and peppery ginger ale disappeared from the tray to reappear magically on the table.

The music would end. The lights would go on. A general noise would arise as the couples awakened from their trance-like gyrations to find their tables and order more gin and light more cigarettes to fill with yet more smoke the low-ceilinged cellar already so blue with fog. Then the lights would dim to extinction again, and a single circle of crimson or blue would grow to focus upon an entertainer. It might be Myra Johnson standing nonchalant and intimate, resting one elbow on the rail before the bandstand. She would stand in utter perfection, dressed with that incredible instinct for expensive simplicity which becomes second nature to the professional manikin, her soft brown skin cool and velvety in the thick hot air. An evanescent, intangible quality of personality would surround her like an aura, quieting even the noisiest and most drunken of the patrons. Then she would sing—perhaps some popular current song, perhaps a number received in exchange for sandwiches and a drink of gin from some derelict unknown. Aloof, yet completely intimate, she'd sing a double entendre version, going from table to table, squeezing between the closely-placed chairs, until the last measure of the song found her back before the bandstand, hands filled with silver and paper money, which she would drop into a kettle, there to be divided, along with the tips of the others, with the others. There would be thunderous applause and the band would begin another dance number, the floor would again become crowded with couples, the waiters would resume dancing about filling orders, and there would be an interlude before the performance of the next entertainer.

Black Bohemia had not only discovered and become habitués of such places, but had introduced them to their paler bohemian brethren. Vachel Lindsay, fresh from the triumph of his poem, "The Congo"; Muriel Draper, whose son Paul was even then absorbing Negro feeling for the dance though living in the "Village"; Mabel Dodge, bringing in tow some famous writer or her American Indian husband; Dudley Murphy, whose startling *Ballet Mechanique* was in gestation; and Carl Van Vechten, already familiar with and unofficial publicity agent pro tem for the New Negro, were all shown the glories of his Nigger Heaven through the kind auspices of the "Niggeratti," that small group of young Negroes who had been swept to the front on the crest of the wave of newly discovered Negro art and intellect. They were a smart-alecky group, some of whom were eventually to vindicate the expectations which had, unasked,

arisen about them. This group was the semi-official guide to Hot Harlem; it was they who saw to it that the white patrons, spendthrifts, dilettantes and seekers-after-truth knew Harlem. And this whole white army was familiar with the hole in the floor of the dimly-lit entrance hall to LeRoy's, where Louise, who once boasted that she would kill any man who two-timed her or any woman who bit her in the back (and made good both brags), entertained.



Their white complexions even made it possible for them to attend the famous Cotton Club at 142nd Street and Lenox Avenue, which, while boasting that it was the very essence of Harlem, drew a rigid color line to keep that essence pure. The obvious Negroes who were allowed to darken the doors of this "typical Harlem hot-spot" could be counted on the fingers of one hand. There was a great black doorman posted to keep the tabulation in the lower brackets and to "spot" those whose light skins might make them so brash as to attempt to invade this holy of holies. The club was famous for its "Creole" (high yeller) chorus. So very famous had this chorus become, in fact, and so lucrative a source of income for the pale-tinted chorines, that a white girl was once inspired enough to "pass" successfully and gain admission to the chorus. This "lily-white" sepia night spot was under the "protection" of gangsters—the same crew that, with high-handed methods and in no uncertain way, had wiped out a competing establishment, the elegant Plantation Club, the day before its scheduled opening.

The Plantation had planned to open in two stories and the basement of a house on 126th Street near the corner of Lenox Avenue, which had been elaborately decorated with thousands of dollars worth of mirrors and a miraculously matched and polished hardwood dance floor parqueted in intricate design by accomplished artists. A superlative show had been rehearsed and costumed. Negro performers, having little or no fear of gangster threats, had blithely continued rehearsing. But the night before the opening, when the cast appeared for rehearsal, the place was in shambles. The mirrors were shattered, the glass-like floor hacked to splinters, the expensive and spectacular costumes burned with acids. The owners of the club were adequately discouraged.

The owners of Club Alabam had also been discouraged, but not for the same reason. Indeed, there seemed to have been no good reason for the failure of the club to become a successful venture. It had been beautifully decorated with Negro scenes—jungle, plantation, cabin, Harlem, etc.—by Aaron Douglas. It

was spacious and successfully cooled; it boasted an excellent cuisine, an excellent line of liquors from the proper bootleggers, and a fine group of entertainers. Yet it failed to capture the public fancy.

The influx of visitors and tourists from downtown sent prices soaring, so that more and more Negroes had to find other forms of entertainment.

For the mass of Negroes in Harlem were economically insecure. Whole communities had to live in one apartment, taking turns at using the beds, kitchen and bath. Even such a division of expenses did not seem to lessen the difficulty of meeting the ever-growing demands of the landlords, who continued to raise the rents higher and higher. Mostly employed as porters, laborers, houseworkers, and elevator operators, Harlemites found their salaries far from adequate. Their love of rich and plentiful food did little to help. So they had hit upon the simple device of combining a way to make a few much-needed extra dollars with the opportunity to have a good time: they gave house-rent parties. For the reasonable stipulation of twenty-five cents admission, one could enjoy a pianist, red lights, a pot of chitterlings or pigs' feet, and a jug of corn licker; there could be revelry until daybreak, with the added attraction of less worry about facing the landlord.

House-rent parties, playing the numbers, and religion became the only pleasures of the many who could not afford to go to the Italian-owned speakeasies and gang-owned nightclubs. The new gambling game, numbers, with its great appeal—the seeming opportunity to make sixty dollars with ten cents—sprang into immediate and understandable popularity, enriching a small group of exploiters. Holstein, Brunder, and Pompey (owner of the Cuban Giants Negro baseball team) were the foremost “bankers” of this unlawful lottery, which was to become a bone of contention between the big underworld outfits of New York. They were the first great numbers “Kings,” “Barons” and “Czars.” Hoodlums like “Bub” Hewlitt, who had been convicted thirty-three times before finally serving a sentence, had things very much their own way, serving as



strong-arm protection for this new “nobility.” These Negro hoodlums had so little to fear from the timid but all-powerful and fearsome “Dutch” Schultz and his Italian gunmen, who had decided to take over the lucrative numbers racket in Harlem, and caused the vice lords and their armies so much trouble, that Mr. Schultz had to hire them before the great white “public enemy” and his gang could complete his putsch successfully.

All this while, Harlem’s entertainment value and contri-

butions were growing. Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Dr. Bud Fisher and Zora Hurston were becoming poets and authors whom one must read. Ethel Waters, Florence Mills, Duke Ellington, Cab Calloway, Hall Johnson, Rex Ingram, Canada Lee, Harry Wills, and Rose McClendon were all being introduced to the greater public through motion pictures, theatres, sports, radio and the concert stage.

This was the heyday of Harlem, when the Negro was still being discovered. When clubs and speakeasies were still the source from which and in which most Negro talent could be found. When 133rd Street was known as "Beale Street" after the Memphis street of that name made famous by W. C. Handy, the "Daddy of the Blues." New dives with fantastic, self-descriptive names sprang up until almost every doorway in the block between Seventh and Lenox Avenues had its sliding peephole and password. Small's had expanded, moved to Seventh Avenue, and was even more popular, if less colorful, than before. In its place on Fifth Avenue the Sugar Cane now held sway, as complete as had been Small's while it was there. Happy Rhone's Black and White had given way to the Capitol. There were clubs to suit every taste and pocketbook. There was the Clam House, where Gladys Bentley—a heavy, bulbous, colored female with the invert's preference for wearing male attire—sang dirty songs in a husky tuneless voice all night long as she played the piano. Pod's and Jerry's, 136, the Nest, the Mad House, and many others—each operated without detracting in the least from its neighbors.

Baron Wilkens's emporium, to which the more experimental of the white females came to traffic with the more advanced black pimps and "sweetbacks," was still operating, taking full advantage of the Nordic's fashionable trek to Harlem. The red-light district—from 110th to 115th Streets—had expanded and now extended up Lenox Avenue to above 125th Street, sending through the side streets tentative fingers which frequently curled to embrace Seventh and Fifth Avenues.

And Harlem indulged in its religious orgies with as great a gusto as its other emotional and artistic outlets. The spectacular Reverend Becton, with his fifty-odd exquisitely-tailored suits and his handmade shoes, shirts, and ties, held unbelievably profitable revivals at Reverend Cullen's church on Seventh Avenue. Theatrically he would stride up onto the altar dais, which his presence transformed into a stage, and begin his performance. His orchestra of attractive young men, who were slightly on the effeminate side, would accompany the congregation as they sang jazzy versions of the Baptist hymns Becton would start. An attendant would stand at rigid attention behind him, ready to hand

him a spotless hand-drawn handkerchief with which to wipe away the heavenly sweat that dewed his brow when the word of God proved particularly heavy. The washer-women and day workers would gaze at his tall handsome figure and become so overcome with the "light" that they would pour out their hundreds of painfully earned nickels and dimes into the collection plates. The nickels and dimes swelled into a fortune, furnishing Becton's home with sybaritic white velvets, great sensuous divans, and massive gold crucifixes. He dwelt in holy (regal) splendor until an aggregation of Philadelphia racketeers, weary of seeing him pocket the wealth that had been theirs until this man of God had revealed the beauties of religion to the masses, riddled his elegant body with bullets.



Stephanie St. Claire held sway in a palatial home near Mount Morris Park, holding seances and becoming (as a sideline, of course) one of the powers in the numbers racket. The Barefoot Prophet was a familiar sight with his giant six-foot-six frame, dispensing luck, the right number, and the word of God for whatever pittance one might give him. Elder Thorne shouted and jazzed her way into the upper-income group, converting hundreds to the barbaric way of God, until God gave some enterprising radio network the insight to recognize her international entertainment possibilities; radio so popularized her that in later years she became the featured attraction at one of the Harlem nightclubs that had moved down into the Broadway sector.

There was Prophet Costonic, who enthralled his cult followers by preaching the word of God and a garbled version of the Christian Science doctrine, accompanied by a formulary of hocus-pocus strangely resembling devil-worship. And all the while Father Divine was becoming God. He was not so quietly building up *his* religion. "Peace" was its byword. "It's wonderful," was his contention. "Peace! It's truly wonderful!" Negroes and whites, rich and poor flocked to him, spreading his word country-wide, buying hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of "Heavens" (as any property of his became known), finally establishing one "Heaven" in the heart of social Newport and another at Krum Elbow in the neighborhood of presidential Hyde Park.

Harlem continued its hectic, money-spending, impossible way, creating colorful character after colorful character. It offered Julian, "the Black Ace," who

flew and fell over Harlem, unwittingly preparing for the day when Italy would war with Ethiopia and he would fly and fight for his black brothers before becoming an Italian pilot and citizen in a fit of pique. Harlem continued to eat at Craig's and to discuss music and art at Eddie's while giving its pennies to Sewing-Machine Bertha, who could buy and sell most of her benefactors. It continued to produce Chappie Gardiners to hoax a willing world masquerading as Ethiopian princesses when they were in reality houseworkers from the Bronx. Or Catarina Jarbera, who traveled the path of song from the blues to opera. The cabaret and the church continued to be the points between which the Negro was held taut, through which he grew and in which he forgot for the moment his great economic problems.

For it was still no easy matter to pay an executive's rent with a porter's salary, and the high cost of food had not dimmed the Negroes' instinct to eat well and copiously. Garvey's economic house of cards had collapsed after his imprisonment and deportation. The numbers offered a million-to-one chance to win a six-to-one gain. Bathtub gin and rot-gut corn, which had been no competition for the cheap drink to be had in the speakeasies, was even less attractive when prohibition was repealed. Sufi preached racial hatred and black Nazism and grew rich before he was killed in a plane crash, although his white secretary somehow managed to survive it. His death left Mme. St. Claire a not-too-despondent widow. The Negro continued to turn to the church and cabaret—and Communism.

THE DARK TOWER

"The Dark Tower" was Countee Cullen's regular column in Opportunity, which he turned over to Nugent as a "guest conductor" for the October 1927 issue.²

Lest one meandering columnist should bear down too severely on the patience of *Opportunity's* subscribers, the "Tower" for this month has been turned over to a guest conductor who will accomplish the double kindness of presenting our readers with a new personal angle on things, while at the same time permitting the usual wielder of this baton to limber up his fingers after a pleasant period of summer inactivity. . . . Introducing Mr. Richard Bruce, artist, poet and for October 1927, impresario of "The Dark Tower."—Countee Cullen

I have just looked over the proofs of *Caroling Dusk*, an anthology of verse by Negro poets, edited by Countee Cullen. It is going to be a beautiful book, with a