

HAS THE NEGRO ARRIVED?

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NOT the least among the changes wrought largely by the World War, the victory in the name of democracy, is the phenomenon which some for the want of a better name call the New Negro. Of recent we have noted in more than one quarter the formal announcement of the actual arrival and self-discovery of an artistically forgotten race. A suppressed and exploited group has become articulate within the span of a few fleeting years. Race inferiority complexes are about to be smashed. The sons and daughters of erstwhile slaves are rejoicing in the power and glory of what may be the Negro Renaissance. This awakening, however, we are informed, is not so sudden as it seems. It has been in the making for a generation, Paul Laurence Dunbar being its first prophet and inspiration. William Pickens, in a hard-hitting little book four years ago, gave warning that the old Negro was passing and that the new Negro was already on the scene.

However, the provocative and in some parts brilliant work, *The New Negro*, edited by Alain Locke (Boni & Liveright) was the immediate occasion for much talk and not a little writing about a subject that to the minds of many is hardly beginning to be. Further discussion is now called forth by new viewpoints concerning the Negro in two books of fiction, *Flight* by Walter White (Knopf) and *Nigger Heaven* by Carl Van Vechten (Knopf).

With some rather unusual essays, fiction and poetry on the average as good, if not better than the ordinary, the distorted pictures of some more or less distinguished individuals, Mr. Locke and his associates assure us that the new Negro is definitely

in the saddle. The evidence here given is the clear strong voice of youth, the changing attitudes of the Negro with respect to himself and the white world, the new tone and technique in language, creative music—sweet melodies, and compelling jazz. As a matter of fact, however, are things so new as they seem? It may be in order, therefore to ask What is the new Negro and to what extent are Negroes generally moved by the new spirit? To be sure, the brother in black has not received a new biological equipment. He has not cast off by any swift means of social evolution what some may think of as primitive instincts of African origin. The changing reactions of the Negro cannot be explained on the basis of an admixture of white and African blood. Civilization, in fact, is not a matter of blood. It does not pass through the germ plasm despite the rationalization of writers like Lothrop Stoddard and William McDougall.

Yet blood counts tremendously in the determination of social values as both Walter White's and Van Vechten's novels show. White Negroes, on this account cross the color line as did Mimi Daquin, the heroine of *Flight*, though not as a rule for reasons like hers. The assertion is made in *Nigger Heaven*, rhetorically perhaps, that ten thousand Negroes are "passing" in New York alone. There is no hankering, however, for the kind of social equality about which some white people are awfully frightened. Across the color line there are positions of leadership in business and politics together with freedom from insult in travel and the contacts of everyday life. Some Negroes live a dual life—passing as white in the

industrial world and as colored in social relations. For instance, a Negro in Harlem may be a white man in a downtown business establishment.

American civilization grants privileges and honors inversely with the pigmentation of the skin. The Negro inescapably and unconsciously accepts this standard of evaluation, coming as it does from the dominant race. Colored Americans accordingly spend millions of dollars to bleach their skin and straighten their hair. It pays to be white or as little black as possible in society in which white is a symbol of power and a badge of opportunity. Notwithstanding this, the Negro is not rapidly becoming white through biological processes. In spite of the premium placed upon white, he views with increasing disapproval the illegitimate mixing of white and Negro blood.¹

The new Negro is heralded by nothing approaching a general revolt in ethics. It is surprising that Mr. White's Mimi, reared under Catholic and Protestant influences, should have been so unsophisticated with respect to, or openly opposed to the sex standards of the orthodox churchgoers and the black Babbitts of Atlanta. A new kingdom of brotherhood is not necessarily assured by the good nature of the Negro. I am not at all sure that the loud free laugh and apparently carefree spirit of the Negro as suggested by *Flight* are indicative of freedom from the venom of race prejudice. The loud laugh sometimes is due to the presence of an unusual vocal apparatus and the absence of the restraints and inhibitions that largely control the conduct of those who participate more fully in the processes of civilization. Nor is

the Negro free from hate as evidenced in the fights and factions of his community life and organized bodies. He is also beginning to hate his oppressors as White and Van Vechten indicate. Let alone, he loves and hates just about like other people.

Van Vechten raises definitely the question of economic security for many educated Negroes in Northern cities, who are not satisfied with the jobs of Pullman porters and bellhops. The white business world is still accustomed to think of the Negro as fit only to do the dirty work. An educated Negro like Van Vechten's Byron Kasson who dares to be something more than an elevator boy, is told quickly his place and to stay there. The Negro, therefore, in view of the reign of Jim Crow in economic relations must build his own business world. In the North, despite good wages here and there, he has hardly begun his economic emancipation. The migrants who made Harlem what it is and the South Side, Chicago, so largely black, have not had the average economic experience, even for Negroes in the South, as land owners or small business men.

Van Vechten paints Harlem a city of flimsy economic foundations in so far as the Negro is concerned, but in glowing colors nevertheless, gay night life, cabarets, beautiful golden brown women and handsome black men; Striver's Row, the abode of the brown-skinned aristocracy. Such is the Mecca of the New Negro—*Nigger Heaven*.

New types of behavior, however, whether in Harlem or elsewhere, are to be defined in terms of changing environment. Our modern world with its incredibly swift means of intercommunication and transportation is affecting Negroes in fundamentally the same way that it is affecting other social elements.

¹ Cf. Melville G. Herskovits, "The Color Line," *American Mercury*, VI, pp. 207-208.

Ideas of democracy, though slightly comprehended, are threatening the foundations of class distinctions. The oppressed and exploited are rising in revolt. Labor, here and there, has discovered its power, learned its rights, and is making demands in the name of industrial democracy. Youth runs wild, horrifying elderly ladies and gentlemen who behaved so perfectly a generation ago.

Shut off from the main channels of culture owing to severe economic handicaps, the Negro has undergone fewer changes socially than the average race group. The contrary assumption is based upon the contrast between the Negro of today and the slave of yesterday without due appreciation of social transformations generally. At most we can only speak of the new Negro relatively. After all there may be a question as to whether the new world of freedom for Negroes is merely the dream of poets, or something grounded upon social facts. An understanding of the social forces determining Negro life leads one to conclude that a great deal more of the old order, the old Negro and the old viewpoint remains than the writers of new declaration of independence seem to realize. The Uncle Toms, the subservient type of Negro, has not been swept so suddenly from the stage of action as some of the exponents of the new order assume. We cannot determine the extent of the new emancipation from the outspoken utterances of the *Chicago Defender*, the *Crisis*, and the ringing pronouncements of a handful of adventuresome intellectuals housed in happy Harlem. But even in Harlem, the greatest Negro city in the world, the backwoods culture of the South and of the sugar cane plantations of the West Indies persists. Living in steam-heated flats and strutting Seventh Avenue cannot convert black peasants into modern men within a single year.

In our South particularly, the conditions that molded the life of the old Negro, the economic and social conflict evolved from slavery and the aftermath of slavery, in a large measure remain. Facing an environmental situation of ignorant and exploited poor whites and Negroes still more ignorant and shamelessly exploited, one does well even to dream of a new Negro in a new world order. To give two or three concrete and rather typical instances, more than 35 per cent of the Negroes above 21 years of age in Georgia, 38 per cent in Alabama, and 43 per cent in Louisiana are illiterate, not to mention the many supposedly literate, who can neither read nor write. In some parts of the South, notably in some sections of Mississippi, 80 to 90 per cent of the Negro farmers are tenants and croppers. These unhappy workers and the poverty stricken masses in the cities, North and South, the millions of menials coming inevitably in the transition from chattel slavery to economic independence, at best can be only slightly touched by the thought currents of the modern world. H. L. Mencken as usual stretches the blanket when he asserts that the majority of Negroes have not advanced in their thinking processes beyond the baboon and porkchop stage, but he does score a point against those who are so unrestrained in their eulogies of the new Negro and his new world of art.

There is, to be sure, a considerable number of isolated Negro intellectuals in the South, but the survivals of slavery are everywhere in evidence, warping the economic structure, here and there, placing in positions of political power men of the mental caliber and social vision of Cole Blaise and Pat Harrison. On every hand are to be seen the symbols of servitude. As matter of historical sequence, the fact of Negro slavery still lingers in the traditions of the South and the nation

as a whole. While this obtains the new South, at least, and consequently the new Negro, cannot become in any large measure social realities. This, quite evidently, is not the viewpoint of the dignified gentlemen who succeeded in writing so beautifully on the South in the April number of the *Review of Reviews* (1926), omitting consideration of the Negro almost entirely.

Unquestionably, the social life of the South, the Negro inevitably included, is in the midst of a changing process, but we are witnessing nothing like a social revolution. The machine is beginning to dominate the South and the Negro, as already indicated. The Negro, wrested from the inertia of rural life as occasion may arise, is being industrialized gradually. Trunk line railways, automobiles, and good roads are thrusting untutored Negroes along with mediaeval thinking whites into the swift currents of modern civilization, resulting in radical changes in the mores of groups whose minds cannot at a time like this keep pace with their bodies. Many years will be necessary for some of these and eternity for others to advance their social ideas to the point already reached by mechanical inventions.

Nevertheless, a new economic order means eventually the birth and advance of new ideas and race attitudes. Already problems with a new center of gravity

that is apart from the Negro, are beginning to engage the mind of the South. The clash between capital and labor, irrespective of color, may be the explanation of some. Occasional disinterested scholarship and the gradual diffusion of knowledge may also be a cause. But there are other causes. Gambling orgies in real estate, for instance, and the influx of northern tourists together with northern capital may change within considerable limits the character of the present social situation. If, for the sake of protecting our children against the heresies of organic evolution, fist fights between Modernists and Fundamentalists continue, the bugaboo of the Negro and social equality may pass temporarily, at least, from the scene of action. With the release of social pressure, whatever the cause, there is a shaking of barriers between master and slave, landlord and peon. The Negro may escape to Chicago or some other point North, or gain an economic vantage ground in the South, send his children to college, who in turn may write books of fiction, weary blues or some other form of verse; and there will be more talk about the Negro as a new creature, while, in fact, he is only changing with the changing order as he learns the art of social adjustment just as other human beings, be they Southern whites or native New Englanders.

