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Chapter: ConclusionConclusion

That there could have been so sharply divided an opinion among Negroes themselves over the issues of a title and the subject matter of a novel as *Nigger Heaven* created, is one of the most significant aspects and revelations of the changing psychology of the Negro as could be found. Superficial observers, white and Negro, label this cleavage a conflict between "art" and "propaganda." The two overlap far too much to make such arbitrary classifications permissible. Of the same general looseness of thought and of phrase is the division into two camps of those on the one hand who think only "respectable" Negroes should be written of and, on the other hand, those who at the opposite pole think that only the lowest types of Negroes furnish sufficiently colorful material for interesting novels, short stories, plays, drawings, or song-making. Obviously, both schools are right and both wrong, for artists worthy of the name will create from whatever material attracts them -- and the work of those who are not artists in the real sense, whatever its temporary value or popularity, will soon die. "Uncle Tom's Cabin" has been sneered at, ignored, or airily been dismissed as bungling "propaganda" for nearly eight decades -- and it still plays in all parts of the world, it has been used as a material for a musical comedy, and a huge sum has only recently--62--been expended to transform it into a moving picture. And who remembers even the title of ten books published in the same year or the same decade as "Uncle Tom's Cabin," lauded by the critics of the era as books "which will live"?

Such clashes of opinions, however, are healthy and health-giving. They are a measure of the awakened consciousness of his own worth and augur well for a continuance and development of this artistic movement which in turn will benefit not only the Negro himself but will help to enrich American artistic life. It is creating and causing the growth of a genuinely critical sense among Negro artists and Negroes generally which is displacing the understandably defensive attitude of the past of exaltment of all things Negro and of disparagement of all things white. It is bringing into more general use rigid standards of perfection with measurements not gained through comparison with other Negro work but with the best of all races and all parts of the world.

Though he speaks particularly of the appraisal of Negro history, the words of Arthur A. Schomburg in an essay on "The Negro Digs Up His Past" in *The New Negro*, are an excellent expression of this new attitude of the Negro. He writes: "Though it is orthodox to think of America as the one country where it is unnecessary to have a past, what is a luxury for the nation as a whole becomes a prime social necessity for the Negro. For him, a group tradition must supply compensation for persecution, -63--and pride of race the antidote for prejudice. ... Vindicating evidences of individual achievement have as a matter of fact been gathered and treasured for over a century: Abbé Gregoire's liberal-minded book on Negro notables in 1808 was the pioneer effort; it has been followed at intervals by less known and often less discriminating compendiums of exceptional men and women of African stock. But this sort of thing was on the whole pathetically over-corrective, ridiculously over-laudatory; it was apologetics turned into biography. But today, even if for the ultimate purpose of group justification, history has become less a matter of argument and more a matter of record."

Mr. Schomburg then lists concisely some of the more notable achievements not only in Negro history but in the story of America, which are notable even by the new standards. More important immediately than these historical records is the spirit of approach -- "a far cry from the puerile controversy and petty braggadocio" of the past, creation of a New Negro quite different from "the rash and rabid amateur who has glibly tried to prove half of the world's geniuses to have been Negroes" in an effort to counteract "the blatant Caucasian racialist with his theories of race superiority and dominance." Through the acquisition of confidence based upon achievement, the Negro and particularly the Negro

artist is becoming less and less annoyed by loud-mouthed, facile-penned detractors. While Lothrop Stoddards--64--and Imperial Wizards are lustily announcing private communications from God and Gobineau telling of the Negro's inferiority, the subject of their revelations is proceeding with sub-lime indifference to disprove their theories.

Perhaps André Siegfried will some day return to America, and, given an opportunity to view the racial scene in all its aspects, the abyss may not seem quite so deep nor as terrifying.