

'BLACK MANHATTAN' AND THE NEGRO LITERATI

William H. Ferris Contends That the Negro's Self Assertion Since 1915 Has Caused Miracle In Harlem

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NEW YORK, Nov. 6.—As I glanced over the fascinating pages of James Weldon Johnson's "Black Manhattan," touching every phase of Manhattan's Negro life, except the political and the religious, giving an appraisal of the Garvey Movement, such as Dr. DuBois with all of his brilliant analysis never did, I thought of the impression which Black Manhattan, and Harlem especially, has produced upon the world at large.

For the past 15 years Harlem has been the storm center of Negro racialism, Negro political radicalism, Negro religious liberalism and the center of the Negro's literary, dramatic and musical renaissance. First came the Negro Society for Historical Research, which John E. Bruce and A. A. Schomburg founded. Then came the N. A. A. C. P. with its program of civic and political equality, then the Urban League with its economic and social program. Then came the development of the Y. M. C. A. and Y. W. C. A., all fine organizations, establishing their central headquarters in New York City. Then 13 years ago, the Messenger, championing socialism and religious liberalism, and the Voice, edited by the late Hubert H. Harrison, made their bows to the reading public. Then 12 years ago the Negro World started its crusade of racialism and the redemption of Africa, and the U. N. I. A. began to spread over the world like a tidal wave, arousing the racial consciousness of black men and women everywhere and commanding the attention of the civilized world.

While colored men had served as assistant district attorney and assistant corporation counsel and had gone to the state legislature and aldermanic council in Harlem, this was not regarded as a Harlem innovation, as they were doing the same thing in Chicago simultaneously and had done the same thing in Boston a generation ago. Dr. William Howard Day and Rev. Dr. Mallon Van Horne had even served on the Board of Education of Harrisburg, Pa., and Newport, R. I., forty years ago.

When I came to New York City in August, 1919, to edit the Negro

World, Harlem was rightly regarded by the country as the whirling dynamo of Negro political and racial activity. In a three-column article on Negro radicalism, which began on the front page of the Chicago Tribune in the late spring of 1920, it was Harlem first, last and everywhere.

And then things began to happen in the musical, dramatic and literary worlds. "Billboard" Jackson began to write about Negro singers, dancers and actors. W. C. Handy, the father of the blues, began to gain recognition as a musical genius. Then Whitney & Tutt, Miller & Lyles and Sissle & Blake came along. "Shuffle Along" and other musical comedies made a hit. Then came Charles Gilpin, starring in "Emperor Jones," and Florence Mills, starring in "Black Birds," getting on Broadway. Then followed "Porgy," "Lulu Belle," "Hallelujah" and now "The Green Pastures," starring Richard Harrison and Salem Whitney, is sweeping Broadway.

Meanwhile, Dr. DuBois, William Pickens and James Weldon Johnson were breaking into print again. Walter White and Jasse Fauset were turning out novels, Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes were singing songs and Paul Robeson was appearing in "Othello." So we may safely say that more Negro editors and authors, composers, singers, dramatists and actors of note and distinction may be found in Harlem than in all of the country put together.

Early Literary Activity

What is the cause? A luxuriant growth of vegetation never springs from a barren soil. Thirty-five years ago, lower New York, between 17th and 53d streets, was the center of Negro literary activity. Twenty-five years ago it was the center of Negro musical activity, but the country was so swept off of its feet by the fad of industrial education that it paid little attention to the colored brother's cultural aspiration.

Noted colored scholars addressed the St. Mark's Lyceum, New York City, and the Brooklyn Literary and Concord Literary in Brooklyn. In those days Mrs. Victoria Earl Matthews had a literary cult, and entertained at her home Dr. Alexander Crummell, Dr. Edward Wilnot Blyden, T. Thomas Fortune and Alice Ruth Moore. In the summer of 1908 I heard the assistant corporation counsel, James D. Carr, deliver an address upon "Evolution" at the philosophical club of Mrs. A. C.

Cowan in Brooklyn.

The Negro almost made it in those days. When I was a student at Yale and Shaw's octaroons played in a large white opera house in New Haven, Conn., the singing of Belle Davis and Mattie Wilkes made a hit. Then, after I had graduated from college, I saw Williams and Walker's "Sons of Ham" make a hit in a white opera house in Philadelphia. Then their "Bandanna Land" and their "Abyssinia" played for a season at a New York opera house.

I recall that in the summer of 1908 E. H. Clement, the editor of the Boston Transcript, wrote me that he had seen Ernest Hogan, the Negro comedian, and that he believed that the Negro possessed innate dramatic and musical gifts.

The new Negro 35 years ago was struggling to give literary expression and 25 years ago to give dramatic and musical expression to his hopes, longings, aspirations and ideals, and white people were inclined to encourage them.

I recall reading, when I was a schoolboy, that Chauncey M. Depew and Robert Ingersoll spoke at a mass meeting in Cooper Union in honor of Frederick Douglass. Later I read about Chauncey M. Depew, Robert Ingersoll and Col. "Teddy" Roosevelt speaking in Bethel A. M. E. Church, when Dr. J. H. Henderson was pastor. It was at a meeting in the same church that one of these men saw in Charles W. Anderson a coming orator. When a colored student at Yale, Harvard, Dartmouth, Brown, Amherst, Williams, Cornell, Columbia, Ann Arbor and the University of Pennsylvania manifested unusual intellectual ability he was pushed to the front. Everywhere, from Boston to Washington, Negro talent was recognized.

The Decline

But then in 1895 came the fad for industrial education and the Negro's self-effacement from politics, which was sponsored by a prominent Negro educator. From 1895 to 1920 the trend of Caucasian propaganda was to dampen the Negro's literary and political aspirations. And colored

men fell for the bait, saying, "Ditto, Lord." Colored Republican leaders like Hon. Charles W. Anderson and Hon. Fred R. Moore would say "the time is not ripe when talented colored men desired political advancement." I recall vividly conversations with national Republican leaders, Massachusetts state leaders, Connecticut state leaders and New York state leaders when I would refer to their seeming indifference to the colored brother. Then even some of the so-called radical leaders regarded William Monroe Trotter as too radical. I know of no more perfect example of what is called "the inferiority complex" than what most of the colored leaders manifested between 1895 and 1915 and what a few manifested today.

It is to the undying glory of some Negroes who were born in New York City or who migrated to Harlem that they cried continually, "Give us a place in the sun" until the world listened to them.

If the poorly trained and thoughtless Negro opportunists had not fallen asleep and been doped with the inferiority complex, they would have received twenty years ago the political, literary, dramatic and musical recognition which they are beginning to receive today.

What of the future? If the new Negro can take a middle ground between the defiant bragadocio and bravado of Marcus Garvey and "the inferiority complex" which Negro leaders everywhere manifested between 1895 and 1915 and which a few leaders manifest today, Black Harlem and colored America will rise north of the Mason and Dixon line to still higher heights of eminence in the political, educational, literary, dramatic and musical realms.

Some may wonder why I have omitted the Cosmopolitan Club, in which Miss Mary White Ovington, Professor Tridon, William Humphrey and Hon. John E. Milholland were prominent figures, which staged a much discussed banquet in the spring of 1903. That was not a Negro movement, but an effort on the part of liberal white thinkers to encourage budding Negro genius.