

Individualism and the “Open Society”

In 1940, as one of my first acts in the pursuit of becoming a more “social” being, I joined a YMCA amateur drama group in Harlem. I wanted to learn about theater so I became a stage technician—meaning a handyman for all backstage chores. But the first thing about this drama group that struck me as highly curious was the fact that all the members were overwhelmingly in favor of doing white plays with Negro casts. I wondered why and very naïvely expressed my sentiments about it. The replies that I got clearly indicated that these amateur actors were not very favorable to the play about Negro life, although they would not plainly say so. Despite the fact that this question of identity was first presented to me within the context of the program of a small, insignificant amateur drama group, its implications ranged far beyond. A theater group, no matter how small, must have an audience. What did the audience at the Harlem YMCA really think about the group’s productions?

Although I continued to work with this group, my preoccupation with its aesthetic values inevitably led me toward a consideration of other, related, social issues peculiar to Harlem. Thus began my first steps toward a long process of social enlightenment. Life was quite complicated and there were no simple answers for anything.

Harlem in 1940 was just beginning to emerge from the depths of the Great Depression and it seethed with the currents of many conflicting beliefs and ideologies. It was the year in which Richard Wright reached the high point of his literary fame, with *Native Son*, and was often seen in Harlem at lectures. The American Negro Theater, a professional experimental group, was preparing to make its 1941 debut as a permanent Harlem institution. The Federal Theater Project had been abolished in 1939 and the echoes of that disaster were still being heard in Harlem’s cultural

circles. Everything in Harlem seemed to be in a state of flux for reasons I was not then able to fully appreciate. But soon came the war and I was caught up in the army for four-and-a-half years. I returned with a radically altered vision to find that although Harlem had the same old problems, it had a new community consciousness. Hence, I could see these old problems from a new point of view. Indeed, what I have learned about Harlem since 1946 is pretty much summed up in this book.

⟨I have attempted to define what a considerable body of Negroes have thought and expressed on a less analytic and articulate level. I do not claim to represent the thinking of *all* the people in America who are called Negroes, for Negroes are certainly divided into classes—a fact white liberals and radicals often overlook when they speak of “the Negro.” There is, however, a broad strain of Negro social opinion in America that is strikingly cogent and cuts through class lines. This social outlook cannot be and never has been encompassed by the program of an organization such as the NAACP, whose implied definition of racial integration offers no answers to the questions that agitate the collective minds of those Negroes who reject such a philosophy. And yet, since it could never be said that such Negroes do not want social progress, what are they looking for that the NAACP does not offer?⟩

To put the question in another way, and in better focus—although until recent years the NAACP has had the prestige of being the major civil rights organization—its membership, usually hovering somewhere between three hundred and fifty thousand and four hundred thousand—it can hardly be said to reflect the pervasive sentiment of an ethnic group as large and as hardpressed as the American Negro. In other words, there is a definite strain of thought within the Negro group that encompasses all the ingredients of “nationality” and strikes few sympathetic chords with the NAACP.

Historically, this “rejected strain,” as Theodore Draper describes it, emerged simultaneously with its opposite—the racial integration strain—although the word “integration” was not then in the Negro vocabulary as a synonym for civil rights or freedom. The prototype leader of the latter strain was Frederick Douglass,

the great Negro Abolitionist, and there is almost a direct line of development from him to the NAACP and the modern civil rights movement. However, the rejected, or nationality strain that exists today can be traced back to certain Negro spokesmen who were Douglass’ contemporaries but who are now barely remembered—Martin R. Delany, Edward Blyden, Alexander Crummell, Henry M. Turner and George Washington Williams. Douglass, Booker T. Washington, Marcus Garvey and W.E.B. DuBois, on the other hand, are well known to the average Negro as historical personalities.

It is important to note that just prior to the Civil War there was conflict among Negroes over what would be the best course of action for the soon-to-be emancipated slaves. Should they return to Africa or emigrate to Latin America; or should they remain and struggle for racial equality in the United States (or seek to accomplish both at the same time)? As one historian has described this conflict:

Some Negroes in America showed an interest in Africa before the 1860’s—usually in the face of the criticism of the black abolitionists such as Frederick Douglass who considered the African dream a dangerous diversification of energies which were needed in the fight for emancipation and civil rights at home.¹

This historian goes on to point out that “one of the major pre-Civil War Negro-American exponents of the ‘Back-to-Africa’ dream [was] Martin R. Delany, Harvard-trained physician and the first Negro to be commissioned with field rank by President Lincoln. . . . He visited Liberia in July, 1859, and saw in the proposed Liberian College ‘a grand stride in the march of African Regeneration and Negro Nationality.’ ”² It was also in 1859 that Delany originated and used the phrase “Africa for the Africans.” However, even most contemporary Black Nationalists believe that Marcus Garvey of the 1920’s invented that slogan.

Thus it can be seen that the present-day conflict within the Negro ethnic group, between integrationist and separatists ten-

¹ George Shepperson, “Notes on Negro American Influences on the Emergence of African Nationalism,” *Journal of African History*, 1, No. 2, 1960, p. 301.

² *Ibid.*, p. 301.

dencies, has its origins in the historical arguments between personalities such as Frederick Douglass and as Martin R. Delany.* Although the peculiar social conditions and race relations in America have made it possible for the Frederick Douglass trend to be the more articulate and dominant up to now, this has not always been so; and it does not mean, moreover, that the opposite strain has become nonexistent. On the contrary, the emergence of the Malcolm X brand of nationalism proves its persistence, despite the fact that both strains have undergone considerable change and qualification. In fact, with W.E.B. DuBois they nearly merged into a new synthesis, for DuBois, in addition to being a founder of the NAACP integrationist trend, was also a leading exponent of the Pan-Africanism that had its origins with Martin R. Delany.

Throughout my adult life I have observed that the ideas of one particular stratum of Negroes on such questions as race, color, politics, economics, art, Africa, minorities or interracial relations are pretty uniform. These ideas are expressed in many different ways but, because of the fact that the American Negro exists under the dominating persuasion of the Great American Ideal, the philosophy of these Negroes has not been allowed the dignity of acceptance as an ethnic conception of reality. Nonetheless, this stratum persists in its own inarticulate way as the residuum of what might be called the Afro-American ethnic group consciousness in a society whose legal Constitution recognizes the rights, privileges and aspirations of the individual, but whose political institutions recognize the reality of ethnic groups only during election contests. Every four years the great fiction of the assimilated American (white and/or Protestant) ideal is put aside to deal with the pluralistic reality of the hyphenated-American vote,

* Martin Robison Delany, born May 6, 1812, Charleston, Virginia, died January, 1885. Delany should be considered the historical prototype of the "Afro-American Nationalist." As co-editor with Frederick Douglass of the leading Abolitionist organ *The North Star* founded in 1847, Delany's presence reflected the nationalist element of the embryonic Nationality vs. Integrationist conflict within the Abolitionist movement (which also had its white faction). For a short biographical sketch of Delany see Jessie Fauset's "Rank Imposes Obligations," *Crisis* magazine, November, 1926, p. 9. Important works by Delany are: *The Condition, Elevation, Emigration of the Colored People of the United States, Politically Considered*, published by the author in Philadelphia in 1852; and *The Official Report of the Niger Valley Exploring Party*, New York, T. Hamilton, 1861.

of which the largest is the Negro-American. But since the Supreme Court decision of 1954 on public school integration, the Negro-American has been catapulted into the role of being the mover and shaker of modern America while putting the Great American Ideal to the most crucial test of its last hundred years.

And what precisely is this Great American Ideal? The superficial answer is that, in practice, it is the living expression of that body of concepts sanctified in the American Constitution. For the Negro, the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments are of special relevance. But this is true because these Amendments, especially, have an historical relationship to the way in which the Negro has influenced the evolution of the American Ideal. They will have a pertinency just as long as the Negro's lot falls short of the egalitarian ideal as set down. But does not the fact that a new Civil Rights Act of 1964 was required in pursuance of the enforcement of these Amendments, indicate that something more is implied than what is stated in them? Is it true that what this Negro stratum of which I speak wants from America is merely this enforcement? Or does the American default on these Amendments indicate that there is something conceptually or legally deficient about the scope of the Constitution itself? Does it indicate perhaps that the real scope of the social implications of the Negro's demands on American society today is not fully spelled out or conceptualized by the Negro himself—or at least that body of Negroes who are today most vocal on the civil rights front?

Whatever the case, it has to be noted that the most vocal opponents of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 cite the American Constitution and object to measures aimed at enforcing the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments as violations of the rights of individuals and private property—privileges which are guaranteed by the same Constitution. This emotional and legal conflict over the interpretation of the Constitution, in the slow and painfully bitter struggle towards the enforcement of constitutional guarantees of racial equality, points up a very real dilemma inherent in the Negro's position in America.

On the face of it, this dilemma rests on the fact that America, which idealizes the rights of the individual above everything else, is in reality, a nation dominated by the social power of groups, classes, in-groups and cliques—both ethnic and religious. The in-

dividual in America has few rights that are not backed up by the political, economic and social power of one group or another. Hence, the individual Negro has, proportionately, very few rights indeed because his ethnic group (whether or not he actually identifies with it) has very little political, economic or social power (beyond moral grounds) to wield. Thus it can be seen that those Negroes, and there are very many of them, who have accepted the full essence of the Great American Ideal of individualism are in serious trouble trying to function in America>

Very understandably, these people want to be full-fledged Americans, without regard to race, creed, or color. They do not stop to realize that this social animal is a figment of the American imagination and has never really existed except in rare instances. They cite the American Constitution as the legal and moral authority in their quest for fully integrated status (whichever interpretation out of several they lend to this idea) and find it necessary to shy away from that stratum I mentioned before, which forms the residuum of the Negro ethnic group consciousness.

However, each individual American is a member of a group. The white Anglo-Saxon Protestants, the white Catholics, and the white Jews are the three main power groups in America, under the political and economic leadership of the WASPs. The American Constitution was conceived and written by white Anglo-Saxon Protestants for a white Anglo-Saxon society. The fact that what is called American Society, or American Culture, did not subsequently develop into a nation made up totally of WASPs—because of Negro slavery and immigration—did not prevent the white Protestants from perpetuating the group attitudes that would maintain the image of the whole American nation in terms of WASP cultural tradition. These attitudes, as sociologist Milton M. Gordon points out, “all have as a central assumption the desirability of maintaining English institutions (as modified by the American Revolution), the English language, and English-oriented cultural patterns as dominant and standard in American life.”³ Naturally, the historical priorities and prerogatives established by the English settlers early in the seventeenth century have been expanded through all the succeeding generations of white

³ Milton M. Gordon, *Assimilation in American Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 88.

Protestants into a well-entrenched social position, characterized by a predominance in economic and political power, buttressed with a strong, cohesive, group solidarity.

Thus, what is usually referred to as ‘general American society’ turns out in reality, insofar as communal institutions and primary group relations are concerned, to be a white Protestant social world, colored and infused with the implicit assumptions of this particular ethnic group. To be sure, it is the largest ethnic group in the United States, and like other ethnic groups it is divided in major fashion by social class.⁴

Although the three main power groups—Protestants, Catholics and Jews—neither want nor need to become integrated with each other, the existence of a great body of homogenized, inter-assimilated white Americans is the premise for racial integration. Thus the Negro integrationist runs afoul of reality in the pursuit of an illusion, the “open society”—a false front that hides several doors to several different worlds of hyphenated-Americans. Which group or subgroup leaves its door wide open for the outsider? None, really. But Gordon does point out one subsocietal exception to this state of affairs between groups which, for our purposes, it is important to note very attentively: “The only substantial exception to this picture of ethnic separation is the compartment marked intellectuals and artists.”⁵

Gordon goes on to explain this stratum, “. . . suffice it here to point out that in the situation of men and women coming together because of an overriding common interest in ideas, the creative arts, and mutual professional concerns, we find the classic sociological enemy of ethnic parochialism.”⁶ In other words, in the detached social world of the intellectuals, a considerable amount of racial integration and ethnic intermingling does take place on a social level. While the Negro intellectual is not fully integrated into the intellectual class stratum, he is, in the main, socially detached from his own Negro ethnic world. Gordon points out that there is evidence that the “outflow of intellectuals from the religio-ethnic groups of America, their subsequent estrangement from the

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 221.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

life of these groups, and the resultant block in communication between the ethnic subsociety and the intellectual [might] have dysfunctional consequences."⁷

In the face of these sociological findings, then, how do Negro intellectuals measure up to the complex problem of being spokesmen on behalf of their ethnic group, the Negro masses? This has to be examined on two levels: First, as creative artists, how can their creative output be assessed? Second, as Negro spokesmen, to what extent do their analyses of the Negro situation get to the bottom of things? Also, is there any correlation between these two intellectual levels of performance, any value judgments to be derived?

For several years the chief spokesman for the Negro among the intellectual class was James Baldwin, who, it might be said, has signalized a new level of involvement. Following Baldwin there have been other literary voices, such as John O. Killens, the late Lorraine Hansberry, Ossie Davis, Paule Marshall and LeRoi Jones. However, if one closely examines the ideas, the social status, the literary content or even the class background of these writers and intellectuals, it is found that they are not at all in agreement on what general course the Negro should follow towards racial equality.

Thus, today, the Negro civil rights-integration movement calls into play two aspects of Negro reality which now demand closer examination and analysis than heretofore—the residual stratum of Negro ethnic group consciousness, of which I have spoken, and the “new” Negro intellectual class that has emerged as of the late 1950’s and 1960’s.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 256.

Harlem Background— The Rise of Economic Nationalism and Origins of Cultural Revolution

In liberal and radical circles it is often said that New York City is not truly representative of what America is, deep in its hinterlands. It has been said that it is a mistake to confuse the cosmopolitanism of New York with the outlook of the Midwest, the Deep South, the North and Far West, the state of Texas or even Maine. This would seem to raise the question: Where is the “real” America to be found? Or, who is the “typical” American and from what region in the United States does he come?

On the other hand, the idea suggests that the United States does not represent a truly uniform nation of peoples. One could explain this lack of uniformity by pointing out that America is a nation that is still in the process of formation, that it is too young to have achieved the kind of advanced cultural fusion found in certain European nations. Yet, with all the long centuries of national development typical of European nations, Paris is not like Normandy or Brittany, London is not the British Midlands and Rome is most unlike Italy south of Naples. It seems, then, that even when nations mature in age it is merely the maturation of variety underneath a uniform surface.

By the same token, American Negroes under the impress of American development have their regional variations. Harlem is not Birmingham, New Orleans or Los Angeles. Yet, these same American conditions have resulted, today, in a degree of cultural affinity among Negroes of all regions that is neither compelled nor needed among the whites. The black world of America is unlike the white in more ways than mere color. Thus to say that Harlem is not Birmingham would call for much qualification. The truth of

the matter is that Harlem has, in this century, become the most strategically important community of black America. Harlem is still the pivot of the black world's quest for identity and salvation. The way Harlem goes (or does not go) so goes all black America.

Harlem is the black world's key community for historical, political, economic, cultural and/or ethnic reasons. The trouble is that Harlem has never been adequately analyzed in such terms. The demand often heard—"Break up the Harlem ghetto!" (as a hated symbol of segregation)—represents nothing but the romantic and empty wail of politically insolvent integrationists, who fear ghetto riots only *more* than they fear the responsibilities of political and economic power that lie in the Harlem potential. Caring little or nothing for the ethnic solvency of the Negro group, the integrationists maintain that since Harlem was created by segregation the only solution is to desegregate it by abolishing it. But this is fallacious logic that refuses to admit the class nature of the American social dynamic that permits social mobility only upwards into the middle class. On the other hand, a forced abolition of a ghetto composed primarily of unemployed and unskilled non-whites would be tantamount to resettlement by decree with all its "undemocratic" implications. Thus, it has not been understood that with all the evils and deprivations of the Harlem ghetto, this community still represents the Negro's strongest bastion in America from which to launch whatever group effort he is able to mobilize for political power, economic rehabilitation and cultural reidentification. Hence, for the Negro to lose his population control of the Harlem area means an uprooting from his strongest base in the American social structure. It is these considerations which reveal the incompetence of much Northern integrationist philosophy, which when carried to its characteristic extremes, sees integration as solving everything. Since integrationists see very little in group economic power, or black political power, to say nothing of cultural identity, they ultimately mislead many Negroes on the bottom of the social scale whose fundamental ethnic group problems the integrationists evade and cannot solve. It must be said that these are the causes behind ghetto uprisings. These glaring defects in the social analysis of Negro ghettos are what lend that quality of unreality to much of what integrationists say and do.

As long as the Negro's cultural identity is in question, or open

to self-doubts, then there can be no positive identification with the real demands of his political and economic existence. Further than that, without a cultural identity that adequately defines *himself*, the Negro cannot even identify with the American nation as a whole. He is left in the limbo of social marginality, alienated and directionless on the landscape of America, in a variegated nation of whites who have not yet decided on their own identity. The fact of the matter is that American whites, as a whole, are just as much in doubt about their nationality, their cultural identity, as are Negroes. Thus the problem of Negro cultural identity is an unsolved problem within the context of an American nation that is still in process of formation.

It is the Negro movement's impact that brings such historical questions to the fore. It forces the whole nation to look into itself—which it has never wanted to do. Historically, the American psychology has been conditioned by the overriding economic motivation of plundering the continent for the wealth of its natural resources. Every aspect of America's national morality is predicated on that materialistic ethos. With no traditional love for the land he adopted, the American has remained to this day a stranger in the land of his birth: ill-at-ease with his power, uncertain about his nationality, an extroverted pragmatist for whom every exposure of the social immorality of his inner life becomes a scandal. A racial integration movement that does not care to look first into the internal disorder of its own house, is also blind to the fact that ghetto pathologies cannot be treated by attacking them from the other side of the racial fence, by way of integration. A social critique of the Negro's position in America that does not perceive the pivotal characteristics of Harlem as a community, fails as a positive critique and throws the entire Negro movement into a disordered melee of conflicting, and often directionless, methods. These pragmatic protest methods, as a result, become so institutionalized that they can no longer be guided, altered, and channeled away from the pursuit of the integrationist mirage, which in the North, recedes farther away after every protest demonstration. The result has been that the northern civil rights movement, in recent years, has created a legion of zealots for whom integration has been hypostatized into a religion rather than a socially scientific method based on clearly understood principles. It is perhaps cruel to have

to say so, but we have to face many truths: In the North, the civil rights movement has produced a crackpot trend marked by a zealous commitment without understanding that borders on anarchism; there has in fact been considerable verbal exposition of the desire for the "revolution of chaos," rather than what could be called "mainstream social change." This anarchistic development has its roots in the accumulated history of incompetent methods.

In Negro life the cultural spheres appear to many as being rather remote, intangible and hardly related to what is called the more practical aspect of race relations. However, the truth is that the more practical sides of the Negro problem in America are bogged down organizationally and methodologically precisely because of cultural confusion and disorientation on the part of most Negroes. *Thus it is only through a cultural analysis of the Negro approach to group "politics" that the errors, weaknesses and goal-failures can cogently be analyzed and positively worked out.*

The years between the day I entered the army, and the war's end in 1945, marked the end of an era for Harlem. For myself, at that time, it merely meant the disappearance of that special adolescent flavor that attaches to a certain locale. Beyond that, it took awhile to understand that World War II represented a very abrupt break, a switchover in the continuity of Harlem traditions. New migrations from the South (as in World War I), the creation of a new middle-class stratum on the crest of the war boom, the war veteran's psychology, etc., all served to hide prewar Harlem behind the mask of a transitional kind of postwar personality. If one tried to be nostalgic about the Harlem flavor that was gone forever, such sentiments were quickly dissipated in the urgencies of adjustment to postwar problems—and they were many.

But after a few years, it became apparent that the very abruptness of that break in the continuity of Harlem traditions served to confound and aggravate the community's postwar problems. Harlem was trying to push forward, it seemed, by cutting itself off from every vestige of its past in that strangely distant time before the war. Intellectually, this attitude proved, in time, to be unworkable. Eventually, one had to go back into the 1930's, the 1920's and even before World War I, in order to understand the Harlem saga—where it had come from, where it had been, and where it might be going.

For myself, the real necessity for seeing Harlem in a retrospective context came slowly. The American ethos is impatient with history and cares deeply only about today, and possibly about tomorrow. History is valid for the American only when it can be used as a facile justification for what is half-heartedly pursued today in defense of pragmatic "Americanism." Negroes are no different in this respect; thus even those who glory in certain black antecedents learn very little from their past.

The profound ineffectiveness of social action in Harlem did not strike me forcibly until around 1950-1951, when Harlem's political leftwing initiated a protest action against the Apollo Theater on 125th Street—the business thoroughfare of white economic control of the Harlem community. A picket line was ordered to protest the showing of the film satirizing Russia, *Ninotchka*, starring Greta Garbo. Without a doubt, this interracial picket line had been ordered by the Communist hierarchy downtown and agreed upon by the captive Negro leadership in Harlem. But from a Harlem point of view, the picketing was as ludicrous as it was meaningless, as few Harlemites who frequented the Apollo really cared about the movie. (They go, first and foremost, to see and hear variety stars in performance. Movies are usually a timing device added to fill in the gaps between stage shows, during which time the theater is practically empty.)

For a native, unassimilated Harlemite, nurtured in Harlem's idiosyncrasies, to be forced to walk in such a picket line represented the height of embarrassment and the depths of ignominy. For it pointed up all too graphically how far removed was the Communist-oriented leftwing from the facts of life and the native psychology of the Harlem mass mind. This protest action met with the open hostility of Harlemites, especially those employed by the Apollo Theater. And the action itself revealed the damning fact that the Harlem leftwing, during this period, took no interest at all in the long-standing grievances of the performers, musicians, stagehands, etc., against the Apollo management. There were no picket lines protesting these issues.

The Negro radical leftwing leadership of Harlem had always shown a snobbish and intolerant attitude towards the type of stage fare featured weekly at the Apollo. The "cultural" tastes of the masses never sullied the aesthetic sensibilities of the Communist elite. Knowing this, we soon realized that it was *not* the picket line

that was wrong but that it was being staged for *the wrong issue*. In a flash the idea dawned that the Russian-baiting film, although a cultural issue being made political, was not the *right* cultural issue at stake here. The *real* cultural issue for Harlem was the Apollo Theater itself: its role as an institution, its ownership, its influence and its history. None of the picketers were old enough to know that their action was simply the most recent of a long list of actions, both open and closed, carried out against the Apollo management since the 1920's. No one was kept out of the Apollo Theater by the picket line, of course, but larger implications became clear.

During the same period, the Apollo Theater became an issue in the Harlem press over a controversy inspired by a stage joke that was interpreted as a slur against Negro women, specifically the prostitutes who frequented the neighborhood near the Apollo. The incident took place at the very time certain members of the Harlem theater movement were trying to convince the Apollo management to permit the presentation of some legitimate drama. The Apollo had responded by presenting Negro versions of *Rain* and *Detective Story*, both of which were box-office failures. The Apollo went back to its usual variety entertainment, and then came the stage joke: A white ventriloquist had his dummy say that he was having a hard time with women lately, whereupon the ventriloquist replied that "just around the corner, women are a dime a dozen." A Harlem Women's Group protested and the Apollo management was chastised in the press which was still smarting over being rebuffed by the Apollo on "legitimate drama."

The owners of the Apollo had been known as people who believed they knew best what Harlemites wanted in the way of entertainment, and said so. Thus Jack Schiffman, one of the managers, was forced to answer with a statement of policy which appeared in the *Amsterdam News*, for the week of September 22, 1951:

The Apollo Theater launched an experiment which it then considered noble and worthwhile. . . . that of putting on fine legitimate stage plays with an all-Negro cast. The experiment proved to be a rather disastrous failure. . . . And so, it's back to the vaudeville policy for us with an occasional flyer in the legitimate field to be anticipated. And, the vaudeville policy is

good enough for us because there is a great deal of satisfaction, in varying degrees, in putting on our weekly shows. . . . Then too, there is the talented youth to be considered. There are many youngsters who are trying to crash into show business and we at the Apollo like to feel that we're playing an important part in supplying the opportunity for these young folk. . . .

From the point of view of the Apollo management, this settled the issue most conveniently; but for the community, it answered none of the larger questions that had hovered about the heads of the Apollo management since the 1920's. One of the members of the pioneer Harlem Writers Club wrote the first of an intended series of articles answering the Apollo management, and tried to get Paul Robeson's *Freedom* newspaper to publish them. Robeson's chief editor, a Communist bureaucrat, sidestepped the issue and refused for reasons of "policy" and "space." Thus, the most fundamental cultural institutional issue in the Harlem community was never aired by the Harlem leftwing.

The Apollo Theater episode was only one of several issues that further widened the breach between certain members of the Harlem Writers' Club and the leftwing cultural inner circle of *Freedom* newspaper. The Apollo Theater issue was rife with many related challenges. The legitimate dramas that failed on the Apollo stage were not representative of Negro Theater despite the all-Negro casts, for the question of the Negro dramatist's role was not considered. *Rain* and *Detective Story*, both white plays, answered only the actor's plea—for integrated casting, for instance serving the short-term interests of such actors as Sidney Poitier, on his way "up" from the defunct American Negro Theater.

The implication of the junior Schiffman's claim that the Apollo management's interest in helping Negro youth crash show business was all altruism was never publicly examined in Harlem. What were the real inside relationships between the Apollo management and the variety, musicians' and theatrical craft unions? How did Negro youth entering show business fare with these unions? Why did the Apollo management close up theater and movie houses in Harlem and sell out only to churches? This prevented rival and competing theater interests from gaining a foothold in Harlem that has worked to the detriment of Harlem cultural life. But the Harlem leftwing evaded these problems, and the official Communist Party leadership could look at the Apollo

and see only one thing to attack—an “anti”-Soviet propaganda film!

The crowning irony in these 1951 events was that right in the midst of the Apollo episode, the Communist Party of the United States saw fit to move its national headquarters onto Harlem's 125th Street in order to escape the pressures of political and press harassment growing out of McCarthyite hysteria. Under a headline—“Communists Woo Harlem—Open Big Drive in Local Area”—the *Amsterdam News* of September 29, 1951, said that the Communists had retreated to Harlem because “this belabored, belittled community is considered to be America's weakest line of resistance against the movement.” Yet, with all the seven Communist front groups listed and functioning in Harlem, the Communist Party had no program that could deal with the fundamentals of Harlem reality.

However, for this writer at least, the Apollo picket line started another train of thought, and established a method and a line of historical investigation into the complex origins of Harlem's problems. There were too many tall tales and glamorous legends in the folklore about Harlem's good old days that refused to die. Wise old men would talk of events of forty years ago as if they happened last year, and conjure up the image of personalities long dead whose great fame was unrecorded except in crumbling newspaper clippings. When, how, and why did they all appear?

The pioneer history of Harlem, James Weldon Johnson's *Black Manhattan*, was, essentially, a cultural history. From a sociological point of view, Johnson was correct in his choice of cultural analysis as a method. Yet the cultural aspects of Harlem developments had economic determinants and political consequences. In economic terms, the origins of Harlem's black community are to be found in the rise of *black economic nationalism*. At the turn of this century Harlem was a predominantly white community that had been “overbuilt with new apartment houses. It was far uptown, and the only rapid transportation was the elevated running up Eighth Avenue—the Lenox Avenue Subway had not yet been built. . . . So landlords were finding it hard to fill their houses.”¹

¹ *Black Manhattan* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1930), p. 148. (Used by permission of Mrs. James Weldon Johnson.)

However, the Harlem whites organized to use all means—legal, persuasive, and conspiratorial—to stem the Negro influx which assumed mass proportions around 1905.

The spirit behind this influx was economic nationalism. The economic organization behind this nationalism was the Afro-American Realty Company, a group of Negro leaders, business men, and politicians of whom the leading voices were Philip A. Payton, a real estate man, and Charles W. Anderson, a Republican Party stalwart who, in 1905, was appointed collector of internal revenue in New York by Theodore Roosevelt. Behind these men stood T. Thomas Fortune, editor of the *New York Age*, the oldest and most influential Negro newspaper in New York. But behind them all stood the guiding mind of Booker T. Washington and his National Negro Business League founded in 1900. All of the personalities in or around the Afro-American Realty Company were proteges of Washington and members of his business league. They were, thus, representatives of Washington's Tuskegee Machine, a power in Negro affairs, and the bane of the civil rights radicals led by W.E.B. DuBois in his Niagara Movement of 1905. By this time nationalism had become aggressive and assertive in economics but conservative in civil rights politics, hence the clash over “program” between Washington and DuBois's new civil rights “radicalism.”

The operations of the Afro-American Realty Company spearheaded the growth of black Harlem by either leasing or buying apartment dwellings that could not be rented and renting them to Negroes. In many cases whites voluntarily abandoned houses, in other cases whites were evicted and replaced by Negroes.

The whole movement, in the eyes of the whites, took on the aspect of an “invasion”; they became panic-stricken, and began fleeing as from a plague. The presence of one colored family in a block, no matter how well bred and orderly, was sufficient to

* Other associates of the Afro-American Realty Company were: Fred R. Moore, Emmet J. Scott, Joseph H. Bruce, Sandy P. Jones, Henry C. Parker, John B. Nail, William Ten Eyck, James E. Garner, Edward S. Payton, Stephen A. Bennett. James Weldon Johnson married Grace Nail, sister to John B. Nail. At this writing, Mrs. James Weldon Johnson still resides in Harlem. Note also that Emmett J. Scott, who was secretary to Booker T. Washington at Tuskegee, also worked closely with Marcus Garvey, personifying the link between Washington's economic nationalism and Garvey's “Back to Africa” nationalism.

precipitate a flight. House after house and block after block was actually deserted.²

Philip A. Payton organized the Afro-American Realty Company to counter the thrust of the Hudson Realty Company, a white group, formed to stop and turn back the black influx after it had begun to spread west of the Lenox Avenue "line" of demarcation. Payton's group then attempted to incorporate with a capitalization of \$500,000 at ten dollars per share with the aim of expanding operations to include building apartments. For a long period the *New York Age* carried an ad appealing for buyers of shares. From 1905 to the beginning of World War I, a legal and financial struggle went on in Harlem between black and white realty interests, during which time Negroes gained a solid foothold.

The dominant thinking of the times was reflected in the remarks of several of the leading minds behind the organization of the Afro-American Realty Company. Speaking to an audience of farmers at the fourteenth annual session of the Tuskegee Negro Conference, Washington was quoted by the *New York Age* as saying "When Race gets Bank Book, its Troubles will Cease."³ He further advised Negroes "Get some property . . . Get a home of your own." W.E.B. DuBois was unhappy over the way Washington emphasized his gospel of "Work and Money." Speaking at a celebration of Lincoln's birthday to the "Professional and Business Men's" group, Philip A. Payton discussed the Afro-American Realty Company's operations and aims, stating "There is strength in financial combination". In pleading for more race support, he declared: "How often do we see because of (this) lack of race confidence a competent Afro-American lawyer or doctor hardly able to exist from want of patronage from his race."⁴

The Afro-American Realty Company lasted about five years. It collapsed, Johnson wrote, because of "lack of the large amount of capital essential . . . but several individual colored men carried on. Philip A. Payton and J.C. Thomas bought two five-story apartments. . . . John B. Nail bought a row of five apartments . . . St.

² James Weldon Johnson, "Harlem: the Cultural Capitol," in Alain Locke (editor), *The New Negro*, 1925, Albert and Charles Boni, p. 304.

³ *New York Age*, February 23, 1905, p. 1.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

Philips Episcopal Church, one of the oldest and richest colored congregations in New York bought a row of thirteen apartments on One Hundred and Thirty-fifth Street between Lenox and Seventh Avenues."⁵ The Afro-American Realty Company initiated a wave of real estate buying among Harlem's new Negro arrivals. Despite much bitter feeling during a fifteen year struggle of Negroes to gain a foothold, Harlem was won without serious violence.

The social role of economic nationalism in the rise of black Harlem and similar movements has been either ignored or poorly understood by most professional Negro historians. Even writers such as John Hope Franklin and E. Franklin Frazier fail to mention either Payton, his realty company or the men around him. More than that, the important influence of Booker T. Washington's philosophy on the rise of black economic nationalism has not been generally acknowledged. This omission of the role of nationalism leaves much of the analysis common to Negro historiography open to question. Philip A. Payton was a disciple of Booker T. Washington, thus the affinity of Washington's economic ideas to the founding of black Harlem is historically factual. Johnson wrote:

The move to Harlem, in the beginning and for a long time, was fathered and engineered by Philip A. Payton. . . . But this was more than a matter of mere business with Mr. Payton; the matter of better and still better housing for colored people in New York became the dominating idea of his life, and he worked on it as long as he lived. When Negro New Yorkers evaluate their benefactors in their own race, they must find that not many have done more than Phil Payton; for much of what has made Harlem the intellectual and artistic capital of the Negro world is in good part due to this fundamental advantage.⁶

Harlem became what the historian, James Weldon Johnson, called "the intellectual and artistic capital of the Negro world" for a very good reason—because New York City was the intellectual and cultural capital of the white world in America. This is of historical and cultural importance in more ways than one. By

⁵ *Black Manhattan*, *op. cit.*, p. 149.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

understanding this, it is then possible to see that the emergence and growth of Negro Harlem took place within the framework of Negro-white relations, both in New York and elsewhere. Manhattan real estate interests, the relations of various national groups, southern Negro migrations, war economics, etc., made Harlem a new Promised Land for the black worker and former "peasant" from both the South and the West Indies. But Harlem also fostered something else which has not been adequately dealt with in the history books—a cultural movement and a creative intelligentsia. That this occurred was not at all strange in terms of the Negro's native artistic gifts. What *was* unique, however, was that this Negro cultural movement ran almost parallel to, and in interaction with, a white American cultural resurgence. Again the historical motif of the Negro dynamic, acting and reacting within the context of Negro-white relations, was demonstrated—but on the cultural plane. Thus it is more than coincidence that Negro Harlem, which began as a trickle of black settlers quickly grew into a city within a city, and the fact that in 1912, a group of white creative intellectuals came together in the "salon" of Mabel Dodge in Greenwich Village to launch the American literary and cultural renaissance that reached its zenith in the 1920's.

In 1930, James Weldon Johnson wrote:

In the history of New York the name Harlem has changed from Dutch to Irish to Jewish to Negro; but it is through this last change that it has gained its most widespread fame. Throughout coloured America Harlem is the recognized Negro capital. Indeed, it is Mecca for the sightseer, the pleasure seeker, the curious, the adventurous, the enterprising, the ambitious, and the talented of the entire Negro world; for the lure of it has reached down to every island of the Carib Sea and penetrated even into Africa. It is almost as well known to the white world, for it has been much talked and written about.⁷

Here, Johnson was describing the Harlem of the 1920's, the age of the Negro renaissance (often called the Harlem Renaissance). A list of its most outstanding personalities would include Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, Walter White, George S. Schuyler, E. Franklin Frazier, J.A. Rogers,

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

Charles Gilpin, Alain Locke, Gwendolyn Bennett, W.E.B. DuBois, Paul Robeson, Abbie Mitchell, Noble Sissle, Eubie Blake, Josephine Baker, Florence Mills, Roland Hayes, Louis Armstrong, Bill Robinson, Duke Ellington, A. Philip Randolph, Jean Toomer, and Ethel Waters, to mention only those who would be known or remembered today. But there were many others whose creative contributions were important. Note that the majority of this creative generation were not New Yorkers, but hailed from places as distant as Joplin, Missouri (Hughes), and the British West Indies (McKay). Harlem was the Mecca for the intelligentsia.

Out of the Greenwich Village literary and cultural movement, centered around Mabel Dodge's famous "23 Fifth Avenue" salon near Washington Square, came the following: Carl Van Vechten; George Cram Cook, the discoverer and mentor of Eugene O'Neill; Emilie Hapgood; Ridgely Torrence; Paul Green; John Reed, the first American Communist martyr-hero; Louise Bryant, Reed's wife; Max Eastman, editor of the original *Masses* magazine of the radical Left; Walter Lippmann, then a Socialist (still a leading journalist); Lincoln Steffens; Elizabeth Gurley Flynn*, a ranking Communist leader; William English Walling, a leading Socialist, and the first Chairman of the Executive Committee of the NAACP, organized in 1910; Sinclair Lewis; Michael Gold; Dorothy and DuBose Heyward—to name the more prominent. These white artists and intellectuals are listed not only to reveal something of the character and quality of this early Village renaissance, but also because most of them are to be remembered for their close personal relationships with certain Negro individuals from the Harlem Renaissance. Historically, there was an ethnic or aesthetic interaction between these two "racial" movements. It was a relationship that helps not only to explain these parallel movements, but reveals much about the nature of the American nationality problem in its evolutionary process.

This 1912 salon coterie later expanded from its first, bohemian

* Elizabeth Gurley Flynn was not an artist but a radical member of IWW (International Workers of the World). Mabel Dodge's group played host not only to artists, but to many of the leading labor radicals of the day such as anarchists Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman, and William "Big Bill" Haywood, the leading figure in the IWW.

stage (the Harlem movement also had its bohemian element) to include such figures as Floyd Dell, V.F. Calverton, H.L. Mencken and Frank Harris—more solid intellectuals, who lent stability to a movement with a pronounced madcap fringe. Both movements had a much greater social potential than they ever realized, and a brief analysis of why, is of useful interest even now. In fact, Harlem's cultural history cannot be fully appreciated without such an evaluation.

The Harlem Renaissance differed from the Greenwich Village renaissance first, in racial content, and also in the respective social levels of the participants and their creative standards, in terms of content and form. Moreover, the Village movement began under the rare guidance and sponsorship of a patroness with a very broad and cultivated background, in the person of Mabel Dodge. The Harlem Renaissance had at its helm no such comparable personality, and thus was rather directionless. C. Wright Mills, our greatest sociologist of late, wrote of the significance of Mabel Dodge:

The type of woman known as the Salon Lady—who passes before us in the pages of Proust—has never been known in America. . . .

Apart from stray figures like Mabel Dodge of lower Fifth Avenue and Taos, New Mexico, there have not been women who ran genuine salons in the sense that salons were run as artistic and intellectual centers in Europe. . . .⁸

The nearest approach to the "Salon Lady" produced by the Harlem Renaissance was not an heiress of old, upper-class white prominence. She was the famous A'Lelia Walker, the daughter of the equally famous Madame C.J. Walker, one of the leading Negro business pioneers who, early in this century, had accumulated a million-dollar fortune from the manufacture of hair and skin preparations.

Madame Walker exemplified the emergence of a new economic class—the black bourgeoisie. This class, of course, was never to achieve any substantial stake in American high finance, and was limited to serving certain special needs of the Negro market. Being late, limited, and marginal, the black bourgeoisie as a class, did not achieve the kind of cultural and intellectual maturity that would

⁸ *Power Elite* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), pp. 78-79.

have produced a Mabel Dodge for the Harlem Renaissance. But it produced most of that movement's creative artists.* These Negro developments, taking place around 1898 to 1910, were symptomatic of the quality of rapid change in the economics of the American social dynamic—a dynamic that creates new middle-class layers. But each new black middle-class trend with new aspirations, gets checked by the color line, and is unable to solve, fully, the tasks set before it. This was the problem of the emergent Negro business class—it could not expand beyond those consumer needs of the Negro community that white businesses passed up. Thus, E. Franklin Frazier was to write of Madame Walker: "It was in the manufacture of cosmetics that Negroes—women—first achieved a spectacular success. . . . The numerous beauty shops, which constitute a large proportion of Negro business undertakings, have provided outlets for these products."⁹ It is interesting that twenty years earlier James Weldon Johnson had admonished: "Notwithstanding, it is idle to expect the Negro in Harlem or anywhere else to build business in general upon a strictly racial foundation or to develop it to any considerable proportions strictly within the limits of the patronage, credit, and financial resources of the race."¹⁰

This was, of course, an old NAACP "integration" type of argument, and became the interracial rationalization for evading the issue of nationalism and its economic imperatives for the Negro community. The logic of this argument has been retarding and detrimental to the Negroes' ghetto welfare. The real reason Negro businessmen have not been able to gain "patronage [and] credit" outside the "financial resources of the race" is because they failed, precisely, to "build business upon a strictly racial foundation." In

* Another Negro business pioneer with artistic offspring was Dr. W.A. Attaway, a Mississippi physician, who in 1909 organized the first Negro legal reserve insurance company in his state. Two of his children are William and Ruth Attaway, the former well known in the 1940's for his novels, *Let Me Breathe Thunder* and *Blood on the Forge*. Actress Ruth Attaway started her career in the original cast of *You Can't Take It With You* on Broadway, and has recently been cast in two of the Lincoln Center Repertory Theater company's productions—*After the Fall*, and *Danton's Death*. See E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro In The United States* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1949), pp. 408-409.

⁹ Frazier, *loc. cit.*

¹⁰ Johnson, *op. cit.*, p. 283.

other words, Negroes of Harlem have never achieved economic control inside Harlem, or inside any other major black community. Failing this, the black bourgeoisie has been condemned to remain forever marginal in relation to its own innate potential within American capitalism. It has also remained politically subservient, intellectually unfulfilled and provincial. Thus, the black bourgeoisie was unprepared and unconditioned to play any leading sponsorship role in the Harlem Renaissance—this class was and still is culturally imitative and unimaginative.

Obviously the famous A'Lelia Walker made an effort, but could not adequately fill the role of Salon Lady—her new class lacked a broad cultural conditioning. Langston Hughes aptly assessed her:

A'Lelia Walker was the then great Harlem party giver. . . . [She] however, big-hearted, night-dark, hair straightening heiress, made no pretense at being intellectual or exclusive. At her "at homes" Negro poets and Negro number bankers mingled with downtown poets and seat-on-the-stock-exchange racketeers. Countee Cullen would be there and Witter Bynner, Muriel Draper and Nora Holt, Andy Razaf and Taylor Gordon. And a good time was had by all. . . . A'Lelia Walker was the joy-goddess of Harlem's 1920's.¹¹

Carl Van Vechten, a music critic, novelist, photographer and art patron, was one of the most important figures in Mabel Dodge's salon. He was the first to establish a link between the Harlem and Greenwich Village artistic movements. He subsequently became the leading white patron of Negro art and artists during the heyday of the Harlem movement in the 1920's. In his first autobiography, Langston Hughes speaks of Van Vechten:

He never talks grandiloquently about democracy or Americanism. Nor makes a fetish of those qualities. But he lives them with sincerity—and humor.¹²

What Carl Van Vechten did for me was to submit my first book of poems to Alfred A. Knopf, put me in contact with the editors of *Vanity Fair*, who bought my first poems sold to a magazine, caused me to meet many editors and writers who were friendly and helpful to me, encouraged me in my efforts to help publicize the Scottsboro case, cheered me on in the writing of my first short

¹¹ Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1945), p. 244.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 255.

stories. . . . Many others of the Negroes in the arts, from Paul Robeson to Ethel Waters, Walter White to Richmond Barthe [sculptor], will offer the same testimony as to the interest Van Vechten has displayed toward Negro creators in the fields of writing, plastic arts, and popular entertainment. To say that Carl Van Vechten has harmed Negro creative activities is sheer poppycock.¹³

Van Vechten had come under fire from Negro newspaper critics for his choice of the title *Nigger Heaven* for his novel on Harlem life, published in 1926. However in 1912-1913, Van Vechten had convinced a rather unwilling Mabel Dodge to permit the first Negroes to attend one of her famous artists' soirees. She had been consulting with Van Vechten, Walter Lippmann and Lincoln Steffens, and Hutchins Hapgood, on how to add special attractions to her "evenings." She wrote in her memoirs:

The first evening I can remember was engineered by Carl [Van Vechten], who wanted to bring a pair of Negro entertainers he had seen somewhere who, he said, were marvelous. Carl's interest in Negroes began as far back as that. . . .

So as readily as I let Carl bring Negroes [once], I let Steff [Lincoln Steffens] suggest another pattern.

She related—"I didn't betray my feelings"—as she watched the "unrestrained Negroes":

While an appalling Negress danced before us in white stockings and black buttoned boots, the man strummed a banjo and sang an embarrassing song. They both leered and rolled their suggestive eyes and made me feel first hot and then cold, for I had never been so near this kind of thing before; but Carl rocked with laughter and little shrieks escaped him as he clapped his pretty hands. His big teeth became wickedly prominent and his eyes rolled in his darkening face, until he grew to somewhat resemble the clattering Negroes before him.

But after discussing this kind of experience with Lippmann and Steffens, she decided: "One must just let life express itself in whatever form it will."¹⁴

Mabel Dodge's salon did not represent the first contacts between

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 272.

¹⁴ Mabel Dodge Luhan, "Movers and Shakers," *Intimate Memories* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1936), Vol. III, pp. 79-80. Used by permission.

Negro and white in the artistic fields. This had already taken place in the theatre as far back as 1898-1900—before Negro Harlem was created—when the talented pioneer Bob Cole wrote music and sketches for white vaudeville shows. But the Mabel Dodge group represented a new American intellectual and creative movement on another level. It was the first white intellectual revolt against the deadening materialistic pall that a triumphant industrialism had spread over the American landscape, choking up the spiritual pores of the nation and threatening to smother its creative potential. "America is all machinery and money making and factories," Mabel Dodge had said after ten years of cultural rejuvenation in Europe. "It is ugly, ugly, ugly."¹⁵

<The new trend of creative intellectuals who gathered around her all felt the same way. They were deeply disturbed and agitated over the way America was developing into a nation without soul. In coming to Greenwich Village from the hinterlands or from universities, they were escaping the real America they had grown up in, in order to find ways of making themselves capable of changing America into what they thought it ought to be. Negro creative artists, on the other hand, came to Harlem seeking creative fulfillment on whatever terms offered to them.

Many of the white creative intellectuals in the new Village movement were inclined towards radical social thought and were not, by any means, ivory tower aesthetes remote from the living issues of the day. Thus several of them, like Van Vechten, looked the facts square in the face and admitted that the racial factor in American thinking was inseparable from the problems of culture and art. And, that in order to deal positively and creatively with cultural and artistic problems, one had also to deal with race. Mabel Dodge was loath to accept this reality at first, but she later changed her mind in a typically American way—salving her conscience on the race question by going over to the side of the Indians, and eventually even marrying one. Interestingly enough, her marriage to an Indian named Luhan was not unconnected with the fact that her good friend, D.H. Lawrence, although British by birth and upbringing, was able to write so cogently on the problems and psychology of Indian-white relations in the United

¹⁵ Mabel Dodge Luhan, *op. cit.*, "European Experiences," Vol. II, p. 453.

States, in his 1923 collection of essays, *Studies in Classic American Literature*. These essays were completed in 1922, in New Mexico, where Mabel Dodge had retired from Greenwich Village.

That the new creative intellectual movement around Mabel Dodge's salon had individuals who immediately concerned themselves with the implications of Negroes and Indians in American society—from an ethnic and cultural point of view—was neither accidental nor surprising. It was all in the nature of things American and/or cultural. These intellectuals could not avoid dealing with these obvious factors in the unsolved American nationality problem. Then, as now, the gnawing question was—who and what is an American? Although it appears that none of Mabel Dodge's intellectuals said so in so many words, the complex and perplexing questions of American cultural revival could not be answered until this nationality question was dealt with, if not settled philosophically.

As an outsider, D.H. Lawrence saw into the heart of one side of the problem in his study of Fenimore Cooper's novels:

The American landscape has never been at one with the white man. Never. And white men have probably never felt so bitter anywhere, as here in America, where the very landscape, in its very beauty, seems a bit devilish and grinning, opposed to us.

The desire to extirpate the Indian. And the contradictory desire to glorify him. Both are rampant still, to-day.

The minority of whites intellectualize the Red Man and laud him to the skies. But this minority of whites is mostly a high-brow minority with a big grouch against its own whiteness. So there you are.

But you have there the myth of the essential white America. All the other stuff, the love, the democracy . . . is a sort of by-play. The essential American soul is hard, isolate, stoic, and a killer. It has never yet melted.¹⁶

Lawrence was able to ignore Negroes in the American democratic equation but Mabel Dodge's American companions in culture could not. Historically, a three-way ethnic component was involved in the original basic ingredients of the formative American nation—white Englishmen, black Africans, and red Indians.

¹⁶ *Studies in Classic American Literature* (Anchor ed.; New York: Doubleday & Co., 1951), pp. 43-73.

By the time the twentieth century came around, it was axiomatic that the future of the American nation would depend on how it could reconcile, democratically, the presence of these three groups. The fact that nineteenth-century immigration added millions of white Europeans who were not of prime English stock, does not essentially alter the qualities of the original ethnic triad. In twentieth-century America, English orientation of the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant group has remained the dominant factor.

Within the Mabel Dodge following, the white intellectuals and artists developed both a pro-Indian and a pro-Negro trend in their cultural approaches. There was another ethnic minority question involved in the Village movement that was not played up—the Jewish question—due to the fact that quite a number of the leading intellectuals in the movement were Jews. Mabel Dodge never discussed the Jewish “group” issue in her memoirs despite the apparent Jewishness of many of her artistic acquaintances. In view of the ever-present issue of anti-Semitism, it is interesting to see that Jews have never been debarred from full and equal participation in American cultural fields. The new Village movement of 1912 was an example of this fact. However the Negro issue was approached with care, and in the face of certain doubts. Mabel Dodge’s first and only evening with Negroes present, at 23 Fifth Avenue, was by invitation only. Her regular weekly gatherings had usually been “open.”

The following excerpt from a letter to Mabel Dodge from Maurice Sterne (with whom she had had a tempestuous affair), foreshadows her departure for Taos, New Mexico. There, as the wife of an Indian, she was to set up a new artists’ colony and begin her memoirs.

Do you want an object in life? Save the Indians, their art-culture—reveal it to the world! I hear astonishing things here about the insensitiveness of our Indian Office.

That which Emilie Hapgood and others are doing for the Negroes, you could, if you wanted to, do for the Indians—You’ll say it is different with the Negroes—They are scattered all over the U.S. so it is easier to bring them before the public. This isn’t at all an advantage, for we have become too familiar with them, and our antagonism towards them was deep-rooted, whereas, as far as the public is concerned, no prejudices exist against the Indians,

only a patronizing attitude which to my mind is worse as far as the Indian is concerned. And it would be the easiest thing in the world to get a number of Indians from different parts of the country to perform at N.Y., and above all at Washington, to make the American people realize that there are such things as other forms of civilizations besides ours. . . .¹⁷

The Emilie Hapgood mentioned in Sterne’s letter belonged to the pro-Negro segment among the new Village intellectuals (as opposed to Mabel Dodge, and others, who were pro-Indian). She had made a patron’s splurge in a forbidden area of the race question—the Negro creative world of Harlem. She initiated the swing to the Negro “image theme” in the theater three years before Eugene O’Neill revolutionized dramatic art with *The Emperor Jones*:

April 5, 1917 is the date of the most important single event in the entire history of the Negro in the American theatre; for it marks the beginning of a new era. On that date a performance of three dramatic plays was given by the Coloured Players at the Garden Theatre in Madison Square Garden, New York, and the stereotyped traditions regarding the Negro’s histrionic limitations were smashed. It was the first time anywhere in the United States for Negro actors in the dramatic theatre to command the serious attention of the critics and of the general press and public.

The plays were three one-act plays written by Ridgely Torrence;* they were produced by Mrs. Emilie Hapgood; the settings and costumes were designed by Robert Edmond Jones, and the staging was under his direction.¹⁸

What was it that motivated the involvement of the white creative intellectuals of this period with Negro culture? Was it merely what Hutchins Hapgood,† in writing about Emilie Hapgood’s theatrical venture, called “pure mental interest”? Why did white intellectuals take such conflicting, but seemingly principled, positions on matters of art, culture and race? Was it a kind of ideal-

¹⁷ Luhan, . . . *Memories*, *op. cit.*, Vol. III, pp. 534.

* Ridgely Torrence was a close friend of Mabel Dodge’s. The plays were: *The Rider of Dreams*, *Granny Maumee* and *Simon the Cyrenian*.

¹⁸ Johnson, *op. cit.*, pp. 175-179.

† Hutchins Hapgood was the brother-in-law of Emilie Hapgood whose husband, Norman Hapgood, was a pioneer journalist in the field of pure foods, conservation of natural resources and other reforms, from 1900 to the 1920’s.

ism peculiar to that era? Was it purely white guilt? Was it white Anglo-Saxon racial and cultural ego? Was it a duty assumed under the obligation of cultural uplift? Did these white intellectuals fully understand the implications of what they were doing? Did they have a definitive cultural goal or were they instinctively groping? Or were their motivations, taken collectively, a confused, spontaneous eclectic mixture?

In any event, during Mabel Dodge's salon period the Village movement had roughly eight years' start over the Harlem movement, which reached its zenith in the 1920's. By then Mabel Dodge's salon was dispersed; the intellectuals who had clustered around her were now playing diverse personal roles both in art and politics. It was post-World War I: Newer and broader challenges and a new, younger, intellectual wave appeared, with a new spokesman—Harold Stearns—who voiced the pessimistic spirit of the Lost Generation. Mabel Dodge was to write in her memoirs: "When a man or a race has to make a new adaption, it is sometimes unsuccessfully hurried like an apple that is rotted before it is ripe, as are many Negroes of Harlem."¹⁹

Mabel Dodge wanted an American cultural renaissance, but shrank from the implications of a black American renaissance as a socially-necessary, historically-determined, parallel movement. Because of her racially-limited view she could not, or would not, see the black cultural renaissance in its more definable role as a cultural catalyst for the reordering of the disordered and disparate ethnic ingredients of American nationality.

Ironically, the view of the Negro intellectuals involved in the Harlem Renaissance was also limited. Only one man saw deeply into the social implications of the movement: W.E.B. DuBois. He outlined his insights in "The Criteria of Negro Art," which was published in *Crisis* in 1926, but he did not carry his analysis far enough. One reason was that DuBois was not functioning as a creative artist (although he has since assumed this role), but as a voice in the politics and economics of civil rights organizations.

The three writers who wrote specifically about the Harlem Renaissance, and were also representatives of it—Langston Hughes, James Weldon Johnson, and Claude McKay—all failed to render

the kind of analysis the movement demanded. A fourth, Wallace Thurman, wrote a sardonic, satirical novel based on the renaissance—*Infants of the Spring*. The situation in Harlem and the world beyond was indeed conducive to criticism. As Langston Hughes later described the era:

I was there. I had a swell time while it lasted. But I thought it wouldn't last long. . . . For how could a large and enthusiastic number of people be crazy about Negroes forever? They thought the race problem had at last been solved through Art plus Gladys Bentley. . . .

I don't know what made many Negroes think that—except that they were mostly intellectuals doing the thinking. The ordinary Negroes hadn't heard of the Negro Renaissance. And if they had, it hadn't raised their wages any.²⁰

Yet, Langston Hughes was created by, and helped to create, this Negro Renaissance. A movement that he never truly understood made him what he is today. In a recent critical study of Langston Hughes, François Dodat wrote that Hughes "integrated himself with the Negro Renaissance," and added; "This poet is not a thinker, but nobody would dream of reproaching him for it, because, on the contrary, he possesses an extraordinary faculty for defining the confused sensations that constitute the collective conscience of simple minds." On the Harlem Renaissance Dodat asserts: "Although it seemed to have such a brilliant future assured, in reality it was the work of a handful of artists and intellectuals who made illusions by their rapid ascent after the total failure of the old ideals, which in any case would not have survived the First World War."²¹

James Weldon Johnson, older than most of the Harlem Renaissance intellectuals, and with more insight into Negro cultural forms, also saw the renaissance somewhat more clearly. Born in 1871, Johnson was in his fifties during the Harlem movement and published *Black Manhattan* at fifty-nine. In 1912, he had published his first novel, *Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*, anonymously. The novel caused a great stir but he did not publish it

²⁰ *The Big Sea*, op. cit., p. 228.

²¹ François Dodat, "Langston Hughes," *Presence Africaine* (Paris, Second Quarter, 1965), Vol. XXVI, No. 54 (English edition), pp. 283-285.

¹⁹ Luhan, . . . *Memories*, op. cit., Vol. III, p. 363.

under his own name until 1927. He was the first Negro to be admitted to the Florida Bar and later became American Consul first in Venezuela and then Nicaragua (1903-1912). He was also one of the early lawyer-leaders of the NAACP. Johnson's main literary contribution was in poetry, yet today, when everything about the American Negro must be seen in its historical perspective, Johnson's descriptive history, *Black Manhattan*, and his autobiography, *Along This Way* (1933), emerge as his most important writing. These two works give us practically the entire panorama of Negro cultural history in America by a man who participated in that history from the 1890's—the decade that marked the actual beginning of the modern Negro cultural movement—until his death in 1938.

In *Black Manhattan*, Johnson traces the history of the Negro in New York City from 1626, when there were eleven Negroes in Dutch "New Amsterdam," down to the establishment of black Harlem, and ends the book in 1929 with a description of the Harlem Renaissance. Johnson's great emphasis was on achievement with very little, if any, analysis. Yet he had a long-range vision of the Harlem movement, if not a deep one. His conclusions, unsatisfactory as they were, vaguely indicated where the Harlem movement might have led:

Harlem is still in the process of making. It is still new and mixed; so mixed that one may get many different views—which is all right so long as one view is not taken to be the whole picture. This many-sided aspect, however, makes it one of the most interesting communities in America. But Harlem is more than a community; it is a large-scale laboratory experiment in the race problem, and from it a good many facts have been found. . . .

Through his artistic efforts the Negro is smashing [an] immemorial stereotype faster than he has ever done through any method he has been able to use. . . . He is impressing upon the national mind the conviction that he is an active and important force in American life; that he is a creator as well as a creature; that he has given as well as received; that his gifts have been not only obvious and material, but also spiritual and aesthetic; that he is a contributor to the nation's common cultural store; in fine, he is helping to form American civilization [italics added].²²

²² *Black Manhattan*, op. cit., pp. 281-284.

If Johnson had said "American nationality" rather than "American civilization," or if he had said "the American Negro nationality within the American nation," he would have made a definite theoretical contribution and things would have been clearer, perhaps, for Langston Hughes. But Johnson could transcend neither the limits of his times nor his own class background. As a ranking exponent of the NAACP interracial philosophy, he instinctively suppressed (as Robeson did later) whatever feelings of cultural nationalism were within him. Thus he ignored the obvious fact that the Harlem Renaissance, in its creative form, content, and essence, was paying a high price for being allowed, now, to contribute "to the nation's common cultural store" and "to form American civilization." The price was that in exchange for the patronage gained from Carl Van Vechten and others among the downtown white creative intellectual movement, the Negro's "spiritual and aesthetic" materials were taken over by many white artists, who used them allegedly to advance the Negro artistically but actually more for their own self-glorification. As a result, a most intense (and unfair) competition was engendered between white and Negro writers; the whites, from their vantage point of superior social and economic advantages, naturally won out.

A tradition of white cultural paternalism swiftly became entrenched in the Harlem movement. From 1917 to 1930, no less than fifteen white playwrights presented works on Broadway dealing with Negro themes. During the same period, five plays by Negroes were produced, of which four were serious. The one that was fairly successful—*Appearances*, by Garland Anderson—was not about Negroes, nor even whites, as such, but about the Christian Science doctrine. There were two box-office failures: *The Chipwoman's Fortune*, by Willis Richardson, produced by Mrs. Sherwood Anderson, and *Meek Mose*, by Frank Wilson, which was produced by Negroes. Only one play, *Harlem* by Wallace Thurman, was actually produced in Harlem.

It is interesting to note that it was not until after World War I that serious Negro playwrights emerged. Prior to the war, the Negro's forte had always been the stage musical. *Shuffle Along*, a musical by Sissle and Blake that was produced in 1921, was the most outstanding Negro achievement in the theater since the Negro broke with the old minstrel form in the 1890's. In fact, it

has not yet been equalled or surpassed, and in terms of book, lyrics and music, it established a new criterion for the American stage musical.

White critics of the theater have all refused to admit the impact of *Shuffle Along* on the evolution of the American musical comedy form. Gilbert Seldes, however, admits to its "vitality" while declining to call it art."²³ The Negro writer, Claude McKay, saw it differently: "The metropolitan critics dismissed it casually at first. There were faults. . . . *Shuffle Along* was conceived, composed and directed by Negroes. There had been nothing comparable to it since the Williams and Walker Negro shows. It definitely showed the Negro groping, fumbling and emerging in artistic group expression."²⁴

All in all, in this period, the rather lopsided interracial collaboration in the theater did not project the Negro playwright, but it did open the doors for the Negro actor-performer who progressed unaided by the playwright. Every Negro dramatic star, including Paul Robeson, Charles Gilpin, and others who emerged out of the Harlem Renaissance, rose to stardom in the plays of white dramatists. Robeson was launched by the plays of Mary Hoyt Wiborg, Nan Bagby Stevens, Eugene O'Neill, James Tully, Edna Ferber, Oscar Hammerstein, and Jerome Kern. (*Taboo*, *Roseanne*, *All God's Chillun Got Wings*, *Black Boy*, and *Show Boat*, respectively). The novelists and poets of the Harlem Renaissance fared better than the dramatists, but the actors and performers fared best of all.

James Weldon Johnson did not truly grasp the crucial nature of the Negro writer's role in the Harlem Renaissance, especially the dramatist's role in the theater as an institution that combines nearly all the other art forms. He was not certain that it was necessary to develop Negro playwrights:

The Negro as a writer for the theatre has not kept pace; he has, in fact, lost ground, even in the special field where he was once prominent, the field of Negro musical shows. In the serious drama three attempts have been made in the professional theatre, only one of which was successful. Coloured people often complain about the sort of light that is shed upon the race in most Negro

²³ *The Seven Lively Arts* (New York: Sagamore Press, 1924), p. 147.

²⁴ *A Long Way from Home* (New York: Lee Furman, 1937), p. 141.

plays. It may be—*there is no certainty*—that their remedy lies in the development of Negro playwrights. Some good reasons can be assigned for this discrepancy between the status of the actor and of the playwright, but they do not alter the fact [*italics added*].²⁵

Notwithstanding Johnson's lack of "certainty"—*without Negro playwrights there can be no true Negro ethnic theater* (provided that one really wants such a thing).^{*} And without an ethnic theater how can there be a cultural renaissance? Or better—what is the cultural renaissance for? If it is for the enhancement of the Negro's cultural autonomy, his artistic and creative development or his nationality, or his group consciousness, or his identity in white America, then he must develop Negro creative writers of every type—but *especially for the theater*. But if the cultural renaissance is merely for cultural integration, then it does not really matter who writes plays or books about certain people who "just happen to have a dark skin" in white America. In that case the Negro renaissance is a misnomer, a fad, a socially assertive movement in art that disappears and leaves no imprint. A cultural renaissance that engenders barriers to the emergence of the creative writer is a contradiction in terms, an emasculated movement. For the creative edge of the movement has been dulled, the ability of the movement to foment revolutionary ideas about culture and society has been smothered. The black creative writer as interpreter of reality or as social critic must wed his ideas to institutional forms. Undermine the concept of the institutional form (such as denying the institution of the Negro ethnic theater in America) and the renaissance must fail, as the Harlem movement of the 1920's failed.

The analytical flaws in James Weldon Johnson's treatment of the Harlem Renaissance developments, reflected the lack of a definitive cultural philosophy characteristic of the other Harlem intellectuals. Langston Hughes' attitudes were merely an extreme expression of the movement's inspired aimlessness. His grateful but uncritical acceptance of white patronage was the other side of the coin of Johnson's grateful but uncritical acceptance that a white

²⁵ *Black Manhattan*, *op. cit.*, p. 225.

^{*} And without an ethnic theater, the Negro playwright is hampered in his development. Thus the seeds of the American Negro Theater's collapse in the 1940's were planted in the 1920's.

playwright (Ridgely Torrence) and a white producer (Emilie Hapgood) were responsible for projecting Negro actors onto a white stage for a white audience so that they commanded "the serious attention of the critics . . . for the first time anywhere in the United States." There was nothing morally or ethically wrong in accepting this patronage at the very outset. The problem was, the pattern was adopted as a permanent *modus operandi* in interracial cultural affairs, without any critical reflections on its outcome for the future of the movement. Thus, the Harlem Renaissance became partially smothered in the guilty, idealistic, or egotistical interventions of cultural paternalism. But this was typical NAACP "interracialism," extended by Johnson from the politics of civil rights to the politics of culture.

What really lay behind James Weldon Johnson's weak neutrality on the question of Negro vs. white creative competition, and his reluctance to come to critical grips with such obvious failures as the Harlem Renaissance, was the class factor in the Negro movement of the 1920's; for the Negro bourgeois-middle-class stratum did not support the Harlem Renaissance movement morally, aesthetically, or financially. The Negro middle class, being politically, socially, and economically marginal, was both unwilling and unable to play any commanding role in the politics and economics of culture and art, as *either patrons or entrepreneurs*. Thus the Harlem Renaissance was an insolvent movement in ways other than in the lack of a cultural philosophy . . . which amounts to the same thing.* A real analysis on the cultural plane of Negro affairs brings one face to face with the hard economic and political facts of American society. Culture and art are spiritual, intellectual, ethical, aesthetic, revolutionary, political, etc.—but they are also a business aspect of private enterprise or of the state. Yet, a truly radical approach to the problems of culture and art cannot be inhibited by the realities of the economic and class barriers against cultural freedom.

* There was some support from the NAACP for the writers of the Harlem Renaissance, despite the fact that the NAACP was, and is, a bourgeois organization. No doubt the influence of leaders such as DuBois and Johnson were responsible for this. Certain wealthy whites, influential in the NAACP leadership, offered literary prizes through the Association's *Crisis* magazine, of which DuBois was then the editor. These prizes were established in 1924. *Opportunity*, the Urban League's publication, followed suit.

W.E.B. DuBois, of the same generation as James Weldon Johnson, was truly groping for the kind of cultural philosophy the Harlem Renaissance needed. This was revealed by Hutchins Hapgood, who had known DuBois at Harvard in the 1890's, and described visiting him sometime around 1912 or 1913:

One of my disappointments as a journalist was my failure to persuade W.E.B. DuBois to help me to get in touch with the Negroes. I liked the fact that the class of 1890 at Harvard had elected DuBois class orator. Then later, when I was studying in Berlin, I met him, apparently having a good time in the way young men do. So when I was working on the *Globe*, and he was the editor of an important paper devoted to the interests of the Negroes, I felt I could approach him. I saw myself writing a series of attractive articles on Negroes. But when I told DuBois with great enthusiasm of what I intended to do and asked him to give me introductions to some of the more expressive of the race, he declined absolutely. "The Negroes," he said, "do not wish to be written about by white men, even when they know they will be treated sympathetically. Perhaps especially then, they do not desire it." DuBois, as he said this, seemed to me proud and truthful, so much so that I gave up the idea.²⁶

During the Chicago conference of the NAACP in 1926, DuBois made the following remarks to a Negro audience:

It is not the positive propaganda of people who believe white blood divine, infallible and holy to which I object. It is the denial of a similar right of propaganda to those who believe black blood human, lovable and inspired with new ideals for the world. White artists themselves suffer from this narrowing of their field. They cry for freedom in dealing with Negroes because they have so little freedom in dealing with whites. DuBose Heyward writes "Porgy" and writes beautifully of the black Charleston underworld. But why does he do this? Because he cannot do a similar thing for the white people of Charleston, or they would drum him out of town. The only chance he had to tell the truth of pitiful human degradation was to tell it of colored people. . . . In other words, the white public today demands from its artists, literary and pictorial, racial pre-judgment which deliberately dis-

²⁶ *A Victorian in the Modern World* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1939), pp. 344-345.

torts Truth and Justice, as far as colored races are concerned, and it will pay for no other.²⁷

With DuBois' incisive cultural criticisms it was no wonder that the NAACP eventually ousted him in 1934.

From within Harlem itself there was another indigenous trend that bears consideration in relation to the Harlem Renaissance: the group of Negro writers and radicals functioning around A. Philip Randolph's *Messenger* magazine. Randolph was then a Socialist and his group was allied with the official white American Socialist Party. The most prominent of the very few Negro Socialists, or sympathizers, of the time were Chandler Owen (Randolph's co-editor of the *Messenger*), Lovett Fort-Whiteman, W.A. Domingo, Hubert H. Harrison, Richard B. Moore, Otto Huiswoud, W.E.B. DuBois, Grace Campbell, Cyril V. Briggs and Frank Crosswaith. When the great split struck the Socialist Party in 1919 over whether to support the Russian Revolution's Bolsheviks, Randolph and Owen did not go over to the pro-Communist, leftwing Socialist faction. Those who did were Fort-Whiteman, Campbell, Moore, Huiswoud and Briggs. In subsequent years, this split among the Negro Socialists was the root cause of more destructive rivalry in Harlem's civil rights and labor politics than the records reveal. Randolph went on to organize the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and Owen turned conservative.

The *Messenger** was founded in 1917 and prided itself on being "the only Radical Negro Magazine in America," militantly espousing a program for "the Negro and the New Social Order." This "new social order" was to be frankly socialistic: The early editions of the *Messenger* meticulously described its political, economic and civil rights platforms for the Negro, and openly preached social revolution. However, the *Messenger* did not have much rapport with the cultural affairs relating to the Harlem Renaissance. It declared bluntly that its socialistic "economics and politics" took precedence over culture and art. The magazine's real attitudes on such questions were revealed in an editorial remark on W.E.B. DuBois and the way he handled his column, "Horizon," in the NAACP magazine, *Crisis*:

²⁷ "Criteria of Negro Art," *Crisis* magazine, [NAACP] (October, 1926), pp. 290-297.

* It was formerly *The Hotel Messenger*, a worker's union paper, started in 1916.

The leading column of the "Horizon" is always "music and art." Then "meetings" which signify the gathering of literateurs. Next "The War," which inspires pictures and scenes for literary descriptions and word painting. "Industry" and "Politics" sections follow. This is no coincidence, but a logical product of DuBois's cerebration. [The *Messenger* carries as its first column, after editorials "Economics and Politics."] This is natural for us because with us economics and politics take precedence to "Music and Art."²⁸

This column on DuBois was unsigned but the writing resembled that of Chandler Owen. In that crucial year of 1919, the *Messenger* Socialists were making their positions clear with regard to all other trends and leaders, especially Negro leaders. In its December, 1922 issue it conducted a broad symposium on the Garvey movement. The *Messenger* admitted that DuBois was "the most distinguished Negro in the United States today. For the last twenty years he has been known as a radical among Negroes." But it disputed the claim that DuBois really deserved the title of sociologist "as we understand it," because none of his sociological studies were strictly scientific, but more historical and descriptive. The *Messenger* attributed this to the fact that: DuBois was educated at a time and place where political science was not in great favor and where political science was little taught. Greek, Latin and classicism were stressed at Harvard. Few of the older Negro leaders have had the modern education.²⁹

Thus as far back as 1919, DuBois was considered to be—at the age of fifty-one—an "old leader" by the new wave Socialists of the *Messenger*:

DuBois's conception of politics is strictly opportunist. Within the last six years he has been Democrat, Socialist, and Republican. . . .

He opposes unionism instead of opposing a prejudiced union. He must make way for the new radicalism of the New Negroes.

But:

Radicalism is a relative term and three decades hence may

²⁸ *Messenger*, March, 1919, p. 22. N.B. It was admitted, however, that DuBois was "courageous and honest."

²⁹ *Ibid.*

pronounce the radicals of today as the reactionaries of tomorrow.³⁰

The *Messenger's* critique of W.E.B. DuBois reveals, today, the early vanity of the then youthful Socialist Party, in thinking that it had mastered a version of the Marxian "scientific socialism." Came the NAACP, the Garvey movement, the Russian Revolution, the American Communist Left, the Harlem Renaissance plus the aftermath of World War I, and the Negro Socialists, particularly, had to demonstrate their socially scientific prowess even more strongly to avoid being inundated by someone else's new trend. But the *Messenger* unwittingly revealed that, in American Negro terms, it was further behind the times than it charged DuBois with being. For it could not deal with the implications of the Harlem Renaissance. It had adopted the old European version of Socialist programming wherein economics and politics took precedence over culture and art. As pioneering Negro Socialists, the *Messenger* intellectuals were just as unoriginal as the Negro Communists were to become during the 1920's. They took their political schemes from the whites, and thus did not grasp the fact that from the native American Negro point of view, neither politics, economics nor culture took precedence over each other but were inseparable and had to function together.

DuBois, however, grasped this fact. In his speech on the "Criteria of Negro Art," he said in part:

I do not doubt but there are some in this audience who are a little disturbed at the subject of this meeting, and particularly at the subject I have chosen. Such people are thinking something like this: "How is it that an organization like this, a group of radicals, trying to bring new things into the world, a fighting organization . . . how is it that an organization of this kind can turn aside to talk about Art? After all, what have we who are slaves and black to do with Art?"

Or perhaps there are others who feel a certain relief and are saying, "After all it is rather satisfactory after all this talk about rights and fighting to sit and dream of something which leaves a nice taste in the mouth."

Let me tell you that neither of these groups is right. The thing we are talking about tonight is part of the great fight we are

³⁰ *Ibid.*

carrying on and it represents a forward and an upward look—a pushing forward. . . .

What do we want? What is the thing we are after? As it was phrased last night it had a certain truth: We want to be Americans, full-fledged Americans, with all the rights of other American citizens. But is that all? Do we simply want to be Americans? Once in a while through all of us there flashes some clairvoyance, some clear idea, of what America really is. We who are dark can see America in a way that white Americans can not. And seeing our country thus, are we satisfied with its present goals and ideals? . . .³¹

In this speech, W.E.B. DuBois went on to describe Negro art in its functional relationship to the civil rights movement, and its aims as Negro cultural expression within the context of the American nationality idea. It was a brief exposition, but it was, undoubtedly, the very first time the theme was ever voiced by a ranking Negro leader, and the decade of the Harlem Renaissance was the proper historical moment for it to be expressed. But the *Messenger* intellectuals did not see this. As the 1920's progressed toward the fateful 1930's, their early radicalism softened, until by 1928, the only vestige of the *Messenger's* 1919 revolutionary initiation was the magazine's cover. Langston Hughes* was to write:

The summer of 1926, I lived in a rooming house on 137th Street, where Wallace Thurman . . . also lived. Thurman was then managing editor of the *Messenger*, a Negro magazine that had a curious career. It began by being very radical, racial, and socialistic, just after the war. I believe it received a grant from the Garland Fund in its early days. Then it later became a kind of Negro society magazine and a plugger for Negro business, with photographs of prominent colored ladies and their nice homes in it. A. Philip Randolph, now President of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, Chandler Owen, and George S. Schuyler were connected with it. Schuyler's editorials, à la Mencken, were the most interesting things in the magazine, verbal brickbats that said sometimes one thing, sometimes another, but always vigorously. I asked Thurman what kind of magazine the *Messenger*

³¹ DuBois, *op. cit.*, p. 290.

* In 1926, Hughes, Thurman, Zora Neale Hurston, Gwendolyn Bennett and others attempted the publication of a magazine called "Fire—a Negro quarterly of the arts." Its first and only issue was attacked by the older Negro intellectuals, said Hughes; "Dr. DuBois in the *Crisis* roasted it." See *The Big Sea*, p. 235.

was, and he said it reflected the policy of whoever paid off best at the time.³²

If Langston Hughes explained the Harlem Renaissance mostly in terms of himself and his limited perceptions, and James Weldon Johnson wrote an admirable and informative essay on the renaissance as an important movement with a history and a future, Claude McKay, a West Indian, could view the Harlem Renaissance both as a participant and as an objective, but interested, outsider. In so doing he unwittingly revealed important aspects of the Harlem Renaissance that Hughes wouldn't have told if he could, and Johnson couldn't have told if he wanted to. For McKay, in his autobiography, sheds important light on two trends that directly or indirectly influenced the Harlem Renaissance: the Garvey movement and the Communist-oriented leftwing of the 1920's.

Claude McKay was more than a decade older than the young group of creative intellectuals who made up the main wave of the Harlem Renaissance. Born in 1890,* he came to the United States from the West Indies at the age of twenty-one, or just about the time Mabel Dodge was establishing her Greenwich Village salon. By 1914 he had been introduced into the circles of the white creative intellectuals in the Village—the new trend growing out of the Dodge salon and Max Eastman's *Masses* magazine. Among McKay's first literary contacts was the international literary bohemian, Frank Harris, editor of *Pearson's Magazine*, who published a few of McKay's early poems. By 1921 McKay had become an associate editor of the *Liberator* (a continuation of the earlier *Masses* magazine, which had been suppressed by the Federal authorities in 1917). Here McKay met the radical wing of the Village movement, centered around the personality of Max Eastman, the *Liberator's* editor.† Thus McKay started his literary career not as a part of the Harlem Renaissance, but as an associate of the white radical leftwing of the Village movement.

³² Hughes, *op. cit.*, pp. 233-234.

* Some sources say 1889 or 1891.

† This group consisted of Crystal Eastman, the editor's sister; Floyd Dell, novelist; Art Young and Hugo Gellert, artists; Genevieve Taggard, poet; William Gropper, cartoonist; Michael Gold, writer; Louis Untermeyer, poet; Arturo Giovannitti, anarchist-poet, and the previously mentioned Maurice Sterne of Mabel Dodge's salon.

As an editor of the white radicals' main publication in New York, McKay was placed in a position of having to introduce the *Liberator* radicals to Harlem radicals, although he himself was not very well acquainted with the Harlem group.* In 1921, Hubert Harrison, Richard B. Moore, W.A. Domingo, Cyril V. Briggs, Otto Huiswoud, and Grace Campbell came to visit the *Liberator* offices to discuss Harlem radical problems. Most of these Negroes were members of what was called the African Blood Brotherhood, founded by Cyril V. Briggs in 1919. They were predominantly West Indians and represented two or three simultaneous aspects of Harlem radical developments of the 1920's. In the first place, the ABB marked the split within Randolph's *Messenger* group over definitions of radicalism. The predominant West Indian composition of the ABB signified a conflict between American and West Indian Negroes over radical policies, inasmuch as Randolph and his coeditor Owens considered themselves the leaders of the "new Negro" trend, a strictly American Negro development. More than that, the ABB represented a momentary break with radical socialism in favor of a radical nationalism that Randolph eschewed. However, the West Indian ABB soon dropped its radical nationalism; won over by the new Communist movement, its top leaders became the "core of the first American Negro Communist cadre."³³ It was from the ABB that the white Communists got their first outstanding Negro Communists—there is no record of any Negroes participating in the 1919 founding rites of the Communist movement. Thus the overall split in the American Socialist Party over whether to support or reject the Russian Revolution was reflected in Harlem in the split between Randolph's *Messenger* and the ABB leaders.

However, because of its crypto-nationalism, the African Blood Brotherhood soon got caught in the middle of the clash between

* James Weldon Johnson's article, "What the Negro Is Doing for Himself," appeared in the *Liberator*, June, 1918, pp. 29-31, describing the work of the NAACP. In the prior issue of April, 1918, p. 40, Johnson took issue with Floyd Dell's review of his book "Fifty Years and Other Poems" in the *Liberator*, March, 1918.

³³ Theodore Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia* (New York: Viking Press, Compass Edition, 1963), p. 326.

the Garvey movement and the Communist movement. The already troublesome conflict that existed between American and West Indian Negroes, over the implications of the Garvey movement, pitted West Indians against West Indians over the issue of Communism. Early in the 1920's Marcus Garvey came out against the Communist movement as follows: "I am advising the Negro working man and laborer against the present brand of Communism . . . as taught in America, and to be careful of the traps and pitfalls of white trade unionism in affiliation with the American Federation of white workers or laborers."³⁴

This leader of "Back-to-Africa" Black Nationalism said much more on the Communist issue, and his attitudes effectively blocked the determined efforts of the Communists to influence, collaborate with, or undermine his movement. This situation greatly frustrated the Communists in their effort to capitalize on the current Negro discontent—as indeed had Garvey. As a result the Communists began to assail Garvey's program as reactionary, escapist and utopian. At the same time, they attempted to infiltrate Garvey's movement. Mrs. A. Jacques Garvey, the leader's second wife, later described Communist tactics: "The Communists now conceived a plan how they could play Garvey against the Klan, then worm their way into his organization. . . . They infiltrated in some of the branches, and secretly sent delegates to the [1924] convention, who moved a motion that the Organization, in the interest of its members, should declare war on the Klan."³⁵

It was very apparent that these infiltrators used by the Communists were none other than the West Indian members of the African Blood Brotherhood. In this regard it is ironic that in the legend built up around the personality of Garvey, the notion has come down that his worst enemies and detractors were all American Negroes who did not appreciate the man's nationalist genius. However, the truth of the matter was that while Garvey's most inspired followers were West Indians, so were his most vitriolic and effective enemies—both in the United States (Briggs) and in the West Indies (the supporters of the "West Indian Protective Society of America," an anti-Garveyite organization headquar-

³⁴ Garvey and Garveyism, A. J. Garvey, 1963 (Published by the author, 1963), p. 87.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 138.

tered in Harlem). The real difference was that none of Garvey's West Indian critics were prominent leaders like DuBois, Randolph and others.

West Indians are never so "revolutionary" as when they are away from the Islands. Thus what weakened the whole Garveyite criticism of the American Negro scene was that, without an economic power base, the Garvey movement could not be launched in Jamaica; this very same flaw created difficulties for him in the United States. Mrs. A. Jacques Garvey wrote that "the subtle economic thrallldom of Colonial Powers in the Caribbean fools many West Indians."³⁶ This was so true that Garvey's initial organizational efforts in Jamaica were defeated, forcing him to come to the "greener pastures" of the United States for success.

In addition to the West Indian's traditional political apathy at home, there was less liberty and elbowroom for political agitation than there was in the United States. Thus it was difficult for the Garveyites to swallow the fact that much of the criticism coming from American Negro leadership was justified; because the West Indians wanted American Negroes to achieve the kind of nationalist unity as a minority, that the West Indians could not achieve as a majority at home, and never have to this day.

As a Jamaican, Claude McKay was also caught in the middle of the multisided American Negro vs. West Indian vs. Garvey vs. Communist controversy. It appears that during this early stage of the conflict McKay assumed a reticent neutrality. Later, McKay openly rejected Marcus Garvey, and much later than that, the Communist Party, also.

After the *Liberator* conference of black and white radicals, McKay made his first contacts with the Harlem intelligentsia. He met W.E.B. DuBois and was surprised at his "cold, acid hauteur of spirit."³⁷ He also met Walter White, the novelist Jessie Fauset, and James Weldon Johnson (who was his favorite among the NAACP officialdom). From this point on, it was apparent that McKay's relationship to everyone and everything connected with the Harlem Renaissance was very tentative. He was not really at

³⁶ Ibid., p. 13.

³⁷ Claude McKay, *op. cit.*, p. 110.

home in the United States or with Negro movements. Always apparent was a vague, undefined barrier between him—as a West Indian—and the American Negroes. He maintained much better rapport with the whites, if only because they seemed to have more to offer him personally and literarily. He goes into great detail in his autobiography about his relations with whites, both in the United States and in Europe. Through it all he was a wanderer, seeking something “a long way from home”—as indeed, he named his book. As such, he was free not to commit himself fully to the Harlem Renaissance and its radical offshoots. Thus he remained, at all times, the critical outsider looking in, the objective traveler passing through on his way to the next adventure or attraction.

McKay undoubtedly saw, better than most, that despite the positive creative features of the Harlem Renaissance, the whole drama was being acted out in a setting of extreme aimlessness, conflict and confusion. In the upheaval of the postwar period, too many diverse trends from different directions met head on, both in Harlem and the Village. Harlem was full of new migrants and veterans. The NAACP had swung into action on a new level of protest against the rise in anti-Negro terror all over the country. It also clashed bitterly, through DuBois, with the wave of Garvey nationalism that was appealing to the lower classes. On the political front, the Russian Revolution had split white American socialism into pro- and anti-Bolshevik factions, the former of which was trying to woo the Negro plus the Garveyite. The radical split was reflected in the ranks of the white intellectuals with whom McKay was allied in the Village. McKay himself, wary of wholehearted commitment to anything but his own art, was blandly attempting to “play ball” with white radicals, the NAACP, the Harlem Renaissance *literati* and all the rich white patrons he could locate.

Thus uncommitted, he made the most of the literary and social aspects of both the Village movement and the Harlem Renaissance. In McKay's autobiography, as in Langston Hughes', there is much description of parties and celebrities. In his discussions of Hemingway and Joyce he revealed that he was very much interested in establishing his own literary worth among his European “peers.” But he seldom discussed critically any of the work coming from the Harlem Renaissance. His own novel, *Home to Harlem*, he compared with Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven*, both of which

had been roundly denounced and rejected by the Negro bourgeoisie.

It was not long before McKay clashed with the *Liberator's* editorial board. Obviously, the Communists' “line” on politics, culture and art, Negroes, etc., was “hardening” too much for the romantic poet McKay essentially was.* Michael Gold, who had been appointed executive editor in Max Eastman's absence in Russia, perfectly personified this new line. Gold thought the *Liberator* “should become a popular proletarian magazine, printing doggerels from lumberjacks and stevedores and true revelations of chambermaids.”³⁸ He had come into the ranks of the radical writers through the Provincetown Playhouse of O'Neill and George Cram Cook, Susan Glaspell, and Edna St. Vincent Millay. But, “he was still intellectually battling up from the depths of proletarian starvation and misery,” McKay pointed out, and his “social revolutionary passion was electrified with personal feeling that was sometimes as acid as lime-juice. When he attacked it was with rabbinical zeal, and often his attacks were spiteful and bitter.”³⁹

McKay and Gold could not make it on the same editorial board, so McKay resigned. It was revealed that Gold was either envious or fearful of McKay, a fact which posed, probably for the first time, the touchy question of the relationship of Jews and Negroes within the Communist Left during the Harlem Renaissance. Indeed on one occasion, Gold challenged McKay to box outside a Village restaurant.

Without a doubt, Michael Gold was not sympathetic to McKay's literary work or anything coming out of the Harlem Renaissance. After 1926, when the *Liberator* ceased publication and *New Masses* appeared (with the same writers), McKay's famous poem “If We Must Die” was severely criticized by the Communists and Gold with the assertion that McKay had “written an indignant poem, attacking lynching, wholly lacking in working-class content.”⁴⁰ Four years later Gold wrote:

* For McKay's early views on white radicalism and race, see his review of T.S. Stribling's novel *Birthright*, *Liberator*, August, 1922, pp. 15-16.

³⁸ Claude McKay, *op. cit.*, p. 139.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 226.

We believe Carl Van Vechten the worst friend the Negro ever had. This night club rounder and white literary sophisticate was one of the first to take an interest in Negro writers in this country. He has thus influenced many of them. He has been the most evil influence—Gin, jazz, and sex—this is all that stirs him in our world, and he has imparted his tastes to the young Negro literateurs. He is a white literary bum, who has created a brood of Negro literary bums. So many of them are wasting their splendid talents on the gutter-life side of Harlem.⁴¹

Note that this example of Communist puritanical puerility was written in 1930, the same year Johnson's *Black Manhattan* appeared—as if to say that the Village literary movement from which Gold himself had emerged, was *not* highly activated by “gin, jazz, and sex” on its Bohemian fringes. As if to say that when the Village whites invaded Harlem “discovering” Negroes, “gin, jazz and sex” would not be required to soften the initial shock of cultural confrontation. At any rate, Gold's critical bomb revealed that the coming of the economic crash had not stilled the ideological uproar, settled no issues, clarified no problems, nor resolved a single cultural question in Negro-white relations first posed in the 1920's.

The critical zeal and political bias that McKay attributed to Michael Gold was a trademark that he carried into the 1930's, and ignited the bitter literary wars between the Communists' *New Masses* and the *Partisan Review*. Started in 1934 as the organ of the John Reed (Writers') Club, *Partisan Review* was something of a literary opposition front to *New Masses*. An angry dialogue was launched in *Partisan Review* in February, 1936, when James T. Farrell attacked Clifford Odets' play, *Paradise Lost*, as “loaded with dull speeches and swaggering platitudes.”⁴² The same month, Michael Gold defended Odets by attacking Farrell in *New Masses*,⁴³ but was himself in turn rebuked three weeks later, by Josephine Herbst, for being as “subjective” as Farrell. She wrote, again in *New Masses*: “If we are to compel our writers on the Left to chant the same song our ranks will thin, not gain recruits, that is certain, and in the process we shall have bankrupted the

⁴¹ “Notes of the Month,” *New Masses* [Negro Literature], February, 1930, p. 1.

⁴² Farrell, *Partisan Review*, February, 1936, pp. 28-29.

⁴³ Gold, *New Masses*, February 18, 1936, pp. 22-23.

intellectual integrity of the cultural movement. . . . You seem to have made yourself a watchdog for strictly workingclass writing. . . . Your anti-intellectualism has bothered me for a long time.”⁴⁴ To which Gold replied in the same issue: “It seems to me truer to say that Farrell left the path of authentic criticism . . . to make an unforgiveable personal attack on Odets before saying a word about the play itself.”⁴⁵ During this period, Max Eastman, who was Michael Gold's first mentor on the *Liberator*, had become an anti-Communist and was attacking the writers and artists around *New Masses* as not being representative of the cultural revolution. Later, a Samuel Sillen of the *New Masses* staff could accuse John Dos Passos, in the July 4, 1939, issue, of hating Jewish Communists in his review of Dos Passos' *Adventures of a Young Man*. In the midst of all this literary and cultural polemics on the Left, were both Langston Hughes and Claude McKay—lined up on the side of Michael Gold. They were soon joined by Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison whose articles and book reviews began to appear in *New Masses* during the late 1930's. But neither Hughes' Renaissance writers nor the newcomers of the 1930's ever achieved among themselves the level and intensity of literary polemics that occurred on the white Left.

The retreat of Claude McKay from his strategic post on the *Liberator* in 1922 was an indication that the trends of the 1920's had thrown the Negro intelligentsia onto the cultural stage in an intuitive and romantic outpouring of “soul,” but without the depth of philosophical insight that would have enabled them to grasp the implications of their movement. It should have been the Hugheses, the Johnsons and the McKays, who created the critical terms to be laid down on this movement—not the Michael Golds. Gold and company on the Communist Left made no great original contribution to either the Harlem Renaissance or the white movement. All the Michael Golds accomplished was to inject a foreign cultural and political ideology into a basically American cultural phenomenon, and engender confusion upon confusion. The essentially original and native creative element of the 1920's was the Negro ingredient—as all the whites who were running to Harlem

⁴⁴ Herbst, *New Masses*, March 10, 1936, p. 18.

⁴⁵ Gold, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

actually knew. But the Harlem intellectuals were so overwhelmed at being "discovered" and courted, that they allowed a *bona fide* cultural movement, which issued from the social system as naturally as a gushing spring, to degenerate into a pampered and paternalized vogue.

The Negro intellectuals represented the crucial American "minority" group in this situation. They were on the ascendant, yet they were placed in a position wherein representatives of another minority could dictate cultural standards to them. This was historically unwarranted. It was as if to say that a Michael Gold came from the Jewish minority in America with a *bona fide* gripe against the system for having been culturally deprived. However, even in the early 1900's, culture thrived in New York's Jewish ghetto. Why did a Michael Gold desert this world in 1917? If it was because he desired to "Americanize" himself out of the Jewish ghetto, by way of the radical Left, then it should have been that his critical polemics on cultural affairs be directed to the Jews who did not follow him into the Communist Party, *not* with the views of the representatives of another ghetto minority*—of whom he knew next to nothing and understood less. On Michael Gold and Negroes in the first great Harlem uprising of 1935, Ernest Kaiser commented: "Oversimplification and sanguineness on the Negro question led Communists during the war to blame all anti-Negro riots and the like on fifth column agents in this country. The Harlem riot, a different kind of a riot, became, in the words of Michael Gold, a hoodlum-led Negro pogrom against the Jewish shopkeepers of Harlem! Even liberals had better understanding of the different types of riots."⁴⁶

In the 1920's the Communists were not telling Jewish writers in the ghetto how to write. If the Negro creative intellectuals had taken a strong position on critical standards during the 1920's, there could have been a lot more constructive criticism within the Harlem Renaissance, which would have benefited the development of the movement.

* Jewish Communists seek to work politically with Negroes on the basis of being white Americans in the labor movement. But ironically, when ghetto Negroes attack Jewish business exploitation in ghettos (because they are white Americans), it is then termed anti-Semitism.

⁴⁶ Kaiser, "Racial Dialectics, The Aptheker-Myrdal School Controversy," Atlanta University, *Phylon* magazine, Vol. 9, No. 4, 1948, p. 299.

McKay's retreat revealed the weak-kneed, nonpolitical, non-committal naïveté which was characteristic of many of the Negro intellectuals. Yet, seeing the 1920's in perspective, this default is understandable. The Harlem Renaissance had too much to contend with in the new Communist leftwing and the new Garvey nationalism. On the other hand, the new Communist Left, due to its own foreign inspiration, was rendered unable to cope with the native literary and cultural movement on the American scene. V.F. Calverton* used the book review pages of *New Masses* to complain: "The revolt of the artist has switched from the neuroticism of the nineties to the eroticism of the twenties!" Calverton expanded his critique to include "the American intellectual [who] thus has become ingrown rather than expansive. He has been as afraid of adventurousness in the intellectual life as the pioneer was unafraid of adventurousness in the practical life."⁴⁷

Prior to this, John Dos Passos had clashed with Michael Gold over leftwing policy in literature and art, again in *New Masses*. Said Dos Passos: "I don't think there should be any more phrases, badges, opinions, banners, imported from Russia or anywhere else. Ever since Columbus, imported systems have been the curse of this country. Why not develop our own. The *New Masses* must at all times avoid the great future that lies behind it."⁴⁸

* Calverton was the founder and editor of *Modern Quarterly*, an independent radical magazine in 1923. Calverton, though himself white, wrote an article, "The Advance of Negro Literature," for *Opportunity* magazine, February, 1926; edited an *Anthology of Negro Literature* for Modern Library (Random House, 1929); and wrote *The Liberation of American Literature* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932).

In 1937, Calverton edited *The Making of Society—An Outline of Sociology* for Modern Library. The aim of this outline was to assist in "Americanizing the Marxian approach." In the introduction, he said American Marxists "have done little to reconcile Marxian propositions with American facts," and "Marxism has contributed little to American sociology." Yet Calverton's compilation of the thought of nearly sixty social thinkers, both ancient and modern, did not include a single Negro sociologist despite the fact that at least three—W.E.B. DuBois, E. Franklin Frazier, and Abram L. Harris—wrote for *Modern Quarterly* during the 1920's. However in 1932, Calverton made an original criticism of Marxist practice in America through his theory of "Cultural Compulsives" (*q.v.*), a conception that had direct relation to the Negro in American culture; but no Negro thinkers took up the question in support of Calverton, who was defeated by the Communists. This controversy over "Cultural Compulsives" showed that neither blacks nor whites were prepared to make any form of radicalism conform with American facts.

⁴⁷ V.F. Calverton, "Intellectuals and Revolution" (review of Floyd Dell's *Love in Greenwich Village*), *New Masses*, October, 1926, p. 28.

⁴⁸ Dos Passos, *New Masses*, June, 1926, p. 20.

What Dos Passos meant was that the *New Masses*, under the cultural and political leadership of Michael Gold, had come under solid Communist control. He was trying to say that the New Masses should forget the entire period of its predecessors—*Masses* and *Liberator*—and seek a new course that had nothing to do with the Russian enchantment with which Gold was so obsessed. So were many others, including Claude McKay, who after resigning from the *Liberator*, had gone to “see for himself” what was happening in Russia.

He arrived in time to attend the 1922 Fourth Congress of the Communist International in Moscow. There he was selected as a “special delegate” representing American Negroes—merely because he was the only Negro in Moscow at that moment:

I went to Russia. Some thought I was invited by the Soviet Government; others that I was sent by the Communist Party. . . . I was not one of the radicals abroad important to the Soviet government; and I was not a member of the Communist Party. All I had was the dominant urge to go. . . . Millions of ordinary human beings and thousands of writers were stirred by the Russian thunder rolling around the world.⁴⁹

The fact that the Russians took up McKay so readily revealed that they were much more eager to receive Negroes and learn about them than the American Communists were to send them over. When the official American Communist Party delegation arrived, they were opposed to McKay's presence and tried to have him sent back to the States. The Americans had brought along their own handpicked Negro representative (whom McKay described as being so fairskinned in pigmentation that the average Russian refused to accept him as genuine, preferring McKay because he *was* black). Oddly enough, McKay got help not from the American Communist Whites in Moscow, but from a veteran Japanese Communist named Sen Katayama, one of the earliest Japanese revolutionaries, born in 1858. Katayama was well known in the United States among Socialists, and was a power in Moscow. McKay went to Katayama seeking protection from harassment by the Americans; the Japanese took up his case with Lenin, Trotsky, Zinoviev, and Radek—the Big Four. From that point on McKay

⁴⁹ McKay, *op. cit.*, p. 153.

had the keys to the city, with the official title of “unofficial observer.” He attended all the sessions of the Congress on the American situation.

McKay wrote, “I listened to the American delegates deliberately telling lies about conditions in America, and I was disgusted.” He reported that not only Communist delegates but radical American intellectuals were deceiving the Russians with false pictures of the American situation. McKay heard the chairman of the American delegation say—“In five years we will have the American revolution.” McKay, himself, was expected to corroborate this forecast, but refused. He wrote: “Truly, I could not speak such lies. I knew that the American workers in 1922 were generally better off than at the beginning of the World War in 1914. . . . How, then, could I stand before the gigantic achievement of the Russian Revolution and lie?”⁵⁰

The Americans misled the Russians about an incipient social revolution in the United States and the Russians believed them because that was what they wanted to hear. In attempting to satisfy the Russian curiosity and thirst for knowledge about American Negroes, the white American Communists revealed their own confusion, ignorance and prejudice. McKay related:

The Negro question came under the division of the Eastern Bureau, of which Sen Katayama was an active official. Because of his American experience and his education among Negroes, Sen Katayama was important as a kind of arbiter between black and white on the Negro question. He was like a little brown bulldog with his jaws clamped on an object that he wouldn't let go. He apparently forgot all about nice human relationships in conferences. Sen Katayama had no regard for the feelings of the white American comrades, when the Negro question came up, and boldly told them so. He said that though they called themselves Communists, many of them were unconsciously prejudiced against Negroes because of their background. He told them that really to understand Negroes they needed to be educated about and among Negroes as he had been.⁵¹

Karl Radek, one of the big men in the Politbureau, invited

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 175.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 180.

McKay and the official Negro delegate* to discuss with him some essentials of the American Negro situation:

Radek wanted to know if I had a practical policy for the organization of American Negroes. I said that I had no policy other than the suggestion of a Negro *Bund*, that I was not an organizer or an agitator and could not undertake or guarantee any practical work or organization.⁵²

The Negro delegate told Radek that McKay "was a poet and a romantic"—this—despite the fact that before their meeting with Radek, McKay and this delegate had had a private talk about the Negro issue at the conference. McKay had compared the powerless situation of the Negroes within the American Communist Party to the strong position of the Finnish and the Russian federations.

The Finnish and Russian federations were not only the most highly organized units of the American party, but, so I was informed, they contributed more than any other to the party chest. They controlled because they had the proper organization and the cash.

I told the [Negro] delegate: "That's what Negroes need in American politics—a highly organized all-Negro group. When you have that—a Negro group voting together like these Finns and Russians—you will be getting somewhere. We may feel inflated as individual Negroes sitting in on the councils of whites, but it means very little if our people are not organized. Otherwise the whites will want to tell us what is right for our people even against our better thinking. The Republicans and the Democrats do the same thing. . . . But we remain politically unorganized. What we need is our own group, organized and officered entirely by Negroes, something similar to the Finnish Federation. Then when you have your own group, your own voting strength, you can make demands on the whites; they will have more respect for your united strength than for your potential strength. Every other racial group in America is organized as a group except Negroes. I am not an organizer or an agitator, but I can see what is lacking in the Negro group."⁵³

* McKay never names this delegate, but Theodore Draper claims he was Otto Huiswoud. See *American Communism and Soviet Russia* (New York: Viking Press, Compass Edition, 1963), p. 327.

⁵² McKay, *op. cit.*, p. 182.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp. 177-178.

McKay saw the problem clearly enough, but he did not tell the Russians his views. Despite the fact that the Russians had accepted him as a *bona fide* representative of American Negroes, he kept insisting that he was not qualified to represent the American Negro group.

McKay should have enlightened the Russians while he was in a position to do so. He should have told them that the Communists in America were about to make serious blunders in handling the national group question. He should have told them that the American Party was not a party of the American workers, as such, but an organization in which leftwing political power was exercised and predicated on national groups; not only on the Finnish and Russian groups, but particularly the Jewish group that later came to dominate leftwing affairs in a degree all out of proportion to its numbers. Jews were also able to play a three-way game inside the Communist leftwing: as "Americanized" Jews, à la Gold; as Jewish Jews; and as pro-Zionist, nationalistic Jews. Leftwing Jews were able to drop their Jewishness and pick it up whenever it suited them. They were able to function as American whites without prejudice, especially in the cultural fields. They were able, as Jews, to wield power through the Jewish Federation. Later they were able to function as pro-Zionist nationalists inside the Left. At the very time McKay was in Moscow seeking audiences with Lenin and Trotsky, the pro-Russian Jewish leftwing in New York had gotten Communist support in putting out a pro-Communist Jewish newspaper, *Freiheit* (*Freedom*), "two years before the American Communists were able to put out a daily organ in English."⁵⁴

American Negroes never achieved, or were not allowed to, what other organized national groups achieved within the Communist Left, and never fought for the right to do so. But they allowed Jewish leaders who came out of the Jewish Federation to become experts on the Negro problem in America. Here was the great default of the Negro intellectuals of the period. McKay, for example, could tell the Negro delegate that the Negro needed the group power of the Finns and the Russians, but he himself was

⁵⁴ Draper, *The Roots of American Communism* (New York: Viking Press, Compass Edition, 1957), p. 341.

not about to take any responsibility as an artist to educate the Negro masses in Harlem along such lines. This, he felt, was the responsibility of the Negro Left politicians, whose failings on this score he criticized. But it was also the responsibility of the intellectuals, who did not have to play the opportunistic politics of the leftwing machine as Negro politicians were forced to, in order to stay in favor with white hierarchies. Instead the intellectuals of the Harlem Renaissance shuttled back and forth between the NAACP officialdom and the Communists, from the Village radical intellectuals to rich white patrons seeking artistic support. If one wants to claim that the prominence of interracial partying on a high cultural level was, in fact, a "social revolution," then perhaps something *was* actually achieved. But it all went down the drain with the coming of the 1929 Crash, and the Negro intellectual class has been badly disoriented ever since.

The Garvey movement was one trend in existence in the twenties that appealed to the group solidarity of the Negro. Yet, like other Negro intellectuals of the period, McKay* steered away from any association with it. He referred to Marcus Garvey as "a West Indian charlatan [who] came to this country, full of antiquated social ideas. . . ." ⁵⁵ A more positive attitude might have dealt with some of the obvious flaws in Garveyism.

After his pilgrimage to Moscow, which McKay considered the highpoint of his career, he traveled about Europe, ending up finally in Paris—a destination that was, in a sense, preordained. Paris had become the last resort of many other literary and artistic Americans, black as well as white. "It was interesting in Paris," McKay wrote, "among the cosmopolitan expatriates. The milieu was sympathetic. It was broader than the radical milieu of Greenwich Village." Then he added: "Frankly to say, I never considered myself identical with the white expatriates. I was a kind of sympathetic fellow-traveler in the expatriate caravan. The majority of them were sympathetic toward me. But their problems were not my problems. They were all-white with problems in white which were different from problems in black." ⁵⁶

* See also: Claude McKay, "Garvey as a Negro Moses," *Liberator*, April, 1922, pp. 8-9.

⁵⁵ Claude McKay, *op. cit.*, p. 354.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 243.

Yet, McKay showed himself to be very much preoccupied with these "white" problems. He was an internationalist in spite of himself, and told all about his personal relationships in Paris with such people as Sinclair Lewis, Gertrude Stein, Eugen Boissevain and his wife, Edna St. Vincent Millay. He met up again with Max Eastman, and with his first literary contact in America—Frank Harris. In Paris, among the expatriates, McKay was able to be a literary man among the literary greats and discuss creative values with his "peers." However his most significant encounter in Paris was with Louise Bryant, the wife of the martyred John Reed.

Paris was symbolic of the fate of the Village movement, and Claude McKay and Louise Bryant made it all the more so. They came from opposite sides of the color line of the 1912 Village movement and both came up in the first wave, before the war. Louise Bryant was in Mabel Dodge's group during this period. She was in love first with Eugene O'Neill (who married Agnes Boulton*), then she fell in love with John Reed and won him away from Mabel Dodge. She had accompanied Reed on his mission to Moscow and was with the Communist hero when he contracted fever and died. For all intents and purposes this ended Louise Bryant's career in the radical movement. For her, as for McKay, Paris became the turning point. Louise Bryant was another one of those rare women who defy conventional categories—much like Mabel Dodge and Emilie Hapgood. McKay described her: "Externally her tastes were bourgeois enough. She liked luxurious surroundings and elegant and expensive clothes and looked splendid in them. But her fine tastes had not softened her will or weakened her rebel spirit." ⁵⁷

This "bourgeois" gloss made it certain that Louise Bryant was not destined to travel the long road from Mabel Dodge's group into the Communist Party. Her husband did, but what Reed's actual attitude was toward the Communist cause when he died has remained an unsolved mystery. Theodore Draper, in his remarks about Reed, ⁵⁸ presented evidence to the effect that the American Communist Party made a founding martyr-hero out of a

* See Agnes Boulton's *Part of a Long Story*, on Louise Bryant, O'Neill, and Harlem (New York: Doubleday, 1958).

⁵⁷ McKay, *op. cit.*, p. 291.

⁵⁸ Draper, *The Roots . . .*, *op. cit.*, p. 291.

man who was "probably as disillusioned as it was possible to be and still remain in the movement." "Reed lived and died an undomesticated American radical," wrote Draper. "He did not fit into the established order before he became a Communist, and he did not fit into the order established by Communism."⁵⁹ Claude McKay himself never became a full-fledged Communist. But unlike Reed, he never became a flamboyant independent radical in his own right.

At the time McKay first met Louise Bryant, she was doing what he called "a brilliant set of articles about Russia for a Hearst paper."⁶⁰ (These articles came out in book form in 1923 under the title *Mirrors of Moscow—Portrait of Eleven Russian Leaders*.) However, in 1918, she had already published *Six Months in Revolutionary Russia*, probably the very first book by an American on what was happening in what was then a strange, faraway land. Both of these books make extremely interesting reading even today. And it is to be noted that one was published the year before the 1919 appearance of John Reed's famous *Ten Days that Shook the World*, the book that is credited with first informing American opinion on the Russian enigma.

As writers, John Reed, Louise Bryant and Claude McKay were in conflict with Communist politics; as politicians, they were in conflict with their consciences as writers:

Louise Bryant thought, as I did, that there was no bourgeois writing or proletarian writing as such; there was only good writing and bad writing. I told her of my great desire to do some Negro stories, straight and unpolished, but that Max Eastman had discouraged me and said I should write my stories in verse. . . . John Reed had written some early stories about ordinary people with no radical propaganda in them, she said, and suggested that I should do the same about my Negro stories—just write plain tales.⁶¹

The Communist Party's literary authoritarians, such as Michael Gold, did not agree with this sort of thinking. Yet McKay and Louise Bryant were actually much closer to Leon Trotsky's views

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 282.

⁶⁰ McKay, *op. cit.*, p. 254.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

on the literature than the Communists, who in the early 1920's were praising Trotsky's great genius in everything. Trotsky had written in *Literature and Revolution*: "It would be monstrous to conclude that the technique of bourgeois art is not necessary to the worker. Yet there are many who fall into this error. 'Give us', they say, 'something even pock-marked, but our own.' . . . Those who believe in a 'pock-marked' art are imbued with contempt for the masses."⁶²

This excruciating dilemma perhaps helped to kill Reed, as it was said he had lost his will to live. It destroyed Louise Bryant, in the end, because she had committed herself so deeply to the politics of the revolution. McKay endured, no doubt, because he refused to commit himself, and because he was black, and in that blackness had learned to endure so much in order to survive. We cannot but admire these three early intellectuals for what they did achieve under such trying and complex circumstances. In the America of the early twentieth century, they confronted unique philosophical and theoretical problems. Reed is to be admired for his daring and, above all, his unfailing independence of thought, his radical romanticism that refused to conform to the foreign authoritarians. McKay is to be credited with his stubborn refusal to give up the search for answers other than those the authoritarians tried to impose on him (although it is remarkable that he accepted so much tutelage from whites on how he, a black writer, should write about Negroes). Louise Bryant is to be admired for her ordeal and her achievements, although few. Women like her, and like Mabel Dodge and Emilie Hapgood, have no place of honor in American cultural history—which says much about the intellectual sickness of this society. Whatever flaws they had in the eyes of the conventional, they were *bona fide* pioneers of a kind. In their restless personalities there was mirrored the growing problem of the modern American woman—an endemic lack of sexual fulfillment. The road from Greenwich Village to Moscow to Paris was tragic for Louise Bryant. Samuel Putnam, another expatriate, gives us a glimpse of her deterioration:

As John Reed's wife, Louise Bryant had been not only a spectator but, for America, one of the chief chroniclers of the Russian

⁶² *Literature and Revolution* (London: George Allen and Unwin, Ltd., 1925), p. 204.

Revolution, and along with her husband had become a heroic figure and something of a legend for our leftward looking intelligentsia. . . . At the time I knew Louise she was drifting from cafe to cafe and was famous for the daring studio parties that she gave in the early hours of the morning. She no longer seemed to care; yet . . . she was invariably warm, friendly, altogether likeable, and never once did she speak of the past, nor would anyone have thought of questioning her about it.⁶³

Questioning her about it would have been useless. Louise Bryant was of the first wave of 1912, most of whom played a certain initiating role and either passed off the scene or handed the mantle to the next wave. They could do no more. This was true also of Claude McKay, although he lived until 1948.

Putnam made other observations about the Lost Generation that are worth noting:

The story of this generation is not Europe's alone; it forms a part of America's annals both social and cultural. Never before in history had there been such a mass migration of writers and artists from any land to a foreign shore. . . .

All these were signs that indicated a deepening discontent with American cultural and spiritual values. The revolt was of a mixed character, being marked on the one hand by a popular-democratic trend as in Anderson, Sandburg, and Lindsay, and on the other hand by a certain tendency to esotericism and a contempt for the arts of the people that with Mencken and his followers became a contempt for the people themselves.⁶⁴

This interpretation has its value, but it is not nearly the whole story. The *real* "popular-democratic trend" was not Sherwood Anderson, *et al.*, but the Negro renaissance trend. The problem was that Claude McKay and his co-aspirationists in culture did not get around to articulating it. For Langston Hughes's superficial and subordinated consciousness, it was merely a period of parties and patrons "when the Negro was in vogue." If the white creative intellectual's discontent was an extension of the crisis in Western European cultural and spiritual values, then the Harlem Renais-

sance intellectuals should have pointed out, at least in broad terms, that the American Negro intellectual's cultural awakening was not only a countertrend to white discontent, but a twentieth-century harbinger of the African awakening in political and cultural terms. Such an intellectual premise fully established in the 1920's, cultivated from 1930 to the 1950's, would not have permitted the growth of the "identity vacuum" that the Negro movement of the 1960's has encountered. Unable to arrive at any philosophical conclusions of their own as a *black intelligentsia*, the leading literary lights of the 1920's substituted the Communist left-wing philosophy of the 1930's, and thus were intellectually sidetracked for the remainder of their productive years.

⁶³ Samuel Putnam, *Paris Was Our Mistress—Memoirs of a Lost and Found Generation* (New York: Viking Press, 1947), pp. 87-88.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 21.