

NEGRO CULTURE:

Heritage and Weapon

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NEGRO culture emerges from and develops as an expression of the struggles of the Negro people for freedom from oppression. It reflects, therefore, the problems and achievements of the developing national liberation movement from whose womb it springs.

Negro culture is also a vital factor in the further development of the Negro's struggle for freedom. Expressing fully the reciprocal relationship between all art and society, it operates as a social force helping to shape the consciousness of Negroes and other Americans, and to move them to social action.

Approached in terms of this frame of reference, Negro culture is seen to have significance, not only in the field of "esthetics," taken in isolation, but also in the wider realm of political struggle. It is from this point of view that the present discussion proceeds.

No attempt is made here to trace the historic development of Negro culture, or to survey the cultural achievements of the Negro people at the present time, or to make technical evaluations of the contributions of Negroes to different fields of culture. Rather, the sole purpose of this discussion is to interpret Negro culture as a social phenomenon which emerges from, and reacts upon, the freedom struggles of the Negro people.

CONCEPT OF NEGRO CULTURE

BROADLY conceived, the term "culture" is to be equated with the term "civilization." It comprehends the entirety of the superstructure which a society has developed on the basis of its prevailing mode of production, on the economic foundation which under-girds and decisively influences the totality of social being. Thus, a people's gov-

ernmental forms, law, science, history, modes of dress, language, recreation, religion, morality and arts—all may properly be conceived as constituting their culture.

More narrowly conceived, the term "culture" is commonly equated with the "arts," that segment of the social superstructure which includes a people's literature, theatre, music, painting, sculpture and the dance. It is in this more limited sense that the term "culture" is used in this discussion.

What, then, is the meaning of "Negro culture"?

There are Negro spokesmen who deny that there is any such thing as Negro culture. They hold that Negroes are, first of all, Americans, and that the Negro artist's creations are simply a part of American culture.¹

The editors of *The Negro Caravan*, for example, partially reflect this point of view in their negation of the concept, "Negro literature." In apparent contradiction to the title and the admirable contents of their anthology, they assert:

"The editors consider Negro writers to be American writers, and literature by American Negroes to be a segment of American literature. . . .

The chief cause for objection to the term is that 'Negro literature' is too easily placed by certain critics, white and Negro, in an alcove apart. The next step is a double standard of judgment which is dangerous for the future of Negro writers."²

This and similar denials of the concept of Negro culture cannot be validated on the grounds that the Negro's art creations have a definite interrelation with the whole body of American culture. True, there are such interrelations. Just as the Negro people are an interacting segment of American economic and political life, affected by and in turn helping to shape the whole, so the Negro arts constitute an interacting segment of American culture, greatly influenced by trends in American cultural life and in turn helping to enrich and to shape the development of American culture. It may properly be said of all the Negro arts what

¹ Not long ago the writer received an invitation from the N.A.A.C.P. chapter at one of the New York colleges to lecture on the subject: "Is There a Negro Culture?"

² Sterling Brown, Arthur P. Davis and Ulysses Lee, *The Negro Caravan*, New York: The Dryden Press, 1941, p. 7.

Gloster says of Negro novels and short stories: they "are really part and parcel of the main body of American authorship . . . inextricable patterns in the warp and woof of the American literary fabric."³

But to say this alone is to ignore the most essential characteristic of Negro culture. The Negro arts defy adequate and fundamental understanding unless they are viewed as the expression of a *distinct people* within the general population of the United States, reflecting their *special* relations to the society as a whole, giving expression to their *special* memories, traditions and aspirations. Only in relation to the development of Negro Americans as an increasingly organized, self-conscious political entity within the American scene does the concept of Negro culture take on full meaning.

THE African homelands from which the original Negro Americans were torn by the slave trade had attained an advanced stage of cultural development prior to the European invasions. On the basis of an economy which included agriculture, the domestication of animals, gold and silver mining, cotton-weaving and the smelting of iron, there had emerged a notable development of the arts.

There was a rich and poetic folk-lore, and in some places a written literature. There was music, both instrumental and vocal. There was the dance. There were rock painting, wood and metal sculpture, ivory and bone carving, weaving, pottery, skillful surface decoration in line and color—in fact, as Alain Locke has pointed out, "everything in the category of the European fine arts except easel painting on canvas, marble sculpture and engraving and etching. . . ." Moreover, it is the verdict of modern artists and critics that, "of the many types of primitive art now known but then yet to be discovered, that of the Negro in Africa was by all odds the greatest and the most sophisticated."⁴

This African cultural development was sharply arrested by the infamous "trade in men." Over a period of four centuries, "mankind in Africa became goods—became merchandise"⁵ and many millions of

³ Hugh M. Gloster, *Negro Voices in American Fiction*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1948, p. viii.

⁴ Alain Locke, *Negro Art—Past and Present*, Washington, D. C.: Association in Negro Folk Education, 1936, pp. 1-2.

See also: W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Folk—Then and Now*, New York: Henry Holdt and Co., 1939, Chapter VI, "The Culture of Africa," pp. 92-125.

⁵ W. E. B. Du Bois, *op. cit.*, p. 128.

Africans were uprooted from their native cultures and brought to the alien shores of the western hemisphere. They came from peoples of West and South Africa and the interior, with widely varying languages, customs, habits and forms of artistic expression. In their new homes, under the oppressive and degrading conditions of slavery, this African cultural heritage has in very large measure been lost.⁶

The concept of Negro culture—certainly in relation to its later development—cannot, therefore, be interpreted simply in terms of African survivals on the American scene. There are some such survivals; and they are reflected in Negro art, especially during its early development in America. But such African survivals by no means provide an adequate base for understanding the nature of Negro culture. The validity and meaning of that concept must be sought primarily in the experiences and development of the Negro people within the United States.

On these shores the former diverse African peoples acquired a new and common language—English. They were settled chiefly in a common geographical area—the South, especially in the expanding “Black Belt” area. They became an integral part of a common economic life—chiefly cotton culture based on slavery and geared to the insatiable commodity market of a developing world capitalism.

From the beginning these African “immigrants” and their progeny have, in varying degree, occupied somewhat the position of “alien Americans.” Inextricably bound up with the economic and political developments of the nation, they have never been able to share fully in the national life. This basic fact has had a profound impact upon the consciousness of Negroes.

It was not merely as Americans but as *Negro Americans* that the slaves fought back in a multitude of ways against the oppression to which they were subjected. It was not merely as Americans, but as *Negroes*—viewed and treated as a special group by the rest of the nation, that they fought for and helped to win their freedom in the Civil War. It was as *Negro freedmen*, not merely “some more Ameri-

⁶There are certain able American scholars—notably Dr. Lorenzo D. Turner and Dr. Melville Herskovits—who report the discovery of extensive African cultural survivals in American Negro life. However, it seems that even those vestiges which they are able to uncover after diligent research serve but to emphasize the overwhelming fact that the American Negro has, for all practical purposes, been severed from most all of the African cultural heritage.

cans," that they forged an effective political coalition with the Southern poor whites during Reconstruction to develop, over a brief decade, the only structure of democratic state government the South has ever known. It was *as Negroes* that the recently liberated segment of the American population—no longer needed as an ally by an industrial bourgeoisie now moving toward its reactionary, imperialist stage of development—was pushed "back toward slavery" during the counter-revolution after 1876. And it is as a *special* population group—with special problems, aspirations and goals—that Negroes have continued their struggles for liberation from Jim Crow oppression during the twentieth century.

THE Negro's struggle for freedom over a period of three centuries has been carried forward, of necessity, through a varied succession of special organizational forms. Among them are the many local conspiracies of rebellious slaves, the Underground Railroad, the numerous Negro People's Conventions—before and after the Civil War, the Niagara Movement, the Garvey Movement, the National Negro Congress, and of major current significance, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Today there is an extensive network of Negro organizations, local and national—religious, fraternal, labor, professional, business, youth, women, civil liberty—all of which are, in one way or another, preoccupied with the struggle for Negro liberation. Of special importance in this regard is the Negro press, whose history extends over more than a century, and whose readers now include several millions.⁷

In the course of this long development, Negro Americans have come to share a heightened group consciousness. Despite certain escapist tendencies to avoid even the use of the term "Negro," the immense majority of Negroes think of themselves *as Negroes*. They experience common forms of oppression in Jim Crow America; they share common sentiments and aspirations; they organize and struggle — as Negroes—for those democratic rights which they, as a special group,

⁷ See, for example: (1) Bella Gross, *The History and Development of the Negro People's Convention Movement in the United States from 1817 to 1840*; (2) Herbert Aptheker, *The Negro in the Abolitionist Movement*, also *Negro Slave Revolts*; (3) James Allen, *Reconstruction—Battle for Democracy*, Chapter 5; (4) Harry Haywood, *Negro Liberation*, Chapter VII; (5) Doxey A. Wilkerson, "The Negro Press," *Journal of Negro Education*, Fall, 1947.

have always been denied. The once diverse African peoples and their progeny, through centuries of common experience in America, have been welded into a distinct political entity, increasingly organized, characterized by greater unity than any other sizable American minority, and with a strong sense of "belongingness." In short, there has been developed in America a new people, an oppressed people—the *Negro people*—with organizational forms and a group consciousness peculiarly its own.

It was inevitable that this people, with its special memories and sentiments and aspirations, should develop its own body of esthetic expression. This it has done in rich abundance—and the product is properly conceived as Negro culture.

Note this typical plaint of the unknown creators of Negro folk music, commonly separated from their loved ones and universally oppressed by the alien and hostile environment of the slave South:

*Sometimes I feel like a motherless chile,
 Sometimes I feel like a motherless chile,
 Sometimes I feel like a motherless chile,
 Far, far a-way from home,
 A long, long ways from home.*

The concluding verse of a similarly characteristic slave lament jolts the modern listener with its spiritual note of triumph:

*Nobody knows de trouble I see,
 Nobody knows but Jesus,
 Nobody knows de trouble I see,
 Glory, Hallelujah!*

A people in slavery, yearning for freedom and seeking some basis for confidence in its attainment, sang:

*Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel?
 An' why not every man?
 He delivered Daniel from the lion's den,
 Jonah from the belly of the whale;
 An' the Hebrew chillun from the fiery furnace,
 An' why not every man?*

Deprived in this world of the most elementary material needs of life, Negro folk artists of the early nineteenth century envisioned a happier day ahead. They sang:

*I got shoes,
You got shoes,
All God's chillun got shoes;
When I get to heav'n, I'm goin' to put on my shoes,
I'm goin' to walk all over God's heav'n,
Heav'n, heav'n;
Everybody talkin' 'bout heav'n ain't goin' dar,
Heav'n, heav'n,
I'm goin' to walk all over God's heav'n.*

Running through a great number of the spirituals is this dual note of complaint against the burdens of slavery and defiant confidence in ultimate liberation. Beneath an all-pervading cloak of religious imagery, some of these songs conveyed a message of struggle not difficult to discern in an era of the Underground Railroad and recurring slave revolts—"Steal Away to Jesus," "Go Down Moses," "The Old Ark's A Movering," "Swing Low Sweet Chariot," "Somebody's Knocking At Your Door," "O It's Goin' To Be a Mighty Day." Other songs expressed even more openly their challenge to the slave power—"Children We Shall Be Free," "Before I'd Be a Slave I'd Be Buried in My Grave," "Walk Together Children, Don't You Get Weary."

The Negro spirituals are clearly the art creations of a particular people with a very special relationship to the society of which they were a part. Their pre-dominating form—the "call and response" chant form—is unquestionably African in origin; and their language and religious imagery are common to many other groups of Americans. But neither Africans nor white Americans could possibly have created the spirituals. They grow out of and give expression to the struggles and sentiments and aspirations of Negroes under the specific conditions of slavery in the United States. They are cultural manifestations of the consciousness of a developing people, the Negro people. They are a great body of Negro culture.

So it is with other important bodies of Negro music—the work songs, the blues, and more recently jazz—the latter of which Sidney

Finkelstein characterizes as "the most important and lasting body of music yet produced in the United States."⁸ None of these is merely "American music"; all are distinctly Negro music, reflecting the special group consciousness of this particular people. They are a part of Negro culture. Thus it is, for example, that Finkelstein correctly interprets the Negro's jazz as "A People's Music," as:

"... a fresh and new musical creation, telling us of the emotional and social life, the sadness, anger and vitality of the Negro people who were brought here as slaves, who through their labor created so great a part of American civilization and American culture."⁹

THE validity of the concept of Negro culture here advanced is attested by the work of Negro artists in all fields.

Decorating the front wall of the library at Talladega College is a magnificent mural by Hale Woodruff, depicting the revolt of the slaves on the trader, *Amistad*. It speaks eloquently, especially in its Alabama setting, of the historic and continuing struggles of a people for liberation from oppression.

Richmond Barthe's "The Blackberry Woman," "Mask of Black Boy," "African Dancer," "Mother and Son" and hosts of other works are really more than the creations of a talented Negro sculptor; they are the expression, through him, of the dignity and grace, the joy and sorrow of a whole people.

In his bitter and satiric prose-poem, "A Litany at Atlanta (Done at Atlanta, in the Day of Death, 1906)", W. E. B. Du Bois articulates the angry protest of the Negro people at one of the massacres so common in that day of resurgent Bourbon triumph:

Behold this maimed and broken thing; dear God, it was an humble black man who toiled and sweat to save a bit from the pittance paid him. They told him: *Work and Rise*. He worked. Did this man sin? Nay, but some one told how some one said another did—one whom he had never seen nor known. Yet for

⁸ Sidney Finkelstein, *Jazz: A People's Music*, New York: The Citadel Press, 1948, p. 11.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

that man's crime this man lieth maimed and murdered, his wife naked to shame, his children, to poverty and evil.

Hear us, O Heavenly Father! . . .¹⁰

Most of the notable fiction by Negro authors—from Charles W. Chesnutt's tales in *The Conjure Woman* (1899) and his first novel, *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900), on up to Richard Wright's *Native Son* and Ann Petry's *The Street*—inevitably varied in form and merit, is preoccupied with the experiences and sentiments and struggles of the Negro people. As Gloster puts it: “. . . American Negro fiction mirrors the *life and thought*” of the Negro people in the United States.¹¹

So it is with Negro dramatists. To cite one example: Theodore Ward's *Big White Fog* helps much to illuminate the Garvey Movement; and his *Our Lan'* recounts the fierce struggle of the Negro freedmen for land during and after the Civil War, with more than a hint of the similar and greater struggles for land that still lie ahead.

The notable biographical and autobiographical works of Negro writers—Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, James Weldon Johnson and many others—are, in essence, the interpretations of selected segments of Negro life and history through the consciousness of important participants.

So it is with Negro actors. A Charles Gilpin in *The Emperor Jones*, Ethel Waters in *Mamba's Daughters*, Canada Lee in *On Whitman Avenue*, Gordon Heath in *Deep Are the Roots*—many of the Negro players in Federal Theatre productions, the famous cast of *Porgy and Bess*, and Paul Robeson in several great roles, including Shakespeare's *Othello*—all bring into their interpretations a quality and meaning that could emerge only from the experiences and sentiments of the Negro people.

The dances of Pearl Primus reinterpret much of the African cultural heritage; and those of Katherine Dunham reflect the influence of the

¹⁰ For the complete “A Litany at Atlanta,” along with an admirable selection of other works by Negro poets and by white poets about Negroes, see: Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps, *The Poetry of the Negro: 1746-1949*, Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1949; see also, *The Negro Caravan*, *op. cit.*

¹¹ Hugh Morris Gloster, *Negro Voices in American Fiction*, *op. cit.*, p. 254.

Caribbean area. But both Primus and Dunham—as is true of the more recently emerging Janet Collins—are in large measure communicating through the different dance idioms (primitive, folk, jazz, modern and ballet) the varying moods and feelings and aspirations of the oppressed Negro people in the United States. When Primus does "Strange Fruit," for example, her audience senses all the horror of lynch terror and the bitterness of the people toward whom it is directed; the plight of the Negro share cropper lives poignantly in her "Hard Time Blues," done to Josh White's recording. Similarly, few if any modern dancers can so ably express the dual note of lament and confidence characteristic of the spirituals as is done in Janet Collins' interpretations of "Nobody Knows de Trouble I See" and "Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel?"

It should be noted that, objectively, a great deal of the work of Negro artists is not at all concerned with expressing the consciousness of the Negro people. Into this category would fall much of the poetry and other writings of William Stanley Braithwaite and other Negro authors, many paintings, a considerable body of essays, some sculpture, a great deal of modern music, and some novels—such as the recent *Country Place*, by Ann Petry, and *Knock On Any Door*, by Willard Motley. Such artistic creations as these are here excluded, perhaps arbitrarily, from the scope of Negro culture.¹²

In such poems as "To John Keats, Poet, At Spring Time," Countee Cullen is the sensitive and gifted lyricist who happens also to be a Negro. But there is also the Cullen, poet of an oppressed people, who wrote such well-known poems of protest as "For A Lady I Know," and "Incident"—the Cullen who with characteristic irony cries out:

*I doubt not God is good,
well-meaning, kind . . .
Yet do I marvel at this curious thing:
To make a poet black, and bid him sing!*

It is very definitely as a *poet of the Negro people*—not merely an "American poet"—that Sterling Brown, in "Old Lem," lays bare the

¹² It would be fruitful to discuss further the validity of this limitation—that is, whether the concept "Negro culture" should also embrace the creations of Negro artists on non-Negro themes. There arises also the question whether certain works by white artists on Negro liberation themes (*e.g.*, Howard Fast's *Freedom Road*) might not properly be classed as Negro culture. Space does not permit an analysis of these issues here.

exploitative roots of the plantation system and its accompanying sanctions, a planter-dominated government and lynch terror:

*"They got the judges
They got the lawyers
They got the jury-rolls
They got the law
 They don't come by ones
They got the sheriffs
They got the deputies
 They don't come by twos
They got the shotguns
They got the rope
 We git the justice
 In the end
 And they come by tens . . ."*

It is only as one who shares fully and deeply the indignities heaped upon an oppressed people—but who shares also their inherent dignity and pride and defiant confidence—that Langston Hughes can proclaim:

*. . . Tomorrow,
I'll sit at the table
When company comes.
Nobody'll dare
Say to me,
"Eat in the kitchen,"
Then.*

Those white Americans who deny the concept of Negro culture due to their ignorance or their failure to appreciate its rich abundance are but reflecting the characteristic chauvinism which permeates our Jim Crow society. Those Negroes who deny the existence of a Negro culture because they distort the struggle for equality into a misguided struggle for "identity" are but engaging in vacuous escapism.

There is, indeed, a *Negro culture*. It is a phenomenon qualitatively different from mere "American culture." It consists of the expression through various art forms of the special consciousness which long years of common experience have developed among the Negro people of the United States.

Negro culture is illustrative of what Stalin's famous definition of a nation characterizes as "a historically evolved, stable community of . . .

psychological make-up manifested in a community of culture."¹³ It is a national culture whose origin and forms and content are to be understood as reflecting the emergence and development of an oppressed people, struggling for national liberation. It will flourish increasingly as the people from whom it springs move progressively toward their historic goal of freedom.

Just as Negro culture emerged historically as the art expressions of the developing Negro people, so must the solution of the big problems which confront its further development proceed as an integral part of the national liberation struggles of the Negro people. Chief among those cultural problems are what might be termed (1) the struggle for literacy, and (2) the struggle for content.

THE STRUGGLE FOR LITERACY

AN ARTIST must command the "language" of his particular medium—whether it be the written word, expressive bodily movement, form and color on canvas, melodic form, or some other—if he would give precise and full expression to the ideas and sentiments he seeks to convey. Historically, the common people everywhere have been shut off in large measure from this technical discipline in the arts, with consequent limitations in the forms of their artistic expression; and only under socialism in the Soviet Union is this state of affairs being decisively reversed. In America, the Negro people have been especially barred, by the conditions of their special oppression, from access to those cultural skills so essential for the fullest development of their art.

Locke has pointed out that the dominant arts in Africa were the decorative and craft arts—sculpture, metal working and weaving; whereas the Negro's chief arts in America have been song, dance, music, and later poetry. Underlying this shift in emphasis is the early Negro American's loss of his ancestral cultural skills in the oppressive environment of slavery.

"We will never know and cannot estimate how much technical African skill was blotted out in America. The hardships of cotton and rice-field labor, the crudities of the hoe, the axe and the plow reduced the typical Negro hand to a gnarled stump, incapable of fine craftsmanship even if materials, patterns and artistic incentives had

¹³ Joseph Stalin, *Marxism and the National Question*, New York: International Publishers, 1942, p. 12.

been available. . . . Stripped of all else, the Negro's own body became his prime and only artistic instrument; dance, pantomime and song were the solace for his pent-up emotions."¹⁴

Thus, the first struggle of the Negro for cultural realization in America was for literacy in the arts. This remains a basic line of struggle for the further development of Negro culture today.

The Negro's big cultural achievements during the nineteenth century were in folk poetry and music—the spirituals and the blues. They were socially created, continuously modified through improvisation, originally unwritten, and passed on by word of mouth. There were no significant folk developments in painting or sculpture, nor could there be under the material conditions of slavery.

These early art forms, despite their great qualities, necessarily limited the range of cultural expression available to the Negro people. Certain technical skills were essential before the Negro artist could express his message through written poetry, fiction, the drama, higher forms of musical composition and the graphic arts.

A great step forward was taken when the Negro people began to achieve mastery over the written word. It came through struggle—for clandestine learning in defiance of the slave codes, for free public schools during Reconstruction, for a revival in Negro education during the second decade of the twentieth century; and the struggle continues as one of major importance today.

It is no mere coincidence that the only notable eighteenth-century slave-poets—Jupiter Hammon on Long Island and Phillis Wheatley in Boston—had the encouragement and aid of benevolent masters in their acquisition of learning; or that the renowned late nineteenth-century poet, Paul Laurence Dunbar, was born and educated in Cleveland.

The first great out-pouring of Negro literary creations above the folk level—often termed the "Renaissance of Negro Art," or the period of the "New Negro"—came during the 1920's. It coincided with the first flourishing development of the Negro press—and for the same reasons.

World War I and its aftermath set into motion a whole series of major developments among the Negro people—new and educative experiences in the armed forces; the great migrations to Northern

¹⁴ Alain Locke, *Negro Art—Past and Present*, *op. cit.*, pp. 3-4.

industrial centers, with the accompanying establishment of a mass Negro proletariat and a crucial bloc of Negro voters; growing struggles for improved conditions in the South; strong protests against the wave of postwar "race riots" and sharply increasing Jim Crow oppression; the Garvey Movement, with its proud and assertive Negro nationalism; and, with it all, the learning to read and write of many hundreds of thousands of formerly illiterate Negro men and women and children.

Here were developments which sharply advanced the liberation struggles of the Negro people, and thereby provided the necessary base for both an emerging Negro press and a notable renaissance in Negro culture. An increasingly self-conscious and militant Negro people had urgent things to say; and their growing command over the language afforded the technical means of expression.

But the Negro's battle for mastery of the written word is far from won. The Sixteenth Census of the United States reports that (in 1940) nearly 650,000 Negro adults 25 years old and over (10 percent of the total) had no formal schooling whatever; that approximately 3,700,000 (57 percent) had four years of schooling or less; and that only about 1,000,000 (15 percent) had one year of high school education or more.

It is clear that the emergence of the many cultural spokesmen of which the Negro people are capable—together with the development of a mass audience especially interested in what they have to say—is in large measure dependent upon major progress in the expansion of educational opportunities for Negroes. And this, of course, will come only through continuing struggle by the Negro people and their progressive allies.

THE Negro's struggle for cultural literacy is by no means confined to the quest for command of the written word. There are special and even more difficult "languages" to be mastered in the various fields of art; and the Jim Crow barriers which stand in the way are truly formidable.

A vast amount of accumulated knowledge and practiced craftsmanship were required to produce the great singers Marian Anderson and Paul Robeson, or composer William Grant Still, or conductor Dean Dixon, or composer-conductor Edward "Duke" Ellington, or painter Aaron Douglass, or others who have achieved greatness in the dance, the graphic arts, music, fiction, poetry, drama, theatre and other fields of

culture. Many thousands of potentially great Negro artists are struggling to acquire mastery of this technical discipline; but the odds against them are terrific.

When, through such fortunate circumstance as philanthropic patronage or otherwise, a talented Negro artist manages truly to master the language of his art and rises to the very top, he is generally welcomed and acclaimed by the elite rulers of the American cultural world—unless, of course, he is a Paul Robeson who insists on using his great art to fight the battles of his people. The illusion is thus created that the Jim Crow bars are down in the fields of art.

Nothing is farther from the truth. Between the fortunate few at the top and the multitude of able young Negro artists struggling to emerge is a vast chasm which is filled with ideological and structural barriers. There is, first of all, the widespread poverty among the Negro people, born of discrimination in employment. The general struggle for jobs for Negro workers is essential, therefore, as a means for laying the economic foundations upon which much extended technical mastery in the arts can be developed.

There is also the patronizing praise which rulers of the cultural world readily express for the Negro's achievements in the "folk arts," with the implication, of course, that aspiring Negro artists would do well to stay "in their place." In the theatre, for example—with few notable exceptions during recent years—Negro dancers included in a company (if any) are generally called upon to do the Charleston or some similarly "appropriate" steps, or Negro actors to play the stereotype roles of an Uncle Tom or Aunt Jemima.

There are widespread barriers against the employment of Negroes in all of the various fields of art, and hence against their having any opportunity to develop practiced craftsmanship. For example, the New York conference of the Cultural Division of the National Negro Congress reported in 1947 the following results of a survey on Negro employment in selected art fields:

1. THEATRE: In 92 plays in three years with 147 parts, 11 parts have been for Negroes.
2. RADIO: Of 30,000 employees, 200 are Negroes—and many of them hold menial jobs.
3. SCREEN: In 500 films recently produced, 11 Negroes were employed—10 of them as Uncle Toms or Aunt Jemimas.

4. PUBLISHING: Of 2,000 books published last year, 28 were written by Negroes or dealt with Negro themes.

5. NIGHT CLUBS: Of 400 in New York, 386 discriminate against Negro performers, and 397 against Negro customers.

This deliberate and wholesale exclusion of Negro artists from employment opportunities is especially serious on those secondary, preparatory levels where the thorough development of previously acquired skills is of tremendous importance for one who would rise to the top. A Negro writer rarely has the opportunity to develop his abilities through employment on a daily newspaper or first-rate magazine. An emerging Negro artist almost never gains employment with one of the vast advertising agencies where he might perfect his skills. A Negro who has learned to play the piano or violin seldom gets a chance further to develop his abilities in the pit of a legitimate theatre and never in a major symphony or opera organization.

The short-lived Federal art and theatre and music projects of the "New Deal" were doing much to open up new channels for the development of technical mastery by young Negro artists—and many of the recognized performers of today won their spurs through W.P.A. The Wallace Youth Caravans of recent months are another wholesome and much needed development to this end. The program of the Committee for the Negro in the Arts—including the arrangement of auditions for young artists, the struggle against job discrimination in cultural fields, scholarship grants, and the presentation of outstanding "new" artists in Town Hall concerts—is making an important contribution. So likewise are various organized campaigns to break anti-Negro barriers on the concert stage and in the legitimate theatre—notably Actors Equity's ban on Jim Crow performances at the National Theatre in Washington, D.C.

The special obstacles which bar Negro artists from most all paths leading up to the top are part and parcel, of course, of the over-all system of special oppression to which the Negro people are subjected by the imperialist rulers of the American economy, and hence of the highly commercialized world of culture. These cultural barriers also have a more particular significance. The Negro artist is especially dangerous to the Jim Crow system of super-exploitation because he is prone to give effective expression to precisely those ideas and sentiments which serve to strengthen the liberation struggles of the Negro people.

To bar the path of technical growth for the Negro artist is to help keep the Negro people "in their place." By this same token, to launch new and large-scale struggles for the attainment of cultural literacy by the Negro people is to strengthen the whole Negro liberation movement, and thereby the struggle against imperialist reaction in the entire nation. This is an important aspect of the anti-fascist struggle which the labor-progressive forces of our country have yet to tackle in a serious way.

THE STRUGGLE FOR CONTENT

MASTERY of the tools of cultural expression, although fundamental to progress, by no means assures the development of a great Negro art. Indeed, along with developing technical progress there arise hosts of new problems with which the folk artist is but little concerned. Most basic among these problems are those associated with the struggle for valid contact.

Art is inexorably social, both in the origins and in its effects. It is a means of communicating ideas and emotions by the artist to other men through his particular cultural medium. It is necessarily partisan. In a society whose dominant characteristic is the class struggle, the artist necessarily takes sides, choosing to express certain ideas and to reject certain others. The highest goal of art is to express, and thereby to advance, true human values—that is, the values cherished by the immense majority of working people everywhere.

A great Negro people's culture, therefore, must have a solid core of realism. It must reflect honestly and understandingly the experiences and consciousness of the Negro people, and the values for which they struggle. It must interpret the aspirations and struggles of the Negro people in relation to those of working people generally, in the United States and throughout the world. The development of such a content for Negro culture is fraught with many hazards.

Most fundamental in this regard is the fact that the avenues of cultural expression in the United States are so completely commercialized, with effective controls in the hands of precisely that finance-capitalist class which is the mainstay of Jim Crow oppression. For them, the general criterion of what art to allow is immediate cash receipts; and with Negro art there is the further incentive to maintain and strengthen the ideology of white supremacy which helps protect their multi-billion dollar system of super-exploitation.

Thus it is that the movies have virtually no roles for Negro actors outside the traditional stereotypes—that even a Lena Horne gets rough treatment for refusing to compromise the inherent dignity of her people for a profit-mad and sterile cinema. Thus it is that that superb and fighting people's artist, Paul Robeson, acclaimed throughout the world, is now barred from the concert stage in the United States. Thus it is that "Rochester" and "Bojangles" and others willing to fit into compromising roles are assiduously cultivated. Thus it is that "Amos 'n Andy" continue to poison the radio channels with their grotesque caricatures of the Negro people.

Honest dramatic portrayals of Negro life rarely find a place on Broadway. Among the 889 identifiable characters analyzed in a two-year sampling of short stories published by eight leading "slick" magazines, only sixteen are Negroes—chiefly menials, racketeers, thieves, gamblers and shady night-club proprietors. In every field of culture—with few and now dwindling exceptions—there are strong barriers against the presentation of Negro art creations and Negro artists unless they adhere pretty closely to the finance-capital "line" of Negro inferiority.

THE impact of this state of affairs on the content of Negro art is devastating. The Negro artist must eat; and he is under tremendous pressure to prostitute his art to the end of physical survival. Many have done just that.

The great "Duke" Ellington can tear up a contract with producers who reject certain of his compositions on the grounds that they constitute "white man's music." The incomparable Paul Robeson can book as many concerts as he can fulfill in Europe. But most sincere Negro artists face a very hard choice when they realize, as one Broadway producer was frank to tell a Negro dancer who shied away from a stereotype role: "You've got to decide whether your need of a job is as great as your racial pride." All too often they decide to take the job.

Not unrelated to this pervading insistence upon Jim Crowism in cultural content is the tendency of many Negro artists to escape into cosmopolitanism and formalism. On the one hand, they deliberately avoid Negro themes, rationalizing on the irrelevant premise that they want to produce art "as good as any other." On the other hand, they seek refuge in the "art-for-art's-sake" avoidance of any realistic themes

whatever, travelling down the fruitless and meaningless road toward non-objective "beauty" and "delight."

It is clear that progressives should fight for the *right* of Negro artists to master any cultural discipline and to deal with any subject matter, including non-Negro themes. But it is also clear that progressives must sharply criticize Negro or any other artists who succumb to the decadent and irrational tendencies so generally characteristic of culture in our moribund capitalist civilization.

The Negro artist is, first of all, a Negro. He lives in a Jim Crow society. He is part of an oppressed people; and his own consciousness is profoundly shaped by the experiences of that people in their struggle for liberation from oppression. Let him try to isolate himself from the social foundations that are his very being and his art will inevitably reveal the distortions of any other uprooted thing.

There is not, and could not be, any valid principle which would restrict the Negro artist to Negro themes. But the Negro artist who aspires to be "as good as any other" (or even better!) would do well to understand that the high road to his goal lies, not in self-negation, but in the full and honest interpretation of his own consciousness—through expression of those memories, ideas, sentiments and aspirations which constitute the special psychological make-up of the Negro people.

Still another obstacle to the development of valid content in Negro culture lies in the impoverishment of the potential Negro audience. The Negro novelists and poets and dramatists want to be read; but few of their own people can afford to purchase their works for from \$2.50 to \$6.00. The Negro dancers and musicians and actors want to be seen and heard; but few Negro families can afford the admission fee to the concert hall or legitimate theatre—and in much of the nation they would be kept out even if they had the fee. The Negro painter wants his work to be seen and enjoyed; but his own people are at work when the galleries are open, and but few can afford to purchase his canvases for their homes.

Consciously or not, every artist addresses his creations to an audience. The general impoverishment of the Negro people robs the Negro artist of precisely that tremendous audience most likely to appreciate valid content in Negro culture. The Negro artist, therefore, must address himself largely to an "alien" audience; and this fact is not with-

out considerable influence on the genuineness of what he tries to say.

The class position and orientation of the Negro artist is another factor which significantly affects the content of Negro culture. Negroes are, overwhelmingly, a working-class people; hence a valid Negro culture must reflect this basic fact. On the other hand, most Negro artists are of the middle class and cherish petty-bourgeois values; hence their creations very often do not reflect honestly and understandingly the experiences and consciousness of the Negro people, and the values for which they struggle.

Illustrative in this regard is Richard Wright. Even in *Native Son* Wright revealed a tendency to see the problems of the Negro people as deeply rooted in unfathomable psychological mysteries, not basically in the class struggle. Further, under the cloak of "naturalism," he selected from the life of his own people precisely those images which give the reader an intense feeling of horror and revulsion. This tendency is still more evident in *Black Boy*. The critics of the bourgeois press, of course, were delighted at what they called his "objectivity," his alleged kinship with Dostoyevsky and Faulkner. But it should be clear that Wright greatly distorted the true character and aspirations and struggles of the Negro people. Moreover, the subsequent degeneration of his once great powers reveals how self-destructive is the path that leads a Negro artist away from his own people.

The problem of developing working-class content in Negro culture is also reflected by the absence of any major work of fiction based on the Negro industrial worker. A mass Negro proletariat was established over three decades ago; and many hundreds of thousands of Negro workers have entered the trade unions since the middle 1930's. But there has not yet appeared a significant novel primarily concerned with interpreting the Negro people's relations to the American labor movement. One hopes that the skill, understanding and class consciousness which Willard Motley demonstrates in *Knock On Any Door* will be turned also to the production of fiction which interprets the experiences of the Negro proletariat.

Finally, the struggle for valid content in Negro culture requires much more widespread information and theoretical understanding of Negro life and history than now obtains among the people in general.

In a discussion of Theodore Ward's *Our Lan'* during its run on Broadway several years ago, a leading Negro minister, unimpressed with the play, commented to this effect: "We ought to get away from

all that past history about slavery; the Civil War ended more than eighty years ago." He simply did not know that the Southern land question which the Civil War and Reconstruction left unsolved—and which the drama so effectively interprets—is one of the fundamental bases of Negro oppression today. Such ignorance and attendant attitudes probably had much to do with causing *Our Lan'* to fold after an all too brief run. They also help explain why there appear so very few cultural creations which afford basic theoretical insight into the Negro question.

The tremendously vital and significant history of the Negro people remains a closed book to most Americans, including the Negro people themselves. It is not taught in the schools; and most efforts to deal with it through cultural media tend to yield such gross lies and distortions as are recorded in the film, *Birth of a Nation*, and the novel, *Gone With the Wind*.

The profit-seeking roots of Negro oppression today and the national character of the Negro liberation movement are, likewise, not understood by most Americans, including the Negro people. White chauvinism is widespread and virulent. Idealist notions that "prejudice" somehow is the "cause" of Negro discrimination, and Utopian illusions about the liberation of the Negro people through "gradual reform"—these about sum up the predominating pattern of so-called "advanced" thought on the Negro question in our country today.

An abiding structure of authentic Negro culture cannot be built on such rotten ideological foundations. A truly great and enduring Negro culture can be developed only by a corps of Negro artists who have a firm theoretical grasp upon the historic and present relations of the Negro people to American society. Thus the struggle for widespread ideological clarity on the Negro question is basic to the struggle for valid content in Negro culture. Here, again, is an area in which the labor-progressive movement has taken only the initial steps essential for the development of a struggle of sufficient proportions to affect the thinking of the broad mass of people.

NEGRO CULTURE AS A SOCIAL FORCE

THE main problems of Negro culture—to develop technical mastery and valid content—are but reflections, of course, of the over-all problem of the Negro people: to achieve economic, political and social

freedom, recognized dignity, and full cultural expression through liberation from national oppression. As the Negro liberation movement grows in unity and strength, as it forges closer bonds with its labor-progressive allies, as it effects new and progressive changes in the objective conditions and relations of the Negro people in American society—as these developments proceed, there will come corresponding progressive achievements in the struggle for literacy and content in the Negro arts.

But Negro culture is much more than a mere reflection of the liberation struggles of an oppressed people; it is a social force which can do much to advance the freedom struggles of which it is an integral part. The Negro artist is an educator of the Negro people; and in a different but most important way, he is an educator of the entire American people.

As is true of all culture, Negro cultural creations are a form of persuasion. The artist tries to get his audience to accept his interpretation of reality. To the extent that he succeeds, he helps to shape the consciousness of men and to influence their role in social action. And this social role of the Negro artist is no inconsequential thing—whether he functions in the service of the imperialist warmakers and exploiters, or in the service of the Negro people and their working-class allies.

Lenin once wrote: "Art must unite the feeling, thought and will of a people, uplift them." There could be no more valid role for Negro culture. The Negro artist who uses his talents consciously to advance the liberation struggles of the Negro people is contributing not only to his own freedom, but also to his self-realization as an artist. The creators of Negro culture must fight to play this role; and the progressive organizations of the people, both Negro and white, must back them up in this struggle.

Paul Robeson continues to demonstrate to the world the potential power of Negro culture as a progressive social force—in the fight against lynch terror and for Negro jobs, in the struggle for a strong and united working class, in the fight for peace, for the liberation of colonial peoples and for socialism. It is a major responsibility of progressives to struggle for the fullest expression of this power—to help release Negro culture from the fetters of Jim Crow oppression, and thus to advance the freedom and security of the Negro people and of all Americans.

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