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Our Contributions to American Poetry

Continued from page 1

ter of fact it has been proved that such prejudice does not belong to children until they absorb it from their elders. In one well-known Congregational family, after removal from Hawaii to California, one of the children asked, "Mother, where are the rest of the people? There are only white people here."

It has been felt that national segregation might solve for us the negro problem but the great migrations during the war made impossible such solution. These migrations, taking place within the last ten years, have been due to various causes, primarily to the vision of new opportunity. As one writer says, "actually hurdling over generations of experience, these people have fled from medieval to modern America." They have established themselves in various centers, Harlem being the largest Negro community in the world. Hither they have come from all parts of the world "their greatest experience being the finding of one another." Segregation has developed race consciousness and Harlem has become the race capital. Here race pride has been born and here has appeared during the last ten years an amazing growth of intellectual and artistic ability. The Negro has leaped into self-expression "A people are great," writes one of them, "when they produce great literature and art. No one can then call them inferior." Langston Hughes, one of the three most remarkable poets since 1920, writes:

We have tomorrow
Bright before us
Like a flame.

Yesterday, a night-gone thing
A sun-down name
And dawn today
Broad arch above the road we came,
We march.

And again: "We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased, we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter.

"We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on the top of the mountain, free within ourselves."

This changed Negro means new race relationships. Both races have excused themselves in the past by the difficulty of their common problem, the white race in a spirit of condescension and the black race in one of self-pity. To-day the call to the white race is for less charity and more justice, less help and more understanding, less caricature and more serious portrayal. We can no longer "press the Negro button" for humor or pathos; aunts, uncles, Sambos—all are gone, even the Colonel and George are no more. The Negro in the log cabin may be more picturesque than the Negro in the Harlem flat but the one in the flat is here to stay and his group is only one of many dark-skinned groups in this country whose ideals are becoming increasingly vital.

The Negro world, the pulse of which beats in Harlem, holds the African in Africa, the West Indian, the Negro American of all classes, north and south. Moreover, persecution has made the Negro, like the Jew, international. It is significant that the Spingarn medals are given by a Jew of wealth and social position—but, nevertheless, one who himself knows the meaning of race persecution. For five years a Negro newspaper has been published in English, French and Spanish, carrying news of Africans to and from all quarters of the world. Two magazines are on a world basis. Three Pan-American Congresses have been held abroad under American auspices.

Obviously, the only constructive line for us is to revalue the Negro on the side of art and culture, past, present and future and humbly to reckon up his contribution to American life on these lines. To this life he has from the beginning contributed more than the white race were wont to understand. Torn from a native background and native culture a culture in some cases very ancient and highly developed, he was, as we have said, suddenly precipitated into a complex and alien civilization and forced to adapt himself completely to it. His rapid assimilation is almost without parallel in history. But in turn the Negro coloured the life and affected the temperament of the people among whom he lived—the people of the South. He gave them his humour and his sentiment, superstition, amiability, illogicality and a sort of "tropic nonchalance." The Negro expressed himself in folk ways folk dance, the origin of modern jazz; folk tale and proverb, a great body of which has been preserved in the "uncle Remus" stories; folk songs of many kinds, of which the spirituals are the worthiest and best known. This folk material is still, much of it, unexplored. Much of it is lost, but the younger artists, white and black, are keen to find and use all that can be discovered.

The Negro spirituals within the memory of many of us were little known and little regarded. The Fisk Jubilee singers did much to recover and preserve these and well known Negro musicians of today have carefully arranged them. They need to be studied from the point of view both of music and of poetry, though it would be hard to tell where one ends and the other begins. The poetic imagination, religious temper serene faith of these great songs are without equal. They grew out of a common experience of suffering of a people whose souls broke through to two ideals, heaven and freedom. The Negro is a poet by birth; the picturesque, the rhythmic and the fervent flavor his habits of speech and thought. "Religion is a natural necessity to him," says one writer, because he has kept near the ideal of man's harmony with nature." Adversity which has always been his lot has been made a thing of beauty in the spirituals—America's only great national music, the singing of which kept the soul of his race alive through slavery.

—from Congregational, Boston

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