



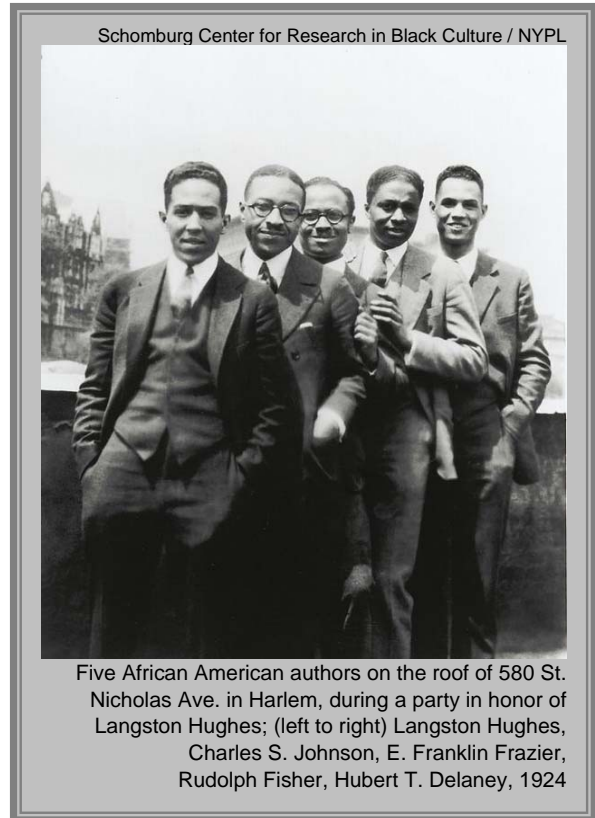
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RACIAL SELF-EXPRESSION

1927

EXCERPTS

CONCURRENT with the growing group consciousness among the colored people there has come into prominence two rather widely divergent opinions as to the principles which should govern the development of the group in America. The opinion represented by one group is that colored people should undertake to conform in every respect to the culture about them, while another group holds that they should develop their own unique culture. Although these two viewpoints can not be said to take this apparently mutually contradictory form in the minds of all leaders, they indicate to a large extent two emerging philosophies of racial development which are receiving emphasis by their respective protagonists. Moreover, it should be added that these two theories have been present since the Negro began to assert himself as a free man in this country, but have received new accentuation by the so-called renaissance of Negro artists and thinkers. The debate in the [periodical] *NATION* between Langston Hughes and George Schuyler was a skirmish in the clash between these two viewpoints. While the younger Negro artists are generally regarded as exponents of the opinion favoring a unique culture among the colored



people, there is apparent disagreement among them. Countee Cullen's insistence that he wants to be a universal poet rather than a Negro poet is indicative of this lack of unanimity. . .

. . . The issue between the philosophies we are examining seems to resolve itself into the old issue of every nationalistic group. At first the group attempts to lose itself in the majority group, disdaining its own characteristics. When this is not possible there is a new valuation placed upon these very same characteristics and they are glorified in the eyes of the group. The same tendencies are observable in the case of the Negro group. There is, however, a conflict between the two tendencies noted above. On the one hand there is an attempt to efface Negroid characteristics and among the extremists of this group to dispense with the appellation, Negro; and on the other hand a glorification of things black. If the New Negro is turning within his group for new values and inspiration for group

life, he is following the course of other nationalistic groups.

But to turn within the group experience for materials for artistic creation and group tradition is entirely different from seeking in the biological inheritance of the race for new values, attitudes and a different order of mentality. In the philosophy of those who stand for a unique culture among the Negroes there is generally the latter assumption. Moreover, while the group experience of the Negroes in America may be a fruitful source for the materials of art and to some extent a source of group tradition, it offers a very restricted source for building up a thorough-going group life in America. By the entrance of the Negro into America, he was practically stripped of his culture. His whole group experience in America has been directed towards taking over cultural forms about him. In spite of the isolation in which he has lived, the Negro has succeeded in doing this to a remarkable degree. From the beginning he has not been able to draw upon a group tradition outside of America. When he has been charged with imitation of white models, he has been forced to plead guilty because there were no others. If the Negro had undertaken to shut himself off from the white culture about him and had sought light from within his experience, he would have remained on the level of barbarism. Even at the present time, if the Negro seeks relief from his conflict with the white majority by a flight from the reality of the culture about him, his development will be arrested and he will be shunted from the main highway of American life. In this respect the Negro's position is different from any other nationalistic group in America. While they can maintain their group life by drawing upon the national tradition from the Old World, and participate only to a small degree in the American tradition, the Negro has no source to draw on outside of America and only an inadequately assimilated American tradition from his past in this country.

It is quite possible that those who advocate a unique culture among Negroes would

agree on the whole with the position taken above but would insist that the main point at issue is the difference in temperamental endowment. Therefore, as promised above, we shall turn to the consideration of this question. It has been pointed out by some that the facility with which the evangelical denominations spread among Negroes as well as the spirituals, and the seeming lack of strong economic motives, are indications of the peculiar racial temperament of the Negro. In the latter respect he is often contrasted with the Jew. But even here we can not say dogmatically that racial temperament has been the decisive factor in the emphasis placed by the Negroes on certain elements of American culture. There are historical and social factors which are adequate reasons to account for the fact that the majority of Negroes are Baptists and Methodists as well as the predilection of the Jew for economic activities. In Africa the Negro has always been a trader and his markets are an outstanding feature of African cultures. Even in America we find a remarkable development of business enterprises and this type of activities has become for many of the younger Negroes the surest means for the group to acquire status.

Mr. James Weldon Johnson has indicated, it appears to the writer, in "God's Trombones [: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse]" the unique contribution of the Negro artists. In this unique work of art he has used the literary language of America to give artistic expression to the racial experience of the Negro in America. Whatever of racial temperament there is in these poems has been made articulate through cultural forms which were acquired by the artist in America. This does not deny that it is possible that the Negro artist working on the materials of the Negro's experience in America will create greater works than white artists. But we can not overlook the fact that at present white writers have surpassed Negro writers on the whole in the use of this material. While it may be true that at times the Negro has attempted to appropriate elements of American culture which have justified the rebuke that he was a "poor imitation of

the white man” it was due to the fact that his group experience in America had not prepared him for such a role, but not because anything in his biological inheritance made the appropriation of such cultural traits incongruous. As the Negro group becomes more differentiated we see developing the same social types that are found in the white majority. There is a growing group of black Babbitts* who are indistinguishable in their mental attitudes from the white Babbitts. The racial temperament of the Negro will assert itself in the cultural traits which he takes over; but such an indeterminable factor can not become the norm for determining the lines along which the Negro should build his culture. But it may be asked if it is desirable for the Negro to acquire uncritically all the traits of American culture. The remainder of this essay will be directed to an attempt to give a brief answer to this question.

The very fact that the issue between these two philosophies of racial development has been raised indicates a sophistication that could never have developed in cultural isolation. Negro leaders have enjoyed a cosmopolitan experience that enables them to view objectively their racial experience, as well as American culture and cultural traits in general. This appears to be increasingly one of the chief functions of the Negro intellectual. His strategic position makes him a critic of values for his group. But it still remains an open question how far the Negro group can escape the adoption of the cultural forms of America. One example will suffice to show that even in the sphere of economic life some selection may be possible[:] the Negro must fit into the competitive industrial life about him either as a laborer or capitalist; but if the cooperative system of production and distribution offers superior spiritual values, then as far as practical he should develop in his economic life a cooperative economic technique. This he should do rather than slavishly take over

* Babbitts: referring to the protagonist of Sinclair Lewis's novel *Babbitt* (1922), who came to symbolize smug narrow-mindedness in American society.

both the form and spirit of modern industrialism. If such a course finds support in the racial experience of the Negro in America or in his temperamental endowment, the task will be easier and will be a distinct contribution to the general fund of American culture. Likewise, if because of racial temperament there is a greater disposition on the part of Negroes to enjoy life than among the whites and this is recognized as a superior value, without sacrificing the efficiency of the group this trait should not be smothered by forcing the Negro's life into generally accepted molds.

Something should be said about another aspect of this question; namely, the building up of a group tradition. It seems to the writer that any such effort should be encouraged only so far as it is compatible with a fuller participation in American culture. In this matter the experience of immigrant groups has a lesson for the Negro. Those immigrant groups which have maintained the greatest group efficiency have suffered the least amount of social maladjustment. The efficiency of their group organization has been the best means for fitting their members for participation in American life. One of the primary needs of the Negro in America where he is not treated as an individual is the development of group efficiency. The work of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History under Dr. Carter G. Woodson is very rapidly creating a group tradition which is necessary for group morale. This is a socializing process through which the individual members of a group acquire status. This is a healthy sign among Negroes and need not be incompatible with their struggle for fuller participation in American culture so long as it does not increase their isolation.