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WHAT THE NEGRO MEANS TO AMERICA

BY HERMANN KEYSERLING

THE negro influence cannot, of course, be accounted for by the spirit of the American continent. The emotional vacuum within the soul of the colonial, which must inevitably be filled from without, accounts for it to a certain extent, but another reason may be found in the rejuvenation of America — its relapse, or rather lapse, into primitivity. As a primitive, the colored man is naturally superior to his white brother, his expressions are more authentic, more genuine, and this superiority is enhanced by the great emotional endowment and the equally great gift of artistic expression of the negro; perfection of expression makes even those enter into his feelings and emotions who personally lack them altogether. But the chief reason for the influence is the fact that hitherto the black native of America has been, from the point of view of Mother Earth, a more authentic American than the white native, even though there may have been no admixture of alien blood since the days of the *Mayflower*.

I know that my American readers will not like this assertion, but there is no evading the truth. The American negro is a purely American type and much more convincing as such than any living white type. I do not in any way beg the question. His convincing power has asserted itself all over the earth; nothing America has created so far can bear comparison with the convincing power of negro dancing and

music—possibly with the one exception of Christian Science.

But is the type of the American negro really native-born? Of course it is. There has never been anything like the American negro in Africa, nor is there anything like him in the West Indies or in South America. The negro dance, the jazz music, those songs which sweep every American audience, are self-expressions of the *emancipated* negro, of what the black man has developed into on American soil since the Civil War. He is, accordingly, an American as opposed to his forbears, as much as any Middle Westerner of old pioneer stock can claim to be. And since the black American happens to have native-born feelings and emotions true to the American soil, which the white man has not as yet developed, he really supplements the latter. This is, in my opinion, the chief reason for the fact that almost all expressions of American emotionalism seem to be of negro origin. They really are of American origin. But since the white man's soul has not yet grown in this respect beyond the stage of receptivity and imitation, it must needs express itself in the black man's way in order to live out its own life.

It is perhaps as well if in this connection I say as much on the subject of the very delicate negro problem as the context allows. The colored man is as true an American as his white brother. OldMagazineArticles.comution does not allow any kind of persecution of citizens, and owing to the extreme conservatism of the American temperament there is little likelihood that the Constitution will ever be changed. There will probably continue to be a certain amount of lynching, as a sort of safety valve, for a considerable time to come, but I cannot imagine that a consistent antinegro policy will ever be

carried through. The social question is already solved, as far as a solution is possible under the circumstances.

In the South, at any rate, a tacitly acknowledged caste system is in existence, and nothing wiser could have been invented. There is equality before the law, but the white and the black lead separate lives. Such a state of things is always possible; not only do the various species of animals live closely together without mixing, but a similar situation has existed in most countries inhabited by various races — such as India, for instance. The American Constitution, however, takes care that the superiority of one caste does not involve oppression of the others. Thus the negroes need not feel humiliated; they can develop, *as Americans*, a racial pride of their own. And they will perhaps even build up a culture of their own.

Let us remember at this point what we said of the great emotional and artistic endowment of the colored man; the first really far-reaching influence from the New World emanated from him. For only the soul has direct attractive power — not intellect, or technical achievement. For only the soul really is 'man.' If America had nothing more to show than technical invention, then there could be no question at all of a lasting American influence on the world. The printing press was invented in Germany — but the world has not become German because of that; had Germany produced nothing else, its very existence would soon have been forgotten. For technical inventions are soulless and can be appropriated by everybody; they eventually belong to him who gives them a soul.

There is nothing paradoxical, therefore, in my assertion that the greatest

achievements of America in the past, be due to them as well. This is the less improbable since the white man's prejudices will have it that whoever has only a drop of negro blood in his veins is counted among the black. If only the really black were thought of and treated as negroes, then the superiority of the white man would continue in all fields for centuries to come. But there is an immense percentage of really white people in the negro caste. Under these circumstances there is nothing improbable in the expectation, considering the emotional and artistic under-endowment of the white American race, that the first original geniuses of the New World will belong to the black. Let us remember that the grandfathers of both Pushkin, Russia's greatest poet, and Alexandre Dumas were colored men.

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Under all circumstances, there are two varieties of authentic natives of America — a white and a black variety. And we have to face the possibility that time may work for the latter on all lines. Not only is the white colonial type lacking in soul, but he is also lacking in physical vitality. He is undoubtedly less vital on the whole than the European, except for those cases in which the immigrant has really become a son of the new North. His health is not really good; erotically he is less strong than the European; the American man who has passed the forties with extraordinary frequency looks spinsterlike. He is very active and energetic on one single line, but usually constitutionally unable to concentrate on others at the same time. He is rarely creative. The mere fact that he puts up with such an inordinate amount and degree of routine life

proves lack of original vitality. This is sometimes due to degeneration; the pioneers or the other first generations of immigrants have very often had to work so hard that their descendants have to pay for it. It may also be due, in part, to the earth in this respect — that this continent breeds a comparatively unvital type of man; in this connection the red Indians are closely akin to the white Americans I am thinking of.

But the chief reason for the white American's lack of original vitality should be the same as that which accounts for American soullessness. Mother Earth was there before man; she will outlive him. Physical life has its source in the earth, and this means more than that man requires food and shelter. If a race becomes almost entirely a race of town dwellers, to whom the country means nothing but a raw material, the prospects of the race cannot possibly be hopeful. Towns there must be; they may be compared to the brain in the physical organism, where forces are spent for the benefit of the whole. Thus Paris thinks and acts practically for the whole of France. But very few Parisians of importance were born in Paris. As far as we can look back in history, towns were, from the point of view of biology, places of spending and not of earning or saving. If they were not again and again replenished by stolid and sturdy sons of the soil, degeneration and decay would set in. The same will hold good until doomsday. It is true that industrial civilization has created new conditions, but this civilization will become stable only when a new state of balance has been arrived at between man the son of the earth and man the exploiter of the earth. The race of those who belong only to the latter type will inevitably

pass away. It is because Europe realizes this that it is giving more and more attention to the establishment of a new life close to nature.

Now in America there is a very real danger that the whole continent — with the exception of a few mountain ranges — will become one single town. It is not easy even to-day to determine where New York ends and Boston begins; owing to the fact that all latter-day town planning and building has been carried out under the assumption that everybody owns a motor car, there is no limit to the extension of suburbs. Chicago even to-day covers a territory which would have sufficed to form a handsome kingdom thirty years ago. The standardization of American life makes it ever so much easier and cheaper to live in town than in the country, all the more so since, or if, farming does not pay. Nor is there any probability of a tradition-bound farmer type developing in the near future, for the only solution of the farmer problem which the Department of Agriculture at Washington seems to visualize is the creation of an exceptionally intelligent and scientifically trained farmer type — and all human history goes to prove that active intellects never found lasting happiness in conforming to the ever-slow processes of nature.

All these circumstances coöperate in producing a general town-dweller psychology. The love of crowds and the extraordinary docility of all Americans in following the suggestions of advertising agents help to complete the picture; the territory of the United States may really some day become one single town. I spent several weeks at that wonderful place in the Californian desert which bears the name of Palm Springs. It counted hardly a couple of hundred permanent residents, but there

were no less than sixty-three real-estate agents. One radiant morning I went up a hill. From the summit of it I saw the whole desert already plotted out with street names and the rest. And then I realized with terror that the whole of the Californian desert may soon grow to be one single town, and that this town may even soon merge into ever-spreading Chicago.

But, all joking apart, the problem is really very serious. For, if the white American continues on his present line of development, then America may end by becoming the black continent of modern days. We know to-day that from palæolithic days onward there have been at least three great civilizations in Africa the original representatives of which were not black. In those early days the negro seems to have played a part similar to that of the gorilla to-day. But the ruling races eventually lost their vitality; they lived too much aloof from Mother Earth. So the negro, notwithstanding his position, has the last word.