Beliefs and customs - Folkstuff

FOLKLORE

NEW YORK

**Forms to be Filled out for Each Interview**

FORM A

**Circumstances of Interview**

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER LEVI C. HUBERT

ADDRESS 353 W. 118th. St., NYC

DATE December 12, 1938

SUBJECT THE WHITES INVADE HARLEM

1. Date and time of interview

A folk-study by this staff-writer, based on personal experiences and observations.

2. Place of interview

3. Name and address of informant

Levi C. Hubert
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4. Name and address of person, if any, who put you in touch with informant.

5. Name and address of person, if any, accompanying you

6. Description of room, house, surroundings, etc.

(Use as many additional sheets as necessary, for any of the forms, each bearing the proper heading and the number to which the material refers.)

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THE WHITES INVADE HARLEM

by

Levi C. Hubert

A few years ago, in the late 1920's, Alain Leroy Locke, a professor at Howard University, and the only American Negro to get a Rhodes' scholarship at Oxford, came to Harlem to gather material for the now famous Harlem Number of the Survey Graphic and was hailed as the discoverer of artistic Harlem.

The Whites who read that issue of the Survey Graphic became aware that in Harlem, the largest Negro city in the world, there existed a group interested in the fine arts, creative literature, and classical music. So, well-meaning, vapid whites from downtown New York came by bus, subway, or in limousines, to see for themselves these Negroes who wrote poetry and fiction and painted pictures.

Of course, said these pilgrims, it couldn't approach the creative results of whites, but as a novelty, well, it didn't need standards. The very fact that these blacks had the temerity to produce so-called Art, and not its quality, made the whole fantastic movement so alluring. The idea being similar to the applause given a dancing dog. There is no question of comparing the dog to humans; it needn't do it well...merely to dance at all is quite enough.

So they came to see, and to listen, and to marvel; and to ask, as an extra favor, that some spirituals be sung.

Over cups of tea, Park Avenue and Central Park West went into raptures over these geniuses, later dragging rare specimens of the genus Homo Africanus downtown for exhibition before their friends.

Bustling, strong-minded matrons, in Sutton Place, on The Drive, even on staid Fifth Avenue, sent out informal notes and telephonic invitations. "There

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will be present a few artistic Negroes. It's really the thing. They recite with such feeling, and when they sing - such divine tones. Imagine a colored person playing Debussy and Chopin."

At every party, two or three bewildered Negroes sat a bit apart, were very polite when spoken to, and readily went into their act when called upon to perform. The hostess would bring each newly-arrived guest over to the corner, and introductions invariably followed this pattern.

"I do so want you to meet Mr. Hubert. He writes the nicest poetry. Something really new. You simply must hear him read his Harlem Jungle tone-poem ... such insight, such depth...so primitive, you know, in a rather exalted fashion."

These faddists spread abroad the new culture, seized every opportunity to do missionary work for The Cause.

"Believe me, the poor dears are so trusting, so childlike, so very, very cheerful, no matter what their struggles or sorrows.

They tell me their most popular hymn is something about, You Can Have The World, Just Give Me Jesus. Isn't that simply wonderful? Such faith, such naivete. They're simply unique."

These women, blessed with money and a modicum of brains, transformed average Negroes with anemic souls into glittering shiny-faced personages. Julius Bledsoe became Jules. Dave Fountain gave a recital before a countess on swanky Sutton Place, and a day later his calling cards read David La Fountaine. Marc D' Albert plays classical selections ever so much better than Marcus Albert.

News that Harlem had become a paradise spread rapidly and from villages and towns all over America and the British West Indies there began a migration of quaint characters, each with a message, who descended upon Harlem, sought out the cafes, lifted teacups with a jutting little finger, and dreamed of sponsors. A literary magazine, Fire, sprang up briefly. Today its single issue is a collector's item.

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Harlem's millionairess, Alelia Walker, whose mother made her fortune with kink-no-more preparations, about this time became imbued with the desire to aid struggling artists. She set aside a floor of her town house at 208 West One Hundred and Thirty-sixth Street to be used as a studio for art exhibits, poetry recitals and musicales. Countee Cullen suggested Dark Tower as the name for this shrine of Harlem art and both he and Langston Hughes had poems inscribed on the walls.

I came from the foot hills of Pennsylvania to sit humbly in this temple while Wallace Thurman, Leigh Whipper, Sonoma Tally, Augusta Savage, Eric Waldron, among others, basked in the sunshine of public appreciation.

Naturally some good came from this fraternizing. Wallace Thurman not only had three books published, but became an editor at Scribners. Her white friends secured a second scholarship for Augusta Savage when she was denied the first because of her color. Countee Cullen went to Paris, where he wrote The Black Christ, conceded by critics to be his best effort. Langston Hughes was acclaimed as the first Negro to bring a genuine contribution to American literature. Gordon Taylor an ex-Pullman porter, rushed his Born To Be into print, Eric Waldron brought out a book, then returned to Brooklyn to muse and ponder. Claude McKay was living in France at the time but he, too, sent over the manuscript of Home To Harlem. Eugene Gorden vented his spleen in several publications, while George S. Schuyler wrote the first satire, Black No More.

It was the golden age for Negro writers, artists, and musicians. Study groups were held in cafes, refurnished railroad flats, even the language of the nation was enriched by Harlem colloquialisms, and the curious habit of 'passing' was brought out into the open in discussions. Whites, hearing for the first time of light-skinned Negroes crossing the line into the white world, eyed their neighbors suspiciously when they came to Harlem and were seated near other whites.

The question was, did these other whites come to Harlem as visitors or were they obeying the call of their kind? Even downtown the uneasiness persisted.

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Did the brunette woman on the fourth floor have a pedigreed ancestry, or was she on vacation from Harlem? Could one tell for certain who was whom by finger nails, or slant of eye, or by wavy hair?

Then the fad for sun tan and even mahogany shades struck the town and no one knew the answer.

In the employees' room of an exclusive Fifth Avenue shoppe a notice was tacked on the wall. It contained an admonition to be careful not to offend customers by confusing them with Negroes. It seems that an old and favored customer had been given the bum's rush because she had been mistakenly sized up as a Negro.

But The Dark Tower was the focal point of contact between the downtowners and Harlem's noveau literati.

One Sunday evening there was a poetry reading. It provided, according to the master of ceremony, an opportunity "for those of us with artistic inclination and talent to be stimulated to increased endeavor." He started the proceedings off with some rhymned classical similies. So it was a relief when a brownskinned, plump-waisted, soft-voiced girl stood up and read a poem ending with "He left me with but my maiden name."

A tall, studious-appearing man lamented that the youth of today must be ashamed of their past, for there could be no other reason for the absence of dialect in their poems. He became offended when another Negro confessed that the only Negro dialect he had ever heard was spoken by Al Jolson or some other corkface artist.

A sudden hush fell on the room as a strident voice from the rear began clamoring. The vibrant tones, compelling and forceful, caused everyone to turn his head and view the possessor of such a voice.

They saw a tall, robust girl with flaxen hair, and heard her say, "Two years ago I left Russia in search of people who would express the newer poetry. I have travelled through England and there all I heard was stilted, artificial phrases which mean nothing. The English are blind, they are unable to face life. They shut

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their eyes to facts which primitive peoples accept freely.

"I have been in America six months. Here, too, I am disappointed. Here also, the poets write about the head only. I want to hear the poetry of the hips. Hemingway calls Walt Whitman an exhibitionist in print. Surely Whitman, if anyone, lived unafraid and unwhipped by life; and that was because he had the proper slant on things.

"Perhaps here in Harlem you will catch the secret of rhythmic poetic expression. If you do you will have captured an inkling of the unattainable.

"Centuries ago African artists made phallic images. Today, in Harlem, your poets should write of the hips and of the victory which belongs eternally to women. Then you'll be writing fo life as it actually is."

Before the group could break out in excited comment, she gathered her wrap about her shoulders, nodded imperiously to her escort, and lumbered away, heavy hips revealed even though concealed by her tight-fitting, red velvet gown.

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