

Excerpt from "The Whites Invade Harlem" by Levi C. Hubert (December 12, 1938)

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 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 fontaine. 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.

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.

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It was the golden age for Negro writers, artists, and musicians. Study groups were held in cafes, refurbished railroad flats, even the language of the nation was enriched by Harlem colloquialisms...

SOURCE: Levi C. Hubert, "The Whites Invade Harlem," December 12, 1938, transcript, American Life Histories: Manuscripts from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1940, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.