Inter-Racial Coöperation

CONFLICTING FORCES IN NEGRO PROGRESS

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The aptitude of any people for progress is tested by the readiness with which they absorb and assimilate the environment of which they form a part," writes Professor Kelly Miller in his book on Race Adjustment. Using this principle as a measuring stick of culture and progress one must reach the inevitable conclusion that the American Negro has been well equipped in temperament and disposition. Coming from Africa some two hundred and fifty years ago, in a condition of almost stark nakedness—both from a physical and a cultural standpoint—the Negro has achieved truly remarkable results in the assimilation of the white man's civilization. Endowed with an elasticity of temperament and a light-heartedness which cannot be crushed, the black man in America, in the face of untold oppression and prejudice, has gained, through the institution of slavery, the greatest language in the world and the most satisfying religion in existence, to say nothing of such achievements as a notion of (if not a voice in) political and civil institutions and a knowledge of industrial habits and methods.

We must admit, then, that whatever his defects or shortcomings may be, the Negro does not suffer from a lack of the gift of imitation; for, where the Indian has almost perished for want of adaptability, the black man has survived in the face of prejudice and discrimination.

Recent developments in Negro life, however, reveal tendencies to use this imitativeness in a way which some Negroes and probably many whites believe does not make for the betterment and progress of the race, namely, the attempt to obliterate the physical characteristics of the Negro. "The columns of Negro newspapers from Massachusetts to Texas are full of advertisements of 'anti-kink' nostrums accompanied by illustrations of heads of long flowing hair," wrote Professor John M. Mecklin in 1914. He went on to add that "there is no doubt that like nostrums for bleaching the skin would appear also were there any hope of success." A perusal of the same newspapers today would reveal that the inventiveness of the Negro has overcome any obstacles to success, for skin-whiteners now share equal honors with "anti-kink" preparations in gracing the pages of many Negro papers. At this juncture, it is but fair to state that some papers are entirely out of sympathy with the movement and do not accept advertisements of the kind just mentioned. Of this phase of the situation more will be said later. It will be interesting to examine first the manner which some of the producers of these preparations adopt in presenting their wares to the buying public of the Negro world.

In papers like the Chicago Defender such advertisements are exceedingly pretentious, both in size and manner of presentation. Photographs are frequently offered contrasting the appearance of a prominent member of the race before and after using the concoction. The efficacy of the nostrum is made apparent not only by the smooth glossy hair or the lightened complexion but also by the satisfied expression on the happy face. The following extracts from recent advertisements indicate the nature of the appeal that is made:

Thousands of men and women in our group have long and straight hair which always looks well groomed. YOU see them every day. You know these people are not so much different from you that they naturally have long, straight hair. THEY MADE THEIR HAIR THAT WAY BY TAKING THE PROPER CARE OF IT."

1 Race Adjustment, p. 43.

2 Democracy and Race Friction, p. 98.

3 Chicago Defender, May 3, 1924.
NEW DOUBLE STRENGTH KINKOUT. WORKS IN 1 MINUTE. WILL MAKE ANY HAIR SMOOTH, SILKY AND GLOSSY... the latest discovery of our chemists. Just rub a little safe, harmless Kinkout on the hair and presto!... If you use Kinkout you won't have to use hot irons—no danger of turning the hair red.

At last! The lighter complexion that increases beauty and is so popular among refined members of the Race. Makes Skin So Light Would Hardly Know She Is Colored. When Mrs. Gresham says Ko-Verra made her skin so white that folks would hardly know she is colored, you can know what this amazing new preparation can do for any person who wants the beauty of a lighter skin. Mrs. Gresham has just been appointed by the governor of Iowa to attend the Illiteracy Conference at Washington, and you can be sure she won't travel without KO-VERRA... Ko-Verra makes the darkest skin look much lighter, and those with tan skin look several shades lighter.

FROM HOMELINESS TO BEAUTY IN 20 MINUTES. DON'T USE TERRA-VITAE UNLESS YOU WANT A LIGHTER SHADE. It contains a powerful bleaching property that gradually but surely lightens the skin.

Thousands Use BLEACHO. Safely and secretly you can now remove the greatest obstacle to your success. Don't envy light complexions. Use BLEACHO!

After reading such appeals one must be led to believe George S. Schuyler—a clever but extremely bitter Negro satirist, who is an associate editor of the Messenger—when he says that his "group is making amazing progress—pigmentarily speaking." In fact, he considers this progress so great that "when referring to the sepia section of the citizenry of this ably governed democ(k)-racy," he intends "to quit using the word 'Negro.' 'Colored' is much more appropriate. While one does see a Negro now and then in Harlem and elsewhere in these Benighted States," he thinks "the type is rapidly becoming extinct through the combined efforts of the 'Nordics' and the ubiquitous purveyors of skin whiteners."

To make a statement regarding the percentage of Negroes using such preparations would be to make a hazardous guess, but that the number is quite large is evident from the wide and persistent prevalence of advertisements concerning them in many of the leading Negro periodicals. Farmers are not the only producers who abandon and cease to cultivate unfruitful fields. The Chicago Defender, the largest Negro newspaper in point of circulation and doubtful of size also, reaching members of the colored race in all sections of the United States, literally thrives on advertisements of this nature. We may believe, therefore, that a considerable portion of the Negro population is not in complete agreement with the opinion of the late Philip H. Brown, Negro Commissioner of Conciliation in the United States Department of Labor, who, in 1923, made the philosophical remark that "Man is made of clay, and like a meerschaum pipe is more valuable when highly colored."

That there is some substantial opposition, however, to the practice of obliterating racial characteristics is plainly evident in the Negro press in certain quarters. It is entirely possible that the silent opposition may be much greater than the expressed, for the revenue from advertisements of toilet preparations without a doubt constitutes a larger source of funds to many Negro periodicals than any other single kind of advertising. We must not lose cognizance of the fact that human nature is much the same, whether under a black skin or a white, and that the pinch of economic necessity often takes precedence over moral conviction. Many a Negro editor ekes out a bare existence at best. As Mr. Schuyler has facetiously remarked, the Negro journalist "can make almost as much with his four-page paper as he could washing dishes." On the other hand, editors of the more prosperous newspapers, if they did have a conviction, might not feel the urge sufficiently to enable them to refuse cash from a prosperous and apparently growing business.

The Chicago Whip, a bitter rival of the Defender and a paper which scrupulously maintains the reputation which it name implies, is one of the periodicals, nevertheless, that apparently has resisted the temptation of the "economic man" and taken an active stand against the policies of...
its contemporaries. The following editorial is an instance in point:

Last week a 'Kinkout' preparation burned all of the combined locks from the head of a foolish user. The user is now bolder and wiser and he has not attained the beauty his soul craved for, but this foolish man is not to be blamed nearly as much as the manufacturer who placed this spurious and harmful product upon the market. There ought to be a limit somewhere upon these 'Kinkout' chemists, who are for the most part white men who are seeking to fitch the money out of the pockets of black people. Every man and woman should make himself or herself as attractive as possible, but a rule of reason should be used and that rule should not include the use of caustic potash to straighten hair nor the use of mercury and tannic acid whereby to lighten a dark skin. If a person desires to straighten or curl his hair as the fastidiousness of the individual determines we would have nothing to say if the same could be harmlessly done, but we who have used potash while scrubbing floors and noticed how the potash ate away the dirt, have common knowledge of what the same potash will do to the human head. These 'Kinkout' products should be barred from respectable newspapers and eliminated from the shelves of reputable barber shops and beauty culturists. Be beautiful if you can, but don't burn your brains out in the attempt.19

It is to be noticed, however, that the opposition here is to harmful preparations rather than to the idea involved in the bleaching of the skin or the straightening of the hair.

Mr. Schuyler is more outspoken regarding the matter. He is constantly ridiculing his calcimined Negro brethren. His attitude is well illustrated by the extracts given below of a dialogue appearing in the Messenger entitled At the Darktown Charity Ball in which he exposes the foibles of the black race as he sees them.

1st Gossip—By the way, who is that woman over there with her hair straightened?

2nd Gossip—You'll have to indicate her better than that, old dear. All these women have their hair straightened, you know. How the white people do laugh about it!

1st Gossip—Well, it is comical to see them with their hair so stiff as with glue—it appears so lifeless and artificial. I was referring to the lady drinking with the minister. If her gown wasn't sleeveless, I would think she was a white woman. Why don't these women enamel their arms, also?

2nd Gossip—Well, these skin whiteners cost quite a bit, and most of these people are always pressed for funds—they belong to the Negro aristocracy, you know.20

In another passage, "2nd Gossip" makes the observation that "the American Negro psychology is such that a man or woman rises higher and higher in our esteem, the whiter they are."

This last thought is echoed in other Negro hearts. Marcus Garvey, the self-pitying Negro Moses, in writing of his difficulties in helping the Negro to see the light, stated in Current History some time ago: "Furthermore, I was a black man and therefore had absolutely no right to lead; in the opinion of the 'colored' element, leadership should have been in the hands of a yellow or a very light man. On such flimsy prejudices our race has been retarded. There is more bitterness among us Negroes because of the caste of color than there is between any other peoples, not excluding the people of India.21"4

This indictment of the Negro race, if it carries the weight of truth, implies serious complications, for it involves the conflict of two forces both of which, although only the development of recent years, are gaining momentum at an ever increasing rate. On the one side we have an attempt to efface racial characteristic, to become as nearly like the white man as possible. On the other side we have an unmistakably powerful force, race pride, which is everywhere evident in Negro life. The Negro is becoming proud of the history of his race and its achievements, past and present. In short, there is a movement within the race increasing from year to year in both volume and intensity, which is beyond a doubt making for the greater solidarity of the group.

When Booker T. Washington was a boy, he was handicapped, so he tells us, by the fact that the stories he "read in school were all concerned with the success and achievements of white boys and men. Occasionally I spoke to some of my schoolmates in regard to the characters of whom I had read, but they invariably reminded me that the stories I had been reading had to do with the members of another race."16 The Negro child today, however, does not experience this disadvantage to the same degree that Dr. Washington did, for now there are available for him readers with selections from the poetry of Dunbar, excerpts from the lives of Scott Bond, Washington, Holtclaw, Du Bois, and Henson, the Negro com-

19 Chicago Whip, May 3, 1924.
20 December, 1924.
22 My Larger Education, p. 103.
panion of Peary at the North Pole. In his home he has Negro dolls to play with and the pictures of Negro heroes to look at. When he grows up he will find in the Negro college, if he is fortunate enough to attend one, a continuation of this process of racialization in the form of courses in Negro history and annual Negro conferences of various kinds.

The Negro does not have to go to college, however, to become imbued with the spirit of race pride, for the Negro press endeavors to give it to him in over-abundance. In some instances it presents unadulterated facts. In others its enthusiasm runs amuck and we find a hodge-podge of fact and fiction which leaves no room for doubt regarding the imaginative qualities of at least some members of the Negro race. A few excerpts from “Questions and Answers in Negro History” by George Wells Parker, who conducts this syndicated feature for the Associated Negro Press will suffice to illustrate this warped point of view. They are offered not as typical of the Negro press as a whole, but rather as evidence of the extremity to which race pride and consciousness may reach.

... most of the very prominent fathers of the Roman church were Africans. ... It might not be too much to say that Africans were the chief founders of the early Roman church, because we find their impress in all the early history of the church. In early times both Christ and the Virgin Mary were represented as black and in parts of Poland, Russia and Spain and Italy there are still shrines to the black Virgin. ... Keep this one thing in mind: every nation of any consequence from the beginning of human history down to the twelfth century was either African or of African descent. Therefore all ancient literature belongs to us. The great Greek and Roman classics are ours, the II(1)iad and Odyssey were the epics of a people who were brown skin, rather than mulatto in color.

I am not in favor of the custom of picking here and there some celebrity who happened to have been born in Africa, or of African parents, and making a great ado over him and what he did. The whole race of those times belongs to us and if the authors were not wholly Africans, they were at least of mixed blood. Homer, Herodotus, Socrates, Plato, Aeschylus, and all the rest, were of mixed blood, so why pick individuals. Claim the whole thing, because it is ours anyway."

Negro pride, however, does not live merely in the past. The Negro in America has a two-fold existence—the one in a white world, and the other in a black. In the former he has his contacts with the white man—some of them pleasant, many of them otherwise. In the latter he lives a life of which most whites are entirely ignorant. In this black world, though it is far from ideal, are most of the things in life that appeal to the human heart. To the curious spectator who peers within is revealed the fact that the virtues, frailties, and foibles of the Negro are quite the same as those of the white man. Last summer the Prince of Wales created a sensation in this country merely by the fact of his royal presence. We find an exact counterpart of this in the black world, as the following item from the Chicago Whip of November 1, 1924, will attest:

HEARTS OF "YY" GIRLS ALL AGOG AS PRINCE DANCES

On last Monday evening His Royal Highness, Prince Kojo Tovalon-Houenou of Dahomey, Africa, and his secretary, Reverend Theodore Stephens, were the guests of the Indiana Avenue branch of the Y. W. C. A. The distinguished visitors arrived at exactly six o'clock in the evening and were met by a charming group of young ladies, each looking her sweetest, awaiting them in the spacious parlors of the institution. The Prince was introduced to all present and accepted the introductions in a manner both ingratiating and courteous. He shook the hands of each young lady present and as he did so many a blush stole to a maiden's cheek and many a maiden's heart went pit-a-pat.

... His Royal Highness was even called upon for a speech. There were many who hoped that he would talk about love but even tho the Prince was all in a whirl because of the beauties that surrounded him on every hand he "bewed to the line" and told them what a wonderful institution they had. ... Just how many private speeches he made has not as yet been ascertained.

... The Prince, in a most tactful manner, managed to dance with all of the girls present.

In the next issue of the Whip society is treated to a front-page picture of the young lady "who was the first of Chicago's younger set to dance with Prince Kojo of Dahomey," and is informed that the prince evidently enjoyed the dance, as "he is lingering with us a wee bit longer than he first expected."

Other aspects of Negro life are equally indicative of the fact that the black world in America is becoming self-sufficient:

BASEBALL AND RACE PROGRESS

By Charles A. Starks
(Associated Negro Press)

A little while ago Negroes had no real outlet for a certain enthusiasm expressed in baseball. The psychology
of the thing was that we had to expend our interest in the game on the heroism of white players, such as a Ruth, a Hornsby, a Sisler or an Alexander, a hero worship that led eternally to "white supremacy," and away from Race Idealism that should naturally be focused on black players. White sport writers, many of them, contended that "Negroes have not the active brains like the whites," so they consigned us to the mediocre fields of obscurity. But we have refused to stay there. "Merit will find a way."

Today, after having made the country at large, and even the major baseball commission, along with Judge Landis, supreme dictator, take notice, for we, too, have our heroes, such as a Charleston, a Rogan, a Jelly Gardner or John Lloyd; we are ushering in a Negro World Series between the Kansas City Monarchs, Negro Western League Champions, and the Philadelphia Hilldales, Negro Eastern League Champions. . . . 9

And so one might continue citing items culled from the Negro press, as, for example, those telling about the Negro airman who planned a world flight; 10 about the heads of the Poro College Company, 11 who recently paid $38,048 in income tax and gave $25,000 to the Y. M. C. A. in St. Louis; about Mr. Jesse Binga, the founder of the Binga State Bank in Chicago; 12 about Mr. William J. Powell, "a youth of twenty-six years," who obtained a permit to build a "garage and electrical service station at the cost of $45,000"; 13 and about other Negroes ad infinitum. One might continue citing these items, all of which prove that there is a strong and deep current of race consciousness, pride, and solidarity in the Negro world today.

But what of the practice prevalent among many Negroes of using "kinkouts" and skin whiteners to obliterate racial characteristics and, according to some black as well as many white critics, to imitate white folks? Can the black man keep up this practice and yet continue to build those mental attitudes which make for respect of self and race? In other words, are there not two conflicting forces at work in Negro life, one or the other of which must be overcome if there is to be unity of purpose and ideals in Negro realms? It is true, of course, that when the Negro organizes his own baseball league or fraternal organization, or when he makes ado over a black prince he is, in a sense, imitating the white man just as he is when he enamels his complexion or straightens his hair. There is, nevertheless, an important distinction to be made, for in the latter instance he is hiding something that is singularly his own in order to fashion himself after another race, whereas in the former instance he is merely appropriating a civilization that is the "common possession of all who assimilate and apply its principles"; 14 and the more successful he is in doing this the more happy and satisfied he will be with his own lot. Professor W. D. Weath-erford put the point quite well when he wrote that "So long as all honor lies in being associated with the white man, the Negro will want social intermingling. So long as there are none of his own race that can meet him on a high plane and can satisfy the longings of his soul, just so long will he be driven to seek fellowship with white men. But build him up, make him sufficient unto himself, give him within his own race life that which will satisfy, and the social question will be solved." 15

Negroes—that is to say, the select few—have already progressed to the point where they have most of the things that satisfy the human soul, and with their possession has properly come a pride in self and race. Can the Negro continue to build up race pride and solidarity, however, and at the same time persist in the hiding of those physical characteristics which are peculiarly his own? Are we to answer this question in the negative, or are we to conclude that "kinkouts" and skin whiteners are merely the creation of Dame Fashion and that while a few Negroes may use them in order to be more like the white race, the majority do so without forethought, merely because smooth hair and light complexions are in vogue? Upon the answer to these questions depends much that is of significance and interest to both the Negro and his white brother.

10 Ibid., October 10, 1924.
11 Ibid., August 22, 1924.
12 Ibid., November 7, 1924.
13 Chicago Whip, November 8, 1924.
14 Ibid., May 3, 1924.
15 Miller, Kelly, Race Adjustments, pp. 263-264.
16 The Negro From Africa to America, p. 432. Quoted from Negro Life in the South, by the same author.