

# As They Face the Future, They Recall the Past

*That the Negro, whose roots in this country parallel those of the Founding Fathers, should be denied participation in the American Dream is, to understate it, ironic. Three recent books telescope their odyssey: "Black Cargoes: A History of the Atlantic Slave Trade," by Daniel P. Mannix with Malcolm Cowley (Viking, \$6.95); "The New World of Negro Americans," by Harold R. Isaacs (John Day, \$7.50), and "Soon, One Morning: New Writing by American Negroes, 1940-1962," by Herbert Hill (Knopf, \$6.95).*

## 1. Sound of Their Masters' Voices

By SAUNDERS REDDING, author of *"The Lonesome Road"* and *"On Being Negro in America."*

WHILE W. E. B. DuBois's *The Suppression of the African Slave Trade* (1896) remains the definitive work on the general subject of slavery, there have been many excellent books subsequent to his. Most of these have been "studies"—a discouraging designation—treating particular aspects of the story with too much particularity and too little dramatic impact to arouse the interest of the popular reader. In short, they have been academic essays for scholars, who traditionally avoid or suppress even such excitement as may be innate in a theme.

Daniel Mannix and Malcolm Cowley are not academicians, but they know their subject; and if *Black Cargoes: A History of the Atlantic Slave Trade* breaks the tradition of academic dullness, it does no harm to the integrity of scholarship. The authors have permitted—rather, they have obliged—the dramatic excitement in the story of Negro slavery to stand. They have done something more: they have humanized a story that too many scholars have treated, except for the obtrusive horrors of the Middle Passage, as if it were merely a demographic index. The authors achieved these results by the simple device of allowing some of the people who were most directly involved with slavery to speak for themselves in anecdotes and explanations.

All the notable and notorious figures are here, from Queen Elizabeth and Bishop de Las Casas to the unprincipled African kings who sold their people to the slavers, and the dissolute Dutchman Vanbukeline, who corrupted mothers so that he might the more easily debauch their daughters.

It all began in seeming innocence, when the Portuguese took slaves "as a recompense from God" and in "the

name of Christ." It developed with amazing force and such cynicism that John Hartop, who was a member of Captain John Hawkins's third expedition, could report matter of factly that "seven thousand Negroes [were driven] into the sea at low tide, at the point of land, where they were all drowned in the ooze except five hundred which we took and carried thence for traffique to the West Indies." It eventually declined, and finally ended with the execution of Captain Nathaniel Gordon in 1862. Gordon was the first and last American slave runner to die for his crimes, which were the crimes of thousands, perpetrated for 350 years.

But the consequences of the slave

trade to America were not all bad. The authors, unlike the traditionalists, are not afraid to make judgments of value, either moral or historical. They remind us that the "nameless Dutch vessel which arrived a year before the *Mayflower* . . . carried the spirituals, jazz, the researches of such Negro scientists as George Washington Carver, the contributions to American culture of younger Negro musicians, statesmen, scholars, and writers; and also she carried, for this age of international struggles, the first link between the United States and Africa."

*Black Cargoes* is certainly not the final word on the subject of slavery; but it is a thorough book, and, for the reasons I've stated, it may very well prove to be the most popular.

## 2. Panelists Dissent on the Ascent

By JAMES M. NABRIT, JR., president of Howard University.

THE PERCEPTIVENESS that marked *Scratches on Our Minds: American Images of China and India*, which established Harold R. Isaac's reputation as interviewer, analyst, and writer, also appears in his *The New World of Negro Americans*, which is an even better book for it displays the author's understanding, insight, and sympathy regarding the colored man in our society.

Mr. Isaacs states that he is essentially concerned with the impact of world affairs on Negro Americans. More specifically, however, he focuses on the effect that the emergence of new African states has had upon racial segregation in the U.S. By 1957, he notes, it "had become common to hear about the effect of race problems upon American standing in the world, but much less common to give heed to . . . the way in which changes in the world are forcing changes in American society." He points out that during the

following three years he asked questions of many people relating to this reverse effect, and that, in particular, he directed these questions to a panel of 107 Negroes.

Conceding that those interviewed do not constitute a cross section of the Negro population, Mr. Isaacs says that they were chosen mainly because of their role as important communicators in society and because of their special experience in relation to Africa. They include writers, scholars, educators, businessmen, churchmen, editors, and persons holding key positions in significant organizations. Unfortunately, his sources were confined to the Negro middle and upper classes.

On the subject of Africa, the panel split into three categories, which Mr. Isaacs identifies as rejecters, inquirers, and affirmers. Most of the members, he found, reacted to their initial discovery of Africa "by trying in one way or another to undiscover it." They were indifferent to or unaware of Africa; in fact, many of them simply rejected any connection whatsoever with the continent. Mr. Isaacs regards

this as quite natural, since it has been usual for minorities fighting for acceptance and assimilation not to acknowledge any relationship or origin that causes them to be despised.

The second group, the inquirers, also rejected Africa, but not nearly so violently. Theirs were "attitudes of tentativeness, sometimes of skepticism, or outright disbelief"; they were "waiting to see." While the even smaller third group, the affirmers, rejected in their youth certain images of Africa, they nonetheless "reached out and grasped Africa for their own." These were persons who early in life were led to an essentially affirmative view of Africa, with which they felt American Negroes had a particular attachment.

William E. B. DuBois, an affirmer, is repeatedly cited by Mr. Isaacs, who reports that no name was mentioned more often in his interviews with the panel. DuBois wrote in 1900: "The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line—the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America, and in the islands of the sea."

The dominant white Atlantic world, Mr. Isaacs observes, no longer calls the tune to which the rest of the world dances. And, while the white supremacy system may not have suffered as complete a downfall as he suggests, it has been sufficiently shattered for non-whites in Asia and Africa to have made clear their intention to participate in determining the destiny of the world. There is no doubt that this development has considerably accelerated integration in this country—notwithstanding the separatist ambitions of the Black Muslims, on whom Mr. Isaacs dwells too briefly.

Readers will probably agree with him that "in this new world, Negroes, accustomed always to feeling the big winds blowing against them, now began to feel the new sensation of having the wind at their backs." They will take issue with him, however, regarding the strength of this wind at the present time and the possibilities of cross currents or reversal of direction.

Those who know Mr. Isaacs's earlier writings will be familiar with his views on African attitudes about American Negroes. With justification, many disagree with him when he suggests that a large number of African leaders look upon American Negroes as being essentially weak or as tools of white men or as people who could not achieve equality without the help of outside events, especially the rise of the new leadership in Africa. Numerous Negroes who have visited and worked in Africa assert that this is not the case. They

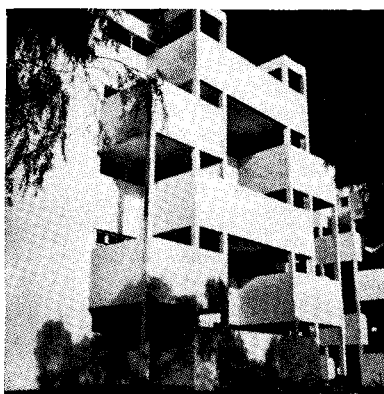
report that Africans identify themselves closely with American Negroes and that there is a unity of spirit between them.

New to socio-historical writing about the Negro is the stress Mr. Isaacs lays on literature—creative literature—as a means of interpreting a people and giving them strength. Hence his keen, appreciative analyses of DuBois, James

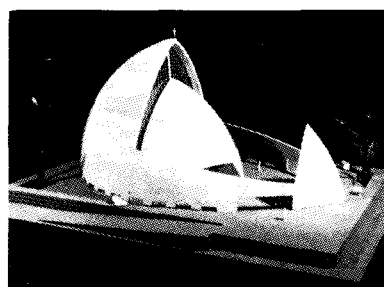
Weldon Johnson, Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Ralph Ellison, Lorraine Hansberry, and James Baldwin.

I do, though, take exception to the title of the author's concluding chapter, "Toward Somebodiness." Negroes are now somebody. They have long been somebody. Their history did not start with 1954. Their brave men did not emerge with Martin Luther King.

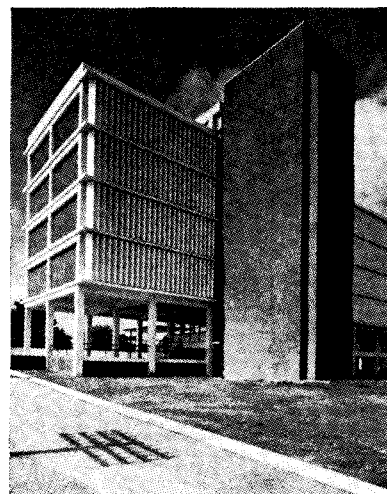
**Emergent Design:** While up until a few years ago the newer buildings in Africa were mostly bland copies of those in Europe, *New Architecture in Africa*, by Udo Kultermann (Universe, \$12.50), reveals that emerging national consciousness has brought with it some of the most exciting modern developments in design.



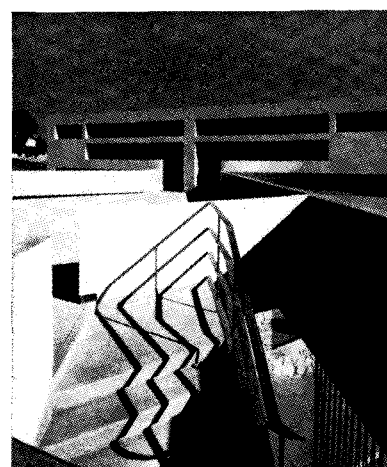
Flats for Arabs in Oran



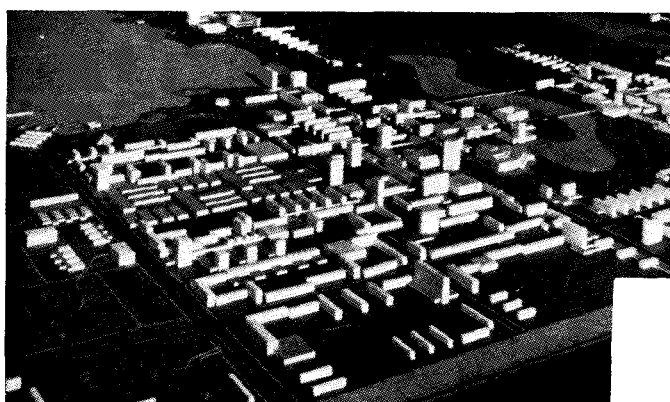
Model of church for Volta District



Police headquarters, Accra, Ghana



School in Agadir, Morocco



Model of Kabaria, a satellite-town of Tunis



### 3. Denial of the Big Dream?

By CHARLES SHAPIRO, author of "Theodore Dreiser: Our Bitter Patriot," published last fall.

IN A smug, pompous, hardening society it is usually the outsider who can best observe and understand the hypocrisies and tragedies that accompany complacency for, while he wants in, he can also take the measure of those who deny him. At the same time, if he is honest and intense, he becomes disturbed at what the denial of the big dream has done to his own potentialities. If he has talent his anger can be transformed into art, and in the very act of creation he is giving the lie to a world that refuses to see him as an individual. A case in point is Herbert Hill's superbly edited *Soon, One Morning: New Writing by American Negroes, 1940-1962*.

One of the joys of this fat volume is that it includes a good deal of previously unpublished material; and, for once, this does not mean a famous writer's laundry list or the debut of a nontalent.

The famous names are present, of course. James Baldwin, fresh from a brooding appearance as *Time* magazine's cover boy, the subject of a patronizing bit in *Life*, and an interview for *Mademoiselle*, is represented by portions of his first novel and by *Letters from a Journey*, wherein he reflects on what he sees abroad and how it affects him as an American Negro. As always, Baldwin's vision is agonizing

in its search for the sources of his pain.

Ralph Ellison's contribution is from part of the original version of *Invisible Man*, in my opinion the best American novel of the Fifties. The selection marked, he says, "an attempt to get the hero of that memoir out of the hospital into the world of Harlem." The piece has all the nightmarish comedy and screaming intensity of the novel; a disturbing and almost unbearable tale, it stands very well by itself as a short story.

Langston Hughes is well represented in each of the three sections into which the book is divided: essays, fiction, and poetry. His story, "Rock, Church," is a sardonic take-off on an opportunistic preacher on the holy make, a Negro Elmer Gantry who out-tricks himself.

Now, as I've said before, Elder Jones was a good preacher—and a good-looking preacher, too. He could cry real loud and moan real deep, and he could move the sisters as no other black preacher on this side of town had ever moved them before. Besides, in his youth, as a sinner, he had done a little light hustling around Memphis and Vicksburg—so he knew just how to appeal to the feminine nature.

The fiction section contains the best work in the anthology. Among its features: a deceptively placid novelette by Ann Petry, an extremely funny tale by Ted Poston, a damning picture by Dorothy West of Bostonian Negroes

trying to avoid their identities, and a beautiful excerpt from William Demby's *Beetlecreek*.

In contrast, Willard Motley's "The Almost White Boy" is almost a parody of the proletarian fiction of past decades.

The colored fellows he palled with called him "the white nigger," and his white pals would sometimes look at him kind of funny but they never said anything. . . . All the guys were swell if you liked them; all the girls flirted and necked and went on crying jags now and then. People were just people.

This throaty nonsense isn't life and it certainly isn't art. It merely proves, along with a sorry item by Chester Himes, that a man can write poorly regardless of race, creed, or color. However, to his credit, Mr. Hill has spared us Frank Yerby, the suburban Negro's answer to Herman Wouk.

Like the fiction, the six essays cover a lot of territory and a lot of viewpoints. Horace R. Cayton's "A Picnic with Sinclair Lewis" explores the loneliness of the creator of *Babbitt*; and in Lewis's ambivalent attitude towards his colored guest (as well as in the guest's own limitations) we see some of the built-in problems that will make the much publicized Negro-white dialogue a difficult and bitter series of confrontations. In "The American Negro Scholar" John Hope Franklin spells out his thesis in acute, personal terms:

. . . The major choice for the Negro scholar is whether he should turn his back on the world, concede that he is the Invisible Man, and lick the wounds that come from cruel isolation, or whether he should use his training, talents, and resources to beat down the barriers that keep him out of the main stream of American life and scholarship. . . . I now assert that the proper choice for the American Negro scholar is to use his knowledge and ingenuity, his resources and talents, to combat the forces that isolate him and his people and, like the true patriot that he is, to contribute to the solution of the problems that all Americans face in common.

There are three main tendencies in Negro writing, Herbert Hill observes in his instructive introduction: ". . . a strong folk tradition; racial protest, first during the antislavery struggle and again in modern times; and now the most recent development, which might be described as the emergence of an esthetic tradition." Certainly this fine collection proves how healthy the esthetic tradition has become.

**Legacy:** ". . . the immortality Mrs. Roosevelt would have valued most would be found in the deeds and visions her life inspired in others," Adlai Stevenson said after her death last fall. *The Eleanor Roosevelt We Remember*, by Helen Gahagan Douglas (Hill & Wang, \$5.95), memorializes that many-sided life in photographs and tributes. Below she is shown reading to children of the Wiltwyck School, whom she invited on an outing every year; and at right, with her first great-grandchild, Nicholas Delano Seagraves.

