

- In Harlem, one is conscious not of color but of poverty, low wages, unemployment, the poorly fed.

## NEW YORK'S BERLIN WALL

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East of Fifth Avenue at 96th Street is New York's Berlin Wall. In one block one steps north from the moneyed quiet of the Upper East Side, the Belgravia and Mayfair of the city, and from the crest of the small hill at Park Avenue or Madison one looks down on 'the vale of Harlem, jumping in the pure flame of the August heat or sunk like a mud flat in the intolerable damp days of hot cloud. For the first time in New York one sees expanses of sky; no skyscrapers slice it into strips; for the first time the city looks spacious. Even the phalanxes of newish, high red-brick apartment blocks that stand for a mile or more between the littered streets and proletarian playgrounds along Madison, rising like fortifications and model prisons, have broad sky between them. At the Park Avenue hill the railway

tracks shoot out from under the flower-beds of the respectable quarters, and the miles of blatant steel blind the eye, as they cut their way through the rusting fire-escapes of the tenements. Forbidden country. Most of my American friends said: 'Don't go there now. There is too much tension. And it is worse in the heat.' Just as they tell you not to go in Central Park at night. My European friends, not having the built-in American instinct for drama, said 'Ali nonsense'.

The European who crosses 96th Street at once feels at home. The foreignness does it — we are all foreigners in Europe — and also the liveliness of the streets. Activity is the principle of white New York; living is the business of Harlem. Strictly one is not immediately in Harlem but in Puerto Rico. The

coffee faces at the crowded slum windows, the huge family groups sitting thin-legged and tattered on doorsteps, the men playing dominoes on the pavements, the barber who looks like a large fly in his grubby shop, shout Spanish. The ads on the walls are Spanish; South American music prances out of doorways. And no one can keep his fingers still. Half-asleep at the door the old man or the young drums on a tin or on his knee. The empty hours of life are filled with drum taps on imaginary drums. In the corner of a playground where youths are playing baseball, four others are huddled secretly in a corner over a man who actually has a real drum and deftly palms and knuckles it. They are so close to one another that their faces nearly touch, their eyes glance at one another recording exquisite recognitions as they listen. Nearby someone fields the ball in the game and as he does so two or three of those drum notes catch his ear. He throws the ball in and then turns and buckles his knees into a grotesque dance that

seizes him like some unavoidable locomotor ataxia. Under the arches at Park Avenue one arrives in the middle of the raucous Puerto Rican market. A madman goes screaming through the crowd of women who are tearing at cotton dresses on the stalls: '*Cristo vivo; muerte No!*' he shouts. No one notices him.

There are Italian, even Spanish and Jewish Harlems — the big shops on 125th Street are Jewish and there is anti-semitism among the Negroes — 'They take their money out the community' — speaking as if Harlem were a nation; but so do many rich Negroes. The place is money-minded and has its class system. 125th Street is the Main Street of Negro Harlem. Few white faces, but every kind of Negro face; no one stares. Suddenly blackness becomes your norm; you begin to feel the furnace heat has burned your face off and that you too are black. In a quarter of an hour you do not notice colour at all. You notice individuals, whereas in the rest of the city people look the same. You notice gait and

stance, for some Negroes walk superbly and stand in a manner that suggests standing is an art in itself. They are people in their pride, not going any where, but hanging about, forever restless on their feet, skipping along circling, idle. Children play round your legs. An audience on very fire-escape is part of the show in the street below. Every other shop is blaring out radio tunes; in every doorway, arguments, small dramas. Transistors everywhere. A Cadillac full of men and girls crawls by; they are all laughing. In a way the adults seem to be at play, like the children racing round the playgrounds. A white taxidriver who dropped me at 135th Street one day, said angrily 'haven't got anything' against them but they're not regular people' and said he wanted to head for the East Side Highway and 'get out of it'. One sees his point; he had seen not colour but poverty, unemployment, low wages, the poorly fed; he was afraid and he had cringed before gaiety.

The unpleasant sight is the white cops. They stand in pairs, flexing their arms,

twirling their batons as if getting ready for a crack, talking to each other but to no one else — and, by Harlem standards, overfed. The well-fed are policing those who do not feed so well. One recognizes them too, not by colour, but by the innate stillness of bullies. James Baldwin, who has said something like this, does not exaggerate. After Birmingham the cops know even more how they are hated. They have their troubles. For there is that mysterious thing called tension. One night when the heat sat on one's chest like an elephant. I went up to 125th Street and, at various places, someone had turned on the fire-hydrants which were spouting water onto the cars and buses. At one corner several hundred Negroes were sitting on doorsteps, looking out of windows, grinning with happiness at a lonely cop who was trying to turn the water off. He failed. Three hours later buses were still being soaked. At the terminal when I got on the bus a Negro girl got on too, but got off at once when she saw the driver closing the windows

and mopping his seat. One saw a moment of fear which the Negro easily conveys by his quick eyes, quickly covered by politeness. She got off. She smelt trouble. She said nervously: 'I'll wait for my husband.'

There is a group of writers called the Harlem Writers Workshop. The organizer, John H. Clarke, edits a monthly review called *Freedomways*, which has just produced an interesting Harlem number. He invited me to a writer's meeting in one of the huge apartment forts for middle-income people. They are modern; and once you are out of the lift into the long corridors where people are slotted, the noise of television is violent. The walls are thin and there is no air-conditioning. About 16 of us sat sweating in a pretty book-lined room, talking about Rhodesia, Kenya, South Africa and Notting Hill Gate. One or two of the writers had been published in England and asked whether the English boom in the Negro novel was over. They suspected it was. They knew the race question was an economic one: lower wages than

white people, higher rents, poor schools kept poor — the Negro is the permanent, sweated immigrant. But the mood of the group was dangerously elated. 'This year everything will be settled,' they insisted (except the judicious Mr. Clarke who comes from Alabama and does not think things are going to be as simple as that: *Freedomways* is warning them that their struggle will be long). 'Or else,' shouted one laughing young man who hopped to his feet and danced about shooting an imaginary gun like a child playing cops and robbers. Everyone laughed at him but no one approved. Black Muslim racism, the notion of the Negro state and the return to Africa are rejected — otherwise their diagnosis is considered acceptable. They are the best-organized Negro group.

The Workshop included John O'Killens whose novels *Young Blood* and *Then We Heard the Thunder* have been published in this country, a dramatist and an established Jamaican writer; and the tendency is broadly one of the commitment to the

Negroes' social struggle. They are not by any means the only Harlem writers. Ralph Ellison is aloof from them — he lives just outside Harlem in an apartment looking down on the Hudson and he believes a writer needs a discipline more exacting than loyalty to a racial group and that there is more to Negro humanity than can be seen by limiting it to its political and social situation. In the present excitement the view is unfashionable, but Ellison is the most impressive Negro writer I have met.

Harlem is a city in itself and contains all that a city has. It has a third of New York's million Negroes; it is the capital of the race. It has its rich, its middling people, its sedate streets where the well-off professional people live, its fantastic property speculators, its money-making churches run like businesses — like a good many church organizations in white New York. The churches bought real estate to house their congregations. Differences between white and black do not touch the fundamental American traits:

there is chiefly the grim difference of status. And then, the Negro has escaped standardization by living below the surface of American life. The Negro is proud to have moved into what, 60 years ago, was a comfortable white suburb, against all the opposition and chicanery of the established. Grave, academically inclined Mr. Clarke took me to see the vast Schomburg collection of books on Africa and the African Negro in the public library where students were working late. It has a fine bust of the first Negro actor to play Othello. There are a couple of blocks on Seventh Avenue which are historic for the Harlem Negro. They are the first property bought by a group who slaved to pay off the high-rate mortgages. These heroes of the ethnic property war — which has been basic in New York life in every generation, as one national group pushes another out, in pursuit of the thoroughly American desire for self-improvement — were known by the formidable moral name of The Strivers. The street is called Strivers' Row and is one of the most

sedate in the whole city and has some of the best brownstones — the top status symbol of all.

The small bookshops of Harlem, stacked in disorderly fashion from floor to ceiling with new and second-hand books, are centres of local agitation. They have a natural connection with the street-corner meeting outside where the speakers range from the cranks and peculiars to the serious politicians. Go into a shop and in two minutes you are asked for your views on Rhodesia and Kenya; all the sensational and serious literature of the Negro revolt in the whole world is there. The Negro loves talk. There is always a group, perhaps behind a curtain or a door, talking politics. One might be among pre-revolutionary Russian exiles, but without Marx. 'A white commnuist is a liar,' someone said, 'and a black one is a fool.' In one shop you see the painted banners that are carried in protest meetings — lurid pictures of police dogs jumping at the throats of children in Birmingham or comic drawings of Southern Gentlemen.

The word is everything in Harlem. The long word or the book word beautifully uttered by the man driving his cab or talking in his shop; the rambling or the inciting word of the street meeting; the Biblical or inflaming word of the unctuous ranting preacher. These people have the gift of tongues which is scarcer among American whites; indeed conversation is commoner there than in white New York. On Sunday mornings in Harlem the word rules. Roars as of murder come from upper rooms over the cleaner's or the grocer's: it is a preacher in a one-room chapel creaming the name of Jesus, in paroxysms about Emmanuel. I found myself one wet Sunday at the notorious Abyssinian Baptist church which has a sweet-machine and a Credit Funeral Office in its entrance, swinging hand in hand with my two neighbors, singing 'Down by the Riverside'. Their hats were like gardens. They put the Communion crumb neatly on a little handkerchief on their knees. They drank the cocktail glass of red liquid which

tasted of vaseline and red currant. And several women in the congregation screamed 'Emmanuel' and 'Oh, Jesus' and fell into convulsions. Groans came from the men. Sobs and sighs from the quieter women. And when we came to sing 'Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen', chorus after chorus, the emotion did not seem too

much and expressed something fundamental about the race, its loneliness and suffering. I don't know how many men and women I shook hands with at the end; no one *seemed* to notice that I was the only white person in the church. But I bet they did. — *New Statesman*, August 16, 1963.

### **Why a University?**

The justification for a university is that it preserves the connection between knowledge and the zest for life, by uniting the young and the old in the imaginative consideration of learning. The university imparts information, but it imparts it imaginatively. At least, this is the function which it should perform for society. A university which fails in this respect has no reason for existence. — *Alfred North Whitehead*.