Lafcadio Hearn's pursuit of African - American culture in Cincinnati

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ABSTRACT

During Lafcadio Hearn's eight years in Cincinnati, he delved deeply into the culture and everyday lives of the African-Americans living in the city in the decade after the Civil War. He frequented the bars and dance halls patronized by them and wrote vivid newspaper stories free of racism about their singing, dancing, and impoverished lives. Many of the blacks were former slaves who had been liberated by the Union's victory or had escaped before the war and had been ushered to freedom by the Underground Railroad. Bordering the slave state of Kentucky, Cincinnati had been an important station in that network. Hearn collected the lyrics of dozens of songs he heard in African-American entertainment venues and from black dockworkers along the riverfront levee. These stories about African-Americans contained some of Hearn's best writing during this early stage in his career. His Cincinnati period marked the beginning of his lifelong interest in exploring different ethnic cultures, foreshadowing some of his writing in New Orleans, Martinique and Japan.

Key words: *Cincinnati, African-Americans, Underground Railroad, Cincinnati Enquirer, Cincinnati Commercial.*

Before arriving in Cincinnati between late 1869 to early 1870, 19-year-old Greek-Irish immigrant Lafcadio Hearn had limited exposure to non-white culture. He had spent most of his life in Dublin and the previous year in London. In both cities, the black population was miniscule. Cincinnati, an important station in the Underground Railroad before the Civil War and one of the country's largest inland cities, had the sixth largest African-American population among the nation's cities.

Hearn's intense curiosity and his sympathy for society's outcasts caused him to interact with and write about African-Americans. Some of Hearn's best stories when he wrote for two of the city's daily newspapers, the *Cincinnati Enquirer* and the *Cincinnati Commercial,* concerned the lives and culture of the area's black residents. He worked for the *Enquirer* from 1872 to 1875, when he was fired for marrying a black woman, and for the *Commercial* from 1875 to 1877, when he moved to New Orleans.

Hearn wrote many memorable personality portraits of the black denizens of Bucktown, an area east of downtown, east of Broadway between Sixth and Seventh streets and the nearby Sausage and Rat Rows along what was then Front Street at the riverfront levee. Although he sometimes lapsed into racial stereotyping, Hearn's portrayal of blacks generally transcended the racist attitudes of that era. He neither romanticized nor denigrated them. He generally depicted his African-American subjects as individuals with virtues and flaws, trying to survive in difficult living conditions by legitimate and sometimes illegitimate means.

There was Dolly, an illiterate but proud woman who resorted to prostitution to raise bail for her jailed boyfriend and doted on a little boy who had been adopted by a neighbor; Henry "Ol' Man" Pickett, a strong-willed but kindly tavern-keeper and former slave who often fed and sheltered people who might otherwise have starved or died from exposure to the

harsh winter weather; Auntie Porter, who, throughout her long life, cared for and raised babies abandoned by their mothers; and Jot, a voodoo man who lived in a dark basement apartment where his clients came to buy spells for snaring lovers or avenging enemies and to pay for charms guarding them against danger and for talismans warding off evil spirits.

Hearn also introduced his readers to Francis A. Boyd, a former Cincinnati African-American teacher who had written a play set in the ancient city of Babylon. Boyd gave Hearn the manuscript of his play so that he could review it in the *Cincinnati Commercial*. Hearn's review was as much an admiring portrait of Boyd's difficult and remarkable life as a perceptive critique of his play.

Born in 1842, Boyd grew up as a free black in Lexington, Ky., where there were no schools for black children. His mother taught him, and he read on his own, learning Greek, Latin, French and other languages. During the Civil War, he served in the Union army under Gen. Benjamin F. Butler. After the war, he opened a school for black children in Westchester, Ky., before moving to Mount Sterling, Ky. A white mob attacked his school in Mount Sterling, and Boyd barely escaped with his life. He later returned to teach there and was viciously assaulted by a white man. Boyd taught in other places in Ohio and in the South before sickness caused him to give up teaching. He wrote a book, "Columbiana: or, The North Star," (Steam Job and Book Printing House of G. Hand, Chicago, 1870). After two years of working on the railroad, he settled in Cincinnati. Unfortunately, Boyd's play that he showed Hearn was never performed. He died at the age of 32 shortly after Hearn's story about him was published.

Having been abandoned by his parents as a boy, having been blinded in one eye and disfigured by an accident as a teenager, and having arrived in America as a foreigner with no friends or family, Hearn understood to some extent the anger, fear and sorrow African-Americans experienced as a result of racial oppression.

Hearn perceived that some of their joy and tenderness as well as their anger, fear and sorrow found powerful expression in their music. As a newspaper reporter working the night police beat, he became familiar with the areas where the riverfront's black roustabouts and their wives and mistresses lived and worked. Roustabout was a term used to refer to stevedores, longshoremen and other dock workers. Cincinnati's riverfront levee and Bucktown contained many bars and dance halls where white people seldom ventured. To the accompaniment of banjos, fiddles and tambourines, the patrons of these often-dingy venues sang songs they learned working on the river or during their years as slaves. They rhythmically slapped their thighs (known as "patting juba") and pounded their feet on the wooden or earthen floors as they swayed, shimmied, whirled and jigged until the early morning hours.

Hearn, one of the few whites who was welcome in those places, appreciated the artistry of this music and wrote down the lyrics of many of the roustabouts' songs. With pen and notebook in hand, he would approach certain roustabouts and ask them to sing several river songs so that he could write down the words. Occasionally, he would induce their cooperation by giving them cigars or drinks. Hearn's friend, Henry Krehbiel, then the music critic for the *Cincinnati Gazette* daily newspaper, sometimes accompanied Hearn to Bucktown and the levee and would notate the music for some of the songs they heard. Hearn fervently believed this music was as worthy of preservation as the classical and popular music being heard at the fancier venues uptown.

Writing down these songs' lyrics in black dialect and publishing them in some of his newspaper stories, Hearn served the valuable role of folklorist. One of the most popular songs among the roustabouts was called "Limber Jim" or "Shiloh." It had so many lyrics that it took 20 minutes to sing the whole song. The only person in Cincinnati who knew all the lyrics was a black laborer who lived in Bucktown and whose mastery of the song earned him the nickname Limber Jim. At Hearn's request, Limber Jim sang all the verses for him one night. Hearn jotted down the verses and included some of the less risqué ones in an Oct. 1, 1876, *Cincinnati Commercial* newspaper story.

Hearn discovered that many of the black singers who performed in the dance halls and bars along the Ohio River levee and in Bucktown could sing Irish songs in a convincing Irish brogue. In that same story, Hearn described how one Cincinnati police officer of Irish descent listened appreciatively as a black man named Jim Delaney sang an Irish ditty known as "The Hat Me Father Wore." Although Delaney "had little or no Irish blood in his veins," Hearn writes, he would "certainly make a reputation for Irish specialties in a minstrel troupe; his mimicry of the Irish character is absolutely perfect, and he possesses a voice of great flexibility, depth and volume."

In a story published in the *Cincinnati Commercial* on March 17, 1876, Hearn delineates the raw power and beauty of the roustabouts' songs and dances. Bucktown's most popular dance-house occupied two stories of Kirk's building on the southeast corner of Culvert and Sixth streets. In concrete, precise prose, Hearn presents the raucous, high-spirited atmosphere of the ballroom:

"With its unplastered and windowless limestone walls; sanded floor; ruined ceiling; half plank, half cracked plaster; a dingy black counter in one corner, and rude benches ranged along the walls, this dancing-room presented rather an outlandish aspect when we visited it. At the corner of the room opposite 'the bar,' a long bench was placed, with its face to the wall; and upon the back this bench, with their feet inwardly reclining upon the seat, sat the musicians…

"The dancers were in sooth a motley crew; the neat dresses of the girls strongly contrasting with the rags of the poorer roustabouts, some of whom were clad only in shirt, pants and shocking hats. Several wickedly handsome women were smoking stogies...The best performer on the floor was a stumpy little roustabout named Jem Scott, who is a marvelous jig-dancer, and can waltz with a tumbler full of water on his head without spilling a drop...The musicians struck up that weird, wild, lively air, known perhaps to many of our readers as the 'Devil's Dream'… The dancers danced a double quadrille, at first, silently and rapidly; but warming with the wild spirit of the music, leaped and shouted, swinging each other off the floor, and keeping time with a precision which shook the building in time to the music. The women, we noticed, almost invariably embraced the men about the neck in swinging, the men clasping them about the waist. Sometimes the men advancing leaped and crossed legs with a double shuffle, and with almost sightless rapidity. Then the music changed to an old Virginia reel, and the dancing changing likewise, presented the most grotesque spectacle imaginable. The dancing became wild; men patted juba and shouted, the negro women danced with the most fantastic grace, their bodies describing almost incredible curves forward and backward; limbs intertwined rapidly in a wrestle with each other and the music; the room presented a tide of swaying bodies and tossing arms, and flying hair."

In these stories, Hearn provides a penetrating depiction of blacks confronting the challenges of surviving in American society soon after the Civil War and of trying to acclimate from rural life to urban life. Some of Hearn's newspaper colleagues, friends and readers were puzzled by his fascination with African-Americans and considered it a sign of moral weakness. But others admired his desire to study with empathy and insight people of a different race and background.

Cincinnati was just as bitterly divided on the issue of race after the Civil War as it had been before the war. The city had a strong contingent of abolitionists and played a key role in guiding thousands of slaves to freedom through the Underground Railroad. Lane Seminary in Cincinnati neighborhood of Walnut Hills became a center of abolitionist thought after it hosted in 1834 a series of debates about slavery that drew national attention. One of those who listened closely to those debates was young Harriet Beecher, the daughter of the seminary's president, Lyman Beecher. Her contact with freed and fugitive slaves in Cincinnati inspired her later (under her married name of Harriet Beecher Stowe) to write *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the blockbuster 1852 novel credited with exposing the evils of slavery to the broader American public.

But there also were powerful pro-slavery and anti-black forces in Cincinnati and throughout Ohio. Ohio narrowly avoided entering the Union as a slave state. By only one vote, the Ohio House of Representatives approved in 1802 a proposed article banning slavery for Ohio's constitution. After the Civil War, many white Cincinnatians opposed granting black people their full civil rights. They didn't want them to be permitted to vote and they didn't want them in their schools, churches or taverns. Hearn knew he risked upsetting some of his readers by writing these stories about African-Americans, but he felt a moral and journalistic obligation to do it.

In an unpublished essay written in 1907 about Hearn, his friend Joseph S. Tunison tried to explain Hearn's attraction to blacks who lived in Cincinnati's riverfront area:

"The men and women of the Levee were strong and Hearn worshipped strength; they were as laughter-loving as Aphrodite, and Hearn loved laughter though he indulged so little in it himself; they were nature-folk, too, or at least they continually suggested in word and manner and mood and life of those African ancestors from whom they were removed by an interval of only two or three generations, and Hearn was looking for something as different as possible from the ways of English, French, and Americans which gave no stimulus to his imagination. He wrote many attractive essays on the traits of his dark friends. People read them and were entranced by them without understanding them or the author."

One Saturday morning just before sunrise in 1876, two police officers heard cries for help and pulled a drunken black man from the Ohio River at the foot of Broadway. They brought him, dripping wet but emerging from his alcoholic stupor, to the Hammond Street police station. When the man identified himself as Albert Jones, the police sergeant said, "Albert Jones! That man can imitate the whistle of any boat on the Ohio or Mississippi River."

Delighted to be recognized for his singular talent, Jones cupped his hands around his mouth and proceeded to imitate the whistles of seven steamboats, which he named, and countless towboats. Hearn witnessed this on one of his nightly police rounds. It inspired him to write a story of great charm and lyrical beauty about Cincinnati riverfront life. The story appeared in the *Cincinnati Commercial* on June 27, 1876.

He writes: “All along the Rows there indeed dwell many who know by heart the whistle of every boat on the Ohio; dusky women, whose ears have been trained by rough but strong affection, as well as old stevedores who have lived by the shore from infancy, and wonderingly watched in their slave childhood the great white vessels panting on the river’s breast. But Albert Jones offers the typical exhibition of this peculiar faculty. The steamboats seem to his rudely poetic fancy vast sentient beings, as the bells of Notre Dame to the imagination of Quasimodo, and their voices come to his ear as mighty living cries, when they call to each other across the purple gloom of the summer night -- shouting cheery welcomes in sweetly-deep thunder-tones, or shrieking long, wild warning…Possibly to him the Song of Steam is the sweetest of all musical sounds, only as a great tone-record of roustabout memories -- each boat whistle, deep or shrill or mellow, recalling some past pleasure or pain in the history of a life spent along the broad highway of brown water flowing to the Crescent City of the South. Each prolonged tone awakes to fresh life some little half-forgotten chapter in the simple history of this Child of the Levee -- some noisy but harmless night revel, some broil, some old love story, some dark story of steamboat disaster, a vessel in flames, a swim for life. Probably the first sound which startled his ears in babyhood was the voice of a steamboat passing by his birth place; and possibly the same voice may serve for his requiem some night when patrolmen do not happen to hear a sudden splash in the dark river. We left him slumbering in his wet and muddy rags, dreaming, perchance, fantastic dreams of a strange craft that never whistles, and is without name -- a vessel gliding noiselessly by unfamiliar banks to a weird port where objects cast no shadows, and even dreams are dead.”

Anxious to live in a warmer climate, Hearn left Cincinnati for New Orleans in October 1877. He moved from there to Martinique in 1887 and in 1890 went to Japan, where he gained his greatest literary fame.

But his Cincinnati writings about African-Americans, the product of a young man who was learning his craft, stand out for their high literary quality and for their humanity. He opened his mind and heart to a people many in society shunned and scorned. He recognized their value and beauty. They repaid him by inspiring some of his best writing of that era and by teaching him about facing a harsh world with courage and perseverance.

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