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Teaching at Howard University: Part II

by John Lovell, Jr
—Professor of English, College of Liberal Arts, Howard University
—Fulbright Lecturer, Osaka University of Foreign Studies, 1960-1961

The large percentage of foreign students and Howard’s unique interest in foreign students make the University a showplace for visitors coming to Washington. In the Japan Times for Monday, December 12, 1960, Max Lerner, a distinguished American social scientist, author, and columnist, and a professor at Brandeis University, reports a recent visit of four days at Howard University. Mr. Lerner was invited to do the Sidney Hillman Series of Lectures, under the auspices of the Social Science Division of the University. He underlines the remarkable fact that 800 of the 5,000 students at Howard come from abroad. He says he had personal talks with many students from Africa and India. It might be added that quite a few others come from the Middle East and the Far East, including Japan.

Mr. Lerner elaborates the concern he found at Howard for “the frame of world forces within which the new nations of Africa and Asia have emerged into independence.” He might have mentioned that six years ago the University held a forum on the future of non-self-governing countries, including discussion—led by native speakers—of several that have recently gained their independence; or that the University operates a full-fledged program of African Studies, including formal courses in African languages which are attended by (among others) governmental specialists; or that the University recently sent one of its experts in history to prepare himself in Asian studies through a special fellowship at Harvard University, and will this summer send one of its experts in Humanities to India on a Fulbright summer seminar—looking toward an intensification of its program in Asian studies. This year, the Howard administration, headed by a new president, Dr. James M. Nabrit, created an office called “Adviser to..."
Foreign Students’ in line with this whole significant educational policy.

Since the previous article discussed at some length the matter of the location of the University in the city of Washington and the residential locations of faculty members, it is desirable to set the record straight on these revelatory points. One statement—that for fifteen blocks all around Howard University stretches a Negro slum—is most remarkable in the light of the most obvious geographical facts. Directly to the east of the University is a large municipal reservoir, and immediately beyond the reservoir is a large private hospital center and immediately beyond that the spacious campus of the Catholic University of America. The reservoir is immortalized in the University hymn which has a line that goes, “Far above the lake so blue. . . .” This eliminates the east entirely. To the immediate south of the University are another hospital, the ball park of the Washington Baseball Association, an elementary public school, and a housing development originally built and supervised by the federal and district authorities. To the immediate west is a large junior high school with an adjoining recreational center, equipped (among other modern facilities) with swimming pool, tennis courts, and other athletic fields. To the north and west of the University are residential areas, it is true, but they are interspersed with heavy trading districts; and where the residences predominate, they are far from slum areas. In fact, many middle-class people, whose families have lived in Washington for generations, have spent their life savings building and maintaining these homes. Considering the clear definition of slums in large cities all over the world, one would have great difficulty in so classifying the residences and apartment buildings in question.

If the full force of the description is accepted, however, namely fifteen full blocks in every direction, the statement becomes more than remarkable. The University is located, centrally, on Sixth Street, Northwest. If one were to take the Administration Building as the center and swing a circle with a radius of 15 blocks, one would draw in many of Washington’s finest homes, shops, churches, hotels, and apartments, for instance, those on 16th Street, Northwest (a quite fashionable residential area), and those on Massachusetts and Connecticut Avenues, not to mention a great slice of downtown Washington. One would have to include many embassies and chanceries, including the British, French, Indian, Russian, and Japanese embassies and chanceries.

This is not to deny that there are slums in Washington and that many of the residents of these slums are Negroes. The Government of the District of Columbia is hard at work eliminating blighted areas and establishing proper residences for people who have come to Washington because they were elsewhere under-

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privileged and lacked opportunities for their own growth and for the planning of the lives of their children. But it is to deny that slums play any conceivable part in influencing the educational efficiency or the social life of Howard University. If Howard University were surrounded by slum areas, it would doubtless be no different from a number of large and highly respected educational institutions in the United States that are not affected by their immediate geographical environment. Howard University, however, simply happens not to be so surrounded.

Two notorious mis-statements of fact appear in the article with regard to the Howard faculty: the first is that non-Negro faculty members are restricted as to residence because of teaching at a Negro college; the second is that the only white American on the faculty was a young dance instructor. Since the second is the more flagrant error, it will be considered first. I have just looked through the catalogue of the College of Liberal Arts which lists the members of the faculty during Miss Kimura’s period of residence (her name is listed). First, I have noted that 113 of them are holders of the doctor’s degree. Second, I have counted more than 30 white Americans on the faculty of that one college alone. To count the faculty members of the other nine colleges would greatly augment both lists. But the significant point here is not how many whites or blacks or yellows or browns occupy chairs of instruction on the various faculties. The significant point is that, in accordance with the clear dictates of the founders, the University in choosing its faculty members and in its policies of advancement and promotion pays little attention to the color of the skin; it chooses the best people it can get for the dedicated jobs. Very recently, a white department head stepped down from administration because he had reached technical retirement age, although he was being retained on the staff by trustee vote; a Negro colleague, whom he had recommended, became head of the department, and the former head reassumed his rank as full professor only.

As to the restrictions on residence upon white or other non-Negro faculty members because they teach in a Negro college, once more the records do not uphold the previous writer’s impressions. If one is acquainted with the residential areas of the District of Columbia, especially with those few districts which can be called exclusive in a racial sense, one need only look at the current Personnel Directory, which lists all Howard employees according to position, and which gives residential and office addresses and telephone numbers. One would see that every exclusive area is represented, even Bethesda-Chevy Chase, unquestionably the most exclusive, and Georgetown, where the new President of the United States lived for a long time, and others across the District line in Maryland and Virginia. The Japanese reader should be reminded that more than 10 years ago, the United States Supreme Court ruled out enforcement of restrictive racial covenants. It is quite true that covenants against certain races and certain foreign-born people are still in existence and are still observed, despite the fact that they are not recognized in the courts; but their existence has not prevented
the teachers at Howard from living all over the restricted areas. Even one of the Negro teachers lives in Chevy Chase! The only sympathetic conclusion one can make is that it is a pity that Miss Kimura did not have knowledgeable advisers when she sincerely sought a suitable place to live in Washington.

Perhaps the most vulnerable parts of the previous article deal with the question of the behavior of the Negro students and the stated and implied conclusions that this behavior is based upon racial characteristics. Certainly there has been sufficient scientific study and investigation over the years to make so unscientific a view as this shocking to the educated eye and ear. The writer of the article should not need to be told that people do not behave boisterously because they are members of a given race, but for other well-established reasons.

And it is just as unfair for her to draw general conclusions about the behavior of a race—if indeed there be a Negro race—on the basis of the alleged boisterous conduct of a handful of people on a bus who accidentally belong to that race as it would be for a foreigner in Japan to condemn all Japanese nationals because some Japanese push vigorously and desperately against their neighbors—apparently caring little for life and limb—to get into electric trains, even when there are seats for everybody. I put it all down to exuberance and the irresistible spirit of competition in some people. As for sending the Negroes back to Africa, this suggestion is ridiculous in the light of the fact that almost none of the present crop of American Negroes came from Africa, and furthermore, that the Constitution of the United States clearly declares (Article XIV, Section 1):

“...All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside.”

That the writer of the article had such thoughts in a fit of anger or
The Power to Write Simple, Lucid and Compelling English

By Masamichi Kano

Mr. T. Okamura has written to me a letter which is printed below in part:

"Now I would like to have your opinion on translation and literary style of English. Commenting in the June 1960 issue on the Asahi Evening News' translation of the Asahi's editorial, you criticized bitterly Japanese-English translation as no good and attractive by any means from your standpoint of true English style, even if the original Japanese is excellent like the Asahi's editorial. What do you really mean by this? I see in this paragraph something illogical and contradictory to your guiding principle—if it can be so called—which has been mentioned in the magazine. And there you suggest that a full-fledged English writer write such an editorial in the English language paper. In my opinion, even when such a capable man, say, an editor-in-chief of the Asahi who supposedly has the sufficient power to write English writes the editorial in English, the outcome is not so much different. In other words, he is supposed to produce no better editorial than the translation, because it is quite natural that he should write in accordance with the flow of his own ideas. Or do you set no value on English written by a Japanese, unless he was born and brought up in America or England and naturally has a complete knowledge of both English and Japanese?

"Once you got into the details of the technical method and demonstrated to us how to increase our vocabulary in our daily reading. At that time I was deeply impressed by your eagerness, and thought that you, too, acquired English just in the same way I have been and am following. (Please understand my straightforwardness). Or do you contend that English-speaking people's way of thinking or expressing thought is intrinsically different from that of Japanese-speaking people, and that they have nothing common despite the fact that both are human beings? People act on human psychology whatever their languages may be. This can be said about English translation of the Asahi's editorial by an expert who rewrites Japanese edi-