

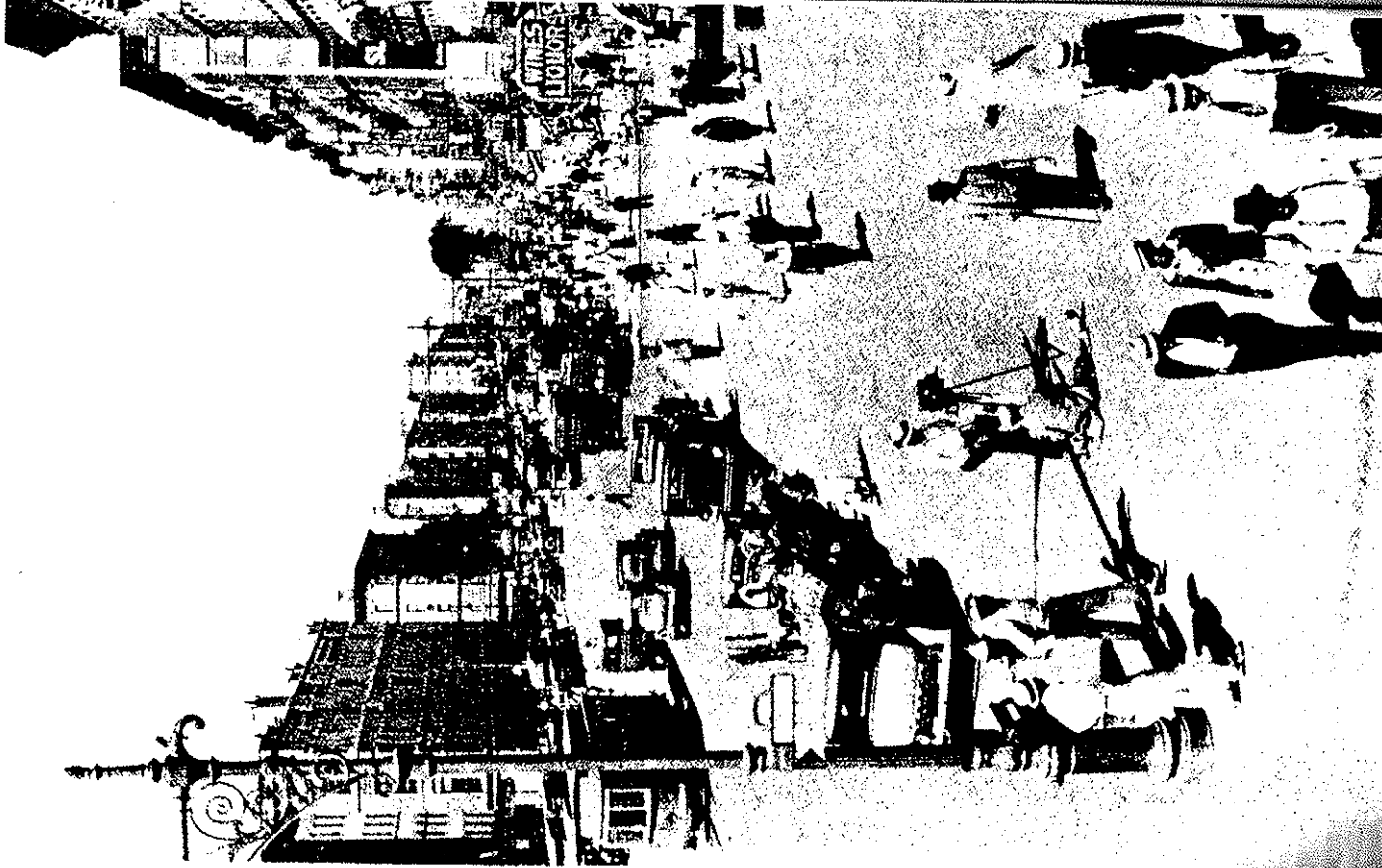
When Harlem Was in Vogue

by

David Levering Lewis



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To my parents

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It's Dead Now

By summer 1932, F. Scott Fitzgerald, golden boy of the Lost Generation, had discovered the writings of Karl Marx and was predicting that "to bring on the revolution, it may be necessary to work inside the Communist party." Two years before, the jovial columnist Heywood Broun (his campaign managed by Alexander Woollcott) had unsuccessfully run for Congress on the Socialist party ticket; since then, leftist politics—leftist political rhetoric, certainly—had made considerable progress in New York literary circles. Malcolm Cowley would soon speak for many of the same white writers who had befriended the Renaissance in its infancy—Anderson, Dos Passos, Dreiser, Mumford, Steffens—when he insisted that the revolutionary movement "can and will do more for writers than the writers can do for the revolutionary movement." Countee Cullen thought so, too, and he surprised Harlem with a new-found political seriousness, declaring, "The Communist party alone is working to educate and organize the classes dispossessed by the present system." The poet laureate of Negro America, joined by Langston Hughes, formally endorsed the Communist party candidacy of William Z. Foster and James W. Ford (the first Afro-American to run for the vice presidency of the United States).

Richetta Randolph, now Walter White's overworked secretary, was certainly not going to vote the Communist ticket in 1932. But with factories padlocked, "Hoovervilles" ringing northeastern urban centers, and gaunt figures stalking the land like flagellants before a medieval plague, she now knew that it was senselessly optimistic to expect a policy of national recovery from the Republican party and Wall Street. The budget of her own organization, sixty thousand dollars in 1930, would slide to half that by 1934. *Opportunity* magazine was

expected to fold by the end of 1932 and the fate of *The Crisis* was as bleak. "Yes," Richetta Randolph wrote to James Weldon Johnson, "the 'depression' has us; and no matter how one tries to ignore it it won't be downed." The economic meaning of the word was as novel as the sounds of the coming stampede of Afro-America to the Democratic party. At the beginning of the year, sociologist E. Franklin Frazier's wife, Marie, had amused Cullen with her maid's reaction to the "depression": "She says, 'Mrs. Frazier, everybody is talking about the depression, de depression. I don't know nuthin' 'bout no depression. I ain't seen nuthin' but hard times all my life.'" That winter, though, "depression" entirely lost its novelty and Fisk faculty wives lost much of their sense of humor.

Harlem, too, was becoming serious. The Lincoln Theatre had already closed, reopening, with obvious symbolic significance, as Mount Moriah Baptist Church. The majestic Alhambra folded a few weeks after the national elections. Nineteen thirty-two was a lethal year for institutions bound up with the manic glamor of the Jazz Age. Texas Guinan and Flo Ziegfeld died broke. John Gilbert, thought to have a voice too high for the talkies, committed suicide. And Clara Bow went to a sanitarium. Julius Rosenwald, representing the positive side of the bold enterprise of that age, also died. When the *Tattler* presented its readers with a "Tattler Platform," a six-point political program the editors hoped to see adopted by the Democratic party, it was unmistakably clear that Dark Tower days were over. The *Tattler* wanted repeal of the Eighteenth Amendment; a Negro congressman from Harlem and a Negro magistrate for the Washington Heights court of Manhattan; employment of Negro clerks and workers in all businesses in Negro communities; better living conditions and normal rents; fair racial hiring and promotion in public utilities corporations; and a federal department of education. Hard times could even bring about solidarity with the West Indian community; early that same year, *Tattler* added a regular section on economics and politics in the Caribbean.

"Go home and turn Lincoln's picture to the wall," exhorted the owner-editor of the Pittsburgh *Courier*, once a rock-ribbed Republican. "The debt has been paid in full." They had done so, and now most of the men and women who had made the Harlem Renaissance cling to the hope that the racial policies of the new administration would be as fair as the encouraging words of Franklin Roosevelt before his inauguration. Walter White shared the uplift of the new president's

inaugural address with millions of humble folk who had voted against the party of Lincoln for the first time. Alain Locke wrote Charlotte Mason of the thrill of hearing FDR "speak some of your thoughts," for the husband of one of her ladies-in-waiting, Francis Biddle, was one of the president's wealthy backers and advisers. There were a few paltry gestures suggesting better rewards to come, with the appointment of a federal judgeship (Virgin Islands) and some forty minor federal positions for "eminent Negroes." Some were reassured by the special closeness of the president's wife and the Afro-American college president, Mary McLeod Bethune, eventually designated "special advisor for minority affairs." But after the intoxication of the "Hundred Days," it was clear enough that the New Deal intended to bypass the Afro-American.

Relief and public works programs under the National Industrial Recovery Act widely discriminated against Afro-Americans, and, in the South, when exclusion was not complete, there were inequalities in pay. When the names of Charles Johnson and Asa Randolph were forwarded to Washington for appointment to the board of the National Recovery Administration (NRA), they were rejected. The vast Tennessee Valley Authority project disbursed but a nominal portion of taxpayers' money to Afro-American labor. It seemed self-evident to NAACP board member Oswald Garrison Villard that the Afro-American worker should not even expect that his lot would be improved until the New Deal "raised the standard of work among the whites." Meanwhile, the lynching rate began to rise again, with twenty-eight lynchings by the end of 1933. As they had in 1919, the NAACP's allies on Capitol Hill introduced antilynching legislation, and civil rights leaders made it clear to the president that, on this moral issue, they expected the support of the White House. But southerners controlled the committees in Congress. One "warm spring Sunday in 1935," FDR remorsefully confided the realpolitik about lynching and jobs and elementary racial justice to White. If he supported the antilynching bill, "they will block every bill I ask Congress to pass to keep America from collapsing. I just can't take that risk." A few of the younger intellectuals already understood. They saw that as far as Afro-America was concerned, Roosevelt's New Deal meant as little as Wilson's New Freedom of 1912; there was only the relative absence of presidential Negrophobia and greater presence of economic misery now.

It seemed inevitable that leftist ideals would be earnestly studied by the younger Afro-American intellectuals—that they would eventually

collaborate with one or another mode of Marxism. How could a race victimized as much by the Depression's putative cures as by its causes lose anything through social revolution? E. Franklin Frazier had tried to solve that puzzle in "*La Bourgeoise noire*," a 1928 article that would be the basis for his classic book on Afro-American elites. He concluded that for a race whose ladies were wont to remark that "only an educated gentleman with culture could be a Pullman porter," the rousing peroration of the Communist *Manifesto* was meaningless. In his forgotten poem "Elderly Race Leaders," Hughes ascribed Talented Tenth conservatism to venality:

Wisdom reduced to the personal equation:

Life is a system of half-truths and lies,

Opportunistic, convenient evasion

Elderly,

Famous,

Very well-paid,

They clutch at the egg

Their master's

Goose laid:

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There were leaders who were bought, who fully justified Hughes's cynicism. But George Streater, leader of the 1925 Fisk University student strike and recently of the *Crisis* staff, worried much more about leaders whose services to the race's oppressors were available free of charge. The paradox was that, somehow, his unmistakable proletarian status made the Afro-American all the more determined to defy the dialectic of the class struggle. "The Negro is nine-tenths a laborer, or ninety-nine-one-hundredths economically insecure," Streater wrote. "Yet, the sympathies of his intellectuals have been with the few who exploit this world for the good of the few."

In its most pathetic manifestations, the psychological bond between Negro and Nordic notables led Benjamin Brawley to rejoice to James Weldon Johnson that President Hoover had preserved law and order by unleashing the army on Washington's Bonus Marchers. At its most bizarre, it led a towering intellect like Du Bois to publish a tortuously

reasoned *Crisis* essay, "Marxism and the Negro Problem," which might well have been written by someone who had not read the major works of Marx. It was evident that the future of the darker races throughout the world lay with the forces of revolution, but "the black proletariat is not part of the white proletariat," Du Bois contended. Its circumstances and goals were not merely different, they were inimical. Capitalism was brutal, concluded this socialist whose two novels had preached labor solidarity, but, for the Afro-American proletariat, the lowest and almost fatal degree of its suffering comes not from capitalists but from fellow white laborers. It is white labor that deprives the Negro of his right to vote, denies him education, denies him affiliation with trade unions, expels him from decent houses and neighborhoods, and heaps upon him the public insults of open color discrimination.

Perhaps Du Bois's protégé George Streater was right in suggesting that having to please the political nonentities, retired businessmen, and misplaced literary people who comprised the Board of the NAACP "took its toll." Finally, there was the amnesia of James Weldon Johnson, writing *Negro Americans, What Now?* and having to be reminded by Arthur Spingarn that no modern political breviary could ignore even the mention of communism. Heeding Spingarn and revising his manuscript to include a trenchant discussion of communism, Johnson concluded that "the wholesale allegiance of the Negro to Communistic revolution would be second in futility only to his individual resort to physical force."

Wholesale allegiance and outright violence were out of the question. Out of its national membership of perhaps fifteen thousand, there were probably never more than two hundred Afro-Americans enrolled in the Communist party of the U.S.A. The potential sympathy of the masses of Afro-Americans and vocal support by a few of their leading artists and writers were more likely concerns. They concerned Joel Spingarn greatly. Spingarn was an economic liberal who hated communism, but as chairman of the board and president of the NAACP he knew that the organization was losing the younger intellectuals, and that to remain preeminent in civil rights the NAACP had to broaden its base. But his and Du Bois's plan for a second policy conference in August 1932 (like the first one in 1916 at his Troutbeck estate near Amenia, New York) never took place because White and his new assistant, Roy Wilkins, stalled the preparations. Nor were its prospects any better for summer 1933, until Joel Spingarn summarily resigned his

offices that March. When they had joined the Association, there had been a "thrilling programme, revolutionary for its time," Spingarn lamented to Mary White Ovington. "Now we have only cases, no programme, and no hope." And Walter White "ignored or thwarted" him at every turn. Meanwhile, the parlous finances of *The Crisis* had constrained Du Bois himself to accept a professorship at Atlanta University, leaving Streater and Roy Wilkins to run the magazine with his remote guidance. Feuding bitterly with Wilkins, Streater warned James Weldon Johnson and the Spingarns that if White was "allowed to get his hands on *The Crisis* the whole movement may as well fold up."

A national program of literature, litigation, and lynching legislation no longer seemed suited to deal with the problems thrown off by economic chaos. "The dismal decade of the thirties grew more and more dismal," White recorded with annoyance. He found himself "with less and less time for the theater, baseball, parties, writing, or any of the other diversions." The NAACP had not yet regained its balance after the Scottsboro misadventure when another case invited new confrontation with the International Labor Defense Fund, just as the Association's own internal dissensions were rising. Angelo Herndon, an eighteen-year-old Mississippi coal miner, was (in spite of white fears to the contrary) an exception—a militant Afro-American communist. In January 1933, a court in Atlanta, Georgia, found him guilty of inciting insurrection (attempting to organize local labor), a crime punishable under state law by death. In its mercy, the court imposed a sentence of twenty years. The son of one of Atlanta's most prominent families had sped home to volunteer his legal services. Benjamin J. Davis was a graduate of Amherst and Harvard Law. His father, a newspaper publisher, was also Georgia's Republican National Committeeman. Rising to address the court, young Ben Davis heard the presiding judge drawl, "Well, nigger, go ahead and say what you have to say." Herndon's trial was a travesty. As for Davis, "instant joining of the Communist party was the only effective reply" he could think of. Unlike the Scottsboro Boys, Herndon was more than battered flesh; he was a photogenic ideologue. On his behalf, the ILD held Angelo Herndon rallies coast to coast, saturated Afro-American ghettos with propaganda, and ultimately won an acquittal, leaving the NAACP to explain lamely why it had applauded but was not a party to the cause.

In Washington, Alain Locke watched the galloping disarray as it spread to the artists. His trip to Europe the past summer had depressed

him greatly, despite the pleasant surprise of discovering that Josephine Baker and Aaron Douglas truly possessed "genius," and tasting the delights of Bricktop's night club in Place Pigalle. "The younger Negroes here," he wrote wearily to Charlotte Osgood Mason, "they're all about on their last legs." New York was almost as bad. The professor conceded the exception of Richard Bruce Nugent, another "genius," who had written the scenario for the choral ballet "Sahdji" (music by William Grant Still), first performed in the summer of 1932 at the Eastman School of Music. But Cullen was being spoiled by praise of his mediocre novel. Hughes was "burnt out and trading on the past." He "might as well give up" on Arthur Fauset, Locke's gifted intimate who had taken a wife. Roland Hayes and Paul Robeson seemed determined to prostitute their art. Somehow, though, the race would come through, Locke promised Mason. How and when he could not now see, "but do let us hold together the silent hope of the future." "Eventually," his voices told him, "there must be true Negroes—really free Negroes." But he was certain they would not be communists, and, as for Hughes, Louise Thompson, the young Californian Loren Miller, and the others posing as communists, Locke dismissed their performance as a "melodramatic burning of broken bridges—to disguise the fact that they were already broken before." Zora Hurston had already written Mason about the root of the problem, sounding a wide-eyed warning: "Godmother, as I see it, unless some of the young Negroes return to their gods, we are lost."

In 1919, the Harlem Renaissance had sprung to life with the measured tread of New Negroes in uniform returning from the World War. Its last days were symbolically so appropriate and the characters who filled them so well cast that what transpired in mid-June of 1932 might well have been a Wallace Thurman film scenario rather than reality. On June 14, at Brooklyn Pier, twenty young Afro-Americans began boarding the German ship *Europa* for the first leg of their trip to the Soviet Union. The group leader, Louise Thompson (soon known as "Madame Moscow"), stayed topside until late that evening, marking off arrivals—Mat Crawford, a friend from Berkeley; Taylor Gordon, the Van Vechten singing favorite; Allen MacKenzie, the sole acknowledged Communist party member; Henry Moon and Ted Poston, journalists; Wayland Rudd, professional actor; Homer Smith, a University of Minnesota journalism graduate turned postal clerk; Mollie Lewis, pharmacist; and Dorothy West, the Boston poet—until all but two

were accounted for and assigned berths in third class. Then came the frantic last-minute arrival of Hughes and Loren Miller who had driven six days nonstop from the West Coast. With his typewriter and big box of Louis Armstrong, Bessie Smith, Duke Ellington, and Ethel Waters records (and the soap and toilet paper Lincoln Steffens had warned him to take along), Hughes was the last passenger up the gangplank on June 15. Expenses for the trip were being paid by Meschabpom Film Corporation of Moscow, which had sent an invitation through James Ford, the CPUSA's Afro-American candidate for vice-president. A sponsoring committee made up of Malcolm Cowley, W. A. Domingo, Rose McClendon, Will Vodery, and several more handled publicity. The Russians intended to make a film about "the exploitation of the Negro in America from the days of slavery to the present," to be called *Black and White* and set in Birmingham, Alabama. Only two of Thompson's group knew much about acting, but no one at Meschabpom knew anything at all about racial discrimination in the American South.

At the same time, shortly before he was to sail to Europe with a young Howard colleague, Ralph Bunche, Alain Locke discovered to his dismay that he had been booked on the same ship carrying the Russian film group. Locke and Bunche were quartered in first class. On the second day at sea, urged along by "waves of curiosity," Locke descended, fully expecting to find the ship's third class awash with Marxist revivalism. Leonard Hill and Henry Moon, former Howard students, spoke darkly about Thompson and Hughes and their intention—along with MacKenzie and Mildred Jones—to stay in Russia after the film was finished. Descending again the following day, Locke introduced the group to Ralph Bunche, the twenty-eight-year-old UCLA Phi Beta Kappa political scientist and Harvard doctoral candidate. Bunche and Hughes were ceremonially affable under Locke's mischievous eye. Later, Bunche wagered that "most of that crowd don't even know what communism is." Locke smugly noted in his daily report to Mason that by Sunday, June 18, many of the twenty-two were in open rebellion against Hughes and Thompson.

Professors Locke and Bunche left the film cast at Bremerhaven. On June 20, after a tragicomedy of missing visas and botched train schedules, the twenty-two arrived at Moscow's Nikolayevsky Station and were riotously welcomed by the city's Afro-American expatriate community. The Soviet citizens' welcome was even more frenzied (although some grumbled that Hughes, Miller, Thompson, and most of

the others were not "genuine Negroes," presumably because they were not dark enough). The group was housed in the Grand Hotel. In the midst of a famine, they were served caviar and sturgeon and rivers of vodka; and when they asked, instead, for ham, eggs, and even grits, the Russian hosts somehow obliged. Russian women found the men magnificent and their dancing intoxicating. Russian men found the women intoxicating and their dancing magnificent. Konstantin Ousmansky, future ambassador to the United States, kept Mildred Jones constantly at his side. Foreign Commissar Maxim Litvinov, Ousmansky's superior, and his English wife opened their home to Hughes, Miller, and Thompson.

Meshrabpom paid each of the twenty-two actors four hundred rubles monthly—"more money to spend than we had ever had in our young lives," Thompson wrote. "Most of it was spent in having a good time—winning, dancing, and dining at the Hotel Metropol, parties, and of course there was always the theatre." There was also the legendary Emma Harris, whom Hughes called "The Mammy of Moscow," a sixty-year-old Afro-American actress from Kentucky who had been the mistress of a nobleman before the Revolution and who still managed to live in the grand manner and to preside over elaborate parties. Even Stalin was believed to have heard Emma's boast that if she could be his cook "she'd put enough poison in his first meal to kill a mule." Emma hated communism but she loathed the world of Scottsboro more, although she attended the numerous Moscow rallies for the nine Alabama boys in company with the *Black and White* twenty-two, a few of whom, said Dorothy West, learned the details of the case from the Russians on whose backs they were invariably hoisted.

Long after the first pleasure and excitement of the Russian experience had worn off, Henry Moon's *Nation* article conveyed its residual fascination: He had never "felt more at home among a people than among the Russians" who had taught him that the roots of racism "are essentially economic. Race prejudice cannot flourish when its roots are destroyed." But for Hughes, the Soviet Union meant a great deal more than color-blind dances at the Metropol and being lionized in Moscow's Park of Rest and Culture. His march leftward had been signalled by a steady output in *The Negro Worker*, *New Masses*, and *Negro Liberator*, such as the one-act play "Scottsboro, Limited," and the poem "The Same." His poem "A New Song" appeared a few months after the *Europa* sailed—"I speak in the name of the black millions / Awakening to Communism. / Let all others keep silent a moment." Then, in

December, *The Negro Worker* published his unprecedented "Goodbye, Christ," the first avowedly atheistic poetic statement by an Afro-American. James Weldon Johnson, who was almost certainly an atheist, had delighted the worldly and moved the common folk of the race with *God's Trombones*. Cullen's voluble paganism always danced about on the hot coals of Puritan guilt. Nearly twenty years had gone by since Hughes had been ashamed of not finding the holy spirit beside his grandmother in a Lawrence, Kansas, revival meeting. "Goodbye, Christ" brought the news that, even for the deeply religious Afro-American, there was no longer a God to bring shame:

Listen, Christ,

You did alright in your day, I reckon—

But that day's gone now.

They ghosted you up a swell story, too,

Called it Bible—

But it's dead now

Goodbye Jesus Lord God Jehova,

Beat it on away from here now.

Make way for a new guy with no religion at all—

A real guy named

Marx Communist Lenin Peasant Stalin Worker Me—

Black and White was never filmed. The twenty-two could not act and most were unable to carry a tune. The gifted German director was hamstrung by an ideologically correct script so intractably awful as to defeat Hughes's editorial surgery. But it was international politics that in the end killed the movie. The United States was about to grant diplomatic recognition to the Soviet Union; on August 11, 1932, the *Paris Herald-Tribune* announced cancellation of *Black and White*. "Comrades, we've been screwed," journalist Ted Poston bellowed as the unsuspecting cast relaxed in Odessa. "And they didn't even have the courtesy to tell us." Meshrabpom offered travel fare and expenses to those wanting to leave immediately and a tour of the Soviet South for the others. Much amused, Locke reported to Charlotte Mason from Berlin the disintegration of the group.

The breakup was an ideograph of Afro-American politics in the thirties. As the old entente cordiale of Jewish notables, Negrotarian publishers, and civil rights grandees fell apart, more artists and intellectuals would turn, with more or less enthusiasm, to communism.

Many would find their high hopes poisoned by political exploitation, arrant racism, and intellectual tyranny often far surpassing that of their erstwhile capitalist patrons. Others—the overwhelming majority—controlled their disillusionment and tried to find a place in the new order. For artists and writers, this often meant a place with a patron better endowed than Casper Holstein, Boni & Liveright, or even the Rosenwald Fund—the Works Project Administration (WPA) of the United States government. Most of the writers of the next generation—William Attaway, Ralph Ellison, Margaret Walker, Richard Wright, Frank Yerby—and most of the artists—Romare Bearden, Jacob Lawrence, Charles Sebree, Charles White—would pass that way. There were a few who came out of the Harlem Renaissance with enough momentum to succeed on their own, to retain easy access to major publishing houses, and to turn misfortune to advantage. Bontemps and Hughes succeeded. For a time, so did Hurston. McKay and Toomer never stopped trying, but never approached their first triumphs. In any case, when the *Europa* weighed anchor and steamed east, those on board would never return to the Renaissance.

Three never returned at all. Lloyd Patterson the artist, Wayland Rudd the actor, and Homer Smith the postal clerk became Russian citizens of some significance. Hughes stayed on for a time, at last angrily leaving the rump group at a railroad stop deep in Uzbekistan. In a dusty city called Ashkhabad, he met the writer Arthur Koestler, then still a few years away from his apostasy in *Darkness at Noon*. It was a meeting of two singularly different mental cultures. Hughes was very "likeable and easy to get on with," Koestler recalled, "but at the same time one felt an impenetrable, elusive remoteness which warded off all undue familiarity." Koestler, the unsentimental Jewish intellectual, held the Russian Revolution accountable for the expediency of all its deeds. Hughes, the sentimental Afro-American intellectual, ignored and excused the Revolution's defects, explaining that he "observed the changes in Soviet Asia through *Negro* eyes. To Koestler, Soviet Turkmenistan was simply a *primitive* land moving into twentieth-century civilization. To me it was a *colored* land moving into orbits hitherto reserved for whites." It was Hughes who told Koestler of the purge trial (one of the earliest) of Atta Kurdov, a local official. Hughes thought the man looked like "a portly bull-necked Chicago ward boss," and he readily left Kurdov to the imperatives of revolutionary justice. For Koestler, the strange proceedings in the Ashkhabad courtroom pointed the way to his own inevitable disillusion. "I thought he might come

back to listen to some jazz," Hughes recalled, after their argument over Kurdov. "But he didn't come back. The trial disturbed him."

In October, Hughes returned to Moscow, where he read D. H. Lawrence short stories and Thomas Mann, wrote articles for Russian and American magazines, and became romantically involved with a Natasha. Meanwhile, Knopf had published *The Dream Keeper*, his fourth volume of poetry, a slender effort devoid of protest and, Van Vechten wrote him, "lacking in any of the elementary requisites of a work of art." Going eastward again, Hughes reached Shanghai just as Nora Holt was leaving. Then he sailed to Japan; after a weird game of cat and mouse surveillance, the Japanese expelled him as a political undesirable. He sailed under the Golden Gate bridge on a "sunny summer morning" in 1933. At the dock, he was met by a liveried chauffeur and driven up Russian Hill to a mansion that had once belonged to Robert Louis Stevenson. His host was a rugged, shy bachelor whose family was one of San Francisco's oldest and richest. Noel Sullivan was the Carl Van Vechten of the Pacific Coast, although, unlike his counterpart, he had no literary talent. "It was," Hughes admitted, "fun to get back to capitalism."

During the next few months, living in Carmel in a cottage loaned him by Sullivan, Hughes wrote harder than ever before in his life—long ten- to twelve-hour daily stretches—occasionally broken by dinners with his neighbors the Robinson Jefferses and Lincoln Steffenses and visits from Nora Holt, Wallace Thurman, and Mabel Dodge with Tony Luhan. The result was *The Ways of White Folks*, fourteen short stories dedicated to Noel Sullivan (and greatly influenced by D. H. Lawrence) which *The New York Times* found to contain "more latent hatred" than *Not Without Laughter*. "One hopes that Mr. Hughes will not let bitterness betray his art into monotony." He travestied Godmother, the Van Vechtens, and the Renaissance.

And as for the cultured Negroes who were always saying art would break down color lines, art could save the race and prevent lynchings! "Bunk!" said Oocela. "Ma ma and pa were both artists when it came to making music, and the white folks ran them out of town for being dressed up in Alabama."

"Father and Son," the last story, an unsentimentalized tale about a suicidally defiant mulatto lad and his caste-ridden white planter father, Hughes was to adapt for the Broadway stage as *Mulatto*.

While Hughes was writing at Carmel, the custodian of the Renaissance was witnessing Europe disintegrating once more. His beloved Italy saddened Locke with its fascist buffoonery, while the Germany of his postgraduate years—the Germany he and his mother had known—was now a steel gymnasium in which, he wrote Mason, “all Germans live with one arm extended in the air.” He heard chilling accounts of Nazi psychopathy from Wilhelm Reich, became ill—drained. Like a character in Thomas Mann’s fiction, he sought Alpine refuge and cure. But to no avail. “Wind, rain, hail, all sorts of queer atmospheric lights” drove him back to Vienna, and then back to New York. “I know it isn’t the end of the world, but it is the end of an era,” he complained to Charlotte Mason.

Locke knew by now that the movement which had been given structure and guidance in the Civic Club some nine years earlier awaited only a proper burial. Yet, as in the final scene of some grand opera, a few of the dying could still sing with gusto. *The Crisis* proudly announced the creation of a Du Bois literary prize of a thousand dollars, donated by a Mrs. Edward Roscoe Mathews and awarded to James Weldon Johnson for *Black Manhattan*. Escaping extinction through last-minute donations, *Opportunity* gamely announced the resumption of the annual prize banquets, and Sterling Brown, John Day, president of John Day Publishing Company, and Fannie Hurst were among the judges. Only a hundred or so contestants entered, less than a tenth of the 1927 number. First prize went to Bontemps for the short story “A Summer Tragedy,” with Marita Bonner and Henry B. Jones winning honorable mention. Pearl S. Buck was guest of honor at the banquet on May 5, 1933, and spoke with what must have been moving sincerity of the psychological burdens of racism. “Let me be of your blood and your race and try to think as one of you,” pleaded this woman who held such extraordinary powers of empathy. The Urban League would mount one more annual literary gala before concluding that the money and interest to sustain the tradition were lacking.

It was in 1933 that Jessie Fauset’s final novel, *Comedy: American Style*, appeared. A student of this literature has judged it “the most penetrating study of color mania in American fiction,” but plodding through the yeasty plots and Antillean prejudices of pigment only strains the reader to care about Fauset’s characters and compels the certainty that the author is no less a victim of their mania. A sarcastic Schuyler might have been tempted to retitle the novel “Very Light Brown No More” and to see in its tragic ending a lamentable logic

determined by Fauset’s elevation of the superficial into a metaphysic. Three years after *Comedy: American Style*, with the death of her sister Helen, Fauset and her husband moved to a neat little house in Montclair, New Jersey, where she lived silently and not very happily thereafter.

McKay’s last novel, *Banana Bottom*, also appeared in 1933. As literature, Sterling Brown found it superior to *Banjo*, far less preachy and less exaggerated in character depiction. Despite a soporific flatness of prose, *Banana Bottom* presents McKay’s most plausible and engrossing character. Bita Plant, a dark-skinned Jamaican girl, educated in Europe but rooted in Afro-Jamaica, is obviously based on the author himself. Through Bita, McKay makes a long-overdue distinction in his fiction between the knowledge of Europe and the values of Europe:

A white person is just like another human being to me. I thank God that although I was brought up and educated among white people, I have never wanted to be anything but myself. I take pride in being colored and different, just as any intelligent white person does in being white. I can’t imagine anything more tragic than people torturing themselves to be different from their natural, unchangeable selves.

But McKay’s heroine is emotionally far healthier than he was, still living in Paris. Max Eastman notified James Weldon Johnson and Charlotte Osgood Mason in May that their friend was “too lonely and isolated over there,” and that the risk was great of losing “one of the few lyrical geniuses we have.” Once again, the hat was passed. Joel Spingarn contributed. James Weldon Johnson believed Henry Allen Moe of the Guggenheim Foundation had made a commitment for a fellowship. In early February 1934, after a twelve-year absence, the Jamaican novelist-poet came home to Harlem, but, oddly, not to the promised Guggenheim. Johnson had been certain it was McKay’s for the asking; Moe had invited McKay along for a pleasant office chat. “It was a bitter disappointment,” McKay complained to Johnson, while Eastman speculated that *Home to Harlem* had soured the white liberals.

McKay had brought two almost completed novels from North Africa. “Harlem Glory,” a raggedly written jumble of Parisian episodes revolving around the expatriate widow of Harlem’s numbers king, Millinda Rose, a character inspired by A’Lelia Walker. Its aban-

document is probably not to be regretted. But the second manuscript, "Romance in Marseilles," could have been his best, once the incredibly awkward prose had been fixed. Lafala, a little West African stowaway whose frozen legs were amputated in a New York hospital, sues the steamship company for his imprisonment in a toilet—but only after "Black Angel," an Afro-American, puts him in contact with a Jewish lawyer. From his court victory to Marseilles, where two prostitutes contend for his affection (and his money), to his return to Africa, Lafala betrays everyone he meets—friend, lawyer, lover—not by initiating actions but by docile adherence to an alien European code of conduct. McKay, who had written the first Afro-American best seller, now found himself as unwanted as a silent film star in the age of talkies. "If only I could find a publisher that would be willing to give an advance," he wrote Johnson, but Saxton told McKay he was part of an expired fad. Alfred Knopf agreed, telling Van Vechten it would be difficult "to do anything with [McKay] without being willing to risk and probably lose a good deal of money."

Three white writers published works—two of them major—on the Afro-American during 1933, and both illustrated the double-edged nature of the material of the Renaissance, the ever-present problem of the right thing said by the wrong person or the wrong thing well said by the right person. At her best, Julia Peterkin belonged to the former group. Walter White dashed off an enthusiastic note to Peterkin about *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, her book of photographs and text about the people on her South Carolina plantation. "It is a superb accomplishment and I am strongly recommending that the Book-of-the-Month Club choose it." In her preface, Peterkin took pains to note the absurdity of placing "all Negroes in one great social class." She knew about Charleston's three hundred colored antebellum families who had been taxpayers. Yet Doris Ullmann's camera and Peterkin's pen were devoted to folk who "do not build or run machines, they have no books or newspapers to read, no radios or moving pictures to entertain, but they have leisure to develop faculties of mind and heart and to acquire the ancient wisdom of their race." No doubt Julia Peterkin was a kindly mistress, Sterling Brown granted in *Opportunity*, but her laborers paid "for their quaintness by their—at best—semi-enslavement. And even for quaintness this is too much to ask."

An even more curious development was White's unequivocal refusal to endorse a friend's novel, Clement Wood's *Deep River*. Wood's *Nigger* had helped launch the Renaissance, and *Deep River* was to be

widely regarded as a socially useful potboiler, realistically treating marriage between a famous Afro-American singer and a white woman. But White disliked the novel's sexual explicitness. A misunderstanding led Wood's publisher to include an endorsement by White in its advertisement. When the dust cleared in early 1934, the publisher had apologized to White, rejacketed the book, and cancelled its contract with the novelist. This controversy foreshadowed White's objection many years later to the Bontemps-Cullen Hollywood script for *St. Louis Woman*. They were "my friends," White explained, but the proposed film "pictured Negroes as pimps, prostitutes, and gamblers with no redeeming characteristics. Even one role supposed to portray a decent person—that of a pious churchgoing woman—represented her as having had several children, each without benefit of clergy." Lena Horne, who had been offered the leading part, came to embrace the NAACP position.

The third book, Fannie Hurst's *Imitation of Life*, was the hugely acclaimed contribution of an *Opportunity* judge and civil rights sympathizer. Afro-American officialdom generally applauded the work: only Sterling Brown had the courage to break ranks and deeply anger Hurst with an *Opportunity* review, "Imitation of life—Once a Pancake," indicating the novel's stereotype "of the contented mammy, and the tragic mulatto; and the ancient ideas about the mixture of the races."

The literary event of the year was James Weldon Johnson's magisterial autobiography, *Along This Way*. Here was the adroit politician mellowed into elder statesman, the aristocrat who proved the natural tendency of some men to rise above all others. Locke was right to call *Along This Way* the "history of a class and also of a generation," the story "of the first generation of Negro culture." It was easily more than that, and, for once, Van Vechten was free of exaggeration in recognizing *Along This Way* as one of the great American autobiographies. Yet it had the serious and ineradicable flaw of its author's unique life and values. In a period when his people were being stretched on the economic rack, Johnson concluded that it was "possible to observe that faster and faster the problem is becoming a question of mental attitudes towards the Negro rather than of his actual condition." The following year Johnson stated the issue still more forcefully in *Negro Americans, What Now?* He would not allow "one prejudiced person or one million or one hundred million" to blight his life, he wrote. He would not let prejudice "or any of its intended humiliations or injustices bear him down to spiritual defeat." To which another patrician leader of vast

culture, Du Bois, sadly observed, "Mr. Johnson fails to realize the vast economic changes through which the world is going today." And Du Bois added, "As for myself, I am perfectly aware that Negro prejudice in America has made me far less a rounded human being than I should like to have been."

In an all-but-final throw of the dice against the James Weldon Johnson sort of psychological elitism, Du Bois had helped Joel Spingarn force the second Amenia conference on August 18, 1933, at which thirty-three of Afro-America's senior leaders and Young Turks gathered at Spingarn's Troutbeck estate a hundred miles north of New York City. The old caution, limited strategies, special relationships, and case-by-case litigation must give way to bold policies and largeness of vision, the delegates agreed. Du Bois pushed for an evaluation of the role of Afro-Americans in the global strivings of peoples of color. It was agreed that a broad base with labor was necessary—white as well as black labor (though not with white labor as currently organized). "The primary problem," the majority stated, "is economic." Yet, when the Amenia conference ended, its resolutions vanished into briefcases, never to be referred to again.

Harlem watched with surprise and amusement now as its traditional leadership turned upon itself. The innovative young painter Romare Bearden savaged the Harmon Foundation in *Opportunity*, deploring its attitude that "from the beginning has been of a coddling and patronizing nature." Arthur Fauset attacked the problem from a more generalized perspective in a trenchant economic and political *Opportunity* essay, "Educational Procedure for an Emergency," warning that unless bold strategies were embraced the "Negro masses must suffer a socio-political-economic setback from which it may take decades to recover." One thing was certain, Fauset went on to say—it was suicidally unrealistic "to believe that social and economic recognition will be inevitable when once the race has produced a sufficiently large number of persons who have properly qualified themselves in the arts. . . ." For Loren Miller the straightforward solution to the racial and national crisis was obvious—"One Way Out—Communism."

Du Bois had a different, much more outrageous solution—outrageous to most of his Talented Tenth disciples. At the beginning of 1934, he had written the first of two *Crisis* essays on the advantages of what he provocatively called "segregation." "Not only shall we be compelled to submit to much segregation," the second essay explained, but sometimes "it will be necessary to our own survival and a step

toward the ultimate breaking down of barriers, to increase by voluntary action our separation from our fellow men." Rivers of ink would flow over this apparent reversal by Du Bois of beliefs that had caused him to clash with Booker Washington a generation gone by. For Walter White, this was the last straw; Du Bois must recant, accept censorship, or leave the NAACP. He left on May 21. The irony of Du Bois's parting accusation against White surely escaped the old editor. He spoke of White as he himself had been spoken of by Carvey. "He has more white companions and friends than colored," Du Bois fumed. "He goes where he will in New York City and naturally meets no Color Line, for the simple and sufficient reason that he isn't 'colored.'"

There were no theoretical and confusing racial policy disputes in the kingdoms of George Baker, alias Father Divine. The weary and downtrodden, along with a good number of the upwardly mobile, were fascinated by the man who called himself God at 20 West 115th Street. Among the Talented Tenth, Divine's appeal was limited, but even there it was by no means negligible. Two mysterious deaths had encouraged the cult's rapid growth. The judge who sentenced Father Divine to a year in jail for creating a public nuisance died suddenly, in May 1932. One year later, the first of Harlem's big business messiahs was kidnapped and murdered in Philadelphia. The Reverend George Wilson Becton had been one of the Lord's most graceful, mellow-voiced, and colorful instruments. Cullen's father had yielded his pulpit to Becton because of poor health, and the preacher had taken the community by storm. Becton's church became the "World's Gospel Feast," where gorgeously caparisoned pages maintained the rule of hushed silence, a mighty choir and orchestra thrilled worshippers at paced intervals, and Becton, radiating animal magnetism and divine revelation, would lead his flock in a great outpouring of "consecrated dimes." Becton's translation from this world shook Harlem as little else had in recent years, leaving a void that Father Divine hastened to fill.

To the educated, Divine's sermons recalled "Kingfish" of Amos 'n' Andy. "As I aforesaid," the messiah would intone, "when you realize that which was in you, I retake and reincarnate. I reproduce, reiterate, and rematerialize your human intelligence, your human skill and ability. . . . I reincarnate them." To the no longer "debauched" devout, these were eternal verities to be grasped in a gnostic trance. The reporter from the *Tattler* pronounced his sermons a "masterpiece as

sermons go." The Carveyite *Negro World* (now the property of Father Divine) carried the good news of Divine's fifteen kingdoms, spread from Harlem to California. The faithful were guaranteed everlasting life on earth and instant erasure of racial status, for the word "Negro" was banned. From Australia, China, Switzerland, cards and letters reached Divine simply addressed to "God-Harlem-New York City."

Divine's kingdom was not politically timid. He condemned fascism, anti-Semitism, and the Scottsboro injustice. This was before the perniciousness of fascism was clearly understood by many Afro-Americans, and at a time when communist tactics had alienated many churchmen from Scottsboro. He criticized the New Deal and made flirtatious remarks about communists standing "for social equality and justice in every issue, and this is the principle for which I stand." He summoned President Roosevelt and Pope Pius XI to an international Righteous Government Convention at Harlem's Rockland Palace, and actually succeeded in securing the presence of mayoral candidates Fiorello La Guardia and John P. O'Brien. Divine's greatest achievement, however, was economic rather than spiritual or political. His mostly female disciples surrendered their worldly goods. After expenditures for extensive real estate investments, for a mansion near FDR's Hyde Park, and a fleet of Cadillacs, there was enough money left to support hostels and cafeterias where board and bed were had for a minimal cost. In Divine's kingdoms they sang, "The abundance of the fullness of all good things / Is whosoever I am!"

While the disciples of Father Divine danced themselves into trances, Bishop Amiri Al-Minin Sufi Abdul Hamid, originally of Lowell, Massachusetts, led his followers through the streets of Harlem to boycott white businesses guilty of discrimination. Sufi Abdul Hamid had come to Harlem in 1930 and founded his Universal Holy Temple of Tranquility on Morningside Avenue. Like Divine, he abolished usage of the term "Negro," and like Divine, he offered Harlem a political program. Sufi Abdul Hamid claimed he had tried without luck to work through Harlem's established leadership, the NAACP, Urban League, and the Baptist Ministerial Conference. His boycott of Chicago's South Side merchants had been fairly successful, but there he had enjoyed community support. In early 1934, with a small band of followers, Sufi's newly formed Negro Industrial and Clerical Alliance chose the large Five & Ten Cents store at 125th Street, still a white stronghold, as its first target. Booted, bearded, beturbaned, Sufi Hamid's heavy six-foot-three frame harbored a powerful speaking voice and piercing chestnut

eyes. Overnight Harlem was electrified—and deeply divided. As thousands of young men joined his movement, as the streets of Harlem became parade grounds for Sufi's troops chanting, "Live and Let Live! Share the Jobs!" the owners of Blumstein's department store formed the white Harlem Merchants' Association. Well-bred Harlem organized the Citizens' League and joined Sufi's people on the picket lines.

The collaboration was uncomfortable and brief. Hamid's bombastic personality ruffled the Talented Tenth, and his strong-arm tactics appalled. The Negro Industrial and Clerical Alliance exacted dues, increased them, and demanded contributions from laborers, ministers, and merchants. It refused to defer to the NAACP or the Urban League. Charges flew that Hamid was running a shakedown operation, victimizing Afro-American and West Indian merchants as readily as white. Fred Moore, owner of the New York Age, called him a blatherer, a faker, and a fleecer. Stunned by his success, the communists denounced the movement through Ben Davis's *Negro Liberator*. By late 1934, the Negro Industrial and Clerical Alliance had thoroughly alienated Harlem's elite and driven the Citizens' League into separate, moderate, and more dignified forms of protest. Watching and writing about post-Depression Harlem years later, McKay saw the white merchants exploit these divisions. "They promoted an interracial banquet to which they invited representative Negroes who," McKay claimed, "made good-will speeches and denounced the activities of irresponsible troublemakers in Harlem."

Jewish merchants claimed they were being intimidated, that Sufi Hamid had praised Hitler for his persecution of German Jews, and they demanded Mayor La Guardia order an investigation. A Jewish Minutemen's organization was formed, while the *Daily News* called the Afro-American street leader "The Black Hitler" and "The Führer of Harlem." For a moment in early November, establishment Harlem (black and white) held its breath as the forces of Father Divine and Sufi Hamid joined in a monster rally at Rockland Palace to end discrimination in hiring and housing. The moment passed, though, and, after an extortion indictment and trial, so did the founder of the Universal Holy Temple of Tranquility from the forefront. Yet his boycott campaign paved the way for the young Reverend Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., and subsequent boycott campaigns.

On Sugar Hill, in Striver's Row, and at the Dunbar (where 60 percent of the original tenants still resided), the new messiahs were

objects of mild sarcasm, and the white Marxists (now almost as numerous as the Negrotarians of the twenties) were spoken of as passing aberrations. There was mild interest in the changing character of aristocratic foreign visitors, the new generation of titled travellers with ideologies as unmistakable as their pedigrees. The Swedish Crown Prince, Lady Mountbatten, the Rothschilds, and Princesses Muriel and Nancy Cunard, convert to communist revolution. Columbia-educated Hikida was a pleasant, shadowy Japanese bibliophile who courted Afro-American leaders with increasing success. He found considerable sympathy for his cause among people like Locke and Schomburg and Dunbar Apartment dwellers (who were visited by Japanese army and navy delegations and given the same cherry trees that blossomed along Washington's Tidal Basin). But if there was considerable sympathy, there was as much ignorance and suspicion of the Japanese. Hikida complained to James Weldon Johnson of a recent trip South during which he met fifty leaders "who asked him how Negroes were treated in Japan!" A friend warned NAACP field secretary William Pickens that communists were going to attack Hikida and the Japanese as "seeking Negro friends to serve imperialist purposes and that you are aiding them." No matter, Pickens replied; he would go to see Japan for himself, "even if I have to resign for a year, or permanently." Another Hikida recruit, an officer of the Associated Negro Press (ANP), confided to Pickens that the race must learn to become superior to whites, like the Japanese: "Things can be done better than white people do them and it is for Negroes to seek these superior standards."

Nancy Cunard, comfortably wealthy English artistic and political revolutionary, found the notables of the community insufferably narrow and feudal. Since the Hotel Theresa had not yet dropped its ban on Afro-Americans, Cunard raised headlines and respectable eyebrows in May 1932 by renting a two-room suite in a St. Nicholas Avenue hotel favored by musicians, writers, and even more questionable lodgers. She had rocked London society with her pamphlet *Black Man and White Ladyship*, reproving her socially prominent mother in the most savage and personal way for objecting to her public love affair with an Afro-American; now Cunard was in Harlem to study her lover's people firsthand. More than that: she had come to disabuse Harlemites of all delusions that the cultured rich—people of her mother's class—cared about their welfare in the slightest.

From her first no-nonsense note ("Dear Mr. Spingarn, I am now here. . ."), Nancy Cunard made her purpose and her expectations of undivided Talented Tenth attention brusquely clear. In a strange repetition of the collective excitement inspired by Locke's *Survey Graphic* edition, her presence and her summons for contributions to the massive anthology *Negro* galvanized the veterans of the Renaissance. McKay and Eric Walrond refused to contribute unless paid, and Toomer, about to marry Margery Content, daughter of one of Wall Street's most respected brokers, informed Cunard that he had put the question of Negro ancestry behind him. Most of the others were delighted to do what came naturally, to write again, still clinging to the hope, as they were, that American racial prejudice was a matter solely of ignorance and misunderstanding which forceful prose by honor college graduates could do much to attenuate. Cunard's contempt could not have escaped their notice. She spoke openly of Harlem's terrifying "snobbery around skin color." Her low opinion of the NAACP and the Renaissance was no secret. Yet, when she chastised James Weldon Johnson ("Am I to expect your article or not?") or upbraided Schomburg for historical sloppiness ("I can't believe either that you wrote this as a joke"), she usually got results. When *Negro* appeared in 1934, there were contributions from Sterling Brown, Du Bois, Frazier, Locke, Rayford Logan, Schomburg, White, Taylor Gordon, and others. But it also carried Cunard's major article on Du Bois and the NAACP: "A Reactionary Negro Organization." The only worthwhile Harlemites, said Nancy Cunard, were those who wrote for or subscribed to the *Negro Liberator*, the communist paper.

"I'll someday have to write out for my own satisfaction—and absorption, the inside story of the 'Negro renaissance' and how it was scuttled from within," Locke promised Godmother. Instead, Afro-America's first Rhodes scholar continued to swing between despair and exhilaration. Because Godmother had let him "into the sanctum of her life" and because she had taught him that "Alain must be true to his real self," it was somewhat easier to carry on. On the other hand, he saw no other course (or so he wrote Mason) than to write off Hughes, Toomer, and Robeson. Seeing the West African opera *Kyankor* on Broadway, revived his faith completely for an hour or so: "Here it is, at last, Godmother—as you have dreamed and prophesied—and though it will not take root immediately—it is here and cannot be denied." He greeted Roosevelt's November 1934 appointment of Francis Biddle to the NRA as though it were a coup d'état engineered

by Mason: "This brings your principles within shooting-range of practical affairs—although I know they have their underground channels already." The New Deal, the New Negro, and Mrs. Mason were ready to reform America.

Others shared Locke's moodiness. "So suddenly I am serious and entirely grown-up," Dorothy West wrote James Weldon Johnson, "and I know that the promise we, the New Negroes, were so full of is enormously depleted. And now there are newer voices that are younger and surer." Among those younger, surer voices was Richard Wright, one of West's communist collaborators, along with Jackman, on *Challenge* (then *New Challenge*), a pale echo of Thurman's *Fire*! "Scold us a little," she begged, "[I sic] and my contemporaries who did not live up to our fine promise. Urge us to recapture." Fallen on hard times, anthropologist William Stanley Braithwaite told James Weldon Johnson that "the race collectively is not intelligent [or else it would have bought enough books to save the Renaissance]."

The last novel of the Renaissance, Hurston's *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, was either ignored or disparaged by many of the Niggerati. Charles Johnson and James Weldon Johnson admired the work, and Locke was so pleased when Lippincott released it in May 1934 that he sent Mason a copy of the glowing *New York Times* review from Europe (a dispatch he hoped would be as heartening to his hospitalized patron as the photograph of the young Trotsky sent later that month). Yet *Opportunity* sneered that "in plot construction and characterization, Miss Hurston is a disappointment." Hurston's novel, her first, was about her immediate family—especially her father—and the life of an autonomous Afro-American polity called Eatonville, Florida. Although the plot is sometimes distended by melodrama and the characters distorted, the novel is enormously satisfying. Hurston's biographer has accurately described *Jonah's Gourd Vine* as "less a narrative than a series of linguistic moments representing the folklife of the black South." But linguistic moments in Afro-American folklife were almost as irrelevant in 1934 as the passions of Fauset mulattoes.

Two writers from whom much more should have come, Rudolph Fisher and Wallace Thurman, died maddeningly avoidable deaths within days of each other. Fisher fell victim to intestinal cancer caused by exposure to his own x-ray equipment, on the day after Christmas, 1934. Bledsoe sang at his funeral, and officers of the 369th Infantry Regiment, along with Cullen, Jackman, and Noble Sissle, escorted the

cortege. Thurman died four days earlier. Just back from Hollywood, he defied his physician's orders to abstain from alcohol and laughingly invited a crowd to a drink with him in his apartment. Dorothy West saw the surprised expression on Thurman's face when he hemorrhaged at 2 a.m. and knew he was going to die. His widow, Louise Thompson, Aaron and Alta Douglas, Countee Cullen, Richard Bruce Nugent, Harold Jackman, Dorothy Peterson, Dorothy West, Walter White, and William Rapp attended the Harlem funeral. Thurman was buried in Silver Mount Cemetery on Staten Island. Locke was devastated, writing Godmother, "It is hard to see the collapse of things you have labored to raise on a sound basis."

The Depression accelerated a failure that was inevitable, for the Harlem Renaissance could no more have succeeded as a positive social force, whatever the health of Wall Street, than its participants could have been persuaded to try a different stratagem of racial advancement. As different as each of The Six was, as unlike as were Toomer and Thurman, Cullen and Hughes, or Larsen and Hurston, they were all creatures in the margin of a rigidly divided, racist society. They knew that not to be white in their America was to be something less than human, whatever their valedictorian achievements. They recognized that, by the laws of the South and the customs of the North, the fundamental distinction drawn by most white Americans was between good and bad Afro-Americans. In this dehumanized scheme of things, neither culture nor color could alter the pariah status of those whose ancestors had been African slaves. Uncle Tom and Frederick Douglass were social equivalents, while the illiterate redneck was the superior of W. E. B. Du Bois. Or at least so the ancient law of race relations ran.

In reality, nevertheless, the Talented Tenth knew also that those who were culturally and physically more assimilated to white America were, more often than not, beneficiaries of some slight humane and material consideration. The Talented Tenth also recognized—however much it evaded or denied—that a chasm of culture separated it from its peasant origins. Objectively, of course, it might have tried to pursue a path that more nearly corresponded to the political and institutional needs and aspirations of the masses of Afro-Americans. Realistically, by emotions and convictions, there was never much chance of that happening. The architects of the Renaissance believed in ultimate victory through the maximizing of the exceptional. They deceived themselves

into thinking that race relations in the United States were amenable to the assimilationist patterns of a Latin country. Allowance could be made for Van Vechten writing to James Weldon Johnson, after publication of *Along This Way*, "A little bit more here and a little bit more there and the dam will break and the waters will no longer be segregated," but it was grievously misconceived for Johnson to believe this.

What was about to break was not the dam of segregation but the long-suffering patience of those Harlemites who never read *Oppportunity* and no longer derived vicarious pride from Walter White's presence at the Saint Moritz. The superstitious had long seen impending calamity in the poor health of the Tree of Hope outside Connie's Inn. The sophisticated discerned the pervasive wrongness of things in Duke Ellington's refusal to perform for a reasonable fee at the 1934 annual NAACP ball, just as, earlier, Roland Hayes had ignored pleas not to sing before segregated audiences. The one-for-all ethos of Harlem was clearly a thing of the past as suffering in these six square miles reached truly terrible dimensions, and signs of further deterioration became unmistakable. Much of this had been foretold by the *Report of the Committee on Negro Housing*, presented to President Hoover in 1931. "One notable difference appears between the immigrant and Negro populations," the investigators stated. "In the case of the former, there is the possibility of escape, with improvement in economic status in the second generation." For Afro-American urban dwellers, the more things changed, the more they worsened. Despite its vaunted Renaissance and distinguished residents, Harlem was no exception. In this "city within the city," almost 50 percent of the families were out of work, yet a mere 9 percent of them received government relief jobs. The community's single public medical facility, Harlem General Hospital, with 273 beds and 50 bassinets, served 200,000 Afro-Americans. The syphilis rate was nine times higher than white Manhattan's; the tuberculosis rate was five times higher; pneumonia and typhoid rates were twice as high; two black mothers and two black babies died for every white mother and infant.

On the evening of March 19, 1935, the riot awaiting its immediate cause swept down Lenox Avenue with ten thousand angry Harlemites destroying two million dollars in white-owned commercial property. A sixteen-year-old Puerto Rican lad, Lino Rivera, had been roughed up by white store clerks who saw him shoplift a pocketknife in the West 135th Street five-and-dime. Rumor spread that the teenager had been beaten to death. By the following morning, three Afro-Americans were

dead, thirty people were hospitalized, and more than one hundred were in jail. Less than a year before, Roscoe and Clara Bruce had sadly informed Talented Tenth readers of the Dunbar News that changing times compelled them to "lay their scissors and their pens aside." It was time to do so.