

SEVENTH AVENUE: THE GREAT BLACK WAY

Jervis Anderson



hen the great bandleader Cab Calloway,¹ who grew up in Rochester and Baltimore, first saw Harlem, in 1929, he was, he said, “awestruck by the whole scene.” Never had he beheld “so many Negroes in one place,” or a street as glamorous as Seventh Avenue. “It was beautiful,” he added. “Just beautiful . . . night clubs all over, night clubs whose names were legendary to me.” The young Duke Ellington²—a native of Washington, D.C.—is said to have remarked on first seeing Harlem, in the early twenties, “Why, it is just like the Arabian Nights.”³

Seventh Avenue was the most handsome of the boulevards running through Harlem. It was bisected into an uptown and a downtown drive by a narrow strip of park, planted with trees and flowers. Despite the renown and importance of 125th street—the district’s main commercial artery—it was Seventh Avenue that deserved to be called the main street of Harlem. It reflected almost every form of life uptown—with its stores, churches, beauty parlors, doctors’ offices, theatres, night clubs, nice-looking apartment buildings, and private brownstones.⁴ The novelist Wallace Thurman⁵



1 **Cab Calloway:** American composer, bandleader, and singer who gained fame at Harlem’s Cotton Club in the 1920s and ‘30s

2 **Duke Ellington:** famous American composer, bandleader, and pianist who helped found big-band jazz and the swing era, 1899-1974

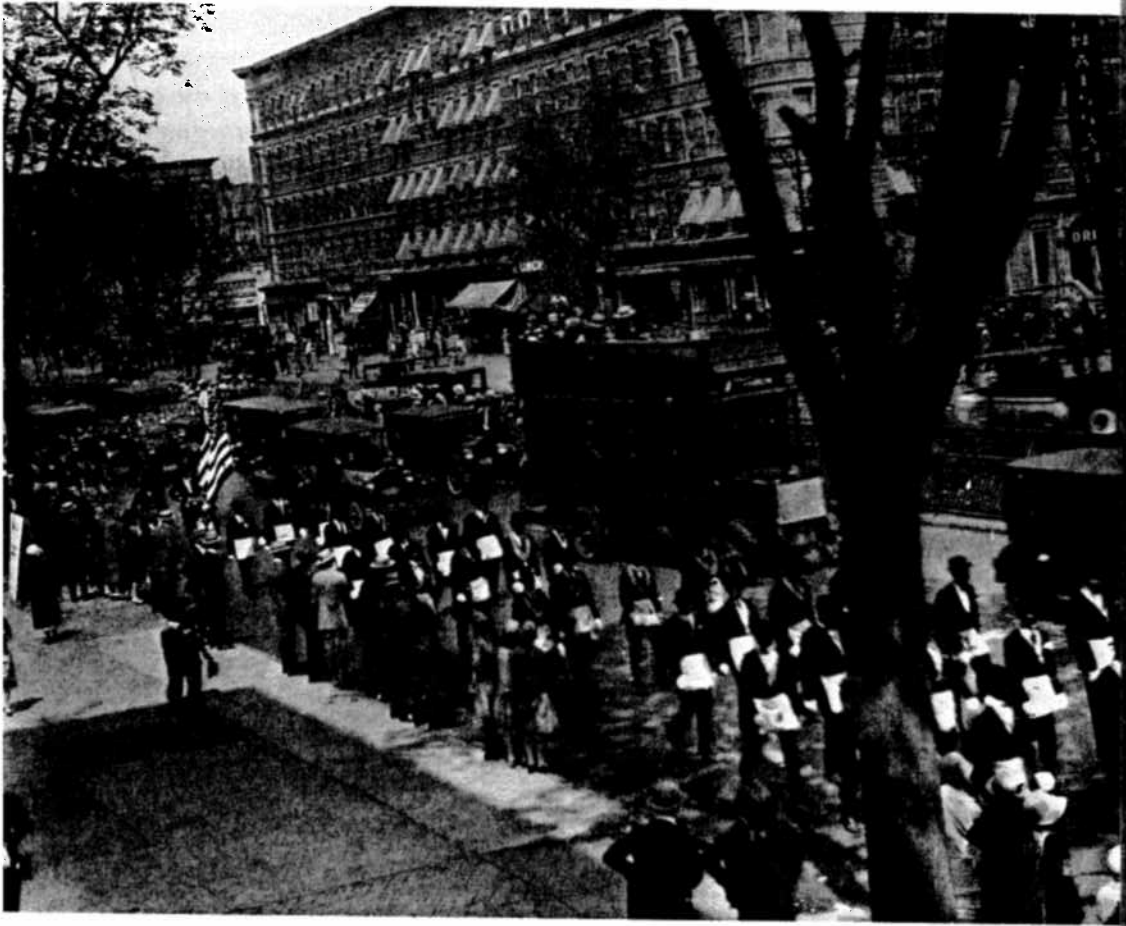
3 **Arabian Nights:** Arabic tales of wonder

4 **brownstones:** dwellings faced with reddish brown sandstone

5 **Wallace Thurman:** African American editor, critic, novelist, and playwright who lived from 1902-1934

referred to it as Harlem's "most representative" avenue, "a grand thoroughfare into which every element of the Harlem population ventures either for reasons of pleasure or of business." From 125th street to 145th street, he added, Seventh Avenue was "majestic yet warm," and reflected "both the sordid chaos and the rhythmic splendor of Harlem."

In the twenties, Seventh Avenue was the headquarters of Harry Pace's Black Swan phonograph company, which produced some of the earliest recordings of jazz and the blues. On the avenue, there were the Renaissance ballroom and such fine theatres as the Roosevelt, the Alhambra, and the Lafayette. Among the churches there, Salem Methodist was perhaps the largest, and among the cabarets, the most famous were Connie's Inn and Smalls' Paradise. During the thirties,



PARADE ON SEVENTH AVENUE IN HARLEM
James Van Der Zee, photographer

James Van Der Zee,⁶ Harlem's best-known photographer, had his studio on the avenue. Of Van Der Zee, a sympathetic and indefatigable recorder of Harlem life, Cecil Beaton wrote in 1938: "In Harlem he is called upon to capture the tragedy as well as the happiness in life, turning his camera on death and marriage with the same detachment." Several of the left-wing ideologues who harangued crowds at the corner of Lenox Avenue and 135th Street edited their little magazines from offices on Seventh. The Blyden Bookstore and the National Bookstore, virtual academies of black consciousness, were on

The CRISIS



THE CRISIS COVER
1926
Aaron Douglas

the avenue. Owned by Dr. Willis Huggins and Lewis Michaux, respectively, their stocks leaned heavily to volumes on African and Afro-American history. "If we couldn't find a book anywhere else," a customer of the National Bookstore later said, "we always knew that Michaux had a copy on hand; but perhaps more important than the availability of books was the kind of books he had—books on Africa now out of print; books on the history of us." At the corner of Seventh and 125th Street—across the way from Michaux's bookstore—was Harlem's best hotel, the Theresa. It was not until around 1940, however, that the Theresa began admitting blacks, at which

point, according to *Ebony*, it became "the social headquarters for Negro America, just as the Waldorf is the home for the white elite." The magazine added: "To its famous registration desk flock the most famous Negroes in America. It is the temporary home of practically every outstanding Negro who comes to New York.... Joe Louis stays there, along with every big-time Negro fighter. So does Rochester and the Hollywood



Cab Calloway with his band

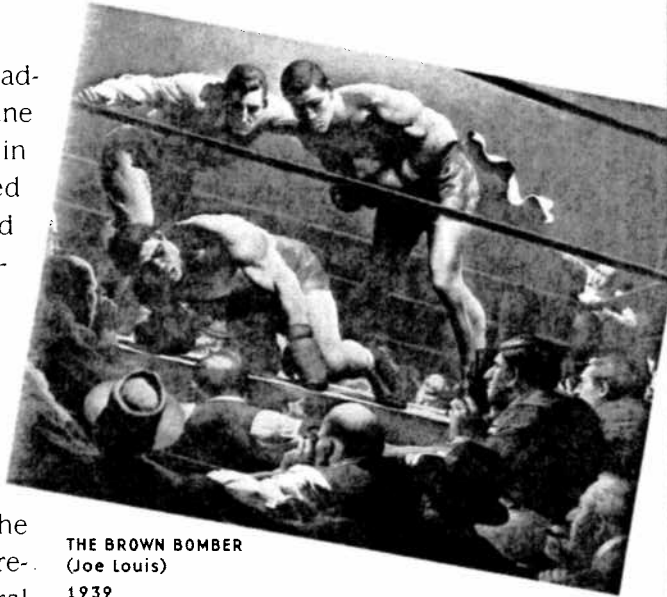
⁶ James Van Der Zee: African American photographer whose work chronicled the Harlem Renaissance. His photos can be seen on pages 16-17, 20, 21, and 61 of this text.

contingent, all the top bandleaders who haven't the good fortune to have their own apartments in town, Negro educators, colored writers, and the Liberian and Haitian diplomatic representatives. Big men in the business world jostle top labor leaders in the flowered, mirrored lobby."

To many in Harlem, Seventh Avenue, a boulevard of high style, was "the Great Black Way." One requirement of a grand funeral procession in Harlem was that it make its way up or down Seventh Avenue at some point. Father Divine's religious marches and Marcus Garvey's black nationalist parades—resplendent with colorful banners and uniforms—achieved a special swagger only when, from other streets and thoroughfares, they swung into Seventh Avenue. When the great black fraternal organizations (the Elks, the Odd Fellows, the Monarchs, the Masons, or the Pythians) came to Harlem for an annual convention, a high point of their gathering was an extravaganza of march and music that they staged on Seventh. Perhaps none of these shows was more attractive than the one in 1927, when some thirty thousand lodge brothers and sisters, stepping to the accompaniment of twenty-five marching bands, cakewalked and Charlestoned down the avenue to tunes like "Me and My Shadow" and "Ain't She Sweet."

But Seventh Avenue presented no finer spectacle than its Easter Parades and its Sunday-afternoon promenades, when the high and low of Harlem—in their best clothes or wearing the latest in fashion—strolled leisurely up and down the avenue. Here is what a writer for *The New Yorker* observed on a Sunday in 1926:

Now that Fifth Avenue is no longer a promenade, only a fashionable procession of shoppers... we have been seeking elsewhere for a street which still retains the loafing stroll as a tempo.... Seventh Avenue



THE BROWN BOMBER
(Joe Louis)
1939
Robert Biggs

between 127th and 134th Streets . . . is still the real thing in promenades. . . . Here the elite of colored New York stroll almost any evening in a true Sunday-afternoon-in-the-park manner. Here the young men in evening clothes and jaunty derbies or in more sporting outfits of spats,⁷ colored shirts, trick canes, loiter on the corners or in front of the theatres and laugh. . . . dusky young school girls go arm in arm, sometimes four or five abreast. Here old women waddle along, leading their favorite hound or poodle; and a group of mammies, exchanging gossip as though in a small-town back yard, mingle with flashy young flappers⁸. . . . Prosperous old men with heavy gold watch chains slung ponderously over wide bellies stroll. . . . Harlem takes its ease on one of the widest and more lovely avenues in the city.

▲ ● ▲



PORTRAIT OF COUPLE, MAN WITH
WALKING STICK
1929
James Van Der Zee, photographer

On other Sunday afternoons, male strollers were to be seen in silk toppers, homburgs, cut-aways, velvet-collared Chesterfields, boutonnieres, monocles, lorgnettes, gaiters, frock coats, and white gloves. Women carried Yankee sand pock-erbooks, and wore high-cuffed peek-a-toe slippers, wide-brimmed hats (decorated with flower bou-quets), and veils in chartreuse, lime, pink, blue, black, and white. In 1932, a journal in Harlem reported that many women were wearing "sleek black carous" with "silver fox and sable trim-mings" and "white satin or velvet evening frocks, with draped bodies." Waistlines were "anywhere from the hip top to a high empire line." Dresses were trimmed with fur, "kolinsky fur, the prefer-ence." Popular that year was a Paris-designed beret, with "a perky feather" shooting skyward. Shoes were generally suede, in various shades of gray. And almost all the women of fashion showed

7 **jaunty derbies.** . . . **spats:** fashions of the twenties: a stiff felt hat with a narrow brim. . . . a cloth or leather covering over the ankle

8 **flappers:** young woman during the World War I years and the 1920's whose conduct and dress was considered scandalous

signs of having had an "oatmeal facial." Of course, not all the strollers on Seventh Avenue were *that* smart-looking. And not all belonged to the better classes. It was not so hard to spot the prostitutes. Accustomed to their own style of street walking, they could not quite conceal the habitual rhythms of their gait or suppress the erotic insolence of their derrieres. Prosperous pimps and racketeers—at the wheels of expensive automobiles—cruised up and down the avenue, trolling for the attention of the young, the pretty, and the innocent. Men dressed as exquisitely as Adolphe Menjou⁹—the "dicty's,"¹⁰ as such classy types in Harlem were called—shared the stroll with day laborers, elevator operators, and shoeshine boys, whose humbler duds were probably what the cut-rate economies of Delancey Street permitted. Servants of rich Park and Fifth Avenue families wore the hand-me-downs of their employers, striving, with amusing result, to look the part of what they had on. A number of women were out in ensembles that, as any knowing eye could tell, had been put together on their own sewing machines.

The *Age* was surely correct when it said, of a promenade in 1934, that "the creme de la creme"¹¹ mingled with the "has beens,"¹² the "would-be's," the "four flushers," the "shallow fops,"¹³ and the "humble."

But it was the relaxed and neighborly air of the stroll that mattered the most. *



PORTRAIT OF COUPLE WITH RACCOON COATS
AND STYLISH CAR
1932

James Van Der Zee, photographer

9 Adolphe Menjou: French film star

10 dicty's: well-dressed men

11 creme de la creme: French for "the cream of the cream"; the best of all

12 "has beens": formerly famous or popular individuals

13 "shallow fops": silly, overdressed men

THE PINK HAT

Caroline Bond Day

This hat has become to me a symbol. It represents the respective advantages and disadvantages of my life here. It is at once my magic-carpet, my enchanted cloak, my Aladdin's lamp. Yet it is a plain, rough, straw hat, "pour le sport,"¹ as was [a] recently famous green one.

Before its purchase, life was wont to become periodically flat for me. Teaching is an exhausting profession unless there are wells to draw from, and the soil of my world seems hard and dry. One needs adventure and touch with the main current of human life, and contact with many of one's kind to keep from "going stale on the job." I had not had these things and heretofore had passed back and forth from the town a more or less drab figure eliciting no attention.

Then suddenly one day with the self-confidence bred of a becoming hat, careful grooming, and satisfactory clothes I stepped on to a street car, and lo! the world was reversed. A portly gentleman of obvious rank arose and offered me a seat. Shortly afterwards as I alighted a comely young lad jumped to rescue my gloves. Walking on into the store where I always shopped, I was startled to hear the salesgirl sweetly drawl, "Miss or Mrs.?" as I gave the customary initials. I heard myself answering reassuringly "Mrs." Was this myself? I, who was frequently addressed as "Sarah." For you see this is south of the Mason and Dixon

¹ "pour le sport": French for "for the sport," meaning that the narrator wore this hat for the fun of it

PORTRAIT OF MY WIFE
1950
Humbert Howard

SHORT STORY 69

line,² and I am a Negro woman of mixed blood unaccustomed to these respectable prefixes.

I had been mistaken for other than a Negro, yet I look like hundreds of other colored women—yellow-skinned and slightly heavy featured, with frizzy brown hair. My maternal grand-parents were Scotch-Irish and English quadroons; paternal grand-parents Cherokee Indian and full blooded Negro; but the ruddy pigment of the Scotch-Irish ancestry is my inheritance, and it is this which shows through my yellow skin, and in the reflection of my pink hat glows pink. Loosely speaking, I should be called a mulatto³—anthropologically speaking. I am a dominant of the white type of the F3 generation⁴ of secondary crossings. There is a tendency known to the initiated persons of mixed Negro blood in this climate to “breed white” as we say, propagandists to the contrary notwithstanding. In this sense the Proud Race is, as it were, really dominant. The cause? I’ll save that for another time.

Coming back to the hat—when I realized what had made me the recipient of those unlooked for, yet common courtesies, I decided to experiment further.

So I wore it to town again one day when visiting an art store looking for prints for my school room. Here, where formerly I had met with indifference and poor service, I encountered a new girl today who was the essence of courtesy. She pulled out drawer after drawer of prints as we talked and compared from Giotto to Sargent.⁵ Yes she agreed that Giorgione⁶ had a sweet, worldly taste, that he was not sufficiently appreciated, that Titian⁷ did over-shadow him. We went back to Velasquez⁸ as the master technician and had about decided on “The Forge of Vulcan”⁹ as appropriate for my needs, when suddenly she asked, “but where do you teach?” I answered, and she recognized the

2 **Mason and Dixon line:** Originally the line between Maryland and Pennsylvania, this boundary became the dividing line between slave states and free states before the Civil War.

3 **mulatto:** a person of mixed Black and white ancestry

4 **F3 generation:** a term from genetics describing the narrator’s mixed ancestry

5 **Giotto to Sargent:** artists; Giotto, Italian painter, 1266-1337; John Singer Sargent, American painter, 1856-1925

6 **Giorgione:** Venetian painter, 1478-1510

7 **Titian:** Venetian painter, 1490-1576

8 **Velasquez:** Spanish painter, 1599-1660

9 **“The Forge of Vulcan”:** a painting by Velasquez

name of a Negro university. Well—I felt sorry for her. She had blundered. She had been chatting familiarly, almost intimately with a Negro woman. I spared her by leaving quickly, and murmured that I would send for the package.

My mood forced me to walk—and I walked on and on until I stood at the “curb-market.” I do love markets, and at this one they sell flowers as well as vegetables. A feeble old man came up beside me. I noticed that he was near-sighted. “Lady,” he began, “would you tell me—is them dahlias or pernies up there?” Then, “market smells so good—don’t it?”

I recognized a kindred spirit. He sniffed about among the flowers, and was about to say more—a nice old man—I should have liked to stop and talk with him after the leisurely southern fashion, but he was a white old man—and I moved on hastily.

I walked home the long way and in doing so passed the city library. I thought of my far away Boston—no Abbey nor Puvis de Chauvannes¹⁰ here, no marble stairs, no spirit of studiousness of which I might become a part. Then I saw a notice of a lecture by Drinkwater¹¹ at the women’s club—I was starved for something good—and starvation of body or soul sometimes breeds criminals.

So then I deliberately set out to deceive. Now, I decided, I would enjoy all that had previously been impossible. When necessary I would add a bit of rouge and the frizzy hair (thanks to the marcel) could be crimped into smoothness. I supposed also that a well-modulated voice and assurance of manner would be assets.

So thus disguised, for a brief space of time, I enjoyed everything from the attentions of an expert Chiropodist,¹² to grand opera, avoiding only the restaurants—I could not have borne the questioning eyes of the colored waiters.

I would press on my Aladdin’s lamp and presto, I could be comforted with a hot drink at the same soda-fountain where ordinarily I should have been hissed at. I could pull my hat down a bit and buy a ticket to see my favorite movie star while the play was still anew.

10 **Abbey nor Puvis de Chauvannes:** American painter and illustrator; French mural painter

11 **Drinkwater:** John Drinkwater, 1882–1937, English poet, playwright, and critic

12 **Chiropodist:** a doctor that specializes in both hands and feet

I could wrap my enchanted cloak about me and have the decent comfort of ladies' rest-rooms. I could have my shoes fitted in the best shops, and be shown the best values in all of the stores—not the common styles “which all the darkies buy, you know.” At one of these times a policeman helped me cross the street. A sales-girl in the most human way once said, “I wouldn't get that Sweetie, you and me is the same style and I know.” How warming to be like the rest of the world, albeit a slangy and gum-chewing world!

But it was best of all of an afternoon when it was impossible to correct any more papers or to look longer at my own Lares and Penates,¹³ to sit upon my magic-carpet and be transported into the midst of a local art exhibit, to enjoy the freshness of George Inness¹⁴ and the vague charm of Brangwyn,¹⁵ and to see white-folk enjoying Tanner¹⁶—really nice, likable, folk too, when they don't know one. Again it was good to be transported into the midst of a great expectant throng, awaiting the pealing of the Christmas carols at the Municipal Pageant.¹⁷ One could not enjoy this without compunction however, for there was not a dark face to be seen among all of those thousands of people, and my two hundred bright-eyed youngsters should have been there.

Finally—and the last time that I dared upon my carpet, was to answer the call of a Greek play to be given on the lawn of a State University. I drank it all in. Marvelous beauty! Perfection of speech and gesture on a velvet greensward, music, color, life!

Then a crash came. I suppose I was nervous—one does have “horrible imaginings and present fears” down here, subconscious pictures of hooded figures and burning crosses. Anyway in hurrying out to avoid the crowd, I fell and broke an ankle-bone.

Someone took me home. My doctor talked plaster-casts. “No,” I said, “I'll try osteopathy,”¹⁸ but there was no chance for magic now. I was

¹³ **Lares and Penates:** In Roman mythology, Lares are guardian spirits of family ancestors and Penates are guardian spirits of the storeroom and hearth.

¹⁴ **George Inness:** American landscape painter, 1825–1894

¹⁵ **Brangwyn:** Frank Brangwyn, British painter, 20th century

¹⁶ **Tanner:** black American painter, 1859–1937, gained international acclaim for depiction of landscapes and biblical themes

¹⁷ **Municipal Pageant:** local Christmas pageant

¹⁸ **osteopathy:** the medical practice that concentrates on the relationship between muscles, bones, and organs

home in bed with my family—a colored family—and in a colored section of the town. A friend interceded with the doctor whom I had named. “No,” he said, “it is against the rules of the osteopathic association to serve Negroes.”

I waited a day—perhaps my foot would be better—then they talked bone-surgery. I am afraid of doctors. Three operations have been enough for me. Then a friend said, “try Christian Science.”¹⁹ Perhaps I had been taking matters too much in my own hands, I thought. Yes, that would be the thing. Would she find a practitioner for me?

Dear, loyal daughter of New England—as loyal to the Freedman’s children as she had been to them. She tried to spare me. “They will give you absent treatments and when you are better we will go down.” I regret now having said, “Where, to the back door?” What was the need of wounding my friend?

Besides, I have recovered some how—I am only a wee bit lame now. And *mirabili dictu!*²⁰ My spirit has knit together as well as my bones. My hat has grown useless. I am so glad to be well again, and back at my desk. My brown boys and girls have become reservoirs of interest. One is attending Radcliff²¹ this year. My neighborly friend needs me now to while away the hours for her. We’ve gone back to Chaucer²² and dug out forgotten romances to be read aloud. The little boy next door has a new family of Belgian hares²³ with which we play wonderful games. And the man and I have ordered seed catalogues for spring.

Health, a job, young minds and souls to touch, a friend, some books, a child, a garden, Spring! Who’d want a hat? *

19 **Christian Science:** a religion founded in 1866 that emphasizes healing through faith

20 ***mirabili dictu!***: Latin for “Wonderful to say!”

21 **Radcliff:** a college for women that is affiliated with Harvard University

22 **Chaucer:** English poet best known for “The Canterbury Tales”

23 **Belgian hares:** animals similar to rabbits but with longer ears and hind legs

LAUNDRY WORKERS' CHOIR

Vivian Morris

March 9, 1939

It was just about noon, early in March, at the West End Laundry downtown where black women work in the ironing department. The foreman there eyed me suspiciously and then curtly asked me, "What you want?" I showed him a Laundry Workers Union¹ card (which I borrowed from an unemployed laundry worker, in order to ensure my admittance) and told him that I used to work in this laundry and I thought I would drop in and take a friend of mine who worked there out to lunch.

He squinted at the clock and said, "Forty minutes before lunchtime. Too hot in here and how. Better wait outside."

"But," I remonstrated, "the heat doesn't bother me. I used to work in here."

"Say," he ignored my argument, "no fishy back talk and get outside." He watched me until I was out of sight and then he left the room. I promptly darted back into the ironing room where my friend worked.

The clanging of metal as the pistons banged into the sockets, the hiss of steam, women wearily pushing twelve pound irons, women mechanically tending machines—one, button half of the shirt done; two, top finished; three, sleeves pressed and the shirt is ready for the

¹ Laundry Workers Union: an organization established to protect the rights of laundry workers

PORTIA IRONING
1907

Leigh Richmond Miner, photographer

VIGNETTE

23

finishers—that was the scene that greeted me as I stood in the laundry's ironing department.

Shirts, thousands of white shirts that produced such a dazzling glare that the women who work in this department wore dark glasses to protect their eyes. The heat was almost unbearable; there seemed to be gushes of damp heat pushed at you from some invisible force in the mechanism of the machine. The smooth shiny-faced women worked in silence, occasionally dropping a word here and there, slowly wiping away dripping perspiration, then back to the machines, to the heavy irons without any outward show of emotion—no protest. The morning had been long and arduous, this was Wednesday—a heavy day, but thank God half the day was nearly over.

The heavy, strong-armed woman paused the iron, arms unflexed, and glanced at the clock. She smiled. Forty-five minutes until eating time. A soft contralto voice gave vent to a hymn, a cry of protest, as only the persecuted can sing, warm, plaintive, yet with a hidden buoyancy of exultation that might escape a person who has not also felt the pathos and hopes of a downtrodden, exploited people.

She sang, a trifle louder, "Could my tears forever flow, could my zeal no languor know. Thou must save, and thou alone, these fo' sin could not atone; In my hand no price I bring. Simply to his cross I cling."

The women tended their machines to the tempo of the hymn. They all joined in on the chorus, their voices blending beautifully, though untrained and unpolished they voiced the same soulful sentiment, "Rock of Ages, cleft for me. Let me hide myself in thee." Stanza after stanza rang from their lips, voicing oppression centuries old, but the song rang out that the inner struggle for real freedom still lit a fiery spark in the recesses of the souls of these toiling women.

The song ended as it began with soft words and humming. One squat, attractive young woman, who single-handedly handled three of the shirt machines, began a spirited hymn in militant tempo, with a gusto that negated the earlier attitude of fatigue the entire crew of the ironing room joined in either humming or singing. They were entering the final hour before lunch but to judge from the speed that the song had spurred them to, you would believe they were just beginning. The perspiration dripped copiously but it was forgotten. The chorus of the hymn zoomed forth.

"Dare to be a Daniel.² Dare to stand alone. Dare to have a purpose firm and make it known—and make it known."

The woman who finishes the laces with the twelve-pound iron wielded it with feathery swiftness and sang her stanza as the others hummed and put in a word here and there.

"Many a mighty gal is lost darin' not to stand."

The words of the next line were overcome by the rise in the humming, but the last line was clear and resonant.

"By joinin' Daniel's band." The chorus was filled with many pleasing ad-libs and then another took up a stanza. Finally the song died away.

Then the squat machine handler said to the finisher who guided the big iron, "Come on, baby, sing 'at song you made up by yourself. The Heavy Iron Blues." Without further coaxing the girl addressed as "baby" cleared her throat and began singing. "I lift my iron, Lawd, heavy as ton of nails. I lift my i'on, Lawd, heavy as a ton of nails, but it pays my rent cause my man's still layin' in jail. Got the blues, blues, got the heavy i'on blues; but my feet's in good shoes, so doggone the heavy i'on blues." Then she started the second stanza which is equally as light but carried some underlying food for thought. "I lif' my i'on, Lawd, all the livelong day. I lif' my i'on, Lawd, all the livelong day, cause dat furniture bill I know I got to pay, Got the blues, blues, got the heavy i'on blues, but, I pay my union dues, so doggone the heavy i'on blues."

There was a sound of whistles from the direction of the river and the girls dropped whatever they were doing and there were many sighs of relief. Lunchtime. ★

2 a **Daniel**: In the Bible, Daniel chose not to eat of the king's food as the others did.

RENT PARTIES

Frank Byrd

Due to the rapid influx of tenants to New York from 1910–1924 and to the prejudice of some landlords, African Americans were charged forty to sixty percent more for rent than were white Americans during the Harlem Renaissance. In order to afford the cost of living, rent parties were created in Harlem, a place already known for its celebrations. In the entries that follow, WPA¹ writer Frank Byrd describes the conditions and terms of rent parties in a piece he wrote in 1938.

August 23, 1938

The history of the Harlem house-rent party dates back as far as World War I. To understand what gave such an impetus and community-wide significance to this institution, it is necessary to get a picture of living conditions as they were in Harlem at the time.

During the early 1920s it is estimated that more than 200,000 black people migrated to Harlem: West Indians, Africans, and American blacks from the cotton and cane fields of the Deep South. They were all segregated in a small section of Manhattan about fifty blocks long and seven or eight blocks wide; an area teeming with life and activity. Housing experts have estimated that sometimes as many as 5,000 to 7,000 people have been known to live in a single block.

¹ WPA: Works Progress Administration, created in 1935 by President Franklin D. Roosevelt as a work program for the unemployed.

Needless to say, living conditions under such circumstances were anything but wholesome and pleasant. It was a typical slum and tenement area little different from many others in New York except that in Harlem rents were higher; always have been, in fact, since the great wartime migratory influx² of colored labor. Despite these exorbitant rents, apartments and furnished rooms, however dingy, were in great demand. Harlem property owners, for the most part Jews, began to live in comparative ease on the fantastic profits yielded by their antiquated dwellings. Before blacks inhabited them, they could be let for virtually a song. Afterward, however, they brought handsome incomes. The tenants, by hook or crook, barely managed to scrape together the rents. In turn they stuck their roomers for enough profit to yield themselves a meager living.

A four- or five-room apartment was (and still is) often crowded to capacity with roomers. In many instances, two entire families occupied space intended for only one family. When bedtime came, there was the feverish activity of moving furniture about, taking down cots, or preparing floor space as sleeping quarters. The same practice of overcrowding was followed by owners or lessees of private houses. Large rooms were converted into two or three small ones by the simple process of strategically placing beaver board partitions. These same cubby holes were rented at the price of full-sized rooms. In many houses, dining and living rooms were transformed into bedrooms soon after, if not before, midnight. Even "shift-sleeping" was not unknown in many places. During the night, a day worker used the room and soon after dawn a night worker moved in. Seldom did the bed have an opportunity to get cold.

In lower Harlem, sometimes referred to as the Latin Quarter and populated mostly by Cubans, Puerto Ricans, and West Indians, accommodations were worse. The Spanish have even less privacy than their American cousins. A three- or four-room apartment often housed ten or twelve people. Parents invariably had the two or three youngest children bedded down in the same room with themselves. The dining room, kitchen, and hallway were utilized as sleeping quarters by relatives or friends.

² **wartime migratory influx:** A large number of Blacks moved north to Harlem during World War I.

Blacks constituted the bulk of the Harlem population, however, and have since the war. At that time, there was a great demand for cheap industrial labor. Strong backed, physically capable blacks from the South were the answer to this demand. They came north in droves, beginning what turned out to be the greatest migration of blacks in the history of the United States. The good news about jobs spread like wild-fire throughout the Southlands. There was money, good money, to be made in the north, especially New York. New York—the wondrous, the magical city. The name alone implied glamour and adventure. It was a picture to definitely catch the fancy of restless, overworked sharecroppers³ and farmhands. And so, it was on to New York, the mecca of the New Negro, the modern Promised Land.

Not only southern, but thousands of West Indian blacks heeded the call. That was the beginning of housing conditions that have been a headache to a succession of political administrations and a thorn in the side of community and civic organizations that have struggled valiantly, but vainly, to improve them.

With the sudden influx of so many blacks, who instinctively headed for Harlem, property that had been a white elephant⁴ on the hands of many landlords immediately took an upward swing. The majority of landlords were delighted but those white property owners who made their homes in Harlem were panic-stricken.

At first, there were only rumblings of protest against this unwanted dark invasion but as the tide of color continued to rise, threatening to completely envelop the Caucasian brethren, they quickly abandoned their fight and fled to more remote parts; Brooklyn, Bronx, Queens, and Westchester. As soon as one or two black families moved into a block, the whites began moving out. Then the rents were raised. In spite of this, blacks continued to pour in until there was a solid mass of color in every direction.

Harlemites soon discovered that meeting these doubled, and sometimes tripled, rents was not so easy. They began to think of new ways to meet their ever-increasing deficits. Someone evidently got the idea of having a few friends in as paying party guests a few days before the

3 **sharecroppers:** tenant farmers who maintain others' land and are provided with money for supplies, housing, and food in return

4 **white elephant:** property that requires high maintenance and yields little profit

landlord's scheduled monthly visit. It was a happy timely thought. The guests had a good time and entered wholeheartedly into the spirit of the party. Besides, it cost each individual very little, probably much less than he would have spent in some public amusement place. It became a cheap way to help a friend in need. It was such a good, easy way out of one's difficulties that others decided to make use of it. The Harlem rent party was born.

Like the Charleston and Black Bottom, popular dances of the era, rent parties became an overnight rage. Here at last was a partial solution to the problem of excessive rents and dreadfully subnormal incomes. Family after family and hundreds of apartment tenants opened wide their doors, and went the originators of the idea one better, in fact, by having a party every Saturday night instead of once a month prior to the landlord's call. The accepted admission price became twenty five cents. It was also expected that the guests would partake freely of the fried chicken, pork chops, pigs feet, and potato salad, not to mention homemade "cawn" liquor⁵ that was for sale in the kitchen or at a makeshift bar in the hallway.

Saturday night became the night for these galas in Harlem. Some parties even ran well into Sunday morning, calling a halt only after seven or eight o'clock. Parties were eventually held on other nights also. Thursday particularly became a favorite in view of the fact that "sleep in" domestic workers had a day off and were free to kick up their heels without restraint. Not that any other weekday offered Saturday any serious competition. It always retained its popularity because of its all-round convenience as a party day. To begin with, the majority of working-class blacks, maids, porters, elevator operators, and the like were paid on Saturday and, more important than that, were not required to report to work on Sunday. Saturday, therefore, became the logical night to "pitch" and "carry on."

The Saturday night party, like any other universally popular diversion, soon fell into the hands of racketeers. Many small-time pimps and madams who, up to that time, had operated under cover in buffet flats, came out into the open and staged nightly so-called Rent Parties. This, of course, was merely a blind for more illegitimate activities that catered primarily to the desire of traveling salesmen, Pullman porters,

5 "cawn" liquor: alcohol made from corn

interstate truck drivers, and other transients for some place to stop and amuse themselves. Additional business could always be promoted from that large army of single or unattached males and females who prowled the streets at night in search of adventure in preference to remaining in their small, dingy rooms in some ill-ventilated flat. There were hundreds of young men and women, fresh from the hinterlands, unknown in New York and eager for the opportunity to meet people. So they would stroll the avenue until they saw some flat with a red, pink, or blue light in the window, the plunk of a tin-panny piano, and sounds of half-tipsy merrymaking fleeting out into the night air; then they would venture in, be greeted volubly by the hostess, introduced around, and eventually steered to the kitchen where refreshments were for sale.

Afterward, there was probably a night filled with continuous drinking, wild, grotesque dancing and crude lovemaking. But it was, at least, a temporary escape from humdrum loneliness and boredom.

The party givers were fully aware of the conditions under which the majority of these boys and girls lived, and decided to commercialize on it as much as possible. They began advertising their get-togethers on little business cards that were naïve attempts at poetic jingles. The following is a typical sample:

*There'll be brown skin mammas
High yallars too
And if you ain't got nothing to do
Come on up to ROY and SADIE'S
West 126 St. Sat. Night, May 12th.
There'll be plenty of pig feet
An lots of gin
Jus ring the bell
An come on in.*

They were careful, however, to give these cards only to the "right" people. Prohibition was still in effect and the police were more diligent about raiding questionable apartments than they were about known "gin mills" that flourished on almost every corner.

Despite this fact, the number of personal Saturday night responses, in answer to the undercover advertising, was amazing. The party

hostess, eager and glowing with freshly straightened hair, would roll back the living room carpets, dim the lights, seat the musicians (usually drummer, piano, and saxophone player), and, with the appearance of the first cash customer, give the signal that would officially get the "rug-cutting" under way. Soon afterward she would disappear into the kitchen in order to give a final, last-minute inspection to the refreshment counter: a table piled high with pig feet, fried chicken, fish, and potato salad.

The musicians, fortified with a drink or two of King Kong (home-made corn whiskey) would begin "beating out the rhythm" on their battered instruments while the dancers kept time with gleeful whoops, fantastic body gyrations and convulsions that appeared to be a cross between the itch and a primitive mating dance.

After some John bought a couple of rounds of drinks, things began to hum in earnest. The musicians instinctively improvised as they went along, finding it difficult, perhaps, to express the full intensity of their emotions through a mere arrangement, no matter how well written.

But the thing that makes the house-rent party (even now) so colorful and fascinating is the unequaled picture created by the dancers themselves. When the band gets hot, the dancers get hotter. They would stir, throw, or bounce themselves about with complete abandon; their wild, grotesque movements silhouetted in the semidarkness like flashes from some ancient tribal ceremony. They apparently worked themselves up into a frenzy but never lost time with the music despite their frantic acrobatics. Theirs is a coordination absolutely unexcelled. It is simple, primitive, inspired. As far as dancing is concerned, there are no conventions. You do what you like, express what you feel, take the lid off⁶ if you happen to be in the mood. In short, anything goes.

About one o'clock in the morning; hilarity reaches its peak. "The Boys," most of whom are hard-working, hard-drinking truck drivers, longshoremen, moving men, porters, or laborers, settle down to the serious business of enjoying themselves. They spin, tug, and fling their buxom, amiable partners in all directions. When the music finally stops, they are soaked and steaming with perspiration. "The girls," the majority of whom are cooks, laundresses, maids, or hairdressers, set their hats at a jaunty angle and kick up their heels with glee. Their tan-

⁶ take the lid off: slang for "let loose"

talizing grins and the uniformly wicked gleam in their eyes dare the full-blooded young bucks to do their darndest. They may have been utter strangers during the early part of the evening but before the night is over, they are all happily sweating and laughing together in the best of spirits.

Everything they do is free and easy; typical of that group of hard-working blacks [is that] most have few or no inhibitions and the fertility of imagination so necessary to the invention and unrestrained expression of new dance steps and rhythms.

The dancers organize little impromptu contests among themselves and this competition is often responsible for the birth of many new and original dance steps. The house-rent party takes credit for the innovation of the Lindy-Hop that was subsequently improved upon at the Savoy Ballroom. For years, it has been a great favorite with the regular rug-cutting crowd. Nothing has been able to supplant it, not even the Boogie-Woogie that has recently enjoyed a great wave of popularity in uptown New York.

Such unexpected delights as these made the house-rent party, during its infancy, a success with more than one social set. Once in a while a stray ofay (white person) or a small party of pseudo-artistic young blacks, the upper crust, the *crème-de-la-crème* of Black Manhattan society, would wander into one of these parties and gasp or titter (with cultured restraint, of course) at the primitive, untutored Negroes who apparently had so much fun wriggling their bodies about to the accompaniment of such mad, riotously abandoned music. Seldom, however, did these outsiders seem to catch the real spirit of the party, and as far as the rug-cutters were concerned, they simply did not belong.

With the advent of "Repeal,"⁷ the rent party went out, became definitely a thing of the past. Ironically, it was too dangerous to try to sell whiskey after it became legal because the laws regulating its sale were more stringent than those that forbid it to be sold at all.

So, the passing of Prohibition also killed one of the most colorful eras that Harlem, New York, and possibly America, has ever known. *

7 "Repeal": refers to the repeal of Prohibition, a law which prevented the manufacture, sale, or transportation of alcohol in the U.S. from 1919-1933

The Negro Speaks of Rivers
by Langston Hughes

I've known rivers:
I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the
 flow of human blood in human veins.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.
I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.
I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.
I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln
 went down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy
 bosom turn all golden in the sunset.

I've known rivers:
Ancient, dusky rivers.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

~1921

THE TROPICS IN NEW YORK

BANANAS RIPE AND GREEN, AND GINGER-ROOT,
COCOA IN PODS AND ALLIGATOR PEARS,
AND TANGERINES AND MANGOES AND GRAPEFRUIT,
FIT FOR THE HIGHEST PRIZE AT PARISH FAIRS,

SET IN THE WINDOW, BRINGING MEMORIES
OF FRUIT-TREES LADEN BY LOW-SINGING RILLS,
AND DEWY DAWNS, AND MYSTICAL BLUE SKIES
IN BENEDICTION OVER NUN-LIKE HILLS.

MY EYES GREW DIM, AND I COULD NO MORE GAZE;
A WAVE OF LONGING THROUGH MY BODY SWEEP,
AND, HUNGRY FOR THE OLD, FAMILIAR WAYS,
I TURNED ASIDE AND BOWED MY HEAD AND WEPT.

Claude McKay

rills: very small streams

HARLEM WINE

THIS IS NOT WATER RUNNING HERE,
THESE THICK REBELLIOUS STREAMS
THAT HURTLE FLESH AND BONE PAST FEAR
DOWN ALLEYWAYS OF DREAMS.

THIS IS A WINE THAT MUST FLOW ON
NOT CARING HOW OR WHERE,
SO IT HAS WAYS TO FLOW UPON
WHERE SONG IS IN THE AIR.

SO IT CAN WOO AN ARTFUL FLUTE
WITH LOOSE, ELASTIC LIPS,
ITS MEASUREMENT OF JOY COMPUTE
WITH BLITHE, ECSTATIC HIPPS.

Countee Cullen



BLUES
1929
Archibald J. Motley, Jr.