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TO "THE LAND OF HOPE"

Blacks in the Urban North

LIKE THE MEXICANS trekking to El Norte, southern blacks were migrating northward by the tens of thousands during the early twentieth century. They were going to the cities of the Midwest and the Northeast, where they joined European immigrants, including the Irish and Jews. Describing the powerful spirit behind this great black migration, the daughter of a sharecropper wrote: "And Black men's feet learned roads. Some said good-bye cheerfully... others fearfully, with terrors of unknown dangers in their mouths... others in their eagerness for distance said nothing. The daybreak found them gone. The wind said North. Trains said North. The tides and tongues said North, and men moved like the great herds before the glaciers." Blacks listened and heard the message:

> *Some are coming on the passenger,*
> *Some are coming on the freight,*
> *Others will be found walking,*
> *For none have time to wait.*[1]

An exodus was under way. "The Afro-American population of the large cities of the North and West," the *New York Age* reported in 1907, "is being constantly fed by a steady stream of new people from the Southern States." Between 1910 and 1920, the black

population jumped from 5,700 to 40,800 in Detroit, 8,400 to 34,400 in Cleveland, 44,000 to 109,400 in Chicago, and 91,700 to 152,400 in New York. W. E. B. Du Bois noted: "There can be no doubt of the drift of the black South northward."[2]

"The Wind Said North"

All over the South, blacks went to bed at night and woke up in the morning thinking and talking about the message of the wind, and then suddenly one day, they found themselves swept up in the migration "fever." Nothing could restrain their boundlessness. "Everybody seems to be asleep about what is going on right under their noses," a Georgia newspaper stated. "That is, everybody but those farmers who have awakened up of mornings recently to find every male Negro over 21 gone—to Cleveland, to Pittsburgh, to Chicago." After half the black population left her little town in Mississippi, a woman said: "If I stay here any longer, I'll go wild. Every time I go home I have to pass house after house of all my friends who are in the North and prospering. I've been trying to hold on here and keep my property. There ain't enough people here I now know to give me a decent burial." To be left behind was to feel a sudden loneliness:

I've watched the trains as they disappeared
Behind the clouds of smoke,
Carrying the crowds of working men
To the land of hope.[3]

On one Georgia plantation, a landlord was surprised to find all of his tenants gone, except two old men. Uncle Ben and Uncle Joe were too poor to purchase train tickets. They sorrowfully told their landlord that everyone else had abandoned him, but that they had loyally remained behind on the plantation. The landlord gave the two men some money because they promised to stay and work the crops. Immediately after he left, the old-timers took the money and boarded the train to join their companions in the North.[4]

Like the immigrants from Asia, Mexico, and Europe, southern blacks were driven by particular "pushes." After emancipation, most blacks had been forced to become sharecroppers and tenant farmers. Dependent on white landlords and enslaved by debts, they complained:

Working hard on southern soil,
Someone softly spoke;
'Toil and toil and toil and toil,
And yet I'm always broke.'

The ordeal of sharecropping was crushing: at the end of the harvest, tenant farmers were often disappointed to find themselves only deeper in debt. Though they were free, many were in economic bondage. "There was," they had painfully come to realize, "no rise to the thing."

Where I come from
folks work hard
all their lives
until they die
and never own no part
of earth nor sky.

Their economic situation became extremely dire as floods destroyed their farms and insects ravaged their cotton crops.

Boll-weevil in de cotton
Cut worm in de cotton,
Debil in de white man,
Wah's goin' on.[5]

Meanwhile, there were "pulls" from the North. World War I had virtually cut off the flow of European immigrants, reducing their numbers from 1,200,000 in 1914 to only 110,000 in 1918. Facing tremendous labor shortages, factory managers dispatched labor recruiters to the South. "These same factories, mills and workshops that have been closed to us, through necessity are being opened to us," a black newspaper in Chicago reported. "We are to be given a chance, not through choice but because it is expedient. Prejudice vanishes when the almighty dollar is on the wrong side of the balance sheet." Traveling in the South, journalist Ray Stannard Baker reported: "Trains were backed into several Southern cities and hundreds of Negroes were gathered up in a day, loaded into the cars, and whirled away to the North. I was told of instances in which Negro teamsters left their horses standing in the streets, or deserted their jobs and went to the trains without notifying their employers or even going home." A black worker told Baker: "The

best wages I could make [in Georgia] was $1.25 or $1.50 a day. I went to work at a dye house at Newark, N.J., at $2.75 a day, with a rent-free room to live in. The company paid my fare North."[6]

Like Mexicans, blacks were following the jobs. "More positions open than men for them," announced the headlines of the *Chicago Defender,* which was owned by black editor Robert Abbott. Article after article described the great labor shortage and the willingness of employers to "give men a chance to learn the trade at $2.25 a day." Classified job listings beckoned:

> Men wanted at once. Good steady employment for colored. Thirty and 39½ cents per hour. Weekly payments. Good warm sanitary quarters free.... Towns of Newark and Jersey City.
>
> Laborers wanted for foundry, warehouse and yard work. Excellent opportunity to learn trades, paying good money. Start $2.50–$2.75 per day. Extra for overtime.[7]

A young black woman asked the *Defender* to send her information about employment in the North:

> *Dear Sirs:* I am writeing to you all asking a favor of you all. I am a girl of seventeen. I now feel like I aught to go to work. And I would like very very well for you all to please forward me to a good job. I am tired of down hear in this ____/ I am afraid to say.[8]

Meanwhile, from the North, blacks sent home glowing reports about their jobs. "M_____, old boy," one of them wrote, "I was promoted on the first of the month. I was made first assistant to the head carpenter...and was raised to $95 a month. I should have been here 20 years ago. I just begin to feel like a man. It's a great deal of pleasure in knowing that you have got some privilege. My children are going to the same school with the whites and I dont have to umble to no one. I have registered—Will vote the next election and there isnt any 'ye sir' and 'no sir'—its all yes and no and Sam and Bill." "I am well and thankful to say I am doing well," wrote a black woman who had recently arrived in Chicago. "I work in Swifts packing Co., in the sausage department.... We get $1.50 a day.... Tell your husband work is plentiful here and he wont have to loaf if he want to work." A South Carolina newspaper described the good fortune of a Greenwood County farm boy who had gone North to work for twenty-five dollars a week. "He came home last week to assist his people on the farm and brought more

than one hundred dollars and plenty of nice clothes. He gave his mother fifty dollars, and put fifty dollars in the Greenwood bank and had some pocket change left."[9]

But there was something more, something deeper than economics: a new generation of blacks was coming of age. "I have men," a white plantation owner stated, "who were slaves on the place.... They have always lived there and will probably die there, right on the plantation where they were born." The old former slaves were passing away, however, and so was the racial etiquette of deference and subordination they represented. "The South," W. E. B. Du Bois observed, "laments to-day the slow, steady disappearance of a certain type of Negro—the faithful, courteous slave of other days, with his dignified...humility."[10]

In place of such old-time Negroes, there were younger blacks, born after the Civil War and after slavery, an institution and way of life that seemed to them in the far distant past. To them, accounts of slavery "were but childhood tales." Slavery was not something they had experienced, something they could remember. They did not feel, as did the older generation, the lingering vividness and sedimentary power of the peculiar institution. White southerners frequently complained that this new generation was "worthless." Lacking the habits of "diligence, order, faithfulness" of those who had been born in slavery, they "rarely remain[ed] long enough under the supervision of any planter to allow him sufficient time to teach them." Compared to the "older class of colored labor," men who were "pretty well up in years" and who constituted a "first rate class of labor," the blacks of the "younger class" were "discontented and wanted to be roaming."[11]

Most of the blacks moving north belonged to this post–Civil War generation, restless, dissatisfied, unwilling to mask their true selves and accommodate to traditional subservient roles. In a statement to a Labor Department investigator in 1916, a black man explained this generational difference:

> My father was born and brought up as a slave. He never knew anything else until after I was born. He was taught his place and was content to keep it. But when he brought me up he let some of the old customs slip by. But I know there are certain things that I must do and I do them, and it doesn't worry me; yet in bringing up my own son, I let some more of the old customs slip by. For a year I have been keeping him from going to Chicago; but he tells me this is his last crop; that in the fall he's going. He says, "When a young white

man talks rough to me, I can't talk rough to him. You can stand that; I can't. I have some education, and inside I has the feelings of a white man. I'm going."[12]

"Tired of the South," these young blacks "wanted to make a change." A migrant declared that he could not live in North Carolina "and be a man and be treated like a man." A black in Mississippi told Ray Stannard Baker that he was planning to move to Indiana: "They're Jim Crowin' us down here too much; there's no chance for a coloured man who has any self-respect." "The exodus... of colored people from the sunny South to the colder states of the North," the *Richmond Reformer* explained, "has its very birth out of the 'Jim Crow' and 'Segregation' conditions which now exist in the cities of the South and which have crowded colored people into narrow unsanitary or unhealthy quarters... segregating them like cattle, hogs or sheep." More intolerable than segregation was racial violence. "For every lynching that takes place," noted Booker T. Washington in 1903, "... a score of colored people leave... for the city."

Yes, we are going to the north!
I don't care to what state,
Just so I cross the Dixon Line,
From this southern land of hate,
Lynched and burned and shot and hung,
And not a word is said.[13]

Young blacks spoke loudly with their feet: they left the South in search of what Du Bois called "the possibility of escaping caste at least in its most aggravating personal features." Possessing "a certain sort of soul, a certain kind of spirit," they found the "narrow repression and provincialism of the South simply unbearable." Why stay in the South, declared the *Chicago Defender,* "where your mother, sister and daughter are raped and burned at the stake; where your father, brother and sons are treated with contempt and hung to a pole, riddled with bullets at the least mention that he does not like the way he is treated"? In letters to the *Defender,* blacks described their flight from southern racism:

Dear Sir Bro.... I seen in the Defender where you was helping us a long in securing a posission as brickmason plaster cementers stone mason. I am writing to you for advice about comeing north.... We expect to do whatever you says. There is nothing here for the colored man but a hard time wich these southern crackers gives us.

They refused to be victimized by southern police abuse:

Dear Sir: I am writing you for information to come north [and] to see if there is any way that you can help me by giving me the names of some of the firms that will send me a transportation as we are down here where we have to be shot down lik rabbits for every little orfence as I seen an orcurince hapen down here this after noon when three depties from the shrief office... come out and found some of our raice mens in a crap game and it makes me want to leave the south worse than I ever did.

And they demanded their dignity:

Dear Sir: wanted to leave the South and Go and Place where a man will Be any thing Except A Ker I thought would write you for Advise As where would be a Good Place for a Comporedly young man That want to Better his Standing who has a very Promising young Family. I am 30 years old and have Good Experience in Freight Handler and Can fill Position from Truck to Agt. would like Chicago or Philadelphia But I dont Care where so long as I Go where a man is a man.[14]

Free from the shadow of slavery, these young people were able to imagine new possibilities for themselves in the North. "I didn't want to remain in one little place all my days," one of them stated. "I wanted to get out and see something of the world." Hoping to become a writer, a young black man went North during the 1920s. "I went to Chicago as a migrant from Mississippi," Richard Wright recalled. "And there in that great iron city, that impersonal, mechanical city, amid the steam, the smoke... there in that self-conscious city, that city so deadly dramatic and stimulating, we caught whispers of the meanings that life could have, and we were pushed and pounded by facts much too big for us." Like novelist Toni Morrison's Joe and Violet, country people who moved from Virginia to New York City, these migrants were responding to the inner urges of "their stronger, riskier selves." Arriving in the northern cities, they shouted: "At last, at last, everything's ahead."[15]

By 1930, some two million blacks had migrated to the cities of the North and changed the course of history. "The migration is probably, next to emancipation, the most noteworthy event which has ever happened to the Negro in America," observed Ray Stannard Baker in 1917. "Negroes are acting for themselves, self-consciously, almost for the first time in their history. They did not win their freedom: it was a gift thrust upon them by the North. But in the present migration..., they are moving of their own accord."[16]

As they traveled to the North, they spoke excitedly about the "Flight out of Egypt," "Bound for the Promised Land," and "Going into Canaan." Jeremiah Taylor of Mississippi had been resigned to remain on his farm until his son returned from town one day and told him that folks were leaving "like Judgment day." After a group of migrants crossed the Ohio River, they knelt down in prayer and then sang: "I Done Come out of the Land of Egypt with the Good News." "The cry of 'Goin' Nawth' hung over the land like the wail over Egypt at the death of the first-born," reported a sharecropper's daughter.[17]

"Railroads, hardroads, dirt roads, side roads, roads were in the minds of the black South and all roads led North."[18]

The Crucible of the City

As they journeyed to "the land of hope," the migrants carried not only hope but also uncertainties. Richard Wright recalled how he had left the South to fling himself into the "unknown." The *Defender* described the migrants' feelings of "trembling and fear": "They were going—they didn't know where—among strange people, strange customs." A song captured their mood of ambivalence:

I'm a poor boy and I'm a stranger blowed in
your town,
Yes I am,
I'm a poor boy and I'm a stranger blowed
in your town,
I'm a poor boy and I'm a stranger blowed in
your town,
I'm goin' where a friend can be found.

But their expectations of freedom exceeded their uneasiness about becoming strangers. And so they went to northern cities, especially to Chicago and New York.[19]

Chicago was "the mouth of the stream of Negroes from the South." Emmett J. Scott's metaphor aptly described this brawling midwestern city—the home of the *Defender,* which had been urging young blacks to come north. Chicago was also the terminus of the Illinois Central Railroad, with its rail lines connected to the small towns of Mississippi, Arkansas, and Louisiana. Chicago was a dynamic industrial center, spawning jobs and inspiring dreams.[20]

In 1900, Chicago had a black population of only 30,000. "I lived on Lincoln Street—there were foreigners there," a black resident remembered, describing the integrated neighborhoods of the time. "My children used to go to white kids' parties, for where we lived there was nothing much but foreigners. There was only one other colored family in that block." Only one ward in the entire city was 25 percent black, while 19 out of 35 wards were about .5 percent black. Twenty years later, the black population jumped to 109,000, concentrated in the predominantly black neighborhoods of the South Side.[21]

The black migration to Chicago sparked an explosion of white resistance. "A new problem, demanding early solution, is facing Chicago," the *Tribune* warned. "It pertains to the sudden and unprecedented influx of southern Negro laborers." The newspaper depicted the newcomers as carefree and lazy: "In a house at Thirty-second and Wabash eight or ten Negroes were lying about on the floor, and one was picking a banjo and singing a song the chorus of which ended 'Mo' rain, mo' rest, / Mo' niggers sleep in de nest.'" Determined to repel this Negro "invasion," several hundred white residents organized the Hyde Park Improvement Protective Club, which announced that real estate agents must not sell homes to blacks in white blocks. "The districts which are now white," a leader of the organization declared, "must remain white. There will be no compromise."[22]

The conflict over housing intensified during World War I as blacks responded to the labor needs of Chicago's war-related industries. In 1917, the Chicago Real Estate Board pointed out that southern blacks were "pouring into Chicago at the rate of ten thousand a month," and warned that this influx would precipitate a decline in property values. A year later, the Kenwood and Hyde Park Property Owners' Association urged whites not to sell or rent to blacks. Whites "won't be driven out," the association vowed; they would prevent a Negro "take-over" and keep their neighborhood "clear of undesirables at all cost."[23]

Meanwhile, the schools became racial battlegrounds. An African American recalled: "The Italian boys were so low morally. They made several attempts to rape some of the girls... [they] used to gang us.... We were always able to have a good fight and have some blood shed." "I remember how I used to fight with the white children, especially the Dago children," said another black. "They would call out to us colored children, 'Nigger, nigger, never die, black face and China eye,' and when I catch one and get through with him he would think *he* was black."[24]

Similarly, the workplace became a terrain of competition and conflict. Before the war, blacks were largely restricted to employment as servants. In 1910, over 60 percent of the women were domestic servants or laundresses; close to half of all the employed men worked as porters, servants, waiters, and janitors. Though generally excluded from industrial employment, blacks were allowed to cross caste labor lines occasionally as strikebreakers. Managers used them as scabs during the 1904 stockyards strike and the teamsters strike a year later. The *Broad Ax,* a black weekly, criticized employers for "bringing hundreds and hundreds of colored men here from the remote parts of the South... to temporarily serve as strikebreakers for such Negro-hating concerns as Marshall Field and Company, Mandel Brothers and Montgomery Ward and Company, who [had] no use for Negroes in general except to use them as brutish clubs to beat their white help over the head." After the settlement of both strikes, the black workers were discharged.[25]

The war, however, generated a sharp demand for labor and opened expanded opportunities for blacks in industries. By 1920, the majority of black men were employed in factories rather than domestic and personal services. Women made similar, although smaller, inroads—15 percent of them had become factory operatives. They had been eager to get out of domestic work. Employers "almost make you a slave," complained a woman who had quit her job as a maid to work in a mail-order house. Personal service reminded blacks of the South, where they had been dependent on whites and closely supervised. Like the Irish maids who left the "service" for factory work, many black women wanted more autonomy. "I'll never work in nobody's kitchen but my own any more," exclaimed one of them who was employed in a box factory. "No indeed! That's the one thing that makes me stick to this job. You do have some time to call your own." For the first time in their lives, black men and women were working in industries, making what they considered good wages—42 cents an hour in the packing houses and even higher rates in manufacturing.[26]

In the stockyards and packing houses, managers deliberately employed African Americans in order to subvert the union activities of white workers. Seeking to keep the workforce racially divided, they hired a black promoter, Richard Parker, to set up a black company union, the American Unity Labor Union. As the front man for the interests of management, Parker played on black suspicions of the white labor movement and pitted the company union blacks against the white workers. He distributed twenty thousand handbills warning blacks not to join the "white man's union." One of his advertisements published in a black newspaper declared:

> GET A SQUARE DEAL WITH YOUR OWN RACE
>
> Time has come for Negroes to do now or never. Get together and stick together is the call of the Negro. Like all other races, make your own way; other races have made their unions for themselves. They are not going to give it to you just because you join his union. Make a union of your own race; union is strength....
>
> This union does not *believe in strikes.* We believe all differences between laborers and capitalists can be arbitrated. Strike is our last motive if any at all.[27]

The Stockyards Labor Council, a white union, tried to counter management's divide-and-conquer campaign by launching its own recruitment drive among black workers. They issued appeals for interracial working-class unity: "The bosses think that because we are of different color and different nationalities we should fight each other. We're going to fool them and fight for a common cause—a square deal for all." At a union rally of black and white workers, a council leader declared: "It does me good to see such a checkerboard crowd—by that I mean all of the workers here are not standing apart in groups, one race huddled in one bunch, one nationality in another. You are all standing shoulder to shoulder as men, regardless of whether your face is white or black."[28]

The council failed to organize the black laborers. "To be frank," an official conceded, "we have not had the support from the colored workers which we expected. Our method of propaganda may have been weak somewhere; probably we do not understand the colored workers as we do ourselves.... Be that as it may, the

colored worker has not responded to the call of unionism." Actually, blacks did not respond because they lacked familiarity with unions, and many did not trust the white union.[29]

Racial competition in the workplace added fuel to social antagonisms in the neighborhoods where tensions were literally beginning to explode. In 1917, bombs destroyed the homes of several black families; a year later, a letter warned black tenants on Vincennes Avenue: "We are going to BLOW these FLATS TO HELL and if you don't want to go with them you had better move at once." Shortly after, three bombs went off in the neighborhood. In 1919, several bombings were aimed at the offices of real estate agents who had sold homes to blacks in white neighborhoods. Altogether scores of bombings resulted in two deaths and many injuries as well as the destruction of property worth thousands of dollars.[30]

To add to the terror, white gangs like Ragan's Colts attacked blacks in the streets and parks, especially Washington Park, which separated the black neighborhoods from the white neighborhoods of Hyde Park. On June 21, 1919, white hoodlums killed two black men, reportedly because they wanted to "get a nigger." White gangs posted notices on the boundaries between white and black neighborhoods, threatening to "get all the niggers on the Fourth of July." Afraid and angry, blacks prepared to defend themselves. African-American lawyer Beauregard Moseley warned that blacks had been pushed to the limit by racial violence and were "resolved to meet force with force."[31]

The Fourth of July passed, apparently without incident, but then the tinderbox of race hatred exploded on July 27. On that Sunday afternoon, Eugene Williams had been swimming at the segregated Twenty-ninth Street beach. Williams, who was clinging to a floating railroad tie, had drifted over to the white side of the beach. Somehow he drowned. Blacks at the scene claimed that Williams went down after he had been hit by stones thrown by whites. A cry swept across the beach: "White people have killed a Negro." Frustrated because the police refused to make any arrests, some blacks attacked several white men. Hours later, in retaliation, white gangs beat some blacks who had wandered into white neighborhoods. General rioting broke out, leaving two people dead and over fifty injured. The next day, violence flared up again. As blacks tried to return home from work at the stockyards, they were dragged from streetcars and assaulted by white mobs; armed whites in cars invaded black neighborhoods, shooting indiscriminately at homes. Innocent whites working at

businesses located in the black areas were beaten by blacks seeking revenge. The rioting continued throughout the week until the militia was finally able to restore order. The casualty figures were grimly high—23 blacks and 15 whites were killed, while 342 blacks and 178 whites were injured.[32]

In response to racism in Chicago, African Americans decided to promote black solidarity and ethnic enterprise. "We should hasten to build up our own marts and trades," a black minister told his congregation, "so we can give employment and help to provide against such a day as we are now experiencing." Political and business leaders advised blacks to turn inward and develop their own communities with earnings from the steel mills, stockyards, and factories: "Why should these dollars be spent with white men? If white men are so determined that Negroes must live separate and apart, why not beat them at their own game?" Blacks were encouraged to establish their own banks, insurance companies, and stores.[33]

Chicago was the "Black Metropolis," but New York City was the home of Harlem, "the Negro Capital of the World." Blacks had been there since the seventeenth century: as slaves, they had constructed the original wagon road on Manhattan and also worked on farms and estates in what was called New Amsterdam. Their presence continued after the transfer of the Dutch colony to England and after the American Revolution. In 1790, African Americans constituted nearly a third of the population living in a section known as Harlem. But their presence gradually decreased over the years, and by 1890, Harlem had become predominantly white and wealthy. The community was soon to be rapidly transformed. Just as the black exodus from the South was beginning, a housing boom in Harlem collapsed.

The glut of vacant apartments attracted the attention of black real estate agents, especially Philip A. Payton, Jr. His strategy was simple: lease apartment houses from white landlords and then rent them to blacks at a profit. One of his advertisements in a real estate journal announced:

> Colored Tenements Wanted
>
> Colored man makes a speciality of managing colored tenements; references; bond. Philip A. Payton, Jr., agent and broker, 67 West 134th.

Payton explained: "By opening for colored tenants first a house on one block and then a house in another I have finally succeeded in

securing over two hundred and fifty first class flats and private dwellings."[34]

Payton's penetration, however, encountered resistance from white residents. "Harlem has been devastated as a result of the steady influx of Negroes," a longtime resident complained in 1913. Some white homeowners organized to counter the black "invasion" and the "black hordes." They signed restrictive covenants which stated that their buildings not be leased or sold to "colored" persons. The president of the Harlem Property Owners' Improvement Corporation declared: "It is the question of whether the white man will rule Harlem or the negro." He urged whites to drive the blacks out of Harlem and "send them to the slums where they belonged." But white property owners often found that their choice was to rent to blacks or not rent at all. In order to make their own loan payments, many of them had to yield; reluctantly, they posted notices on their buildings:

> NOTICE
>
> We have endeavored for some time to avoid turning over this house to colored tenants, but as a result of...rapid changes in conditions...this issue has been forced upon us.[35]

"The 'border line' which separated whites and Negroes 'rapidly receded' each year," observed historian Gilbert Osofsky, "and by 1914 some 50,000 Negroes lived in the neighborhood." The border kept moving: between 1920 and 1930, 118,792 whites left the neighborhood, while 87,417 blacks arrived. Symbolically, Temple Israel of Harlem became Mount Olivet Baptist Church. Harlem had become the home of more than two-thirds of all the blacks living in Manhattan—the "largest colony of colored people, in similar limits, in the world."[36]

Soon Harlem became overcrowded. In 1925, the population density was 336 persons per acre compared to only 223 for Manhattan as a whole. Meanwhile, landlords were allowing their apartments to deteriorate, and tenants were complaining about broken pipes, leaking roofs, unsanitary conditions, and rats. Unable to move to other areas of the city because of discrimination, blacks were forced to pay higher rents, spending approximately 33 percent of their income on rent, compared to 20 percent for working-class whites. Housing costs were especially burdensome for Harlem blacks because they were confined to low-wage employment.

According to sociologist E. Franklin Frazier, New York had two types of businesses—those that employed "Negroes in menial positions" and those that employed "no Negroes at all." While some black women worked in the garment industry, most of them were domestic servants. The men generally worked as longshoremen and teamsters or as elevator operators, janitors, porters, chauffeurs, and waiters.[37]

Though African Americans lived in congested housing and were employed in low-wage jobs, they felt a surge of power and a sense of pride. Coming to Harlem in search of "the land of hope," they had broken the chains of racial subordination forged by centuries of slavery. Harlem seemed to be a place where black people could begin anew in America. "I sit on my stoop on Seventh Avenue," one migrant declared, "and gaze at the sunkissed folk strolling up and down and think that surely Mississippi is here in New York, in Harlem, yes." This feeling of freedom inspired them to create a community that represented more than just a place where blacks lived. Restless and hopeful, they were ready, eager to listen to a charismatic leader articulate what was on fire within them—fierce dreams of dignity refusing to be deferred. Suddenly, in 1916, Marcus Garvey arrived in Harlem. "Up, you mighty race," he declared, "you can accomplish what you will."[38]

Black Pride in Harlem

Garvey personified a new stirring, a vision of black pride sweeping through Harlem like a fresh breeze blowing north from Jamaica. In his autobiography, he recalled how he was unaware of race as a young child on the Caribbean island: "To me, at home in my early days, there was no difference between white and black." One of his friends was a "little white girl." "We were two innocent fools who never dreamed of a race feeling and problem. As a child, I went to school with white boys and girls, like all other negroes. We were not called negroes then." But at the age of fourteen, Garvey was told by his friend that her parents had decided to send her away to school and that she was not to write to him because he was a "nigger." The incident shook Garvey: "It was then that I found for the first time that there was some difference in humanity, and that there were different races, each having its own separate and distinct social life."[39]

A few years later, during a trip to Europe, Garvey began to formulate his ideology of black nationalism. "You are black," meaning inferior, he had been told. The insult led Garvey to

ask: "Where is the black man's Government? Where is his King and his kingdom? Where is his President, his country, and his ambassador, his army, his navy, his men of big affairs?" Unable to find these symbols of power, Garvey declared: "I will help to make them." His imagination began to soar as he envisioned "a new world of black men, not peons, serfs, dogs and slaves, but a nation of sturdy men making their impress upon civilization and causing a new light to dawn upon the human race." In 1914, Garvey returned to Jamaica, where he founded the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) to unite all the "Negro peoples of the world" and establish a black nation in Africa.[40]

In 1916, Garvey decided to relocate the base for his movement in Harlem. The UNIA exploded with activity—colorful parades in Harlem led by Garvey dressed in military uniform, the publication of *The Negro World,* the establishment of small-business enterprises like grocery stores and laundries in the community, and the launching of the Black Star Line. During the 1920s, Garvey's organization had 9,000 members in Chicago, 6,000 in Philadelphia and Cincinnati, 4,000 in Detroit, and over 30,000 in New York.[41]

Garvey offered a message that electrified many blacks in Harlem and many other ghettos of urban America: the color of their skin was beautiful, and Africa had a glorious past. "When Europe was inhabited by a race of cannibals, a race of savages, naked men, heathens and pagans, Africa was peopled with a race of cultured black men, who were masters in art, science, and literature." Many Harlemites found their voices in their new leader. "Now we have started to speak," Garvey declared, "and I am only the forerunner of an awakened Africa that shall never go back to sleep." Garvey depicted a glorious future for blacks: "We are the descendants of a suffering people; we are the descendants of a people determined to suffer no more." To overthrow oppression, they must reclaim their continent: "If Europe is for the Europeans, then Africa shall be for the black peoples of the world. We say it; we mean it.... The other races have countries of their own and it is time for the 400,000,000 Negroes to claim Africa for themselves." A song of the Garvey movement urged:

> *Advance, advance to victory,*
> *Let Africa be free;*
> *Advance to meet the foe*
> *With the might*
> *Of the red, the black, and the green.*

Red symbolized the blood of the race, black their color, and green the greatness of Africa's future.[42]

Influenced by Booker T. Washington's philosophy of black self-help and independence, Garvey promoted black capitalism and called upon his followers to invest in his shipping company: "The Black Star Line Corporation presents to every Black Man, Woman, and Child the opportunity to climb the great ladder of industrial and commercial progress. If you have ten dollars, one hundred dollars, or one or five thousand dollars to invest for profit, then take out shares in the Black Star Line, Inc. This corporation is chartered to trade on every sea and all waters. The Black Star Line will turn over large profits and dividends to stockholders, and operate to their interest even whilst they will be asleep." Some 40,000 blacks bought 155,510 shares amounting to three-quarters of a million dollars.[43]

The most prominent symbol of the UNIA, the Black Star Line became a slippery slope for Garvey. In 1922, the leader was arrested, charged with using the mails to defraud by advertising and selling stock for a nonexistent ship. According to Garvey, "a sum of $25,000 was paid by one of the officers of the corporation to a man to purchase a ship, but the ship was never obtained and the money was never returned." Garvey's managers had also made mistakes in their purchase of ships that required very costly repairs, and the corporation became mired in debt. The government's case was weak, for it could not prove intent to commit fraud. But Garvey was found guilty and sentenced to five years in prison. From the Atlanta penitentiary, Garvey sent a message: "My work is just begun. Be assured that I planted well the seed of Negro or black nationalism which cannot be destroyed even by the foul play that has been meted out to me." Released two years later by a presidential pardon, Garvey was deported to Jamaica as an undesirable alien.[44]

Garvey was gone, but the powerful dreams he represented remained in the hearts of Harlemites. The *New York News* declared that Garvey had "awakened the race consciousness and race pride of the masses of Africans everywhere as no man ever did... save Booker T. Washington." The *Spokesman,* a black publication, echoed: "Garvey made thousands think, who had never thought before. Thousands who merely dreamed dreams, now see visions."[45]

In the visions of black intellectuals, Harlem became what Langston Hughes called the center of the "New Negro Renais-

sance," "a great magnet" pulling them from everywhere. "More than Paris, or the Shakespeare country, or Berlin, or the Alps," Hughes said, "I wanted to see Harlem, the greatest Negro city in the world." Hughes would remember the "thrill of the underground ride to Harlem": "I went up the steps and out into the bright September sunlight. Harlem! I stood there, dropped my bags, took a deep breath and felt happy again."[46]

Drawing their inspiration and materials from black folks and their culture, Harlem's black intellectuals created a literature that rebelled against Middletown America. Actually, many of them had come from the black middle class. In his sociological profile of these writers, Robert Bone found that "the parents of the Renaissance novelists were 55 percent professional and 45 percent white collar." Hughes complained that his father, a wealthy rancher, was "interested only in making money." Many of the writers had attended college, and they felt especially hurt by the stings of discrimination and inequality. Educational and economic success, they had come to realize, did not mean social acceptance. To these middle-class black intellectuals, Harlem held out the promise of what Alain Locke called the "New Negro." The "mass movement of the urban immigration of Negroes" was "projected on the plane of an increasingly articulate elite." In the "largest Negro community in the world," "the peasant, the student, the business man, the professional man, artist, poet, musician, adventurer and worker, preacher and criminal, exploiter and social outcast" were coming together. They were forming an imagined community based on a vision of black pride. "In Harlem," Locke announced, "Negro life is seizing upon its first chances for group expression and self-determination. It is—or promises at least to be—a race capital."[47]

The "New Negro" would be "a collaborator and participant in American civilization," and black intellectuals would be in the forefront of this great movement. But first blacks had to learn how to accept themselves. In his essay "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," Hughes explained that the tragic problem of black intellectuals was denial: they did not want to be black or write about black life. "One of the most promising of the young Negro poets said to me once, 'I want to be a poet—not a Negro poet,' meaning I believe, 'I want to write like a white poet'; meaning subconsciously, 'I would like to be a white poet'; meaning behind that, 'I would like to be white.'" Such a flight from black

identity was bound to undermine his artistic creativity. "I was sorry the young man said that," Hughes continued, "for no great poet has ever been afraid of being himself. And I doubted then that, with his desire to run away spiritually from his race, this boy would ever be a great poet." Hughes understood this denial, for he knew that there was a "mountain standing in the way of any true Negro art in America—this urge within the race toward whiteness, this desire to pour racial identity into the mold of American standardization, and to be as little Negro and as much American as possible."[48]

To overcome the "racial mountain," Hughes insisted, black writers had to declare boldly: "I am a Negro—and beautiful!" The lives of black folks had to be celebrated, for theirs was a counterculture affirming the joy of life rather than the fear of spontaneity. Simple people, they had their songs and a nip of gin on Saturday nights; they did not care to be like whites, obsessed with work and materialistic success. Black folks, Hughes insisted, furnished a "wealth of colorful, distinctive material for any artist" because they had been able to preserve their "own individuality in the face of American standardizations." "Perhaps these common people will give to the world its truly great Negro artist," Hughes declared, "the one who is not afraid to be himself."[49]

In his own poems, Hughes described his search for identity. Was he African? he had wondered. "So long, so far away" was Africa; "not even memories" were "alive." "I did not feel the rhythms of the primitive surging through me," he explained apologetically. "I was only an American Negro—who had loved the surface of Africa and the rhythms of Africa—but I was not Africa. I was Chicago and Kansas City and Broadway and Harlem." Still, though the drums were "subdued and time-lost," Hughes felt he could hear a song of Africa through "some vast mist of race."[50] Hughes was struggling to create an identity that was both African and American, a racial self symbolized by the rivers of both continents.

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 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.[51]

In contrast to Hughes, Jean Toomer decided that his struggle against the "racial mountain" compelled him to go not to Harlem, but to the rural South. As a young writer searching for his roots, Toomer wandered from university to university—Wisconsin, Chicago, New York University, City College of New York. He was the son of a white father and a mulatto mother. His father, a planter, had abandoned the family shortly after Toomer was born, and Jean and his mother lived in Washington, D.C. In 1921, he left New York to teach in a black school in rural Georgia. In the South, black folk culture beckoned, and Toomer felt something irresistible surge within him. In a letter to a friend in 1922, Toomer described the epiphany he had experienced:

> Within the last two or three years...my growing need for artistic expression has pulled me deeper and deeper into the Negro group.... It has stimulated and fertilized whatever creative talent I may contain within me. A visit to Georgia last fall was the starting point of almost everything of worth that I have done. I heard folk-songs come from the lips of Negro peasants. I saw the rich dusky beauty that I had heard many false accounts about, and of which till then, I was somewhat skeptical. And a deep part of my nature, a part that I had repressed, sprang suddenly to life and responded to them."[52]

What came out of this powerful encounter was the lyrical novel *Cane*. The story opens in rural Georgia, where the soil is a rich red, and the black people are strong and beautiful. The roots of black culture reach all the way back to a continent across the Atlantic. The Dixie Pike is described as a road that "has grown from a goat path in Africa." But something tragic and evil haunts the land. The people are prisoners of slavery's past. One of the characters, Kabnis, moves from the North to Georgia. The hills, valleys, folk songs, and red soil surround him, but he is unable to appreciate this beauty. Middle class and mulatto, he has become separated from black folks and their culture. He wants to connect himself to them but cannot come to terms with that part of his own black past symbolized by the old ex-slave Father John. When Kabnis sees Father John, he recoils, insisting: "An besides, he aint my past. My ancestors were Southern blue-bloods." His denial keeps him "suspended a few feet above the soil whose touch would resurrect him." To recover his wholeness would require his acknowledgment of slavery as well as his black ancestry.[53]

Toomer painfully understood this truth. Like Kabnis, he was never able to resolve the dilemma of his biracial identity. In 1924, the same year as the publication of *Cane*, he went to France to study at the Georges Gurdjieff Institute, seeking to develop a cosmic consciousness. "I am," he told friends, "what I am, and what I may become I am trying to find out." "What was I?" Toomer asked. "I thought about it independently, and, on the basis of fact, concluded I was neither white nor black, but simply an American." A year later, Toomer returned to Harlem, where he set up a Gurdjieff group and gave lectures on Gurdjieff methods. In 1930, James Weldon Johnson requested Toomer's permisson to publish some of his poems in a book entitled *American Negro Poetry*. Toomer refused, explaining: "My poems are not Negro poems. My prose likewise. They are, first, mine. And, second, in so far as general race or stock is concerned, they spring from the result of racial blending here in America which has produced a new race or stock. We may call this stock American." A "blended" individual, Toomer, unlike Hughes, could not uniformly celebrate his blackness.[54]

Like Toomer, Zora Neale Hurston felt compelled to touch the "soil" of black folk culture in the South. Born and raised in the all-black town of Eatonville, Florida, she initially attended Howard University, where she began writing and publishing short stories. As a young writer, she realized that Harlem was the place to be: "So, beginning to feel the urge to write, I wanted to be in New York." There she could set her hat "at a certain angle and saunter down Seventh Avenue, Harlem City, feeling as snooty as the lions in front of the Forty-Second Street Library." During the 1920s, Hurston studied anthropology with Franz Boas at Barnard College and Columbia University. In 1927, she returned to the South to do research on black folks and write about them. Out of her research came a novel, published in 1937, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.[55]

In this novel, Hurston's main character, Janie, runs off with a young man. She finds Joe Starks exciting, for he is ambitious and has a dream of building an all-black town. "De man dat built things oughta boss it," he declares. "Let colored folks build things too if dey wants to crow over somethin'." Starks has his own idea of what Janie should be: "A pretty doll-baby lak you is made to sit on de front porch and rock and fan yo'self and eat p'taters dat other folks plant just special for you." Janie discovers she has become "Mrs. Mayor Starks," a possession for "*him* to look at." She tries to rebel: "You sho loves to tell me whut to do, but Ah can't tell you nothin' Ah see!" And Starks retorts: "Dat's 'cause you need tellin'. It would be pitiful if Ah didn't. Somebody got to think for women and chillun and chickens and cows. I god, they sho don't think none themselves." Forced into submission, Janie learns to hush, but the "spirit of the marriage" leaves the bedroom.[56]

Like Toomer, Hurston found Hughes's concept of the "racial mountain" too simplistic, too one-dimensional. What rendered race especially complex for her was gender. The "Negro Renaissance" seemed stifling to Hurston as an artist and as a woman. "From what I had read and heard," she complained, "Negroes were supposed to write about the Race Problem. I was and am thoroughly sick of the subject. My interest lies in what makes a man or a woman do such-and-so, regardless of... color." Indeed, within the world of blacks, as she saw it, there was a gender mountain.[57]

"But a Few Pegs to Fall": The Great Depression

By the 1920s, Harlem had become a slum, the home of poor people desperately clinging to deferred dreams. The Harlem Renaissance, with its cabarets and literary lights, hid much of the ghetto's squalor. Then came the Great Crash of 1929 and the shattering of the economy, unshrouding the grim reality behind this veil of glamor. "The depression brought everybody down a peg or two," Langston Hughes observed. "And the Negroes had but a few pegs to fall."[58]

African Americans fell into deeper poverty everywhere, in the South as well as the North. In 1930, despite the great migration, the majority of them still lived below the Mason-Dixon Line, growing cotton as sharecroppers and tenant farmers. Their livelihoods crumpled along with the stock market: cotton prices had dropped sharply from 18 cents per pound in 1929 to 6 cents in 1933. That

year, two-thirds of the blacks cultivating cotton only broke even or went deeper into debt. Moving to southern cities in search of work, blacks encountered angry unemployed whites, shouting: "No Jobs for Niggers Until Every White Man Has a Job!" "Niggers, back to the cotton fields—city jobs are for white folks." By 1932, more than 50 percent of blacks living in southern cities were unemployed.[59]

In northern cities, unemployment rates among African Americans soared to similar levels. In 1932, sociologist Kelley Miller described the black worker as "the surplus man, the last to be hired and the first to be fired." In Harlem, according to social worker Anna Arnold Hedgeman, blacks were "faced with the reality of starvation and they turned sadly to public relief.... Meanwhile, men, women, and children combed the streets and searched in garbage cans for food, foraging with dogs and cats.... Many families had been reduced to living below street level. It was estimated that more than ten thousand Negroes lived in cellars and basements which had been converted into makeshift flats. Packed in damp, ratridden dungeons, they existed in squalor not too different from that of Arkansas sharecroppers."[60]

The statistics told the story of hardship and hunger for blacks. In its survey of 106 cities, the Urban League found that "with a few notable exceptions...the proportion of Negroes unemployed was from 30 to 60 percent greater than for whites." Similarly, government reports showed that blacks joined the relief rolls two times more frequently than whites due to unemployment. In October 1933, 18 percent of the black population was on relief, compared to 10 percent for whites. "Heretofore [the black's] employment problem has been chiefly one of advancement to positions commensurate with his ability," an Urban League leader explained. "Today he is endeavoring to hold the line against advancing armies of white workers intent upon gaining and content to accept occupations which were once thought too menial for white hands." Even the jobs once viewed as degrading were now coveted by whites.[61]

The New Deal offered little relief to blacks. Federal programs designed to provide a safety net for people in distress forced blacks to take a back seat. The Agricultural Adjustment Administration gave white farmers and workers higher rates of support than their black counterparts. "The AAA was no new deal for blacks," wrote historian Harvard Sitkoff; "it was a continuation of the same old raw deal." Similarly, the National Recovery Administration failed

to protect black workers from discrimination in employment and wages. Blacks denounced the NRA as "Negroes Ruined Again" and "Negro Removal Act." In 1935, at a conference called "The Position of the Negro in the Present Economic Crisis," black leaders and intellectuals declared disappointment in the Roosevelt administration: "The Negro worker has good reason to feel that his government has betrayed him under the New Deal."[62]

The economic crisis and the failure of the New Deal generated strategy debates among blacks, especially within the NAACP. Feeling that blacks had been battered economically and politically, W. E. B. Du Bois decided that they should consider "voluntary segregation." As a leader of the NAACP and the editor of *The Crisis,* Du Bois had long been a fighter for integration. But the Great Depression led him to urge blacks to "herd together" and "segregate" themselves, at least on an interim basis, in order to survive. They should view themselves as black consumers and producers, committed to working together to build a black "economic nation within a nation." They should create a "closed economic circle"—shop at Negro-owned stores stocked with Negro-grown food, transported by Negro shippers, and processed by Negroes. What Du Bois had in mind was not capitalism but a "cooperative and socialistic state" within the black community, "a collective system on a non-profit basis" with the consumers at "the center and the beginning of the organization." Du Bois argued that such a separatist strategy was only "common sense." Blacks should "face the fact quite calmly that most white Americans [did] not like them." Criticized harshly by the NAACP for his segregationist proposal, Du Bois resigned as editor. Declaring that segregation was an evil, the NAACP called for "the building of a labor movement, industrial in character, which will unite all labor, white and black, skilled and unskilled, agricultural and industrial."[63]

Indeed, as the NAACP recognized, blacks had begun to enter industrial employment and the labor unions. In 1933, the United Mine Workers led by John L. Lewis launched a campaign to bring black workers into the union by employing black organizers and demanding equal pay, regardless of race. Known as "the U.M.W. Formula," this strategy was adopted by the Committee for Industrial Organization (CIO), which initiated massive organizing drives across the country. Led by Philip Murray, the Steel Workers Organizing Committee announced that its policy was "one of absolute racial equality in Union membership." In St. Louis in 1937, an Urban League official reported: "The S.W.O.C. organizers are making it a point to have a Negro officer in each lodge, composed from a plant in which there are Negro workers." In the auto industry, the United Auto Workers urged blacks to join, pledging its opposition to racial discrimination. In 1941, after it enrolled black workers, who constituted 12 percent of Ford Motor Company's labor force, the UAW won union recognition and wage increases. While these achievements did not mean the end of racism among white workers, they demonstrated that interracial labor solidarity was essential, especially in the struggle against management during a time of economic crisis. Like the "giddy multitude" of Bacon's Rebellion, these black and white workers understood their common class interests.[64]

Meanwhile, seeking to attract black voters, New Deal policymakers were beginning to address the needs of blacks. The Public Works Administration, for example, mandated the proviso: "There shall be no discrimination on account of race, creed or color." Blacks praised the WPA for prohibiting racial discrimination and for giving them a chance to participate in the program. "In the northern communities, particularly the urban centers," a black journal editorialized, "the Negro has been afforded his first real opportunity for employment in white-collar occupations." The Democratic Party's strategy of appealing to blacks paid off. The massive migration of blacks to northern cities had led to a national political realignment. A contemporary political analyst calculated that black voters held the power to control elections in northern states totaling 157 electoral votes, 31 more than the southern states. During the Depression, disillusioned with Herbert Hoover and the Republicans, African Americans were starting to abandon the party of Lincoln. In the 1936 presidential election, according to George Gallup, over three-fourths of northern blacks voted for Franklin D. Roosevelt, who had been promoted among them as the second "Emancipator."[65]

Blacks were becoming players in a newly emerging Democratic coalition, but their advances in labor and politics would soon be swept into the powerful international currents of World War II.