12 Million Black Voices

A FOLK HISTORY OF THE NEGRO

IN THE UNITED STATES

LORD IN HEAVEN! Good God Almighty! Great Day in the Morning! It's here! Our time has come! We are leaving! We are angry no more; we are leaving! We are bitter no more; we are leaving! We are leaving our homes, pulling up stakes to move on. We look up at the high southern sky and remember all the sunshine and the rain and we feel a sense of loss, but we are leaving. We look out at the wide green fields which our eyes saw when we first came into the world and we feel full of regret, but we are leaving. We scan the kind black faces we have looked upon since we first saw the light of day, and, though pain is in our hearts, we are leaving. We take one last furtive look over our shoulders to the Big House—high upon a hill beyond the railroad tracks—where the Lord of the Land lives, and we feel glad, for we are leaving. . . .

For a long time now we have heard tell that all over the world men are leaving the land for the streets of the city, so we are leaving too. As we leave we see thousands of the poor whites also packing up to move to the city, leaving the land that will not give life to her sons and daughters, black or white. When a man lives upon the land and is cold and hungry and hears word of the great factories going up in the cities, he begins to hope and dream of a new life, and he leaves.

In 1890 there were 1,500,000 of us black men and women in the cities of the nation, both north and south. In 1900 there were 2,000,000 of us. In 1920 there were 3,500,000 of us in the cities of the nation and we were still going, still leaving the land. So many of us crowded into New York City that Harlem's black population doubled between 1900 and 1920. In Philadelphia our influx increased the number of black people by one-third in a few years. In Chicago our endless trek inflated the Black Belt population by more than 125,000 from 1920 to 1930. And our tide continued to roll from the farm to the factory, from the country to the city.

Perhaps never in history has a more utterly unprepared folk wanted to go to the city; we were barely born as a folk when we headed for the tall and sprawling centers of steel and stone. We, who were landless upon the land; we, who had barely managed to live in family groups; we, who needed the ritual and guidance of institutions to hold our atomized lives together in lines of purpose; we, who had known only relationships to people and not relationships to things; we who had never belonged to any organizations except the church and burial societies; we, who had had our personalities blasted with two hundred years of slavery and had been turned loose to shift for ourselves—we were such a folk as this when we moved into a world that was destined to test all we were, that threw us into the scales of competition to weigh our mettle. And how were we to know that, the moment we landless millions of the land—we men who were struggling to be born—set our awkward feet upon the pavements of the city, life would begin to exact of us a heavy toll in death?

We did not know what would happen, what was in store for us. We went innocently, longing and hoping for a life that the Lords of the Land would not let us live. Our hearts were high as we moved northward to the cities. What emotions, fears, what a complex of sensations we felt when, looking out of a train window at the revolving fields, we first glimpsed the sliding waters of the gleaming Ohio! What memories that river evoked in us, memories black and gloomy, yet tinged with the bright border of a wild and desperate hope! The Ohio is more than a river. It is a symbol, a line that runs through our hearts, dividing hope from despair, just as once it bisected the nation, dividing freedom from slavery. How many desperate scenes have been enacted upon its banks! How many grim dramas have been played out upon its bosom! How many slave hunters and Abolitionists have clashed here with fire in their eyes and deep convictions in their hearts! This river has seen men whose beliefs were so strong that the rights of property meant nothing, men whose feelings were so mighty that the laws of the land meant nothing, men whose passions were so fiery that only human life and human dignity mattered.

The train and the auto move north, ever north, and from 1916 to 1928, 1,200,000 of us were moving from the South to the North and we kept leaving. Night and day, in rain and in sun, in winter and in summer, we leave the land. Already, as we sit and look broodingly out over the turning fields, we notice with attention and hope that the dense southern swamps give way to broad, cultivated wheat farms. The spick-and-span farmhouses done in red and green and white crowd out the casual, unpainted gingerbread shacks. Silos take the place of straggling piles of hay. Macadam highways now wind over the horizon instead of dirt roads. The cheeks of the farm people are full and ruddy, not sunken and withered like soda crackers. The slow southern drawl, which in legend is so sweet and hospitable but which in fact has brought down on our black bodies suffering untold, is superseded by clipped Yankee phrases, phrases spoken with such rapidity and neutrality that we, with our slow ears, have difficulty in understanding. And the foreigners—Poles, Germans, Swedes, and Italians—we never dreamed that there were so many in the world! Yes, coming north for a Negro sharecropper involves more strangeness than going to another country. It is the beginning of living on a new and terrifying plane of consciousness.

We see white men and women get on the train, dressed in expensive new clothes. We look at them guardedly and wonder will they bother us. Will they ask us to stand up while they sit down? Will they tell us to go to the back of the coach? Even though we have been told that we need not be afraid, we have lived so long in fear of all white faces that we cannot help but sit and wait. We look around the train and we do not see the old familiar signs: FOR COLORED and FOR WHITE. The train speeds north and we cannot sleep. Our heads sink in a doze, and then we sit bolt-upright, prodded by the thought that we must watch these strange surroundings. But nothing happens; these white men seem impersonal and their very neutrality reassures us—for a while. Almost against our deeper judgment, we try to force ourselves to relax, for these brisk men give no sign of what they feel. They are indifferent. O sweet and welcome *indifference!*

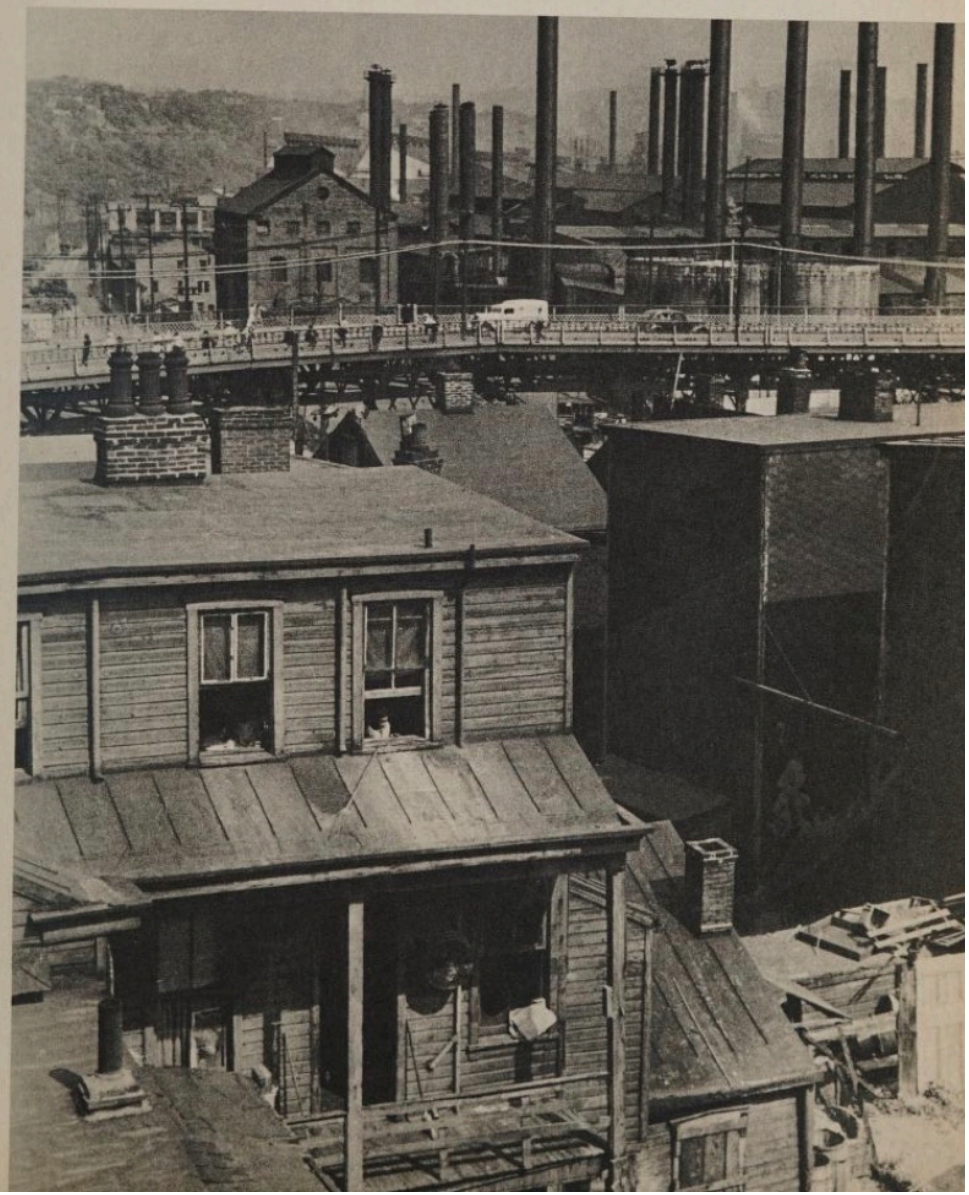
The miles click behind us. Into Chicago, Indianapolis, New York, Cleveland, Buffalo, Detroit, Toledo, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, and Milwaukee we go, looking for work. We feel freer than we have ever felt before, but we are still a little scared. It is like a dream. Will we wake up suddenly and find that none of this is really true, that we are merely daydreaming behind the barn, snoozing in the sun, waiting to hear the hoarse voice of the riding boss saying: "Nigger, where do you think you are? Get the hell up from there and move on!"

Timidly, we get off the train. We hug our suitcases, fearful of pickpockets, looking with unrestrained curiosity at the great big brick buildings. We are very reserved, for we have been warned not to act "green," that the city people can spot a "sucker" a mile away. Then we board our first Yankee street car to go to a cousin's home, a brother's home, a sister's home,

a friend's home, an uncle's home, or an aunt's home. We pay the conductor our fare and look about apprehensively for a seat. We have been told that we can sit where we please, but we are still scared. We cannot shake off three hundred years of fear in three hours. We ease into a seat and look out of the window at the crowded streets. A white man or a white woman comes and sits beside us, not even looking at us, as though this were a normal thing to do. The muscles of our bodies tighten. Indefinable sensations crawl over our skins and our blood tingles. Out of the corners of our eyes we try to get a glimpse of the strange white face that floats but a few inches from ours. The impulses to laugh and to cry clash in us; we bite our lips and stare out of the window.

There are so many people. For the first time in our lives we feel human bodies, strangers whose lives and thoughts are unknown to us, pressing always close about us. We cannot see or know a *man* because of the thousands upon thousands of *men.* The apartments in which we sleep are crowded and noisy, and soon enough we learn that the brisk, clipped men of the North, the Bosses of the Buildings, are not at all *indifferent.* They are deeply concerned about us, but in a new way. It seems as though we are now living inside of a machine; days and events move with a hard reasoning of their own. We live amid swarms of people, yet there is a vast distance between people, a distance that words cannot bridge. No longer do our lives depend upon the soil, the sun, the rain, or the wind; we live by the grace of jobs and the brutal logic of jobs. We do not know this world, or what makes it move. In the South life was different; men spoke to you, cursed you, yelled at you, or killed you. The world moved by signs we knew. But here in the North cold forces hit you and push you. It is a world of *things.*

Our defenseless eyes cloud with bewilderment when we learn that there are not enough houses for us to live in. And competing with us for shelter are thousands of poor migrant whites who have come up from the South, just as we have come. The cost of building a house is high, and building activities are on the downgrade. It is wartime; no new labor is coming in from the old countries across the seas. The only district we can live in is the area just beyond the business belt, a transition area where a sooty conglomeration of factories and mills belches smoke that stains our clothes and lungs.



We black folk are not the only ones who move into this so-called transition area; it is the first port of call for that incoming horde of men who float continuously into cities. The tenements we live in are old; they are rarely repaired or replaced. On most of our buildings are signs: THIS PROPERTY IS FOR SALE. Any day we can be told to move, that our home is to be torn down to make way for a new factory or a new mill.

So, under the black mourning pall of smoke from the stacks of American industry, our observing Negro eyes watch a thousand rivulets of blood melt, fuse, blend, and flow in a common stream of human unity as it merges with the great American tide. But we never mix with that stream; we are not allowed to. For years we watch the timid faces of poor white peasants—Turks, Czechs, Croats, Finns, and Greeks—pass through this curtain of smoke and emerge with the sensitive features of modern men. But our faces do not change. Our cheek-bones remain as unaltered as the stony countenance of the Sphinx.

From this transition area we watch many of the immigrants move on to the rooming-house district which almost always borders the transition area of the big industrial city; later many of them move from the rooming-house area into the apartment-house district. After that the only news we hear of some of them is what we read in the newspapers. Of a morning, years later, we pick up the Chicago *Daily Tribune,* or the Cleveland *Plain Dealer,* or the Detroit *Free Press,* or the Philadelphia *Inquirer,* or the New York *Times,* and see that some former neighbors of ours, a Mr. and Mrs. Klein or Murphy or Potaci or Pierre or Cromwell or Stepanovich and their children—kids we once played with upon the slag piles—are now living in the suburban areas, having swum upstream through the American waters of opportunity into the professional classes.

Times without number our eyes witness this drama. The gigantic American companies will not employ our daughters in their offices as clerks, bookkeepers, or stenographers; huge department stores will not employ our young women, fresh from school, as saleswomen. The engineering,

aviation, mechanical, and chemical schools close their doors to our sons, just as the great corporations which make thousands of commodities refuse to employ them. The Bosses of the Buildings decree that we must be maids, porters, janitors, cooks, and general servants.

We remain to live in the clinging soot just beyond the factory areas, behind the railroad tracks, near the river banks, under the viaducts, by the steel and iron mills, on the edges of the coal and lumber yards. We live in crowded, barn-like rooms, in old rotting buildings where once dwelt rich native whites of a century ago. Because we are black, because our love of life gives us many children, because we do not have quiet ways of doing things, because the outdoor boisterousness of the plantation still clings to us, because we move slowly and speak slowly, white people say that we are destructive and therefore do not want us in their neighborhoods. When we return home at night from our jobs, we are afraid to venture into other sections of the city, for we fear that the white boys will gang up and molest us. When we do go out into white neighborhoods, we always go in crowds, for that is the best mode of protection.

White people say that they are afraid of us, and it often makes us laugh. When they see one of us, they either smile with contempt or amusement. When they see *two* of us, they treat us as though some grave thought were on their minds. When they see *four* of us, they are usually silent. When they see *six* of us, they become downright apprehensive and alarmed. And because they are afraid of us, we are afraid of them. Especially do we feel fear when we meet the gangs of white boys who have been taught—at home and at school—that we black folk are making their parents lose their homes and life's savings because we have moved into their neighborhoods.

They say our presence in their neighborhoods lowers the value of their property. We do not understand why this should be so. We are poor; but they were once poor, too. They make up their minds, because others tell them to, that they must move at once if we rent an apartment near them. Having been warned against us by the Bosses of the Buildings, having

heard tall tales about us, about how "bad" we are, they react emotionally as though we had the plague when we move into their neighborhoods. Is it any wonder, then, that their homes are suddenly and drastically reduced in value? They hastily abandon them, sacrificing them to the Bosses of the Buildings, the men who instigate all this for whatever profit they can get in real-estate sales. And in the end we are the "fall guys." When the white folks move, the Bosses of the Buildings let the property to us at rentals higher than those the whites paid.

And the Bosses of the Buildings take these old houses and convert them into "kitchenettes," and then rent them to us at rates so high that they make fabulous fortunes before the houses are too old for habitation. What they do is this: they take, say, a seven-room apartment, which rents for $50 a month to whites, and cut it up into seven small apartments, of one room each; they install one small gas stove and one small sink in each room. The Bosses of the Buildings rent these kitchenettes to us at the rate of, say, $6 a week. Hence, the same apartment for which white people—who can get jobs anywhere and who receive higher wages than we—pay $50 a month is rented to us for $42 a week! And because there are not enough houses for us to live in, because we have been used to sleeping several in a room on the plantations in the South, we rent these kitchenettes and are glad to get them. These kitchenettes are our havens from the plantations in the South. We have fled the wrath of Queen Cotton and we are tired.

Sometimes five or six of us live in a one-room kitchenette, a place where simple folk such as we should never be held captive. A war sets up in our emotions: one part of our feelings tells us that it is good to be in the city, that we have a chance at life here, that we need but turn a corner to become a stranger, that we no longer need bow and dodge at the sight of the Lords of the Land. Another part of our feelings tells us that, in terms of worry and strain, the cost of living in the kitchenettes is too high, that the city heaps too much responsibility upon us and gives too little security in return.

The kitchenette is the author of the glad tidings that new suckers are in town, ready to be cheated, plundered, and put in their places.

The kitchenette is our prison, our death sentence without a trial, the new form of mob violence that assaults not only the lone individual, but all of us, in its ceaseless attacks.

The kitchenette, with its filth and foul air, with its one toilet for thirty or more tenants, kills our black babies so fast that in many cities twice as many of them die as white babies.

The kitchenette is the seed bed for scarlet fever, dysentery, typhoid, tuberculosis, gonorrhea, syphilis, pneumonia, and malnutrition.

The kitchenette scatters death so widely among us that our death rate exceeds our birth rate, and if it were not for the trains and autos bringing us daily into the city from the plantations, we black folks who dwell in northern cities would die out entirely over the course of a few years.

The kitchenette, with its crowded rooms and incessant bedlam, provides an enticing place for crimes of all sort—crimes against women and children or any stranger who happens to stray into its dark hallways. The noise of our living, boxed in stone and steel, is so loud that even a pistol shot is smothered.

The kitchenette throws desperate and unhappy people into an unbearable closeness of association, thereby increasing latent friction, giving birth to never-ending quarrels of recrimination, accusation, and vindictiveness, producing warped personalities.

The kitchenette injects pressure and tension into our individual personalities, making many of us give up the struggle, walk off and leave wives, husbands, and even children behind to shift as best they can.

The kitchenette creates thousands of one-room homes where our black mothers sit, deserted, with their children about their knees.

The kitchenette blights the personalities of our growing children, disorganizes them, blinds them to hope, creates problems whose effects can be traced in the characters of its child victims for years afterward.

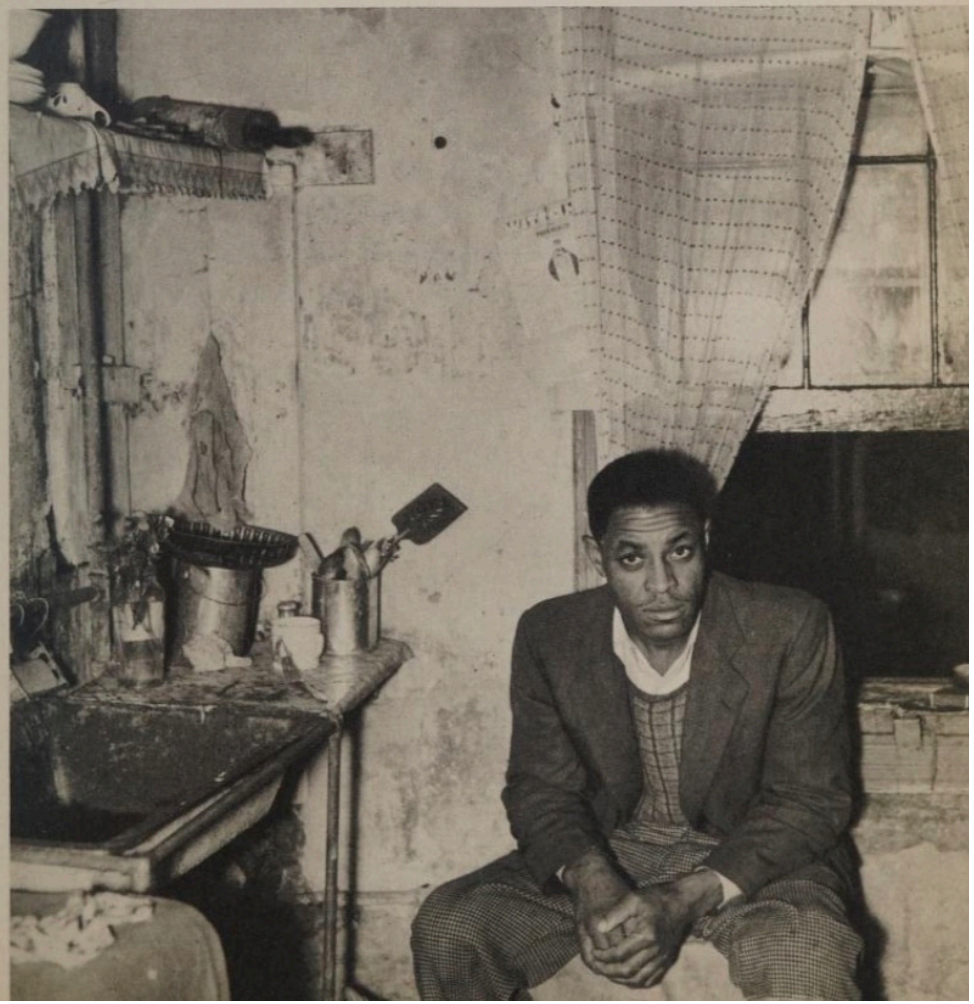
The kitchenette jams our farm girls, while still in their teens, into rooms with men who are restless and stimulated by the noise and lights of the city; and more of our girls have bastard babies than the girls in any other sections of the city.

The kitchenette fills our black boys with longing and restlessness, urging them to run off from home, to join together with other restless black boys in gangs, that brutal form of city courage.

The kitchenette piles up mountains of profits for the Bosses of the Buildings and makes them ever more determined to keep things as they are.

The kitchenette reaches out with fingers full of golden bribes to the officials of the city, persuading them to allow old firetraps to remain standing and occupied long after they should have been torn down.

The kitchenette is the funnel through which our pulverized lives flow to ruin and death on the city pavements, at a profit. . . .



A few of our black boys save enough from their weekly wages to make payments on homes. But they discover that white home-owners refuse to sell to them and stand solid against any extension of the Black Belt. Meanwhile we continue to pour in from the South, swelling our numbers that live in these locked-in quarters. And then one day some shrewd white man, eager for a high profit, decides to sell his home to a black buyer, and for the first time a black family "invades" a white neighborhood and is greeted with violence. When our black fathers go to work in the mornings, they hear the muttered insults of their white neighbors. Bricks are hurled through the windows of our homes; garbage is tossed at our black children when they go to school; and finally bombs explode against our front doors. But whenever we can escape the terrors and limitations of the Black Belt, we move into the white area, disdainful of reprisal.

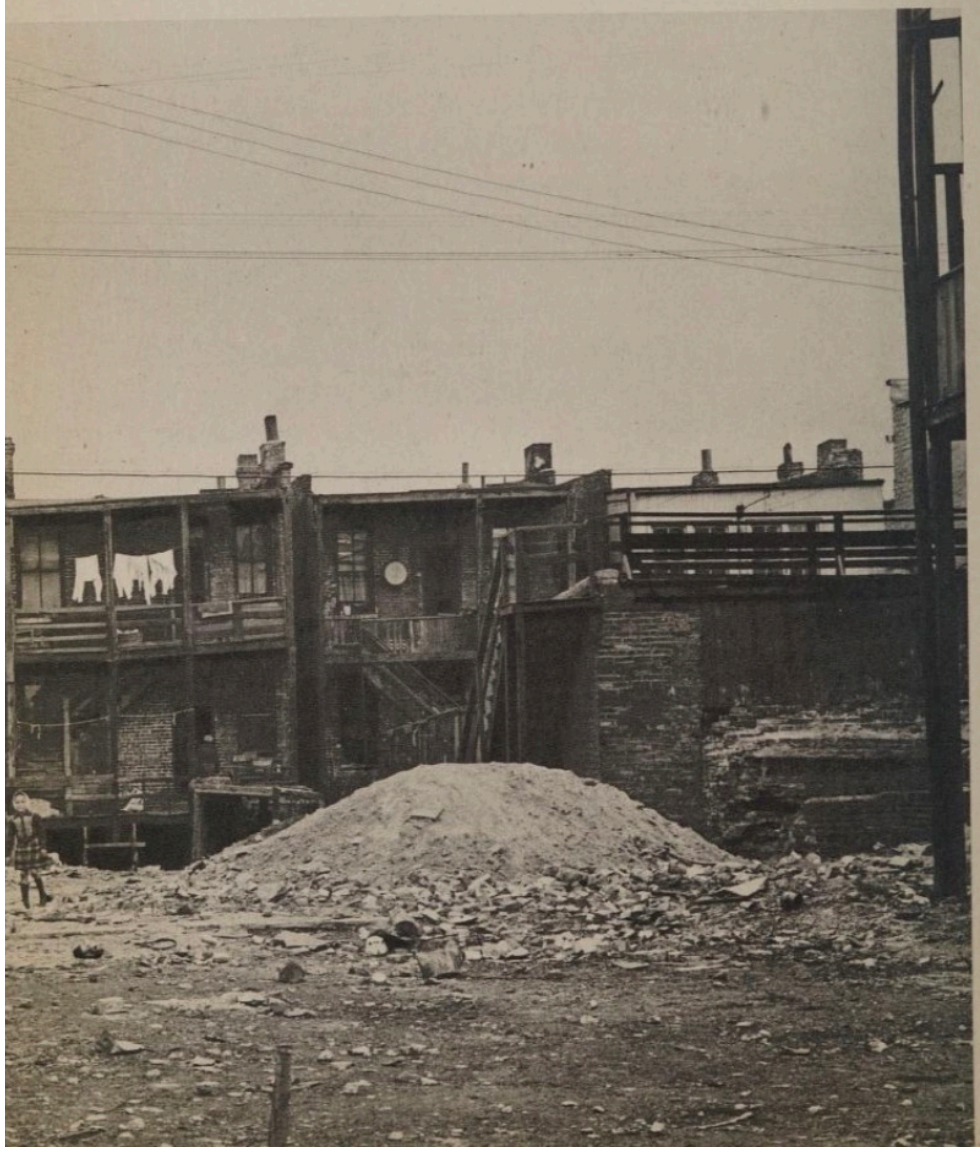
Grudgingly, the white population falls back, street by street, leaving its homes empty. Sometimes the members of a white family will board up their old homestead and move away, but not before they have cautioned their real-estate broker that no black folk should be allowed to purchase their property. The white families do not want black strangers to dwell within the walls of rooms made sacred to them through long years of intimate living.

With rows of empty houses at their disposal, the Bosses of the Buildings step in with the smiles of salesmanship. They purchase the abandoned properties, promising to respect the wishes of the owners, and then they immediately hang up placards, saying: NOW OPEN TO COLORED TENANTS. And we black folk, glad at long last to find living space, rush to sign leases at exorbitant rentals. In this manner we force the whites back year by year until the tide of our black life, pushing irresistibly outward, reaches the border of some restricted middle-class neighborhood, and then the warfare begins anew. Encouraged by powerful real-estate boards and business interests, home-owners hurriedly create property-owning associations to stem

our black "invasion." If the situation is acute and feeling is running high, local vigilante groups will spring into action; but usually a more routine course is followed: long, grim "legal" documents are drawn up covering agreements among wide groups of white home-owners who pledge not to sell their property to us blacks under any circumstances. They call these agreements "restrictive covenants," and in time they grow to be as powerful a detriment to us as had been the policies of the Lords of the Land in the South. In many of the large cities of the United States these agreements affect 80 per cent of all real estate, and they are hailed by the Bosses of the Buildings as the "solution," and the real-estate profits which accrue from our kitchenettes are thereby guaranteed.

Though the United States Supreme Court has so far adroitly avoided rendering a direct decision as to the constitutionality of these restrictive covenants, almost all state, county, and city courts invariably pronounce them "legal." Sometimes ponderous judges point out to us black folk that the real justice of their judgment lies in the fact that we black folk can organize our own property-owning associations and exclude white folk, if we so desire! The courts therefore juggle words so that these restrictive covenants are always "constitutional" and in defense of public policy, thereby assuming the role of policemen in enforcing residential segregation. Newspapers, radios, Protestant and Catholic churches, Jewish synagogues, clubs, civic groups, fraternities, sororities, leagues, and universities bring their moral precepts to bolster their locking-in of hundreds of thousands of us black folk in single, constricted areas. Once again the evils which we thought we had fled forever come back; once again educational appropriations for our black children are curtailed. Local boards of education twist the boundary lines of school districts in such fashion that our boys and girls are legally jim-crowed. The inventive Yankee Bosses of the Buildings go further and contrive even new practices: they reduce the services of the city in our districts; many of our streets remain unlighted

at night; violations of fire laws go unpunished; garbage piles up in our alleyways; pavements fall into disrepair; merchants dump tons of their stale and rotten food into the stores and shops of our Black Belts and exact prices as high for these damaged goods as first-rate and grade-A commodities sell for in other sections of the city. Even in times of peace some of the neighborhoods in which we live look as though they had been subjected to an intensive and prolonged aerial bombardment.



Because we are eager to escape these marked-off areas of life, we usually pay more for our homes than whites pay for those of similar value. The Bosses of the Buildings increase their selling prices when they see our black faces. We pay the first installment and then, usually, every member of our family who is able-bodied must work in order to help meet future payments, for our wages are low and our jobs are restricted. Often we move into one room of our new home and rent the remaining rooms to

lodgers. Buying homes is a gamble for us black folk in northern cities; completing the purchase depends upon a lot of factors far beyond our control. A depression may throw us out of our low-paying jobs and then we lose our property. Or the health of one or more of the members of our family may fail in the hard grind of a city life that is still new and strange to us.

The Bosses of the Buildings seldom repair the kitchenettes in which we live, and day after day our children romp and play in the hallways and on the stairways until the old buildings sway and creak as though ready to fall in the first high wind. Often the Bosses of the Buildings refuse to pay taxes to the city on Black Belt property, for they know that the amount of accumulated taxes will soon exceed the actual value of the buildings. After they have wrung from us the last bit of profit, they allow the city to assume control of the dilapidated property. And when whole areas of our Black Belt have become filled with condemned buildings which are dangerous for human habitation, the officials of the city will decide that it is unwise to demolish them, for the majority of us black folk would be without shelter, inasmuch as the rest of the city is barred against us.

If you want to see how crowdedly we live, if you want to know how our meager incomes force our families to "double up" to save space, visit a kitchenette building in some Black Belt and look at the long list of American names under our mail boxes: Jackson, Jefferson, Harrison, Grant, Adams, Johnson, Wilson, Madison, Washington, Taylor. . . . So many of us are forced to live in one building that you would think you were reading a crude telephone directory or a clumsy census report when you see our names scrawled on the walls of a thousand dingy vestibules.

Because the Lords of the Land did not build schools for us, many of us know no trades. When applying for a job, we are asked: "What can you do?"

We reply simply and naïvely: "Anything."

What we mean, of course, is that we know nothing but manual labor. Hence, while the Irishman, the Scot, the Croat, the Welshman, the Frenchman, the Spaniard, to whom opportunities are open, merge with the river of American life, we black folk remain out of touch with the quickening fluids of American hope.

In the main, we black folk earn our living in two ways in the northern cities: we work as domestics or as laborers. Our work inside the homes of the Bosses of the Buildings does not differ greatly from the work we did in the homes of the Lords of the Land. But it is in industry that we encounter experiences that tend to break down the structure of our folk characters and project us toward the vortex of modern urban life. It is when we are handling picks rather than mops, it is when we are swinging hammers rather than brooms, it is when we are pushing levers rather than dust-cloths that we are gripped and influenced by the world-wide forces that shape and mold the life of Western civilization. We load and unload the ships and trains, demolish and erect buildings, wheel barrows of cement and sand,

pound steel spikes into miles of railroad track, lay brick, drive heavy trucks of lumber and gravel, butcher hogs and sheep and cattle, dig ore, and mine coal.

During the First World War we find plenty of jobs. We are hired at low wages and perform the heavy and dirty work, work which the poor white workers call "nigger work." Our choice is a hard and narrow one, but we make it. Our choice is between eating and starving, and we choose to eat. Mainly our jobs in industry come to us through two routes: (1) strike-breaking and (2) when factories and mills expand so rapidly that not enough white workers can be found to work in them. Here is how it happens: the white workers, the majority of whom will not admit us to membership in their powerful trade unions, go out on strike against the wage cuts and long hours imposed by the Bosses of the Buildings, to whom color is of less significance than profits. To break the strike, the Bosses of the Buildings appeal to us black folk to work; they send labor agents into the South to fetch us north; they promise us "protection"; they tell us that they are our "best friends." We are hungry and eager to work, and yet we know that if we work we will be taking the jobs of other men, and we do not want to do that. We do not want to be scabs; we do not want to be strike-breakers; we do not want to snatch food from the tables of poor white children, for we, of all people, really know how hungry children can be. But, again, we say that we have no choice, and the white workers are emphatic in drawing the color line against us. So, trembling and scared, we take spikes, knives, guns, and break the picket lines and work for the Bosses of the Buildings for our daily bread. And when the work day is over, we find ourselves fighting mobs of white workers in the city streets. After scores of such battles in many cities, after much blood is shed, we black folk gain a precarious foothold in the industries of the North.

But even after we are steadily employed in these industries, the Bosses of the Buildings arrange our lives so that we remain a constant threat to the poor white union workers, who now hate us more than ever for having broken their strike and driven down their wages. But still they refuse to admit us to union membership. Surreptitiously, the Bosses of the Buildings counsel us black folk to have nothing to do with the white workers; they tell us that "good white people" have given us our jobs and we can retain them only if we keep to ourselves. They help us to build churches; they make donations to our institutions; they generally ingratiate themselves as benefactors. And to us, men with simple folk minds, men who have been long used to dealing with other men and not with organizations, this seems sensible and right. So we follow the lead of the Bosses of the Buildings.

The Bosses of the Buildings are much shrewder than the white workers; they place us black folk in the most strategic positions in their plants; they create entire departments for us and place black straw-bosses over us to tell us what to do.

And we feel proud, for we know that the trade unions of the white workers will not sanction such advances as this for us. Yet, deep down, we know the motives that prompt the Bosses of the Buildings to do this for us; in fact, they tell us quite frankly: "Listen, you boys, we are making you boss of this whole department, but we want you to keep away from the white boys, see? We're paying you higher wages than they get, and when they go out on strike we want you boys to carry on."

And we say: "Yes, sir. Thank you, sir."

The white workers, in turn, are wary of us. For generations our labor has been pitted against theirs and their living standards have in many instances been dragged down below even ours. It is an old, sore problem that evokes unreasonable attitudes when it is discussed. Guilty feelings on both sides make it difficult for us to work alongside one another in the mills and factories. We strive for trade-union membership, but the white workers bar us. So we turn to the Bosses of the Buildings, just as in the South we turned to the Lords of the Land, and beg for help. And we get help, but at what a price!

To divide and exploit us still further, the Bosses of the Buildings send their "mouthpieces," their gangster-politicians, to us to preach a gospel that sounds good. They tell us that old Abe Lincoln's party, the Grand Old Party, the Republican Party, is "a ship and all else is the sea"; they explain to us that the Republican Party freed us and is therefore our "natural friend," and that we would be "selling our birthright for a mess of pottage" if we voted for any other party. Our naïve folk minds become lost in the labyrinth of this reasoning. For centuries we have had to rely on the word of others instead of on our own judgment and organized strength; so, with the memory of the Lords of the Land still vivid in our minds, with the image of the hard face of the riding boss still lingering before our eyes, we are swept by our simple fears and hopes into the toils of the gangster-politicians.

Innocently, we vote into office men to whom the welfare of our lives is of far less concern than yesterday's baseball score. The gangster-politicians play a tricky game. In the realm of politics, just as in the realm of jobs, the Bosses of the Buildings pit us against the prejudiced white population and in turn pit them against us. It operates somewhat like this: they make us afraid and then offer to save us. During election campaigns the gangster-politicians come into black neighborhoods and inform us that the whites are planning to attack us, and they tell us that they, and they alone, are our friends and will protect us if we vote for them. Then they go to the bewildered whites and tell them that we black folk plan to attack them; and then they pose as the friends of the whites and propose to protect *them* against *us*. They ask our black boys to work for them, to become precinct captains, and our boys consent, for here is the promise of a job behind a desk, the kind of job that the white population does not want us to have. In exchange for our vote the gangster-politicians sometimes give us so many petty jobs that the white newspapers in certain northern cities contemptuously refer to their city hall as "Uncle Tom's Cabin."

Usually our voting strength constitutes the balance of power in those northern cities where the population is divided by the artificially stimulated animosities of many races, and the gangster-politicians, once our vote has established them in the power of office, grant a free hand to the Bosses of the Buildings to proceed with a policy of dishonesty against *all* the citizens of the city.

Yet through the years our loyalty to these gangster-politicians remains stanch because they are almost the only ones who hold out their hands to help us, whatever their motives. They induce enduring sentiments of gratitude among us simple folk. It is the gangster-politician who distributes baskets of food to our poor black families at Christmas time; it is the gangster-politician who advises the distraught black home-owner who is about to become a victim of a mortgage foreclosure; it is the gangster-

politician who directs the black plantation-born grandmother to a dentist to have her teeth pulled; it is the gangster-politician who bargains our black boys out of jail when they clash with the law. The Bosses of the Buildings declare that they will not be taxed to build social agencies among us black folk, and the gangster-politicians, passionate seekers of political power, are thereby enabled to perform the function that the social consciousness of the city should perform, granting favors to us in return for votes that place them in political office. The most paradoxical gift ever tendered to us black folk in the city is aid from the underworld, from the gangster, from the political thief. The law says that we are *all* free, but the Bosses of the Buildings say that only *they* are free. We are caught in a tangle of conflicting ideals; we must either swap our votes for bread or starve.

The white workers come to feel that the gangster-politicians are taking their wages from them in the form of high taxes, and they blame us black folk for voting them into power. The white workers charge that we black folk corrupt the life of the city, menace their wages, lengthen their hours of work, decrease the value of their very homes in the neighborhoods where we both live. Of course all this is only relatively true, but the Bosses of the Buildings have so ordered the structure of the lives of both black and white that it is only through a heroic effort of will that either of us can cast off this spell of make-believe and see how artificial and man-made is this enmity between us, to see that our common lives are bound by a common cause.

The majority of both black and white, however, live under the spell wrought by the Bosses of the Buildings. During the years following the First World War a depression grips the nation and the poor white workers, frantic and embittered, begin to push us out of our jobs. We can be waiters no longer, for the Bosses of the Buildings, to appease the unrest of the white workers, grant them the honor of serving tables in many hotels and cafés. They feel that it is wiser to give them our jobs than to let them go

idle and think and organize. In many cities, where there was a black porter there is now a white porter. In many apartments white cooks replace black cooks. As our unemployment increases, the Bosses of the Buildings pay more taxes to feed us and we sit in our kitchenettes and wonder.

Bloody riots break forth over trifling incidents that would ordinarily be forgotten in the routine of daily living. Throughout the North tension mounts. The atmosphere grows ripe for violence. We feel it coming. Still we go to the scab jobs for bread. Then, suddenly, over anything, over an imagined insult, over an altercation between a black boy and a white boy on a beach, over the wild rumor that a white man has slapped a black boy in a store, over the whispered tale that some white man has spoken improperly to a black girl, over the fact that a black man has accidentally stepped on a white woman's foot, over the gossip that a black woman has talked back to a white woman—it matters not what the pretext is!—street-fighting, protracted, bitter, sanguine, flares in Pittsburgh, Chicago, Washington, New York, Atlanta, and East St. Louis. They kill us and we kill them. We both feel that we are right. This is what life comes to when men's minds are snared in darkness and confusion. . . .

State troops come and impose order. When the fighting is over, we bind up our wounds and count our dead, and another day finds us still marching forward for jobs. Again we say, of the North as of the South, that life for us is daily warfare and that we live hard, like soldiers. We are set apart from the civilian population; our kitchenettes comprise our barracks; the color of our skins constitutes our uniforms; the streets of our cities are our trenches; a job is a pill-box to be captured and held; and the unions of white workers for a long time have formed the first line of resistance which we encounter. The gangster-politicians are our captains, the men who lead us into the immediate assault. The Bosses of the Buildings are the generals who decree the advance or retreat. We are always in battle, but the tidings of victory are few.

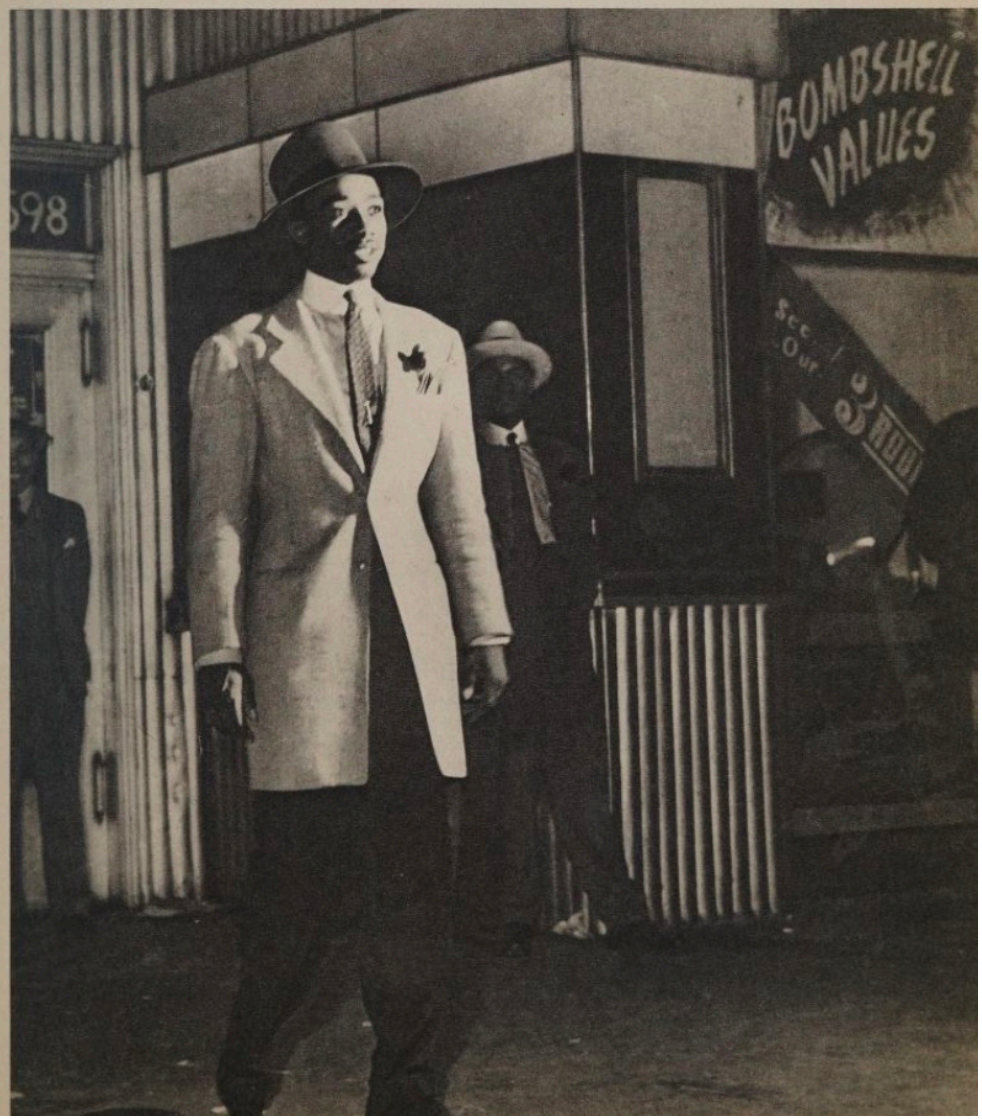
When off duty after a hard day of fighting, we are like spent troops, ready to plunge into pleasure to obliterate the memory of this slow death on the city pavements. Just as in the South, in spite of the Lords of the Land, we managed to keep alive deep down in us a hope of what life could be, so now, with death ever hard at our heels, we pour forth in song and dance, without stint or shame, a sense of what our bodies want, a hint of our hope of a full life lived without fear, a whisper of the natural dignity we feel life can have, a cry of hunger for something new to fill our souls, to reconcile the ecstasy of living with the terror of dying. . . .

It is when we seek to express ourselves that the paradoxical cleavage in our lives shows most. Day after day we labor in the gigantic factories and mills of Western civilization, but we have never been allowed to become an organic part of this civilization; we have yet to share its ultimate hopes and expectations. Its incentives and perspectives, which form the core of meaning for so many millions, have yet to lift our personalities to levels of purpose. Instead, after working all day in one civilization, we go home to our Black Belts and live, within the orbit of the surviving remnants of the culture of the South, our naïve, casual, verbal, fluid folk life.

Alone together with our black folk in the towering tenements, we play our guitars, trumpets, and pianos, beating out rough and infectious rhythms

that create an instant appeal among all classes of people. Why is our music so contagious? Why is it that those who deny us are willing to sing our songs? Perhaps it is because so many of those who live in cities feel deep down just as we feel. Our big brass horns, our huge noisy drums and whirring violins make a flood of melodies whose poignancy is heightened by our latent fear and uneasiness, by our love of the sensual, and by our feverish hunger for life. On the plantations our songs carried a strain of other-worldly yearning which people called "spiritual"; but now our blues, jazz, swing, and boogie-woogie are our "spirituals" of the city pavements, our longing for freedom and opportunity, an expression of our bewilderment and despair in a world whose meaning eludes us. The ridiculousness and sublimity of love are captured in our blues, those sad-happy songs that laugh and weep all in one breath, those mockingly tender utterances of a folk imprisoned in steel and stone. Our thirst for the sensual is poured out in jazz; the tension of our brittle lives is given forth in swing; and our nervousness and exhaustion are pounded out in the swift tempo of boogie-woogie.

We lose ourselves in violent forms of dances in our ballrooms. The faces of the white world, looking on in wonder and curiosity, declare: *"Only* the Negro can play!" But they are wrong. They misread us. We are able to play in this fashion because we have been excluded, left behind; we play in this manner because all excluded folk play. The English say of the Irish, just as America says of us, that only the Irish can play, that they laugh through their tears. But every powerful nation says this of the folk whom it oppresses in justification of that oppression. And, ironically, they are angered by the exhibition of any evidence to the contrary, for it disturbs their conscience with vague and guilty doubts. They smile with cold disdain when we black folk say that our thirst can be slaked in art, that our tensions can be translated into industry, that our energies can be applied to finance, that our delight in the world can be converted into education, that our love of adventure can find fulfillment in aviation. But in one way or another, the white folk deny us these pursuits, and our hunger for expression finds its form in our wild, raw music, in our invention of slang that winds its way all over America. Our adoration of color goes not into murals, but into dress, into green, red, yellow, and blue clothes. When we have some money in our pockets on payday, our laughter and songs make the principal streets of our Black Belts—Lenox Avenue, Beale Street, State Street, South Street, Second Street, Auburn Avenue—famous the earth over.



The Bosses of the Buildings would have the world believe that we black folk, after these three hundred years, have locked in our veins blood of a queer kind that makes us act in this "special pattern." In their classrooms and laboratories they attempt to harness science in defense of their attitudes and practices, and never do they so vigorously assail us as "trouble-makers" as when we say that we are "this way" because we are made to live "this way." They say we speak treasonably when we declare that human life is plastic, that human nature is malleable, that men possess the dignity and meaning of the environmental and institutional forms through which they are lucky or unlucky enough to express themselves. They solemnly assert that we seek to overthrow the government by violence when we say that we live in this manner because the Black Belt which cradles our lives is created by the hands and brains of men who have decreed that we must live differently. They brand us as revolutionists when we say that we are not allowed to react to life with an honest and frontal vision.

We live on, and our music makes the feet of the whole world dance, even the feet of the children of the poor white workers who live beyond the line that marks the boundary of our lives. Where we cannot go, our tunes, songs, slang, and jokes go. Some of the white boys and girls, starved prisoners of urban homes, even forget the hatred of their parents when they hear our sensual, wailing blue melodies. The common people of the nation grow to love our songs so much that a few of us make our living by creating a haven of song for those who are weary of the barren world of steel and stone reared by the Bosses of the Buildings. But only a few of those who dance and sing with us suspect the rawness of life out of which our laughing-crying tunes and quick dance-steps come; they do not know that our songs and dances are our banner of hope flung desperately up in the face of a world that has pushed us to the wall.

Despite our new worldliness, despite our rhythms, our colorful speech, and our songs, we keep our churches alive. In fact, we have built more of them than ever here on the city pavements, for it is only when we are within

the walls of our churches that we are wholly ourselves, that we keep alive a sense of our personalities in relation to the total world in which we live, that we maintain a quiet and constant communion with all that is deepest in us. Our going to church of a Sunday is like placing one's ear to another's chest to hear the unquenchable murmur of the human heart. In our collective outpourings of song and prayer, the fluid emotions of others make us feel the strength in ourselves. We build great churches, some of the greatest in terms of membership—some of our churches have more than 20,000 members—ever built in the history of Western civilization. Our churches are where we dip our tired bodies in cool springs of hope, where we retain our wholeness and humanity despite the blows of death from the Bosses of the Buildings.

Our churches are centers of social and community life, for we have virtually no other mode of communion and we are usually forbidden to worship God in the temples of the the Bosses of the Buildings. The church is the door through which we first walked into Western civilization; religion is the form in which America first allowed our personalities to be expressed. Our churches provide social activities for us, cook and serve meals, organize baseball and basketball teams, operate stores and businesses, and conduct social agencies. Our first newspapers and magazines are launched from our churches.

In the Black Belts of the northern cities, our women are the most circumscribed and tragic objects to be found in our lives, and it is to the churches that our black women cling for emotional security and the release of their personalities. Because their orbit of life is narrow—from their kitchenette to the white folk's kitchen and back home again—they love the church more than do our men, who find a large measure of the expression of their lives in the mills and factories. Surrounding our black women are many almost insuperable barriers: they are black, they are women, they are workers; they are triply anchored and restricted in their movements within and without the Black Belts.

So they keep thousands of Little Bethels and Pilgrims and Calvarys and White Rocks and Good Hopes and Mount Olives going with their nickels and dimes. Nurtured in the close and intimate folk culture of the South, where each person knew the others, where the basic emotions of life were

shared by all, many of them sometimes feel that the elaborate ritual of our big churches is too cold and formal for them. To retain the ardent religious emotionalism of which they are so fond, many of them will group themselves about a lonely young black preacher and help him to establish what is called a "store front" church, in which they are still able to perform their religious rituals on the fervid levels of the plantation revival. Sometimes, even in crowded northern cities, elderly black women, hungry for the South but afraid to return, will cultivate tiny vegetable gardens in the narrow squares of ground in front of their hovels. More than even that of the American Indian, the consciousness of vast sections of our black women lies beyond the boundaries of the modern world, though they live and work in that world daily.

Outside of the church, many of our black women drift to ruin and death on the pavements of the city; they are sold, by white men as well as by black, for sex purposes. As a whole, they must go to work at an earlier age than any other section of the nation's population. For every 5 white girls between the ages of ten and fifteen who must work, 25 of our black girls must work; for every 5 white mothers who must leave their children unattended at home in order to work, 25 of our black mothers must leave their children unattended at home in order to work. As modernity and complexity spread through the cities, our black women find that their jobs grow fewer. Many white folk send their soiled clothes to the laundry and hire Japanese, Chinese, and Filipinos as servants to do their domestic work.

Many of our children scorn us; they say that we still wear the red bandanna about our heads, that we are still Uncle Toms. We lean upon our God and scold our children and try to drag them to church with us, but just as we once, years ago, left the plantation to roam the South, so now they leave us for the city pavements. But deep down in us we are glad that our children feel the world hard enough to yearn to wrestle with it. We, the mothers and fathers of the black children, try to hold them back from

call them, we will pour out our pity upon them. Always our deepest love is toward those children of ours who turn their backs upon our way of life, for our instincts tell us that those brave ones who struggle against death are the ones who bring new life into the world, even though they die to do so, even though our hearts are broken when they die.

We watch strange moods fill our children, and our hearts swell with pain. The streets, with their noise and flaring lights, the taverns, the automobiles, and the poolrooms claim them, and no voice of ours can call them back. They spend their nights away from home; they forget our ways of life, our language, our God. Their swift speech and impatient eyes make us feel weak and foolish. We cannot keep them in school; more than 1,000,000 of our black boys and girls of high school age are not in school. We fall upon our knees and pray for them, but in vain. The city has beaten us, evaded us; but they, with young bodies filled with warm blood, feel bitter and frustrated at the sight of the alluring hopes and prizes denied them. It is not their eagerness to fight that makes us afraid, but that they go to death on the city pavements faster than even disease and starvation can take them. As the courts and the morgues become crowded with our lost children, the hearts of the officials of the city grow cold toward us. As our jobs begin to fail in another depression, our lives and the lives of our children grow so frightful that even some of our educated black leaders are afraid to make known to the nation how we exist. They became ashamed of us and tell us to hide our wounds. And many white people who know how we live are afraid of us, fearing that we may rise up against them.

The sands of our simple folk lives run out on the cold city pavements. Winter winds blow, and we feel that our time is nearing its end. Our final days are full of apprehension, for our children grapple with the city. We cannot bear to look at them; they struggle against great odds. Our tired eyes turn away as we hear the tumult of battle. . . .