Bulldaggers, Pansies, and Chocolate Babies

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CHAPTER 2

“Harlem on My Mind”: New York’s Black Belt on the Great White Way

Harlem . . . Harlem
Black, black Harlem
Niggers, Jigs an’ shiney spades
Highbrowns, yallers, fagingy fagades
“... Oh say it, brother,
Say it...”
Pullman porters, shipping clerks an’ monkey chasers
Actors, lawyers, Black Jews an’ fairies
Ofays, pimps, lowdowns an’ dicties
Cabarets, gin an’ number tickets
All mixed in
With gangs o’ churches
Sugar foot misters an’ sun dodgin’ sisters
Don’t get up
Till other folks long in bed ...

—“Harlem” by Frank Horne*

“OFAYS, PIMPS, LOWDOWNS AN’ DICTIES”

In March 1926, Anita Handy edited a new magazine called A Guide to Harlem and Its Amusements, in which she planned to provide tips for touring Harlem’s most popular attractions. When her inspiration was denounced in the black press for focusing only on the neighborhood’s lurid side, she responded that she only intended to satisfy the curiosity of those who had recently seen David Belasco’s Broadway production of Lulu Belle and read Carl Van Vechten’s controversial novel Nigger Heaven. She claimed that these two works had “caused a great number of people, especially white people, to visit Harlem,” but regret-
tably, in her opinion, these crowds did not know “how to see the community in-
telligently.”

The highlight of Handy’s tour would include a trip to the epicenter of this
thriving nightlife, a stretch known as “Jungle Alley,” which was located between
Lenox and Seventh avenues on 133rd Street. Many of the nightclubs, such as
Barron’s Exclusive Club, one of Harlem’s oldest (having opened in 1915), Con-
nor’s, and the Clam House, were found on this block. In her publicity, she also
promised that she would not show just the “night side life,” but also “the better
side of Harlem,” including its churches, schools, and modest homes. Admit-
tedly, she indicated, “The night life side is the only side the white tourists care
to see, as it is the only side they have heard about.” For those wishing to expe-
rience the “real thing,” Handy’s guide presumably offered an invaluable service
to visitors who only knew Harlem from what they saw on the stage and read in
popular fiction.

As this account indicates, white fascination with Harlem was fueled in large
part by its representations in the popular literature and entertainment of the
1920s. Plays, novels, and songs depicted an idealized, exotic, and rather risqué
view of life among New York’s black denizens above 125th Street, and the images
lured white people to encounter the authentic milieu on their own. New night-
clubs and speakeasies could not open fast enough to oblige the hordes of white
tourists. Writers, entertainers, and producers capitalized on the newest vogue
and aroused further interest in Harlem’s seamier side by continuing to simulate
it on stage and in fiction. Practically over night, these simulations of Harlem
became the basis for how the “real” Harlem would be seen and experienced by
white visitors. Concurrently, however, black community leaders attempted to
counter these representations by publicizing the high moral standards of the
residents and arguing that the decadence was a result of “the hundreds of
downtown white people” who go to Harlem for a “moral vacation.”

In the 1920s, Harlem was a contested space for representation, and this
chapter examines that contestation through the distorted margins separating
private and public, natural and staged, and authentic and manufactured. While
the previous chapter explored this phenomenon via the semiprivate rent party
institution in Harlem and the lesbian and gay demimonde throughout New
York City, here I will focus on how the commercial theater of the 1920s com-
pli cated the struggle for a representative view of black life and how competing
forces attempted to define the “real” Harlem. The pithily titled *Harlem* (1929)
serves as one of the clearest enactments of this struggle.

*Harlem* is a Broadway melodrama by Wallace Thurman and William Jourdan
Rapp, and the production is historically significant because it was the first commercially successful Broadway play written by an African American—Thurman (although it was cowritten by Rapp, a white playwright). In *Harlem*, Thurman and Rapp consciously recycled many of the conventions of popular Broadway melodrama, which they profitably combined with the white attraction for Harlem’s nightlife. The final product is a fascinating hybrid that also includes elements of black folk drama, musical comedy, and social realism. The drama, which was billed as a “Thrilling Play of the Black Belt,” demonstrates what George Hutchinson calls “the cobbled together of traditions out of heterogeneous elements and a babel of tongues.” This “hybridity,” which paralleled the contemporaneous divisive public debate inside and outside the black community, reveals that “real life” 1920s Harlem was a fragmented site of identification, and demonstrates the impossibility of determining an “authentic” African American identity for that era. Even more notably, through the collaboration of the black and white playwrights, depictions of the “old” and “new” Negro, and the attempt to re-create Harlem in Times Square, there is a genuine attempt to blur the boundaries between the races and create a work of art that transcends racial categorization.

If this sounds particularly grandiose for a play that was subtitled *A Melodrama of Negro Life in Harlem*, the *Harlem* playwrights called their work an “educational drama,” and they deliberately intended to assail the stereotypes traditionally associated with Blacks on stage, such as the mammy figure, the slow-witted, superstitious “darkie,” and the cunning but malapropism-spouting trickster. Indeed, Thurman and Rapp strove to “present the [N]egro as he is” in a veritable, starkly naturalistic environment, and they even included a “Glossary of Harlemisms” in the playbill for deciphering the hip, jazz-inflected, colloquial dialogue spoken on stage. The drama contains a cross-section of a black community, which in the world of this play includes licentious, unrestrained young women, barbaric, sexually out-of-control partygoers, gun-shooting, handsome gangsters, as well as displaced, pious, southern folk, and idealistic, male social climbers. The conflicting images within Thurman and Rapp’s play fly in the face of black bourgeois critics, who insisted on images that put Blacks in a positive light and assisted in the task of racial uplift. While simultaneously hoping to educate their audiences, the playwrights were required by their producers to construct a play that would also appeal to the tastes of their mainstream Broadway audience, who craved larger-than-life characters, thrilling drama, and, as one contemporary producer instructed, a “wow” in the third act.
“SO LIKE VAN VECHTEN, START INSPECTIN’”

Broadway audiences were conditioned to a particular view of Harlem that had permeated the popular culture by 1929. To appreciate the pressure on Rapp and Thurman to embody this vision, one need look only at the controversy surrounding the publication of Carl Van Vechten’s *Nigger Heaven*, which helped initiate the Harlem vogue. Before examining Rapp and Thurman’s depiction of Harlem, this section will provide a context for the literary and theatrical representation of an “insider’s view” of Harlem as it was stimulated by that novel.

In August 1926, *Nigger Heaven*, by white novelist and socialite Carl Van Vechten, appeared in bookstores across the country. The novel was an instant best seller, and within just a few months, it went through nine printings. In addition, the novel’s subsequent international success helped make Harlem an obligatory stop for tourists visiting New York City. Although the book was never adapted for the stage or film, its relationship to popular entertainment is not at all tangential. Its depiction of black life in Harlem had a tremendous impact on the way in which images of race were presented, perceived, and discussed in the era. As a result, nearly all of the African American performers on Broadway and in the nightclubs of the 1920s were influenced, arguably both positively and adversely, by this novel. More importantly, the arguments it raised about cultural difference laid the groundwork for public discussions over African American representations performed in a variety of venues.

A great deal has been written about Van Vechten’s novel and the firestorm it provoked among literary and political leaders in the era, but because of its connections to the New York theater and nightclub worlds, it is worth discussing in this context. In brief, the melodramatic plot concerns the tempestuous romance of two young African Americans, Byron Kason and Mary Love. Naive, beautiful Mary is a librarian and Byron a struggling writer, and the two develop a wholesome, deep love for one another. Byron, however, grows increasingly caustic from a lack of success selling his stories, and as his failure becomes more and more debilitating, he considers Mary’s love smothering and patronizing. Soon after, he falls for the impetuous and exotic Lasca Sartoris, who was based on Nora Douglas Holt, a wealthy socialite of the 1920s and good friend of Van Vechten’s. In the novel Lasca shows Byron the pleasures of the flesh and material wealth (as well as introducing him to Harlem’s raucous night life). Eventually Lasca tires of Byron and dismisses him for Harlem’s numbers king (who now would be known as a “bookie”), Randolph Pettijohn. When Pettijohn is killed in a nightclub by a Harlem “sheik,” who is also angry at his taking Lasca
away from him, Byron is circumstantially linked to the murder. Seeing no way out of this turn of events, Byron unloads his own pistol into the corpse of Pettijohn and succumbs to the law and his own fate. Thus ends the story of an idealistic young black man who comes to the Big City and is destroyed by its callous indifference.

The responses to the book culminated in perhaps one of the most contentious debates over black representation in American history and demonstrated the deep divisions within the community and among the cultural leaders. Alain Locke, Rudolph Fisher, James Weldon Johnson, and Charles S. Johnson gave the book high praise. Wallace Thurman, who offered faint acclaim for the book as a work of literature, spoke out against the damnation heaped upon the novel. In “Fire Burns,” an editorial printed in the first and only edition of the literary magazine FIRE!!, Thurman wrote:

Group criticism of current writings, morals, life, politics, or religion is always ridiculous, but what could be more ridiculous than the wholesale condemnation of a book which only one-tenth of the condemnators have or will read. And even if the book was as vile, as degrading, and as defamatory to the character of the Harlem Negro as the Harlem Negro now declares, his criticisms would not be considered valid by an intelligent person as long as the critic had had no reading contact with the book.7

A large vocal black contingent, however, was incensed by the book’s publication even though many, as Thurman and others indicated, never got past the title page. This outcry did not, however, stop people from reading the novel, and more likely added to its success. Robert F. Worth surmises that the novel sold more copies “than all the books by black writers of the Harlem Renaissance combined.”8 Many Harlemites, though, believed their community had been betrayed and exploited by Van Vechten, whom they had treated with the greatest hospitality or at least quiet tolerance as he did his “research.”9 Andy Razaf poked fun at Van Vechten’s methodological explorations in his song, “Go Harlem.” The lyric includes the line: “So, like Van Vechten, / Start inspectin’, / Go, Harlem, go Harlem, go.”10 Many in the community scorned Van Vechten’s sensationalized portrait of their community, and unsuccessfully tried to ban him from visiting Harlem.

The title was especially offensive to some, but Van Vechten vociferously claimed that his use of the term was not intended to offend—perhaps he wished for it to shock—but he used the term nigger heaven ironically, both as a
theatrical allusion and as a metaphor for Harlem. On a literal level, it refers to the second balcony in downtown theaters, where black audiences were relegated when they attended a Broadway show. The packing of black people into the gallery, requiring them to use separate doors and unadorned stairways, which contrasted with the ornate passageways leading to the orchestra and mezzanine sections of Broadway theaters, was a powerful social reminder of their status. (Incidentally, these characteristics are still evident in the existing Broadway theaters built around the turn of the century.) Even when the whites in the orchestra and mezzanine below were joyously applauding an all-black show like *Shuffle Along*, the theatrical spaces dictated, or better yet, “disciplined” in Foucauldian parlance, the great racial divide.\textsuperscript{11}

Metaphorically, Van Vechten’s title refers to Harlem itself, pointing to the neighborhood as a segregated section for Blacks, situated geographically at the top of Manhattan Island. Although the title suggests a paradise-like quality of this community and its separation, in Van Vechten’s intended usage, the novel ironically presents Harlem as an overcrowded enclave for its black residents. The central character of the novel, Byron, articulates this view in an oft-quoted passage:

> We sit in our places in the gallery of this New York theatre and watch the white world sitting down below in the good seats in the orchestra. Occasionally they turn their faces up towards us, their hard, cruel faces, to laugh or sneer, but they never beckon. It doesn’t seem to occur to them that Nigger Heaven is crowded, that there isn’t another seat, that something has to be done.\textsuperscript{12}

Unfortunately, Van Vechten’s social commentary is lost within the melodramatic proceedings of the book. Overpowered by the exciting and vibrant nightclub scenes, which include the exploits of black gangsters, loose women, and dedicated revelers, Byron’s rant seems more like sour grapes than a social indictment.

In his defense, Van Vechten never intended to exploit or insult his black hosts; in fact he had envisioned “taking up the Chinese and the Jews” in future fictional exposés (he never did).\textsuperscript{13} He championed black causes in his *Vanity Fair* columns and was a patron to several black artists, including Langston Hughes. He was a tremendous supporter of many black artists and entertainers, and his renowned parties included numerous African American guests at a time when New York’s high society was strictly segregated.

In an era when black identity was being forged, and positive images were at
a premium, Van Vechten seemed to be more interested in rebelling against white middle-class ideals and intent on sending a cultural shockwave through New York’s elite.

Van Vechten’s book had an even more profound effect, and it touched a nerve among African Americans when racial tensions were especially high across the nation. In 1926, news of lynchings from the South continued to seep into Harlem, and there was still not a Senate-passed antilynching bill that would at the very least reflect a modicum of white concern. In a highly theatrical protest in December 1926, two political organizations, the National Negro Development Union and the National Negro Centre Political Party, gathered in Harlem in response to the lynching of Bertha Lowman and her two brothers in Aiken, South Carolina. Demanding that President Coolidge take action to halt the activity of the Ku Klux Klan, S. R. Williams, a Wilberforce College professor, used Van Vechten’s novel as evidence of white culpability. After denouncing *Nigger Heaven* and reading excerpts from the novel, he tore two pages from the book and asked the energized crowd what should be done with the pages “to show proper resentment of their contents.” As the crowd responded “Burn ’em up!” Williams lit the pages on fire and held them over his head until they were completely incinerated. There might be another ceremony, Williams told the crowd, to burn the rest of the book.14

In addition to showing *inter*racial divisions in the 1920s, the controversy surrounding *Nigger Heaven* reflects *intra*racial splits and fragmentation. While critics and reporters of the era attempted to depict Harlem as a community united by racial commonalities, the response to *Nigger Heaven* attested to the depth of the fissures with which it was bisected. Class divisions, varying national origins, political affinities, and religion were just some of the ways in which the community was divided, and Van Vechten created a call to arms. Apart from the occasional political protest, the battle over *Nigger Heaven* was mostly academic, and the theater of operations was the black mainstream and scholarly press, the black intelligentsia and religious figures its main warriors.

James Weldon Johnson, a good friend of Van Vechten’s, championed the novel in the black journal *Opportunity,* and he pointed to the multifaceted presentation of Harlem in the novel. In his review, he applauds Van Vechten as the first white novelist to portray Harlem life not as a single experience, and he says the author presents “the components of that life from the dregs to the froth.” Johnson sees the book as a truthful, nonmanipulative narrative and a genuine documentary of Harlem, but at the same time, one that is literary and artful.
Commenting on Van Vechten’s treatment of Harlem’s less wholesome elements, Johnson focuses on the universalism of the love story at the novel’s heart:

The scenes of gay life, of night life, the glimpses of the underworld, with all their tinsel, their licentiousness, their depravity serve actually to set off in sharper relief the decent, cultured, intellectual life of Negro Harlem. But all these phases of life, good and bad, are merely the background for the story, and the story is the love life of Byron Kasson and Mary Love.15

Johnson maintains that the book is surely going to be “widely read,” and will undoubtedly “arouse much discussion.” Understanding that some people will have difficulty getting beyond the title and try to talk knowingly about the book anyway, he concludes: “This reviewer would suggest reading the book before discussing it.”16

In his scathing review in The Crisis (also a black journal) several months after the novel’s publication, Du Bois never mentions James Weldon Johnson by name, but he responds to Johnson’s appraisal point by point. He refers to the book as “a blow in the face” to the black community. Although he objects to the title, he says that that is the least of the novel’s offenses, asserting, “after all, a title is only a title.” In particular, Du Bois condemns the book for being an unflattering and false representation of Harlem. Assuming the opposite of Johnson’s position, he calls the work’s portrait of black life a “caricature,” which, he explains, “is worse than untruths because it is a mass of half-truths.” He writes: “Probably some time and somewhere in Harlem every incident of the book has happened; and yet the resultant picture built out of these parts is ludicrously out of focus and undeniably misleading.”17 He defiantly refutes any allegation that the depiction of Harlem is fair and balanced, and he posits a critique of the white, one-sided perception of Harlem, which focuses only on its scandalous images. He writes:

[Van Vechten] is an authority on dives and cabarets. But he masses this knowledge without rule or reason and seeks to express all of Harlem life in its cabarets. To him the black cabaret is Harlem; around it all his characters gravitate. . . . Such a theory of Harlem is nonsense. The overwhelming majority of black folk never go to cabarets. The average colored man in Harlem is an everyday laborer, attending church, lodge and movie and as conservative and as conventional as ordinary working folk everywhere.18
In a conclusion that seems to answer Johnson’s appeal for people to read the book, Du Bois says: “I read Nigger Heaven and read it through because I had to. But I advise others who are impelled by a sense of duty or curiosity to drop the book gently in the grate and to try the Police Gazette.”

Du Bois’s argument that the title was not a metaphor for Harlem, as Van Vechten posited, but rather a synecdochical archetype, was reiterated by community and religious leaders, who mourned the adverse effect it had on the neighborhood. They viewed such works as Lulu Belle and Nigger Heaven and their depiction of Harlem as a “paradise for cheap sport” with dismay. This was a small element of Harlem life, they argued, and the more dominant “good” and “decent” side of their neighborhoods was ignored. Reverend William Lloyd Imes, a pastor of St. James’ Church, asked:

Would white folk like to be judged by their cheapest and vilest products of society? Do they feel flattered by the sordid, degrading life brought out in our courts? Those who really know Negro Harlem find its good, decent homes, its schools, its churches, its beginning of business enterprises, artists, musicians, poets, and scholars, influential civic organizations, modern newspapers and magazines published and controlled by the race, all of which is a veritable romance in itself.

And in a tongue-in-cheek, ironic piece for the Messenger, George S. Schuyler wrote that Harlem had very recently earned a degree of respect for its growing number of intellectuals, writers, and poets. But he claims that these achievements have been nearly forgotten due to the interest in the vulgar nightlife. facetiously, he states that Carl Van Vechten and Broadway impresario David Belasco would soon be participating in a public debate to determine who is “most entitled to be known as the Santa Claus of Black Harlem, a community described as the Mecca of the New Negro but lately called ‘Nigger Heaven.’” Poking fun at Belasco and Van Vechten’s capitalization on black life and their self-serving “support” of black literary and cultural life, he concludes, “Both contestants are well known for their contributions to the Fund for the Relief of Starving Negro Intelligentsia and for their frequent explorations of the underground life north of 125th Street.”

Within a year, Nigger Heaven became an integral part of the popular culture and was synonymous with Harlem entertainment. Its representations of black cabaret performers, singers, and dancers were replicated in the nightclubs, musical shows, and plays in New York and other cities across the United States. A
A blunt example of the circulation of the title and its images can be found in George S. Oppenheimer and Alfred Nathan, Jr.'s song “Nigger Heaven Blues,” which appeared in The Manhatters, a musical revue that first appeared in Greenwich Village in the late spring of 1927 and moved to the Selwyn Theatre in August of the same year. The song was set in a cabaret scene and performed by whites in blackface, and the lyric attempts to capture the rag-tag, sexual spirit of the novel and includes the verse, “High yaller girls, choc’late and buff, / Doing their stuff, doing it rough / Oh boy, I got the Nigger Heaven Blues.” As critics warned, the original socially and politically ironic intentions of the title were consumed by the depictions of salacious dancing and unending jazz music.

Even more than being a cultural marker, the novel became a travelogue, a tourist’s guidebook for visiting Harlem. The book was deemed a work of fiction, but people wanted an unmediated experience of the scenes from the novel because they seemed so “real” and “authentic.” An article from 1929 printed in the Jamaican Mail, a Kingston, Jamaica, newspaper, reflects this desire to experience the real, untainted Harlem. The author of the piece, Viscountess Weymouth, writes that since reading Nigger Heaven, she has wanted to experience Harlem, “this colourful Mecca of jazz, high spirits and drama.” Fortuitously, she met Carl Van Vechten at her first party in New York, and he “promised that he himself would unlock the ebony gates of Nigger Heaven” to her and her unidentified traveling companions. Their first stop was Connie’s Inn, where she saw a not very satisfying musical revue. Her disillusionment with Connie’s arose from the fact that except for the waiters and entertainers (she was quite impressed in particular by “a beautiful negress” who performed “an exotically barbaric dance”), there were nearly no “coloured people in the room.” She states sadly: “I was disappointed; the whole atmosphere was so obviously faked to lure the tourist.” The club lacked the authentic environment that typified her reading of the novel. Her spirits rose, however, with their arrival at the Sugar Cane, which figures prominently as the model for Van Vechten’s fictional “Black Venus” speakeasy in Nigger Heaven. Upon entering, she thought the place empty, but then “realized that black faces were beginning to extricate themselves from the dark background.” She recounts the scene with a cinematic detachment, almost as an ethnographer recording her observations on the behavior of her black subjects: “All of them dance beautifully, but violently, keeping quite still about the shoulders and swaying from the hips. When the band stopped they again faded quietly into darkness.” All in all, she was more than satisfied by her trip to this club because the speakeasy lived up to the expectations established by Van Vechten’s novel.
Her evening concluded at an unnamed, carefully secluded pub. At first she was anxious and afraid as she entered the dimly lit club. She notes, “It was crowded with dusky faces; ours were conspicuous as the only white ones. I do not think we should have been admitted had Mr. Van Vechten not been there.” Her initial fright at the sense of impending danger and overall sense of foreboding recalls the Black Mass scene from *Nigger Heaven*. And like that unnamed space, she regarded this club as so covert and genuine, she was careful not to disclose its name or exact location. Publicizing it in her account would destroy the ineffable dark secrets she had learned. The sense of excitement and lawlessness of the scene was heightened by the “well-stocked bar” that greeted her upon entering, for as she reminded her readers, the United States at this time was “the land of prohibition.” Her fear finally dissipated and her sense of security returned later in the nighttime when a white policeman strolled in, “had a drink,” and left “happy.”

To Weymouth, this club was the most educational and pleasing of all her stops, as she could also watch black people interacting in an environment untainted by white intrusion (except for Van Vechten’s guided party, of course). She recalled listening to “St. Louis Blues” “wailing” around her, and she described the music as “the broken, melancholy chant of a race of slaves, alive with a throbbing rhythm running through it, and breaking free at the close, dominant and virile.” Her tour concluded with a breakfast of waffles and fried chicken at the speakeasy, and she and her small party of whites left the club after dawn. Cynical observers, as well as a significant segment of the black community, referred to this particular version of Harlem as “Van Vechtenland,” one that was created and strengthened in the white imagination. Thurman and Rapp’s *Harlem* was originally intended as an antidote to this vision with a more accurate delineation.

**“CITY OF REFUGE, CITY OF REFUSE”**

When *Harlem* opened on Broadway, Whitney Bolton, a critic for the *New York Telegraph*, called the play “the most unretouched and, therefore, the most accurate of the photographs made at Seventh avenue and 132d street.” To Bolton, the photographic accuracy of the play extended to the treatment of its socially realistic characters: “The dark man of Manhattan Island and his girl of tantalizin’ tan receive here the consideration and study that no play which touched them has had before this work of William Jourdan Rapp and Wallace Thurman was written.” Other New York critics also praised the production’s veracity within
its dramatic framework. One critic found the muddled melodramatic plot rather contrived, but said that “it is the many bits of authentic [N]egro life and Harlem color that make it humanly novel and interesting.” Similarly Alison Smith pointed out that even when the “feeble and disjointed” plot lagged in spots, “There [was] always the sense of an authentic picture” of black life. And Brooks Atkinson of the New York Times wrote, “As [N]egro melodrama, Harlem has a ring of authenticity that comes from the [N]egro influence in its authorship.” The generally mixed reviews of the play notwithstanding, most of the responses in the press pointed to the impressive skill with which the neophyte, white director Chester Erskin and the playwrights, one black and one white, re-created Harlem life on the Apollo stage on 43rd Street (which is not to be confused with Harlem’s Apollo Theatre on 125th Street, which opened in 1934).

Although it was not the phenomenal success that Lulu Belle had been in 1926, Harlem managed to turn a small profit during its brief run on Broadway. Produced by Edward A. Blatt (who, several decades later, was the company manager of the Broadway play The Great White Hope, starring James Earl Jones), Harlem opened on Broadway on February 20, 1929, and played 93 performances (just shy of the 100-performance mark deemed necessary to be considered an unqualified hit within the industry). A few months later, a national tour of the play opened in Chicago, and while some members of the African American community petitioned to close the show, proclaiming that it offered a distorted view of black life, the production did quite well. In June of that year, the Broadway version closed rather abruptly after some financial rancor—the cast demanded they be paid the equivalent rates of other Broadway performers. The press reported that Erskin publicly called the actors “a bunch of crafty niggers” and that he vowed to shut down the show “not withstanding crowded houses.” Thurman spoke out against the reports and asserted Erskin’s innocence. After reassembling the cast, which included just five members of the original Broadway company along with most of the actors from the touring cast, the producers transferred the show to the Eltinge Theatre on Forty-second Street on October 21, 1929. The timing could not have been worse. The stock market crashed exactly one week later, and the reopened Harlem closed after sixteen performances.

The play was the brainchild of Thurman, a major literary voice in the Harlem Renaissance and best known today for his novels The Blacker the Berry . . . (1929) and Infants of the Spring (1932), both of which also depict Harlem life. Iconoclastic and caustic, Thurman riled the old guard of the Harlem Renaissance with his “lukewarm interest in promoting African American identity.”
Contemporary accounts by people who knew him, including Langston Hughes, Richard Bruce Nugent, and Dorothy West, describe him as self-loathing, morose, and extremely bitter. These qualities, Thurman’s early critics claimed, were evident in his writing. In his review of *The Blacker the Berry*, W. E. B. Du Bois said that Thurman appeared to “deride blackness.”

Recent scholarship, especially by Eleonore Van Notten, David R. Jarraway, Amritjit Singh, and Daniel M. Scott III, paints a different picture. Thurman’s characters are far more varied than earlier thought. Rather than focusing on images of racial uplift or forwarding propaganda, Thurman created much more complex views of black life. He eschewed racial and sexual boundaries, and his work reflects this orientation. For example, in his novels he presents black characters who successfully pass for white (*Berry*) and ones who engage in both heterosexual and homosexual affairs (*Infants*). Thurman was intent on breaking down the barriers between the races, an effort best articulated by Raymond Taylor, the protagonist of *Infants of the Spring*: “Anything that will make white people and colored people come to the conclusion that after all they are all human . . . the sooner amalgamation can take place and the Negro problem will cease to be a blot on American civilization.”

It is probably safe to surmise that this “amalgamation” was what Thurman had in mind when he enlisted the help of writer and friend William Jourdan Rapp to write a three-act play about the experiences of a representative black family in Harlem. Rapp, a former feature writer for the *New York Times* and editor for *True Story Magazine*, had written the scripts for numerous radio soap operas and was a burgeoning playwright in his own right. By the time Rapp died in 1942 at age forty-seven, he had coauthored three other Broadway plays, including *Whirlpool* (1929), *Substitute for Murder* (1935), and *The Holmeses of Baker Street* (1936). None of these was as successful as *Harlem*. Rapp and Thurman collaborated on two other plays, *Jeremiah the Magnificent* (1929), which received just one performance in 1933, and *Black Cinderella* (1929), which was apparently never completed.

The basis for *Harlem* is Thurman’s short story “Cordelia the Crude,” which he wrote for the 1926 black literary magazine *Fire!!*, and which focuses on a young woman’s descent into prostitution after the sexually reticent narrator gives her two dollars after their first tryst. The climax of the story takes place at a Harlem rent party and offers a sensationalized view of Harlem after dark. This depiction of Harlem became the raison d’être for the play and the backdrop for Rapp and Thurman’s collaboration. Their partnership was, by all accounts, a felicitous one, and they established a strong, lasting friendship. Thurman’s cor-
respondence with Rapp from 1929, the year *Harlem* opened, to 1934, the year of Thurman’s death, shows a strong professional and personal bond between the two men. Thurman entrusted Rapp in managing his financial affairs during his divorce from Louise Thompson and asked that Rapp be the first to be notified of Thurman’s death by the officials of the tuberculosis sanitarium where he died. In addition, Thurman confided in Rapp about the basis of the divorce suit, a sexual incident that occurred in the bathroom of 135th Street subway station. In a narrative that has a great deal in common with “Cordelia the Crude,” twenty-three-year-old Wallace Thurman was broke, hungry, and without prospects, and he accepted two dollars from a man in exchange for sexual favors. When Thurman accepted, two plainclothes police officers emerged from the mop closet and took them both to jail. Thurman gave a phony name and address, spent two days in jail, and scrounged up $25 for the fine. The other man, a repeat offender, received a six-month sentence.

The level of trust between Thurman and Rapp is also evident in the numerous articles they wrote in conjunction with the play’s opening. In an essay unpublished in his lifetime, “My Collaborator,” Thurman offers a glimpse of their working relationship:

I have often wished for a movietone camera during our play writing sessions. Posterity should not be deprived of the picture of Bill Rapp, excited over the possibilities or difficulties of a scene, leaping from his chair, pacing the floor, frantically gesturing the while he shouts Negro dialect with decided East Side overtone.

The essays also suggest why the final version of the playscript seems to be a jumble of different artistic perspectives. The play attempts to integrate Thurman’s expertise in recording realistic scenes from Harlem nightlife with Rapp’s experience writing radio soap opera. Even the onstage rent party, the high point of the show, seems tacked on. Most likely this impression has to do with the fact that it was a rather late addition to the play, the “wow” that producers claimed the script lacked in its earliest incarnation. In “Detouring *Harlem* to Times Square,” Rapp and Thurman said that there were several versions of the play as they tried to “wow” the third act. They finally did, and Chester Erskin and Edward A. Blatt came aboard.

When *Harlem* was finally produced, the problems with the script did not go unnoticed by the critics. The physical production received generally very favorable reviews, but the script was faulted for its disjointed craftsmanship. Many
critics remarked that it was serviceable, but its tone and style were inconsistent and seemed to go in several different directions at once. Indeed, as indicated by the snippets from the reviews already quoted, *Harlem* is a “cobbling together” of familiar dramatic genres, including melodrama, social realism, and black folk play. As evidenced by the reactions in the popular press, however, in between the structural junctures of these dramaturgical forms there were flashes—or ephemeral snapshots—of presumably “natural” black behavior, “authentic” Harlem sights and sounds, and “real” black Harlemites (as opposed to actors) at work and play. The effects of this reconstruction reaffirmed the “truth” of those images for Broadway theatergoers, but at the same time, they also pointed to the constructedness of those images in the “real” Harlem.

In brief, the plot of *Harlem* centers around the Williamses, a poor and struggling black family in Harlem, and the tumultuous events that arise from a rauous rent party in their home one Saturday in late November. The play also includes a hard-boiled, young black woman who will stop at nothing in her quest for wealth and fame, gun-shooting gangsters, the murder of an oily gambler, the subsequent frame-up of a hardworking, young black man, and proper justice as generated by a shrewd white detective. But at the core of the melodramatic maelstrom and musical mayhem is a modest black family trying to eke out a life in this strange new neighborhood. The audience learns within the first few minutes of the play that the family is new to Harlem, having only recently come north. The idealistic oldest son, Jasper, had recognized the numerous job opportunities that New York’s industrial center promised, moved there with his own wife and children, and shortly afterward summoned his extended family to this “City of Refuge” from their economic and racial oppression in the Deep South. However, the promises of a better life have been unfulfilled, as articulated by the family’s matriarch, referred to only as “Mother Williams,” who calls Harlem a “City of Refuse.” She proclaims:

City of Refuge! Dat’s what you wrote an’ told us. Harlem is de City of Refuge. Is yo’ shure you don’ mean City of Refuse? Dat’s all dere is heah. De people! Dese dark houses made out of de devil’s brick, piled up high an’ crowdin’ one another an’ smellin’ worse dan our pig pen did back home in summer. City of Refuge! You—I—God, have mercy on our souls.

From the outset, this ambivalence toward Harlem is at the heart of the play and recalls the situation in the real-life neighborhood. But the tension between the “actual” conditions and the presumed conditions, or those associated with im-
ages of Harlem from popular culture, is defused onstage for theatergoers as it was for tourists visiting the district after dark. On the one hand, the economic and social situation of the family is rather miserable, but on the other, the sensational and riotous atmosphere belies the play’s ameliorative attitude toward their poverty.

In its various drafts prior to opening on Broadway, the play was called Black Mecca, City of Refuge, and Black Belt, but in all cases, Harlem intended to present an authentic view of the neighborhood from an insider’s perspective. As responses in the black press confirmed, however, this “view” catered to that of its mostly white spectators. According to a report in the New York Age, an African American publication, the play’s press representative said that no advance publicity or opening night tickets were sent to the black press because the “show was primarily for ‘white consumption.’” It was presumably intended to give whites a privileged view of Harlem that black people would not need to see since they lived it. The black press did attend, however, and the criticism surrounding the play echoed that which greeted Nigger Heaven three years before. Reactions to Harlem in the black press once again stimulated the debate over visibility-at-all-costs versus the propagation of positive black images. For example, Theophilus Lewis remarked on the equality of the play’s black representations, presented within a dramatic form typically reserved for whites. That is, the play presents melodramatic black characters the same way in which white characters would be presented in a similar kind of play. Rather than addressing an essential black difference in the drama, which plays about “exotic” black life tended to do, Lewis believed that the playwrights fashioned a play around “ordinary” individuals. He wrote, “Its characters are not abnormal people presented in an appealing light but everyday people exaggerated and pointed up for the purpose of melodrama.” Salem Tutt Whitney of the Chicago Defender, on the other hand, argued that the exaggerated images were particularly harmful to developing racial attitudes. In an argument similar to Du Bois’s about Van Vechten’s novel, he said:

There is no denying the fact that “Harlem” possesses dramatic value. It moves swiftly. Events take place in rapid succession that sometimes thrill and always entertain. But it is impossible for us to like the story. It is the Race situation that furnishes the ground for my objection. Most of the white people who see “Harlem” say, and are anxious to say, that it is a true portrayal of Race life. They do not say one phase of our Race life. To me it is not realism, it is exaggeration. And thereby we are condemned as a race.
Yet as these reviews depict, the most fascinating aspect of the play is the way in which it combines both “exaggerated” and “realistic” images of black life. The play’s varied dramaturgical approaches reflect the constantly transforming terrain of Harlem and the futility of defining an “authentic” blackness. Thurman’s utopian vision of an “amalgamation” of the races is only occasionally successful in the final product, and it more strongly points to the fragmentation and hybridity of a black identity shifting and buckling under the weight of excessive conflicting representations. The pressure of accommodating the demands of a popular theater apparatus—intent on confirming racial stereotypes—all but makes the work of two artists trying to transcend racial categorization burst at its seams. If we employ Homi Bhabha’s terminology, examining the “in-between spaces” of the extremes of “realism” and “exaggeration” shows the impossibility of claiming a “truth” for a particular race of people, and this in itself is a form of transcending racial categorization.41

“GO, HARLEM, GO HARLEM, GO”

Framed by a rather hackneyed melodramatic structure, the underlying motive for the play is undoubtedly its presumed presentation of naturalness and unfettered scenes from black life. To this end, the play celebrated pluralism, but one could argue that it also reaffirmed attitudes of white superiority. This was accomplished in a few subtle ways. Most obviously, it recapitulated the exoticizing white gaze. Unlike those attending an actual Harlem nightclub or rent party, white theatergoers could sit in their orchestra seats and study the customs and behavior of the Blacks onstage, whom the publicists went to great length to say came directly from Harlem. The play allowed audiences an opportunity to penetrate black life, in a manner similar to Viscountess Weymouth’s Van Vechten–escorted excursion, while maintaining a comfortable social distance, which is not guaranteed in an integrated club or party.

The segregated theater conditions contributed to the separation of the races. The irony of this is evident in a letter that Wallace Thurman wrote to his Harlem collaborator William Jourdan Rapp: “Five different times I have bought seats for myself to see Harlem—including opening night—and tho I asked for center aisle seats (as much as a week in advance) not yet have I succeeded in not being put on the side in a little section where any other Negro who happened to buy an orchestra seat was also placed.”42 Audiences could gawk at the black actors on stage, but they were not compelled to come into contact with them from their unobstructed and comfortable positions in the socially hierarchical
Broadway theaters. Under these circumstances, *Harlem* on Broadway offered a view of Harlem that few audience members would have had the opportunity to see in real life.

Most of the play occurs in the Williamses’ household, a five-room, 132nd Street railroad flat, which the family shares with several tenants. The setting’s careful attention to physical and atmospheric detail, as described in the stage descriptions, pictures from the production, and critical responses, demonstrates the way in which the production strove for photographic realism of a Harlem flat. Reconstructed in a highly naturalistic manner, the apartment is in need of repair, “feebly lit,” and constantly assaulted by outside noises such as the screeches of clothes line pulleys, screaming and cursing neighbors, and the “salacious moans of a deep toned blues singer” emanating from a nearby Victrola. The audience is constantly reminded that the Williamses’ home is cramped and the rest of the neighborhood is closing in on it, invoking the crowded living conditions of the community.

The careful attention to details of the environment (within the confines of the Williamses’ home as well as its relationship to the “real” Harlem) is indicative of the play’s claim to naturalism. The description of the set, for example, seems to be a direct imitation of Strindberg’s “backdrop-at-an-angle” design that enhanced the naturalistic effect of *Miss Julie*. In the stage descriptions, the playwrights say that the living room of the Williamses’ home is to be constructed “on a slant in relation to the footlights, so that the end of the rear wall on the right is nearer the front wall on the left.”

Because this gives the sense that the walls are literally closing in on the characters (from the audience’s standpoint anyway), the design would reduce the playing space, causing the flat to appear crowded and too small for the family and the several lodgers. More importantly, however, is the sense that the play offered a wholly different view of Harlem. The effect of this slanted depiction of the Harlem home would be what Strindberg called “an unfamiliar perspective” for the audience. The play’s naturalistic setting offered a perspective of Harlem seldom seen by tourists—the private, domestic lives of Harlem residents.

Through this heightened realism and overt claims of “authenticity,” Thurman and Rapp wanted to galvanize new images of African Americans and the neighborhood. Previously, works using the neighborhood as their setting tended to depict Harlem’s public spaces, such as the streets, nightclubs, and speakeasies. But *Harlem* not only offered an after-hours view of the neighborhood, it also depicted a domestic side of the community. As Una Chaudhuri says in her discussion of stage naturalism, this manner of disclosure of the pri-
vate within a public sphere allows for a theater of “total visibility,” or one that promises to “deliver the whole truth” of the world it unmasks. Even though the play’s exposure of a private realm pointed to the dire economic and social situation of the neighborhood’s residents, its emphasis on crime, jazz, and sultry dancing also revealed the depths of the presumed mysterious, exotic world of lower-class black people. The realistic scenic design and staging exposed the peripheries of the primitive, unrestrained behavior of black people in their natural setting.

The play’s heightened realism and presumed authenticity also stemmed from the careful attention applied to the dialogue. According to press reports, the playwrights attempted to capture the speech patterns and singular phrases of the neighborhood and to further portray the foreignness of Harlem. To this end, they liberally peppered the script with “genuine” bits of dialogue supposedly spoken by native Harlemites. The “Glossary of Harlemisms” (an authenticating device Carl Van Vechten also employed in Nigger Heaven) listed in the playbill included twenty-four terms, defined so white audiences would not feel alienated by the language. A few examples include:

**Sweetback.** A colored gigolo, or man who lives off women.

**Dicty.** Highbrow.

**Monkey-hip-eater.** A derisive name applied to a Barbados Negro; supposed to have originated with the myth that Barbados Negroes are passionately fond of monkey meat, particularly “monkey hips with dumplings.”

**Chippy.** A tart; a fly, undiscriminating young wench.

**Mess-around.** A whirling dance; a part of the Charleston.

**38 and 2.** That’s fine.

**Forty.** Okay.

The use of these terms and the printed translation may have provided local color and a level of verity to the play, but there is also a potential parodic element in their inclusion.

In the play language is used in a manner similar to the black folklore recorded by Zora Neale Hurston. In the introduction to Mules and Men (1935), Hurston describes rural black folk’s use of language as a method of resistance. That is, they will speak only in “pleasantries” and superficialities and not divulge what they truly think and feel to meddlesome whites. According to Hurston, Blacks’ language to strangers is evasive, and while white strangers may think they understand black speech, they really don’t: “He can read my writing
but he sho’ can’t read my mind. I’ll put this play toy in his hand, and he will seize it and go away. Then I’ll say my say and sing my song.” While white Broadway audiences assumed that the glossary was provided as a tool for cracking the code created by idiomatic expressions and regional dialect, this may have been Thurman’s elaborate play toy for the audiences.

Parodic or not, Thurman and Rapp took great pains in the press to argue that the value of *Harlem* was not simply as a form of entertainment. In an article written together called “Few Know Harlem, the City of Surprises,” they state that the play highlights the differences between black and white people, which boils down to class distinctions. They point out, for example, that there is a steadily increasing black middle class, who similar to their white counterparts “go for vacations in Europe, Atlantic City, the Maine woods and Southern California.” But on the other hand, they state, “There are some phenomena peculiar to Harlem alone, phenomena which are inherently expressions of the Negro character before it was conditioned by the white world that now surrounds him.” These main differences include the numbers game, which they call “Harlem’s most popular indoor sport and the outlet for the Negro’s craving for gambling,” and the house rent parties. They report, “Some people have found rent parties so profitable that they have become professional givers of house rent parties, getting their whole income from them.” Although the playwrights insist that the community is marked by its economic and ethnic diversity, it is the last two “institutions peculiar to Harlem” and not the hobbies of the “Americanized” black middle class that are given life in their play.

The comments reinforce the notion that class, as Martin Favor explains, is “a primary marker of racial difference.” Du Bois indicated as much when he invited *Crisis* readers to respond to a questionnaire about appropriate representations of black people in art and literature. Among other questions associated with class differences, he asked: “Can publishers be criticized for refusing to handle novels that portray Negroes of education and accomplishment, on the grounds that these characters are no different from white folk and therefore not interesting?” The question itself points to the conflation of middle-classness with whiteness (and bland normalcy). “Authentic blackness,” then, is not determined by the color of one’s skin but primarily by the (lower) class status of the black individual.

Within this conceptual framework, Thurman and Rapp attempted to present a more complex portrayal of familiar character types. In another joint essay, for instance, they claim that their play earns the right to be called “educational theatre” because *Harlem* “presents the [N]egro as he is,” rather than reasserting
the age-old images of the “stage Negros,” or as they bluntly call them, “white folks’ niggers.” The latter images, according to the authors, consist of “the old servant or mammy type known derisively among Harlemites as ‘Uncle Toms’ and ‘handkerchiefs,’ the lazy slowfoot type typified by such vaudevillians as Bert Williams and [the Shuffle Along creators] Miller and Lyles, and the superstitious, praying type who is always thrown into abject fear by darkness, lightning and thunder.” In the same article, they quote an unnamed black critic who praises the play for making black people “understandable” to white audiences and for “educating the theater-going public.” The critic writes: “The [white] man in the orchestra seat may not sympathize with [the black characters’] motives, but he can readily understand them. And understanding these characters helps him to better comprehend the concrete Negroes he has seen in the subway or reads about in the crime columns of the newspapers.” Of course, as the critic implies, these two nonsegregated arenas would have been the most common places for whites to encounter black people directly.

To Thurman and Rapp, Harlem would offer a different version of the incomprehensible, scandal-driven image propagated in the press and in literature. Therefore, in order to make the “inhabitants” of Harlem’s Black Belt understandable, they presented a cross-section of “concrete Negroes,” reflecting the multiple, often conflicting, and sometimes derogatory representations of Blacks in Harlem. The play and its Broadway production, however, were constantly at odds with this objective. The goal of redefining Blacks on the Broadway stage was a noble one, but nevertheless it often perpetuated “exotic” and “primitive” images of African Americans. For example, a publicity handbill hailed the play for those very images: “Harlem! The City that Never Sleeps! A Strange, Exotic Island in the Heart of New York! Rent Parties! Number Runners! Chippies! Jazz Love! Primitive Passion!” The “educational” intentions of Thurman and Rapp were pitted against the desires of Broadway theatergoers, who expected to see a version of the “real” as perpetuated by Nigger Heaven or Lulu Belle.

The public relations campaign helped to ensure that these expectations would be met, and it often reconfirmed the worst possible stereotypes of black people in its effort to demonstrate the “naturalness” of the performances on stage. One of the most egregious examples of this appears in a New York Times profile of the twenty-five-year-old director Chester Erskin two weeks after the show opened. Erskin, according to the article, understood “that good [N]egro dramatic players are rare,” so he “visited dives, speakeasies, rent parties, restaurants, cabarets and private homes” to find suitable, authentic “personalities” for
FIG. 2. *Harlem* program cover for the touring production at the Majestic Theatre in Chicago circa 1930. Artist unknown. (Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.)
his production. The young director accumulated his cast in this manner, and with the patience that “could give Job a tussle,” Erskin “instructed” his cast on the fine points of acting. Reconfirming a stereotypical notion that black people are naturally inferior to whites, the article explains the procedure in which Erskin staged the play:

[Erskin’s] first direction was to make his players repeat the lines after him, word for word, until they could recite them from memory. Then he permitted a few gestures and later he taught them the art of entrances and exits and how to ignore the audience. When they proved a bit slow in grasping things, their great lament was: “You know, Misto’ Erskin, we’se colored people. We cain’t think as fast as white folks.” When the play actually opened and they were praised for their individual performances they replied, “Misto’ Erskin done it.”

While Thurman and Rapp took great pains in their attempts to banish the “Uncle Tom” and “the lazy slowfoot” types from their play, as well as the white cultural imagination, the publicity reinserted it. The article concludes with another instance of the childlike image associated with African Americans in a tribute to Erskin’s paternal patience and kindness: “[The black actors] at first insisted that he sit in the front row and watch them during every performance and often he still does. Whenever they are applauded they look in his direction for his approval.” The playwrights were evidently powerless to halt the Broadway publicity machinery that relied on such tactics to make a “black play” sell to its mostly white audiences. Yet the conflicting images, which combined those based on elements left over from minstrelsy with more progressive representations, enacted the struggle to form a fully integrated black identity. In this regard, the play Harlem mirrored the racial complexities that characterized the neighborhood.

“THE DOOMED CHILDREN OF HAM”

The characters of the play are from the poor working class, and the neighborhood is certainly taking its toll, especially on the older characters. They are being gradually subsumed by the effects of modernization. On one level, the exposure of the social and economic conditions of the characters was not unlike other Broadway plays of the era that theatrically realized the lives of the urban poor. Although contemporary descriptions of the play highlighted the racy rent party dancing and the melodramatic hijinks of the gangsters and detectives
who appear prominently in the play, *Harlem* also evokes the social realism of such plays as DuBose and Dorothy Heyward’s *Porgy* (1927) and Elmer Rice’s *Street Scene* (1929). The genre was a familiar one on Broadway in the 1920s, and the plays within the category tended to address the distressing results of “an oppressive urban environment.” As with these plays, *Harlem* stresses the tragic dehumanization of its characters as a result of city living, and points to the personal and familial rifts that the corrupting environment causes. In Thurman and Rapp’s play, for instance, several of the characters pine for a simpler (though far from idyllic) southern lifestyle, which they have recently left, and they repudiate the northern urban environment, which now consumes them.

One of the most caustic and darkly comic expressions of this urban discontent is Father’s response to another character’s complaint about the crowded subway conditions. He answers, “Dey may lynch you down home, but dey shure don’t squeeze you to death on no subway.” Whereas the South has its share of random misery, the North’s modern conditions are much more stifling and suffocating (both physically and socially). According to Father, there is, ironically, far less freedom for black people in this new environment than there had been in the South. It is certainly not the “City of Refuge” black migrants had been promised. For Broadway audiences, however, *Harlem*’s constricting backdrop seems little more than a mere gripe for party poopers like Mother and Father who complain nonstop about the living conditions and who refuse to enjoy the raucous rent party.

In addition to the Broadway realism of the play, there are characteristics of other genres that were also prevalent in the 1920s. These variant dramaturgical components, as several critics pointed out, do not always successfully meld in *Harlem*. Brooks Atkinson, for instance, called the play “a rag-bag drama and high pressure blow-out all in one,” and Richard Lockridge described it as “a play which at its least is sudden melodrama, broken by pistol shots, and at its best a colorful, changing picture of the dark civilization within our lighter one.” Arthur Ruhl saw a dramatic structural divide based on the supposed logical outcome of its racially divergent authors. He writes that the play “was composed of two different strains, and one of these what might be described as the white or Broadway element overlaid the black.” Judging from the critics’ reactions, one can see that the familiar conceits of the melodrama and social realism (forms associated with white playwrights) did not integrate well with the “authentic” pictures of black life (identified with Thurman’s contribution).

The opening of the play, for example, juxtaposes the expectations of the urban social realism drama, and its tawdry, tragic implications, with a kinder, gentler form. Aside from the laments about the ill effects of urbanization,
Harlem later gives the impression that it is closer in form to a folk drama, which tended to employ provincial settings. For instance, the first act begins in the Williams household as the family prepares for the rent party, and the act concludes with the party itself. Little else happens between. The characters clean, discuss burned bread, and debate whether or not they are better off in Harlem than they were down South. New York World critic Alison Smith praised this slice-of-life aspect of the play, stating, “It has the deep, half unconscious thrill of compassion which the Negro actors give to a study of nostalgia, the bewildered, inarticulate homesickness of a little family, lured from their North Carolina cabin into the smouldering jungle of Harlem.”

The domestic setting and the leisurely unfolding of the action bear the hallmarks of black folk drama form, especially in its presentation of a family faced with adversity. This form, incidentally, would not have been a completely unfamiliar one to many in the audience at Harlem.

The black folk drama was primarily a staple of church groups and playwriting competitions in black journals, and the plays occasionally appeared in commercial theaters. In fact, the first nonmusical play written by an African American to appear on Broadway, Willis Richardson’s The Chip Woman’s Fortune (1923), fit this genre. Historically, the folk drama form, to which Richardson subscribed, was consciously modeled after the Irish folk plays of writers such as J. M. Synge and Lady Gregory—a comparison echoed by Heywood Broun’s remarks. Just as Thurman and Rapp intended to banish the “white folks’ niggers” from their play, the Irish authors intended to banish the stereotypically sentimental, drunk, and pugnacious “stage Irishman” and instead depict honestly the provincial Irish. Similarly, the African American folk playwrights attempted to capture, in James Hatch and Leo Hamalian’s description, “the everyday life of ordinary black people during hard times.” The handwringing, destitute Mother of Harlem, for instance, who continually prays for the souls of her family, seems to be the direct descendant of the keening Maurya in Synge’s Riders to the Sea (1904). An indication of this background occurs midway through the first act, when Mother, overwhelmed by the family’s misfortunes and their propensities for rent parties, “buries her head in her hands and sways the upper part of her body,” beseeching: “Father in heaven! Father in heaven! Forgive dis sinful household. Lawd, fo’give dem. Save my poor wicked children. Watch over dem. Show dem de light. Guide dem, Father. Shield dem from de devil and cleanse der bodies with de Holy Spirit. Amen! Father! Amen!” Yet pitted against the urban realities of this play, the folk characteristics come off as quaint, nostalgic, and outdated.

The two oldest family members, Mother and Father, for instance, are par-
ticularly denotative of the folk drama form. They represent bucolic domesticity, but they are subsumed by urban industry. The stage directions, for example, describe Mother as a “typical southern woman, ready to moan and pray at the slightest provocation,” but she has no control over her children. About Father, a large, gruff man, the stage directions say, “The North has rendered him helpless. He is just a big hulk being pushed around by economic necessity.” Displaced and discontent, Mother and Father represent what Alain Locke in 1925 called the “Old Negro.” That is, as opposed to the “New Negro,” who is “inevitably moving forward under the control largely of his own objectives,” Mother and Father represent the previous generation of Blacks who lack autonomy, consciousness, and self-respect. These characters are bereft of proper names in the play perhaps because, as Locke also explains, the Old Negro “was more of a formula than a human being—a something to be argued about, condemned or defended, to be ‘kept down,’ or ‘in his place,’ or patronized, a social bogey or a social burden.” Even more significantly, the parents lack control over their family as well as the rent party in their home. The parental roles actually belong to Jasper, who brought the family to Harlem, and his sister Cordelia, who runs the household.

Mother and Father have succumbed to what Cornel West describes as the “white world’s view” of themselves and their condition. They have little or no agency and do not foresee that black people will improve their conditions; in short, they have accepted the circumstances of white supremacy. Mother places all of her hope for progress in religion, and Father has simply lost hope that black people will endure in a white world. As Father despairingly explains, “Dey ain’t nothin’ for a nigger nowhere. We’s de doomed children of Ham.” Their “devaluation” and “degradation” have essentially made them void of effectiveness in the environment in which they are placed. As West argues in relation to Ellison’s *The Invisible Man* (1952), when total submission or hopelessness saturates a black individual, the situation renders him or her invisible and without humanity, hence “nameless.” Mother’s and Father’s own namelessness corresponds with their lack of connection to a community, and as West also writes, the “theme of black rootlessness and homelessness is inseparable from black namelessness.” For Father, the sense of eternal displacement, no matter where he is placed, has turned in on itself to become a racial hatred, which is evident in an exchange with Jasper:

**Father**: You know what’s wrong wid’ Harlem? Dey’s too many niggers! Dat’s it—too many niggers.

**Jasper**: You said the same thing ’bout down home.
The exchange also shows the suffocating effects of segregation. The lack of diversity in a ghetto produces frustration and dissatisfaction among the clustered masses.

Whereas Mother and Father appear antiquated and ineffectual in this environment, and the hope of a new homeland for industrious African Americans and a place where they may establish roots is unrealized, the promise of social betterment is rendered through their oldest son, twenty-eight-year-old Jasper. He represents the epitome of Locke’s definition of the “New Negro” and is the model of racial uplift that Du Bois and others advocated in the black arts. Unlike his parents, Jasper is forward thinking, hardworking, and optimistic about improved social conditions for Blacks. More importantly, rather than being subsumed by Harlem, he is empowered by it. He says about his environment, “Why, Harlem is the greatest place in the world for Negroes. You can be a man here. You can ride in the subway and go anywhere your money an’ sense can carry you.” In direct contrast to his father’s unmanly inability to lead the family, hold a job, or secure self-respect, Jasper is autonomous, driven, and self-reliant. He also represents the powerful synthesizing of the black split subjectivity as articulated in W. E. B. Du Bois’s definition of “double consciousness.” In Du Bois’s system of black empowerment, Jasper represents the fulfillment of the desire to integrate the fractionated black (male) subject, which Du Bois describes as the “longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge the double self into a better and truer self” and ultimately “make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face.” In the first act of the play, the Williams home becomes a battleground for the opposing forces of the Old and New Negro, and Locke’s ideas are given dramatic immediacy.

These dialectical representations personify the transformational black cultural identity of the 1920s. As Stuart Hall articulates, “Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything that is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past, they are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power.” The Williams home symbolizes the nexus of black culture. Past and present collide here, and black cultural identity is (to reiterate Bhabha) “in the process of being formed.” But this process is certainly not without resistance. If Mother and Father represent what Blacks used to be, and Jasper represents what Blacks are “becoming” according to Alain Locke’s specifications, then thrown into this atmosphere is the menace to that cultural identity, Cordelia Williams, Harlem’s Pandora, Lulu Belle, and Lasca Sartoris all rolled into one.
“**SUGAR FOOT MISTERS AN’ SUN DODGIN’ SISTERS**”

Cordelia, the oldest Williams daughter, is the central character of the play and the cause of the sensational events that occur. Her madcap machinations threaten to bring down the entire house and throw the dramaturgical structure off-kilter. In fact, by the beginning of the rent party, it is clear that the quaint black folk drama form combined with the urban social realism cannot repress the divisive, unrestrained, and explosive energy that Cordelia has unleashed on this vision of the Harlem neighborhood. Near the end of act 1, the play has veered off from the picturesque realism and into full-blown melodrama, reminiscent of the white-concocted *Lulu Belle*. Similar to the title character of that play, and also like Lasca Sartoris in *Nigger Heaven* (comparisons several critics invoked), Cordelia is a brazen, hard-hearted, young black woman. Walter Winchell referred to her in his review as a “chippie off the old block,” and throughout *Harlem*, she is variously referred to as a “chippie” (or a loose woman), a “hincty [or “snooty”] wench,” and a “good-for-nothin’ strumpet.”

While Mother, Father, and Jasper evoke issues of race associated with class, Cordelia is defined by her alluring, but dangerous, sexuality. From her initial appearance, the stage directions make this perfectly clear:

> [Cordelia] is about eighteen years old and has dark brown skin and bobbed hair. She is an overmatured, southern girl, selfish, lazy, and sullen. She is inspired by activity or joy only when some erotic adventure confronts her or a good time is in view. She has no feeling for her parents or for her brothers and sisters. Considering herself a woman of the world, she holds their opinions and advice in contempt. She is extremely sensual and has an abundance of sex appeal. Her body is softly rounded and graceful. Her every movement and gesture is calculated to arouse a man’s eroticism.

Cordelia’s uninhibited sexuality and uncontrollable need for excitement explode the conventions of the outmoded folk drama form, and she sets the melodramatic apparatus into play. The backdrop for this modern morality play is the sexually charged onstage rent party (or as the playbill’s glossary defines it, “A Saturday night orgy staged to raise money to pay the landlord”), which Cordelia commandeers.

By the end of the first act, the guests and musicians have all arrived, and the party is in full swing. Robert Littell referred to this scene as “a queer, sordid, good-natured orgy, with fifteen or more couples hugging each other in the
most extraordinary dances.” The scene was particularly significant in that it re-created the Harlem that audiences wanted to see: A Harlem infused with sultry jazz music and torrid dancing. According to the responses in the press, the dancing in this scene was “sensual,” “barbaric,” and “anything but lovely” (one critic described it as “grizzly bear dancing”). The stage directions confirm that its blatant allusion to sexual activity was the intended result. The playwrights describe the staging in the following manner:

Body calls to body. They cement themselves together with limbs lewdly intertwined. Another couple is dipping to the floor and slowly shimmying belly to belly as they come back to an upright position. A slender, dark girl with wild eyes and wilder hair stands in the center of the room supported by the strong lithe arms of a longshoreman. Her eyes are closed. Her teeth bite into her lower lip. Her trunk is bent backward until her head hangs below her waist, and all the while the lower portion of her body is quivering like so much agitated Jell-O.

As evidenced by the critical responses, the erotic, “quivering” black bodies on display in this scene delivered the third act “wow” that the playwrights so desperately sought.

For some critics, the scene underscored the supposed cultural and instinctual differences between black people and white people. Richard Lockridge, for example, referred to the black dancers as “unself-conscious and barbaric,” and in the rent party scene “the members of the cast seem to forget they are acting and . . . give themselves over to rhythms which the [N]egro has brought to the white man and which the white man, however he may try, is always a little too self-conscious to accept.” The seemingly “natural” and spontaneous dancing on view in the rent party scene reiterated the entrenched view of an undeniable black primitivism. For Broadway audiences accustomed to seeing the energetic, precisely choreographed dances of musical comedies and revues, the undulating, groping black dancers offered a physicality that seemed unrehearsed, unrestrained, and unconscious. That is, the scene authenticated the romantic and popular notion that black people are naturally “exotic” and “primitive.” Lockridge, for example, went even further in his review to argue that the overtly sexual dancing actually made the melodramatic murders in the play’s plot frighteningly believable. The glimpses of “actual” black behavior provided a backdrop for the formulaic aspects of the play, which gave the production a layer of truth and authenticity. He states that the actors “dance lustily, swayingly, shamelessly and reveal the simplicity and deep earthiness of their race’s
hold on life. And the melodrama of murder is made the more real and plausible by the revelation which the dancing gives of their uncerebral directness. Men and women who dance like that have the strength for violence.”

To this particular critic, the primal movement of the black dancers, framed within the proscenium at the Apollo Theatre on Broadway, pointed to a presumed historical and biological primitiveness and barbarism associated with black bodies.

Similarly, Whitney Bolton wrote that he was “not at all sure that many of the players didn’t forget they were on a stage and believed themselves actually participants in a rent party.” Therefore, the enactment of the rent party potentially granted what Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett describes as an “unmediated encounter” for the Broadway audiences, or one in which the “performances . . . create the illusion that the activities one watches are being done rather than represented, a practice that creates the illusion of authenticity, or realness.” Separate from the contrivances of the play’s plotting, the rent party scene offered not just an image of the “real,” but an interaction with it and moments of complicity in the illusion. As Robert Littell wrote about this sensation, “Stage parties are as a rule pretty terrible, but the [N]egro rent-paying guests throw themselves into it with such spontaneous go and enthusiasm that one feels as if one was there.”

The unrestrained sexual behavior that characterized this appreciation for Harlem, however, was not completely at home on the notoriously conservative Broadway. Activities tolerated and applauded in Harlem were cause for arrest on Broadway as a result of the Wales Padlock Law established in 1927. As Brooks Atkinson explains in his 1970 book Broadway, this law “empowered the police to arrest the producers, authors, and actors of plays that the police disapproved of, and to padlock the theater for a year if the courts brought in a verdict of guilty.” About Harlem and its salacious rent party scene, Burns Mantle of the Daily News cautioned that some theatergoers might be offended by the erotic “animalistic exhibitions” of the “‘Harlem’ realists” because “unfortunately there are likely to be those in the audience who are a bit sensitive about learning the facts of life in mixed company.” Some of the other critics feared as well that the overly suggestive dancing by the fifty-or-so supernumeraries might cause the police to halt the show and close it down. Atkinson predicted in the Times review that the show would have a good run, “Or will if the police censors, who were in the audience last evening do not clang down Forty-second Street with their patrol wagons.” Like Atkinson, Bide Dudley of the Evening World implied that the censor might forcefully tone down the “exaggerated dancing” a bit, but Whitney Bolton said that “such dancing is on view in any [N]egro
cabaret and if the police interfere with this, they ought, in fairness, to interfere uptown.”84 There were, however, no raids upon Harlem.

Although chiefly a gimmick to attract audiences who craved the exuberant and sensational side of Harlem, the rent party also figured rather importantly in the plot. Cordelia, who represents this image of the devil-may-care Harlemitite, uses the party as an opportunity to seduce one of the guests, the “shy and slippery” Roy, a “numbers runner,”85 and impetuously, she agrees to move in with him without the benefit of marriage. And just as Lulu Belle tormented the upstanding and faithful George and led him to ruin with her own wily ways, and Lasca Sartoris brought about the destruction of Byron Kason in Nigger Heaven, Cordelia leads the young man who thought he could domesticate her, the love-struck Basil, to the brink of a murder he is later accused of committing. As the curtain descends on the first act, and as the dancing at the rent party becomes more intense, Basil vows to “slit” Roy’s “dirty guts” while Cordelia exits with “loud mocking laughter.”86 The slice-of-life portrait of Harlem all but dissipates, and the high-speed melodramatic antics precipitated at the end of act 1 continue into act 2. The second act takes place in Roy’s apartment, where he and Cordelia have begun to make a home for themselves (in time sequence, it takes place almost immediately after the first act). Whereas the previous act takes its time in building the momentum that culminates in the rent party, in this, the shortest of the acts, the events unfurl at a breathless pace. First we meet Kid Vamp, Roy’s dashing but insidious “banker.” When Cordelia goes out for cigarettes, the “Kid” kills Roy for withholding money from him and hides the body behind an arras. By the end of the act, and after several dramatic twists and turns, Cordelia, not knowing that the “Kid” is a murderer, promises to move in with him. In addition, Basil, who has followed Cordelia to Roy’s apartment, gets into a fight with the Kid. (Cordelia has exited again and does not witness it.) Basil is knocked out in the tussle, and the Kid seizes the opportunity to place the gun in Basil’s hand, framing him for Roy’s murder. And in nail-biting melodramatic fashion, Basil resumes consciousness as the police are banging on the door, and he flees out the bathroom window to safety.

By the third act, Cordelia has returned home where the rent party continues, and she has implicated her entire family in the swirl of disorder she initiated. It will take an outside (white) presence to sort things out. In this act, the various theatrical genres crash together and create an atmosphere of combustible energy. Once again, returning to the Williamses’ home, the play reverts to its previous social realism and folk drama forms. For example, there are two
rather lengthy bits in which Dr. Voodeo, a dealer of spiritual powders and herbs, and the Hot-Stuff Man, a dealer in stolen clothing, ply their wares. Neither character advances the plot, but they provide local color and offer a glimpse into particular aspects of black life. The Hot-Stuff Man explains, for instance, that he does such strong business in Harlem because black people cannot appear to be poor if they are to be accepted by white society. He says: “Folks in Harlem has to dress. They gotta’ look as good or betta than white folks and they don’ have as much money to spend. It takes fellows like me to fix ’em up—see?” The scenes with these characters give way to the obligatory unraveling of the melodramatic crime, which is the central feature of the act. The tension builds increasingly, and the act includes a shoot-out, the death of the villain (Kid Vamp), and the vindication of the hero (Basil).

The troubles wrought upon the house by Cordelia are sorted out by Detective Sergeant Palmer (named Donohue in the original script)—the sole white character in the play. His presence, even in this predominantly black neighborhood, serves as a palpable reminder of the social hierarchy of the 1920s and affirms what many race theorists argue: Race as a legal construct cannot be denied. In this hot pot of lawlessness and social unrest, the white patriarchal figure is on the scene almost immediately to solve the problems among the black residents and restore order to this very public domestic space. The hope for an autonomous, independent black (male) leader, as embodied by Jasper, is dashed. It turns out Jasper is powerless to control his sister, and a white deus ex machina is necessary to settle the chaos. As Daniel Gerould explains, this reinscription of the social status quo is typical of melodrama, and according to C. W. E. Bigsby, early-twentieth-century realism is characterized by “a faith in social and metaphysical order which remained curiously untroubled.” The play ends as Cordelia, rebellious as ever, exits the Harlem flat with one of the party’s musicians, Ippy (for those who are keeping count, he is her fourth lover in the play), vowing to be a star on the stage. Mother, on the other hand, is overwhelmed by the events of the evening, and defeatingly cries, “Lawd! Lawd! Tell me! Tell me! Dis ain’t de City of Refuge?”

The plaintive sigh of Mother is overshadowed by the sensational exit of Cordelia and the possibilities that lie ahead for her. As Ippy explains,

She don’ have to stay in Harlem. Look at Josephine Baker—makin’ all Paris stand on its head! Look what Florence Mills did! Look at Ethel Waters! Why Delia got more than all of them—more voice, more shape, more pep to her dancing! Given a chance and someone to coach her, she’d set the world on fire.
According to the reviews in the popular press, this assessment was not too much of an exaggeration. Isabel Washington apparently played the role to the hilt in the original New York production and received mostly raves. Alison Smith described her performance as “almost fatally realistic.” Robert Garland referred to her as “Vivid, cheap as cheap can be, you believe in her and her tawdry affairs.” Robert Littell wrote, “The wild, raucous, hard-boiled, sensuous abandon of Isabel Washington is worth going a long way to see,” and “Miss Washington’s inexhaustible natural pep, and a gorgeous hoarse voice, which blows out of her like a factory whistle when she is angry, makes this character something quite new and fascinating.” On the other hand, Whitney Bolton found her performance offensive in its unrestrained physical exhibition of sexuality, and in his review said that the producer, Edward A. Blatt, should “urge Miss Washington to curb her dislocations in the interest of peace and prosperity.” Likewise, Bide Dudley of the *Evening World* suggested that she “pipe down a bit” and rein in her unseemly lewdness.\(^{92}\)

Paradoxically, the excessiveness of Washington’s performance was hailed, or disparaged in a few cases, because of its remarkable “naturalness.” The reactions to the performance recall similar points that Alisa Solomon makes in her discussion of Nora in Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House.* Just as actresses playing Nora created a stir in their offensive portrayals of “inappropriate behavior” for upstanding women, Washington’s performance as Cordelia registers as “naturalistic” precisely because it is “unbecoming.” \(^{93}\) This “unladylike,” predatory manner was indeed not strictly a “new and fascinating” creation, as Littel writes. To a large extent, expectations of black femininity had already been conditioned by what people had read about or seen in other Broadway shows and in the nightclubs uptown. Lasca Sartoris from *Nigger Heaven* and Lulu Belle from Sheldon and MacArthur’s play, for example, were well-known representations of the trope of the female, black, sexual snare. Isabel Washington, however, supplied an additional layer of authenticity to her performance that may qualify it as “new and fascinating”: Unlike the stage incarnations of the aforementioned black characters, Washington was actually an African American. The few times that *Nigger Heaven* had been represented in musical reviews the performers were in blackface, and Lenore Ulric, a white actress, likewise played Lulu Belle in blackface. Therefore, the representation was certainly not new, but the chippie of Rapp and Thurman’s *Harlem* was at least played by a black woman.

The fate of Cordelia in the play represents an even more transgressive dramaturgical act. Rapp and Thurman may have given the Broadway backers the third act “wow” they demanded, but the playwrights did not budge on the fate
of Cordelia. In typical melodramatic structure, decadent and dangerous Cordelia, along with the gangsters and murderers, should have been punished (or destroyed) in the end. Accordingly, good must will out in the moralistic framework of the well-made play. In fact, Rapp and Thurman were advised to rewrite the ending of Harlem to make it more palatable for Broadway audiences and the New York censor. Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur, the playwrights of the smash hit The Front Page (1928), and the latter the cowriter of Lulu Belle, offered a detailed scenario for the recommended revision. According to Rapp and Thurman, Hecht and MacArthur suggested “the play should show Cordelia Williams going on and on along her sinful career and finally ending up disastrously, say, in Paris.”94 This is exactly the way, perhaps not surprisingly, that Lulu Belle ends, and Rapp and Thurman politely declined the advice.

Wallace Thurman’s tendency to avoid literary moralizing is evident in much of his work (and incensed many of his contemporary critics), and perhaps this is why he and Rapp left Cordelia’s future uncertain. She is the portrait of a true individual, not bound by gender, race, or sexuality, and in her final renunciation, she claims that she is “gonna’ be livin’ high, standin’ in de lights above deir heads, makin’ de whole world look up at me.”95 She is the embodiment of youthful dreams and creative expression, a utopian view of the black artist. It is also tempting to read a little of Ibsen’s Nora into Rapp and Thurman’s Cordelia. Both characters are defiant in the end, leaving their confining domestic spheres for journeys of self-discovery. A Doll’s House ends with a distraught Torvald, all alone, questioning his own moral beliefs. Similarly, Rapp and Thurman’s play concludes with a keening Mother Williams reconsidering Harlem as a place where African Americans can live freely and morally. Her entreaty is drowned out, however, by the throbbing sounds of partying and jazz music.

Throughout Harlem, there are moments when the play threatens to collapse under the weight of the musical underscoring, metatheatricality, and overlaid dramatic forms. The strain caused by these different aspects of the play is a result of the dramaturgical “hybridity,” to apply Homi Bhabha’s term, and its uneasy mixture of several dramatic genres.96 Between the gaps of the melodramatic and naturalistic forms, critics believed they detected the “bits of authentic [N]egro life,” or photographic glimpses of a “real” Harlem. Within these rifts, such as during the first-act rent party scene, they argued, genuine black behavior could be observed, for as Solomon poetically explains in relation to A Doll’s House, “realism trembles to life in the tension between melodrama and metaphor.”97 The play’s moments of presumed “naturalness” were therefore the
ironic result of the very visible seams of the theatrical forms. The dramaturgi-
cal forms and character representations shift and turn back on themselves in
Harlem and make the “real” purely conjectural. Plumbing the depths of the play
for a putative black authenticity reveals not a fixed cultural identity but one
that is constantly transforming. The merging of the distinct forms, and the pre-
sumptions surrounding the combination of black and white elements, reflect
the neighborhood’s own manufactured authenticity. Harlem in the 1920s was a
mass of contradictions: Determining its essential character is a foolhardy ven-
ture, for as one character says in Thurman and Rapp’s play, “Harlem is sho’ one
funny place.” Yet examining the neighborhood as a contested space of racial
images, weighing the varying notions of a unified definition of “African Amer-
ican,” and sifting through the differing claims of a “real” Harlem, one exposes
the fluid nature of an identity, presumed to be fixed, that is nonetheless elusive,
deceptive, and fantastically mutable.