New York City
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Villages

The Vejigante Café, at 155 East 106th Street in the middle of El Barrio (Spanish Harlem), is a tiny little place. I went there one October afternoon after wandering around the broad, crowded streets while Papoleto Melendez, the Nuyorican (as New York’s Puerto Rican artists enjoy calling themselves) poet, told me about characters and episodes of life in the neighborhood, past events, his childhood in these blocks, how they had changed, what remained of the past. We visited “La Marqueta,” the long covered market tucked beneath the Park Avenue Elevated (and Papoleto shook his head: “Gone flat . . . used to be much bigger, ya know . . . full of shops and lights, people, hubbub”). We stopped off for a few minutes at a Caribbean cultural center to chat about The Capeman, the musical by Paul Simon and Derek Walcott (it narrates the story of a youth gang battle—one of the many that also inspired West Side Story: but initially the other Nuyorican poet, Pedro Pietri, was to have written its lyrics). Again and again we passed by shops and stores lining East 116th Street (also called Luís Muñoz Marín Boulevard, after the 1940s politician and governor of Puerto Rico). Above all, in these wanderings of ours, while taking in the new perspectives and savoring the infinite variety of the city, we kept stopping in our tracks: to chat with people lolling about street corners, sitting on stoops, or leaning out of windows.

Then, while the sun was going down, we ended up in this place for a beer. The Vejigante really is a rather unusual café, because despite its small size it also functions as a meeting place, a reading room, and a showroom for Puerto Rican craft articles. Bizarre, colorful masks—timely reminders of Caribbean folklore—hang from the walls, and near the bar stand tiny showcases containing wooden sculptures, fanciful jewels, and works in soft terra-cotta; books and magazines are strewn about on the three small tables and crammed into the bookshelves next to the entrance.

An unpredictable kind of place, the Vejigante Café. When we entered, Mario (a moving spirit of the place and one of Papoleto’s close friends) was rattling on in Spanish to a man dressed in white from top to bottom—hat, jacket,
vest, and pants—who seemed interested in purchasing some masks, but after a few minutes he came and sat at the table next to ours and started talking to us in the most wonderful English, resonant and sonorous. He told me that after teaching art history in Puerto Rico for some years, he had become disillusioned with the academy and decided to opt for a more precarious but enthralling form of independence. Now he spent a good deal of his time at the café, reading, writing, and entertaining the customers—and talking. He’s got the gift of gab, has Mario, and Papoleto and I give him free rein, we egg him on; meanwhile, the streets outside vibrate to the overlapping notes of salsa and merengue, the piercing voices of youngsters in colored jackets, the sharp cries from sidewalk to window and back again, and the musical singsong of the elderly basking in the fast-fading rays of the day and the season.

And so, in this tiny Spanish Harlem café—light-years away from Fifth Avenue and Times Square—a long yarn is spun: starting with the condition of artists in the ghetto, it ponders the question of huge federal government cuts to the funds for cultural projects, touches the Puritan fear of physicality in American culture, celebrates the triumph of the body in the art of Titian and Rubens, and culminates in the (shared) admiration for the small, controversial picture by Courbet, L’origine du monde.

When one of the café’s other moving spirits, Maria (seems to be the name of the day today), appears at the door with a dish of pasteles, the subject moves on to food and touches upon material culture. And that sense of communal intimacy that I had become aware of on first entering the neighborhood—the feeling that I was inside a village in the metropolis—becomes more intense and all-pervading.

I ask Maria if she can give me the recipe for pasteles, a national Puerto Rican dish . . .

People will have told you that New York is a tentacular city, an alienating metropolis where anonymity and disintegration rule the roost. This is certainly true. Even in the most openly inviting (or dull) touristy areas, the sheer size of the city is enough to cow you into a sense of feeling lost, or even vulnerable. And you don’t need to watch Martin Scorsese’s Taxi Driver for confirmation of the city’s ruthlessly high-strung urban-living style: venturing a few steps off the traditional tourist routes will more than suffice. Pace New York mayors!

Even at its very special heart—which goes by the name of Manhattan—New York is a tough city, a “metropolis-metropolis,” at once fiercely individualistic (the rat race, the survival of the fittest) and, more importantly, made up of individuals. Consider for one moment the standard
photographs and freeze-frames of journalistic reports: a sea of faces and bodies that emerge from anonymity only by carving out a completely separate and absolute individuality—almost as if nothing else existed between the two poles of faceless masses and individual monads. Maybe the ice-skating rink at Rockefeller Center, one of New York’s many unavoidable icons, is the perfect metaphor for what I wish to say: beneath the looming skyscrapers, everyone cutting arabesque figures à la Jackson Pollock in the ice, swirling and swooping round and round to the hypnotic music, and taking great care not to bump into each other . . .

True, the great metropolis is alienating and the rat race begins anew every morning. But this is a piecemeal perception, and is even wide of the mark. New York is also, significantly, a metropolis made up of groups, and its inhabitants are more sociable than might at first be thought. You can feel this walking around the streets, hanging about the cafés, and even descending into the depths of the subway: you are on your own—at times acutely so—but in constant, mysterious association with others. And I believe that this contradiction is precisely part and parcel of the charm with which the city is imbued.

But there is more. This mammoth metropolis seems to ride roughshod over all things, seizing hold of them and redefining them in a vortex whose brutish capacity to shatter and transform impedes any kind of stability or settling. And yet it is also a city of villages—of neighborhoods where speed slows, the vortex relents, the puzzle becomes recognizable contour and design, and familiarity gets the better of anonymity. Now, it is not always easy to uncover this reality of villages, because the eye is too often dazzled by bright exteriors or befuddled by the dullness of commonplaces. And, unlike your traditional tourist paradise, these villages do not exactly welcome you with open arms: they are often dark, removed, dangerous, and forbidding places that are difficult to enter (assuming one wishes to in the first place) on the right foot and in the right frame of mind.

Indeed, there is always the risk that visitors to these metropolitan areas will succumb to the unhealthy and sensationalistic spirit of curiosity stoked up by the mass media. In the nineteenth century, people used to go slumming when the East End of London and the Lower East Side of New York, proletarian neighborhoods swarming with immigrants, became the “other side” of Victorian society (New York’s Chinatown—complete with fake opium dens—was the number one attraction for tourists seeking their thrills). And there is also the risk of falling into the trap laid down by certain nineteenth-century anthropologists who superimposed upon these metropolitan areas ideological constructs elaborated to cope with the “primitive” people of Africa and Asia, thus equating them with a Black Continent inhabited by different and alien races.
In both cases, the idea that these areas are not really part of the city predominates—that they are either nonexistent places to be removed or abnormal growths that have formed on the body of the metropolis. And yet, these areas are the city and, in a certain sense, it is precisely here that the city actually was born. If we wish to uncover the city’s roots, history, and identity, it is to these areas—in the midst of that restless vortex that is the rest of Manhattan—that we must look: in the intensity of its street life, in the intermingling of its cultures, and in the sense of solidarity that seeps through metropolitan anonymity and disintegration.

Take, for example, the Lower East Side, where ties with the past and the role of memory are strongest and most vital. On the map, it occupies the area between East 14th Street and the ramps to Brooklyn Bridge, between Lafayette Street and the East River—an irregular quadrilateral, more than half of which falls under the name of downtown. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, when the city was still a tiny plot of land, this area was dotted with water meadows, farms, orchards, and hills. Then, in its southern part, around Collect Pond (more or less the site of present-day Federal Plaza and Foley Square), building began: refined houses for the nascent middle-to-upper classes, theaters, and meeting places, but also factories and workshops of a metropolis in the making, and nearby a port in great ferment. The Collect Pond shortly became murky in appearance, an unwelcome stench arose, and the buildings on the banks worryingly started giving way. The rising middle class abandoned the area and moved northward. The pond was dried up by means of a canal (which is still thought to run beneath Canal Street), more factories were built, the popular amusements quarter at the entrance to the Bowery expanded, and the whole area sloughed off its original skin. The close proximity of the port, the commercial thoroughfare of Broadway, and the financial district of Wall Street determined the area’s fate as the city frenetically and irresistibly expanded in width and length.

Then, from the middle of the nineteenth century onward, hundreds of thousands of immigrants from all over the world arrived to join those small communities of blacks who, first as slaves and later as free men, had lived in the area ever since the mid-1600s. After the immigrants had been put through the humiliating hoops of Castle Garden and, later, Ellis Island (where they were quarantined, scrutinized, examined, vetted, and, sometimes, given another name), a large number of those admitted ended up in different parts of the country. But another significant percentage settled in the narrow streets and overcrowded tenements of the Lower East Side: Germans who had left their native land following the revolutionary uprisings of 1848, Irishmen seeking refuge from the social calamities of famine and failed potato crops, and—after digging silver and gold mines,
building embankments for the Intercontinental Railroad, and cooking and laundering in the West—significant numbers of Chinese in flight from what can only be called pogroms. Later in the nineteenth century, it was the turn of Eastern European Jews harried by tsarist repression, and Italians brought to the brink of starvation during the process of national formation. Not to mention much smaller numbers of Spaniards, Greeks, Turks, Cypriots, Moroccans, gypsies . . .

The Lower East Side became the immigrant quarter par excellence, the gateway to America in an era when “America” was most intensely synonymous with “mirage.” Living and working conditions were horrific. About the time of the First World War, the neighborhood contained half a million immigrants, and in certain blocks the population density was double that of Bombay and three times that of London. And then there were the grueling hours of work in clothing industry workshops; the endless and uncontrolled social plagues of child labor, domestic work, and prostitution; streets and houses deprived of ventilation and lighting; incessant exploitation; individuals, family units, and whole generations shattered and deformed under the relentless steamroller of the extraction of surplus labor. All in all, a bloodcurdling story that can be gleaned from the novels of Abraham Cahan and Anzia Yezierska, the autobiographies of Marcus Ravage and Rose Cohen, and the photographs of Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine.

However, the history of these metropolitan villages by no means consists purely of brutalization and physical and social degradation. When immigrants and America crossed paths, a whole series of bitter dynamics came to the fore. Perhaps most importantly, these dynamics made liars of those guileless, early-twentieth-century sociologists who upheld that the process of Americanization would have come about slowly, mechanically, and painlessly: the mythical “melting pot” that would finally transform immigrants into Americans. What actually happened in neighborhoods like the Lower East Side can more accurately be described as a meeting-cum-confrontation, a kind of tug-of-war situation that would change protagonists on both sides: glorious strikes (like that of the shirtmakers, which, under the leadership of young, recently arrived immigrant women, lasted several months in 1909 before coming to a victorious end); the agitations of anarchists, socialists, and communists; a dialectic of German, Irish, Yiddish, Italian, and Cantonese cultures; a stubborn longing to resist and fight back in the workplace, at home, and in the streets; and an overturning of homegrown traditions and habits, which at the same time called into question the American gospel.

On that magnificent stage we call the street, everything came into reciprocal relation with everything else: languages, religions, cultures, and
habits simmered, blended, and were finally transformed in a kind of ongo-
ing subterranean alchemic process. This daily tug-of-war (thousands of
immigrants from all over the world turning into American proletarians)
transformed the neighborhood into an immense laboratory. Unsurprisingly,
it is precisely in this laboratory that we find the beginnings of cinema
(David W. Griffith) and popular shows (Eddie Cantor, Irving Berlin), the
establishment of a Yiddish theater, the emergence of an exquisitely
American realist tradition in painting (John Sloan, the Ash Can school,
Jerome Myers, Ben Shahn), and, later, abstract expressionism (the New
York school), the first significant examples of Jewish American and Italo-
American novels and the literary experiments of modernism, a mature
political and radical form of journalism and social photography, and the first
stirrings of the Beat Generation and the avant-garde cultures of the 1960s
and 1970s. All of this (and much else besides) erupted into being and
matured in the Lower East Side laboratory, only to overflow its confines and
redefine the city of New York again and again. More than that, it rein-
vented America itself and helped to shape the twentieth century.

This dialectic between exploitation and resistance, brutalization and
creativity, is inherent in the whole of experience on the Lower East Side.
Indeed, when the first phase of its history came to a halt around the
1920s, the “gateway” was by no means closed. Of course, there was a kind
of diaspora in the direction of other neighborhoods, and things did sim-
mmer down somewhat, but its characteristic function as a laboratory never
disappeared. The area remained very much itself even during the 1930s,
1940s, and 1950s, enduring all the violent counterblows that national
and worldwide history had to offer, decline and standstill, stagnation and
renewal. When, in the 1950s and 1960s, a new chapter began in the open
story of immigration to the United States with the arrival of other Asians
and, above all, Puerto Ricans, the laboratory function of the Lower East
Side once again took center stage.

Little Italy was on the wane, and the Jewish ghetto had seen better
days, but at the same time Chinatown was expanding and “Loisaida,” an
emblematic Spanglish deformation of “Lower East Side,” was coming into
being. Most importantly, the area’s original village-inside-the-city char-
acter remained, as can be seen in Jerome Myers’s painting entitled Life on
the East Side: in the foreground, a street scene, with the road reduced to a
narrow path, elderly bearded men, women with brightly colored hand-
kerciefs on their heads, children darting in and out the stalls of the mar-
ketsplace, densely packed bodies, and a sense of communal living. In the
background, tall and mysterious, impending yet detached, stand the grey
profiles of the towers and skyscrapers of Manhattan. Or take Anzia
Yezierska’s tale of 1920, The Fat of the Land: after rejecting the tumultuous
Lower East Side for the ascetic comforts of Riverside Drive, the main character later returns to her original neighborhood to savor anew the animated streets, the pleasures of haggling over prices, and the sense of belonging to a community.

So perhaps one afternoon you should make a beeline for the haunts comprised (and compressed) within the irregular quadrilateral. When I made my first visit to this area more than twenty-five years ago, I departed hesitantly from the corner of Baxter Street, Worth Street, and Columbus Park: in the middle of the nineteenth century this was the site of infamous black and Irish slums, the so-called Five Points (Dickens, who knew a thing or two about slums, was horrified when he visited it during his trip through America). Then I cut across toward Mulberry Street and Bayard Street, once upon a time the most congested and disreputable area inside Little Italy. From there I got caught up in the chaos of Mott Street, Pell Street, and Doyers Street, a Chinatown district that can’t have changed much over the last hundred years. I proceeded along a stretch of Elizabeth Street (the “Elisabetta Stretta” of Sicilian immigrants) where the atmosphere was far more genuine and less tacky than nearby Little Italy (it is suffering the pains of gentrification now, but some old haunts still remain, like the Albanese butcher shop). I felt as if I was moving inside a kaleidoscope of places, colors, faces, sounds, and images: towering above me were the century-old tenements whose russet-brown bricks had blackened with age, the rusty fire escapes, and, all around me in the streets, an incredible confusion of people, teeming about tranquilly, to-ing and fro-ing; and a host of small stores pouring their merchandise onto the sidewalks, a cobbler on the corner, a bulletin board covered in ideograms with local community information (deaths, births, job offers and requests), rows of elderly people seated in front of shops and local bars, and the reverberating sounds of different languages newly molded by life in the metropolis.

I remember crossing the Bowery, which once proudly hosted performances of riotously popular shows running the whole gamut of human experience (from Shakespeare, Tolstoy, and Wagner to Buffalo Bill, the Barnum Circus, and the Peking Opera), and which is now the busy domain of wholesale commerce and aimless existences. And I remember taking Grand Street, only to get lost in the maze of nineteenth-century streets of what used to be (and in part still is) the Jewish ghetto with its countless shops, commercial activities, and the daily ups and downs of living and survival in the new metropolitan shtetl: Orchard Street, where even today things are proffered, haggled over, and bought on a sidewalk reminiscent of a bazaar; Norfolk Street, with its stately synagogues, at once austere and fanciful in style; Rivington Street, with its matzos shops
and kosher wines; Hester Street and Essex Street, where the past has less willingly relaxed its grip on the present, sprinkled with dusty shops displaying seven-branched candelabras and deluxe bound editions of the Talmud, and the piquant aroma of pickles stuffed inside the enormous barrels of local grocers; East Broadway, with a towering building that used to house the central offices of the Jewish Daily Forward, founded by Abraham Cahan (and now the site of a Buddhist temple); the signs of rabbis and congregations, the public bathrooms for women, the murals that narrate the social history of the quarter . . .

When I took Clinton Street and headed north beyond Delancey Street, I realized that the atmosphere was changing: from China, Italy, and the Jewish shtetl I was now moving beneath a Caribbean sunshine. Although I knew little about it at the time, I was entering Loisaida. Synagogues now battled it out with tropical gardens, yet despite the more glaring evidence of degradation, there was also a strong sense of community, of village. In front of Casa Adela, a small Puerto Rican restaurant along Avenue C (it serves excellent mondongo, or tripe, and refreshing vegetable juices), three old ladies take bets on the unlicensed lottery, a group of elderly people sit around a foldaway table playing dominos, the air is filled with the aroma of cuchifritos (fried foods) drifting in from the local kiosk, and Spanglish yells and countyells chase one another along the street. And a few hundred yards away stands the building that houses the Nuyorican Poets’ Café, the mythical downtown stage for poetic, musical, and theatrical creativity in multicultural New York.

While my yesterdays have been blending with your todays, we have ended up in the heart of Alphabet City, the Manhattan area guides usually warn you against entering, especially after dark. Walk northward along Avenue C—or Loisaida Avenue as it is now officially known—until you reach East 9th Street (Henry Roth’s Call It Sleep is set exactly in this area). Pass in front of the Sixth Street Community Center, and immerse yourself in the park on Tompkins Square: here you will meet with other scenarios, intimate scenes, promptings, and tensions. This is perhaps the most complex and contradictory area in Manhattan, where the clash between exploitation and the will to resist gains in intensity with each passing day, and the century-old history of the Lower East Side continues. To me, it is also the most fascinating area in Manhattan: more real than other parts of the city, the place where most of my friends are on this side of the ocean, where I feel most “at home” in the metropolis.

Beyond Tompkins Square, along St. Mark’s Place, East Village begins. A glamorous and ambiguous punk-chic zone, East Village spearheads the SoHo assault of wealth and snobbery on the whole of the Lower East Side, although fortunately its attacks have been in part repelled. At this point,
how can one resist the peace and quiet of the Life Café or the Leshko Café or the Café Orlin? Or the Polish cuisine of Christine’s, the Ukrainian dishes of Veselka, the Indian specialties of Panna II, the Italian cookery of Brunetta’s? Or the attraction of bars and theaters like LaMama, the Theater for the New City, or the P.S. 122? And when you arrive at the far end of St. Mark’s Place (whose multiethnic past is visible everywhere), you could always take a break in front of the immense Cooper Union, the celebrated school of applied arts where Abraham Lincoln, Mark Twain, and the striking shirtmakers once spoke, and decide what to do next.

Yet the Lower East Side is not the only village in New York. There is, of course, Greenwich Village, which, as its very name suggests, makes no bones about its own collocation inside the great metropolis (indeed, if it is true that “wich”—from the Latin vicus and its medieval High German descendant wich—already means “village,” the name is a classic example of redundancy). Here, too, in the quadrilateral around Washington Square Park and the tangle of irregular streets between the park and the Hudson River, northward until West 14th and south almost down to Canal, history’s heavy footsteps have left their mark, determining more of the area’s contemporary appearance than first meets the eye. Henry James himself, in his 1880 novel Washington Square (set in the 1840s), had pitted the solidity of the Washington Square area—its having “something of a social history”—against the vagueness and abstractions of the city (its “theoretic air”) stretching northward.

No doubt about that: Greenwich Village positively oozes with social history—maybe less so than the Lower East Side, but it is equally possessed of a powerful symbolic value. Indeed, its microhistory can even, in many ways, be said to be an aid to understanding the city’s macrohistory, its contradictions and chiaroscuro, what is present and what is absent. We start with the Native Americans, who, at the time of Dutch domination, called the village that developed in this part of Manhattan “Sapponckanican” or “Sapohannikan” (“tobacco field”). We continue with the formerly enslaved blacks, who, for much of the seventeenth century, were actually owners of allotments in the area south of present-day Christopher Street and east of present-day Hudson Street: Paulo Dangola, Symon Congo, Anthony Van Angola—new names for new identities in a process that would become familiar for successive waves of immigrants. And then there were the African Americans who, as fugitive or manumitted slaves or, after the Civil War, as legally free men, settled mostly in the web of streets around Grove, Carmine, Thompson, and Sullivan, after drifting away from the southern-most area of Five Points.

Around 1840 there were approximately sixteen thousand African Americans in New York, out of a total population of three hundred thou-
sand. And, beside an African Free School and a station on the Underground Railroad (the network of churches and private houses that hid slaves fleeing from the South during the pre–Civil War years), the African Americans also found time to inaugurate the African Grove Theater on the corner of Bleeker and Grove. Between 1821 and 1829 the theater repeatedly staged performances of *Othello* and *Richard III*: at the beginnings of a career that would lead to numerous European accolades, the young black actor Ira Aldridge usually interpreted the two Shakespearean characters. Black spectators paid no entrance fees, while the few whites who attended were invited to take their places in a segregated area because they were “unable to behave properly in a black establishment.”

Then it was the turn of the Irish and the Italians. Seeping in from the confines of the nearby Lower East Side, the two communities (particularly the Italians, whose numbers increased year after year from the 1860s on) muscled in on African American territory and took up occupancy side by side. When the black community began its march toward the north of the city, the Irish and Italians took their places between Thompson and Sullivan and especially in the area between Bleeker and Carmine, where, for example, the Church of Our Lady of Pompeii rose on the site of what was previously a black church.

The Italian community in New York could count on a number of famous (or shortly to be famous) names, including Lorenzo Da Ponte (Mozart’s librettist), opera singer Adelina Patti, Giuseppe Garibaldi, Antonio Meucci, and yet others besides. But for the most part, Italian inhabitants in the Village were made up of workers, bricklayers, street vendors, barbers, and a growing number of specialized craftsmen, shopkeepers, street musicians, and restaurateurs. The community was dominated by a number of loved/hated figures: the *padrone*, a middleman who allocated jobs in exchange for a percentage (or *bossatura*); the banker (often a grocer), who, for a certain sum of interest, would look after people’s savings and send whatever was required back to their homeland; and, of course, the “Mano Nera” (Black Hand), the New York version of the *mafia*, *camorra*, and *’ndrangheta*, which, as time proceeded, came to replace all spontaneous forms of territorial defense in the metropolis. More than anything, however, it was the dreaded sweatshop that ruled the “colonia” (as it was often called): young Italian—and Jewish—immigrant women soon became familiar with the long hours of work and dangerously unhealthy environments that this infamous institution represented. This proletarian, popular character of the Italian settlement in Greenwich Village was to long outlast the legislative measures undertaken to reduce immigration to a trickle in the mid-1920s. Throughout the
1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, the area south of Washington Park remained an extension of Mulberry Street–style Little Italy, complete with meeting places, dives, family-run restaurants, the Caffé Roma, the Caffé Bertolotti, the Caffé San Remo, shops selling pasta and cheese (and a good red wine that cut out a very special niche for itself during the Prohibition years), and small-time theater—a familiar and intimate villagelike atmosphere that was further enhanced by a series of narrow, winding streets.

Despite Caroline Ware’s groundbreaking volume (Greenwich Village, 1920–1930, published in 1935), the history of immigration and of its impact on life in Greenwich Village remains an extremely complex and relatively unfamiliar subject. And other historical blind spots remain, too. For many decades, an invisible boundary line running along the southern side of Washington Square Park effectively divided that Village from another Village whose wealth and refinement were symbolized by the solemn brownstone houses (which have in part survived to the present day) and, to the back, the mews, or roads lined with stables and carriage depots—the other side of Greenwich Village, itself with a long and symbolic history. When the city was still largely concentrated on the southern tip of the island, this area was an uninterrupted expanse of green. And it was here that well-heeled families would flee to escape the suffocating humidity; it was here that city businesses were transferred when epidemics struck the small urban settlement (cholera in 1798, yellow fever in 1820, smallpox in 1823, and cholera again in 1832 and 1849); and it was here that the first state penitentiary was located, giving rise to a limited albeit significant network of local services (hotels, staging posts, restaurants, and shops). All of these left their mark and helped determine the character of the village “outside the walls.” And so, when the close-knit web of streets around the port and Wall Street started becoming too overcrowded, a highly significant phenomenon took place: for the first time, the rising middle class (traders, entrepreneurs, lawyers) drew a distinct line between the workplace and place of residence. The city ran upward along Broadway: to the east of this lively thoroughfare was an area that was still too closely bound up with the port, but the green expanse to the west was already well established among the rich as a place of refuge. There was no escaping this choice.

Further elements contributed to establish this other side of Greenwich Village. In origin, the area that is today occupied by Washington Square was used as a mass grave for the thousand-odd victims of cholera in 1798, the poor and nameless, and those who had been hanged (the gallows were set up in the northwest corner of the park). And so it remained until 1826, when work began on transforming the area into a parade ground.
For the next twenty-five years or so, parades and military exercises were held here, while in the meantime the wealthy Village to the north continued to expand and the Greek Revival buildings of New York University were built to the east. The fact that the area was successively subjected to these two developments effectively meant that the vertical growth of New York somehow "skipped" the heart of the Village. Indeed, the terrain gave way too readily (and, symbolically speaking, it was perhaps unsuitable: again, the "underneath" of the metropolis!) and was considered an inappropriate location for the high-rise constructions—offices, apartment blocks, and popular tenements—that had already begun their skyward-soaring journey elsewhere in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Also, the layout of streets in the area was the most enmeshed and disorderly in New York. The people responsible for the 1811 town planning scheme (which imposed the notorious grid system: streets and lots divided up into equal blocks) were unable—or unwilling—to meddle with the Greenwich Village maze; as a result, West 4th Street intersects with West 10th Street, West 11th Street, and West 12th Street! The sum result of all this was that commercial traffic within the area was severely hampered. The area to the north of the invisible boundary line thus remained the most sought-after on the part of the wealthy propertied class, and it was built in their image: Greek Revival, Gothic Revival, brownstones, gardens, mews, ailanthus trees (also called, significantly, "trees of heaven"), and so on—the "old New York," the rich and refined "urban village" handed down to us in the works of Henry James and Edith Wharton.

Poor immigrants and wealthy New Yorkers, then. And soon, a third element was to be active, in the strange alchemy of Greenwich Village. The very "separateness" of the neighborhood—its intimate and reserved character, the otherworldly nature of its tangled alleyways, its low rents, and the overwhelming presence of an immigrant population—all helped ensure that the area to the south and west of Washington Square became a center of attraction for growing numbers of artists and politicians from the mid-nineteenth century on. Edgar Allan Poe, Herman Melville, Walt Whitman, and Mark Twain all fell under its spell: they discovered the area, came back to it on a more or less regular basis, and even lived there (Pfaff’s beer house at 653 Broadway became their main meeting place). Then, between the late 1800s and early 1900s especially, the phenomenon became more pronounced. The rebellion against the suffocating puritanism of "Main Street" (that Midwest that was the birthplace of so many American authors) combined with the call to arms of foreign avant-gardism, and explosive internal tensions (these are the years of the great strikes organized all over the country) combined with the traumas and
enthusiasm sparked by immensely significant international events like the Russian Revolution of 1905, the First World War, and the Russian Revolution of 1917.

Writers, female poets, militants, dramatists, feminists, painters, critics, and intellectuals—many of them destined to leave their mark on the cultural milieu of the age—crowded into Greenwich Village during the years between 1890 and 1920: Stephen Crane, O. Henry, Hart Crane, Edna St. Vincent Millay, John Dos Passos, John Reed, Emma Goldman, Theodore Dreiser, Eugene O'Neill, John Sloan, Mabel Dodge Luhan, Edmund Wilson, and many, many more—a lengthy and highly impressive list, to be sure. Paradoxically, most of these artists or intellectuals were escaping from (or rebelling against) their native villages—and then they rediscovered familiar coordinates and new energies in this unique cosmopolitan village at the heart of the metropolis. As John Reed once wrote: “Within a block of my house was all the adventure in the world; within a mile was every foreign country.”

So, in the difficult years bridging the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the topography of the Village mushroomed to include the “new theater,” the “new painting,” the “new poetry,” the “new woman,” the anarchists and the Industrial Workers of the World, Freud, Ibsen, and Strindberg, postimpressionist painting, left-wing magazines like the Masses and the Liberator, working-class rallies and the extraordinary Paterson Strike Pageant (when silk factory workers from nearby New Jersey staged a version of their long dramatic struggle at the Madison Square Garden under the direction of John Reed), and cozy, smoky haunts like Polly’s Restaurant, Christine’s, Grace’s Garret, and the Pepper Pot: an acutely contradictory story brimming over with romantic impulses and intense individualism, serious research and plain humbug, which Albert Parry described in his emblematically entitled book Garrets and Pretenders (1933).

This magmatic phase came to a close with the First World War and, more importantly, with the ferocious repression of the Left in 1919–20. The following decade, dominated by Prohibition and the often desperate anxieties of the Lost Generation, was more a contrived (and sometimes commercialized) repetition of the preceding phase, as Malcolm Cowley openly admits in his intense overview of the period, Exile’s Return (1934). Partly as a result of the Village’s overtures to the outside world in the form of a newly extended Sixth Avenue beyond Bleecker Street and the opening of a subway line beneath the neighborhood, the fruitful dialectic between immigrants and political and cultural radicalism gradually diminished, and the two worlds increasingly went their separate ways.

Something of that feverish energy was to linger on, however, in the streets of the Village. In the 1940s and 1950s, the neighborhood bore wit-
ness to other experiences: the Beat Generation, action painting, the Living Theater, and the folk revival. But something seemed to be lacking now, in the stock image of that Village as a place where everything was to be experienced in the tension of the moment: the sense of a profound historical background—of that “social history” of which James spoke and which, as we have seen, was no small thing. The rest is “today’s history”: a neighborhood largely dominated by real estate and tourism, by its proximity to the immense art market of SoHo, and by the turmoil of certain areas associated with sex and gender (like Christopher Street, the symbol of the gay movement)—yet also a neighborhood that, in certain parts, has managed to preserve a peaceful, timeless atmosphere, beautiful views, and several remnants of the past.

So, take my advice: if you happen to find yourself in Washington Square one sunny autumn morning or one balmy springtime evening, have just a look at the celebrated arch (it was designed by Stanford White, the artificer behind much of Manhattan before his untimely murder at the hands of a rival suitor; and one midwinter evening in 1916 a group of scallywags led by John Reed and the painter John Sloan climbed to its top and proclaimed the “Free Independent Republic of Washington Square”). And, a few steps away from the intense chess games on the stone chessboards, take just one moment to look at the statue of Garibaldi (I read somewhere that the position of the “Hero of the Two Worlds”—drawing his sword with his left leg forward—is erroneous, and that the sculptor died before being able to correct it: from that moment on, Garibaldi has risked lopping off his kneecap). Even venture farther on until the corner of Prince and Greene streets where the Caffè Fanelli is located, perhaps the last surviving symbol of an Italian past. . . . But then try to resist the temptation of the lights, animation, and attractions of the streets that lead down toward SoHo (Thompson, Sullivan, MacDougal), or of Bleecker Street and West 4th Street beyond Sixth Avenue. This is a tourist trap now—a Village that celebrates itself and the memories of itself, a shopwindow quarter. No, do as I do when I feel like opting out of the more frenetic side of New York: seek out the hidden recesses, the quieter settings—those little streets that, as O. Henry wrote in his story “The Last Leaf,” “have run crazy and broken themselves into small strips called ‘places.’ These places make strange angles and curves. One street crosses itself a time or two.” Here, on both sides of Seventh Avenue, Hudson Street, and Greenwich Street, in the direction of the Hudson, you will rediscover a city of the past that has, in certain respects, survived into the present: the low houses that so outraged Le Corbusier, the great theorist of skyscrapers and reinforced concrete; the small, densely packed gardens whose overhanging branches stretch down to caress the benches below;
the tranquil bars hidden away in the darkness; the small courtyards connected one to the other by gates and arches; the lanes, paths, and culs-de-sac; the fleeting glimpses of houses retreating from the main streets; the sidewalks nuzzled by slender trees; the tiny corner shops; the sound of footsteps in the hazy silence; the warm stones of a bygone architecture; and the unceasing machinations of a benevolent labyrinth that bewitchingly leads you astray only then to bring you back (“The streets are always disappearing around here,” as a friend of mine living in the area once told me).

Loiter for as long as you wish about the street corners, take in the rarified peace of the St. Luke-in-the-Fields garden and mull over the sudden slopes and slants of Abingdon Square, where the usual perspectives of Manhattan seem to explode and implode: these are the places where New York eases up (and eases you up), although it’s still New York. At this point, in these out-of-the-way recesses, in the midst of that crazy tangle of streets, you can find the places where Edgar Allan Poe lived and first read *The Raven* in public; where John Reed wrote *Ten Days That Shook the World*; where John Sloan painted his great urban scenarios; and where the militants of the Industrial Workers of the World and the journalists of the *Masses* used to meet. You may come across the White Horse Tavern, where the Welsh poet Dylan Thomas drank himself to death, and Patchin Place, where e. e. cummings composed so many of his joyful and irreverent pieces, and the “narrowest house in Manhattan” at 751/2 Bedford Street, where Edna St. Vincent Millay wrote (possibly): “My candle burns at both ends.” This, too, is New York, albeit another New York.

And lastly, Harlem. Yet another village in the metropolis, Harlem covers an area that stretches from East 110th Street and the northern edge of Central Park to Riverside Drive in the west, the Harlem River in the east, and 162nd Street in the north. Here, too, any attempt to tell the story of the neighborhood necessarily implies telling the story of the city itself. Peter Stuyvesant, the already mentioned choleric Dutch governor of Nieuw Amsterdam, laid the foundations of the Nieuw Haarlem village in 1658 alongside the river that would later take its name, in the vicinity of present-day East 125th Street: rolling hills, streams, hollows, woods and green fields, farms, farmers, and a fair number of black slaves. At the height of English domination, in 1666, the area was provided with a southern boundary that ran obliquely from present-day West 129th Street on the Hudson to present-day East 74th Street on the East River, and in 1683 it became an integral part of the city of New York.

Even as late as the early nineteenth century, Harlem’s destiny seemed to follow closely in the footsteps of that of Greenwich Village: it was to be a place “outside the wall” where the rich could escape from the sum-
mer furnace and pestilential stenches of the city in the south. The area of flat land in the center and to the east (Harlem Plain) and the hilly area of land to the west (Harlem Heights) complemented one another perfectly, making for a restful panorama and a bracing climate. Slowly but surely the farms disappeared, while the number of sprawling estates and stately abodes multiplied. In 1837 the railroad arrived and the flatlands lying to the east were subjected to increasingly intense building programs—a rural village and a residential area: but also, from the mid-1800s on, a place of temporary settlements, out-and-out “shantytowns” populated by newly arrived Irish and German immigrants (as we have already seen in the more or less contemporary case of Seneca Village, these were years of extreme geographical-social mobility).

Following the Civil War, Harlem developed at an increasingly rapid rate: the first lines of the Elevated opened their way northward along Second, Third, and Eighth Avenues, a process that led to greater stability among immigrant settlements and an increase in the number of residential nuclei. Downtown, the city was becoming more convulsive by the minute, and the tangle of commerce and business greedily gobbled up entire neighborhoods and vast areas of land; but in the case of Harlem, the bet was to transform the area in what would become the suburbs of the 1940s and 1950s—a residential area for the middle and upper middle classes. Hence, in the closing decades of the nineteenth century, Harlem featured the building of a distinctive and refined architecture that, even in the midst of the desolate ghetto of today, stands as a living reminder of that shortsighted bet and angrily bespeaks the indelible contradiction of a society: long rows of buildings in red stone and terra-cotta and yellow sandstone of Ohio, in styles that vary from Romanesque revival and Italian Renaissance to Gothic revival; arches, bow windows, entablatures, columns and ashlar, high stoops, solemn-looking churches, majestic Queen Anne–style mansions, five-, six-, or seven-story buildings featuring immense gables and lofty garrets, large apartments with many rooms, spacious avenues, broad sidewalks...

Between 1880 and 1890, the transformation of Harlem was brought about by a handful of aggressive developers, veritable antelitteram yuppies. However, they stumbled into a fin de siècle marked by a wave of recessions and social upheavals: the real-estate market nose-dived time and time again, and the risky idea of turning the neighborhood into a sophisticated residential area was thwarted by the selfsame advance of the city, by its march northward along expanding transport facilities, and by its projection beyond the confines of the island toward the Bronx and Queens. The stately buildings increasingly came to resemble cathedrals in the desert. Thus, while rich New Yorkers banded themselves together, as if
under siege, around the Heights and Mount Morris Park, the first German, Jewish, and Italian families “fleeing” from the Lower East Side started arriving, lured by a property market in urgent need of oxygen and keen to realize whatever profits could still be had: these were the flimsy layer of immigrants who could be said to have “made it.” And their arrival served only to hasten the departure of those rich “one hundred percent Americans.” But not even the advent of these upwardly mobile immigrant families could stave off the problems of a real-estate market that, over the previous twenty years, had gone about building those enormous apartment complexes and now saw them left empty—complete with all those large rooms originally destined to satisfy the needs and rituals of large middle- and upper-middle-class families (and their numerous servants). It is at this point that the African Americans made their appearance.

To follow the path that led African Americans to Harlem means once more retracing the history of the whole city: from the first settlement around Wall Street to that of Five Points and, from there, driven onward by successive waves of immigration, to Greenwich Village. Yet, following the arrival of the Italians and the Jews, the African Americans did not hang around for long in the Village, either. The next move, around the end of the nineteenth century, was to Tenderloin and San Juan Hill. Legend has it that on taking charge of the sinister and vaguely defined area between West 20th and West 55th Streets and 7th and 10th Avenues, an American police captain nicknamed it Tenderloin, in anticipation of the lavish kickbacks that could be expected (“From now on, it’s only tenderloin for me!” he was heard to declare when he took office). As for San Juan Hill, the double cross-reference is to the bloody battle in which Teddy Roosevelt and his Rough Riders took part during the Spanish-American War of 1898, and to the violent racial tensions that exploded repeatedly in this architecturally and urbanistically unfortunate area located between 55th and 64th streets and 10th and 11th avenues: an abrupt surge in the topography of Manhattan.

When, for the above reasons, Harlem opened its doors to the African Americans, the umpteenth exodus began. But other factors were at work, too, in this beginning-of-the-twentieth-century scenario: the acute poverty of the southern states, combined with the disillusion experienced by many in the wake of unfulfilled post–Civil War promises and the fears generated by the widespread savagery of the Ku Klux Klan, served to swell the ranks of a new mass migration that would reach its height around the time of the First World War. The northern cities, and in particular New York (a cosmopolitan Mecca complete with a great port overlooking the Atlantic), were the chosen destinations, but it soon became clear that
neither Tenderloin (then in the clutches of urban overhaul with the building of the new Pennsylvania Station) nor San Juan Hill (with its insufferable congestion) would have been able to contain this new, massive influx.

At this point, a young black entrepreneur, Philip A. Payton Jr., came into the reckoning. Payton convinced a number of real-estate owners to let him their properties, set up the Afro-American Realty Company and took to renting some of the apartments originally destined for the “one hundred percent American” white middle and upper middle classes to black families. Once set in motion, the mechanism went ahead of its own accord and the developers could heave a sigh of relief. The larger complexes were sold or hired out to local investors and intermediaries, the apartments were restructured in such a way as to boost their number (livability and practicality being of decidedly secondary importance), high rents were maintained in order to cover expenses, and the “new history” of Harlem was on its way. And when, at the end of the First World War, young black American soldiers (who had become familiar with a thoroughly different reality from that experienced in the southern states) made their return from the front, the area north of Central Park became loaded with different psychological and material implications. Shortly this influx from the South was joined by that of the Caribbean (with all the linguistic, cultural, and religious complexities that might be expected), a process that would give rise to the first, authentic “black city” of Manhattan. Or, perhaps we should say, another “village inside the city.”

The “new” Harlem was at first a highly irregular triangle whose base stood along 131st Street between Eighth Avenue and the Harlem River, and whose vertex was located on Lenox Avenue at 142nd Street. During the 1920s it had become an equally irregular trapezoid, taking in the area between 130th and 144th streets, Eighth Avenue, and the Harlem River. And in the 1930s it went down as far as the park (‘trickling down’ even farther a good ten blocks on its western side) and up as far as 166th Street, widening out to include Amsterdam Avenue. The major roads were—and still are—Seventh Avenue, Lenox Avenue, and 125th Street, genuinely public places within the “village” where most of the commercial, social, cultural, and political activities are concentrated. Here, for many years, Lillian Harris (better known as Pig Foot Mary) wheeled her barrow of boiled pig’s feet, skillfully investing the abundant proceeds in real estate within the neighborhood; here, the intersection between Lenox Avenue and 125th Street, the site of many rallies and gatherings, was known as “Street Corner University”; here, the Harlem photographers and chroniclers, James Van Der Zee and Austin Hansen, set up their studios; here lived the jazz singers Florence Mills and Alberta Hunter, the musicians W.
C. Handy, Fletcher Henderson, and Eubie Blake, and the writer James Weldon Johnson; here, establishments like Small’s Paradise, the Renaissance Theater, and the Apollo Theater were set up; and here could be found the headquarters of the most important Harlem newspaper, New Amsterdam News, and of the fighting Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters . . .

Harlem’s history is long and involved, and Gilbert Osofsky’s Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto is required reading for anyone wishing to delve further into the matter. It includes, for example, the story of that remarkable blossoming of talent during the 1920s, when the neighborhood became a laboratory of literary, musical, and theatrical experiment: the Harlem Renaissance, ushered in by black intellectuals like W. E. B. DuBois and Alain Locke, saw the emergence of talents like the poets Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, and Claude McKay, the narrator Jean Toomer, and the anthropologist and writer Zora Neale Thurston; the explosion of jazz, the great orchestras, and celebrated soloists; a frenetic nightlife in the streets, in establishments that soon became legendary and in salons like that owned by A’Lelia Walker at 108–110 West 136th Street. It also brought with it considerable ambiguity: this was the neurotic, anxiety-ridden Jazz Age, and many white downtown intellectuals, aesthetes, and artists turned to Harlem in search of new “stimuli,” a diverse elation, and an equivocal “primitivism” after the exhausted commercialization of Greenwich Village. The maître à penser of this generation of seekers, and the contradictory promoter of a Harlem at once real yet overly aesthetic and existential, was the critic and writer Carl Van Vechten. And the Cotton Club, the new Mecca of Harlem nightlife, remained rigidly segregated: Duke Ellington played there, but the bouncer wouldn’t allow W. C. Handy (the “father of the blues”) to take a seat inside and listen to him.

The Wall Street crash of 1929 snuffed out the lights of the Harlem Renaissance, too. An even more desperate poverty took root in Harlem’s broad streets and refined buildings; with unemployment levels going through the roof, rents rising, and general living conditions worsening by the minute, the rage and anxiety of the people found expression in the riots of 1935 and, later, in 1943. As Langston Hughes wrote:

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore—
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over—
Like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

New generations of writers—from Richard Wright to Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin—now narrated the story of the neighborhood; new groups went about their organization; new personalities came to dominate the headlines, like Malcolm X, whose Organization of Afro-American Unity set up an office in the Hotel Theresa on the corner of 7th Avenue and 125th Street, and who was later murdered during a rally at the Audubon Ballroom on West 166th Street between Broadway and St. Nicholas Avenue. And new revolts flared up on its streets during the decades that followed. A friend of mine who now teaches in Washington once told me the events of an afternoon in 1968: he (a white youth) had gone for a stroll around the ghetto to savor anew its splendid architecture when, all of a sudden, he felt a hand around his arm—an old black man took him quietly but firmly to the nearest subway station and told him: “Now you better get on the first train back downtown.” The news of Martin Luther King’s assassination had just been announced on the radio, and the ghetto was about to explode.

One morning, take a walk to the top of Mount Morris Park (the rocky hill that now goes under the name of Marcus Garvey Park), where a cast-iron bell tower stands. It is an octagonal structure whose small Doric columns support a platform and a small, covered observation post: this is the last fire observation tower remaining in Manhattan, a city that has always been particularly prone to devastating fires as a result of its old wooden buildings. The hill also became famous thanks to Henry Roth when he started writing again after his long writer’s block following the publication of Call It Sleep: the first volume of his strange autobiography, Mercy of a Rude Stream, is in fact titled A Star Shines Over Mt. Morris Park. The location plays a key part in the volume and is described during the period when the Jews started populating the area after abandoning the Lower East Side, just before the arrival of the African Americans.

From the hilltop you get a great all-around view of the neighborhood’s low horizon and its animated topography—the ridges, the long spacious avenues, and stately buildings. And most importantly you can see the stoops, those entry steps that so thoroughly characterize “old New York,”
and which here take on an appearance all their own: they are so high and imposing that they seem to anchor the phantom-ship buildings, with their masts and decks, poops and figureheads, to the sidewalk.

While descending the hill of Mount Morris Park in the direction of Lenox Avenue (aka Malcolm X Boulevard), the words of Claude McKay in his classic 1928 volume, *Home to Harlem*, may well come to mind: “Harlem! How terribly Ray could hate it sometimes. Its brutality, gang rowdism, promiscuous thickness. Its hot desires. But, oh, the rich blood-red color of it! The warm accent of its composite voice, the fruitiness of its laughter, the trailing rhythm of its ’blues’ and the improvised surprises of its jazz.” A veritable riot of emotions difficult to resist when walking the streets of this historic ghetto, in the shadow of such extraordinary architecture, up and down hills where the island seems to rear up, spin upon itself, and then plunge back downward among the crowds of people walking at your side, standing on corners, or loafing about on entry steps.

All around, the past is never far away from the present. That church down there on the northwestern corner of West 131st Street and Lenox Avenue is called Ebenezer Gospel Tabernacle, but it was originally built in 1889 as a Unitarian church. And so did it remain until 1919, when it became the Congregation and Chebra Ukadisha B’nai Israel Mikalwarie, a place of worship for a tiny community of Orthodox Jews coming from Eastern Europe. Then, in 1942, it was sold to an African American congregation. Going northward, the broad sidewalks of the Boulevard are a constant reminder of the fact that Harlem was originally intended to be a city and a residential area, avoiding all the congestion that had marked the beginnings of downtown. Yet one cannot help but notice the heartbreaking degradation that afflicts so many of the blocks in the area: the blinded, boarded-up windows of the buildings, the patchy grass of dusty, brick-laden lots, the depressing sense of abandonment in the alleys and side streets. This is a Harlem whose history has been written in scratches and scars onto its streets and houses: the hardships and the tragic struggles to survive are there to be seen in the faces, gestures, attitudes, and words of its people. And that is what often makes taking a look around the area, almost out of curiosity, so difficult and unpleasant.

That Harlem, too, is a place of contrasts is undeniable: they can even be read in the place-names. For example, just a few blocks off from the corner of Malcolm X Boulevard and West 125th (one of the main streets of the neighborhood, the center for shops and offices, the heart of business and the ghetto economy), you will find Strivers’ Row and Sugar Hill—both telling names.

Strivers’ Row is a complex of residential buildings erected in 1890 by David H. King Jr., who entrusted the project to some of the most impor-
tant architects of the time, including the ubiquitous Stanford White: refined-looking houses of a sophisticated design arranged in small blocks with (an unusual occurrence in Manhattan) alleys at the back. Originally built for the white Protestant middle classes, the houses were offered first to upwardly mobile middle-class immigrants and then to the black middle classes. They were inhabited by famous musicians, lawyers, architects, doctors, and professional people of all kinds (and also by Harry Wills, the boxer whose ambition to fight for the world heavyweight title in the 1920s was thwarted by the resistance of organizers fearing the advent of another Jack Johnson, the black fighter who held the title uninterrupted from 1908 to 1925).

Sugar Hill, conversely, is the glorified ideal of well-heeled Harlem. At the beginning of the 1800s the grand estates of Alexander Hamilton ("The Grange") and Samuel Bradhurst ("Pinehurst"), names of lasting importance in the history of the city and the nation, were located here. Although the area then fell in line with the overall transformation in the neighborhood, it nonetheless retained an air of sophistication and class. The houses and churches are ample evidence of this. Take the incredibly kitsch Our Lady of Lourdes on West 142nd Street, which incorporates elements belonging to three different nineteenth-century buildings: the facade and eastern wing come from the National Academy of Design; the stone pedestals flanking the main staircase are from the "Marble Palace," the immense department store designed by A. T. Stewart; and the apse was taken from the eastern side of St. Patrick's Cathedral. In the area you will also find the City College of New York (the university for less well-off students), the castle of James A. Bailey (the celebrated entrepreneur who, together with James A. Barnum, redefined the role of the circus as a specific form of mass entertainment in the nineteenth century), and Hamilton Terrace (widely considered one of the most beautiful streets in New York: a riotous orgy of stone and brick in the most glorious range of shapes and colors, carvings and sculptures, and myriad forms of disparate ornamentation).

Hordes of people bustle all about you, and once again it feels like you are back in a village in the metropolis. Perhaps you are stuck on the corner, unsure of where to go next. You might pop along to the legendary Apollo Theater where staff invite you to step inside the foyer and take a look at photographs, program bills, and posters to get an idea of the immense contribution made to the black performing arts of both yesterday and today. Or you could head for the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, on Malcolm X Boulevard and West 135th Street, to look for material related to the history of the ghetto and the Harlem Renaissance. Or walk down toward the Studio Museum on West 125th
Street and Malcolm X Boulevard to see an exhibition by an African American artist. There again, you might want to seek out Minton’s Playhouse on the ground floor of the Cecil Hotel, on West 118th Street, where Charlie Parker and Thelonious Monk used to play. Or even go along to the neo-Gothic Abyssinian Baptist Church at 136–142 West 138th Street, and listen to some excellent gospel music on a Sunday morning. But, if the truth were known, you’d give your right arm at this present moment to see Pig Foot Mary still alive, wheeling her barrow of steaming pig’s feet along the street . . .

So, there you have it: the Lower East Side, Greenwich Village, Harlem, Spanish Harlem. If you now pick up a map and draw a circle around these areas, you will feel that it is they—and not, arguably, Fifth Avenue or Times Square or even Central Park—that make Manhattan what it is: the metropolis par excellence and the symbol of modernity, vertical and horizontal gigantism, chaos and anonymity, frenzy and change. Places whose startling contradictions—be they locked away neatly in the past or achingly alive in the present—live side by side with this peculiarly intimate dimension, with this astonishing community feeling.

. . . the pasteles, tortelloni made from potatoes, green bananas, plantains, and yautía roots (all peeled and grated finely), milk, oil and salt, and stuffed with diced pork meat, smoked ham, currants, alcaparrado, and peas, and wrapped in plantain leaves and left to simmer in a covered saucepan for three quarters of an hour, turning from time to time.

This recipe for pasteles sneaks its way into my notebook beside a recipe I had copied down for cholent—a traditional Jewish dish that resembles a kind of stew with peas, potatoes, barley, and onions, all thickened up with a sprinkling of flour, seasoned with pepper and paprika, and left in a heated place for a whole night. (In the immigrant Lower East Side, women used to prepare cholent in a saucepan, then take it along to the baker’s, who would keep it in his oven overnight for ten cents, each saucepan carefully distinguished one from the other by the addition of colored ribbon. A few days ago, Hasia Diner, a professor at New York University, told me of her research into the culinary habits of immigrants and how these, too, are traversed by the processes of Americanization.)

Anyway, the pasteles are proving to be a hit, and from the moment Maria puts the dish on the table it’s been nonstop coming and going in the Vejigante Café. Friends, acquaintances, friends of friends, and people I’d met on the street an hour or so ago with Papoleto all appear as if by magic. They taste the pasteles and then hang around. Mario and Maria take a couple of small folding tables from the back and set them up in the street in front of the café, near the
old men playing dominoes, a group of youngsters listening to a Jimmy Cliff cassette on the stereo, and the women leaning out of windows. Papoleto and I buy a few cans of beer, line them up on the small tables, and place what remains of the pasteles in front of them. As we do so, an improvised local street party thunders into life between outbursts of laughter, the singing of songs, and yells and calls from one side of the street to the other. The crazy colored masks hanging in the window of the Vejigante gaze down on us benevolently, and Spanish Harlem, El Barrio, smiles all about us on an evening that is now a red lake.

I’ll hang on for a while here with Papoleto and the others, shaking hands and chatting, drinking beer and tasting the pasteles and other sweetmeats that people dropping in have brought over. Then, a little later on, when perhaps they’ll be playing the sweet-sad notes of the calypso (that melancholy entwined with happiness), Papoleto will accompany me down to the bus stop where I’ll wait for the number 1, direction downtown. And then I’ll gallop off down the slender, winding body of Manhattan, up and down her hills, toward East 4th Street and Loisaida Avenue, toward what here is mi casa.

From one village to another.