



"In the Heart of Harlem" by Bernie Robynson, 1953. From the collection of Langston Hughes. (Courtesy of the Langston Hughes Papers, James Weldon Johnson Collection in the Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library)

# HARLEM IS NOWHERE

A JOURNEY TO THE MECCA  
OF BLACK AMERICA

SHARIFA RHODES-PITTS



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Dedicated to the memory of Minnie Davis (1923–2008),  
who told me to *stop and stare*, and to all the neighbors  
who looked after me on Lenox Avenue

## A Colony of Their Own

I HAD ALREADY put the key into the door of my building on Lenox Avenue when the question came at my back. In one movement I withdrew the key and turned to face my inquisitor. He stood waiting for my reply and then asked again: *Do you think you'll ever go home?*

It was one of the neighborhood men who stand outside the front door during the day, sentinels keeping a vigilant watch. When I first moved here they were almost invisible to me; we did not speak and exchanged only the occasional nod. Neither I nor the men were being standoffish. There seemed to be an unspoken rule—perhaps a universal prudence for any strange girl arriving in any strange place—that I should come to know the women first. After I had been accepted by the women, the men began to make themselves known. By that point, the women had warned me about which men to avoid, I'd learned to discriminate between geezer flirtation and jive, and I could hold my own with the biggest jive talkers. Soon, I was drawn into a form of protection. My new friends declared this adoption at unexpected moments—one

or another of the neighbors would introduce me as their daughter. If I was stranded in the midst of an unwanted conversation with a persistent sidewalk suitor, one of the sentinels would swoop in to see him off. But if I came home accompanied by a man of my own choosing, I was later expected to give an account of his intentions, employment, and character.

*Home*, he said again to my puzzled stare. *Down South. Do you think you'll ever go back home?*

It was a time when I was often in and out of the city. During phone conversations with friends, if I said I was *at home* they'd always ask, *Where?* But on this day, the man's question came out of nowhere. As I'd approached the stoop he'd remarked, *Cold enough for you?* on what was a relatively warm day a few weeks before the start of spring. I'd responded, *Not bad, not bad at all*, noting how easily that banality passed my lips—approximating the tones of a northerner, feigning comprehension of their seasons. Maybe he sensed the falseness of my reply. Maybe that's why he asked that question, presuming a desire I was not in contact with on that particular morning.

I answered cheerfully. *Home to Texas? But I go back all the time...* This sent him scattering into an apologetic retreat, as if he suddenly had a sense of invading my privacy. *Oh*, he said, and *Oh*, he repeated, as if the problem of my dislocation had suddenly been made right.

I did not ask him if he ever went home. I did not think of it until I was already in the narrow corridor that leads to the staircase that leads to my apartment, and now, in the act of recording it, this passing forgetfulness that he was also far from home strikes me as a failure of empathy. The yearning may have been more his than my own.

It was odd that he should think of me, even as I crossed my own threshold, as a stranger—someone on the verge of depar-

ture, highly susceptible to the mere mention of flight. (I might at that moment have turned around and gone; I might just then have been thinking of it.) But it says much about the permanent status of my residence here. My neighbors were accustomed to seeing me leave with luggage in the earliest part of the morning. I had maintained an innocence of city politics and refused certain hallmarks of the committed citizen of New York, like a red or black wire rolling cart for groceries, or a tabloid newspaper selected on the basis of the best horoscopes. I should not have been surprised that some of my neighbors on Lenox Avenue were still trying to understand my presence in their midst. On a different occasion, a different man from outside my door had asked where I was from. He was surprised—pleased, even—to hear I was from Texas. *Oh*, he'd said. *I thought you were a foreigner.*

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One restless, idle hour, I sat at the library on 135th Street and consulted *The Columbia-Lippincott Gazetteer of the World*, copying out the following entry, as if to gain my bearings:

Harlem: A residential and business district of N Manhattan borough of New York City, SE N.Y., bounded approximately by Central Park and 110th St. (S), East R. (E), Harlem R. (NE), 168th St (W). Largest Negro community (pop. More than 400,000) in U.S. grew up here after 1910; one of the most congested districts in U.S., Harlem also has large colonies of Puerto Rican, Italian, and Latin American background. The Du. Settlement of Nieuw Haarlem was est. here 1658 by Peter Stuyvesant; in the Revolution, Continental forces stopped the British advance up Manhattan in battle (Sept., 1776) of Harlem Heights. Area remained virtually rural until improvement in 19th cent. of transportation

links with lower Manhattan. Public-housing projects (began in 1930s) and other attempts to relieve unfavorable conditions there have been made.

At first it seems to give an all-encompassing view—complete with official borders, colonial heroics, and important urban planning highlights. Yet it manages to say nothing at all. In search of further detail I seized upon another definition, from the pages of *The Handbook of Geographical Nicknames*. This volume reveals that a city called Hankow is “The Pittsburgh of China”; that “The Happy Valley” refers to war-torn Kashmir and to the riverine gorge cut by the Tennessee; and that the Harz Mountains of Germany, the location of the silver mines where Leibniz once toiled, is now or once was “The Stronghold of Paganism.” Situated near these is Harlem, whose nickname, “The Capital of the Negro Population of the United States,” was not nearly as catchy or evocative as I’d expected. Though the phrase lacks poetry, it retains an accidental precision: the outdated term “Negro” (already antique when the book was published, in 1980) fixes our attention on the past.

At the library I found another source of coordinates. *Harlem is blocked in by the high ridges of Morningside Heights and St. Nicholas Terrace, by the East and Harlem rivers, and by Central Park*. Those declared boundaries did not tell me anything new. More important was the action of those physical frontiers: *Harlem is blocked in*. Geography is destiny. *The WPA Guide to New York City*, first published in 1939, goes on to describe who and what is blocked in by those ridges, those rivers, and that pastoral fiction of a park:

Negro Harlem, into which are crowded more than a quarter of a million Negroes from southern states, the West Indies,

and Africa, has many different aspects. To whites seeking amusement, it is an exuberant, original, and unconventional entertainment center; to Negro college graduates it is an opportunity to practice a profession among their own people; to those aspiring to racial leadership it is a domain where they may advocate their theories unmolested; to artists, writers, and sociologists it is a mine of rich material; to the mass of Negro people it is the spiritual capital of Black America.

I went on a tour of Harlem, thinking it would be useful to know what the packs of visitors were being told. We met at the corner of 135th Street and Lenox, in front of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, just two blocks from my building. The tour guide, a young white woman, began by asking the group to shout out whatever came to mind when they heard the word Harlem. Some said *music*, others said *riots*. Those who didn’t say *music* or *riots* said *Bill Clinton* and *soul food*.

After that exercise in free association, the guide led us on a brief circuit covering a radius no larger than five blocks. As we began, she gave a condensed history of what happened when blacks first moved into Harlem. With a call-and-response style reminiscent of kindergarten, she asked what happened next. The chorus of mostly white tourists shouted out: *The white people leave!*

The guide had a habit of calling Lenox Avenue, Fifth Avenue. As we passed through one block of brownstone houses, I overheard a couple marveling at the architecture, noting the *little pointy tops* of a cluster of homes. The man asked his wife, had they seen them before? Like the mansard roofs in France? Did she remember they were named after a guy called Mansard? A woman



West 133rd Street, ca. 1877. (Photo by Silas A. Holmes / Courtesy of New-York Historical Society, Department of Prints, Photographs, and Architectural Collections)

came out of one house and asked if anyone in the group knew someone to rent her top two floors. When one tourist asked the price of brownstones these days, the guide, a young graduate student in history, asserted somewhat huffily that she was not a real estate broker. One woman repeatedly interrupted the tour to ask how far away the famous Sylvia's soul-food restaurant was.

Often, I fell away from the group, trailing behind. I was familiar with most of the history being discussed. For me, the biggest revelation had come at the beginning of the tour. As we stood at the meeting point, the corner of 135th and Lenox, in the shadow of the Schomburg Center, the guide had passed around a photo. It was a picture of the street that crosses my corner of Lenox Avenue. The caption on the back read *West 133rd Street between 5th and 6th Ave-*

*nues. 1880–1881.* Today, standing at the corner of 133rd Street looking east across Lenox Avenue (formerly Sixth Avenue), one sees the six towers of the Lenox Terrace apartment complex. The picture showed that same area, but in 1880 it resembled a moonscape. The terrain is utterly flat and is covered by a rough sod. In the foreground stands a group of three attached brick town houses. Their windows form an orderly grid, and the steps leading up to each building look bright white, untrodden. Most important, these three houses don't connect to any others. They stand isolated, with empty space on each side. After about twenty yards, a second cluster of three attached houses is seen to the right of the first group. They are also flanked by open space. Beyond that group, after another twenty yards or so, are yet another bank of houses. Across the gaps they seem to reach toward each other. The groups of houses are built parallel to each other, in a line, respecting the logic of an invisible map. But the houses do not quite form a street. They form the beginning of a street, the intention of a street, the merest suggestion of a street.

In the far distance, visible through the gap between the first two sets of homes, there is a fourth detached set of buildings. It is the dream of another street. Toward the vanishing point, flanked by nothing at all, is a solitary tree, a remnant of what was there before this idea of a neighborhood was imposed on the landscape. The picture preserves a moment when the idea was not yet accomplished, it hangs between dream and reality. This is a prehistoric Harlem—nothing that counts for History has happened there yet. There is sky, open space, and very little shelter. Without the caption, it would be hard to know if this was the beginning or end of a civilization—a place just being built, or recently destroyed.

This is Harlem, barely inhabited—at the very beginning of its settlement in the 1880s. The buildings are only a few years old, the vast blank spaces between them are evidence of how this land—a farming suburb—was haphazardly annexed by the

metropolis. The houses were built as speculative enterprises, each group of three representing a gamble by some intrepid pioneer. The bourgeois commuter society that grew up here is not yet established, nor are the other houses that would eventually complete this and other streets.

The houses in the picture all face south, toward settled Manhattan, expectantly oriented toward the people who would arrive from downtown. But there are no people in the photograph. And though the buildings themselves suggest the presence of people, the arrangement of those structures in that space and the utter quietude of the landscape collide with the clamor we know should accompany buildings like those. Curtains hang in a few windows of the first group of buildings. One window, on the top floor of the middle house, is slightly ajar. Someone is there. Or, someone has been there and just left. Or, someone is about to arrive.

Here, blank spaces—possibilities—prevail. This picture shows what is about to be built, and also what is now already gone. In the 1950s the houses and tenements and even the very streets from 132nd to 135th between Lenox and Fifth Avenues were razed in a slum-clearance program, to build the high-rise middle-class housing complex of Lenox Terrace. A single row house remains, hidden in the midst of the towers. Nuns live in that house. There is some empty space on either side, and it no longer lines any street.

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I used to stare into similar wide, open spaces as a child. I grew up in a city where the combined meaning of the words *urban* and *planning* was imprecise. To reach the side of town where we lived, you took a highway from the city center that crossed vast stretches of undeveloped land. From the window of our car, I stared into these spaces. I sought evidence of activity in the deep distance—

perhaps a figure dashing across the field—from which I could invent a story. Typically, the only figures in those fields were small herds of undernourished horses or cattle. This brittle land was used as a makeshift pasture—livestock foraged for nourishment among the dry brush between oil pumps and electric towers. I looked out the windows of our car to see how far into the horizon my eyes could carry me, watching for something I hadn't noticed before. But that landscape never changed. It was twenty years before new housing was built along that highway. When I was a child, those fields were always marked with faded billboards offering the acreage for development, perpetually in search of a willing taker.

When I came to live in Harlem, the fenced-off, overgrown empty lots here also attracted my eye. At first, they were evidence: I had indeed arrived in the place I'd heard of. The empty lots held some significance; it was similar to the feeling I'd had when, riding from the airport in New Delhi, I first saw cows in the road. Yes, this is the place I have heard about, I'd thought. There are cows all over the road exactly as they were in the guidebook pictures. The empty lots in Harlem had the same verifying quality. Later, those empty lots provided something beyond veracity. They were a place for the eyes to rest. This was not some romance for ruins. These blank, disavowed spaces had been labeled as blight, but they provided a visual and mental break from the clamor of the buildings and people. There was a hint of the horizon.

Here was solace from the crowded landscape—both the physical crowdedness of buildings and people and the crowd of stories and histories. A friend of mine describes certain cities as being *full*—too much has happened there, you cannot move. Paris, he says, is the quintessentially *full* city. I suspect he'd say Harlem is another place that is too full—though its crowdedness and overpopulation have been discussed in other terms. In the empty lots, my mind escaped history.

Later I understood that these empty fields were indeed the setting of a history, the loathsome history of neglect and destruction stretching back to the beginning of black settlement in Harlem and its corollary, white flight. But at first, as in Texas, those spaces where my thoughts played were just settings for scenes and fancies whose significance was fleeting. I admired the wild patches of Queen Anne's lace that grew up in summer. Independent businessmen used some lots as locations for unofficial open-air markets, selling used furniture or vintage clothes.

Many of these places are now occupied by new condominiums. One is now a Mormon church. As the empty lots disappeared, I became more interested in what was there before. In some places it is possible to see what was there: the foundation of a building remains; a front stoop rises up from the sidewalk but leads to nothing. Such things recede into the background, part of the natural history of this place, as if they had always been like that. But this is the evidence of an unnatural history—it was not always this way, it came to be that way for a reason.

There are new empty lots different from those I noticed upon first arriving. Returning after a year's absence, I found an empty lot at the southwestern corner of Lenox Avenue and 125th Street. It was covered with fresh gravel, to stop its reversion to a wild field. When I first saw the lot something sank inside of me—the sensation mocked the feeling of a demolition, a building brought to its knees. This new empty lot opened a new horizon: from 125th Street you could see clear through the block to 124th Street. But the view was not one that gave rest or inspired the eye and mind. There was only the instantaneous, frantic search for something that once was there and was there no longer.

It was a grand old apartment house whose facade hugged the corner, making the intersection look like a stately plaza. It might have been a candidate for landmark status, but its windows were

sealed up with cement bricks. Soon after I arrived in Harlem, the few tenants remaining in the building's storefronts—a decrepit Chinese restaurant, a flamboyant haberdashery, a store specializing in women's undergarments, and a shoe shine and repair service—had all closed up shop.

The building stayed in place long after those stores had gone. For a few years it brought revenue as the background for various athletic-wear billboards; for several seasons a heroic image of Muhammad Ali, having just knocked out an opponent, loomed over Lenox Avenue. I heard a rumor that the building had not been demolished because a family lived inside and that they'd defiantly refused to leave when the other tenants cleared out. This seemed impossible with all of the windows bricked over, and I never saw anyone enter or exit the building. But I did always see—through a small window in a battered door on Lenox Avenue—a light illuminating the vestibule.

There used to be an empty lot near my house, on Seventh Avenue just south of 133rd Street. One day in summer, I saw through its chain-link fence a pile of watermelon rinds at the rear of the lot. There was an open pit in the ground nearby, where someone was burying the waste. Later, the pile disappeared and the open pit was covered by recently turned earth. Soon, construction began on that site. It was only a matter of weeks before the frame of a new building rose up on the lot. A security guard was now stationed there each night to guard the property. He didn't wear a uniform, and like many of the men (and sometimes women) who work security jobs at construction sites in Harlem, he was an immigrant from West Africa.

Later, when construction was nearly completed but the premises were not yet occupied, I passed again one night and saw through the building's glass doors the outline of a man sitting in the condominium entry. He kept watch in near darkness, visible

only by the light of a nearby street lamp. Whenever I passed the spot, I looked to see if anyone was inside. Sometimes the guard was there, slumped in his seat, sleeping through his shift out of exhaustion or boredom. Other times, there was only an empty chair. A few times, the watchman waved hello. Once, the figure beckoned me inside.

I didn't accept the invitation. The building still looked unoccupied, but a large sign now hung from its facade. The building is called the Ellison. To advertise the property, the sign shows a photograph of a handsome, clean-cut young black man in a suit. He is shown in regal profile, his eyes are closed, his chin is lifted toward the sky. *Change your state of mind*, begins the sales pitch for the new condominiums. The man on the sign looks lost in contemplation, on the brink of transcendence, about to receive some celestial enlightenment. Or maybe he has just thrown back his head and is about to unleash a howling laugh.

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That picture from 1880 shows the beginning of what was, essentially, a failed settlement. More buildings were constructed so the isolated housing blocks eventually formed complete streets. As people moved in, Harlem became, according to one observer in 1905, *a haven for the clerks and small merchants, the family man and the newly married couple and the young professional man, who all flocked thither*. But the real estate speculation behind the Harlem housing boom had not anticipated the city's delay in extending transportation to the area. Many town houses and apartment buildings were empty or partially empty. Around 1900 the situation attracted the interest of African American businessman Philip A. Payton Jr., an associate of Booker T. Washington. Payton proposed to several landlords that he act as a broker, renting their vacant properties to black tenants. He began quietly, with a

few houses on 134th Street east of Lenox Avenue (the same area shown in that photo of prehistoric Harlem). According to James Weldon Johnson,

The whites paid little attention to the movement until it began to spread west of Lenox Avenue; they then took steps to check it. They proposed through a financial organization, the Hudson Realty Company, to buy in all properties occupied by colored people and evict the tenants.

Another group, Shaw & Company, pursued the same tactics, as did the Harlem Property Owners' Improvement Association. But Payton was equal to the challenge. When the Hudson Realty Company started buying property and evicting blacks, Payton combined with other black businessmen to launch the Afro-American Realty Company, which bought property and evicted whites. A December 17, 1905, article from the *New York Times* reported the furor with the tone of an urgent telegram: *Real Estate Race War Is Started in Harlem; Dispossessed White Men Ask Negroes to be Allowed to Stay; Colored Folks Retaliated; They Were Dispossessed First—Then Formed a Real Estate Company to Buy Tenements*. Payton and the Afro-American Realty Company are accurately credited with the invention of black Harlem. The strategy was not merely to secure rental housing or buy individual property, but to harness the collective economic power of well-to-do blacks, toward the general empowerment of the race.

The *New York Herald* described the unfolding controversy on December 24, 1905, under the headline *Negroes Move into Harlem*.

An untoward circumstance has been injected into the private-dwelling market in the vicinity of 133rd and 134th Streets.

During the last three years the flats in 134th between Lenox and Seventh Avenues, that were occupied entirely by white folks, have been captured for occupation by a Negro population. Its presence there has tended also to lend much color to conditions in 133rd and 135th Streets between Lenox and Seventh Avenues.

One Hundred and Thirty-third Street still shows some signs of resistance to the blending of colors in that street, but between Lenox and Seventh Avenues has practically succumbed to the ingress of colored tenants. Nearly all the old dwellings in 134th Street to midway in the block west from Seventh Avenue are occupied by colored tenants and real estate brokers predict that it is only a matter of time when the entire block, to Eighth Avenue, will be a stronghold of the Negro population.

As a result of the extension of this African colony, dwellings in 133rd Street between Seventh and Eighth Avenues, and in 132nd Street from Lenox to Eighth Avenue have depreciated from fifteen to twenty per cent in value, especially in the sides of those streets nearest to 134th Street. The cause of the colored influx is inexplicable.

After a few years of this *untoward circumstance*, the good citizens of Harlem resolved to erect a twenty-four-foot fence on 136th Street, a battlement to defend their besieged city. The *New York Indicator*, a real estate publication, summarized popular opinion:

Their presence is undesirable among us... they should not only be disenfranchised, but also segregated in some colony in the outskirts of the city, where their transportation and other problems will not inflict injustice and disgust on worthy citizens.

As white Harlem gathered its forces, a spokesperson for a group of outraged citizens offered a self-serving prophecy, masked as philanthropy: *We believe... that real friends of Negroes will eventually convince them that they should buy large tracts of unimproved land near the city and there build up colonies of their own.*

Only two decades had passed when the prophecy was borne out under slightly altered circumstances. A Negro colony spread from the concentrated area around Philip Payton's original buildings on 134th Street, until it became an onslaught no wall could contain. White New Yorkers quit Harlem. Some sold their property at a loss, others abandoned houses and apartment buildings, preferring to board them up rather than rent or sell to black people. Eventually, the move of blacks into Harlem reached the physical limits of the ridges, the rivers, and 110th Street. Alain Locke, writing in the introduction to his 1925 anthology *The New Negro*, found that the concentration of black New Yorkers crowding into that physical space mirrored a metaphysical force then gaining strength.

In Harlem, Negro life is seizing upon its first chances for group expression and self-determination. That is why our comparison is taken with those nascent centers of folk-expression and self-determination which are playing a creative part in the world today. Without pretense to their political significance, Harlem has the same role to play for the New Negro as Dublin has had for the New Ireland or Prague for the New Czechoslovakia.

Locke was among the first to define Harlem as *a race capital*, a physical center that *focuses a people*. It was *the stage of the pageant of*

*contemporary Negro life* on which would unfold *the resurgence of a race*. Locke invokes two young European republics whose people had rejected imperialism through nationalism. But he did not aspire to self-determination by means of actual political sovereignty or a separate nation for blacks. Locke believed that Harlem would be a place of cultural and social uplift. This, in time, would lead to equality for blacks within the wider American scene. In 1925, Locke asserted that *Harlem represents the Negro's latest thrust towards Democracy*.

Others tried to add their own pronouncements to Locke's prophecy. *The New Negro* anthology includes Charles S. Johnson reaching for Locke's gravitas, while waxing nostalgic about events still in progress: *And there was New York City with its polite personal service and its Harlem—the Mecca of the Negroes the country over. Delightful Harlem of the effete East! Old families, brownstone mansions, a step from wonderful Broadway, the end of the rainbow.*

In 1928, Wallace Thurman's *Negro Life in New York's Harlem* noted that the neighborhood—known as *The Mecca of the New Negro, the center of black America's cultural renaissance, Nigger Heaven, Pickaninny Paradise, Capital of Black America*, among other monikers—had been *surveyed and interpreted, explored and exploited*. But Thurman launches his own survey and interpretation, producing *a lively picture of a popular and interesting section* that reads like a travel guide, with chapters on social life, night life, amusement, house rent parties, the numbers, the church, and newspapers. The resulting vision of Harlem is a great deal less than the sum of its parts.

Langston Hughes riffs on Harlem in his contribution to a 1963 special Harlem issue of *Freedomways* magazine. Hughes mixes sentimentality with a dose of his typically biting wit, in the following incantation:

Harlem, like a Picasso painting in his cubistic period. Harlem—Southern Harlem—the Carolinas, Georgia, Florida—looking for the Promised Land—dressed in rhythmic words, painted in bright pictures, dancing to jazz—and ending up in the subway at morning rush time—headed downtown. West Indian Harlem—warm rambunctious sassy remembering Marcus Garvey, Haitian Harlem, Cuban Harlem, little pockets of tropical dreams in alien tongues. Magnet Harlem, pulling an Arthur Schomburg from Puerto Rico, pulling an Arna Bontemps all the way from California, a Nora Holt from way out West, an E. Simms Campbell from St. Louis, likewise a Josephine Baker, a Charles S. Johnson from Virginia, an A. Phillip Randolph from Florida, a Roy Wilkins from Minnesota, an Alta Douglas from Kansas. Melting pot Harlem—Harlem of honey and chocolate and caramel and rum and vinegar and lemon and lime and gall. Dusky dream Harlem rumbling into a nightmare tunnel where the subway from the Bronx keeps right on downtown, where the jazz is drained to Broadway whence Josephine [Baker] goes to Paris, Robeson to London, Jean Toomer to a Quaker Meeting House, Garvey to Atlanta Federal Penitentiary, and Wallace Thurman to his grave; but Duke Ellington to fame and fortune, Lena Horne to Broadway, and Buck Clayton to China.

The business of defining Harlem has already been perfected. You have heard them all before: Harlem is *a ruin*, it is *the home of the Negro's Zionism*; it is *a third world country*; an *East Berlin whose Wall is 110th Street*. This is hyperbolic Harlem, *the cultural capital of black America* or its *epicenter* (likening the place to a natural disaster). There is Harlem as Mecca—a city of sanctuary, a place that merges devotion and duty.

In *The New Negro* Alain Locke declared: *Harlem, I grant you, isn't typical—but it is significant, it is prophetic. No sane observer, however sympathetic to the new trend, would contend that the great masses are articulate as yet, but they stir, they move, they are more than physically restless.*

But in another essay included in the 1925 anthology, James Weldon Johnson offered a different kind of prophecy. In the tradition of the best oracles, it comes in the form of a riddle:

The question naturally arises, “Are the Negroes going to be able to hold Harlem?” If they have been steadily driven northward for the past hundred years and out of less desirable sections, can they hold this choice bit of Manhattan Island? It is hardly probable that Negroes will hold Harlem indefinitely, but when they are forced out it will not be for the same reasons that forced them out of former quarters in New York City. The situation is entirely different and without precedent. When colored people do leave Harlem, their homes, their churches, their investments and their businesses, it will be because the land has become so valuable they can no longer afford to live on it. But the date of another move northward is very far in the future.

Johnson suspected that Locke's restless masses would be forced—as before in New York, but compelled by a different propulsion—to move yet again. But he did not dwell much on the possibility, or divulge a spell to stop events from coming to pass.

## Into the City of Refuge

EMMA LOU MORGAN arrives in Harlem with the turn of a page. She has come far. How was the journey, Emma Lou? She keeps the details close to her chest, hidden away in the space between the end of one chapter and the beginning of the next. We are not told what she saw crossing the country from Los Angeles, or how long it took; whether sleep on the journey was fitful, or if there were moments on the way when she felt like getting off that train and making her way back home to Boise, Idaho, which she had fled looking for education and enlightenment in the California sun.

That didn't last long. Soon she was filled with *more determination than ever to escape should the chance present itself*. Emma Lou took her chance when it came, with little thought given to the vehicle of her flight. *Once more, Emma Lou fled into an unknown town to escape the haunting chimera of intra-racial color prejudice.*

Emma Lou Morgan is running from her black skin. Wallace Thurman tells us as much in the epigraph to his novel *The Blacker the Berry* . . . : *My color shrouds me in*, goes the selection from poet

things (*blacks blacks blacks blacks*) with Lutie's idea, on the pages of Ann Petry's novel *The Street*: finally she was in a place where she was not merely black.

I like to think of Emma Lou and Helga and Lutie and Jule and King Solomon brushing shoulders with García Lorca, who is unable to grasp the various paths they followed as refugees and fugitives in that black city where he was a tourist. There are many paths, but how many destinations for this journey? Some, like Helga Crane, are immediately taken in, content to live within the boundary. Some, like, Emma Lou, long to see 135th Street and then find it does not merit their expectation. Surely there must have been many like Jule, for whom the destination itself did not conjure any particular magic. Or others like Pinkie, who would like to be anywhere, not there—thinking of flight but with no place to go. There is no going home, and the place where you have arrived offers no substantial shelter.

Emma Lou and Helga Crane both leave Harlem. Lutie is driven to commit a gruesome murder, and then flees, too. Reading their stories as a teenager in Texas, I only cared about the first part of their irresistible trajectory—an outward, upward momentum.

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Of my own arrival, I can say that it is difficult to tell the beginning without any inkling of the end, to show you the light of enchantment without any shadow of disenchantment. I no longer find anything remarkable about my own arrival here. It was not the arrival of a fugitive or a refugee. That feeling—of running from something or running to something—only came later, in the very streets where I was living, and often simultaneously.

I cannot fit my entry into Harlem into a neat narrative arc, like those of Emma Lou and Helga, or Lutie and Pinkie. I had come to New York for a visit, with the faintest unresolved notion of

making a move. I bought the *Amsterdam News* on a Thursday, when the apartment listings would be new, and called up the cheapest spots. I saved the paper, so I can tell you that the listing described as *Harlem 1 bedroom / Renovated, locked doors / No fee. By Owner*, for \$775 with a minimum income of \$40,000 that I did not have, was already taken when I called. The *one bedroom for \$775 with hardwood floors and new appliances in an elevator bldg and quiet neighborhood* must also have gone quickly. That would have left the studio apartment on Edgecombe Avenue for \$675, which was not actually an option. A previous bad experience of cramped studio living had taught me the true nature of my Texan sense of space.

At the top of the page I found the ad for *3 Rms. Floor-thru apt. No Kit. Clean, Non-smoker. Ref's req'd, \$750/mo.* When I called the number the owner said the apartment wasn't taken. In the margin of the now-creased and aged newsprint are the directions I quickly scrawled. I went uptown at once.

The apartment was located in the very last house on the block of 120th Street between Lenox and Seventh Avenues. I met the landlady on the garden level and followed her up three flights of decrepit stairs. We entered the available apartment on the top floor. Its green-painted hallways and matching green carpet were hideous, but there was light streaming in from the front and back windows and a skylight presiding over the entryway and landing. To cross from the front to back required a short stroll. It was, even without a kitchen, the very definition of happiness. I wrote a check for the first and last months' rent, then went downtown to collect my things.

At the time, the miraculous location of a floor-through brownstone apartment—even a floor-through brownstone apartment without a kitchen and with a lamentable green hallway complemented by ugly green wall-to-wall carpeting—held a certain

sense of destiny. It was somehow meant to be. The notion that an apartment without a kitchen was ever anyone's destiny has to do with the general desperation of real estate in New York City, but it is a good indicator of how I saw the world then. I needed providence as an escort on my own ascent from the subway station into Harlem. I, too, was going to meet a place I had already filled with so many expectations. I, too, would have to match the pictures in my mind—the ones I'd invented and the ones I'd seen in books—with the world that was now my own.

But I did not immediately rush out to follow the trails of my favorite Harlem characters; I did not rush to stand before the hallowed sites where history had been made. I did not rush at all. I moved slowly, keeping a deliberately languid pace, because some part of me needed to pretend that my body was still in Texas. And my eyes were still in Texas, too, because I could not give up the habit (and did not lose it until much later) of meeting the eyes of everyone I passed. I didn't know (or did know and didn't mind) that it was through the eyes I would be dragged into stories.

I met eyes with the older ladies who gathered in front of buildings and with the elderly men who sat on park benches in the median, as the traffic rushed north and south around them. When crossing paths with young men who seemed about to make an unwanted advance, I smiled brightly and shouted *Hi!* like an overexcited flight attendant, and then kept walking while they were too stunned to reply. But often I did not refuse when a man offered to walk with me some part of the way down Lenox Avenue, always ending such promenades at the corner of my block. Once, I saw an old lady struggling with her groceries and offered my hands. We walked together for a while, but when she, too, stopped at the corner where her street met Lenox Avenue I was puzzled—alarmed that my assistance could be confused for predation.

I did not make a pilgrimage to the home of Langston Hughes. Instead I met—probably in the street—a young man who lived in Hughes's old house and who made certain everyone knew this fact within minutes of making his acquaintance. I did not immediately go up to the Schomburg Center. Instead I spent hours at a branch library, reading the newspaper and waiting to use the public computers in order to look for a job. Eventually I started going out to dances and art openings, but many more nights I stayed inside, listening to the radio and to the sounds of traffic on Seventh Avenue.

I furnished my apartment with discoveries from junk shops and neighborhood antique dealers whose premises were filled to the rafters with half-upholstered sofas and repaired lamps that would likely never again give light. I purchased a barely functional but finely crafted chair that was sold to me on assurance that I was "handy." I pined after an Art Deco bedroom set that had supposedly belonged to Billie Holiday. It would have cost more than a month's rent, which I could not spare, and my mother warned me by phone from Texas not to trust the pedigree. I picked up tables from the sidewalk, bought cut-glass goblets from the Salvation Army on 125th Street, and purchased knickknacks from elderly ladies having tag sales to raise money for their church. I spent the money for two weeks' worth of groceries on an exotic folding table with a copper-tray tabletop. The seller said it was Persian; his final, successful sales ploy was that although it was his sincere desire to give me a bargain price, he could easily get more money from buyers of *the other persuasion*—by which he meant white shoppers at flea markets in suburban Connecticut. And though I could not remove the sickly green carpet, my landlady relented to my capricious wish to paint the walls of my study an overheated red. (It was the presence of that extra room, just for my work, that had caused me to accept the kitchenless dwelling.)

I had the sense, when putting together these implements for life in my first apartment, that I was bringing in castaways, remnants of other lives that had been lived here. During those early days in Harlem, I also saw great piles of furniture and clothes on sidewalks, of greater quantity and less organization than one would see in an average trash disposal. These piles confused me, until I realized they were the aftermath of evictions.

Even though it was just a few short years ago, nearly all of the stores where I bought the items for my first apartment are gone—there is no room for the junk of old Harlem. But then, the junk prevailed, in shops and on piles in the street. Though I didn't know who lived in my rooms before me, I was already aware of the furor in Harlem about gentrification. I arrived the very week a long, hand-wringing article on the subject had appeared in *The New Yorker*. More recently a plaintive piece in the *New York Times* sought to find common ground between Harlem old and new, but instead skillfully illustrated the distance between them. In an interview, one new resident described parties featuring a parlor game in which she and other recent arrivals joked about what amenities the neighborhood needed most. The answer agreed upon at the latest gathering was that Harlem was in dire need of a Thai restaurant. At the time, Harlem was also experiencing a housing deficit, lacking over 38,000 units of housing needed by its poorest residents.

When I was new to Harlem and experiencing my own pangs of complicity on the issue, I asked a politically minded friend if I was a gentrifier. He firmly answered no—because I was black and poor. I was not convinced. Another friend laughed at the archetypal narrative of my move north and dubbed me Miss Great Migration 2002.

If I was part of the new Harlem, that meant the new café at the end of my block, opened only a few months before I moved to

town, should have been my natural habitat. It was lauded as a marvel of civilization and progress—one *New York Times* reporter theorized that the availability of a quality latte in Harlem was a symbol of the neighborhood's imminent conversion. Yet I couldn't help but wince when noticing my elderly neighbor Mr. Edward standing outside the door of that new café, but never going in. He hovered next to the entrance, drinking a seventy-five-cent cup of bodega coffee.

Once, while sitting inside the café, I happened to overhear a conversation between two white men seated nearby. One seemed to be a stay-at-home dad who worked in marketing; he talked business while nursing a toddler in a stroller. I gathered from eavesdropping that the other man was visiting his friend's new neighborhood for the first time. *This is fabulous*, he exclaimed. Then, noting the first man's skills in marketing, he added: *Really, you have to do something to get the word out. There need to be more people up here!*

I later read an article in the *New York Sun* that joyously reported that developers had purchased several high-rise rental buildings in Harlem and would be turning them into expensive condominiums. The buildings, long a stronghold of Harlem's middle class, were originally built as a consolation prize because blacks were barred from living in similar developments in lower Manhattan. The article ended by celebrating the return of *people* to Harlem, which used to be a place *people* only visited, during Prohibition, for booze and big bands.

The visitor I overheard and the journalist I read were afflicted by that exuberant myopia common to colonists of varied epochs and ambitions: thus did the explorers conquering Africa for God, king, country, and commerce, declare with the endorsement of the Vatican that any land where the native people were not Christians was officially a *terra nullius*, a no-man's-land. (*There need to*

*be more people up here!*) Thus did the nineteenth-century British architects of the plan to restore Europe's Jews to Israel as a refuge against pogroms (a plan conceived mostly from British theological and political self-interest) examine the map of the ancient homeland and declare that it was an empty territory, *a land without a people for a people without a land. (There need to be more people up here!)*

I should not have been shocked by those careless quips, but it was the sort of thing that made me especially tight-lipped when I happened to run into a white acquaintance downtown who, upon hearing I had moved to Harlem, and perhaps having read that recent *New Yorker* article, was pressingly curious to know about *interesting things going on up there...*

During those first months in New York, I was busy with an assignment at my new job with a Harlem-based publisher: to pore through the archives of photographer James VanDerZee in order to make a new book of his images. VanDerZee's photo studio operated during the height of the Harlem Renaissance, capturing Harlemites in elegant portraits, wearing their finest threads. His were the kind of pictures that would have pride of place on a mantel or be tucked into an envelope along with a letter sent back home, a tableau of the good life available up north. When VanDerZee's work was rediscovered in the late 1960s by curators of the controversial "Harlem on My Mind" exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, his photographs of cosmopolitan Harlem provided an antidote to the destitute, shell-shocked image then attached to the neighborhood and formed a new iconography of its best days.

VanDerZee's Harlem is a province of extravagance, culture, and high society. We meet the delicate young students of a danc-

ing school, adorable in a hundred different ways, and the dandified members of all-male social clubs. In individual portraits of cultured ladies and fine gentlemen, unidentified Harlemites whose personal histories are not preserved display the glamour and bearing of celebrities and aristocrats. A couple poses in front of an exquisite convertible sedan clad in matching full-length raccoon fur coats. A group portrait shows a vast wedding party, the bridesmaids wearing matching taffeta headgear and the men dressed in white tie, all attended by a retinue of flower girls and ring-bearers. Improbably, VanDerZee's signature—etched into the negative of these photos—shows that both pictures were taken in 1932, during the depths of the Great Depression.

Outside the archive, I compared the buildings and the faces I saw in the street to the buildings and faces in the photographs. It was easy to establish which intersection was the setting of a certain parade and easy to note how soot and grime had attached to the facade of a certain church. But it was not possible, just by looking, to establish a direct connection between the people I saw motionless in the photographs and coursing through the streets. One could assume a trajectory, the continuity of families across eight or nine decades. *Here we have arrived*, the photographs whispered. *And here we remain*, came the answer from the streets. But I noticed in the contemporary faces some alteration, the consequence of a force not visible within the frame.

Then, I was always looking for approval, seeking it out in a returned smile—I was looking for mutuality. I was not known by anyone; they could not verify my background. I was unable, therefore, to truly lay claim to this place where I'd landed. My relationship to it was, for some time, like the effect of a picturesque landscape that hangs as a backdrop in a portrait studio, with the sitter arranged statically in the foreground.

It was a setting. It was not, exactly, History.