to me or to Bing. He eagerly began to list what Bing could tell me about Harlem, about all the famous writers and artists and musicians and athletes that had lived here, about the riots and the hustlers and much more, but I had stopped listening to him and Bing was staring across the avenue into the dark.

Eventually the younger man left. Bing sat down next to the door in one of the discarded dinette chairs that serve as sidewalk furniture. There was a second empty chair, so I sat down, too. I told him I would like very much to hear about his youth. He told me he had grown up on 135th Street, where the hospital is now, where his tenement building stands no longer. He said I'd find in the library a picture of the building the way it used to look. (I did not realize it then, but I had already found such a picture; that apartment building looms in the background of the photo labeled *Within Thirty Seconds Walk of the 135th Street Branch*). I told Bing I'd look it up next time, and that he would have to tell me more about it. Though he nodded at the suggestion, Bing resumed staring. After a few moments during which neither of us said a word, he declared it was time for dinner and that he would be going in. I went inside, too. I did not return to the library the next day, or for many days thereafter.

4

Harlem Dream Books

The instructor said,
Go home and write
a page tonight.
And let that page come out of you—
Then, it will be true.

The opening lines of the poem contained the homework assignment. The poem was "Theme for English B" by Langston Hughes. The class was English II, sophomore English. I am in Texas, age fifteen.

I already knew the name Langston Hughes; my mother's bookshelves held a copy of his biography along with a thick volume of his correspondence with Arna Bontemps. These I used to comb *selectively, looking for bits of juicy Harlem Renaissance gossip.* [illegible] was a volume called *The Best of Simple,* which I had [illegible]. By the time we studied him in my high school class, I [illegible] heard at least one poem, probably the one about the [illegible]

Negro whose soul has grown deep like the rivers, or the poem in which a mother admonishes her child that *life for me ain't been no crystal stair.* Both were popular selections for Black History Month assemblies and talent shows.

I dutifully followed the instruction for the homework assignment: we were to write a poem in the style of Hughes's "Theme." My imitation did not improve upon the original. Like that poem's protagonist, I was also *the only colored student in my class.* I was too young to properly consider the riddle that distinction provoked for Hughes's student and for me: *So will my page be colored that I write?*

I remember reading the lines in which the protagonist described himself as *twenty-two, colored, born in Winston-Salem* and recently displaced to *this college on the hill above Harlem.* I assumed Hughes was writing of Columbia University, where he'd briefly been a student. My knowledge of Harlem geography was then nonexistent; now I know that *the steps from the hill* that lead *through a park* and across *St. Nicholas, Eighth Avenue, Seventh,* to the protagonist's lodgings at the YMCA on 135th Street, describe a descent I have made many times, from the Gothic spires of City College, through St. Nicholas Park, and into the neighborhood's heart.

Back then, in Texas, I relied on an imaginary map of upper Manhattan. The directions it gave suited me, for I could think of no gap greater than between what I knew of Columbia University and what I believed I knew of Harlem. It was a gap that corresponded precisely with the distance between my private Episcopalian high school and the house where I'd write my own theme. *I guess I'm what I feel and see and hear, Harlem, I hear you...* wrote Hughes. I pictured the poet looking down from his perch onto the streets of Harlem below. Finding the sounds of Hughes's Harlem more intriguing than the noise in my own neighborhood, I tried to hear Harlem, too.

And what did I hear of Harlem? It is difficult to reach across time toward the echoes of that earlier perception. What I find

there is another Langston Hughes poem, and another homework assignment. This poem was full of questions:

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?

We weren't required to imitate this poem, answer its successive questions, or map its rhyme scheme. The poem was an object for our study of figurative language. We were instructed to pay special attention to the similes embedded in each line: the dream that dries up, festers, stinks, crusts over, and sags. Each action was a tiny metamorphosis, in which the subject of Hughes's inquiry darts across the space of language, from the concrete and observable to the realm of imagination and emotion.

I would not have noted then, as I do now, that the final line takes a shorter path to meaning. It defies the established pattern, expanding the field of our lesson: it is not a simile. When the dream explodes, it doesn't do so after the manner of anything else. It explodes because that is the natural resolution of all unfulfilled dreams—combustion is their destiny. To deliver his message, Hughes switches from similes to the more urgent vehicle of metaphor.

I remember appreciating the simplicity of the poem's title: "Harlem." The name did not appear anywhere else in the poem, but by virtue of that title alone, the images described in Hughes's lines took on a documentary quality. Faithfully trusting the poet as a source of reportage, I thought: of course Harlem is a place where dreams are consumed by various degrees of frustration. We (my white classmates and me) did not have to know much about the place to be somehow certain of that.

Armed with a new appreciation of figurative speech, I looked for more Hughes in the school library and discovered the romance of his love poems. There was "Harlem Night Song":

Come, Let us roam the night together
Singing.
I love you.
Across
The Harlem roof-tops
Moon is shining.
Night sky is blue.
Stars are great drops
Of golden dew.
Down the street
A band is playing
I love you.
Come,
Let us roam the night together
Singing.

I memorized the poem and imagined a bard at least as handsome as Langston Hughes singing those words to me. And there was "Juke Box Love Song":

I could take the Harlem night
and wrap around you,
Take the neon lights and make a crown,
Take the Lenox Avenue busses,
Taxis, subways,
And for your love song tone their rumble down.
Take Harlem's heartbeat,
Make a drumbeat,
Put it on a record, let it whirl,
And while we listen to it play,
Dance with you till day—
Dance with you, my sweet brown Harlem girl.

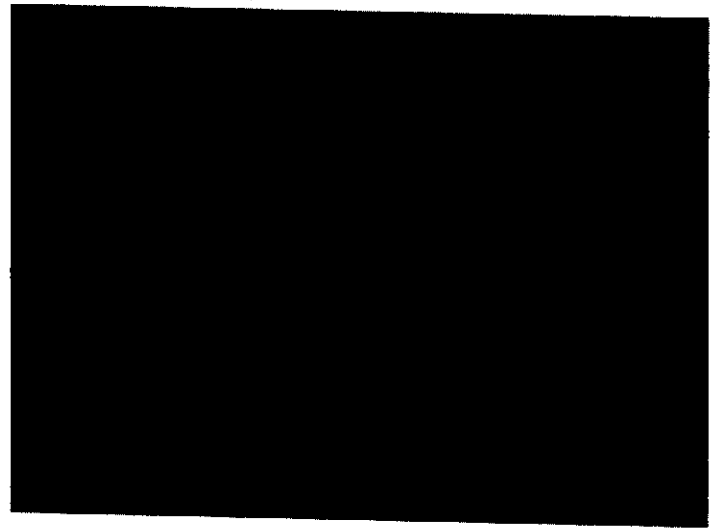
Hughes had harsher songs, the tone of which would have pierced the mood and cleared the dance floor of all love-struck couples. So, until many years later I skipped over poems like "The Weary Blues." Lenox Avenue was still the bandstand, but the poet was not striking up Tin Pan Alley love songs. This was a funereal dirge, sung without accompaniment. Reading its opening lines in the midst of my Harlem rhapsodies, I moved on to another poem. Here's what I missed:

"I got the Weary Blues
And I can't be satisfied.
Got the Weary Blues
And can't be satisfied—
I ain't happy no mo'
And I wish that I had died."
And far into the night he crooned that tune.
The stars went out and so did the moon.
The singer stopped playing and went to bed

While the Weary Blues echoed through his head.
He slept like a rock or a man that's dead.

Also at the school library, I found pictures that I associated with Hughes's Harlem poems. They were from Aaron Siskind's *Harlem Document,* a collection of photographs made during the Great Depression. They showed families crammed into tenements and dancers at the Savoy ballroom, marchers on Seventh Avenue, and schoolchildren playing stickball. I found shots of a street vendor selling watermelons from the back of a truck, and children playing in the shell of an abandoned building whose doorway is marked KEEP OUT. Siskind ventured into private apartments to record family scenes: Here is a woman in a crowded, disheveled

Untitled [Street Facade 1], from "Harlem Document Series," ca. 1937–1940. (Photo by Aaron Siskind / Courtesy of the Aaron Siskind Foundation and George Eastman House, International Museum of Photography and Film)

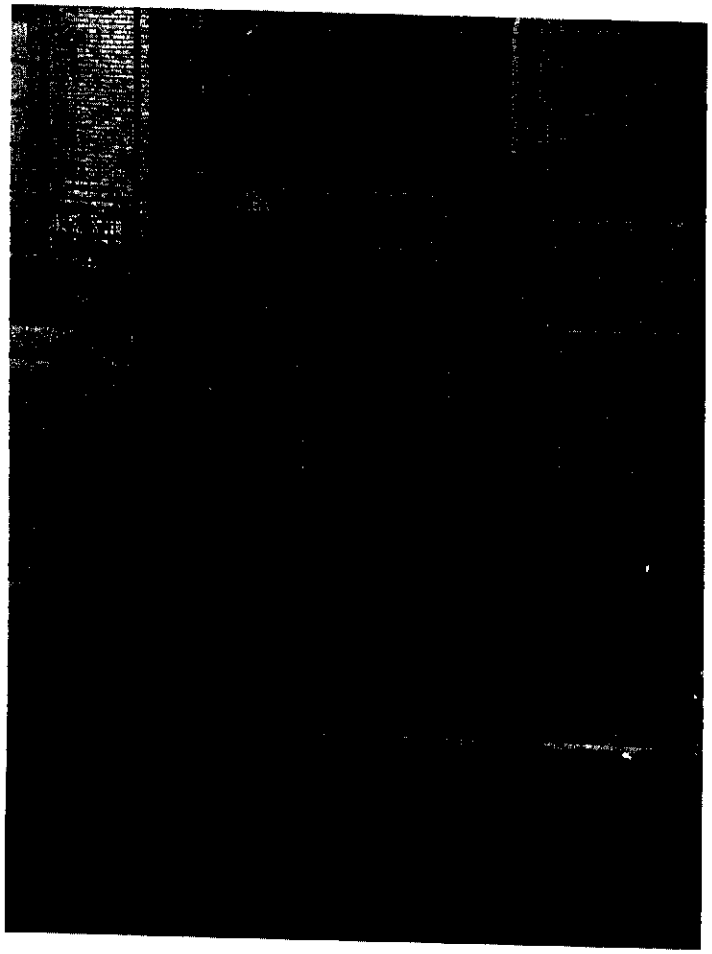


Untitled [Street Facade 2], from "Harlem Document Series," ca. 1937–1940. (Photo by Aaron Siskind / Courtesy of the Aaron Siskind Foundation and George Eastman House, International Museum of Photography and Film)

kitchen. She stands before an icebox with the door open, looking in. Her face is just barely in profile; the camera seems unconcerned with her defining features. On the nearest side of that turned-away face, you can nearly glimpse a smile, or at least a hint of amusement. She wears a stylish ensemble—a fluted tea-length black skirt that falls above elegant yet sensible shoes, a blouse with draped keyhole openings at the shoulders.

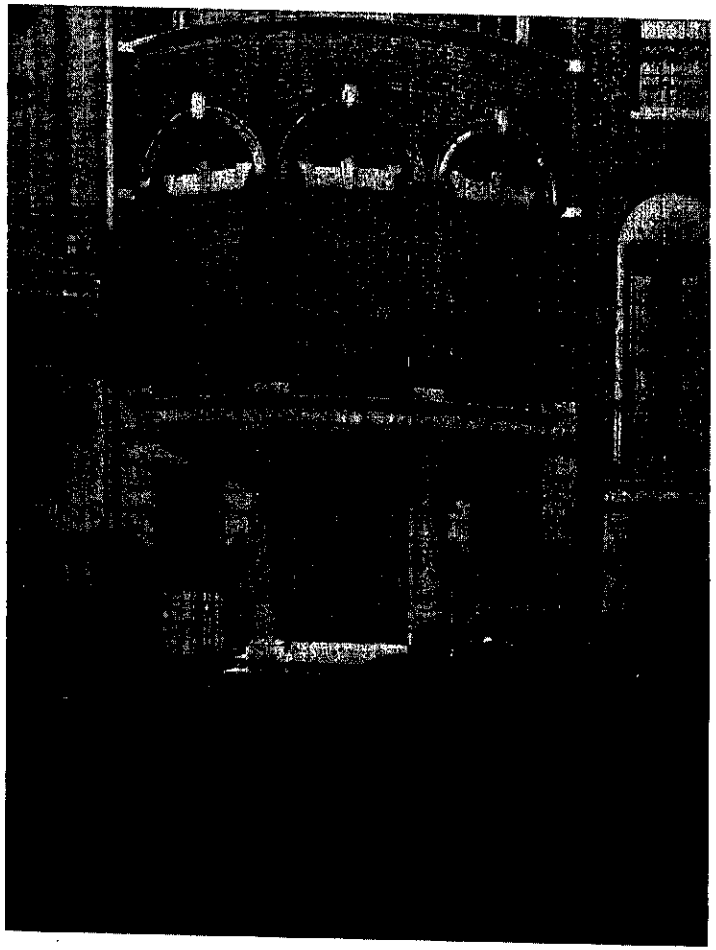
The photograph could be read as "Depression-era woman looking for food," but the woman stands with the poise of a spokesmodel for a kitchen-appliance store showing off the latest modern conveniences. The picture captures her fine clothes, her grace, and that hint of a smile. But perhaps we are meant to register only her black skin, her cramped surroundings, and wonder if the icebox is empty.

Siskind was concerned with showing the destitution of Harlem



Untitled [Street Facade 3], from "Harlem Document Series," ca. 1937–1940. (Photo by Aaron Siskind / Courtesy of the Aaron Siskind Foundation and George Eastman House, International Museum of Photography and Film)

during the Depression. But among the photos I studied in *Harlem Document,* the one that occupied me most carried the fewest social signifiers—no skin, no appliances, no face denying the



Untitled [Street Facade 4], from "Harlem Document Series," ca. 1937–1940. (Photo by Aaron Siskind / Courtesy of the Aaron Siskind Foundation and George Eastman House, International Museum of Photography and Film)

camera's view. It showed only the front of an apartment building, its facade staring blankly at the camera, its many windows boarded up with horizontal slats. The repetition of the windows

and the boards created a jarring visual beat, abstracting the poverty that was figured elsewhere so explicitly.

This was a rhythm to which you could not dance. Beneath their bleak and bitter sheen, the other pictures had a bit of sepia charm from having passed into history, but this facade did not provide the comfort of the long gone. I knew—even then, growing up in Texas—that Harlem was a place where you could still find buildings boarded up like that, forsaken for more than half a century.

Hughes's love poems still floated through my mind, along with the amorous territorialism of a jazz ballad I listened to as a teenager, playing the cassette in an infinite loop: *You can have Broadway / give me Lenox Avenue.* Those lyrics and everything I had heard about the Harlem Renaissance collided with the repulsion thrown off by the boarded-up buildings. I did not understand how this place existed as both haven and ghetto. It seemed, to my teenage mind, a great paradox. It also revealed something damning about the history I had learned—a flattened version of events where a place is allowed to be only one thing or the other.

The unpublished outtakes of Siskind's Harlem project offer a submerged narrative. I was surprised to find many more disconcerting images of facades. It's as if, while trawling uptown streets to record the scenes that became *Harlem Document,* Siskind had often retreated from the easy schematics of reportage, drifting toward photography as architectural survey. Frame after frame shows abandoned buildings and brownstones, elegant and majestic if not for the bricks and boards. Here, Siskind releases Harlem from the scrutinizing grip of the social realist's eye, but the abstractions of his facade studies also tell a story.

I realized much later, that, though Siskind's photos of abandoned buildings could not be classed as street life reportage or used as evidence for social programs of the New Deal, the images still documented events in motion. Just as the natural inclination of a dream

is not explosion but expression and fulfillment, the natural destiny of a building is not to be sealed off from the world around it, no longer offering shelter. The buildings had been abandoned and boarded up for a reason. There *was* human activity captured within the frame of those eerie photographs. The activity was contempt.

What you call a ghetto, I call my home. The voice of a young man who opens the introduction to Bruce Davidson's book *East 100th Street* is a challenge to that project before it has even begun—a taunt to the photographer and viewer. The voice matches the stark, frank portraits in high-contrast black-and-white. The subjects often stare directly into the camera, unlike Siskind's Harlemites—turned away or looking into the distance. I am still in the library as a teenager, but my taste for the real as defined by twentieth-century photographers has veered from nostalgic to gritty. Davidson delivered this quality in his 1960s portraits of street toughs and the tender shots of families whose lives seemed to sag along with their furniture. These images came closer to the realities I was by then reading about in Harlem coming-of-age memoirs by Claude Brown and Piri Thomas. How close? Davidson takes us into the bedroom of Harlem odalisques—one is draped naked across a bed that is itself stripped nearly to the ticking-covered mattress. Another photo shows a woman in a negligee, the heart-shaped cardboard top of an old Valentine's candy box fixed to the wall as decoration. In another, the rotting carcass of a dead horse crowns the abundant debris piled in an empty lot.

My study of Davidson's work was not limited to observation. In the pages of a commonplace book where I collected quotations from my favorite writers (at the time, Hurston and Baldwin, Ellison and Fanon, Whitman and Dickinson and Walcott), I also made sketches from the photographs of *East 100th Street.* If the

poetry of Hughes was one kind of apprenticeship (*Go home and write / a page tonight...*), Davidson's pictures provoked another. But one element of the photographs could not be revealed by way of careful sketches—the white lie of the realist photographer, a sin of omission. We rarely learn under what circumstances such photographs are made. How did Davidson and Siskind gain entry? Were the reclining women in Davidson's dingy rooms aspiring models, the photographer's lovers, or whores? Who granted access? And after access, who granted permission?

These questions are necessary, because such photographs are destined to play a role, cast out of art's refuge to the harsher realm of sociology and political propaganda. These pictures make an argument about the way life is lived. The people in a photograph end up as symbols. They are both specific and generic—the photographs capture moments in time and space, but the subjects are transformed into representative specimens.

Too often in documentary photographs, the transaction is obscured and the presence of the eye is not accounted for. As a film student experimenting with photography, I could never take pictures of people on the street. In those days—visiting Harlem to use the library—I made photo expeditions halfway across 125th Street before giving up and turning back toward Broadway. My efforts resulted in a mediocre collection of photos featuring no people at all, only words on signs. My eyes were drawn to two slogans in particular, united in their ubiquity: *JESUS SAVES* and *LIQUOR.*

In *Harlem Document,* Siskind's images are paired with texts from the Works Progress Administration's Federal Writers Project. The project deployed a number of young writers, scholars, and journalists to collect oral histories from black New Yorkers, especially in Harlem. While a number of unknown writers participated

as interviewers, *Harlem Document* includes the work of a few who went on to prominence, including Ralph Ellison and Dorothy West. Though not included in the Siskind volume, the wider project also gave a boost to the young Zora Neale Hurston, as well as to Margaret Walker, Arna Bontemps, and Richard Wright. They were paid twenty dollars per week for their services.

The question of access that sounds so urgently from the Harlem photographs of Siskind and Davidson also arises from the stories collected by these oral historians. FWP writer Frank Byrd answers it this way: *I was a neighborhood boy.* So Byrd could easily join games of hardball, basketball, and stickball, and then strike up conversations. *That way you got to know the people. And that was the beginning, you see.... Then you had to pass the time of day with them until you felt a warm relationship so that you could talk, so that* they *could talk.*

Ralph Ellison remembered a similar method. *I hung around playgrounds. I hung around the streets, the bars. I went into hundreds of apartment buildings and just knocked on doors. I would tell some stories to get people going and then I'd sit back and try to get it as accurately as I could.*

Both men describe a kind of stakeout, where their proximity led to friendship, which eventually led to talk. But there was also a proximity of circumstances, for *they were black and themselves "on relief."*

In some cases, the writers later converted the FWP material into their own artistic product. One encounter, transcribed by Dorothy West and included in *Harlem Document,* shows the young writer clearly trying out her powers of narrative, pathos, and poetry within the confines of her sociological mission. Ralph Ellison uses the words of one woman—whom he must have approached in one of those hundreds of apartment buildings he canvassed for the FWP—in his essay "The Way It Is." He records the suspicion with which his questions were met:

"So you want to know about how we're doing? Don't you live in Harlem?"

"Oh, yes, but I want to know what *you* think about it."

"So's you can write it up?"

"Some of it, sure. But I won't use your name."

"Oh I don't care 'bout that. I *want* them to know how I feel."

She became silent. Then, "You didn't tell me where you live, you know," she said cagily. I had to laugh and she laughed too.

"I live up near Amsterdam Avenue," I said.

"You telling me the truth?"

"Honest."

"And is your place a nice one?"

"Just average. You know how they go," I said.

"I bet you live up there on Sugar Hill."

"Not me," I said.

"And you're sure you're not one of those investigators?"

"Of course not."

"I bet you are too." She smiled.

I shook my head and she laughed.

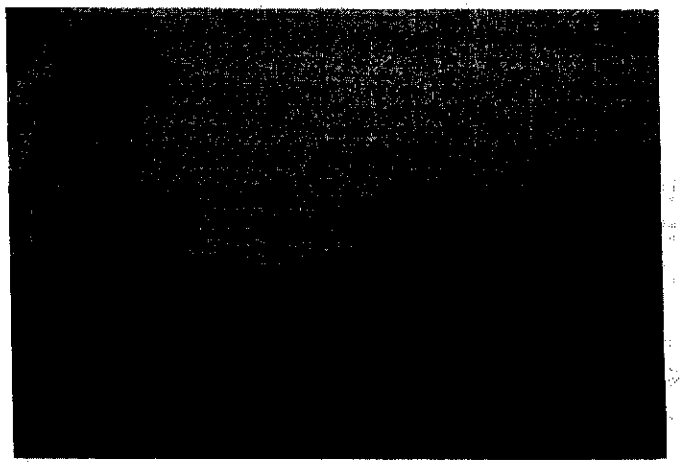
Another example is the barstool testimony of a railroad porter interviewed by Ellison:

> I'm in New York, but New York ain't in me. You understand? I'm in New York, but New York ain't in me. What do I mean? Listen. I'm from Jacksonville Florida. Been in New York twenty-five years. I'm a New Yorker! But I'm in New York and New York ain't in me. Yuh understand? Naw, naw, you don't get me. What do they do. Take Lenox Avenue. Take Seventh Avenue. Take Sugar Hill! Pimps. Numbers.

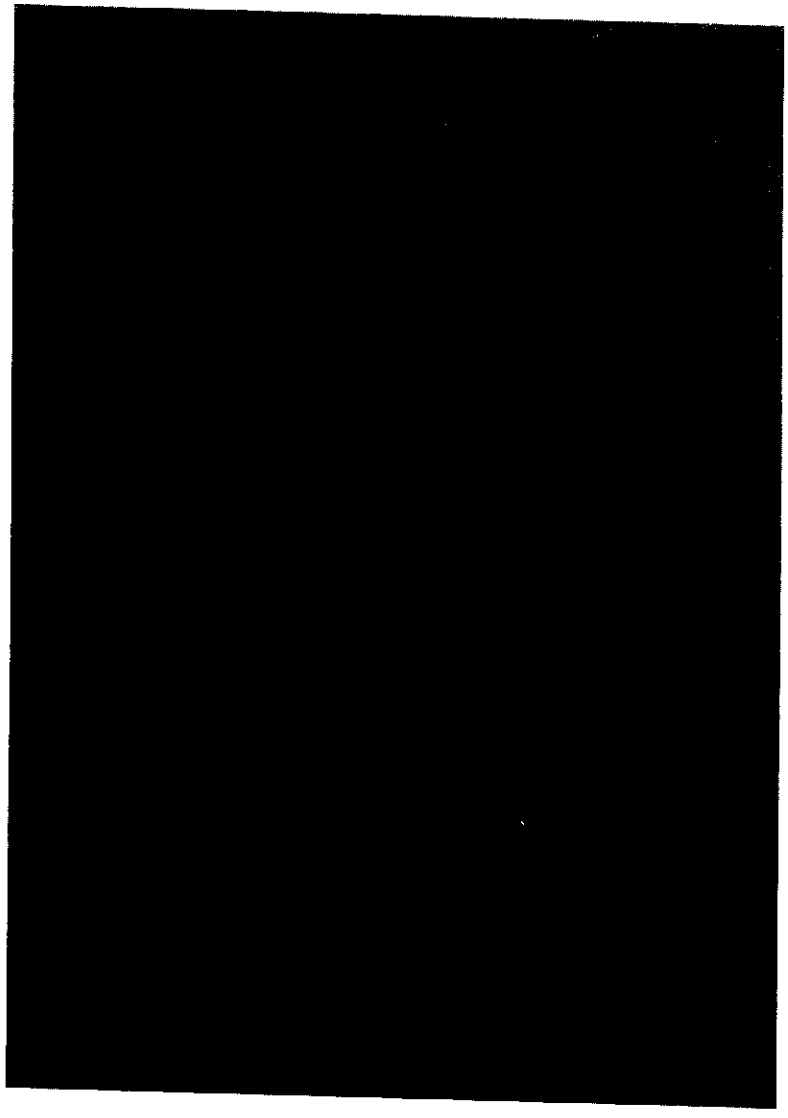
> Cheating these poor people out what they got. Shooting, cutting, backbiting, all them things. Yuh see? Yuh see what I mean? *I'm* in New York, but New York ain't in me! Don't laugh, don't laugh. I'm laughing but I don't mean it; it ain't funny. Yuh see, I'm on Sugar Hill, but Sugar Hill ain't on me.

Yuh understand? Naw, naw, you don't get me. The railroad porter's existential musings later appear verbatim, from the mouth of a character in Ellison's *Invisible Man*.

> "And you have to take care of yourself, son. Don't let this Harlem git you. I'm in New York, but New York ain't in me, understand what I mean? Don't git corrupted."



Ralph Ellison, Langston Hughes, and James Baldwin (left to right), ca. 1955. (Courtesy of the Langston Hughes Papers. James Weldon Johnson Collection in the Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library)



Zora Neale Hurston, 1934. (Photo by Carl Van Vechten / Courtesy of the Van Vechten Trust and the Carl Van Vechten Papers. Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library)

Langston Hughes was not a member of the FWP, but since the earliest days of his career, he, too, was concerned with fidelity to "the way it is." As early as 1926, he argued that *the low-down folks, the so-called common element* would be the only launching ground for a *truly great Negro artist, the one who is not afraid to be himself.* The other classes, producing greater numbers of artists of lesser quality, were too self-conscious and too concerned with European standards, he thought, to make a great achievement.

Hughes himself was from a modest background, but he was well educated and well traveled. He had his own moment of confusion about European standards when, famously, his white patroness Charlotte Osgood Mason rejected some of his writings as lacking the authentic and primitive qualities of the work that had first gained her attention and accolades from the white publishing world. This episode sent Hughes into a crisis—he broke with Mason and went on an extended trip to Haiti to recover. His crime had been attempting poetry that was, in the opinion of his patroness, inauthentic. *And let that page come out of you— / Then, it will be true.*

Throughout the rest of his career, Hughes hewed closely to a style of poetry that could better be labeled "authentic" and pertaining to *the so-called common element.* He enjoyed wide popularity, earning the unofficial title of Harlem's poet laureate. But some of his work, including the collection *Montage of a Dream Deferred,* caused at least one reviewer to grumble about *the limitations of folk art.*

Through the 1950s and 1960s, Harlem's beloved poet wrote a popular weekly column for the *Chicago Defender* that borrowed the voice of the *low-down folks.* Like Ellison and the other WPA writers, Hughes was a denizen of Harlem barstools. From that

perch he copied down as accurately as possible the humor, cadences, and quandaries of his neighbor's lives, animating them though his barfly avatar Jesse B. Semple, also known as Simple. Though Simple was a fictional creature, Hughes explained the nature of his material: *I cannot truthfully state,* confesses Hughes, *as some novelists do at the beginnings of their books, that these stories are about "nobody living or dead."*

> The facts are that these tales are about a great many people—although they are stories about no specific persons as such. But it is impossible to live in Harlem and not know at least a hundred Simples, [and, referring to other characters in the Simple tales] fifty Joyces, twenty-five Zaritas, or reasonable facsimiles thereof.

On one occasion, Hughes came face to face with a facsimile of his hero. When entering the local pub, a bartender who was an avid reader of the Simple columns introduced the writer to a patron. *Without me saying a word, a conversation began so much like the opening chapter in my book that even I was a bit amazed to see how nearly life can be like fiction or vice versa.*

Hughes opened himself as a medium for the voices of the public. I wonder what effect that had on what he could or could not say about his private life. Hughes, like many of the most prominent figures of the Harlem Renaissance, was a homosexual, although his biographer is content to class him as asexual. While Hughes's love for his people received full-throated, unequivocal expression in his writing, his love for men could not.

There was one love poem by Langston Hughes that I did not encounter back as a never-been-kissed teenage girl. It is written in the voice of the folk:

I hope my child'll
Never love a man.
I say I hope my child'll
Never love a man.
Love can hurt you
Mo'n anything else can.

. . . . . .

I'm goin' up in a tower
Tall as a tree is tall,
Up in a tower
Tall as a tree is tall.
Gonna think about my man—
And let my fool self fall.

Zora Neale Hurston is a writer about whom the questions of fiction, fact, and authenticity are always urgent. She is one of the most iconic writers associated with the Harlem Renaissance, yet it is rarely noted how little of her written production concerns the place itself, and how little time Hurston actually spent there. This particular trick played on literary history seems fitting for a writer who thought of New York as both *a basement to Hell* and the place where she was most free: *At certain times I have no race, I am me. When I set my hat at a certain angle and saunter down Seventh Avenue, Harlem City, feeling as snooty as the lions in front of the Forty-Second Street Library, for instance... the cosmic Zora emerges.*

The cosmic Zora was the one brought up in the protective landscape of an all-black town in Florida, with little interaction from the white world to disrupt the certainty that she and her people were the center of existence. The cosmic Zora had lied about her age in order to further her education. Cosmic Zora was the scene-stealer who

made jaw-dropping entrances at parties. She spoke *carefully accented Barnardese* but abandoned that refinement when it hindered her collection of anthropological materials during trips down South.

Langston Hughes tells a hilarious but possibly apocryphal story that shows the unflappable Zora Hurston at work in the streets of her Harlem City. He describes the research she pursued for her studies at Columbia University:

> Almost nobody else could stop the average Harlemite on Lenox Avenue and measure his head with a strange-looking, anthropological device and not get bawled out for the attempt, except Zora, who used to stop anyone whose head looked interesting, and measure it.

Hurston gives a wonderful mission statement for her work: *Research is a formalized curiosity. It is poking and prying with a purpose. It is a seeking that he who wishes may know the cosmic secrets of the world and they that dwell within.*

Hurston was as resourceful in her research as she was in procuring the means to pursue it. She was a protégée of the same demanding patroness who rejected Langston Hughes. But Charlotte Mason did not cause Hurston any angst, at least none that Hurston later wrote about. Hughes only barely conceals the scorn left over from his colossal falling out with Hurston when he describes how *[to] many of her white friends, no doubt, she was a perfect "darkie," in the nice meaning they gave the term—that is a naïve, childlike, sweet, humorous, and highly colored Negro.* But Hurston also manipulated those patronage relationships to her advantage, gaining support for the research trips that took her throughout the American South, to Jamaica, and to Haiti. In some ways, her association with both the *niggerati* (as she deemed her black creative contemporaries in Harlem's artistic and literary

bohemian set) and the *negrotarians* (as she called the enthusiastic white supporters) happened from a distance. Harlem was a point of access and a point of departure. Harlem was the place that launched her into the wider world. She was not blocked in.

I have always been intrigued by a particular product of Hurston's research. Her "Glossary of Harlem Slang" accompanied a short piece of fiction that was called "Story in Harlem Slang." Indeed, the story's plot is so thin that it seems her main intention was to showcase her fluency in the fast-flicking mother tongue of the street. What happens is not as important as how it's said, and the uninitiated will need Zora Neale Hurston nearby to explain.

A brief selection from the glossary shows her vivid mastery of the language. There are many variations on the provinces of Hell among other place names:

> Bam, and down in Bam – down South
> Beluthahatchie – next station beyond Hell
> Diddy-wah-diddy – a far place, a measure of distance. (2) another suburb of Hell, built since way before Hell wasn't no bigger than Baltimore. The folks in Hell go there for a big time.
> Ginny Gall – a suburb of Hell, a long way off

And then there are the many synonyms for black:

> Aunt Hagar – Negro race
> Conk buster – cheap liquor; also an intellectual Negro
> Dark black – a casually black person, also low black, lam black, damn black
> Eight-rock – very black person
> Handkerchief-head – sycophant type of Negro; also an Uncle Tom

Inky dink – very black person
Jar head – Negro man
Jig – Negro, a corrupted shortening of zigaboo
My people! My people! – Sad and satiric expression in the Negro language: sad when a Negro comments on the backwardness of some members of his race; at other times, used for satiric or comic effect

But for all its value as research, and its possibly diverting pleasures for those white patrons who, according to Hughes, considered Hurston a *perfect darkie,* Hurston's Harlem dictionary defines a troubling conundrum. If Hughes was the unmediated, celebratory voice singing of the folk to the folk, Hurston acted as a filter, collecting, preserving, and exalting the genius and artistry of black folk life even as she acted, sometimes literally, as a tour guide and interpreter.

This complexity extends to other aspects of Hurston's thought. On the one hand, she celebrated the all-black town that grew her up, eventually arguing in favor of segregation on the grounds that black people had nothing to gain from mixing with white folk. But, just as often, she casts off the shared burden of racial experience: *Since I wash myself of race pride and repudiate race solidarity, by the same token I turn my back upon the past. I see no reason to keep my eyes fixed on the dark years of slavery and the Reconstruction.*

What does it mean to turn one's back on the past, as Hurston pronounced? It means more than her experiments with personal mythology. It is, perhaps, a stony kind of realism. From where she stood, the past did not hold any mystical key to the present. (*My old folks are dead. Let them wrestle all over Hell about it if they want to.*) From where she stood, the future did not necessarily hold salvation. (*Standing on the watch-wall and looking, I no longer expect the millennium. It would be wishful thinking to be searching for justice in the absolute.*)

In almost every essay James Baldwin wrote about Harlem, there is a moment when he commits a literary sleight-of-hand so particular that, if he'd been an athlete, sportscasters would have codified the maneuver and named it "the Jimmy." I think of it in cinematic terms, because its effect reminds me of the technique wherein camera operators pan out by starting with a tight shot and then zoom out to a wide view while the lens remains focused on a point in the distance.

Baldwin's classic Harlem essays "The Harlem Ghetto," "Notes of a Native Son," and "Fifth Avenue Uptown" all have examples of this tactic. The earliest of these, "The Harlem Ghetto," finds Baldwin pacing the streets of the neighborhood where he was born in 1924. *Harlem, physically at least, has changed very little in my parents' lifetime or mine. Now as then the buildings are old and in desperate need of repair, the streets are crowded and dirty, there are too many human beings per square block.*

Baldwin goes on to enumerate other hardships of Harlem life: rents that are higher than elsewhere in the city, food that is of lesser quality yet more expensive than elsewhere in the city, job discrimination, and low wages. Baldwin's first deployment of "the Jimmy" happens almost immediately. *All of Harlem,* he observes, *is pervaded by a sense of congestion, rather like the insistent, maddening, claustrophobic pounding in the skull that comes from trying to breathe in a very small room with all the windows shut.*

It could be another example for my high school lesson on similes, but it reveals much besides the linguistic force Baldwin perfected as a teenage holiness preacher. Baldwin's description of life in Harlem suddenly quits the specific and, through that powerful image of the stifling, sealed-off room, makes a dash for the general. It is one of those grand, poetic generalizations that are

Baldwin's great gift to literature, as well as his great rhetorical weakness. But Baldwin's trick is not just a matter of figurative language. We are so accustomed to these kinds of sweeping statements about Harlem and—as they're often called—the "Harlems of America," that it's difficult to measure the work done by that simple phrase: *All of Harlem*. With those words, Baldwin positions himself as an expert/interpreter of the place which in "Fifth Avenue, Uptown" he describes as *the turf (bounded by Lenox Avenue on the west, the Harlem River on the east, 135th Street on the north and 130th on the south. We never lived beyond these boundaries; this is where we grew up...)*. Having transcended those boundaries to reach the pages of *Commentary* magazine, Baldwin's phrase *All of Harlem* indicates not only the place he is speaking about, but to whom he speaks. That great leap, from speaking about particular situations of particular people in a particular place to voicing the generalized conditions of Negroes, is performed for the benefit of the mostly white audience. It's possible to think of the move Baldwin makes as a kind of transcendence, insofar as he leaves behind the boundaries of Harlem itself, and the specifics of its daily, lived reality, in the process of describing it. Sometimes it seems that Baldwin's wide angle looks past what he is describing toward the people he is describing it for. The price of this particular transcendence is to become a spokesperson, a representative. But in February 1948, when the essay appeared, that conundrum was still in Baldwin's future. By the end of the year, Baldwin was living in Paris. It was the first of a series of departures, a deliberate attempt to escape that very small room of Harlem, and America, where he could no longer breathe.

In 1955, when Baldwin was already established in Paris, *Harper's* published the essay "Me and My House." It was later renamed and became the title essay for the collection *Notes of a Native Son*. The essay concerns the death and burial of Baldwin's father, which

coincided with the writer's nineteenth birthday and the 1943 Harlem riot. It is more narrowly a memoir, so Baldwin is mostly limited to the landscape of his own psyche, the events of his own life, and the relationship between himself and his father, rather than to the relationship between a whole race and the rest of the world. But "Notes of a Native Son" still contains some moments of Baldwin's particular form of transcendence. In the days leading up to the riot, Baldwin remembers a peculiar silence. *All of Harlem, indeed, seemed to be infected by waiting.* Later, after the riot, Baldwin surveys its aftermath in the form of smashed plate glass all over the streets and interprets the debris pattern as if reading tea leaves.

> Harlem had needed something to smash. To smash something was the ghetto's chronic need—most of the time it is the members of the ghetto who smash each other and themselves. But as long as the ghetto walls are standing there will always come a moment when these outlets do not work. If ever, indeed, the violence which fills Harlem's churches, pool-halls, and bars erupts outward in a more direct fashion, Harlem and its citizens are likely to vanish in an apocalyptic flood.

Here, Baldwin switches into prophet mode, and the events in Harlem become a parable for the racialized soul-sickness plaguing America. Baldwin the prophet is also Baldwin the healer, so "Notes of a Native Son" ends with a prescription: *Blackness and whiteness did not matter, to believe that they did was to acquiesce to one's own destruction.* It is a message found in much of Baldwin's work, where he is so often addressing a *we* that is startlingly mobile. At times the *we* is Baldwin's family, or the people he grew up with in and around the turf. At other moments, the *we* seems

to be the mostly white audience of the middlebrow magazines where Baldwin was a frequent contributor. At its most profound, Baldwin addresses a *we* that, perhaps, had not previously been taken for granted in American literature, challenging white America to align itself with the *we* of black Harlem. In "Fifth Avenue, Uptown," Baldwin challenged the readers of *Esquire* to *walk through the streets of Harlem and see what we this nation have become.*

As early as my high school lessons on Langston Hughes, I had absorbed the platitude that the task of the writer was to glean universal lessons from specific and personal experiences. But in Baldwin, I learned the particular peril of that path for a black writer. As Baldwin admits in his "Autobiographical Notes," *I have not written about being a Negro at such length because I expect that to be my only subject, but only because it is the gate I had to unlock before I could hope to write about anything else.*

After working for the Federal Writer's Project, when he was still in the midst of writing *Invisible Man,* Ralph Ellison accepted an assignment to report on a free mental health clinic in Harlem. It begins with a perspective that is the reverse of Baldwin's trademark move. Ellison makes a panoramic survey of Harlem before zooming in on his chosen topic.

> To live in Harlem is to dwell in the very bowels of the city; it is to pass a labyrinthine existence among streets that explode monotonously skyward with the spires and crosses of churches and clutter underfoot with garbage and decay. Harlem is a ruin; many of its ordinary aspects (its crimes, casual violence, crumbling buildings with littered area-ways, ill-

> smelling halls and vermin-invaded rooms) are indistinguishable from the distorted images that appear in dreams, and which, like muggers haunting a lonely hall, quiver in the waking mind with hidden and threatening significance. Yet this is no dream, but the reality of well over four hundred thousand Americans, a reality which for many defines and colors the world. Overcrowded and exploited politically and economically, Harlem is the scene and symbol of the Negro's perpetual alienation in the land of his birth.

By 1948, when Ellison wrote those words, Harlem was the scene and symbol of a great deal. Alain Locke had begun with the dissection of Harlem as a representative specimen for all of black America, and photographers like Aaron Siskind used the neighborhood as a laboratory for their experiments in atomizing reality.

His masterful description takes us, as near as a realist photographer's lens, into a typically gritty Harlem scene, but Ellison keeps the shifting and fugitive quality of dreams nearby. The very circumstances make it difficult to tell one from the other, for real life is *indistinguishable from the distorted images that appear in dreams.* Ellison reverses the arrangement of dreams and realities that appears in *Invisible Man,* when his protagonist arrives in Harlem from the South and declares, *This was not a city of realities but of dreams.*

The South hovers above Ellison's landscape. That lost place and lost way of life cannot be reconciled with the present, due to

> a vast process of change that has swept [the American Negro] from slavery to the condition of industrial man in a space of time so telescoped (a bare eighty-five years) that it is

literally possible for them to step from feudalism into the vortex of industrialism simply by moving across the Mason-Dixon Line.

Ellison attempts to ignore sociology and economics in favor of psychology, keeping to his stated subject. But recently, a sociologist using Ellison's essay to establish the framework for her study of gentrification in Harlem in the 1990s found much that was relevant to her field—especially what she called Ellison's depiction of Harlem as a *metaphoric space.*

That description of Ellison's Harlem reminds me of something from W. E. B. DuBois. At the beginning of *The Souls of Black Folk,* DuBois describes his amused irritation with the pressing and searching inquiries from well-meaning whites about life as a Negro. *How does it feel to be a problem?* was his summary of their curiosity. Reading that sociologist, and Ellison, I wondered, How does it feel to live inside a metaphor?

Ellison is interested in a different question. How have black people who were *the grandchildren of those who possessed no written literature* come to *examine their lives through the eyes of Freud and Marx; Kierkegaard and Kafka, Malraux and Sartre*? This juxtaposition, for Ellison, results in a *world so fluid and shifting that often within the mind the real and the unreal merge, and the marvelous beckons from behind the same sordid reality that denies its existence.* And that world, as lived out on the streets of Harlem, produces *the most surreal fantasies:*

> A man ducks in and out of traffic shouting and throwing imaginary grenades that actually exploded during World War I; a boy participates in the rape-robbery of his mother; a man beating his wife in a park uses boxing "science" and observes Marquis of Queensberry rules (no rabbit punching, no blows beneath the belt); two men hold a third while a lesbian slashes him to death with a razor blade; boy gangsters wielding homemade pistols (which in the South of their origin are but toy symbols of adolescent yearning for manhood) shoot down their young rivals. Life becomes a masquerade; exotic costumes are worn by day. Those who cannot afford to hire a horse wear riding habits; others who could not afford a hunting trip or who seldom attend sporting events carry shooting sticks.

Thus Ellison describes the psychic breaks and identity crises that lead to the Lafargue Psychiatric Clinic in the basement of St. Philip's Church on 134th Street, a place founded and operated by black and white psychiatrists because blacks could not receive mental health care at other hospitals.

But, inevitably, mental health cannot be divorced from sociology and economics.

> Not quite citizens and yet Americans, full of the tensions of modern man but regarded as primitives, Negro Americans are in desperate search for an identity. Rejecting the second-class status assigned them, they feel alienated and their whole lives have become a search for answers to the questions: Who am I, What am I, and Where? Significantly in Harlem the reply to the greeting, "How are you?" is often, "Oh, man, I'm *nowhere*"—a phrase revealing an attitude so common that it has been reduced to a gesture, a seemingly trivial word.

Ellison's essay "Harlem Is Nowhere," written in 1948, finds that the general condition of life in Harlem is the source of the specific mental conditions of the clinic's patients, whose specific

names and histories he does not explore. The *general* condition of second-class citizenship among black Americans leads to a *general* condition that is, or approaches, collective insanity. He does not remark upon whether he includes himself among the afflicted.

Within the essay, his position, to the degree he is located anywhere, is slightly outside the boundaries of the landscape under scrutiny. His function is related to the interpretive roles of Hurston or Baldwin, but he doesn't match Hurston's entertainments or Baldwin's exhortations. His beautiful, clinical descriptions emit a kind of hostility. A similar hostility is heard in "No Apologies," Ellison's 1967 contribution to a heated exchange with Norman Podhoretz, the editor of *Commentary*. Asserting that Podhoretz was *throwing his typewriter at the whole unsuspecting Negro people,* Ellison's lengthy response to Podhoretz is nothing short of an evisceration. But Ellison's gripe isn't merely a reflexive defense against injury done to himself or all black people. He takes specific issue with *how often white liberals, possessing little firsthand knowledge of any area of the society other than their own, eagerly presume to interpret Negro life while ignoring their primary obligation as intellectuals—which is to know what they are talking about.*

Likening Podhoretz and other would-be white interpreters of black life to *absentee owners of tenement buildings [who] exploit the abstract sociological "Negro" as a facile means of getting ahead in the world,* Ellison issues a decree banishing trespassers and pretenders from the realm of his culture and his thought, demanding that members of other cultural groups

> respect the sacredness and inwardness of my own, and that they recognize my right to define it, glorify it, affirm it, criticize it—even though to them it seems wrapped in the black-

> est of mysteries. I must insist because such regard for others is seldom reciprocated when the Negro American's sense of his own reality is in question.

Ellison directly addresses some of the dilemmas of interpretation and orientation found in Hurston and Baldwin. In claiming the *sacredness and inwardness* of his position as a black writer concerned with black lives, Ellison rejects the position of tour guide or interpreter. His activity—defining, glorifying, affirming, criticizing—takes place behind a curtain of mystery. Crucially, in this 1967 essay Ellison raises, once again, the question of reality, that conundrum that he tracks through the Harlem streets in 1948 and runs from in the pages of his 1952 novel. For Ellison in 1967, reality is still *in question.* Perhaps even more so because this is the moment when Ellison was at his height as author of *the most distinguished American novel written since World War II,* and also was being denounced by young writers who, like Amiri Baraka, were getting up to some *nowhere shit* in the name of a programmatic, didactic notion of the role of the black artist. Additionally, as far as his sense of reality was concerned, this was also the period when Ellison was stumbling into the deferrals, excuses, and diversions that prevented his ever completing another novel.

Which brings us back to "Harlem Is Nowhere." Among his dizzying haunted-house descriptions of life in the neighborhood, one of the most intriguing pronouncements is that *this is a world in which the major energy of the imagination goes not into creating works of art, but to overcome the frustrations of social discrimination.* This causes the crises leading to that free psychiatric clinic. But, Ellison also acknowledges, that energy also led to various other forms of creative response, including the slang of his title. In the 1967 polemic where Ellison so defiantly stakes out the claim of his intellectual territory, his insistence on *sacredness and*

inwardness reads like his own attempt to overcome such frustrations, groping toward that inward and sacred space where literature is possible.

"Harlem Is Nowhere" was not published by the magazine that commissioned it in 1948. It did not appear in print until 1964, when it was published in *Harper's*. As the editorial note preceding the piece observes, *how little has changed in the everyday life of the ghetto in the past sixteen years. Ellison's essay helps explain, and in hindsight justifies, the impatience of the American Negro in 1964.* The essay was published in August. Perhaps by coincidence, that issue must have hit the newsstands around the time the third major riot in Harlem occurred. It is unclear if *the impatience of the American Negro in 1964* is an oblique reference to this event or an uncanny presentiment. The explanation and justification mentioned in the editorial note are worth a mention. Interestingly, the version of the essay that appeared in *Harper's* omits the section about the Lafargue Clinic, which had been the very impetus for the piece in 1948. Possibly it was no longer in operation and the editors didn't want to include anything that wasn't, according to that maddening adjective of the magazine trade, timely.

But in the original essay (published in full in *Shadow and Act*), the clinic is the scene where the madness of white supremacy could be overcome. The clinic was a place where its clients could *explain* and *justify* to themselves the conditions inside their minds and in the world. Unmoored from the setting of the psychiatric clinic, Ellison's essay becomes another occasion to *explain* and *justify* the *whole unsuspecting Negro people* to the same readers of *Harper's* who were already used to being—variously—horrified, soothed, chastised, and exhorted by James Baldwin.

We find Ellison carefully watching the perimeter, defending his right to live and create from beyond a veil, but also oriented outward, toward maintaining his position upon the elevated dais

of various panel discussions, a dignitary in the republic of letters, a spokesman even—the most exceptional Negro novelist of his generation. To the degree his call for inwardness coincided with his talent turning in on itself, Ellison occupied a negated position, a nowhere. *One "is" literally, but one is nowhere; one wanders dazed in a ghetto maze, a "displaced person" of American democracy.*

In the best of circumstances, that dazed wanderer is also the dreamer, creating a world that hasn't yet come to be. Utopia, after all, means nowhere. Ellison's biographical note in *Harper's* stated, *He is best known for "Invisible Man," a novel about "one Negro's effort to find his place in the world."*

In 1948, Ralph Ellison heard the street slang *Oh, man, I'm nowhere* and heard the identity crises, negation, and psychic despair provoked by daily life under white supremacy.

In 1961, James Baldwin, writing "Fifth Avenue, Uptown," perhaps writing from Paris, remembered a different greeting:

> "How're you making it?" one may ask, running into them along the block, or in the bar. "Oh, I'm TV-ing it"...with the saddest, sweetest, most shame-faced of smiles, and from a great distance. This distance one is compelled to respect; anyone who has traveled so far will not easily be dragged again into the world.

Baldwin's greeting also referred to a state of negation, but now it was expressed in reference to the lives of certain young men in Harlem, who, unemployed and without prospects, were spending their lives at their mother's house, watching daytime TV.

In 1981, when Aaron Siskind's photos were published as *Harlem Document*, the writer, photographer, and director Gordon

Parks contributed a brief introduction to the volume. His piece fulfils the typical obligation of writing about Harlem—offering pronouncements that Harlem is this or Harlem is that. His reminiscence of Harlem also includes something he heard on the street.

> "Heh, baby, how you doing?" That was a familiar greeting when I was a young man up in Harlem. Today it's "What's happening, brother? What's shaking up and down the line?"
>
> . . . Jobless young people with anger in their eyes stand on the corners and stare into space. "Nothing's happening," they say. "Nothing's shaking *up* or *down* the line."

Perhaps it is just a coincidence that these three writers emerge from their descent into Harlem with the trophy of a greeting from which to derive a metaphor about all of black existence. I think it has more to do with the instrument of the writer's art, a blade that is sometimes destructive and reductive, though it also flashes light. Perhaps those greetings and their interpretations say more about the interpreters than about those who are purported to use them.

Don't get corrupted.

The town house at 2144 Fifth Avenue is located within the boundaries of James Baldwin's turf—near the corner of 131st Street, where Baldwin grew up. The house has a varicolored brick facade on its two lowest levels, with typical brownstone above. Someone has carefully painted the bricks in alternating shades of pastel blue, green, and pink. For years I passed that building, noting its strange decoration, noting the plate-glass window that looked out onto Fifth Avenue from the second floor, noting how

the windows above never gave any indication of lives lived within. A minimum of business was transacted in the appliance, furniture, and lamp repair shop operating at street level.

Later, I found out this had once been the location of L. S. Alexander Gumby's Book Studio. Then I passed the building with more curiosity, wondering how to gain entry and what would be the proper way to approach, thinking that I should take a companion because I might disappear into one of those dark upper stories. My relationship with the building went on like this for a long while: it was the setting of my worst single-girl-doing-research fantasies. In the meantime, I collected information about the life of the man whose ambitions had reached their height inside the confines of that room with the plate-glass window looking out over upper Fifth.

Alexander Gumby came to New York from Baltimore around 1906. According to an unpublished autobiographical essay, immediately he *became a New Yorker in spirit and principle,* having discovered *more freedom of action than [he] had ever known before.* A passionate theatergoer, he collected Broadway playbills, pictures, and newspaper clippings as souvenirs. He made scrapbooks of the material, a carryover from a childhood hobby, and when he worked at Columbia waiting tables, he made scrapbooks about Columbia, too. He worked as a butler and caretaker for a banker in Riverdale. The banker was also a collector, so Gumby's responsibilities included the stewardship of *pottery, bronzes, ivories, etc.* Upon leaving that situation, he was armed with a letter of introduction recommending him highly on account of services rendered: *I have been going to Europe for a number of years,* wrote his employer, *and have left him in full charge of my house and all its contents and I have never had occasion to regret it.*

Gumby's impulse to compile, collect, and curate the detritus of his reality matured when he found himself overwhelmed by what

he called his *overflowing collection of clippings.* He attacked the problem with intense seriousness, describing it in a detailed statement of purpose:

> I decided to gather them into scrapbooks. Without experience in the arranging of such a vast amount of miscellaneous material, I naturally made a botch of it in my first efforts. When I finally admitted to myself that it would all have to be done over, I decided to classify the material into groups. I soon found, however as my collections continued to grow, that even this arrangement was unsatisfactory, for it was impossible to interfile new material. It was not until I adopted the looseleaf method that I found a satisfactory answer to my problem. That, of course, meant remounting my material once more. After sorting it into master subjects, I found out that I had enough Negro items for a scrapbook on that subject alone. This Negro scrapbook I in turn divided into master subjects; and because the leaves could be shifted, I was able to break the master subjects into chapters. I arranged the clippings chronologically that were not too badly damaged by their repeated remountings in the unsuccessful scrapbooks. I soon had a bulging volume of Negro items, whereupon I broke the chapters up into separate books. Thus began my Negro Scrapbook collection.

The birth of Gumby's Negro Scrapbook, or "Negroana" as it was later called, came just before two other significant developments in his life. First, he became *acquainted with a young man who was a few years my junior.* A bawdy song by Gumby, written in 1907, using the voice of his alter ego Count DeGumphry, perhaps tells us something about their meeting:

I am a Count,—
The Count DeGumphry.
I am looking for an heir,
Of some yankie millionear
That has a income of a hundred thousand pounds a year.

In his typewritten memoirs, Gumby describes this relationship as a *staunch friendship* that lasted nearly three decades. The man, a scion of a New York business family, was Gumby's lover and patron. It was with the help of this friend, Charles W. Newman, that Gumby began to amass a collection of rare editions, manuscripts, and ephemera to complement his scrapbook productions. Hardly anything is known about their relationship—whether it was a true love that had to be suppressed because of its challenge to the racial and sexual order, or whether it was a less tender transaction. Alexander Gumby's story, when it is told at all, is usually mentioned as a minor footnote to other more celebrated queer lives of the Harlem Renaissance era. There is Richard Bruce Nugent, with his bohemian disregard for neckties and socks, throwing off his bourgeois pedigree with defiant dishevelment. There is Countee Cullen, marrying the daughter of W. E. B. DuBois in a lavish ceremony and then leaving her behind to embark on their European honeymoon in the company of his alleged lover, the Harlem man-about-town Harold Jackman. There are the rumors about A'Lelia Walker and Langston Hughes, and rumors about many others. Those rumors serve a purpose for the history of love that mirrors a similar tendency in black history to insist upon its "firsts," and to speculate about the African blood coursing through the veins of historical figures like Beethoven. But while the life of Gumby is known—and, thanks to Gumby himself, ferociously documented—it is not much celebrated. It is

not necessary for rumors to swirl about Gumby's sexuality. In a letter to his friend Bruce Nugent, Gumby was frank about the many charms of Columbia University to be found outside the library. Perhaps part of the silence around Gumby is that the terms of his relationship with a white man mirrored the patronage relationship going on throughout Harlem, where art was paid for by white enthusiasts and fetish-collectors, and where black gangsters paid tribute to the white mob. Perhaps the open combination of white patronage and sex in Gumby's life accounts for the way his story has disappeared. Or maybe the silence also has to do with the fact that Gumby's story is, in part, a narrative of failure.

But now I am getting ahead of the story, because at this point, when he has just begun the passionate project of his Negroana scrapbooks, Gumby himself had no intention of disappearing. Indeed, his entire activity seemed to guard against oblivion. Gumby arrived in Harlem in the earliest days of the New Negro push into the neighborhood. He established himself (or Newman established him) at 2144 Fifth Avenue almost immediately, for that is the return address supplied in correspondence related to the second chief occupation of his early years, the Southern Utopia Fraternity.

The S.U.F. was dedicated to the support and edification of *young college men from the South for the purpose of helping themselves as well as all young men from Southern schools who come to New York seeking a larger experience.* The actual activities of the fraternity are not described in the materials Gumby pasted into a few of his scrapbook pages. It seems as though its mere existence, and the notice it garnered, were most important. Its founding was noted in local newspapers: *Young College Men from South Organize.* A subsequent mention announces the election of officers,

including the election of Gumby himself to the position of treasurer. The scrapbook preserves a bank draft drawn in Gumby's name in the amount of five dollars *for S.U.F. premiere dance.* There are elegantly printed ephemera: the cover of a program to be held *Thursday evening, April the Sixth, Eight-thirty* announces that *Mr. Justice of the Fraternity will entertain Members and Friends of the Frat.* A small calling card expresses the Fraternity's mission statement: *Its purpose is to bring into closer relation for mutual cooperative help ambitious young men from the various schools who spend their time wholly or in part in New York and vicinity.*

The major document we have of the fraternal order is a letter, written by Gumby in 1917, which resembles the marching orders for a coup. In six pages of feverish prose Gumby solicits the aid of members for his faction: *It is now that your help is needed, in order that our Fraternity may be launched on the waves of life.* The source of the controversy is not clear; he proposes amendments to the constitution and doing away with lengthy debating during meetings. He mentions that the fraternity needs its own clubhouse, because members are being snatched away by other groups that boast facilities.

With a level of detail that tells us much more about the character of Gumby and the other young men who comprised the Southern Utopia Fraternity than it does about their aims, Gumby fills several pages with purple prose about the status of the organization and the problems at hand:

> S.U.F. was organized in the year of 1915 by a body of very able men, and it can be truthfully said, what they did, was well done in parts. But they failed to rivet the parts together. Tis the rivteing we must now do. This Fraternity must be united in one body, its parts working in unison, if it is to

fulfil the purpose it was so religiously organized to do. Today it stands in parts.

So well did those able men of uncommon ability create the parts, that its ghost has forever since walked among those that were associated with the move.

Tis the haunt of that ghost that has forced this body of men to seize all credential of the S.U.F. and attempt to place a body round its ghost by riveting the parts together with amendments to the constitution, that the ghost may cease to wander and dewing [*sic*] honor to those that created the ghost.

The document reveals Gumby to be a young man of great feeling: *May the banner, spouting greatness and glory beyond the expression of words... be carried on.* He was a young man of great feeling who could not spell: *These talks wer plain talks. We threw off all faulce forms of politenest or display of rhetorical phrases or sincear or fishy friensdhip.*

The high ambition revealed in Gumby's hopes for the Southern Utopia Fraternity matched the hopes then being harnessed on the streets, which were just beginning to fill with blacks moving to Harlem from the South and from other parts of the city. As the migration reached its peak, other organizations were formed, including the Sons of Georgia, the Sons and Daughters of North Carolina, the Virginia Society, the Georgia Circle, and the Southern Beneficial League. While Gumby's somewhat pompous document may not be an accurate reflection of the other groups, all connected the new Harlemites with their origins, while encouraging their aspirations in the North.

Before the occurrence of any of the events that historians use to fix the official beginning of the Harlem Renaissance, the Southern Utopian Fraternity was founded and failed. Or at least we can

assume it failed, because there are no further notices of its activities in Gumby's scrapbook. His employment for the next period is difficult to pin down—at some point he worked for the postal service—but this is when his attentions turned even more toward scrapbook making. His brief memoirs note, rather vaguely, that *in the years from 1914 until America went into the first World War, I had the opportunity of going to several large cities in towns in this country and in Canada.* Gumby's mission, on these tours, was to visit libraries to study *various methods of compiling and mounting scrapbook material.* Also during these trips, he scoured bookshops for items to add to his collection, such that he soon *became better known for my collection of choice books than for my scrapbooks.* In 1922, Gumby was registered in the latest edition of *Who's Who in Book Collecting.*

A typewritten bibliography lists some of the items of his collection, including an 1804 copy of *The Life and Achievements of Toussaint L'Ouverture,* a signed edition of *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass,* William Lloyd Garrison's *Thoughts on African Colonization,* and a 1900 title by W. E. B. DuBois, *College-Bred Negro.* Rare editions from the era of slavery were joined by contemporary productions that probed the history of Africa, the conditions of blacks in the South, and recent novels. When his collection began to outgrow his two and a half rooms on Fifth Avenue, Gumby took out a lease of the entire floor.

This expansion gave Gumby the opportunity to establish the Gumby Book Studio in 1925. It was intended

> for my personal use, to entertain my friends, and as a place in which to master the art of making scrapbooks. It should have been called "The Gumby Scrapbook Studio" as it was intended, but at the time I thought the name a bit too long. Soon other friends formed the habit of visiting the Studio, and they in turn brought their friends who brought their

friends, regardless of race or color, those who were seriously interested in arts and letters. The Studio became a rendezvous for intellectuals, musicians, and artists. I daresay that the Gumby Book Studio was the first unpremeditated interracial movement in Harlem.

Nineteen twenty-five was the year that brought Alain Locke's special Harlem edition of *Survey Graphic* magazine, which became the anthology *The New Negro.* It was also the year when Gumby's fellow bibliophile Arthur Schomburg enjoyed success for the exhibit of his collection at the 135th Street Branch library. Locke's anthology solidified his role as spokesman of the new generation of black artists, scholars, and aesthetes; Schomburg's exhibit led to the acquisition of his collection by the New York Public Library. Alexander Gumby's tea parties to celebrate his scrapbooks may not seem to match the achievement of those other men. He would have read Locke's grand pronouncements and known that Schomburg had made a small fortune. His retrospective clamoring for some distinction of his own (*the first unpremeditated interracial movement in Harlem*) may reveal some self-consciousness in comparison to the other heady undertakings of the era. But it also shows Gumby's solid commitment to his enterprise. He was master of the very small territory that was his domain.

Gumby's scrapbooks went on view for Negro History Week exhibitions in Philadelphia, Boston, and New York City. In the course of such travels, parts of his collection inevitably went missing. But mostly his activity happened outside of institutions. The production of scrapbooks is a private endeavor, rather different from the intellectual heroics of his contemporaries. It requires papers, scissors, and paste, as well as lots of time to pore over materials. It doesn't happen on street corners or on barstools or at meetings. Crucially, the art of the scrapbook is an act of preservation rather than creation. It is accomplished through juxtaposition and accretion. Within the pages of his scrapbooks, Gumby assembled a mass of information on the history and achievements of black people that was something like that mass accumulating within the boundaries of Hurston's Harlem City. He focused on the most exceptional and the most beautiful, rather than on the most wretched or the most "authentic." And Gumby completely ignored the mundane.

His perspective brings to mind the opening pronouncement in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God,* in which she describes the ambitions of women who *forget all those things they don't want to remember, and remember everything they don't want to forget. The dream is the truth.* Gumby's dreams, what he remembered and what he failed to remember, reached their fullest expression through his rather feminine, peculiar occupation. He was building a diorama while his contemporaries engaged in the outward, upward, excavating, campaigning activities more typically associated with the race man. The interior nature of Gumby's vocation and his private, idiosyncratic interaction with history is perhaps another reason why his memory is scarcely kept.

But at least for a while, Gumby lived a charmed existence. Pictures of him inside the book studio (preserved in one scrapbook) show the handsome Gumby flashing an inviting smile as he sits with legs crossed, taking coffee in a dressing gown. His table is covered with a crisp tea cloth, and his coffee service looks like quality china—at least one source remembers it as Spode. Other pictures show different views of his residence: a long chamber with a low ceiling seems to be the room with the plate-glass window that I had seen from the street. His walls were lined with shelves specially fitted to house his oversized scrapbooks; various pictures hang above a piano.

In April 1929, an article celebrating Gumby appeared in the

"Who Is Who" column of the *New York News*. In December 1929, the *New York Times* published an article about him, "Negro History in Scrapbooks." That same month, Gumby's lover lost a fortune in the stock market crash and was laid low by a *war ailment*, which might be a polite term for nervous breakdown. Gumby's activities would henceforth not be as well funded.

Despite this misfortune, the first part of 1930 was full of activity at Gumby Book Studio. The studio gave a Sunday afternoon tea hosted by a debutante group called the Primrose Patch, at which *Maurice Hunter, artist's model, gave some interpretive poses; O. Richard Reid gave a talk on art; Theodore Hernandez and Thomas Corbett sang.* The studio's fifth anniversary was celebrated with another tea given by a Miss Willie Branch, in which she performed "The Gypsy Maid," "The Maniac," and "Hagar." A report on the event declared, *While much cannot be said for the vehicles which Miss Branch included in her repertoire, her interpretation of them was noteworthy. One could only wish that Miss Branch had chosen lighter and more pleasing themes instead of the morbid and melodramatic ones mentioned above.*

On the occasion of his anniversary, the *New York News* heralded Gumby's efforts. *Not only does Mr. Gumby seek out the great things that has [sic] been done, but also the seeds of things that will be great in the future. Thus his studio is a laboratory for the youth of the race, struggling in art, music, poetry or other creative expression.*

In 1930, Gumby also launched a publication to serve as a printed laboratory. *Gumby's Book Studio Quarterly: A Journal of Discussion* appeared, bearing cover articles including "A Plea for Intolerance," by George S. Schuyler, and "The African Origins of the Tango," by Arthur Schomburg.

But at the end of May 1930, a small notice appeared in the *New York News:*

> The Gumby Book Studio, 2144 5th Avenue, which has been the center of many brilliant musical and poetical recitals and exhibitions for the past five years has closed for the summer and alterations. It will re-open in the fall with a full line of current books, magazines, newspapers, music, rare books, pamphlets and manuscripts relating to the race. It will be the market place and barter mart of race art and letters for the literati of America.

This was a hopeful program for the future. In reality, according to his own memoirs, after his friend's illness Gumby had to sell some of his rare editions in order to keep the studio going. When he closed *for the summer and alterations,* he put his belongings in storage.

This closing of the studio began a tragic chapter. *The loss of my Studio and the fact that I was overworked combined to send me to the hospital I remained there for four years.* Near the beginning of his convalescence, in 1931, a benefit was held at the Renaissance Ballroom. The organizing committee was led by the artist Augusta Savage and included Bessye J. Bearden (mother of the artist Romare), the society columnist Geraldyn Dismond, and actress Rose McClendon, among others. An advertisement for the benefit listed a number of prominent patrons sponsoring the event, including Paul Robeson, Zora Neale Hurston, Countee Cullen, W. C. Handy, Langston Hughes, Arthur Schomburg, and Bill Robinson. Entertainment was furnished by *principals of the Cotton Club Revue and Noble Sissle* among other *Harlem Night Club Stars.* Gumby himself was not well enough to attend, but a page in his scrapbook preserves items announcing the event—including a scrawled message sent by a friend as she prepared for the party. It is full of a socialite's breathless flutter: *Dear*

Gumby, Just to say hello and that I'm thinking of you, we are expecting a great affair tonight we shall all be thinking of you—everything is working fine, hope you can read this I'm so excited. Love, Alta.

Support from the benefit and other friends provided enough money to pay for Gumby's storage expenses for a short while, but eventually he fell behind in his payments and an auction was arranged to sell his belongings. Facing this newest difficulty, Gumby was aided by a friend who offered to take care of the debt in exchange for *certain first editions* and his Americana scrapbooks. The friend, who *did not want any of the scrapbooks of Negro items,* offered to keep them in his home until Gumby could retrieve them.

But when Gumby left the hospital in 1934, he contacted his friend and found that *our gentlemen's agreement had not been strong enough to assure the collection's security.* His books were stored in a cellar without any protection. Friends and family of the steward had been allowed to take whichever of the rare books they desired. Meanwhile, Gumby's Negroana scrapbooks were languishing in more than a dozen cases in a low-lying part of the cellar. A watermark on one trunk gave the first clue of their condition. Two cases of scrapbooks were completely ruined, only *paper mud and mildew inside.* Gumby was able to save some of the items from within those books, and the rest he took to the inadequate lodgings he'd rented for six dollars per week after his release from the hospital.

On the ruins of his scrapbooks, Gumby intended to rebuild.

> I decided to remove all Negro items from scrapbooks that were not essentially Negroic and to add them to the Negro collection, as that part had suffered the least damage. While I was doing the revamping, I got the idea of making this part of the collection a far-reaching historical items of Negroana, with each one of its volumes so fine and selective

> in its makeup that no other collector could ever hope to equal it.

Yes, things have been different since I came back from out there. A 1934 article in the *Amsterdam News* that declared Gumby's *comeback* has the collector looking *reflectively* at the walls of his new rented room on 126th Street. *Out there* is the sanitarium, and it is not far-fetched to wonder whether Gumby's assessment of things that were different included—in addition to his own circumstances—the changes that had taken place in Depression-era Harlem, at the end of the not-yet-coined Renaissance. *No, times are not what they once were.*

His cheer returns when speaking of his new plans. *I have an idea and I'm going to put it over.* The article does not mention the sorrow of the lost items, but instead describes his dream to display the 160 scrapbooks, 3,000 books, and rare prints and paintings that comprised the remains of his library. Having *no where to display them in a proper atmosphere where people genuinely interested may come and browse them,* Gumby was consumed by a vision:

> Now, I believe that there should be some place in Harlem where all of this... could be made available to the people who wish to make use of them for research work. It should also be a place where the talented Negro artist, poet, author, actor, journalist and musician could gather and meet in mutual friendship and exchange of ideas with contemporaries—a place where he would not be expected solely to sing spirituals or create art and poetry of a strenuously Negroid and grotesque sort, a place free of religious bigotry, political ballyhoo, social and academic snobbery, a place where artists of all races could meet and mingle freely for art's sake, expressing their own individualities.

Gumby's art center would provide a social and research facility for artists and intellectuals of all races, including a theatre, an art studio and gallery, instruction in the arts, a scholarship fund to support study in Europe and events *charged at all times with a bona fide artistic atmosphere.* He also hoped it would help elevate what he saw as the dismal quality of work being produced at that moment: *I have not the slightest doubt that such an art center would have a constructive effect upon our present-day so-called Negro classics and semi-classics, now being manufactured almost exclusively from backwoods, cornfield, and waterfront material.*

An autobiographical essay Gumby wrote some two decades later for the January 1957 edition of the *Columbia Library World* makes no mention of his art center dream. By then, Gumby was again working at Columbia and had arranged for his scrapbooks to become part of the Special Collections department of the university's Butler Library. A brief article appeared in the *Columbia Daily Spectator* to publicize the holdings. Gumby's ambition was now more modest, or possibly toned-down and misreported by a student journalist who perhaps could only see Gumby's creation in terms of what it meant for white observers. *I want the white people to judge themselves on the Negro problem by reading both sides of the question,* Gumby said of his collection. The reporter noted, *Mr. Gumby hopes that his history of the Negro... will stimulate interest in Negro history and culture and act as a basis for greater cooperation and understanding among the races.*

An anemic account of Gumby's scrapbooking activity is given, along with mentions of the highlights of the collection now housed in the library. These included nine volumes on Joe Louis, three volumes on lynchings, and scrapbooks on Booker T. Washington and jazz. Gumby is said to be currently *making scrapbooks on Columbia, the Negro and Communism, and many personalities such as Dr. Bunche.* Gumby was also occupied with cataloguing

his collection. No details are given about the fate of Gumby's rare books and other items. Perhaps he retained them, never having established the art center of his dreams. Or perhaps he'd had to continue selling them off, in order to survive.

The remains of Gumby's scrapbook collection are still at the Rare Books and Manuscripts department of Columbia's Butler Library, but the holdings have been photographed and put on microfilm; special permission is necessary to handle the pages he painstakingly compiled. Gumby relinquished his collection with the agreement that it would be put on regular display, but that hasn't happened. The scrapbook pages are promoted more as secondary sources on the celebrated figures and important topics that Gumby catalogued, rather than seen holistically as the brilliant and strange production of the man himself.

In that same 1957 memoir, Gumby basically concedes this vision of his scrapbooks' future, saying, *Whether or not I have succeeded, I do sincerely hope the collection will be useful for serious historical research, and an abiding incentive to those who try to make scrapbooks on any subject.* This hope was elsewhere stated somewhat differently when, in December 1929, a *New York Times* article noted:

> "My greatest ambition," remarked Gumby, his brown face beaming with the patient enthusiasm of the collector, "is to write the history of the negro in scrapbooks. Perhaps there are others who will come later to put what I have collected into a more concise form."

A page on the microfilm preserves Gumby's personal book plate. His name, L. S. Alexander Gumby, is written in a calligrapher's copperplate hand on a prominent scroll. The words *EX LIBRIS* support the composition from the bottom of the frame. Flowers and foliage festoon the perimeter, while the center is occupied by

the muscular figures of two men. One has his back turned against the viewer and his face turned away; the other is positioned slightly below the first, reaching across in assistance. Together they lift a giant, partially opened book, grimacing under the labor.

Eventually I passed 2144 Fifth Avenue when the front door of the lamp repair shop was open. Music played from a speaker above the threshold; outside was a shallow tub filled with water in which two small turtles swam. To the side of the door, a small potted plant was in bloom. This tableau, and the fact that I was walking with a male friend, beckoned me toward the place I had for so long avoided. Inside, I found the proprietor of the shop. He was at work, repairing a table that was turned on its side. The wall of the storefront was lined with shelves that held dozens of lamps of all sizes and designs. I told him I was glad he was open, because my house was full of broken lamps I had never managed to fix. This was true, but seeing that I had nothing with me that would bring him immediate business, the owner must have known that I was merely making conversation. He did not react much beyond a remote *Oh?* before continuing with his task. Since he didn't turn us out of the store immediately, I looked all around the shop. Besides the shelves of lamps, the walls were covered in a metallic paper whose pattern looked like something from the 1970s. There were also scattered artifacts that drew my attention, a poster of Malcolm X, an antique-looking jug that advertised a southern brand of whiskey. Like a visitor to a curiosity shop, I marveled aloud at each object, exclaiming in a manner that the owner must have found irritating. Continuing my attempt to make conversation, I told him what a nice plant he had outside, and said it looked like a jasmine. Without looking up, he said he didn't know what it was. I told him I was pretty sure it was a jasmine because I

had one at my house that never blooms, and he offered just as little interest as before. Discarding all niceties, I told the owner I'd always been curious about this shop because it was the same building where a man named Alexander Gumby had lived. Did he know anything about that man?

He stopped working, patient with my intrusion. He didn't know anything about Alexander Gumby, but I must have the wrong place because this space had been a lamp-repair shop for many years, and before that it was a hardware shop. When I told him I was certain it was the same address, and that Alexander Gumby had lived upstairs, he said, *Nope, no way,* and went back to his business with the upended table. I conceded that maybe I had the wrong place, and thanked him for his time. I told him I liked the jazz he was playing through the speaker above the door. He smiled at that, and then my friend and I were gone.

Not long after, I passed 2144 Fifth Avenue again. The lamp shop was closed, as it had been so many times I'd passed before. But things were different. The windows of the upper floors—including the large plate-glass window which had been Gumby's Book Studio—those windows whose darkness had halted my approach—were all covered with wooden boards.

Recently, I began to record my dreams. It was not an effort at self-help or psychoanalysis; the idea was to have a catalog of the realms I sometimes visit at night, often repeatedly. The landscapes in my dreams combine certain elements of some places I've been: the gently undulating hills of the English countryside; the winding waterways of southern India; the steely gray and rich green of the Scottish highlands; the angular spires of cypress trees in Tuscany; and the flat horizon and open skies of the West Texas high desert—where one isn't able to hide. Added to this topography is

a distorted version of my everyday scenery. Of this territory I wrote in my notebook, *I arrived in a dream Harlem. Things were much different.*

In this dream Harlem, I visit a library whose magnificent architecture is a more appropriate shrine to Schomburg's endeavor than the forbidding red brick fortress where I spend so many waking hours. It is located on one corner of a dream version of Marcus Garvey Park. The hill of Mount Morris still commands the center, but the plaza formed by the streets around the park resembles some squares where I've lingered in London's Bloomsbury. Inside the dream library is a magic volume that solves all the enigmas that follow me from the real library into my sleep. In this dream Harlem, the avenues are even wider and more grand. I visit elegant lounges that have mahogany fittings and floor-to-ceiling windows that open onto the avenue—striped silk curtains billow in the breeze. In that dream Harlem, that nowhere Harlem, I reach the campus of City College by ascending the face of a ragged cliff many times more treacherous than the steps of St. Nicholas Park. In these settings unfold various plots of which I am not exactly the author.

In the morning, before the tyranny of daylight has imposed itself, when the dream world and the real world are still entangled, some images from the night's travels are still available. More often, they slip back toward the dark, toward the blackest of mysteries; perhaps to be visited again in a future passage, perhaps to be altered, perhaps to be lost.

The collision of real world and dream world may tell me something about the choices made by the writers I have loved. When I was young, their words introduced me to Harlem and to writing. Their challenges were not so different from the fevered operation by which I try to record my dreams before they are exiled from the dominion of voluntary recall and rational thought—that

rush to transpose a dream into words, at once preserving the vision and altering its reality. This nowhere, between dream and reality, between what one sees and what one imagines, between what is happening and your attempt to describe it, is the territory we wander while awake. It forms a montage of deferred dreams that couldn't be transcribed accurately before disappearing into the dark.

Soon after arriving in Harlem, I heard a man giving a talk at the museum on 125th Street. In an aside quite removed from the rest of his subject matter, he exclaimed, *Harlem is a city of dream books!* I didn't know what he meant, but I was intrigued by the sound of it. Later, when I came to know about the numbers racket, I learned—from my neighbors and from the library—about the books that make symbols of dream imagery and daily happenings and attach them to numbers. One book offered the following "Harlem Hunches" for the year 1944:

Colored woman calling first thing in the morning	655
Colored man calling first thing in the morning	622
White woman calling first thing in the morning	852
White man calling first thing in the morning	258
Black cat crossing path	142
White cat crossing path	318
Dog barking at you	466
To meet a cross eyed colored man	659
To meet a cross eyed white man	752
To meet a cross eyed white woman	775
To be approached by a beggar early in the morning	336
Carrying stick around Black Jack game	668
To hear a man play the dozen	912
To hear a woman play the dozen	012
To see a car hit a colored man	312

To see a car hit a colored woman	621
To see a car hit a white man	972
To see a car hit a white woman	749
To meet an old girl friend	133
To meet an old boy friend	355
To see cats fighting	345
To see dogs fighting	545
To see a funeral procession	371
To see a wedding	234
To see a mule	555
To see a crowd	882
To see a riot	222
To see a gang fight	228
To see cops chasing bandits	299
To see a hold-up	613
To see a fire	424
To see fire engines rushing	302
To see two men fighting	797
To see two women fighting	798
To see an automobile accident	112
To see a trolley car hit a person	511
To see an Elks parade	888
To see a communist demonstration	615
To meet your sweetheart unexpectedly	757
To trip while walking	481
To shout for joy	327
To meet a colored number runner unexpectedly	718
To meet a white number runner unexpectedly	757
To meet a circus parade	711
To meet a colored actor on the street looking for work	510
To see an organ-grinder	103
To pass a person smoking reefer	028

To have a barber cut your face	367
To see a man thrown out of a speakeasy	641
To see a woman thrown out of a speakeasy	580
To see a crap game on a street corner	238
To see a speakeasy raided	679

These numbers are said to be extra lucky because they are bolstered by prophetic power.

You could say: I dreamed I was trapped in a house with a gargantuan wild beast pacing hungrily outside the window, and I raced around that house slamming doors behind me while running through a series of rooms that were arrayed in a circuit. Then I dashed to the top of a winding staircase where there were no more floors to ascend. Or, I dreamed I was in a house where the floor kept falling out from beneath me, caving in without giving way completely, so it seemed as if I was sinking and gaining ground simultaneously. Or, I dreamed I was visiting friends in a house on a dream version of Striver's Row, when suddenly it started tumbling around so that we were not inside a house after all, but locked within a sphere whose movements we could not control.

Consultants of a dream book would not use those details to venture an interpretation or diagnose an affliction. Instead—by fixing my dream images with certain numbers—they'd invent a diversion to bring temporary release. Upon hearing such scenes a knowledgeable person might say, without hesitation: One. Two. Five.