

THE GREAT DEPRESSION

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Great literature, we like to believe, is timeless, so Shakespeare's works will endure forever. No doubt he gave voice to emotional truths that touch very diverse people. But interpretations of the meanings of Shakespeare's plays have varied widely over the years, and these interpretations have been shaped by events taking place in the interpreters' own times. Shakespeare himself was enmeshed in the social, religious, and political issues of Elizabethan England, and his plays are full of direct and indirect references to those issues. Or, to give an example from American literary history, Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851) was mostly ignored during the nineteenth century; it became acknowledged as great literature only in the 1920s, long after the author's death. Melville's work tended to be very skeptical of human perfectibility and social progress, and such skepticism resonated more for the intellectuals of the early twentieth century than for those in the nineteenth century.

Artists and writers always are influenced by the context of their times, and how their works are received depends on the historically shaped beliefs of those who behold them. This was especially true during the 1930s. Of course, the descent into economic depression that began with the stock market crash of October 1929 was felt most directly in material life. The previous decade had brought prosperity for middle- and upper-class Americans. True, the 1920s were hard times for farmers and the urban poor, but a larger number of people than ever before had more income and could afford more consumer goods than at any time in U.S. history. With the Great Depression, however, came massive cuts in wages and employment. Per capita disposable income dropped about one-third, while the unemployment rate reached 25 percent in the early 1930s. Although working-class people were hit hardest, for they had the fewest resources to fall back on, the downward spiral of the economy tugged at almost everyone. To put it simply, most families still had the necessities of life and even some luxuries, but most had less than before. More important, the number of families slipping into poverty grew dramatically.

Beyond the shrinkage of material resources, Americans' confidence was shaken. No one seemed to know when, how, or if the crisis would end. Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal helped some, but politicians and economists had no permanent solutions. The depression

made people question the most fundamental tenets of the American creed: that our economy and society ensured a brighter future for all, that equality of opportunity was the American way, that hard work would be rewarded, and that the American dream of prosperity was still attainable. How could they believe such things when the leaders and heroes of the 1920s—businessmen, financiers, and great captains of wealth—seemed as confused as everyone else, when breadlines grew ever longer and when unemployment and poverty wore the familiar faces of family and friends? (Ironically, the very phrase “The American Dream” was coined in 1931.)

Much of the art and literature of the era reflected these changed perceptions. It was not as if the writers and artists of the twenties had been celebrants of American culture. On the contrary, the carnage of World War I, the meanness of the Versailles treaty, and the postwar era’s gaudy materialism—these all alienated many talented people, creating a “lost generation” of American writers. Several exiled themselves to Paris (Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald among them), but even those who stayed in the United States wrote with a bitterness born of betrayal. John Dos Passos captured his generation’s loathing of the money grubbing, the spiritual emptiness, and the unseemly hedonism that often came masked by pious espousals of democratic ideals. Most writers would have agreed with H. L. Mencken that the more a man declared his own honesty, patriotism, or piety, the more likely he was a scoundrel or a thief. Above all, the literature of the 1920s stressed the individual’s need to make a separate peace with the world; each person must suffer his or her pain alone and must find his or her own joy or community, but all must know that God, society, or money could not save them.

Ironically, literature written during the Great Depression contained less of this cynicism. In the midst of the crisis, writers and artists no longer felt so peripheral to their culture. The worship of business that characterized America in the 1920s marginalized all who felt that the life of the mind—scholarship, artistic creation, the humanities—counted for more than dollars. As the Great Depression continued, Americans’ belief that millionaires were heroes worthy of emulation grew shaky. For some intellectuals, there was a strange exhilaration in others’ loss of faith in the American dream. If the competitive economy had atomized people, the depression could bring them together as each other’s keepers, and there is no doubt that the rediscovery of community—of workers, regions, racial or ethnic groups—was an important theme of the writing of the decade.

Moreover, the crisis called for new *ideas*, intellectuals’ specialty. On the most functional level, this meant the channeling of university people like economists and sociologists into the government. But even novelists and painters became tied to the Roosevelt administration. The New Deal appropriated funds for agencies like the Federal Writers’ Project (in which the government underwrote the creation of plays, oral histories, and travel guides), the Works Progress Administration (which hired unemployed artists to paint murals on federal buildings), and the Farm Security Administration (in which unemployed photographers—including such great camera artists as Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans, and Ansel Adams—documented the lives of homeless families, unemployed

workers, and southern tenant farmers). So a relatively small amount of government aid and, more important, a sense of being socially useful made the Great Depression a period of tremendous energy and excitement in the arts.

This notion of being socially useful took highly political forms. For some, the crisis intensified a hatred of modernity, including cities, factories, and all that was progressive. This tendency was exemplified by the Southern Agrarians, a group of fiction writers, poets, and historians who self-consciously rejected the booming growth and power of the twentieth century to extol the virtues of small-scale life on the land, more particularly in the rural South. The agrarians were fundamentally conservative and nostalgic, and certainly they were blind to the poverty and racism of the southern past. Still, theirs was a powerful critique of the aggrandizing, money-worshipping, and progress-loving elements of American culture.

More commonly, artists and writers turned to the left. Many believed that capitalism, with its enormous concentrations of private wealth and power, made a few people rich while it impoverished the masses, and the Great Depression certainly seemed to offer evidence. Their political and economic solutions varied widely, from New Deal reforms through socialism, communism, and anarchism. What united them all, however, was their commitment to depicting common folk struggling against the system that exploited them. Much of the 1920s' elitism and irony were gone, for the new literature sought to be a tool of empowerment. Rather than maintaining a detached and critical distance from America, intellectuals now strove to make the arts and humanities instruments of change by depicting ordinary people in their daily struggles, sometimes being overwhelmed and sometimes winning symbolic or real triumphs.

Poverty, exploitation, and disease—the arts revealed life in all its grimness. Indeed, the primary task of creative expression, many would have argued, was to expose human misery and to unmask the evil system that caused it. However, it was at this historical moment of crisis that glimmers of hope also appeared in literature, hope arising from a renewed faith that masses of men and women could be makers of their own destinies, that they might seize as their birthright America's unfulfilled democratic promise.

Such an environment was not congenial to "art for art's sake," the belief that creativity was pure mental work that soared above the "real world." The new view was that artists and intellectuals must never again become mere aesthetes, escaping from daily life to challenge themselves only by creating beautiful, if empty, works. They had an obligation to engage the issues confronting people. One can see this shift in the styles of artistic expression: a renewed emphasis on realism and naturalism in fiction, less stress on abstraction in painting, and, above all, a shift to the documentary style, a mode of expression that appeared to deny the presence of the artist altogether. Documentary style pretends to be artless: The camera just records what is going on; the writer merely reports what he or she sees. The documentary style—seemingly objective, dispassionate, and factually accurate—became very common in fiction and nonfiction and in film and photography, for it appeared to reveal human suffering in the most clear and unmediated way, and by so doing, it sounded an unmistakable call for reform.

INTRODUCTION TO DOCUMENT 1

President Franklin Roosevelt, his wife Eleanor, and other government leaders received thousands of letters, some asking for assistance, others applauding the New Deal, and still others condemning it. Document 1 gives a sense of the range of opinions expressed by citizens, including racist and nativist attacks on the poor, warnings that the New Deal smacked of communism and declarations that, if something more was not done soon, revolution was inevitable. Above all, there were pleas for help from the poor themselves.

1. AMERICANS WRITE TO THEIR LEADERS

ELKADER IOWA

SEPTEMBER 11 1934

MR. FRANKLIN ROOSEVELT

Dear President Roosevelt

I am in a terrible perdicament So I thought of you to send my plea of trouble to you because I drempt the other night that I Should write to you thinking that may = be I could get Some help from you as long as no one els will help me out I am an old woman Seventy two years old and an invalid that is the worst of it I can't get around at all. I bin Sitting in a chair for years already if I am not in bed I can't walk alone atall So that makes it pretty hard fore me to be put out of my home the one I worked so hard for over forty-Six years, So please help me Some way or I will half to Sine my last bit away if I could only raise thirteen Hundred Dollars than I could Stay in my home Oh. So please help me Mr. Roosevelt and answer right away or els it will be to late if I ever get onto my feet I Sure will try and pay you back. I helped So many out but it Seems now that I am in the grattes trouble no = body will help me So please Mr. Roosevelt help me Sincerely Mrs. A. M. U.¹

FEBRUARY 1936

MR. AND MRS. ROOSEVELT

WASH. D.C.

Dear Mr. President:

I'm a boy of 12 years. I want to tell you about my family My father hasn't worked for 5 months He went plenty times to relief, he filled out application. They won't give us anything. I don't know why. Please you do something. We haven't paid 4 months rent, Everyday the landlord rings the door bell, we don't open the door for him. We are afraid that will be put out, been put out before, and don't want to happen again. We haven't paid the gas bill, and the electric bill, haven't paid grocery bill for 3 months. My brother goes to Lane Tech. High School. he's eighteen years old, hasn't gone to school for 2 weeks because he got no carfare. I have a sister she's twenty years, she can't find work. My father he staying home. All the time he's crying because he can't find work. I told him why are you crying daddy, and daddy said why shouldn't I cry when there is nothing in the house. I feel sorry for him. That night I couldn't sleep. The next morning I wrote this letter to you, in my room. Were American citizens and were born in Chicago, Ill. and I don't know why they don't help us Please answer right away because we need it. will starve Thank you. God bless you.

Anonymous
Chicago, Ill.²

FAYETTEVILLE, W.VA.

NOVEMBER 4, 1936

WASHINGTON, D.C.

My dear Mrs. Roosevelt:—

I am wondering whether or not a letter to you from a wholly unbiased and unprejudiced person will be a little helpful to you and your husband. I know (and you know!) that you have strenuous days ahead. I feel possibly that the viewpoint of certain representative village people here represent current opinion throughout the country and that a few of the remarks I heard in an Editor's office this morning may give you an idea of what is in people's minds—now that the election is over. It is a saner viewpoint than yesterday! not a thing can be done about matters except to discuss them!

I voted the straight Democratic ticket as usual. The Editor in whose office I spent a few moments this morning is a Republican. . . .

THE EDITOR: —“—We hope sincerely that things will turn out all right, but, my heavens, this orgy of spending!”

REPUBLICAN: —“—Now that he's had such a landslide he'll go crazy with spending and giving. He'll think, 'why need I bother about what this person or that thinks!'”

DEMOCRAT: —“—He's done a lot that's constructive. My only regret is the slaughtering of livestock and ploughing under of wheat. But he couldn't foresee the drought.” . . .

The above may give you an idea of the trend of thought. Personally I have found that the more you give the lower classes the more they want. Never satisfied. In my charitable work I become discouraged and it makes me know what your husband is up against. The people (some) are so simple-minded. They think the President is going to keep on giving. My gardener (White) and my maid (col.) voted democratic this election, not from coercion on my part but because “Roosevelt will take care of us.”

Some of us (conservative democrats) regret the prevalence of certain graft in minor county officials, Relief offices, Welfare, etc. but I know it's all too far away for you to control . . .

I am very sincerely yours,
NGS (Mrs. RJS).³

NEW YORK, N.Y.

OCTOBER 1939

MR. HARRY HOPKINS

WASHINGTON, D.C.

Dear Mr. Hopkins:

. . . I have found out after careful investigation that we are feeding many foreigners who send out their wives to work and who have money in the bank. While the men drink wine and play cards in saloons and cafes. I have spoken to one Italian whom I met. And I ask him what he was doing for a living. He said me drinka da dago red wine and play cards and send the wife out to work. Isn't a very good thing for us to support them. No wonder the taxpayers are grumbling about taxes. Most of them are a race of black hands murders boot leggers bomb throwers. While most of the sheeney jews as they are called are a race of dishonest people who get rich by swindling, faking and cheating the poor people. Besides the jews are responsible by ruining others in business by the great amount of chisling done. And selling even below the cost prices, in order to get all the others business. The foreigners and jews spend as little as they can to help this country. And, they live as cheap as they can. And, work as cheap as they can, and save all the money they can. And when they have enough they go back to their country. Why don't we deport them under the section of the United States Immigration Laws which relates to paupers and those who become a public charge. The Communist Party is composed mostly by foreigners and jews. The jews are the leaders of the movement and urge the downfall of this government. . . .

A Taxpayer⁴

HORNELL, NEW YORK
 MARCH 7, 1934
 U.S. SENATOR ROBERT F. WAGNER
 SENATE BUILDING,
 WASHINGTON, D.C.

My Dear Senator:

It seems very apparent to me that the Administration at Washington is accelerating its pace towards socialism and communism. Nearly every public statement from Washington is against stimulation of business which would in the end create employment.

Everyone is sympathetic to the cause of creating more jobs and better wages for labor; but, a program continually promoting labor troubles, higher wages, shorter hours, and less profits for business, would seem to me to be leading us fast to a condition where the Government must more and more expand its relief activities, and will lead in the end to disaster to all classes. . . .

I am not addicted to annoying public office holders with correspondence but if there are any private rights left in this country, then I would appreciate an early reply to this letter, so that I may take such action as is still possible to protect myself and family.

With kindest personal regards,

Yours truly,

W. L. C. [male]⁵

NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE

AUGUST 15, 1936

MRS. FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT

Dear Lady,

Will you please warn the people of what's going to happen in America if these property owners don't quit making industrial slaves out of their laborers and working them on starvation wages, paying them a wage whereby they cannot obtain the desires of life, or else installing machinery and laying the common laborer off of his job to starve to death.

We don't want a revolution in this country where innocent men, women, and children will be shot down without mercy like they are doing in Spain and also like they did in Russia. We want peace on earth

good will toward men. You know Mrs. Roosevelt with the majority of us poor people we desire good things as well as the higher classes of society. For instance we desire a nice home to live in with sanitary surroundings. We desire a nice refrigerator, electric stove, fan, nice furniture, radio, a nice car with money to take a vacation, but one cannot have these desires of life at a wage of 8.00 10.00 or \$12.00 per week, and if we could, we could not accumulate no money and would have to go on being industrial slaves and our children would fall under the same yoke of bondage that we and our fore parents were under. And never be considered no more than an ordinary slaves. . . .

After all, it is natural with any human being to want to obtain the desires of life with the least physical exertion possible. But the great majority of the men that wear the overalls and are forced by the task master or property holder to exert their bodies strenuously every day do not get even proper and sufficient food to maintain their bodies while at work. . . .

This alone will bring on a revolution if it is not remedied. There would not be so many crimes committed if every man and boy were out from under bondage of hard labor and were getting the desires of life. We have plenty young John Dillingers, pretty boy Floyds, Jessie James roaming all over our land today wanting jobs, desiring to marry and settle down and live a comfortable life and cannot get hold of enough money to buy a marriage license. And the next thing we know they strike back at the ones that are responsible for their being in that condition. Mrs. Roosevelt this nation is hanging over a giant powder keg just waiting for someone to light a match. . . .

. . . I am thirty four years old married and have one daughter. I have a eighth grade education, I got a job last week as labourer on the new courthouse here, although I am a painter by trade, and just because I am a little crippled on my right side the contractor would not work me, he said the insurance company would not allow him to.

And so I cannot see a very bright prospect in life. Although my wife slaves in a cotton mill but I want a job so as I can get her out of it, for I am afraid she has contracted tuberculosis. Hoping an answer, I remain

Yours, Sincerely, [Mr.] DBP⁶

INTRODUCTION TO DOCUMENTS 2, 3, AND 4

The Roosevelt administration established several programs to address the poverty of the Great Depression. Among these was the Resettlement Administration in 1935, designed to move poor families to entirely new areas, often in government-planned communities. Though the program was short-lived and somewhat unpopular in Congress, it involved a significant investment in documentary photography. Ben Shahn, Arthur Rothstein, and Dorothea Lange were just three of the many artists who were hired to photograph rural poverty as part of the Resettlement Administration. They produced thousands of pictures, some of which have become iconic representations of both the trials but also the persistence of the American people in the Great Depression.

It is easy to assume that the following photographs were neutral representations, devoid of argument and message and simply candid images of American life. But ask yourself how the photographers captured their subjects, how they framed the context, and what emotion or impression they hoped to leave in their viewers.

The first two photographs were taken in early 1936 by Dorothea Lange, who was spending a month photographing migrant farm laborers in California for the Resettlement Administration. Lange recalled being "drawn by a magnet" to Florence Thompson and her children at this camp in Nipomo. Thompson told Lange that she was thirty-two and had been living on vegetables from the surrounding fields and birds that her children were able to kill. She asked no questions of Lange but did not object to her photograph being taken. The picture on the left was published in contemporary San Francisco news outlets and immediately struck a chord. Why do you suppose it spoke so powerfully to Americans, and why has it continued to draw us in? Given that Dorothea Lange took many pictures of Florence Thompson, what explains the power of the photograph at left, which became an American icon of hard times, as opposed to the one at right?

Ben Shahn was another photographer for the Resettlement Administration, who spent months traveling through the American South. Here he photographed a young girl in the cotton fields in 1935, taking pains to label the photograph with the following information: "Schools for colored children do not open until January 1st so as not to interfere with cotton picking."

Arthur Rothstein was only twenty years old—a college senior—when he was hired by the Resettlement Administration as its first photographer, assigned to capture rural and small-town America. His photograph of a demonstration by unemployed workers in the spring of 1936 captures the political moment of the mid-1930s, when many turned toward more radical solutions. As Rothstein wrote of his work, the goal was "to move people to action." In your view does Rothstein's photograph send a political message?

4. DEMONSTRATION OF THE UNEMPLOYED. COLUMBUS, KANSAS (MAY 1936)

ARTHUR ROTHSTEIN



Image 10.4 Arthur Rothstein,
"Demonstration of the Unemployed.
Columbus, Kansas," May 1936

Source: Courtesy Library of Congress, Prints and
Photographs Division LC-USF34-005162-E.

INTRODUCTION TO DOCUMENT 5

The federal government's funding of documentary photography in the Farm Security Administration extended to other areas of American life. The Works Progress Administration, perhaps best known for constructing highways, bridges, dams, and post offices across the nation, many of which still stand today, also housed the Federal Writers' Project, designed to employ artists by paying them to document folkways and histories of Americans at all stations in life. Several who would later become renowned authors—including Richard Wright, Saul Bellow, and John Cheever—began their careers employed by the Federal Writers' Project. One such individual was Ralph Ellison, who was paid to interview African Americans in Harlem in the late 1930s. Ellison acknowledged that his work with the Federal Writers' Project broadened his understanding of black life, which in turn shaped his midcentury masterpiece, *Invisible Man*. His interviews in Harlem also helped him develop an ear for vernacular speech. This "documentary" approach, though far from neutral, reflected the Depression-era engagement with the nation's myriad local cultures, an attempt to capture the diversity of experience that made up a larger American identity.

5. "A POOR WHITE IS A BRING DOWN"

RALPH ELLISON, INTERVIEW WITH AN AFRICAN-AMERICAN
MUSICIAN, HARLEM, JUNE 15, 1939

I was sitting up on the bandstand drumming, trying to make myself some eat-up change. Wasn't such a crowd in the place that night, just a bunch a them beer-drinkers. I was looking down at em dancing and wishing that things would liven up. Then a man came up and give me four dollars just to sing one number. Well, I was singing for that man. I was really laying it Jack, just alike Marian Anderson. What the hell you talking about; I'd sing all night after that cat done give me four bucks. . . . But this is what brings you down. One a these bums come up to the stand and says to the banjo player: "If you monkeys don't play some music, Im gonna throw you outta de jernt."

Man, I quit singing and looked at that sonofabitch. Then I got mad. I said. "Where the goddam hell you come from, you gonna throw somebody outa *this* band? How you get so bad? Why you poor Brooklyn motherfriger, I'll wreck this goddam place with you."

. . . You see he thought cause we was black he could talk like he wanted to. In a night club and drinking beer! I fixed him. I bet he wont try that no more.

Man a poor white is a bring-down. He aint got nothing. He caint get nothing. And he thinks cause hes white hes got to impress you cause you black.

Then some of em comes up and try to be your friend. Like the other night; I'm up on the stand drumming and singing, trying to make myself some change. I was worried. I got a big old boy, dam near big as me, and every time I look up hes got to have something. Well the other night I hadnt made a dam thing. And I was sitting there drumming when one of those bums what hangs around the place— one a these slaphappy jitterbugs, comes up to me and says: "You stink!"

Now you know that made me mad before I even knowed what he was talking about. A white cat coming up to me and talking about I stink! I said 'What you talking about? What you mean I stink? He said: "You aint a good fellow like the other cats. You

wont take me up to Harlem and show me around.' I said: "Hell yes, mammydodger, I stink! If that's what you mean Im gon always stink. You'll never catch me carrying a bunch of you poor sonsabitches up there. What the hell you gonna do when you get up there? You aint got nothing. Hell, you por as I am. I dont see you coming down to Harlem to carry me up to show me the Bronx. You darn right I stink.' Man, he just looks at me now and says: "Jack, you sho a funny cat."

Can you beat that? He oughta know I aint got no use for him. DAM!

Another one comes up to me—another one of those beer drinking bums— and says: "I want to go up to your house sometime."

I said: "Fo what! Now you tell me fo what!" I said: "What-in-the-world do you want to come up to my place for? You aint got nothing and I sho aint got nothing. Whats a poor colored cat and a poor white cat gonna do together? You aint got nothing cause you too dumb to get it. And I aint got nothing cause I'm black. I guess you got your little ol skin, that's the reason! Im supposed to feel good cause you walk in my house and sit in my chairs? Hell, that skin aint no more good to you than mine is to me. You caint marry one a Du Ponts daughters, and I know dam well I caint. So what the hell you gon do up to my place?"

Aw man, I have to get these white cats told. They think you supposed to feel good cause they friendly to you. Boy I don't fool with em. They just the reason I caint get ahead now. They try to get all a mans money. That's just the reason I found me a place up the street here. Got two rooms in a private house with a private bath. These others cats go down to Ludwig Baumans and give him all their money so they can meet you on the street and say 'Oh you *must* come up to my apartment sometimes. Oh yes, yes, I have some lovely furniture. You just *must* come up sometime; you know man, they just want to show off. But me I done got wise. Im getting my stuff

outa junk shops, second hand stores, anywhere. I aint giving these Jews my money. . . .

See this bag? I got me a head a cabbage and two ears a corn. Im going up here and get me a side a bacon. When I get home, gonna cook the cabbage and bacon, gonna make me some corn fritters and set back in my twenty-five-dollars-a-month room and eat my fritters and cabbage and tell the Jews to forgit it! Jack I'm just sitting back waiting, cause

soon things is gonna narrow down to the fine point. Hitlers gonna reach in a few months and grab and then thingsll start. All the white folksll be killing off one another. And I hope they do a good job! Then there wont be nobody left but Sam. Then we'll be fighting it out amongs ourselves. That'll be a funky fight. Aw hell yes! When Negroes start running things I think I'll have to get off the earth before its too late!

INTRODUCTION TO DOCUMENT 6

Tom Kromer grew up in West Virginia, where his father had been a coal miner and then a glass-blower. Kromer was a talented student, and he enrolled at Marshall College, but the death of his father and his own lack of funds caused him to drop out before finishing a degree. The Great Depression soon followed, and Kromer was left a vagrant. For a few years, he rode freight trains across the country. Finally, he was able to join the Civilian Conservation Corps, which afforded him the time and money to write his autobiographical *Waiting for Nothing* (1935). The author Lincoln Steffens assisted Kromer in having the manuscript published by Alfred A. Knopf Company. Perhaps more than any other Depression-era book, this one gave a sense, not only of hopeless wandering but also of the terror of being homeless. Kromer left nothing out: the alcoholism, the cruelty of the police and the middle class, the violence of "stiffs" against each other, and the ever-pressing need for "three hots and a flop"—food and shelter.

6. FROM WAITING FOR NOTHING

TOM KROMER

I crouch here in this doorway of the blind baggage. For five hours I have huddled here in the freezing cold. My feet dangle down beneath the car. The wind whistles underneath and swings them back and forth. The wheels sing over the rails. Up in front of me the engine roars through the blackness, that is blacker than the night. The smoke and the fire belch into the sky and scatter into scorching sparks that burn my back and neck. I do not feel the wind that swings my legs. They are

frozen. I have no feeling in them. I slink far back in this door and put my hands over my face. Great God, but I am miserable. I cannot stand this much longer. I was a fool for nailing the blind baggage of this passenger. I was a fool, and now I am freezing to death.

I think. How am I ever going to get off this drag if it ever does stop? I can't walk. My feet, that are frozen, will not hold me up. I sit here and think, and I doze. I awake with a jerk.

"You damn fool," I say, "you can't go to sleep here. You will fall under those wheels that sing beneath you. Those wheels would make quick work of you, all right. Those wheels would make mincemeat of you. You would not be cold any more."

I begin to sing. I sing loud. I yell at the top of my voice, because of the roar of the wheels and the sound of the wind underneath me. I don't want to fall under those wheels. I am only a stiff, and I know that a stiff is better off dead, but I don't want to fall under those wheels. I can feel myself getting dopey. I try to sing louder. I try to hear my voice over the sound of the wind and the cars, but I cannot. I cannot keep awake. I can see that I cannot keep awake. I am falling asleep. I wonder if this is the way a guy freezes to death. I am not so cold now. I am almost warm. The wind roars just as loud as before. It must be just as cold as it was before. But I am not cold. I am warm. Great Christ, I must not let myself freeze to death. I swing my arms. I reach my head far out over the side of the car. The wind tears at my face, but I keep it there until the tears run down my cheeks. Oh, Christ, won't this drag never stop?

I feel the buckle of this drag beneath me. I feel it jerk and throw me forward. I hear the whine of air for brakes. I grab the sides of this car with all my might. My frozen fingers slip, then hold. I am not scared. I am not afraid. I just grab the sides of the car and hold. I feel this train slacken speed. I see the scattered lights of a town. Only a few lights, but I see that this drag is going to stop. I begin to laugh. I laugh like a crazy man when I see that this drag is going to stop.

I hang on with all my might. There will be a jerk when this drag stops. I do not want to go under those wheels. We pull to a stop in front of this jerk-water station. There will be no bulls [police] in this place. The thing to do is to get off this drag before it starts again. It will not stay here long. How am I going to reach the ground? My legs are numb. They are frozen. They will not hold me up. I rub them fast and hard. I feel them sting and burn as the blood begins to run. I try to move them. I can move them. I can see them move. But I feel nothing when they move. I pull myself to my feet. I am standing. I can

see that I am standing, but I cannot feel the car beneath my feet. I reach out over the side of the car and grab the ladder. I climb down. I hold with one hand and guide my legs with the other, but I climb down. I stop at this last step. It is a long way to the ground for my frozen feet. I jump. I fall face-down in the cinders at the side of the track. This drag whistles the high ball. She pulls out. I lie here in the cinders with my bleeding face and watch the coaches go by. I lie here in the cinders with my frozen legs that have no feeling in them. I shiver as I think of that blind baggage with the roar of the wheels and the sound of the wind underneath. I push my fists into the ground and get to my feet. I grimace at the pain that shoots through my legs, but I grit my teeth and walk.

What I want right now is a cup of coffee. A cup of good hot coffee will always warm a guy up. I am too cold to want to eat. I make it to the main stem of this town. There are lights in the few stores that are still open. I pass a restaurant. There is a sign in the window. It says: "Try our ten-cent hamburgers." I wonder if they would let a frozen stiff try their ten-cent hamburgers. I walk in. There are two customers eating. I walk up to this bird behind the counter. He backs away. He glances at his cash register. He has a scared look on his face. I look in the mirror that lines the wall. I do not blame this guy for being scared. What I see scares me, too. My face is as black as the ace of spades. It is smeared with blood from the cuts of the cinders as they scraped my face. I hit those cinders hard.

"Buddy," I say, "I am broke. Could you spare me a cup of coffee?"

"I can't spare you nothin'," he says. "Beat it before I throw you out."

Imagine this bastard. I am half starved and half froze, and he turns me down for a lousy cup of coffee. I am too cold to even cuss him out. I want to cuss him out, but I am too cold. I walk down the street and hit these other two restaurants. They turn me down flat. I can't get me anything to warm me up. But there is one thing I will have to get, and that is a flop. In weather like this a stiff has got to have a flop.

"Where is the town bull?" I say to this guy on the corner.

"You will find him in the garage," he says. "He will be shootin' the bull by the stove in the garage."

I walk over to this garage and find this hick cop by the stove in the office.

"Chief," I say, "I want to get locked up in the can. I am on the fritz with no place to flop."

"The jail ain't no hotel," he says. "I can't lock you up. I can't louse the jail up by locking you up."

Well, if this is not a hell of a note! A stiff can't even break into a lousy can. They call this a free country, and a stiff can't even break into jail to get away from the cold and the wind.

"Can I warm up a little by your fire?" I say. "I am froze."

"Get this straight," this bull says; "we have no use for lousy stiffes in this town. The best thing you can do is to hit the highway away from here."

"What is a stiff supposed to do, shoot himself?" I say.

"If I catch you in this town tomorrow, it will be a good thing if you do shoot yourself," he says.

I go out to the street and walk. I walk fast. I do not feel like walking fast, but I have to to keep from freezing to death. That's how cold I am. I pass a pecan grove. Over away from the road I can see a shack with a light in it. I knock on the door. An old man comes to the door with a lantern in his hand.

"Hello," I say. "Have you got somewhere a guy could flop for the night around here? I am freezing to death, with no place to flop."

He puts his hand on the top of my head.

"Son, do you believe in Christ?" he says.

"Sure," I say, "I believe in Christ. Have you got some place I could flop around here?"

"The last days are upon us," he says. "The sound of the trumpet is soon upon us. Repent or you burn in everlasting flame."

This guy is as batty as a loon. I can see that.

"Have you got some place I could flop outside?" I say. "An old shed or something?"

Outside will not be too far away from this guy. He is ready for the booby-hatch.

"The lamb that is lost is the care of the Lord," he says.

He leads the way to this building where they store the pecans. It is a big place. The floor is covered with piles of these pecans. He takes a shovel and digs a hole down in one of these piles, he puts two burlap sacks in the bottom of it.

"Son," he says, "lay down in this hole and rest." I get in.

He covers me up with pecans, and piles sacks on top of me. My face is all that is sticking out of the hole. He puts a sack over my face.

"Rest that you may better fight the battles of the Lord," he says.

He takes his lantern and goes back to his shack.

It is pitch-dark in here now. I lie under these pecans and think. Here I am lying down in a hole. Here I am covered up with pecans. Before I went on the fritz, I was lying nights in a feather bed. I thought I was hard up then. I had a decent front. I had my three hots and a flop. Can you imagine a guy thinking he is hard up when he has his three hots and a flop? That was two years ago, but two years are ten years when you are on the fritz. I look ten years older now. I looked like a young punk then. I was a young punk. I had some color in my cheeks. I have hit the skids since then. This is as low down as a guy can get, being down in a hole with pecans on top of him for covers. If a guy had any guts, he wouldn't put up with this. I think. Why should one guy have a million dollars, and I am down in a hole with pecans on top of me for covers? Maybe that guy has brains. Maybe he works hard. I don't know. What is that to me if he is there and I am here? Religion, they say in the missions. Religion and morals. What are religion and morals to me, if I am down in a hole with pecans on top of me? Who is there to say that this world belongs to certain guys? What right has one guy to say: This much of the world is mine; you can't sleep here?

I lie here in the darkness and think. It is too cold to sleep. On the blind baggage of the drag I could not keep my eyes open. Now I cannot close them. I listen to these rats that rustle across the floor. I pull this sack

off my face and strain my eyes through the blackness. I am afraid of rats. Once in a jungle [hobo camp] I awoke with two on my face. Since then I dream of rats that are as big as cats, who sit on my face and gnaw at my nose and eyes. I cannot see them. It is too dark. I cannot lie here and wait with my heart thumping against my ribs like this. I cannot lie here and listen to them patter across the floor, and me not able to see them. I pull myself out of these pecans and get to my feet. I tiptoe out to the road. I do not want to wake this crazy old codger who dug the hole for me. I do not want to hurt his feelings, and besides, he might go off his nut.

I walk. I lower my head far down to keep the whistling wind from cutting my face like a knife. I listen to the creak of the trees as the wind tears through them. I keep to the left of the road. I cannot hear the sounds of the cars as they come up behind me. You can hear nothing for the roar of the wind. From time to time I turn my head to stare through the night for signs of a headlight. When I see one, I stop in my tracks and hold out my hand for a ride. They do not stop when they see me raise my hand. They step on the gas and go faster. They do not care to pick up a worn-out stiff with blisters on his feet. It is night. They are afraid. They are afraid of being knocked in the head. I do not blame them for being afraid. You cannot tell what a stiff might do when he is as cold and fagged as I am. A stiff is not himself when he is as cold as I am.

I reach the town and skirt it. I am afraid of rats, and this town bull has a face like a rat. I reach the yards and crawl into one of these cars that line the tracks. I shove the doors almost shut. I do not shut it tight. If they start moving these cars during the night, I want to be ready for a quick get-away. I take this newspaper out of my pocket and spread it on the floor. I take off my shoes and use them for a pillow. I lie down, I am all in. I am asleep in a minute.

I do not know how long I am asleep. I awake with a jerk. Something has awakened me. All at once I am wide-eyed and staring. There is a feeling of queer-ness in the top of my head. I know that feeling. I get that feeling when there is something wrong. I had that feeling once when a drag I was on went over the ditch. That feeling was in the top of my head just

before a guy I was talking to on the street dropped dead. My breath comes in short gasps. There is a crawling feeling all over me. A tingle starts at my feet and runs to my hair. I feel a chill in the roots of my hair. I know what that is. My hair is standing up. I raise up on my elbow. The rustle I make as I move on the paper sounds like thunder in the quietness of the car. A ray of light comes through the opening in the door. It is not strong enough to reach to the other end of the car, but I know that there is nothing there. It is in back of me. Whatever it is that is in this car is in back of me. . . .

Then, through the dark, comes this squeal. It is a wild squeal. A squeal like something is mad and crazy. It is like something that has lost its mind. I feel it bound through the air and land on my back. It knocks me down to the floor. These sharp claws bite into the nape of my neck. The long fingers grip my throat so that my breath comes in sobs. I am strangling. I grab at these claws. I feel a man's wrist. A strong wrist. A wrist that is all covered with hair like an animal's. I am down on my belly on the floor of the car. These fingers like hot iron press tighter and tighter. I feel these knees that bore into the small of my back. My neck wrenches backward. So far back I wait to hear it snap. Dizzier I get, and dizzier. Like in a dream I know that these claws that bite into my neck are trying to kill me, to choke me to death. I struggle blindly in the darkness.

I throw myself to my back. I feel the claws loosen their grip. I feel them slide off my neck and tear the flesh off in strips. I feel the burn on my throat and the moistness that I know is blood. I stumble to my feet as he sprawls on the floor. I am facing him now in the dark. He scrambles to his feet. He is only a shapeless mass in front of me. It is a shapeless mass that wants to kill me, to choke me till there is no life in me. I see it hurl itself through the air. I brace myself against the side of the car and kick out with my foot with all my might. I feel it hit, hard. I hear a grunt, a squeally grunt that a pig might give. My foot is buried in his belly. He thuds to the floor. He rolls over and over, but he is up again in a second. There is a flash in his hand. Through the

ray of light that comes through the door I see this flash. My spine creeps. I know what that flash is. It is a knife. I cannot let him get at me with the knife. I cannot let him rip me open with the knife. He is going to murder me with the knife. I have to get out of here. Great Christ, I have to get out of here. I leap towards the door and reach it. I claw at it and try to pry it open. It is caught. The splinters bury themselves in my finger-nails. I do not notice the pain. I am too afraid to notice the pain of a splinter in my nails. Again behind me I hear that scream.

I swing around. The knife flashes through the air above my head. I grab at the hairy wrist that holds the knife. The razor-sharp edge slashes my arms. I know it slashes my arms because of the scorched feeling and the wet that spurts against my face. I struggle with the wrist that holds the knife and the arm that clubs at my head. I am getting weak. The loss of blood has made me weak. I cannot hold the arm that clutches the knife. I glue my eyes to this flash that quivers and shakes over my head as we strain in the ray that comes through the door from the moonlight. Nearer it comes and nearer. I twist the wrist with all my strength. I twist till I hear the snap of it through our panting and

scuffling. I hear this scream again as the arm goes limp and the knife clatters to the box-car floor. I start to dive for the knife on the floor and feel this fist that smashes to my face. I sprawl to the other end of the car. I grope in the dark and try to get up. I cannot. I am too weak to get to my feet. I lie here and tremble on the floor.

Through the ray of light that comes from the door I see this guy stand and stare at the floor. The gleam of the knife is there. He does not pick it up. He is not looking at the knife. It is this pool of blood from my slashed-up arm he is staring at. He stares like a guy in a trance at this blood. He flops to his knees and splashes his hands in the blood and screams. He splashes his hands in the pool of blood and smears it all over his face. I can see him quiver and shake and hear his jabber as he smears the blood. I lie here and wait for the flash of the knife, but it does not come. He leaps to his feet and jumps towards the door of the car. He jabbers and babbles as he shoves against it. He slides it open and leaps to the tracks. I can hear his screams as he crashes through the thickets.

I lie in the darkness with my bloody arm and shiver and sob in my breath.⁸

INTRODUCTION TO DOCUMENTS 7 AND 8

In the following two pieces, Meridel Le Sueur offers us chilling accounts of how women were affected by the Depression. "Women on the Breadlines" (1932) captures some of the same wandering, hopeless quality of Kromer's novel. As Le Sueur points out, however, many vagrant women would rather starve alone than face the shame of asking for help. "Women on the Breadlines" appeared in *New Masses*, the cultural organ of the Communist Party of America. The editors appended a note criticizing the article for its despairing tone. In Document 8, "I Was Marching," which appeared in *New Masses* two years later, Le Sueur took a much more affirmative position. The immediate subject was the 1934 Minneapolis Teamsters strike. Here Le Sueur described the terrors of the strike, not merely the fearful confrontation with police but also the deeper terror of a middle-class person, raised to value individual achievement, losing herself in collective action. But as Le Sueur argues here, individualism was now a dead end, and joint resistance a source of change and hope.

7. WOMEN ON THE BREADLINES (1932)

MERIDEL LE SUEUR

I am sitting in the city free employment bureau. It's the woman's section. We have been sitting here now for four hours. We sit here every day, waiting for a job. There are no jobs. Most of us have had no breakfast. Some have had scant rations for over a year. Hunger makes a human being lapse into a state of lethargy, especially city hunger. Is there any place else in the world where a human being is supposed to go hungry amidst plenty without an outcry, without protest, where only the boldest steal or kill for bread, and the timid crawl the streets, hunger like the beak of a terrible bird at the vitals?

We sit looking at the floor. No one dares think of the coming winter. There are only a few more days of summer. Everyone is anxious to get work to lay up something for that long siege of bitter cold. But there is no work. Sitting in the room we all know it. That is why we don't talk much. We look at the floor dreading to see that knowledge in each other's eyes. There is a kind of humiliation in it. We look away from each other. We look at the floor. It's too terrible to see this animal terror in each other's eyes.

So we sit hour after hour, day after day, waiting for a job to come in. There are many women for a single job. A thin sharp woman sits inside the wire cage looking at the book. For four hours we have watched her looking at the book. She has a hard little eye. In the small bare room there are half a dozen women sitting on the benches waiting. Many come and go. Our faces are all familiar to each other, for we wait here every day.

This is a domestic employment bureau. Most of the women who come here are middle aged, some have families, some raised their families and are now alone, some have men who are out of work. Hard times and the man leaves to hunt for work. He doesn't find it. He drifts on. The woman probably doesn't hear from him for a long time. She expects it. She isn't surprised. She struggles alone to feed the many mouths. Sometimes she gets help from the charities. If she's clever she can get herself a good living from

the charities, if she's naturally a lick spittle, naturally a little docile and cunning. If she's proud then she starves silently, leaving her children to find work coming home after a day's searching to wrestle with her house, her children.

Some such story is written on the faces of all these women. There are young girls too, fresh from the country. Some are made brazen too soon by the city. There is a great exodus of girls from the farms into the city now. Thousands of farms have been vacated completely in Minnesota. The girls are trying to get work. The prettier ones can get jobs in the stores when there are any, or waiting on table but these jobs are only for the attractive and the adroit, the others, the real peasants, have a more difficult time. . . .

It's one of the great mysteries of the city where women go when they are out of work and hungry. There are not many women in the bread line. There are no flop houses for women as there are for men, where a bed can be had for a quarter or less. You don't see women lying on the floor at the mission in the free flops. They obviously don't sleep in the jungle or under newspapers in the park. There is no law I suppose against their being in these places but the fact is they rarely are.

Yet there must be as many women out of jobs in cities and suffering extreme poverty as there are men. What happens to them? Where do they go? Try to get into the Y.W.C.A. without any money or looking down at heel. Charities take care of very few and only those that are called "deserving." The lone girl is under suspicion by the virgin women who dispense charity.

I've lived in cities for many months broke, without help, too timid to get in bread lines. I've known many women to live like this until they simply faint on the street from privations, without saying a word to anyone. A woman will shut herself up in a room until it is taken away from her, and eat a cracker a day and be as quiet as a mouse so there are no social statistics concerning her.

I don't know why it is, but a woman will do this unless she has dependents, will go for weeks, verging on starvation, crawling in some hole, going through the streets ashamed, sitting in libraries, parks, going for days without speaking to a living soul like some exiled beast, keeping the runs mended in her stockings, shut up in terror in her own misery, until she becomes too super sensitive and timid to even ask for a job. . . .

We are in a jungle and know it. We are beaten, entrapped. There is no way out. Even if there were a job, even if that thin acrid woman came and gave everyone in the room a job for a few days, a few hours, at thirty cents an hour, this would all be repeated tomorrow, the next day and the next. . . .

So we sit in this room like cattle, waiting for a non existent job, willing to work to the farthest atom of energy, unable to work, unable to get food and

lodging, unable to bear children; here we must sit in this shame looking at the floor, worse than beasts at a slaughter. . . .

It's not the suffering, not birth, death, love that the young reject, but the suffering of endless labour without dream, eating the spare bread in bitterness, a slave without the security of a slave.

Editorial Note: This presentation of the plight of the unemployed woman, able as it is, and informative, is defeatist in attitude, lacking in revolutionary spirit and direction which characterize the usual contribution to *New Masses*. We feel it our duty to add, that there is a place for the unemployed woman, as well as man, in the ranks of the unemployed councils and in all branches of the organized revolutionary movement. Fight for your class, read *The Working Woman*, join the Communist Party.⁹

8. I WAS MARCHING (1934)

MERIDEL LE SUEUR

I have never been in a strike before. It is like looking at something that is happening for the first time and there are no thoughts and no words yet accrued to it. If you come from the middle class, words are likely to mean more than an event. You are likely to think about a thing, and the happening will be the size of a pin point and the words around the happening very large, distorting it queerly. It's a case of "Remembrance of things past." When you are in the event, you are likely to have a distinctly individualistic attitude, to be only partly there, and to care more for the happening afterwards than when it is happening. That is why it is hard for a person like myself and others to be in a strike.

Besides, in American life, you hear things happening in a far and muffled way. One thing is said and another happens. Our merchant society has been built upon a huge hypocrisy, a cut-throat competition which sets one man against another and at the same time an ideology mouthing such words as "Humanity," "Truth," the "Golden Rule," and such.

Now in a crisis the word falls away and the skeleton of that action shows in terrific movement.

For two days I heard of the strike. I went by their headquarters, I walked by on the opposite side of the street and saw the dark old building that had been a garage and lean, dark young faces leaning from the upstairs windows. I had to go down there often. I looked in. I saw the huge black interior and live coals of living men moving restlessly and orderly, their eyes gleaming from their sweaty faces.

I saw cars leaving filled with grimy men, pickets going to the line, engines roaring out. I stayed close to the door, watching. I didn't go in. I was afraid they would put me out. After all, I could remain a spectator. A man wearing a polo hat kept going around with a large camera taking pictures.

I am putting down exactly how I felt, because I believe others of my class feel the same as I did. I believe it stands for an important psychic change that must take place in all. I saw many artists, writers,

professionals, even business men and women standing across the street, too, and I saw in their faces the same longings, the same fears.

The truth is I was afraid. Not of the physical danger at all, but an awful fright of mixing, of losing myself, of being unknown and lost. I felt inferior. I felt no one would know me there, that all I had been trained to excel in would go unnoticed. I can't describe what I felt, but perhaps it will come near it to say that I felt I excelled in competing with others and I knew instantly that these people were *NOT* competing at all, that they were acting in a strange, powerful trance of movement *together*. And I was filled with longing to act with them and with fear that I could not. I felt I was born out of every kind of life, thrown up alone, looking at other lonely people, a condition I had been in the habit of defending with various attitudes of cynicism, preciousness, defiance and hatred. . . .

The next day, with sweat breaking out on my body, I walked past the three guards at the door. They said, "Let the women in. We need women." And I knew it was no joke. . . .

I found the kitchen organized like a factory. Nobody asks my name. I am given a large butcher's apron. I realize I have never before worked anonymously. At first I feel strange and then I feel good. The forewoman sets me to washing tin cups. There are not enough cups. We have to wash fast and rinse them and set them up quickly for buttermilk and coffee as the line thickens and the men wait. . . .

Then I am changed and put to pouring coffee. At first I look at the men's faces and then I don't look any more. It seems I am pouring coffee for the same tense, dirty sweating face, the same body, the same blue shirt and overalls. Hours go by, the heat is terrific. I am not tired. I am not hot. I am pouring coffee. I am swung into the most intense and natural organization I have ever felt. I know everything that is going on. These things become of great matter to me.

Eyes looking, hands raising a thousand cups, throats burning, eyes bloodshot from lack of sleep, the body dilated to catch every sound over the whole city. Buttermilk? Coffee?

"Is your man here?" the woman cutting sandwiches asks me.

"No," I say, then I lie for some reason, peering around as if looking eagerly for someone, "I don't see him now."

But I was pouring coffee for living men. . . .

That night at eight o'clock a mass-meeting was called of all labor. It was to be in a parking lot two blocks from headquarters. All the women gather at the front of the building with collection cans, ready to march to the meeting. I have not been home. It never occurs to me to leave. The twilight is eerie and the men are saying that the chief of police is going to attack the meeting and raid headquarters. The smell of blood hangs in the hot, still air. Rumors strike at the taut nerves. The dusk looks ghastly with what might be in the next half hour.

"If you have any children," a woman said to me, "you better not go." I looked at the desperate women's faces, the broken feet, the torn and hanging pelvis, the worn and lovely bodies of women who persist under such desperate labors. I shivered, though it was 96 and the sun had been down a good hour. . . .

I am one of them, yet I don't feel myself at all. It is curious. I feel most alive and yet for the first time in my life I do not feel myself as separate. I realize then that all my previous feelings have been based on feeling myself separate and distinct from others and now I sense sharply faces, bodies, closeness and my own fear is not my own alone, nor my hope. . . .

THE NEXT DAY

Two men died from that day's shooting. Men lined up to give one of them a blood transfusion, but he died. Black Friday men called the murderous day. Night and day workers held their children up to see the body of Ness who died. Tuesday, the day of the funeral, one thousand more militia were massed downtown.

It was still over ninety in the shade. I went to the funeral parlors and thousands of men and women were massed there waiting in the terrific sun. One block of women and children were standing two hours waiting. I went over and stood near them. I didn't know whether I could march. I didn't like marching in parades. Besides, I felt they might not want me.

I stood aside not knowing if I would march. I couldn't see how they would ever organize it anyway. No one seemed to be doing much.

At three-forty some command went down the ranks. I said foolishly at the last minute, "I don't belong to the auxiliary—could I march?" Three

women drew me in. "We want all to march," they said gently. "Come with us."

The giant mass uncoiled like a serpent and straightened out ahead and to my amazement on a lift of road I could see six blocks of massed men, four abreast, with bare heads, moving straight on and as they moved, uncoiled the mass behind and pulled it after them, I felt myself walking, accelerating my speed with the others as the line stretched, pulled taut, then held its rhythm.

Not a cop was in sight. The cortege moved through the stop-and-go signs, it seemed to lift of its own dramatic rhythm, coming from the intention of every person there. We were moving spontaneously in a movement, natural, hardy and miraculous.

We passed through six blocks of tenements, through a sea of grim faces and there was not a sound.

There was the curious shuffle of thousands of feet, without drum or bugle, in ominous silence, a march not heavy as the military, but very light, exactly with the heart beat.

I was marching with a million hands, movements, faces and my own movement was repeating again and again, making a new movement from the many gestures, the walking, falling back, the open mouth crying, the nostrils stretched apart, the raised hand, the blow falling, and the outstretched hand drawing me in.

I felt my legs straighten. I felt my feet join in that strange shuffle of thousands of bodies moving with direction, of thousands of feet and my own breath with the gigantic breath. As if an electric charge had passed through me, my hair stood on end. I was marching.¹⁰

INTRODUCTION TO DOCUMENTS 9 AND 10

From the shocking images of American poverty in the documentary photographs to the attempts to capture regional and racial dialects in the oral histories and working-class fiction, there was a pervasive aim of broadening access to culture in the 1930s. Perhaps the most memorable of these efforts was the stirring performance of contralto Marian Anderson at the Lincoln Memorial in April 1939.

Anderson had begun to sing as a child at the Union Baptist Church in Philadelphia and continued to impress audiences with her virtuosity in the choir. Though local conservatories refused to admit her as a student because of her race, she gained substantial support after winning a 1925 competition to sing with the New York Philharmonic Symphony Orchestra and went on to perform across Europe. She returned to the United States in 1935 with a triumphant appearance at Carnegie Hall, then gave a concert at the Roosevelt White House, and for the next few years toured across North America.

Yet despite her box office power, she was subject to the same segregation laws that other African Americans experienced. In 1939, Howard University hoped to arrange a concert for her at Washington D.C.'s Constitutional Hall, which was owned by the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR), a civic organization. A few years earlier, the DAR had adopted a rule barring African Americans from performing at the hall after some members protested against blacks and whites being seated in proximity to one another.

The DAR denied that they had turned down Anderson because of her race—there was a mere booking conflict, they said. Others in the organization argued that keeping Anderson out of Constitution Hall was a simply a matter of obeying the law, that their rule against black performers aligned with the segregation policies in the District of Columbia, which dated back to the Woodrow Wilson administration. Ending segregation, the DAR argued, was not their problem but something to be solved by the District as a whole. Eleanor Roosevelt, in response, resigned her membership in the DAR. Her explanation to the organization's president, Mrs. Henry M. Robert, is Document 9. The next day, Roosevelt addressed her decision in her syndicated column, "My Day," giving the country a sense of her reasoning.

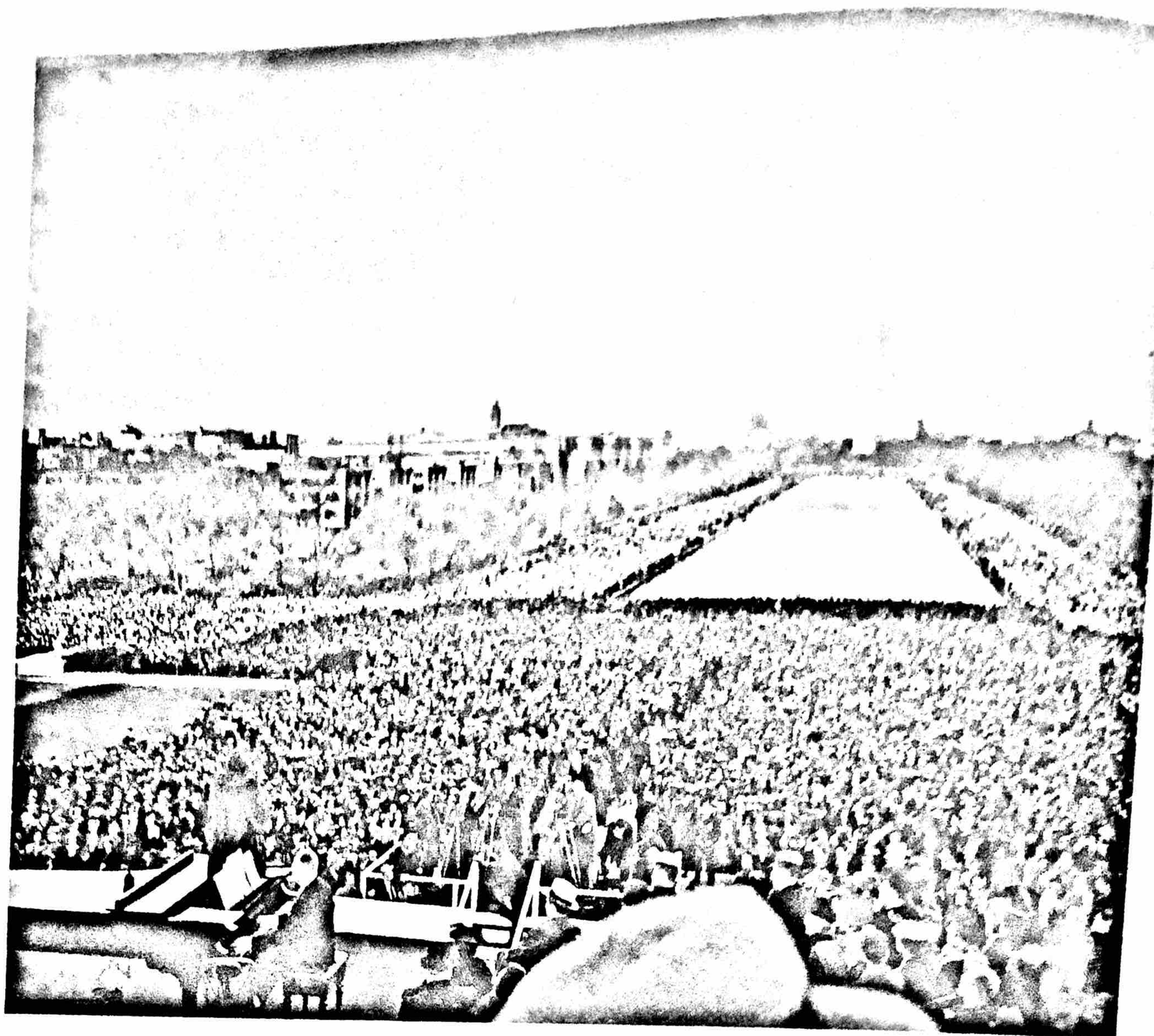


Image 10.5 Robert S. Scurlock, photograph of Marian Anderson performing in front of the Lincoln Memorial

Some of the 75,000 of all races who converged between the Lincoln Memorial and the Washington Monument on Easter Sunday to hear Marian Anderson. Thousands more tuned in to listen over the radio.
 Source: Scurlock Records, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution.

9. ELEANOR ROOSEVELT TO HENRY M. ROBERT

FEBRUARY 26, 1939

My dear Mrs. Robert:

I am afraid that I have never been a very useful member of the Daughters of the American Revolution, so I know it will make very little difference to you whether I resign, or whether I continue to be a member of your organization.

However, I am in complete disagreement with the attitude taken in refusing Constitution Hall to a great artist. You have set an example which seems to

me unfortunate, and I feel obliged to send in to you my resignation. You had an opportunity to lead in an enlightened way and it seems to me that your organization has failed.

I realize that many people will not agree with me, but feeling as I do this seems to me the only proper procedure to follow.

Very sincerely yours,
 [Eleanor Roosevelt]¹¹

10. "MY DAY" (FEBRUARY 27, 1939)

ELEANOR ROOSEVELT

... I have been debating in my mind for some time, a question which I have had to debate with myself once or twice before in my life. Usually I have decided differently from the way in which I am deciding now. The question is, if you belong to an organization and disapprove of an action which is typical of a policy, should you resign or is it better to work for a changed point of view within the organization? In the past, when I was able to work actively in any organization to which I belonged, I have usually stayed until I had at least made a fight and had been defeated.

... Even then, I have, as a rule, accepted my defeat and decided I was wrong or, perhaps, a little too far ahead of the thinking for the majority at that time. I have often found that the thing in which I was interested was done some years later. But in this case, I belong to an organization in which I can do no active work. They have taken an action which has been widely talked of in the press. To remain as a member implies approval of that action, and therefore I am resigning.¹²

INTRODUCTION TO DOCUMENT 11

Eleanor Roosevelt's decision attracted considerable attention and more than a few accusations that she was using this as a political opportunity. But the larger problem was the system of segregation in the District, which also prevented Anderson from singing at a local high school when she had been barred from Constitution Hall. In light of this situation, Roosevelt worked with Interior Secretary Harold Ickes to arrange for Anderson to sing in the open air on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. Anderson's agent, Sol Hurok, lauded the plan to hold the concert in front of the memorial as a clear message to those who had snubbed the singer because of her race.

Eleanor Roosevelt's intervention helped her husband's ongoing efforts to court black voters away from their historic loyalty to the Republican Party and into the fold of the Democratic New Deal coalition. The administration must have delighted at the letter (Document 11), written by a resident of Harlem to Interior Secretary Ickes, who introduced Anderson at the Lincoln Memorial to the 75,000 listening on the mall and the hundreds of thousands more across the country who thrilled at her performance over the radio.

11. LOUISE JEFFERSON TO HAROLD ICKES (1939)

My dear Mr. Ickes,
It is safe to say that eight million Negroes listened to the glorious voice of Miss Marion [sic] Anderson

on Sunday last: listened with gratitude for her offering but with deeper gratitude to you for making it possible.

The occasion was the most significant and distinctive that has yet occurred to promote better race relations and to sponsor Negro achievement.

Please accept my thanks and congratulations for affording this honor and privilege.
Most Respectfully,
Louise E. Jefferson¹³

POSTSCRIPT

Marian Anderson's performance was just one of many moments of hope in the midst of the Great Depression. Another such moment came when the rising black star of the prize ring, Joe Louis, defeated Max Baer in September 1935. Times were hard on Chicago's South Side before the crash, and they were harder now. Richard Wright, author of the era's great novel of African American life, *Native Son*, described black Chicago's joy at Louis's victory. Folks streamed out of taverns, pool halls, and rooming houses where they had listened to the fight. "Lawd, they'd never seen or heard the like of it before. They shook the hands of strangers. They clapped one another on the back. It was like a revival." Two hours later, down on 47th Street, 25,000 people formed a snake line and wove in and out of traffic. "Something had happened alright," Wright wrote, "and it had happened so confoundingly sudden that the whites in the neighborhood were dumb with fear. They felt—you could see it in their faces—that *something* had ripped loose, exploded. Something which they had long feared and thought was dead." The quiet, dignified Louis's triumph was so much more than a mere victory in the ring.

Four centuries of oppression, of frustrated hopes, of black bitterness, felt even in the bones of the bewildered young, were rising to the surface. Yes, unconsciously they had imputed to the brawny image of Joe Louis all the balked dreams of revenge, all the secretly visualized moments of retaliation, AND HE HAD WON! Good Gawd Almighty!

It was a symbolic victory, of course, and the feelings couldn't last forever. But for now, Wright wrote, Louis's conquest was,

the concentrated essence of black triumph over white. From the symbol of Joe's strength, they took strength, and in that moment all fear, all obstacles were wiped out, drowned. They stepped out of the mire of hesitation and irresolution and were free! Invincible! A merciless victor over a fallen foe! Yes, they had felt all that—for a moment.¹⁴ . . .

QUESTIONS

1. Why did people write to President and Mrs. Roosevelt? What did they ask for, and what opinions did they express about the Depression's origins and solutions?
2. In what sense were Depression-era writings and photographs hopeful or despairing? What vision did they offer of collective or individual action?
3. How did the Great Depression alter people's daily lives? Do you see evidence that it affected women differently? African-Americans?
4. Why did Tom Kromer blur the line between fiction and autobiography?
5. Do the photographs inspire emotional responses in you? Fear? Sadness? Pride?
6. Why do you think Marian Anderson's concert—and the story behind it—made national news?

ADDITIONAL READING

Important accounts of the Great Depression include David Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear* (1999); Alan Brinkley, *The End of Reform* (1995); Ronald Edsforth, *The New Deal* (2000); and Alonzo

Hamby, *For the Survival of Democracy: Franklin Roosevelt and the World Crisis of the 1930s* (2007). For an account of the Roosevelt administration, see William E. Leuchtenburg's *The Four Years On Roosevelt and His Legacy* (1995). The flavor of the times is captured in the oral history by Studs Terkel, *Hard Times* (1970), and Ann Banks, *First Person America* (1981). Some aspects of culture in the decade are covered in Anthony Lee, *Painting on the Left* (1999); Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front* (1996); and Lewis Erenberg, *Swingin' the Dream* (1998). On the west, see Timothy Egan, *The Worst Hard Time: the Untold Story of Those Who Survived the Great American Dust Bowl* (2006). On workers' response to the crisis, see Elizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal* (1991). On the Depression and race, see Patricia Sullivan, *Days of Hope: Race and Democracy in the New Deal Era* (1996). On the most famous outlaw of the era, see Elliott J. Gorn, *Dillinger's Wild Ride* (2009). For Joe Louis in the 1930s, see Randy Roberts, *Joe Louis: Hard Times Man* (2010). On the Federal Writers' Project, see Federal Writers' Project, *These Are Our Lives* (1967), and Jerrold Hirsch, *Portrait of Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (1973). Finally, for more on Americans' relationship with Franklin Roosevelt, see Lawrence and Cornelia Levine, *The People and the President* (2002).

ENDNOTES

1. Federal Emergency Relief Administration Central Files, Box 4, National Archives, found in Robert S. McElvaine, *Down and Out in the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983), letter 59.
2. Federal Emergency Relief Administration: New General Subject Files, 1935-1936" files, Box #4, "Anonymous Letters," found in McElvaine, *Down and Out*, letter 75.
3. Eleanor Roosevelt Papers, Franklin Delano Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, Box 2727.
4. McElvaine, *Down and Out* letter 107.
5. Robert F. Wagner Papers, Drawer 1-A-3, Georgetown University Library, found in McElvaine, *Down and Out*, letter 108.
6. Eleanor Roosevelt Papers, FDR Library, Box 2725, found in McElvaine, *Down and Out*, letter 141.
7. Ellison, Ralph. [City Street]. New York City, New York, 1939. Folklore Project, Life Histories, 1936-1939, U.S. Work Projects Administration, Federal Writers Project, Library of Congress.
8. Tom Kromer, *Waiting for Nothing and Other Writings*, edited by Arthur D. Casciato and James L. W. West (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986), pp. 94-103.
9. Meridel Le Sueur, "Women on the Breadlines," originally published in the *New Masses* (January 1932), from *Harvest: Collected Stories*. Reprinted with the permission of The Permissions Company, Inc., on behalf of West End Press, Albuquerque, New Mexico.
10. Meridel Le Sueur, "I Was Marching," *New Masses* (September 18, 1934), pp. 16-18, courtesy of International Publishers, Inc.
11. File copy of letter from Eleanor Roosevelt to the President-General of the Daughters of the American Revolution, February 26, 1939, National Archives.
12. Eleanor Roosevelt, "My Day," February 27, 1939.
13. Letter from Louise E. Jefferson to Secretary Harold Ickes, Office of the Secretary of the Interior, Record Group 48, National Archives.
14. Richard Wright, "Joe Louis Uncovers Dynamite," *New Masses* (October 8, 1935).