



## CHAPTER 25

### A MOMENT IN DRAMA

# Sweet Home Chicago

From Chicago Renaissance  
to *A Raisin in the Sun*

Like the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s in New York City, the Chicago Renaissance saw an outpouring of African American literature and the arts from a concentrated black urban population. But the Harlem Renaissance reached its highpoint during the relatively prosperous years of the Jazz Age, whereas the Chicago Renaissance got under way in the gloomiest days of economic depression in the 1930s. As a result, the Chicago themes tended to be more overtly social and political than those of the Harlem Renaissance. And the Chicago Renaissance took place over a more extended period, stretching from the 1930s to 1960.

Although the word *renaissance* is frequently interpreted as “rebirth, or renewal,” for many of these artists the flowering of black literature, art, and music was not a revival so much as a new thing, a consequence of an enormous African American migration from the South to the cities of the North. Chicago, the junction of many railroads, received a large share of those migrants, so much so that it was often thought of as the “Promised Land.” The black population in Chicago leapt from under 15,000 in 1890 to over 100,000 in 1920, almost 500,000 in 1950, and over 800,000 in 1960. The life that evolved on the black

South Side of Chicago—or “Bronzeville,” as it was popularly known—was a blend of southern black culture, both rural and urban, and extensive northern urban adaptations of that culture.

Life in Chicago’s Bronzeville and the smaller African American enclaves was hard. Migrants from the South often had trouble finding all but the most menial jobs because the decently paid ones were reserved for white workers. Often the policies of labor unions reinforced white employment privilege. In the Great Depression, however, even jobs as waiters, dishwashers, janitors, or cleaning women could be scarce. Housing was also difficult to find. Blacks were discouraged from moving outside the ghettos—sometimes by violent measures—and sometimes were legally banned from “covenanted” white residence areas. Housing prices and apartment rents rose rapidly and out of proportion to their poor quality. Landlords, black and white, capitalized on the housing demand by splitting existing apartments into tiny sordid units called “kitchenettes.”

Just because blacks had escaped the worst weapons of southern racism—lynching and the deprivation of the vote most notoriously—did not mean they enjoyed respect, freedom, and ample opportunity in Chicago. The police could be brutal, bureaucrats unfeeling, and individual white Chicagoans every bit as racist in their attitudes as the southerners blacks had left behind. But on the whole, life improved in Chicago, and black migrants enjoyed a sense of family and community in the crowded ghetto. Still, life remained a struggle.



“Changing Tenants” sign on a Chicago apartment building, 1941. Signs like the one above were indicative of the city’s institutionalized racial segregation, in which the demographics of entire buildings and neighborhoods would shift as African Americans moved in. “Changing tenants” meant that a building was being vacated by whites and would be rented exclusively by African Americans, essentially a euphemism for what is often called “white flight” today.

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The selections in this chapter speak for themselves about the vibrancy and diversity of Bronzeville's people and activities. But a few themes need highlighting. First, the Chicago Renaissance had a strong social and political basis. It began in the Great Depression of the 1930s, when more than one-third of Americans were out of work. It was greatly influenced by the urban sociology movement that devoted academic resources to the study of city problems, a movement that originated at the nearby University of Chicago, which built the earliest and strongest such program of any university. Influenced and aided by social scientists, many black and white Chicago writers of the 1930s dealt with the "facts" and conditions of the city, especially the life of the lower classes. Second, the Chicago Renaissance was radically political. During the Depression, when views on the left proliferated, many Chicago writers belonged to or were sympathetic to the Communist Party, then a small but highly influential organization.

For African Americans, both the burdens and the opportunities in the North gave rise to a cultural explosion. Blues, jazz, and gospel were adapted from their "country" origins as they were carried North, along with instruments such as the guitar, banjo, and fiddle. The literary arts flourished, as did the written correspondence between black Chicagoans and their fellow writers in other cities. Cultural forms borrowed from each other—both themes and structures. European and American mainstream arts were influential but were filtered through a strong racial awareness. The efforts of individual writers and other artists were linked through a network of cultural and social institutions that included libraries, community centers, and federal agencies. It was a time of powerful sociological and literary analysis. Literature did not remain a provenance of writers working alone but became a common expression of black Americans' social, political, and racial identity.

Social conflict was everywhere in Chicago between 1930 and 1960. Major themes for African American artists were civil rights, oppression, poor housing, and poverty. A few motifs appear frequently in the work of the African American writers of the period, and several questions related to these recurrent themes are worth readers' special attention:

- **Home:** Where does it lie? The South? Chicago? Africa? Is it found in heaven or an inner life? Is it in the life of one's people?
- **Travel:** Is one's home "on the road"? What role is played by trains and train stations in the work of Chicago Renaissance artists?
- **The struggle to survive, to make it through:** What sources of strength are available in the arts and in religion? How should one respond to the oppressor and to oppression?
- **Getting ahead:** How is life to be improved for oneself and one's family? An often thwarted desire for respectability, cleanliness, and education characterizes the hopes of many, especially women.
- **Religion:** How can black Christianity be distinguished from the white version imposed on slaves? How does one draw on the liberating elements of Christianity?
- **Having a good time:** Despite one's troubles and fears and the disapproval of others, how can one find pleasure in the world?

- **Music:** Why does music figure so strongly in the work of the Chicago Renaissance? Chicago's golden age for blues, jazz, and gospel was reflected in many art forms of the period.
- **Serving time:** How are jail sentences, just or unjust, represented in African American arts of the period?
- **Love:** What happens when familial love conflicts with sexual love? How is the two-timing lover represented?

You will find these themes throughout this chapter, which includes a number of different genres. The writers of the Chicago Renaissance excelled in many forms. This chapter is a small anthology of their nonfiction, popular and literary poetry, and fiction, culminating in Lorraine Hansberry's famous play, *A Raisin in the Sun*. The other works included here provide a context for Hansberry's play.

(Note: The "Starting Points for Further Research" sections for the poets in this chapter appear after their respective biographies in Chapter 19, "Biographies of Selected Poets.")



#### VIDEO LOCALE

George King's *Goin' to Chicago*. Filmmaker and Chicagoan George King's 1994 documentary *Goin' to Chicago* chronicles the huge migration of black Americans from the agrarian South to the industrial North and West following World War II through the personal stories of a small group of older Chicagoans, most of whom were born in the Mississippi Delta. The film is available from the California Newsreel website at <http://www.newsreel.org/films/gointoch.htm>.

## TIMELINE FOR THE CHICAGO RENAISSANCE

Although the Chicago Renaissance began around 1935 and ended around 1960, in order to give a fuller literary history of the artists featured in this chapter and more comprehensive context to the political and religious landscape, the timeline starts in the late 1800s and ends in 1965.

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| 1893 | The World Columbian Exposition in Chicago brings midwestern artists to the city, setting the stage for the Chicago Renaissance.                 |
| 1905 | The <i>Chicago Defender</i> is founded, an African American newspaper that would play a large role in northern migration of blacks to the city. |
| 1908 | Richard Wright born on a Mississippi plantation.  |
| 1912 | The quarterly magazine <i>Poetry</i> founded in Chicago by Harriet Monroe. The Little Theater founded to support young Chicago playwrights.     |
| 1917 | Gwendolyn Brooks born in Topeka, Kansas; she will grow up in Chicago.   |

- 1922 Louis Armstrong becomes a major player in the Chicago jazz scene.
- 1926 A circle of New York artists and bohemians, including Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston, found the literary magazine *Fire!!* and publish its first and only issue.
- 1927 Richard Wright moves to Chicago. The Savoy Ballroom on the South Side opens, the first dance hall in Chicago welcoming black patrons.
- 1928 Oscar Depriest of Chicago becomes the first African American elected to Congress in the twentieth century.
- 1929 The New York Stock Market collapses on October 29, marking the beginning of the Great Depression.
- 1930 Lorraine Hansberry born on the South Side of Chicago.
- 1932 The George Cleveland Hall branch of the Chicago Public Library opens with a special collection of African American works.
- 1934 Gwendolyn Brooks publishes her first poetry in the Chicago *Defender*.
- 1935 Frank Marshall Davis publishes *Black Man's Verse*.
- 1936 An increasingly radical black population in Chicago founds the Chicago Negro Congress to rally for black rights.
- 1937 Frank Marshall Davis publishes *I Am the American Negro*. Richard Wright moves to New York.
- 1940 Richard Wright publishes *Native Son*, about an African American man confronting the social and economic obstacles in 1930s Chicago.
- 1941 Gwendolyn Brooks enrolls in Inez Cunningham Stark's South Side poetry workshop.
- 1942 Margaret Walker's collection of poetry *For My People*, celebrating African American culture, is published.
- 1943 Blues legend Muddy Waters moves to Chicago.
- 1945 Richard Wright publishes *Black Boy* after moving to Paris. St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton publish *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City*. Gwendolyn Brooks publishes *A Street in Bronzeville*.
- 1947 The Chess brothers, Leonard and Phil, become part owners of Aristocrats Records, which introduces songs recorded by Muddy Waters.
- 1948 Frank Marshall Davis publishes *47th Street*.
- 1950 Gwendolyn Brooks receives the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry for *Annie Allen*, published in 1949.
- 1950–1965 The Chess brothers reorganize Aristocrats Records, rename it Chess Records, and include more blues, R&B, and rock 'n' roll. Chess Records becomes a home for such artists as Willie Dixon, Howlin' Wolf, Sonny Boy Williamson, and Chuck Berry.
- 1951 Sam Cooke becomes the lead singer of the Soul Stirrers, a Chicago-based gospel quartet. Margaret Danner's four-poem series "Far from Africa" is published in *Poetry*.

- 1953 Gwendolyn Brooks publishes her semi-autobiographical novel *Maud Martha*.
- 1956 Gwendolyn Brooks publishes *Bronzeville for Boys and Girls*, a children's book.
- 1959 *A Raisin in the Sun* first produced.
- 1960 Gwendolyn Brooks publishes *The Bean Eaters*.
- 1964 The Civil Rights Act of 1964 is signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson, abolishing Jim Crow laws and effectively outlawing segregation and discriminatory practices in businesses, public places, and schools. It is the most far-reaching civil rights legislation since the Reconstruction period following the end of the Civil War in 1865.
- 1964 Gospel and pop/R&B singer Sam Cooke dies in a mysterious shooting.
- 1965 President Lyndon B. Johnson signs the Voting Rights Act of 1965, leading to dramatic increases in black voter registration.

## NONFICTION OF THE CHICAGO RENAISSANCE



St. Clair Drake.

At the height of the Chicago Renaissance, two African American social scientists, St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton, produced a rich, highly detailed description of life in Chicago's black community. Their 1945 book *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* is a finely drawn view of the black ghetto by social scientists who were themselves trapped in it by the color of their skin. A classic of modern sociology, it is still available today—all 900-odd pages of it.

Thanks in part to the University of Chicago, which had some of the best social scientists in America, the city of Chicago was the site of many important sociological studies. But Drake and Cayton, influenced by but not based at the university, conducted their voluminous research under the sponsorship of the Work Projects Administration (WPA), the federal program that was to give meaningful jobs to many talented Chicagoans, black and white, during the long economic depression of the 1930s.

Among the scholars and writers to celebrate *Black Metropolis* was Richard Wright, who wrote the book's introduction, describing the importance of the Chicago school of sociology in general and Drake and Cayton's study in particular:



I did not know what my story was, and it was not until I

Horace R. Cayton, c. 1941, in his office at the Parkway Community House. (See "Literary Locale" on p. 1754.)

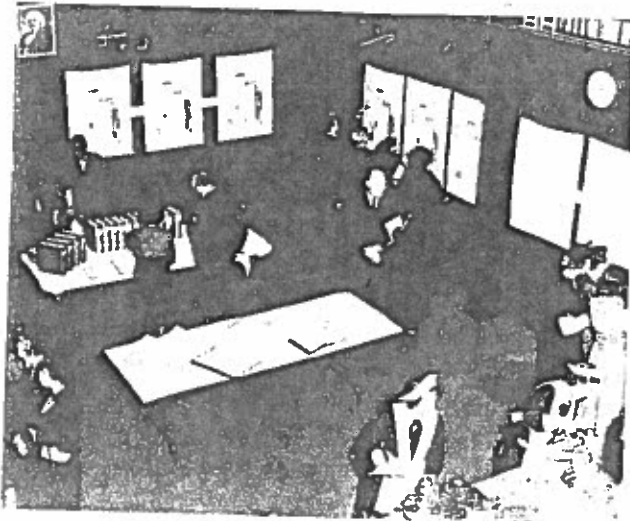


Exhibit of WPA research materials, in the basement of the Church of the Good Shepherd in Chicago, 1939. This public exhibition gathered research from 23 studies, presenting the most extensive examination of northern black communities ever undertaken. Supervised by social scientist Horace Cayton and funded by the federal Works Progress Administration (WPA), the research and exhibit became the basis for Cayton's groundbreaking book written with St. Clair Drake, *Black Metropolis* (excerpt below).

stumbled upon science that I discovered some of the meaning of the environment that battered and taunted me. . . . The huge mountains of fact piled up by the Department of Sociology at the University of Chicago gave me my first concrete vision of the forces that molded the urban Negro's body and soul.

It was from the scientific findings of men like the late Robert E. Park, Robert Redfield, and Louis Wirth [all University of Chicago sociology professors] that I drew the meanings for my documentary book, *12,000,000 Black Voices*; for my novel, *Native Son*; it was from their scientific facts that I absorbed some of that quota of inspiration necessary for me to write *Uncle Tom's Children* and *Black Boy*. *Black Metropolis*, Drake's and Cayton's scientific statement about the urban Negro, pictures the environment out of which the Bigger Thomases of our nation come.

Wright's generous praise provides a strong link between his own books' main characters (including Bigger Thomas, the protagonist of *Native Son*) and the beginnings of a social scientific view of black Chicago. Wright's powerful novels and stories, he claims, were not simply the product of some overwhelming natural force, but of conscious reading and thinking about sociology and anthropology. Wright, who never finished high school, had immersed himself in the latest, most detailed scholarly study of Chicago ghetto life.

### ST. CLAIR DRAKE

(1911–1990)

### AND HORACE R. CAYTON

(1903–1970)

In the opening pages of *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* (1945), sociologists St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton describe daily life in Bronzeville, Chicago's black ghetto in the 1930s.

### *The Spirit of Bronzeville*

(1945)

"Ghetto" is a harsh term, carrying overtones of poverty and suffering, of exclusion and subordination. In Midwest Metropolis it is used by civic leaders when

they want to shock complacency into action. Most of the ordinary people in the Black Belt refer to their community as "the South Side," but everybody is also familiar with another name for the area—Bronzeville. This name seems to have been used originally by an editor of the *Chicago Bee*, who, in 1930, sponsored a contest to elect a "Mayor of Bronzeville." A year or two later, when this newspaperman joined the *Defender* staff, he took his brain-child with him. The annual election of the "Mayor of Bronzeville" grew into a community event with a significance far beyond that of a circulation stunt. Each year a Board of Directors composed of outstanding citizens of the Black Belt takes charge of the mock-election. Ballots are cast at corner stores and in barbershops and poolrooms. The "Mayor," usually a businessman, is inaugurated with a colorful ceremony and a ball. Throughout his tenure he is expected to serve as a symbol of the community's aspirations. He visits churches, files protests with the Mayor of the city, and acts as official greeter of visitors to Bronzeville. Tens of thousands of people participate in the annual election of the "Mayor." In 1944-45, a physician was elected mayor.

Throughout the remainder of this book we shall use the term "Bronzeville" for Black Metropolis because it seems to express the feeling that the people have about their own community. They live in the Black Belt and to them it is more than the "ghetto" revealed by statistical analysis.

*The Axes of Life:* What are the dominating interests, the "centers of orientation," the lines of attention, which claim the time and money of Bronzeville—the "axes of life" around which individual and community life revolves? The most important of these are: (1) Staying Alive; (2) Having a Good Time; (3) Praising God; (4) Getting Ahead; (5) Advancing the Race.

The majority of Bronzeville's people will insist that they came to Midwest Metropolis to "better their condition." Usually they mean that they were seeking an opportunity to sell their labor for a steady supply of money to expend on food, clothing, housing, recreation, and plans for the future. They were also searching for adequate leisure time in which to enjoy themselves. Such goals are a part of the general American Dream. But when a Negro talks about "bettering his condition" he means something more: he refers also to finding an environment where exclusion and subordination by white men are not rubbed in his face—as they are in the South.

### Staying Alive

Before people can enjoy liberty or pursue happiness, they must maintain life. During the Fat Years the problem of earning a living was not an acute one for Negroes in Chicago. More than three-fourths of the Negro men and almost half of the women were gainfully employed, though their work tended to be heavy or menial. Wages were generally lower than for the bulk of the white working people, but they permitted a plane of living considerably higher than anything most parts of the South had to offer. Though the first few years of the Depression resulted in much actual suffering in Bronzeville, the WPA eventually provided a bedrock of subsistence which guaranteed food and clothing. The ministrations of social workers and wide education in the use of public health facilities seem to have actually raised the level of health in the Black Ghetto during the Depression years. The Second World War once more incorporated Negroes into the productive economic life of Midwest Metropolis, and most of them had plenty of money to spend for the first time in a decade.

The high infant mortality and general death rates, the high incidence of disease, and the overcrowding and hazardous work, have all operated to keep the rate of natural increase for Negroes below that for whites. The man in the street is not aware of these statistical indices, but he does experience life in the Black Belt as a struggle for existence, a struggle which he consciously interprets as a fight against white people who deny Negroes the opportunity to compete for—and hold—“good jobs.” Civic leaders, who see the whole picture, are also acutely aware of the role played by inadequate health and recreational facilities and poor housing. They also recognize the need for widespread adult education which will teach recent migrants how to make use of public health facilities and to protect themselves against disease. The struggle for survival proceeds on an unconscious level, except when it is highlighted by a depression, a race riot, or an economic conflict between Negroes and whites.

### Enjoying Life

Bronzeville's people have never let poverty, disease, and discrimination “get them down.” The vigor with which they enjoy life seems to belie the gloomy observations of the statisticians and civic leaders who know the facts about the Black Ghetto. In the Lean Years as well as the Fat, Bronzeville has shared the general American interest in “having a good time.” Its people like the movies and shows, athletic events, dancing, card-playing, and all the other recreational activities—commercial and noncommercial—which Midwest Metropolis offers. The recreations of an industrial society reflect the need for an escape from the monotony of machine-tending and the discipline of office and factory. For the people of Bronzeville, “having a good time” also serves another function—escape from the tensions of contact with white people. Absorption in “pleasure” is, in part at least, a kind of adjustment to their separate, subordinate status in American life.

If working as servants, Negroes must be properly deferential to the white people upon whom they depend for meager wages and tips. In fact, they often have to overdo their act in order to earn a living; as they phrase it, they have to “Uncle Tom” to “Mr. Charley” a bit to survive. If working in a factory, they must take orders from a white managerial personnel and associate with white workers who, they know, do not accept them as social equals. If self-employed, they are continually frustrated by the indirect restrictions imposed upon Negro business and professional men. If civil servants, they are in continuous contact with situations that emphasize their ghetto existence and subordinate status. But, when work is over, the pressure of the white world is lifted. Within Bronzeville Negroes are at home. They find rest from white folks as well as from labor, and they make the most of it. In their homes, in lodge rooms and clubhouses, pool parlors and taverns, cabarets and movies, they can temporarily shake off the incubus of the white world. Their recreational activities parallel those of white people, but with distinctive nuances and shadings of behavior. What Bronzeville considers a good time—the pattern for enjoying life—is intimately connected with economic status, education, and social standing. A detailed discussion of recreational habits is therefore reserved for those chapters dealing with social class. Suffice it here to say that Bronzeville's people treasure their inalienable right to pursue happiness.

### Praising the Lord

It is a matter for continuous surprise that churches in America's large urban communities are able to compete with secular interests and to emerge even stronger than the church in rural areas. Despite the fact that only about half of the adults in America claim church membership, the strong Protestant and Catholic tradition in the culture retains its hold upon the minds of the American people. The church and religion have been displaced from the center of the average man's life, but remain an important side-interest for many people. The general trend toward secularization of interests has affected men more strongly than women, but probably the majority of Americans pay some lip-service to religion and participate occasionally in the rites and ceremonies—at least upon occasions of birth, marriage, and death.

It has become customary in America to refer to Negroes as a "religious people." The movies and the radio, by their selection of incident and dialogue, tend to reinforce this prevalent conception. A walk through Bronzeville also seems to lend confirmation to this belief, for the evidences of an interest in "praising the Lord" are everywhere—churches are omnipresent. Negroes have slightly more than their expected share of churches and twice their share of preachers; a large proportion of the people seem to enjoy "praising the Lord." The spirit of Bronzeville is tintured with religion, but like "having a good time" the real importance of the church can be understood only by relating it to the economic and social status of the various groups in Bronzeville.

### Getting Ahead

The dominating individual drive in American life is not "staying alive," nor "enjoying life," nor "praising the Lord"—it is "getting ahead." In its simplest terms this means progressively moving from low-paid to higher-paid jobs, acquiring a more comfortable home, laying up something for sickness and old age, and trying to make sure that the children will start out at a higher economic and cultural level than the parents. Individuals symbolize their progress by the way they spend their money—for clothes, real estate, automobiles, donations, entertaining; and the individual's choice is dictated largely in terms of the circle of society in which he moves or which he wishes to impress. These circles or groupings are myriad and complex, for not all people set their goals at the same distance. Out of the differential estimates of the meaning of success arise various social classes and "centers of orientation."

There are, of course, some small groups in Midwest Metropolis, as elsewhere, who interpret success in noneconomic terms, who prize "morality," or "culture," or talent and technical competence. In general, however, Americans believe that if a man is *really* "getting ahead," if he is *really* successful, his accomplishments will become translated into an effective increase in income. People are expected to "cash in" on brains or talent or political power.

For thousands of Negro migrants from the South, merely arriving in Bronzeville represented "getting ahead." Yet Negroes, like other Americans, share the general interest in getting ahead in more conventional terms. The Job Ceiling and the Black Ghetto limit free competition for the money and for residential symbols of success. Partly because of these limitations (which are not peculiar to Chicago) it has become customary among the masses of Negroes in

America to center their interest upon living in the immediate present or upon going to heaven—upon “having a good time” or “praising the Lord.” Though some derive their prestige from the respect accorded them by the white world, or by the professional and business segments of the Negro world, most Negroes seem to adopt a pattern of conspicuous behavior and conspicuous consumption. Maintaining a “front” and “showing off” become very important substitutes for getting ahead in the economic sense. Leadership in various organizations often constitutes the evidence that a man has “arrived.”

Leaders in Bronzeville, like Negro leaders everywhere since the Civil War, are constantly urging the community to raise its sights above “survival,” “enjoying life,” and “praising the Lord.” They present “getting ahead” as a racial duty as well as a personal gain. When a Negro saves money, buys bonds, invests in a business or in property, he is automatically “advancing The Race.” When Negroes “waste their substance,” they are “setting The Race back.” This appraisal of their activity is widely accepted by the rank and file, but leaders sometimes press their shots too hard. When they do so, they often get a response like that of the domestic servant who resented the attempts of a civic leader to discourage elaborate social club dances during the Depression: “We [the social club] give to the Federated Home and about ten or fifteen other institutions. If we want to give a dance, I think that’s our business. We poor colored people don’t have much as it is, and if we sat around and thought about our sufferings we’d go crazy.”

### Advancing the Race

White people in Midwest Metropolis become aware of Negroes only occasionally and sporadically. Negroes, however, live in a state of intense and perpetual awareness that they are a black minority in a white man’s world. The Job Ceiling and the Black Ghetto are an ever-present experience. Petty discriminations (or actions that might be interpreted as such) occur daily. Unpleasant memories of the racial and individual past are a part of every Negro’s personality structure. News and rumors of injustice and terror in the South and elsewhere circulate freely through Negro communities at all times. “Race consciousness” is not the work of “agitators” or “subversive influences”—it is forced upon Negroes by the very fact of their separate-subordinate status in American life. And it is tremendously reinforced by life in a compact community such as Black Metropolis, set within the framework of a large white community.

Negroes are ill at ease in the land of their birth. They are bombarded with the slogans of democracy, liberty, freedom, equality, but they are not allowed to participate freely in American life. They develop a tormenting ambivalence toward themselves and the larger society of which they are a part. America rejects them; so they tend to hate. But it is the only land they know; so they are sentimentally attached to it. Their skin color and social origins subject them to discrimination and contumely; so they often (consciously or unconsciously) despise The Race. The people they know most intimately, however, are colored, and men cannot totally hate themselves and their friends. Thus their moods fluctuate between shame and defiance. Their conversation becomes a bewildering mixture of expressions of “racial depreciation” and “race pride.”

*The Cult of Race:* Negroes feel impelled to prove to themselves continually that they are not the inferior creatures which their minority status implies. Thus,

ever since emancipation, Negro leaders have preached the necessity for cultivating "race pride." They have assiduously repeated the half-truth that "no other race has ever made the progress that Negroes have made in an equivalent length of time." They have patiently attempted to popularize an expanding roster of Race Heroes—individuals who have attained success or prominence. "Catching up with the white folks" has been developed as the dominating theme of inspirational exhortations, and the Negro "firsts" and "onlies" are set up as Race Heroes. "Beating the white man at his own game" becomes a powerful motivation for achievement and explains the popularity of such personalities as Joe Louis or Jesse Owens, George Washington Carver or outstanding soldier-heroes. A myth of "special gifts" has also emerged, with Negroes (and whites also) believing that American Negroes have some inborn, unusual talent as dancers, musicians, artists and athletes.

In the period between the First and the Second World Wars, this emphasis upon race pride became a mass phenomenon among the Negroes in large urban communities. Race consciousness was transformed into a positive and aggressive defensive racialism. Negroes in Black Metropolis, as in other communities, feeling the strength of their economic and political power, have become increasingly aware of the achievements of individual Negroes, and have developed an absorbing interest in every scrap of evidence that "The Race is advancing," or is "catching up with white folks," or is "beating the white man at his own game." Unable to compete freely as *individuals*, the Negro masses take intense vicarious pleasure in watching Race Heroes vindicate them in the eyes of the white world.

Race pride is a defensive reaction that can become a mere verbal escape mechanism. Negro leaders are therefore perpetually involved in an effort to make race pride more than an end in itself: to utilize it as a morale builder, as the raw material of "racial solidarity." They seek to use it for "advancing The Race." They foster race pride in order to elicit support for collective action—the support of Negro business enterprises, the organization of petition and protest, the focusing of economic and political power. The most persistent theme of speeches and editorials in Bronzeville is: "Negroes must learn to stick together." The leaders use it also to encourage individual achievement, by interpreting the success of one Negro as the success of all. Out of this interplay between race consciousness, race pride, and race solidarity arise certain definite social types: the Race Hero, the Race Leader, the Race Man, the Race Woman.

The average person in Bronzeville is primarily interested in "staying alive," "getting ahead," "having a good time" and "praising the Lord." Conscious preoccupation with "racial advancement" is fitful and sporadic, though always latent. The masses leave "the burden of The Race" to those individuals who are oriented around "service"—the Race Leaders. Some of these are people who devote much of their leisure time to charitable organizations or associations for racial advancement. For others solving the race problem is a full-time job. For instance, a score or so of individuals in Bronzeville are elected and appointed politicians who "represent The Race." There are also a few civic leaders who earn their living by administering social agencies such as the Urban League, the YMCA, the YWCA, settlement houses, and similar organizations. In Bronzeville, too, there are numerous "self-appointed leaders"—men and women, often illiterate and poverty-stricken, who feel the call to "lead The Race out of bondage." They harangue their small groups of followers on the

streets, in storefronts, or in the public parks with a fanaticism that alienates them from the masses as well as from the affluent and educated.

Most of the people in Bronzeville do not hold membership in any of the organizations for "racial advancement," such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the National Negro Congress, the Urban League, or the Council of Negro Organizations. They follow the activities of Race Leaders in the Negro press, they cheer and applaud an occasionally highly publicized victory over those who maintain the Job Ceiling and the Black Ghetto. They grumble persistently about "lack of leadership." They contribute an occasional nickel or dime to drives for funds. But when some inciting incident stirs them deeply, they close ranks and put up a scrap—for a community housing project, to remove a prejudiced policeman, to force a recalcitrant merchant to employ Negroes. And they periodically vote for Negroes to represent them in state, local, and national bodies. In general, "solving the race problem" is left in the hands of Race Leaders—the "racial watchdogs," as one Bronzeville preacher called them.



#### LITERARY LOCALE

**Parkway Community House—Bronzeville, Chicago.** Originally called the Good Shepherd Community Center when it was founded in 1936 as an educational and recreational outreach program of the Good Shepherd Congregational Church, the Parkway Community House became a locus for community arts and cultural activity during the heart of the Chicago Renaissance. Horace Cayton, the co-author of *Black Metropolis* (1945), was its director from 1939 to



Young pianist giving a recital at the Parkway Community House, 1942.



Poet and playwright Langston Hughes, discussing a new script with actors at Chicago's Parkway Community House, 1942.

1948. Under his direction, the organization grew into one of Chicago's major institutions for promoting the activities of local artists and intellectuals. Regular visitors included sociologist, author, and civil rights leader W. E. B. Du Bois; writers Richard Wright, Langston Hughes, Margaret Walker, Arna Bontemps, and Gwendolyn Brooks (all of whom are featured elsewhere in this chapter); actor Paul Robeson; and photographer Gordon Parks.

The center was named the Parkway Community House when it relocated in 1941 to 5120 South

Parkway. The new space enabled the organization to expand its functions to include a clinic, nursery school, dormitory, birth certificate bureau, relief office, meetingplace for unions, and a facility for arts workshops and performances. In its current incarnation, at 500 E. 67th Street, its offerings have been downsized in the face of financial constraints, but it still provides important assistance to local residents, including first aid, child care, afterschool and youth development programs, literacy programs, programs for senior citizens, and support services for victims of domestic violence.

## POEMS OF THE CHICAGO RENAISSANCE

In 1925, few observers of the Chicago literary scene would have predicted the soon-to-come outpouring of poetry from highly talented black writers. For most Americans, Chicago poetry in the 1920s and 1930s meant the work of prominent white writers such as Sherwood Anderson, Edgar Lee Masters, Vachel Lindsay, and above all, Carl Sandburg. This poetry was no doubt stimulated by the presence in Chicago of *Poetry*, a small quarterly founded in 1912 by Harriet Monroe. *Poetry* soon became the most influential poetry magazine in the world;