

Study Guide

Compiled and edited by Jack Marshall

for

The American Century Theater
presentation of

Native Son

by Richard Wright and Paul Green

April 14-May 9, 2009

Theater II, Gunston Arts Center
2700 South Lang Street ▪ Arlington Virginia

For Teachers—

The stage adaptation of *Native Son*, viewed in conjunction with a reading of the novel, opens many possible topics for study and discussion that may not arise from reading the novel alone and enhances others that the novel raises.

This study guide does not presume to be a study guide for the novel, but rather an aid for using the play, according to each teacher's objectives for the class, to promote critical thought about

- the issues raised by both play and novel,
- the role of live theater in communicating social and political ideas, and
- the people and environment that produced *Native Son*, the drama.

About The American Century Theater

The American Century Theater was founded in 1994. We are a professional nonprofit theater company dedicated to presenting great, important, and worthy American plays of the Twentieth Century . . . what Henry Luce called “*the American Century*.”

The company's mission is one of rediscovery, enlightenment, and perspective, not nostalgia or preservation. Americans must not lose the extraordinary vision and wisdom of past playwrights, nor can we afford to surrender the moorings to our shared cultural heritage.

Our mission is also driven by a conviction that communities need theater, and theater needs audiences. To those ends, this company is committed to producing plays that challenge and move all Americans, of all ages, origins, and points of view. In particular, we strive to create theatrical experiences that entire families can watch, enjoy, and discuss long afterward.

This study guide is part of our effort to enhance the appreciation of these works, so rich in history, content, and grist for debate.

The American Century Theater is supported in part by Arlington County through the Cultural Affairs Division of the Department of Parks, Recreation, and Cultural Resources and the Arlington Commission for the Arts.



*Theater you can afford to see –
Plays you can't afford to miss!*

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Class Discussion Topics

Before seeing the play

General

- Do you like seeing movie or stage adaptations of books you have read? Why or why not?
- Have you seen a film adaptation of a novel that you have known well (such as the Harry Potter, Lord of the Rings or Twilight series)? How did it make you feel about the book? Did it change how you saw the characters? Was it an accurate presentation of the book?
- How would you describe the difference between books and visual representations of books? Which do you enjoy more?
- Which is the more expressive and intense medium: books, live theater, or movies?

Native Son

- How do you picture Bigger Thomas? If you were casting a movie, what actor would you cast to play him?
- What famous actor would be a good Max?
- Do you think *Native Son* will make a good play? Why or why not?
- Richard Wright's co-author of the play, Paul Green, believed that the play needed a happier ending than the book. Do you think movies and plays need to be more optimistic than books to be popular?

Watching the play

- As you watch *Native Son*, think about how each element of the production—casting, set, lighting, costumes—affects the way the story comes to the audience.
- How is watching a play as part a group of people different from reading a novel by yourself? Do you think the audience affects how you enjoy and experience the play? If so, how?

After seeing the play

General

- Did you like the play? Did it keep your interest? Why or why not?
- Was it an accurate presentation of the book? How was it different?
- The play was less than two hours long. Do you think this makes the experience more intense than reading?
- How is live theater different from watch a movie?

Native Son

- Was Bigger Thomas as you expected after reading the novel? How was he different? Does seeing a real human being as Bigger change how you view the character? Why?
- The original production of *Native Son* was seen almost exclusively by whites. How would a white audience member's reaction to the play be different from that of a black audience member in 1941? How? What about in 2009? Would the reactions of white and black audience members be more similar to each other today?
- Plays add actors, designers and stage direction to the author's words, while in a novel, only the words of the author carry the ideas and story. Did these extra elements change the story? Did they make them clearer or less clear?
- The stage version of *Native Son* is seldom performed. Why do you think this is? Should the play be produced more often?

Themes and Ideas for Essays and Research

The *Native Son* creative team

While Richard Wright wrote the novel himself, the play adaptation was a collaborative effort in which he, director Orson Welles, producer John Houseman, playwright Paul Green, and star Canada Lee all had influence over the final product. What did each bring to the project, and how was the result different because of him?

The Harlem Renaissance

Native Son was written at the tail end of the Harlem Renaissance, and it was heavily criticized by some of that movement's major figures. Some even found the novel and play a contradiction of the spirit and principles of the movement. Was it?

The intersection of art and politics

Wright's co-author Paul Green was dedicated to the abolition of the death penalty as well as to civil rights. He was also determined to create a play that would be popular. How did these objectives draw him to the project? Were they in conflict with each other? How does the need for critical approval and commercial success get in the way of using the stage for political and social expression?

Canada Lee

By any measure, Canada Lee was a remarkable man. Why is he so little known today? What causes some figures to become famous and others to be forgotten? How can we revive the reputation of Canada Lee and others?

Live theater

In 1941, live theater had great influence on the culture. Does it have any today? Is it important? Can other media, like TV, movies, and the internet, do everything live theater once did, or does live theater fill a unique role?

Native Son

Opening: Mar 24, 1941 **Closing:** Jun 28, 1941

St. James Theatre, Broadway, NYC

Setting: Chicago. The Present.

Opening Night Production Credits

Produced by Orson Welles and John Houseman

Written by Paul Green and Richard Wright; **Based on** the novel by Richard Wright

Directed by Orson Welles

Scenic Design by James Morcom

Opening Night Cast

<u>Jacqueline Ghant Andre</u>	A Neighbor
<u>Frances Bavier</u>	Peggy
<u>John Berry</u>	A Reporter
<u>C.M. Bootsie Davis</u>	Ernie Jones
<u>Philip Bourneuf</u>	Buckley, D.A.
<u>Eileen Burns</u>	Miss Emmett
<u>Anne Burr</u>	Mary Dalton
<u>Ray Collins</u>	Paul Max, Atty for the Defense
<u>Evelyn Ellis</u>	Hannah Thomas
<u>Nell Harrison</u>	Mrs. Dalton
<u>Canada Lee</u>	Bigger Thomas
<u>William Malone</u>	Judge
<u>Helen Martin</u>	Vera Thomas
<u>Rena Joseph</u>	Clara
<u>Joseph Pevney</u>	Jan Erlone
<u>J. Flashe Riley</u>	Jack
<u>Don Roberts</u>	A Newspaper Man
<u>Stephen Roberts</u>	A Newspaper Man
<u>Erskine Sanford</u>	Mr. Dalton
<u>Wardell Saunders</u>	Gus Mitchell
<u>Everett Sloane</u>	Britten
<u>Paul Stewart</u>	A Newspaper Man
<u>Roderster Timmons</u>	G.H. Rankin
<u>Lloyd Warren</u>	Buddy Thomas
<u>George Zorn</u>	A Newspaper Man

Wright's Troubling Novel: Shifting Critical Views of *Native Son*

Richard Wright's goal in writing *Native Son* was to present honestly, directly and without sentiment the complex and disturbing status of racial politics in America. The volume of criticism that the novel generated, and continued to generate, as well as its continued vitality after more than 60 years, demonstrate how thoroughly Wright succeeded.

Early reviewers, especially African American critics, recognized the book's significance. Charles Poore, in the *New York Times*, declared that "few other recent novels have been preceded by more advance critical acclamation." *Native Son* was seen as a novel of social protest, typical of works from the 1930s, when writers who lived through the Great Depression created works critical of the American dream. Thus, Wright was easily subsumed in the category of "protest novelist" along with John Steinbeck, Theodore Dreiser, and others.

In the decade that followed its publication, the novel's reputation was often attacked. Writers like James Baldwin, in his 1948 essay "Everybody's Protest Novel," and Ralph Ellison, in the *New Leader*, soundly criticized Wright for being harsh, pessimistic and impatient, his portrait of the black man in America far too hopeless. Baldwin argued that the protest novel did not advance the cause of equality by straining relations between the races. Ellison attacked the novel aesthetically and politically, declaring it crude and excessively Marxist in perspective.

In his 1963 article, "Black Boys and Native Sons," Irving Howe defended Wright as a sterling representative of the protest tradition in black literature. The "black power" movement took inspiration from *Native Son*, with many of its members declaring a kinship with Bigger, who they felt was doubly useful as a symbol of what white racism had wrought, and a threat of the racial violence that was sure to come. Theodore Solotaroff stated in his *The Red Hot Vacuum & Other Pieces on the Writings of the Sixties*, "We came to our own yearly confrontation with the algebra of hatred and guilt, alienation and violence, freedom and self-integration and in the struggle for what is called today 'civil rights' the meaning of Bigger Thomas and of Richard Wright continue to reveal itself."

By the 1980s, Wright's reputation was firmly established in American literature, and *Native Son* became required reading in high schools and colleges. New questions were being posed about his work. For example, an aspect of the novel previously unexamined was Wright's attitude towards women. Marie Mootry discussed this in her 1984 article, "Bitches, Whores, and Woman Haters: Archetypes and Typologies in the Art of Richard Wright." She was not alone in criticizing Wright's novel for its view of women, although she was more direct than some. She found that Bigger's inability to see women as human beings, with the same rights to expression that he claimed for himself, restricted his view of humankind and made his self-destruction a foregone conclusion.

David Bradley, a *New York Times* critic, admitted to hating the novel on his first reading, finding Bigger to be a despicable sociopath. However, upon reading it for the fourth time years later, he believed the book to be "a valuable document—not of sociology but of history. It reminds us of a time in this land when a man of freedom could have this bleak and frightening vision of his people."

In *Native Son: The Emergence of a New Black Hero*, Robert Butler offered a contemporary interpretation of Wright's work: "The novel is much more than the 'powerful' but artistically flawed piece of crude naturalism that many early reviewers and some later critics mistakenly saw. It is a masterwork because its formal artistry and its revolutionary new content are solidly integrated to produce a complex and resonant vision of modern American reality."

Orson's Farewell: The Remarkable First Production of *Native Son* —Jack Marshall

It is hard to believe, observing the current state of live theater, literature and mass entertainment in America, that there once was a time when critical, culture-altering ideas regularly reached the public through published works of fiction, and when the stage was among the most powerful tools for igniting such ideas into public debate, political action, and social movements. But there was such an era, and it peaked in the 1930s, when the stress and turmoil of the Great Depression created a hothouse for provocative artistic expression. And at the tail end of this period came one of the most remarkable examples of what the dynamic interaction of revolutionary thought, artistic innovation, literature and theater could achieve.

It was the stage production of Richard Wright's novel, *Native Son*.

The catalyst for the project was Orson Welles, then waiting for the release of the film that would transform into a Hollywood icon, *Citizen Kane*. Perhaps Welles knew that his next theatrical production would be his last as the Boy Wonder of Broadway. His Mercury Theater Company had been the most dynamic and surprising of many dynamic and surprising troupes in New York, and he was the company's resident genius and lightning rod. Welles had led the mob of first-nighters to an abandoned theater to improvise an opening night for the incendiary musical, *The Cradle Will Rock*; he had turned *Julius Caesar* into a hard-edged political tract, and transformed *Macbeth* into a voodoo spell. Now he was entranced by Richard Wright's newly published novel, *Native Son*, an unblinking examination of the consequences of white oppression and racism, portraying the black man in America as a ticking time-bomb, his fuse lit by centuries of abuse, ready to explode with violent results.

The book itself was a ticking bomb, and Welles—as always, equal parts idealist, visionary and showman—felt the stage, his stage, was the perfect place to explode it. Wright himself had described the book as “a special premiere given (to the reader) in his own special theater.” John Houseman, Welles' long-suffering partner who provided periodic ballast to Welles' erratic ways, was the first to read *Native Son* and realize its potential for Mercury and Orson, and took it upon himself to persuade Wright to adapt it into the theatrical script. Wright was dubious, and with good reason. Most of

the portrayals of blacks on stage and screen up to that point had been ridiculous at best and outrageously offensive at worst.

Houseman swore to Wright that he and Welles were “convinced that the material is capable of extension and development in the dramatic form” which was a medium in which a serious artist can directly and courageously express himself to audiences.” His entreaties did the trick. But Houseman was disappointed to discover that Wright had already made a commitment to playwright Paul Green that if *Native Son* were ever adapted for the stage, they would do it together. Now the embryonic project had four bona fide stars with strong personalities, Houseman, Wright, Green and Welles, in the middle of it. It was a combination as unstable as the fictional protagonist of *Native Son*, Bigger Thomas.

Wright and Green were a genuine odd couple. Green was a Southern white progressive, dedicated to civil rights and other causes, including the abolition of the death penalty. He frequently wrote plays about black characters, and Wright, while working with Chicago’s Federal Negro Theater in 1936, had organized a staged reading of Green’s *A Hymn to the Rising Son*, an indictment of the cruelty of chain gangs. Wright was impressed with Green’s avoidance of black stereotypes, but his cast refused to perform the play, arguing that it did not present blacks in a sufficiently positive light. Thus it was ironic that when Green and Wright began working on the script for *Native Son*, Green worked to “lighten up” the portrayal of Bigger Thomas, and make him more sympathetic.

Wright, perhaps out of respect for Green’s playwriting accomplishments and because he was working in a new medium, yielded a lot of ground—so much, in Houseman’s view, that it threatened the integrity of the work. He wrote in his autobiography that Green tried “til the day of the play’s opening, through madness, reprieve, suicide, regeneration and other purging and sublimating devices, to evade and dilute the dramatic conclusion with which Wright had consciously and deliberately ended a book in which he wanted his readers to face the horrible truth “without the consolation of tears.”

Although Wright had invented the term “black power,” he seemed powerless against Green’s persuasion, and the draft given to Houseman had a sentimental ending that he regarded as dreadful. Houseman refused to produce it. Then he began working secretly with Wright to restore the book’s ending to the play, without ever informing Green. (Decades later, Paul Green had his version of the script produced in North Carolina.)

The script was secondary anyway, once the Boy Genius got his hands on it. As usual, Welles pulled, tugged and stomped on the text, using his astounding imagination and vast array of technical skills: he was a gifted set, lighting, sound and costume designer in his own right, and was uniquely able to coordinate the visions of his designers into a coherent whole.

Not without driving everyone crazy in the process, however. Welles was especially focused (he was an undiagnosed sufferer from Attention Deficit Disorder his whole life) because, for once, he wasn't in the cast. But like all Mercury Theater productions, the rehearsal schedule swung between erratic and dangerous. One tech rehearsal lasted 36 hours. Welles became obsessed with lighting, and kept demanding that more instruments be hung over the stage until the grid collapsed, nearly killing some members of the crew. To keep the pace of the intermission-free show seamless, Welles hired thirty-six stage hands, who were drilled mercilessly in set changes.

Houseman and others have commented that Welles displayed more than his usual level of intensity on *Native Son*, which is a little frightening to imagine. Welles biographer, Simon Callow, attributes some of this to Welles' growing rage over the delays in releasing "Citizen Kane," but it is also true that Welles was truly an ideological ally with Wright. His hatred of bigotry, racism and segregation was genuine and heartfelt, and he was a committed civil rights activist all his life. And it appears that Wright trusted Welles implicitly. He was frequently present at rehearsals, but as far as anyone knows, gave the director free rein . . . which, Orson being Orson, was going to be the final result anyway.

Paul Green, in contrast, was kept away. When he finally saw the play, shortly before opening, he felt betrayed, and returned with legal reinforcements, threatening lawsuits. Houseman's only reinforcement in the battle that followed was Welles, who simply berated Green until he left. According to Houseman, neither he nor Welles ever spoke to him again, nor he to them. But he did not ask to have his name pulled from the play as co-author.

Welles, meanwhile, as befit his ADD, was equally as occupied with freeing *Citizen Kane* from the studio as he was with *Native Son*. He even placed the iconic "Rosebud" sled on the *Native Son* set, which amused Wright no end. The publicity surrounding the *Kane* soap opera also built interest in *Native Son*.

Welles had taken a gamble in the casting the play's "make or break" role of Bigger Thomas. In 1935, Canada Lee, a former boxer, violinist, jockey, and nightclub owner who had just begun to act professionally, had been cast by Alfred Hitchcock in his film *Lifeboat*. Welles used him in 1936 in his "Voodoo *Macbeth*" as Banquo, and Lee had continued to act professionally. But nothing in his resume or experience as an actor prepared him to play a part as large and difficult as Wright's antihero. By some estimates, Welles spent so much time working with Lee that he neglected the rest of the cast—some reviews that raved about the play complained about the quality of the smaller roles. But Welles had used his time well. Lee's performance was unanimously hailed as brilliant, and the small film record of his few movie appearances suggest that he was indeed an actor of depth and presence.

Although reviews were unanimously positive, there was no agreement about which elements of the production were excellent other than Canada Lee. As is almost always the case with adaptation of iconic books, some felt the play wasn't sufficiently faithful to Wright's text, while others argued passionately that it was too faithful. While every reviewer was impressed with Welles' hypercreative and theatrical direction, some questioned whether Orson's style overwhelmed Wright's substance—a fair question, and one that Welles encountered regularly throughout his theatrical career and his film career as well. Welles was artistically incapable of telling any story straight-forwardly, perhaps because he was so easily bored himself. A Welles production had to keep the audience breathless. But the critical cheers easily drowned out the naysayers. Brooks Atkinson of the *Times* wrote: "Mr. Welles is a young man with a lot of flaring ideals, and when he is standing on the director's podium, he renews the youth of the theater."

As Welles biographer Cowell notes, *Native Son* was not the only show in town. Far from it: the spring of 1941 on The Great White Way featured the original productions of *Arsenic and Old Lace*, *Lady in the Dark*, *Johnny Belinda*, *Pal Joey*, *Panama Hattie*, *The Corn is Green* and *The Man Who Came to Dinner*. Business started well, but began falling off. The show was picketed by the Urban League, which found the play's grim ending offensive and "counter-productive," and the Communist Party, which regarded former member Wright as a traitor to the cause. The biggest problem, in the producer's view, was the lack of sufficient support from African-American audiences, who seldom ventured into Broadway theaters. This was especially vexing to Wright, who brainstormed with Houseman to find ways to engage the black press.

But in retrospect, it may have been unrealistic to expect a serious, politically controversial, and socially explosive show like *Native Son* to be a huge commercial hit, no matter how stylishly it was directed. Even in those days, New York audiences liked happy endings, music and yuks, and *Native Son* was no *Arsenic and Old Lace*. Nor is it likely that a majority of potential white ticket-buyers were receptive to Wright's harsh indictment, or eager to experience it first hand. That *Native Son* ran 114 performances has to be judged a triumph.

The show was put on the road (in a stripped down version) and had a successful tour, then returned to Broadway briefly, again to critical acclaim. By this time, Welles was gone, *Citizen Kane* having been released, and his transition from Boy Genius of Broadway to Star-Crossed Genius of Hollywood was in full swing. *Native Son* was to be the final gasp of the Mercury Theater, the end of Welles' partnership with Houseman, and in the view of some, the zenith of serious theater in America. It would be more than a decade before the signs of theater's decline in American culture became unmistakable, but Orson Welles was the one artist whose daring and energy might have sent it on a completely different path. Instead, he crossed over to the enemy.

Native Son became one of the rare Broadway shows that acquired the reputation of being unproducable without the original director and star. (The Gertrude Lawrence musical *Lady in the Dark*, another legendary show of 1941, met the same fate.) It entered Broadway lore as a landmark, but exited the American stage repertoire. Today, Welles' Broadway adventures are barely recalled, and Canada Lee has been forgotten. John Houseman is remembered, if at all, as a TV pitchman for a defunct investment company, and an elderly character actor whose last appearance was a cameo in *The Naked Gun*. Of Paul Green's many important plays, only his pageant *The Lost Colony* sparks recognition from the average theatergoer.

Only Richard Wright's novel, and its place in our political thought and social history, has endured. *Native Son's* remarkable stage adaptation helped ensure that, and for that, it deserves a nation's thanks and respect.

Richard Wright's Life

—Ann Rayson

Richard Wright (4 Sept. 1908-28 Nov. 1960) was born Richard Nathaniel Wright on Rucker's Plantation, between Roxie and Natchez, Mississippi, the son of Nathaniel Wright, an illiterate sharecropper, and Ella Wilson, a schoolteacher. When Wright was five, his father left the family and his mother was forced to take domestic jobs away from the house. Wright and his brother spent a period at an orphanage. Around 1920 Ella Wright became a paralytic, and the family moved from Natchez to Jackson, then to Elaine, Arkansas, and back to Jackson to live with Wright's maternal grandparents, who were restrictive Seventh-day Adventists. Wright moved from school to school, graduating from the ninth grade at the Smith Robertson Junior High School in Jackson as the class valedictorian in June 1925. Wright had published his first short story, "The Voodoo of Hell's Half-Acre," in three parts in the *Southern Register* in 1924, but no copies survive. His staunchly religious and illiterate grandmother, Margaret Bolden Wilson, kept books out of the house and thought fiction was the work of the devil. Wright kept any aspirations he had to be a writer to himself after his first experience with publication.

After grade school Wright attended Lanier High School but dropped out after a few weeks to work; he took a series of odd jobs to save enough money to leave for Memphis, which he did at age seventeen. While in Memphis he worked as a dishwasher and delivery boy and for an optical company. He began to read contemporary American literature as well as commentary by H. L. Mencken, which struck him with particular force. As Wright reveals in his autobiography *Black Boy*, he borrowed the library card of an Irish co-worker and forged notes to the librarian so he could read: "Dear Madam: Will you please let this nigger boy have some books by H. L. Mencken?" Determined to leave the South before he would irretrievably overstep the bounds of Jim Crow restrictions on blacks, Wright took the train to Chicago in December 1927.

In Chicago Wright worked at the post office, at Michael Reese Hospital taking care of lab animals, and as an insurance agent, among other jobs. There, in 1932, he became involved in the John Reed Club, an intellectual arm of the Communist party, which he joined the next March. By 1935 he found work with the Federal Negro Theater in Chicago under the Federal Writers' Project. He wrote some short stories and a novel during this time, but they were not published until after his death. In 1937 Wright moved to New

York City, where he helped start *New Challenge* magazine and was the Harlem editor of the *Daily Worker* as well as coeditor of *Left Front*. Wright's literary career was launched when his short story collection, *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938), won first prize for the *Story* magazine contest open to Federal Writer's Project authors for best book-length manuscript. Harper's published this collection with "Fire and Cloud," "Long Black Song," "Down by the Riverside," and "Big Boy Leaves Home"; in 1940 the story "Bright and Morning Star" was added, and the book was reissued. *Native Son* followed in 1940, the first bestselling novel by a black American writer and the first Book-of-the-Month Club selection by an African-American writer. It sold 215,000 copies in its first three weeks of publication. *Native Son* made Wright the most respected and wealthiest black writer in America; he was awarded the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's prestigious Spingarn Medal in 1941. After *Uncle Tom's Children*, Wright declared in "How Bigger Was Born" that he needed to write a book that bankers' daughters would not be able to "read and feel good about," that would "be so hard and deep that they would have to face it without the consolation of tears"; *Native Son* is uncompromising.

In *Native Son*, Wright presents his guilt-of-the-nation thesis. His main character, Bigger Thomas, is a nineteen-year-old edgy small-time criminal from Chicago's South Side ghetto. The novel races with no stops in between the three parts: Book I, Fear; Book II, Flight; and Book III, Fate. When Bigger is offered a job as a chauffeur for a wealthy white family, he imagines himself in various fanciful scenarios, including sexual ones with the daughter. Lines that referred to Bigger's sexual interest in Mary Dalton were taken out in 1940 and only restored fifty-three years later in the 1993 Library of America edition, edited by Arnold Rampersad and copyrighted by Wright's second wife, Ellen Wright. Bigger's first driving job requires him to take Mary to pick up her communist lover, Jan Erlone, then eat with the couple in a black diner on the South Side. They drink themselves into oblivion on the ride home and invite Bigger to join them. Jan leaves, and Bigger must take Mary home and put her in bed. Terrified to be in Mary's bedroom and afraid to be caught as he is kissing her, he puts a pillow over her face when her blind mother walks in. Realizing he has accidentally murdered her, he drags her in a trunk to the basement and burns her in the furnace. Bigger rationalizes, correctly for a while, that the whites will never suspect him because they will think he is not smart enough to plan such a crime.

As it begins to snow, Bigger leaves the Dalton house and returns to his mother's tenement feeling like a new man. Bigger now sees that everyone he knows is blind; he himself is filled with elation for having killed a white girl, the ultimate taboo, and gotten away with it. To seal his guilt, Wright has Bigger murder his girlfriend Bessie in a brutal and premeditated way, in Book II. As the snowfall becomes a blizzard, Bigger is surrounded by the white world, whose search closes in and captures him. At the trial in Book III Bigger is never convicted for Bessie's murder, but only for the assumed rape of Mary, deemed to be a more serious crime than even Mary's murder. Boris A. Max, a Communist party lawyer, undertakes Bigger's defense because Bigger has implicated Jan and the party in a kidnap note to the Daltons.

While Wright made blacks proud of his success, he also made them uncomfortable with the protagonist, Bigger, who is a stereotype of the "brute Negro" they had been trying to overcome with novels of uplift by the "talented tenth" since the Gilded Age. Wright's argument is that racist America created Bigger; therefore, America had better change or more Biggers would be out there. At the end, when Max fails to understand Bigger, who cannot be saved from the electric chair, Wright is faulting the Communist party for not comprehending the black people it relied on for support. (Personally disillusioned with the party, Wright left it in 1942 and wrote an essay published in *Atlantic Monthly* in 1944 called "I Tried to Be a Communist," which was later reprinted in *The God That Failed* (1949), a collection of essays by disillusioned ex-Communists.) *Native Son* continues to be regarded as Wright's greatest novel and most influential book. As a result, he has been called the father of black American literature, a figure with whom writers such as James Baldwin had to contend.

To divest himself of Wright's influence, Baldwin wrote a series of three essays criticizing Wright's use of naturalism and protest fiction. In "Everybody's Protest Novel," published in *Partisan Review* in 1949, Baldwin concludes, "The failure of the protest novel lies in its rejection of life, the human being, the denial of his beauty, dread, power, in its insistence that it is his categorization alone which is real and which cannot be transcended." On the other hand, Wright has been credited with presaging the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s, particularly in his protest poetry, much of which was published in Chicago in the 1930s. As Irving Howe said in his 1963 essay "Black Boys and Native Sons," "The day *Native Son* appeared, American culture was changed forever. No matter how much qualifying the book might later need, it made impossible a repetition of the old lies . . . [and] brought

out into the open, as no one ever had before, the hatred, fear, and violence that have crippled and may yet destroy our culture."

As Wright was rising to prominence, his personal life was going through changes as well. In 1939 he had married Dhimah Rose Meadman, a Russian-Jewish ballet dancer. Wright moved her, her son, her mother, and her pianist to Mexico for a few months and then realized the marriage was not a success. He returned to New York and divorced Dhimah in 1940. On the trip back to New York, Wright stopped to visit his father for the first time in twenty-five years. In *Black Boy*, he describes his father during this visit as "standing alone upon the red clay of a Mississippi plantation, a sharecropper, clad in ragged overalls, holding a muddy hoe in his gnarled, veined hands . . . when I tried to talk to him I realized that . . . we were forever strangers, speaking a different language, living on vastly distant planes of reality." In 1941 he married Ellen Poplar, a white woman and Communist party member with whom he had worked and been in love before he married Dhimah. A year later their first daughter was born. Their second daughter was born in Paris in 1949.

During 1940-1941 Wright collaborated with Paul Green to write a stage adaptation of *Native Son*. It ran on Broadway in the spring of 1941 and was produced by John Houseman and staged by Orson Welles. Simultaneously, Wright published his sociological-psychological treatise *Twelve Million Black Voices: A Folk History of the Negro in the United States* (1941), with photographs collected by Edwin Rosskam; the book was well received. His autobiography, *Black Boy*, came out in 1945, again a bestseller and Book-of-the-Month Club selection, although the U.S. Senate denounced *Black Boy* as "obscene." The later section about his life in Chicago and experience with the Communist party was not published until 1977 under the title *American Hunger*. Wright's publishers in 1945 had only wanted the story of his life in the South and cut what followed about his life in the North. There have been numerous biographies of Wright, but all must begin with *Black Boy*, Wright's personal and emotional account of his childhood and adolescence in the Jim Crow South. In a famous passage in the autobiography that has bothered critics and set Wright apart from the African-American sense of community, he asserts the "cultural barrenness of black life": ". . . I used to mull over the strange absence of real kindness in Negroes, how unstable was our tenderness, how lacking in genuine passion we were, how void of great hope, how timid our joy, how bare our traditions, how hollow our memories, how lacking we were in those intangible sentiments that bind man to man, and how shallow was even our despair." He found an "unconscious irony" in the

idea that "Negroes led so passionate an existence": "I saw that what had been taken for our emotional strength was our negative confusions, our flights, our fears, our frenzy under pressure." Statements like these are contradicted by others that describe a caring community. For example, when Wright's mother suffers a paralytic stroke, "the neighbors nursed my mother day and night, fed us and washed our clothes," and Wright admits to being "ashamed that so often in my life I had to be fed by strangers."

In 1946 Wright was invited to France. After he returned to the United States he decided he could no longer tolerate the racism he experienced even in New York City. Married to a white woman and living in the North, he still was not able to buy an apartment as a black man; furthermore, he hated the stares he and his family received on the streets. And he was still called "boy" by some shopkeepers. So in 1947 he moved permanently to France and settled in Paris. Wright never again saw the United States. He worked during 1949-1951 on a film version of *Native Son*, in which he himself played Bigger. Wright, forty years old and overweight, had to train and stretch verisimilitude to play the nineteen-year-old Bigger. During filming in Buenos Aires and Chicago, the production was fraught with problems. The film was released briefly but was unsuccessful. European audiences acclaimed it, but the abridged version failed in the United States and the film disappeared.

Wright did not publish a book after *Black Boy* until 1953 when his "existential" novel, *The Outsider*, was published to mixed reviews. Cross Damon, the main character, is overwhelmed by the demands of his wife, his mother, and his mistress. Seizing a chance opportunity during a train crash, he leaves his identity papers with a dead man and disappears. He ends up committing three murders to save himself, then is himself murdered by the Communist party in the United States for his independence. *Savage Holiday* followed in 1954, a "white" novel whose main character, Erskine Fowler, exemplifies the dangers of repressed emotion. Fowler has been obsessed with desire for his mother. He marries a prostitute, then murders her; the graphic murder scene disturbed some readers. The novel is an exception to Wright's work in that it has no black characters. *Savage Holiday* was not even a mild critical success.

During the mid-1950s Wright traveled extensively—to Africa, Asia, and Spain—and wrote several nonfiction works on political and sociological topics. He had helped found *Présence Africaine* with Aimé Césaire, Leopold Senghor, and Alioune Diop during 1946-1948. He spent some time in Ghana and in 1954 published *Black Power* (a term coined by Wright) to mixed

reviews. *Black Power* concerns itself with the color line in Africa and the new "tragic elite," the leaders of the former colonies. Ghanaian writer Kwame Anthony Appiah said later that Wright failed to understand Africans when he urged Africa to leave tribal custom behind and join the technological era. In April 1955 Wright attended the Bandung Conference in Indonesia, the first meeting of twenty-nine new nations of Africa and Asia. He published his account as *The Color Curtain* in 1956 (after the French edition of 1955).

Throughout his international political activities, Wright knew correctly that he was being shadowed by the Central Intelligence Agency; his paranoia was later justified when evidence about his surveillance was made available under the Freedom of Information Act. After Wright made two trips to Franco's Spain, he published a book of his observations, *Pagan Spain* (1956); here Wright with his "peasant" understanding exposes the dark side of violence and moral hypocrisy beneath the national adherence to Catholicism. In 1957 he put together a collection of his lectures given between 1950 and 1956 in Europe, *White Man, Listen!*, which includes "The Literature of the Negro in the United States," an important overview. Wright's books published during the 1950s disappointed some critics, who said that his move to Europe alienated him from American blacks and thus separated him from his emotional and psychological roots. During the 1950s Wright grew more internationalist in outlook. While he accomplished much as an important public literary and political figure with a worldwide reputation, his creative work did decline.

The last work Wright submitted for publication during his lifetime, *The Long Dream*, a novel, was released in 1958. Here he portrays his strongest black father, Tyree Tucker, and treats the black middle class in the setting of Clintonville, Mississippi. This was the first novel in a planned trilogy about Tyree Tucker and his son Fishbelly. Wright did finish the second novel, *Island of Hallucinations*, about Fishbelly's escape to Paris, but it was not published. *The Long Dream*, taking place in the long-gone South of the 1940s, seemed out of date to readers; critics faulted Wright for being away from the source of his material for too long, and *Time* magazine criticized him for "living amid the alien corn." Subsequent critics, however, have regarded his late fiction more seriously. In 1959 Wright's *Daddy Goodness* was staged in Paris in collaboration with Louis Sapin, and a 1960 Broadway stage version of *The Long Dream*, produced by Ketti Frings, was unsuccessful.

During his last year and a half, Wright suffered from amoebic dysentery acquired during his travels to Africa or Asia, and he died suddenly of an apparent heart attack while recuperating at the Clinique Eugène Gibez in Paris. There have been recurrent rumors that Wright was murdered, but this has not been substantiated. After his death, his wife Ellen submitted for publication his second collection of short stories, *Eight Men* (1961), which Wright had completed eight years earlier. She then published his novel *Lawd Today* in 1963, generally considered to be the least powerful of Wright's works, although William Burrisson has argued for its sophistication and artistic merit ("Another Look at *Lawd Today*," *CLA Journal* 29 [June 1986]: 424-41). *Lawd Today*, clearly influenced by James Joyce's *Ulysses*, presents one day in the life of Jake Jackson in Chicago. Wright had finished this manuscript in 1934, titled it *Cesspool*, and had had it repeatedly rejected by publishers before *Native Son* was released.

The unexpurgated 1993 edition of *Native Son* saddles readers with an even less sympathetic Bigger Thomas, ensuring this novel's role in confronting future generations of complaisant Americans about the scourge of race and fulfilling W. E. B. Du Bois's prophecy in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) that "the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line."

Paul Green (1894–1981): The Innovator

American playwright Paul Green would be an apt symbol for the American Century Theater's mission, for in many ways he personifies the passionate, ground-breaking, thoughtful and inclusive 20th Century stage works that this company is dedicated to presenting to 21st Century audiences. He also is an artistically, politically and historically important figure who, like many of his contemporaries, is largely unknown to a large segment of the public. Paul Green's prolific career and accomplishments deserve more recognition, respect, and gratitude.

Paul Eliot Green was born on March 17, 1894. He grew up on a cotton farm in rural Harnett County, N.C., and quickly learned to appreciate hard physical labor as well as history, literature and music. He read books as he followed a mule-drawn plow. He taught himself to play the violin, and was an accomplished musician: he would later compose music for his dramas. After high school, Green supported himself by teaching and playing semi-professional baseball until he earned enough money to go the University of North Carolina.

His collegiate education was interrupted by World War I, but the war was an education too. Green left the military as a passionate opponent of war and inhumanity of all kinds. He finally graduated from the University in 1921 and began to write plays. His writings reflected his passionate hatred of racial discrimination, capital punishment, military conflict and abuse of power. The play that launched his career, *In Abraham's Bosom*, was a powerful statement about the plight of the black man in the South, and earned the young firebrand the 1927 Pulitzer Prize for Drama. The same year, Green's tragic depiction of the decline of an old Southern family, *The House of Connelly*, became the newly formed Group Theatre's inaugural production—a major historical achievement for Green, as the Group Theater went on to become one of the transforming forces in American Theater.

Rather than continue on the clear path to becoming an influential Broadway playwright, Green moved from the success of *The House of Connelly* into a unique new area. He began experimenting with developing a new dramatic form, the symphonic drama, a form of historical pageant usually set on the very site depicted in the action, and embodying music, dance, pantomime and poetic dialogue. From 1927 to 1936, Green wrote folk plays designed for

local audiences in Iowa, North Carolina and other states; several never received a professional production. He was lured back to Broadway briefly in 1936 to write the book and lyrics for *Johnny Johnson*, an anti-war operetta with music by Kurt Weill. Green wrote 32 songs for the show, which broke with all convention by being an American musical with little or no comedy.

By 1937, Green was ready to unveil the first of his symphonic dramas. It was *The Lost Colony*, recounting the tale of Sir Walter Raleigh's doomed colony on Roanoke Island. It was an immediate sensation, and the production has been regularly re-mounted in North Carolina every year since its debut. Green wrote sixteen more symphonic dramas, spanning many states and historical landmarks. Today more than fifty symphonic dramas are regularly produced around the country. Indeed, many commentators credit Green with inventing one of the two significant American contributions to dramatic form, the other being the American musical.

Paul Green's huge creative output included not only symphonic dramas, but other plays of various types, essays, books of North Carolina folklore, several novels, and a number of cinema scripts for such prominent stars of the 1930s as Will Rogers, Bette Davis, Janet Gaynor, and others. In 1941, Green was called upon by Richard Wright to help him adapt Wright's novel *Native Son* for the Broadway stage. In the end it was not a happy collaboration: Wright and Green were well-matched politically, but Green's strong sense of hope and optimism as well as his playwriting style clashed with the novelist's objectives and the harsh tone of the novel. Many of Green's contributions to the script were surreptitiously removed in rehearsal by director Orson Welles and producer John Houseman, and Green, understandably, felt mistreated and ill-used. But without Green's early involvement, the play may well have never been produced.

After *Native Son*, Green concentrated on local dramas and his outdoor pageants, returning to Broadway only sporadically, as with his adaptation of Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* in 1951. Throughout his long career, Paul Green supported human rights causes in person, in print, and financially. He wrote and spoke out against political oppression, war, lynching, chain gangs, prejudice, and superstition. He was particularly committed to ending the death penalty in North Carolina, and many times waged letter campaigns on behalf of condemned men, urging new trials, commutations, or pardons. Through the 1920s and 1930s, Green was not an absolutist regarding the death penalty, but came to believe that it ought to be abolished, arguing that "no absolute punishment should be based on less than absolute knowledge."

Green taught philosophy and drama at Chapel Hill until 1944, when he retired to devote his time to writing. He was a lifetime participant in the cultural life of North Carolina, one of the co-founders of the North Carolina Symphony and the Institute of Outdoor Drama, which supports the nationwide community of symphonic dramas that evolved using the model of Green's *Lost Colony*.

Green traveled the world on behalf of UNESCO, lecturing about drama and about human rights. In addition to his early Pulitzer Prize, he was awarded two Guggenheim Fellowships, the National Theatre Conference Award, and nine honorary degrees.

Paul Green died on May 4, 1981, when he was 87 years old. He was posthumously inducted into the Theatre Hall of Fame in New York in 1993 and the North Carolina Literary Hall of Fame in 1996.

Canada Lee: The First “Bigger Thomas”

—Jack Marshall

Of all the talented individuals involved in *Native Son*, none was more impressive than the man who created the role of “Bigger Thomas,” Canada Lee.

He was born Lionel Cornelius Canegata on May 3, 1907 in New York City’s San Juan Hill district, to West Indian parents. Canegata studied the violin at the age of seven, and by the age of twelve was a concert violinist. When he was 14, Canegata ran away to the Saratoga Race Track in upstate New York to become a jockey. After two years of riding, he grew too large for the job and became a horse exerciser for prominent racehorse owners. Then Canegata changed course again, and set out to become a boxer.

He won 90 of 100 fights and the Metropolitan Inter-City and Junior National Championships, and the national amateur lightweight title. Before one match, an announcer butchered his name and called him “Canada Lee.” Lee liked it and kept it.

In 1926, he turned professional, and by 1930 he was a leading contender for the welterweight championship. Lee fought in over 200 fights as a professional boxer, losing only 25. But a punch to the right eye detached his retina, and ended his career just as it was getting interesting and profitable. So it was back to music: Canada Lee formed a fifteen-piece orchestra at a nightclub in Harlem, *The Jitterbug*, which he also managed. Both the band and the nightclub were wiped out by the Depression. By the mid-30s, Lee was broke, and once again looking for a profession. Characteristically, he had other talents he hadn’t even used yet.

While applying for a job as a day laborer, Lee stumbled upon an audition in progress at the YMCA, and on a sudden impulse, read for a role. He earned a supporting part in Frank Wilson’s 1934 production of *Brother Moses*, which played to a crowd of over ten thousand in Central Park. In the first acting job of his life, Lee received rave reviews, and decided that acting would be his new career.

He worked with the Federal Theater Project in a play called *Stevedore* in 1934, and was seen by Orson Welles, then the life-force of Broadway, who cast him as in the so-called “*Voodoo Macbeth*” (1936) at the American Negro Theater. That production was a major turning point in director Welles’

career as well as a legendary Broadway “happening.” Lee played Banquo in this controversial production, which featured a Haitian setting, *Emperor Jones*-style drumming and a cast of over *two hundred* black actors. Lee reportedly rescued Welles from angry protesters twice during the run, among the many reasons Welles remembered Lee later.

For two years, Lee worked in various black theater and Theater Project productions, including the lead role in *The Big White Fog*. He also made his film debut, playing, appropriately, a boxer, in 1939’s low-budget “Keep Punching.” Then Welles gambled on Lee to play the central role of “Bigger Thomas” in the stage adaptation of Richard Wright’s *Native Son*. When the 1941 production was a hit, Lee was briefly the toast of Broadway. *The New York Times* called him “the greatest Negro actor of his era and one of the finest actors in the country.” Wright also applauded the performance, noting the contrast between Lee’s affable personality and his intensity as Bigger Thomas. (Ironically, it was Wright, not Lee, who played Bigger in the ill-conceived film adaptation of the play. Canada Lee’s performance today exists only in the memories of a few, and the accounts of the time.)

Lee was as committed to social justice and civil rights as the other progressive figures involved with *Native Son*, and his activities quickly took on a politically controversial character. Playwright Langston Hughes wrote two brief plays for Lee, but their criticism of racism in America was seen as too controversial and uncommercial, and neither was ever staged. Lee spoke to schools, sponsored various humanitarian events, and began lecturing directly against the segregation in America’s Armed Forces. But Lee also was a prominent supporter of the war effort. He appeared at numerous USO events, and received an award from the United States Recruiting Office and another from the Treasury Department for his help in selling war bonds.

During World War II, Lee continued to act in plays and in films. In 1942, he played in two Broadway comedies by William Saroyan, earning good reviews even as the plays failed. In 1943, he took a lead role in a production of the race-themed drama *South Pacific*, directed by Lee Strasberg, and in 1944 he became the first African-American to play Caliban in a Broadway production of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*. More milestones were to come: director George Rylands cast him as Bosola in *The Duchess of Malfi*, one of the first occasions in which a black actor portrayed a white character in a major Broadway production. In 1946, Lee became the first African-American producer on Broadway with *On Whitman Avenue*, a drama about racial prejudice in which he also played a leading role. The play addressed the need

for fair housing laws and was praised by former First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, who wrote weekly columns encouraging readers to see it.

Lee also continued to act in films, though the good roles were rare. He refused to accept parts that he believed were demeaning to his race. Perhaps his most famous film role was in Hitchcock's *Lifeboat* (1944), in which he played the role of a stevedore named Charlie. According to some critics, *Lifeboat* was the first major Hollywood movie in which a black character was not handled in stereotypical fashion. This appears to have been Lee's influence, for he insisted on changing his dialogue, which had been originally written in the "Steppin Fetchit" dialect that was routine for black characters in the 1930s.

In 1947, he played a supporting role in another boxing picture, the John Garfield classic *Body and Soul*. In 1949, he took another supporting role in *Lost Boundaries*, a drama about "passing" as white.

By the late 1940s, the rising tide of anti-Communism had made many of Lee's earlier contacts during his Broadway period toxic to his career. His name had appeared in some FBI files that were made public in the course of the spy trial of Judith Conlon, and suddenly Canada Lee—artist, thinker, patriot, humanist—was suspected of being "subversive." Lee condemned the effort to implicate him at a press conference in 1949, calling it racially motivated. "I am not a Communist! I shall continue to help my people gain their rightful place in America," he declared defiantly.

But the forces allied against him and other blacklisted artists were strong and not to be denied. When Canada Lee came up for a TV role shortly thereafter, he was barred by the sponsor, the American Tobacco Company. Over the next three years, it has been estimated, Lee lost forty roles.

The FBI reportedly offered to clear Lee's name if he would publicly call singer/actor/ activist Paul Robeson a Communist. Lee refused, saying, "All you're trying to do is split my race!" Unable to get work in America, Lee was cast in a British film, *Cry, the Beloved Country*. (He and Sidney Poitier were admitted to South Africa for the location filming only after director Zoltan Korda applied for permits to bring them along as his indentured servants.) But it was to be his last film role. Returning to the U.S., Lee found himself still blacklisted and unemployable. Impoverished and despondent, he told Walter White of the NAACP, "I can't take it any more! I'm going to get

a shoeshine box and sit outside the Astor Theater. My picture is playing to capacity audiences and, my God, I can't get one day's work!"

A few months later he was dead, of kidney failure and uremia, at forty-five.

Because a rumor (vindictively circulated by right-wing columnist Walter Winchell) held that Lee had indeed turned against Robeson, his legacy was stained for many years, and his important place in the struggle for civil rights was neglected and nearly forgotten. But Canada Lee deserves recognition as an important trailblazer for his race, a brave and resolute warrior for racial progress in America, and not least of all, an amazingly versatile and talented man. Like the character he is best known for, Bigger Thomas, Canada Lee was crushed by the pressures of deep-seated bigotry that crippled his career and destroyed his health. But in his short life, he made a real difference in his country, and helped lay the foundation for the changes that were to come. As we celebrate Native Son, we owe it to Canada Lee to celebrate him as well.

The Harlem Renaissance

Richard Wright was an important intellectual force during the Harlem Renaissance, and his novel, *Native Son*, was both a product of it and one of its important engines of controversy.

From approximately 1919 to 1940, there was an explosion of African-American literature, art and political thought in a period known as the Harlem Renaissance. Also known as the New Negro Movement, the Harlem Renaissance was a result of several factors. Thousands of blacks migrated from the South to the Northern industrial cities, following the employment opportunities that became available during World War I. A thriving and dynamic black middle class began to develop. More educational and cultural opportunities became available to blacks, who eagerly strived to make up for centuries of opportunity lost to slavery and oppression.

A new radicalism among black thinkers helped spark the Harlem Renaissance. The publication of black magazines such as A. Phillip Randolph's *The Messenger* and the NAACP's *The Crisis* (edited by W.E.B. DuBois) led to the development of what was referred to as a "new consciousness" of racial identity. Marcus Garvey's radical ideas of an independent black economy, racial purity, and the creation of societies in Africa were catalysts for debate, controversy, and pride, opening doors to creative thought and sending political and philosophical discourse in exciting new directions. These included the need for economic and social equality, as well as political power. New York's Harlem neighborhood became a magnet for black intellectuals, writers and artists, and was soon the cultural center of a black Renaissance movement that was national in scope.

A Chronology of Important Events and Publications in the Harlem Renaissance, 1919-1940

1919

- February: the 369th Regiment marched up Fifth Avenue to Harlem
- February: First Pan African Congress organized by W.E.B. Du Bois, Paris
- June to September: Race riots in Washington, D.C., Chicago, Charleston, Knoxville, Omaha, and elsewhere.
- September: Race Relations Commission founded.
- Marcus Garvey founded the Black Star Shipping Line.

- Benjamin Brawley published *The Negro in Literature and Art in the United States*.

1920

- August: the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) Convention held at Madison Square Garden.
- November: O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones*, starring Charles Gilpin, opened at the Provincetown Playhouse.
- James Weldon Johnson, first black officer (secretary) of the NAACP appointed.
- Claude McKay published *Spring in New Hampshire*.
- Du Bois's *Darkwater* published.

1921

- *Shuffle Along* by Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake, the first musical revue written and performed by African Americans (cast members include Josephine Baker and Florence Mills), opened, May 22, at Broadway's David Belasco Theater.
- September: Marcus Garvey founded African Orthodox Church
- Second Pan African Congress.
- Colored Players Guild of New York founded.
- Benjamin Brawley published *Social History of the American Negro*.

1922

- First Anti-Lynching legislation approved by U. S. House of Representatives.
- Publications of *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, edited by James Weldon Johnson; Claude McKay, *Harlem Shadows*.

1923

- “Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life” is founded by the National Urban League, with Charles S. Johnson as its editor.
- May: the National Ethiopian Art Players staged *The Chip Woman's Fortune* by Willis Richardson, first serious play by a black writer on Broadway.
- Claude McKay spoke at the Fourth Congress of the Third International in Moscow, June.
- October: The Cotton Club opened
- Marcus Garvey arrested for mail fraud and sentenced to five years in prison.

- Third Pan African Congress.
- Publications of Jean Toomer, *Cane*; Marcus Garvey, *Philosophy and Opinion of Marcus Garvey* (two vols.).

1924

- March: Civic Club Dinner, sponsored by Opportunity, bringing black writers and white publishers together,. This event is considered the formal launching of the New Negro movement.
- May: O'Neill's *All God's Chillun Got Wings* starring black singer/actor/activist Paul Robeson, opened.
- Countee Cullen won first prize in the Witter Bynner Poetry Competition.
- Publications of Du Bois, *The Gift of Black Folk*; Jessie Fauset, *There is Confusion*; Marcus Garvey, "Aims and Objects for a Solution of the Negro Problem Outlined"; Walter White, *The Fire in the Flint*.

1925

- March: *Survey Graphic* issue, "Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro," edited by Alain Locke and Charles Johnson, devoted entirely to black arts and letters.
- October: American Negro Labor Congress held in Chicago.
 - Dr. Ossian Sweet and 10 other blacks defended by Clarence Darrow and the NAACP were acquitted of murder by an all white jury in Detroit.
 - *Opportunity* held its first literary awards dinner; winners included Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, and Zora Neale Hurston.
 - The first Crisis awards ceremony was held at the Renaissance Casino; Countee Cullen won first prize.
- Publications of Cullen, *Color*; Du Bose Heyward, *Porgy*; James Weldon Johnson and J. Rosamond Johnson, eds. *The Book of American Negro Spirituals*; Alain Locke, *The New Negro*; Sherwood Anderson, *Dark Laughter* (a novel portraying life among American blacks).

1926

- Countee Cullen became Assistant Editor of *Opportunity*; began to write a regular column, "The Dark Tower."
- March: Savoy Ballroom opened in Harlem.
- Publications of Wallace Thurman, *Fire!!*; Langston Hughes, *The Weary Blues*; Carl Van Vechten, *Nigger Heaven*; Eric Walrond, *Tropic Death*; W. C. Handy, *Blues: An Anthology*; and Walter White, *Flight*.

1927

- May: *In Abraham's Bosom* by Paul Green, with an all-black cast, won the Pulitzer Prize.
- July: Ethel Waters first appeared on Broadway.
- Marcus Garvey deported.
- Louis Armstrong (in Chicago) and Duke Ellington (in New York) began their careers.
- Harlem Globetrotters established.
- Charlotte Mason decided to become a patron of "The New Negro."
- A'Lelia Walker opened a tearoom salon called "The Dark Tower."
- Publications of Miguel Covarrubias, *Negro Drawings*; Cullen, *Ballad of the Brown Girl, Copper Sun, and Caroling Dusk*; Arthur Fauset, *For Freedom: A Biographical Story of the American Negro*; Hughes, *Fine Clothes to the Jew*; James Weldon Johnson, *God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse and The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man (reprint of the 1912 edition)*; Alain Locke and Montgomery T. Gregory, eds. *Plays of Negro Life*.

1928

- Countee Cullen married Nina Yolande, daughter of W.E.B. Du Bois, April 9; described as the social event of the decade.
- Publications of Wallace Thurman, *Harlem: A Forum of Negro Life*; Du Bois, *The Dark Princess*; Rudolph Fisher, *The Walls of Jericho*; Nella Larsen, *Quicksand*; Jessie Fauset, *Plum Bun*; Claude McKay, *Home to Harlem*.

1929

- February: Negro Experimental Theatre founded,
- Wallace Thurman's play *Harlem*, written with William Jourdan Rapp, opened at the Apollo Theater on Broadway and became hugely successful.
- June: Negro Art Theatre founded.
- September: National Colored Players founded.
- Black Thursday, October 29, Stock Exchange crash.
- Publications of Cullen, *The Black Christ and Other Poems*; Claude McKay, *Banjo*; Nella Larsen, *Passing*; Wallace Thurman, *The Blacker the Berry*; and Walter White, *Rope and Faggot: The Biography of Judge Lynch*.

1930

- *The Green Pastures* (musical) with an all-black cast, opened on Broadway, February 26.
- Universal Holy Temple of Tranquillity founded; Black Muslims opened Islam Temple in Detroit.
- Publications of Randolph Edmonds, *Shades and Shadows*; Charles S. Johnson, *The Negro in American Civilization: A Study of Negro Life and Race Relations*; James Weldon Johnson, *Black Manhattan*; Langston Hughes, *Not Without Laughter*.

1931

- “Scottsboro Boys” race trial, April through July.
- A'Lelia Walker died, August 16.
- Publications of Arna Bontemps, *God Sends Sunday*; Jessie Fauset, *The Chinaberry Tree*; Langston Hughes, *Dear Lovely Death*, *The Negro Mother*, *Scottsboro Limited*; Vernon Loggins, *The Negro Author: His Development in America to 1900*; George S. Schuyler, *Black No More*; and Toomer, *Essentials*.

1932

- June: Twenty young black intellectuals traveled to Russia to make a movie, “Black and White”.
- Mass defection of blacks from the Republican party began.
- Publications of Sterling Brown, *Southern Road*; Cullen, *One Way to Heaven*; Rudolph Fisher, *The Conjure Man Dies*; Hughes, *The Dream Keeper*; Claude McKay, *Ginger Town*; Schuyler, *Slaves Today*; Thurman, *Infants of the Spring*.

1933

- National Negro Business League ceased operations after 33 years.
- Publications of Jessie Fauset, *Comedy, American Style*; James Weldon Johnson, *Along This Way*; McKay, *Banana Bottom*.

1934

- Rudolph Fisher and Wallace Thurman died within four days of each other, December 22 and 26.
- W.E.B. Du Bois resigned from *The Crisis* and NAACP.

- Apollo Theatre opened.
- Publications of Arna Bontemps, *You Can't Pet a Possum*; Randolph Edmonds, *Six Plays for the Negro Theatre*; Hughes, *The Ways of White Folks*; Zora Neale Hurston, *Jonah's Gourd Vine*; James Weldon Johnson, *Negro Americans: What Now?*; George Lee, *Beale Street: Where the Blues Began*.

1935

- Harlem Race Riot, March 19.
- *Porgy and Bess*, an opera with an all-black cast, opened on Broadway, October 10.
- *Mulatto* by Langston Hughes, first full-length play by a black writer, opened on Broadway, October 25.
- 50 percent of Harlem's families unemployed as a result of the Great Depression.
- Publications of Cullen, *The Medea and Other Poems*; Hurston, *Mules and Men*; Willis Richardson and May Sullivan, *Negro History in Thirteen Plays*.

1937

- Publications of McKay, *Long Way From Home*; Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

1938

- Richard Wright published *Uncle Tom's Children*

1939

- Publication of Hurston, *Moses; Man of the Mountain*.

1940

- Richard Wright's protest novel *Native Son* became the first bestselling novel and the first Book-of-the-Month Club selection authored by a black American writer
- Publications of Hughes, *The Big Sea*; McKay, *Harlem: Negro Metropolis*.

