Coronet
APRIL, 1942

12 MILLION BLACK VOICES

by

RICHARD WRIGHT

EACH DAY when you see us black folk upon the dusty farm or hard city pavements, you take us for granted. But we are not what we seem.

Our outward guise still carries the old familiar aspect which three hundred years of oppression in America have given us, but beneath the garb of the black laborer, the black cook, the black elevator operator, lies an uneasily tied knot of pain and hope whose snarled strands converge from many points of time and space.

We black folk were born into Western civilization of a weird and paradoxical birth. The men who tore us from our native soil, weighted our legs with chains, stacked us like cord-wood in the foul holds of clipper ships, and dragged us across thousands of miles of ocean, held locked within their hearts the fertile seeds that were to sprout into a new world culture, that were to blossom into a higher human consciousness. But their sense of the possibility of building a more humane world brought devastation and despair to our huts on the long, tan shores of Africa.

That captivity blasted our lives, disrupted our families. Our folkways and folk tales faded from consciousness. We were stripped of everything —left only the feelings of fear and fatigue. Our bent backs gave design and order to the fertile plantations of the new world. Vast palatial homes were reared by our black hands. Our masters had a glittering prize but, blinded by it, they could not detect the stealthy forces that would wreck their empire and disperse us black men like whirling atoms upon the face of the earth.

We were finally freed. But it was a gnawing sense of guilt, a cloudy premonition of impending disaster, a soil becoming rapidly impoverished, rather than the strength of moral ideals alone, that freed us.

BLACK VOICES

The Lords of the Land

TODAY, more than one-half of us black folk in the United States are tillers of the soil—and most of these are sharecroppers and day laborers. The land we till is beautiful, with red and black and brown clay, with fresh and hungry smells, with pine trees and palm trees, with rolling hills and swampy delta. The land is rich—but we are poor.

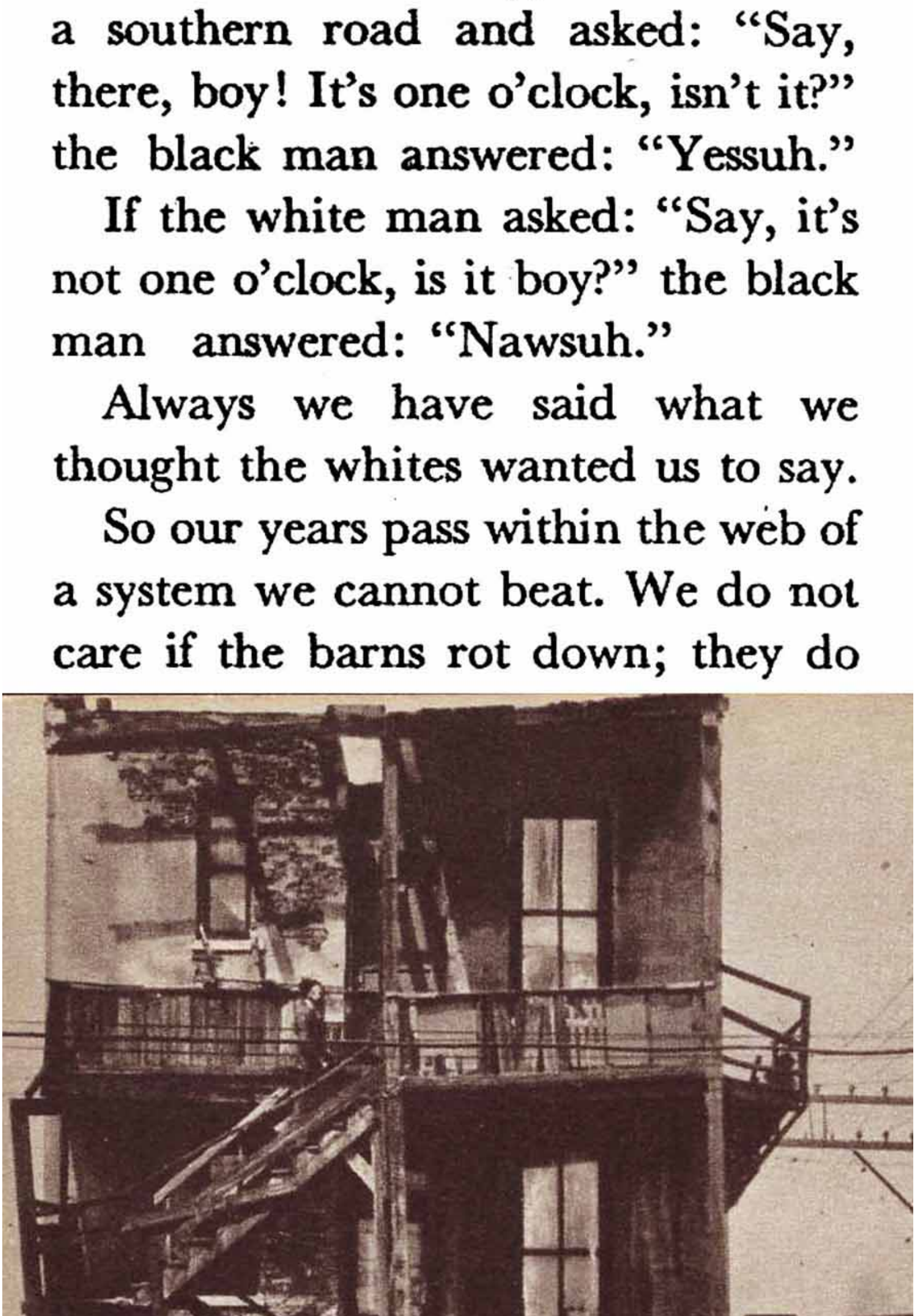
To paint the picture of how we live on the plantations is to compete with the movies, radio, newspapers—even the Church. They have painted one picture: charming, idyllic, romantic; but we live another: full of the fear of the Lords of the Land, bowing and grinning when we meet white faces, toiling from sun to sun, living in unpainted wooden shacks.

If a white man stopped a black on a southern road and asked: "Say, there, boy! It's one o'clock, isn't it?" the black man answered: "Yessuh."

If the white man asked: "Say, it's not one o'clock, is it boy?" the black man answered: "Nawsuh."

Always we have said what we thought the whites wanted us to say.

So our years pass within the web of a system we cannot beat. We do not care if the barns rot down; they do



Gone de old plantation
For a filthy kitchenette

BLACK VOICES

Sister's cookin' greasy greens
—is supper ready yet?

not belong to us, anyway. In cold weather we strip and burn boards from our shacks and palings from the straggled fences. During long winter days we sit in cabins that have no windowpanes; the floors and roofs are made of thin planks of pine.

To supplement our scanty rations, we take our buckets and roam the hillsides for berries, nuts or wild greens; sometimes we fish in the creeks; at other times our black women tramp the fields looking for bits of firewood, piling their aprons high, coming back to our cabins slowly, like laden donkeys.

Our black children are born to us in our one-room shacks, before crackling log fires, with rusty scissors boiling in tin pans, with black plantation mid-wives hovering near, with pine-knot flames casting shadows upon the wooden walls, with the sound of kettles of water singing over the fires in the hearths. Many of our schools are open for only six months a year, and allow our children to progress only to the sixth grade. The schoolhouse is usually far away.

But Sunday is a glad day. We call our children to us and comb the hair of the boys and plait the hair of

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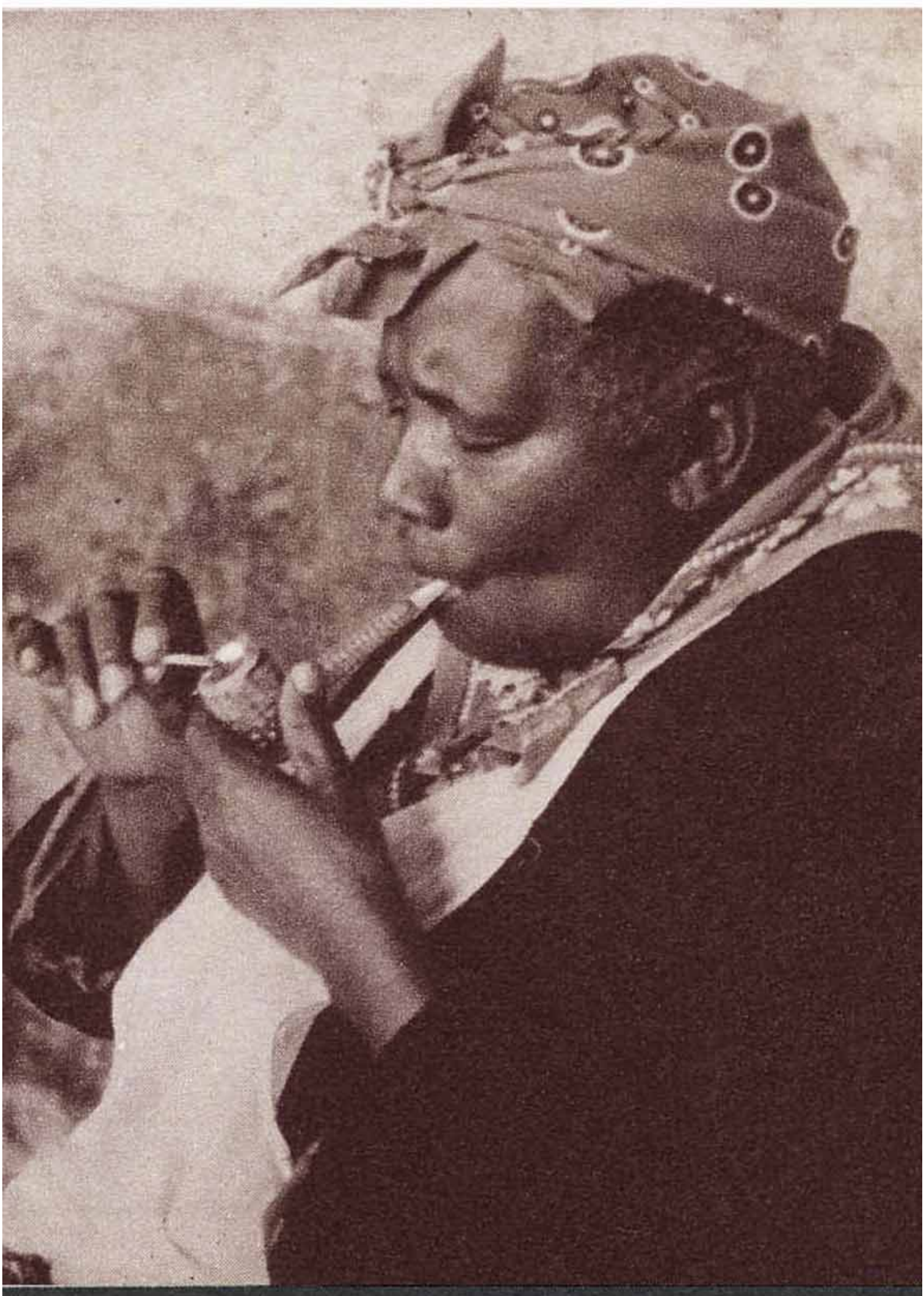
BLACK VOICES



Gone de black old mammies
A-bossin' o'er the roost

the girls. We wrap the girls' hair in white strings and put a red ribbon upon their heads; we make the boys wear stocking caps to keep their hair in place. Then we rub hog fat upon their faces to take that dull, ashy look away from skins made dry and rough from the weather of the fields. In clean clothes ironed stiff with starch made from flour, we hitch up the mule to the wagon, pile in our Bibles and baskets of food—hog meat and greens—and we are off to church.

The preacher tells of days long ago and of a people whose sufferings were like ours. He preaches of the Hebrew children and the fiery furnace, of Daniel, of Moses, of Solomon and of Christ. What we have not dared feel in the presence of the Lords of the Land, we now feel in church. Our hearts and bodies swing out into the meaning of the story the preacher is unfolding. Our eyes become absorbed in a vision.

On Saturday nights, we go to the crossroad dancehall and slow drag, ball the jack and Charleston to an old guitar and piano. Dressed in starched jeans, an old silk shirt and big straw hat, we swing the girls over the plank floor, clapping our hands, stomping our feet and—singing.

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BLACK VOICES

Sleep my kinky-headed babe
You've stormy days ahead!

But there are times when we doubt our songs; as our children grow older, they leave us to fulfill the sense of happiness that sleeps in their hearts. Unlike us, they have been influenced by the movies, magazines and glimpses of town life. We despair to see them go, but we tell them that we want them to escape this life.

The Bosses of the Buildings

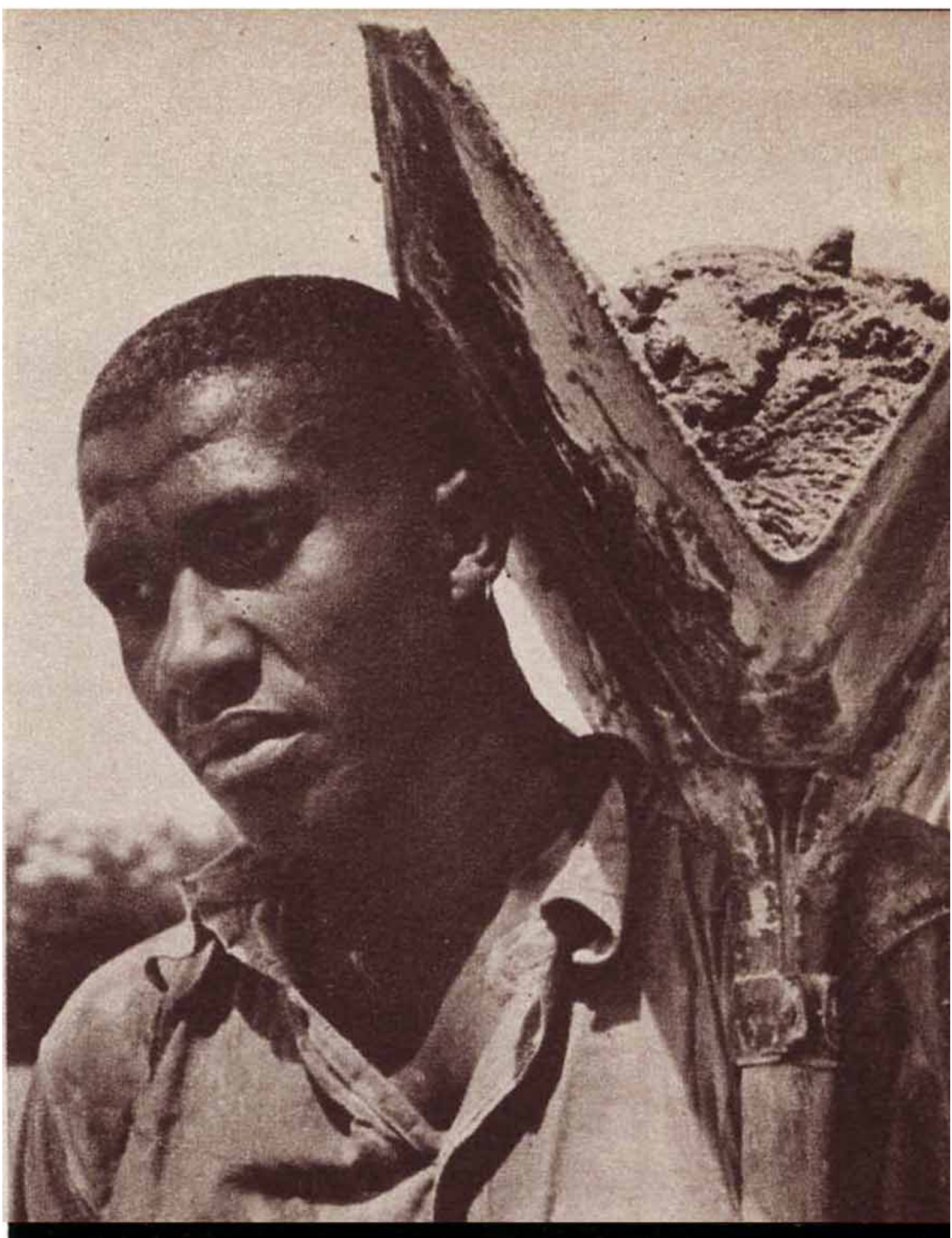
And then news comes of better places to go. The Bosses of the Buildings send men down from the North, telling us how much money we can make digging in the mines, smelting ore, laying rails and killing hogs. They tell us that we will live in brick buildings, that we will vote, that we will be able to send our children to school for nine months of the year, that if we get into trouble, we will not be lynched, and that we will not have to doff our hats, slap our thighs and laugh when we see a white face. We listen, and it sounds like religion.

And so finally, for the first time in our lives, we straighten our backs, drop the hoe and walk off.

"Hey, where the hell you going, nigger?"

"I'm shaking the dust of the South off my feet, white man."

BLACK VOICES



Your bones'll ache from totin' loads
On shoulders sorely bent

"You'll starve up north, n***r."

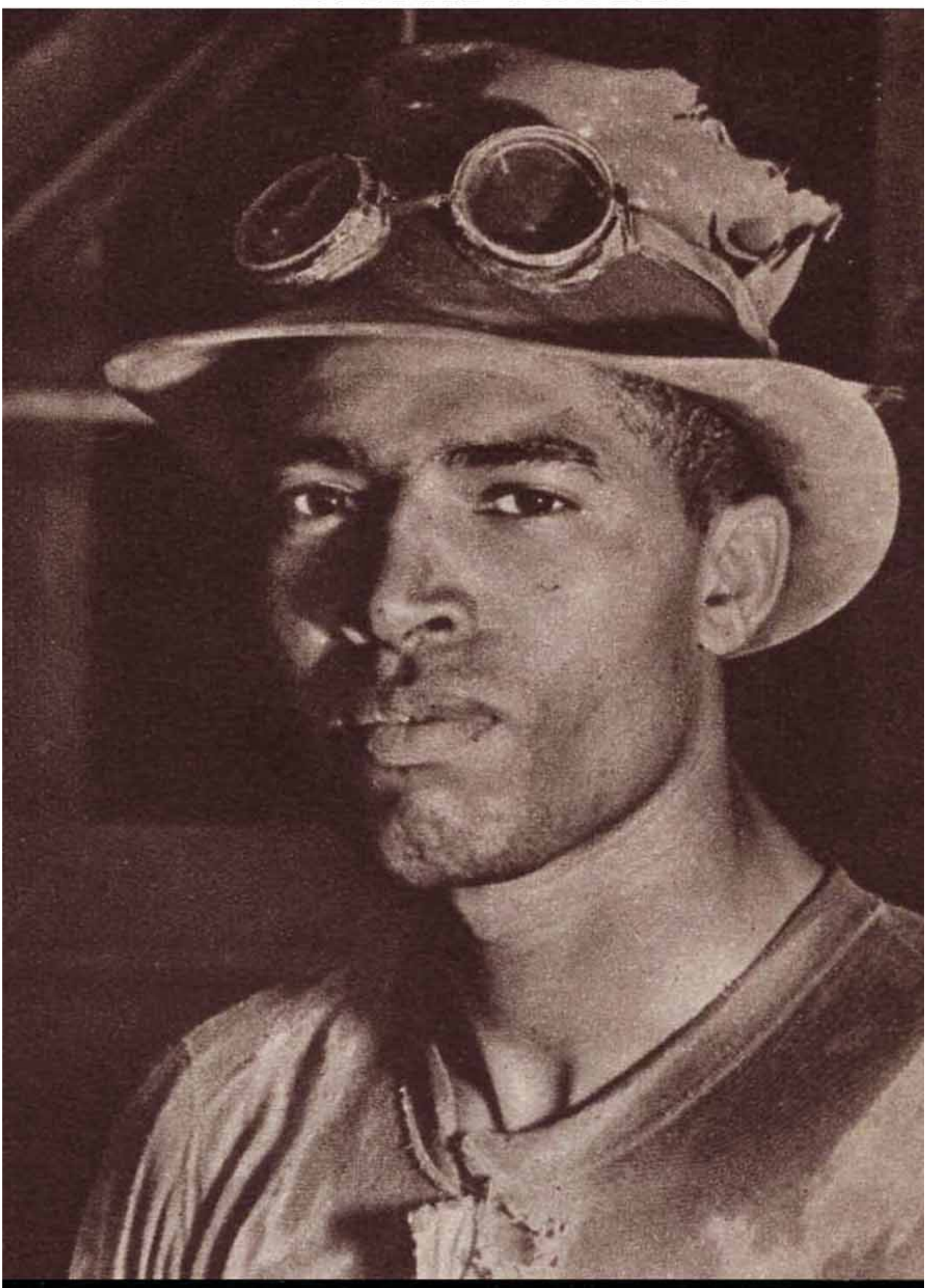
Perhaps never in history has a more utterly unprepared folk wanted to go to the city. We, who were landless upon the land; we, who had barely managed to live in family groups; we, who needed the guidance of institutions to hold our atomized lives together in lines of purpose; we who had had our personalities blasted with two hundred years of slavery and had been turned loose to shift for ourselves—we were such a folk as this when we moved into a world destined to test all we were.

We see white men and women get on the train, dressed in expensive new clothes. We look at them guardedly and wonder will they bother us. Will they ask us to stand up while they sit down? Will they tell us to go to the back of the coach?

But nothing happens. These white men seem impersonal, and their very neutrality reassures us—for a while. The miles click behind us. We feel freer than we have ever felt before, but we are still a little scared. It is like a strange dream.

Timidly, we get off the train. We hug our suitcases, fearful of pickpockets, looking with unrestrained curiosity at the great big brick buildings. Then we board our first Yankee

BLACK VOICES



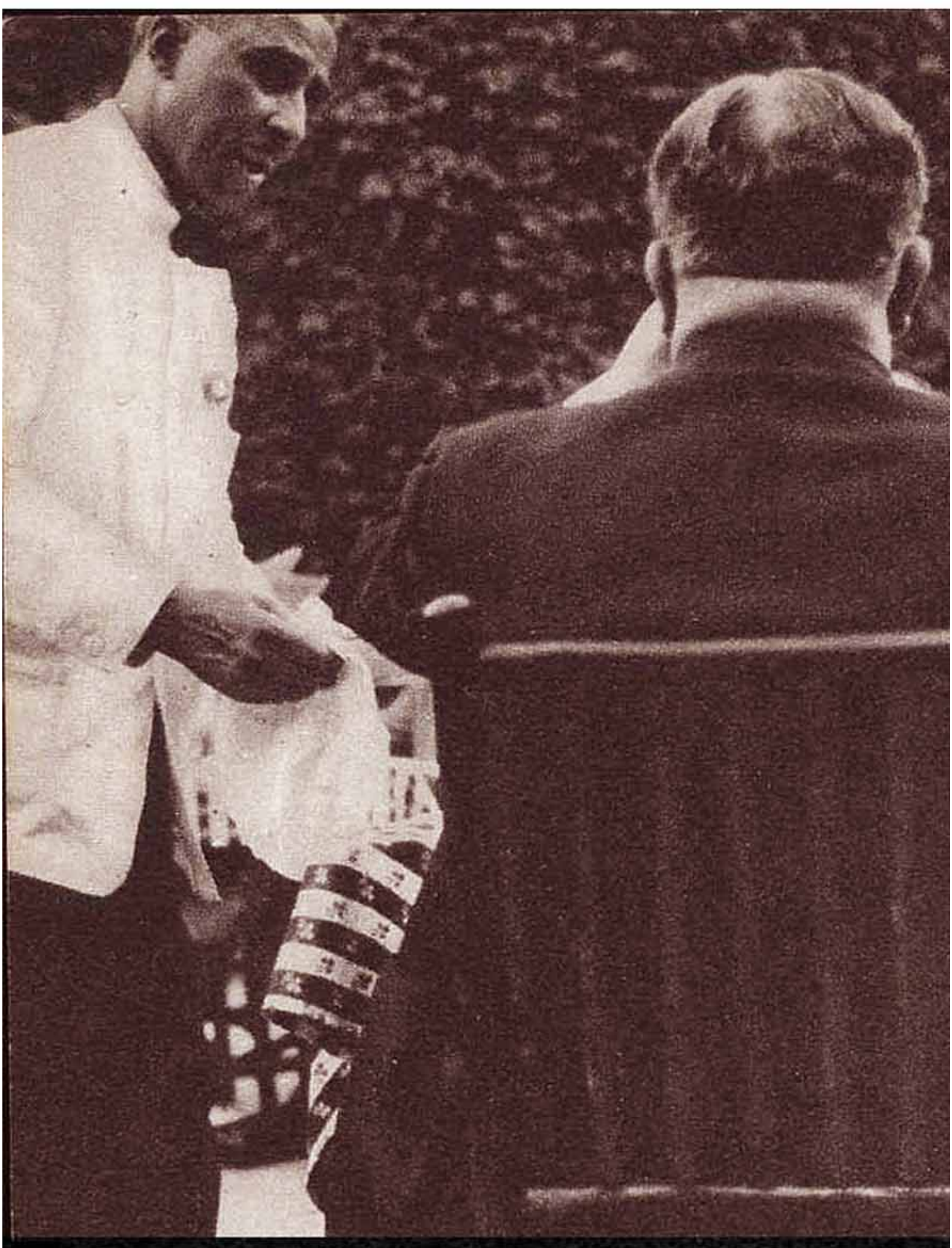
You'll toil and sweat day after day
To pay de white man rent

street car to go to a cousin's home, a brother's home, a sister's home or a friend's home. We pay the conductor our fare and look about apprehensively for a seat. A white man comes and sits beside us, not even looking at us, as though this were a normal thing to do. The muscles of our bodies tighten. Indefinable sensations crawl over our skins and our blood tingles. Out of the corners of our eyes we try to get a glimpse of the strange white face that floats but a few inches from ours. The impulses to laugh and to cry clash in us; we bite our lips and stare out of the window.

There are so many people. We cannot see or know a *man* because of the thousands upon thousands of *men*. We learn that the brisk, clipped Bosses of the Buildings are not at all *indifferent*. They are deeply concerned about us, but in a new way. It seems as though we are now living inside of a machine. In the South men spoke to you, cursed you, yelled at you or killed you. But here in the North cold forces hit you and push you. It is a world of *things*.

Our defenseless eyes cloud with bewilderment when we learn that the gigantic American companies will not employ our daughters in their

BLACK VOICES



You'll find, no matter where you go—
No matter how you figger

offices as clerks, bookkeepers or stenographers; huge department stores will not employ our young women, fresh from school, as saleswomen. The engineering, aviation, mechanical and chemical schools close their doors to our sons, just as the great corporations which make thousands of commodities refuse to employ them. The Bosses of the Buildings decree that we must be maids, porters, janitors, cooks and general servants.

The Kitchenette's the Thing

We live in crowded, barn-like rooms, in old rotting buildings where once dwelt rich native whites of a century ago. And because we are black, because our love of life gives us many children, because we do not have quiet ways of doing things, white people say we are destructive and therefore do not want us in their neighborhoods. We are afraid to venture into other sections of the city. When we do go, we always go in crowds, for that is the best mode of protection.

White people say that they are afraid of us—which makes us laugh.

When they see *one* of us, they either smile with contempt or amusement. When they see *two* of us, they treat us as though some grave thought were on their minds. When they see

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A black man's almost always wrong
A white man's always right

four of us, they are usually silent. When they see *six* of us, they become downright alarmed. And because they are afraid of us, we are afraid of them.

They say our presence in their neighborhoods lowers the value of their property. They make up their minds, because others tell them to, that they must move at once if we rent an apartment near them. And then, when the white folks move, the Bosses of the Buildings convert these old houses into "kitchenettes"—and rent them to us at fabulous rates.

They take, say, a seven-room apartment which rents for $50 a month to whites and cut it up into seven small apartments of one room each; they install one small gas stove and one small sink in each room. The Bosses of the Buildings rent these kitchenettes to us at the rate of, say, $6 a week. Hence, the same apartment for which white people pay $50 a month is rented to us for $42 a week!

Sometimes five or six of us live in a one-room kitchenette. The kitchenette is our prison, our death sentence without a trial. With its filth and foul air, with its one toilet for thirty or more tenants, it kills our black babies so fast that in many cities twice as many of them die as white babies.

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On Saturdays you'll pretty up
In high-tone Sunday best

The kitchenette provides an enticing place for crimes of all sorts—the noise of our living, boxed in stone and steel, is so loud that even a pistol shot is smothered.

The kitchenette blights the personalities of our growing children, disorganizes them, blinds them to hope. It jams our farm girls, still in their teens, into rooms with men who are restless and stimulated by the noise and lights of the city; and more of our girls have bastard babies than the girls in any other sections of the city. It urges our black boys to run off from home, to join together with other black boys in gangs, that brutal form of city courage.

"We Do N****r Work"

IN THE MAIN, we black folk earn our living in two ways in the Northern cities: we work as domestics or laborers. We are hired at low wages and perform "n****r work." Our choice is between eating and starving, and we choose to eat.

Mainly our jobs in industry come to us through strike-breaking. The white workers, who will not admit us to membership in their powerful trade unions, go out on strike against the wage cuts and long hours imposed by the Bosses of the Buildings. To break the strike, the Bosses of the

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But on Sundays you'll repent
So you'll go to church and learn

Buildings appeal to us black folk to work; they promise us "protection"; they tell us that they are our "best friends." We do not want to be scabs; we do not not want to snatch food from the tables of poor white children. We, of all people, know how hungry children can be.

But we have no choice; so, trembling and scared, we take spikes, knives and guns, and break the picket lines. And when the work day is over, we find ourselves fighting mobs of white workers in the city streets. In such a way do we black folk gain a precarious foothold in the industries of the North.

Innocently, we vote into office men to whom the welfare of our lives is of far less concern than yesterday's baseball score. The gangster-politicians play a tricky game. During election campaigns they come into black neighborhoods and inform us that the whites are planning to attack us—that they alone are our friends and will protect us if we vote for them. They ask our black boys to become precinct captains, and our boys consent, for here is the promise of a job behind a desk, the kind of job that the whites do not want us to have.

Yet through the years our loyalty to these gangster-politicians remains

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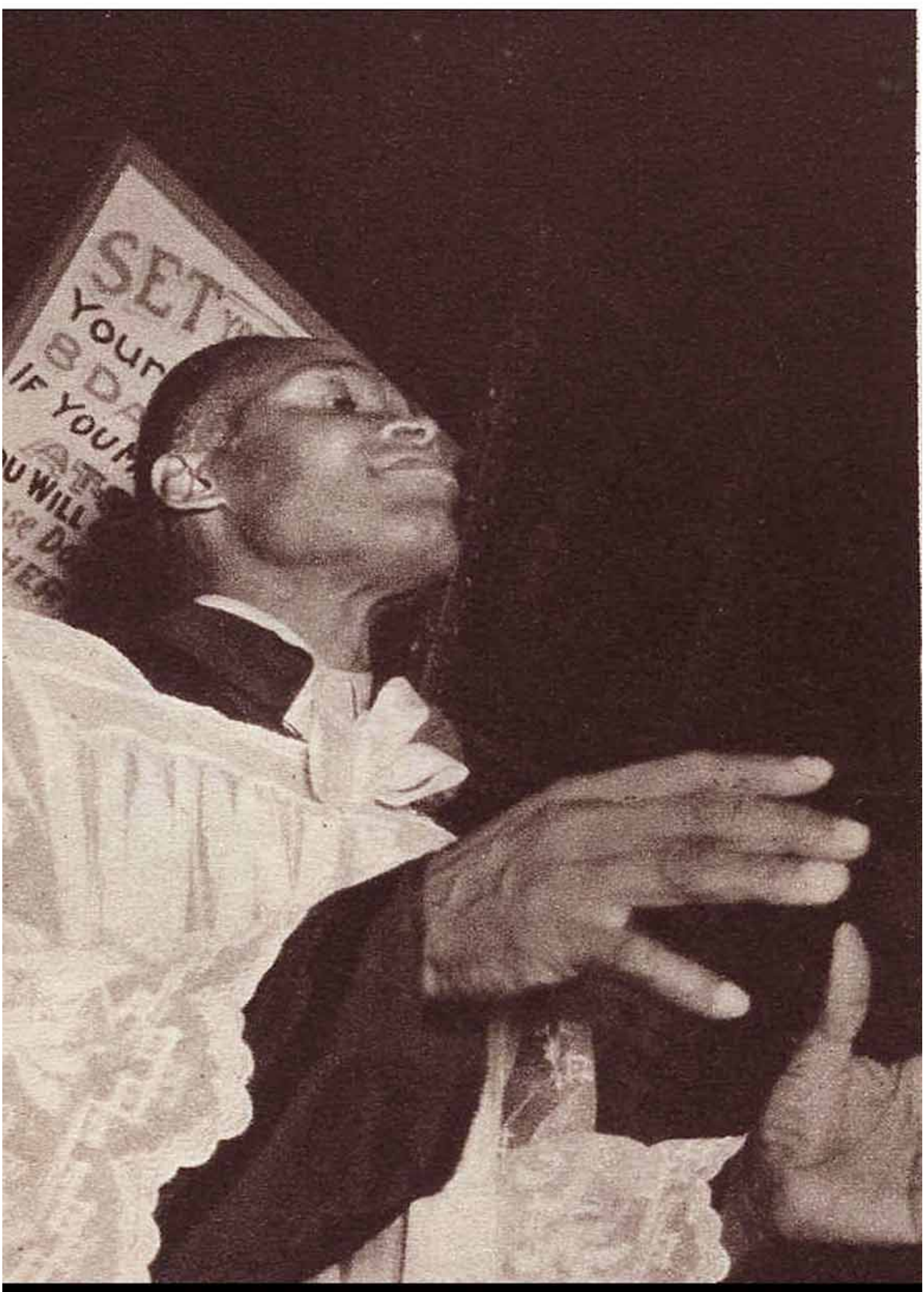
BLACK VOICES



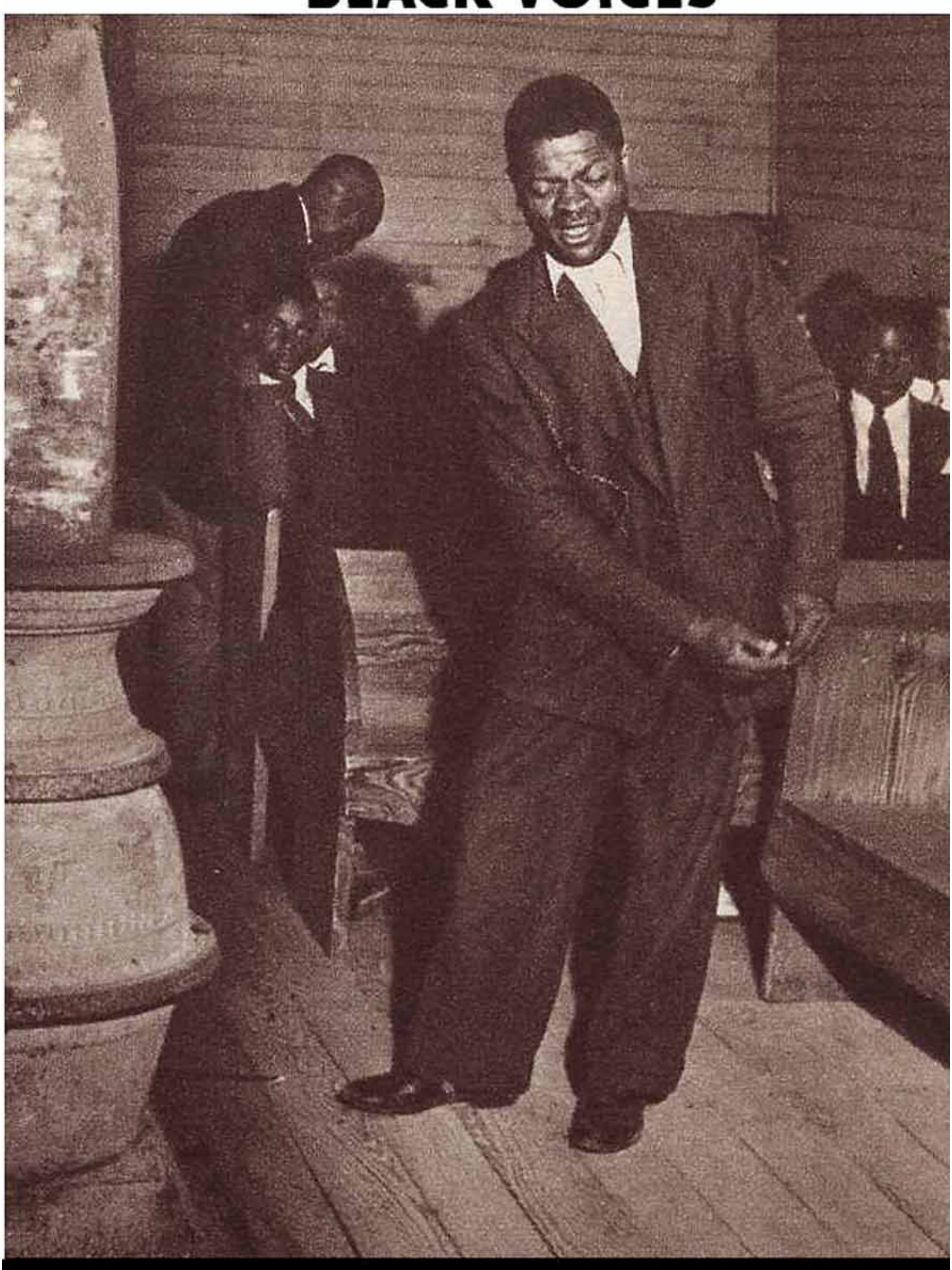
How dem Hebrew chillun
In de furnace did burn

staunch, because they are almost the only ones who hold out their hands to help us, whatever their motives. It is the gangster-politician who distributes baskets of food to our poor black families at Christmas time; it is the gangster-politician who advises the distraught black home-owner who is about to become a victim of a mortgage foreclosure; it is the gangster-politician who directs the black plantation-born grandmother to a dentist to have her teeth pulled; it is the gangster-politician who bargains our black boys out of jail when they clash with the law.

But nevertheless bloody riots break forth over trifling incidents. Throughout the North tension mounts; the atmosphere grows ripe for violence. Suddenly, over anything—an altercation between a black boy and a white boy on a beach, a whispered tale that some white man has spoken improperly to a black girl, the fact that a black man has accidentally stepped on a white woman's foot—street-fighting flares. They kill us and we kill them. We both feel that we are right.

State troops come and impose order. When the fighting is over, we bind up our wounds and count our

BLACK VOICES



An' you'll lose yourself in prayin'
Every Sunday ob de year

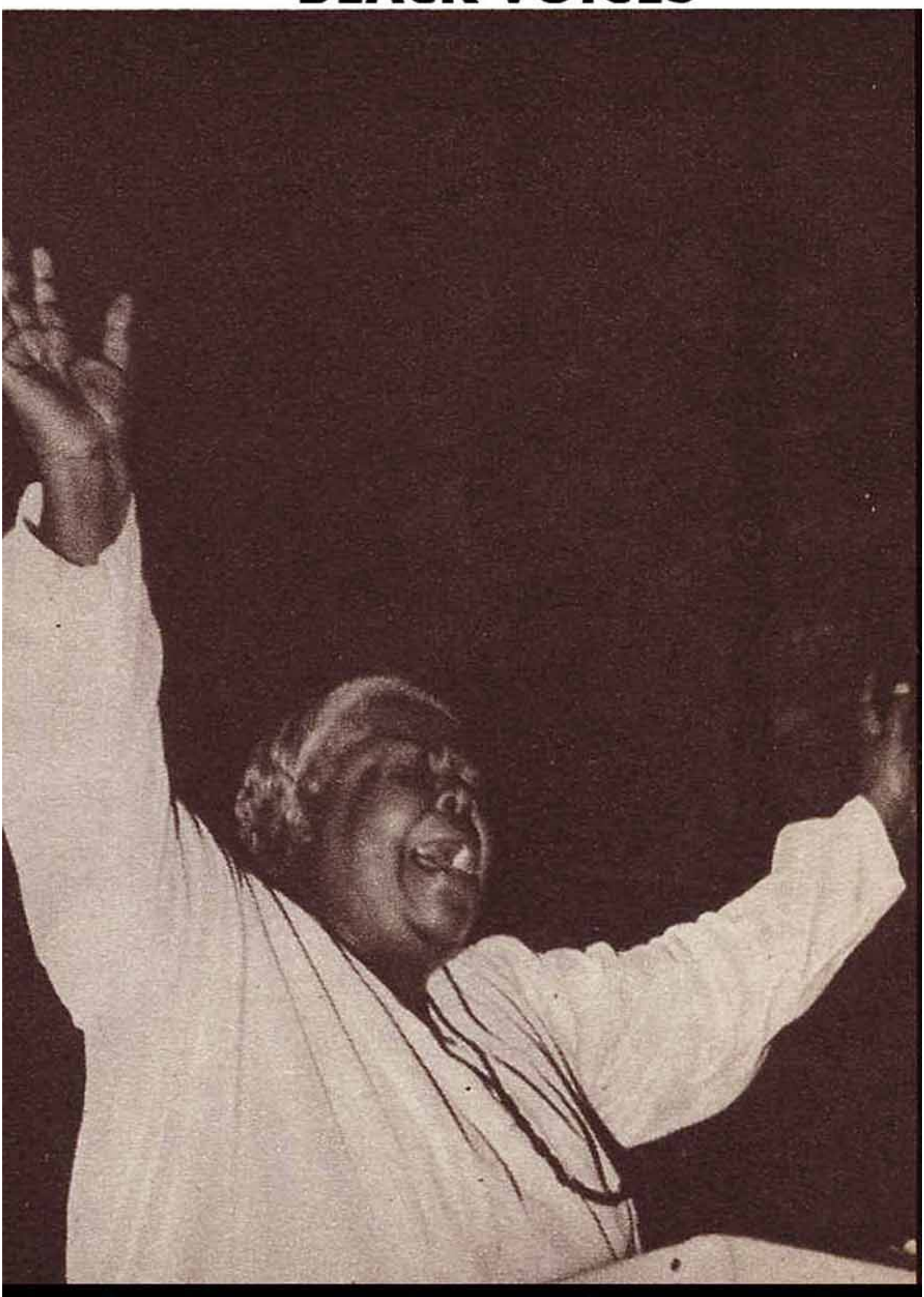
dead. We say that life for us is daily warfare: our kitchenettes comprise our barracks; the color of our skins constitutes our uniforms; the streets of our cities are our trenches; a job is a pillbox to be captured and held. The gangster-politicians are our captains, and the Bosses of the Buildings are the generals who decree the advance or retreat. We are always in battle, but tidings of victory are few.

"Only the Negro Can Play"

ALONE together with our black folk in the towering tenements, we play our guitars, trumpets and pianos, beating out rough and infectious rhythms that create an instant appeal among all classes of people. Why is our music so contagious? Why is it that those who deny us are willing to sing our songs? Perhaps it is because so many of those who live in cities feel deep down just as we feel. Our blues, jazz, swing and boogie-woogie are our "spirituals" of the city pavements—our longing for opportunity.

We lose ourselves in violent forms of dances in our ballrooms. The faces of the white world, looking on in wonder and curiosity, declare: "*Only* the Negro can play!" But they are wrong. They misread us. We are able to play in this fashion because we

BLACK VOICES



In your long white robes you're ready
When de great day's here

have been excluded, left behind. Every powerful nation says this of the folk whom it oppresses in justification of that oppression.

They smile with cold disdain when we black folk say that our thirst can be slaked in art, our tensions translated into industry, our energies applied to finance, our delight in the world converted into education and our love of adventure find fulfillment in aviation.

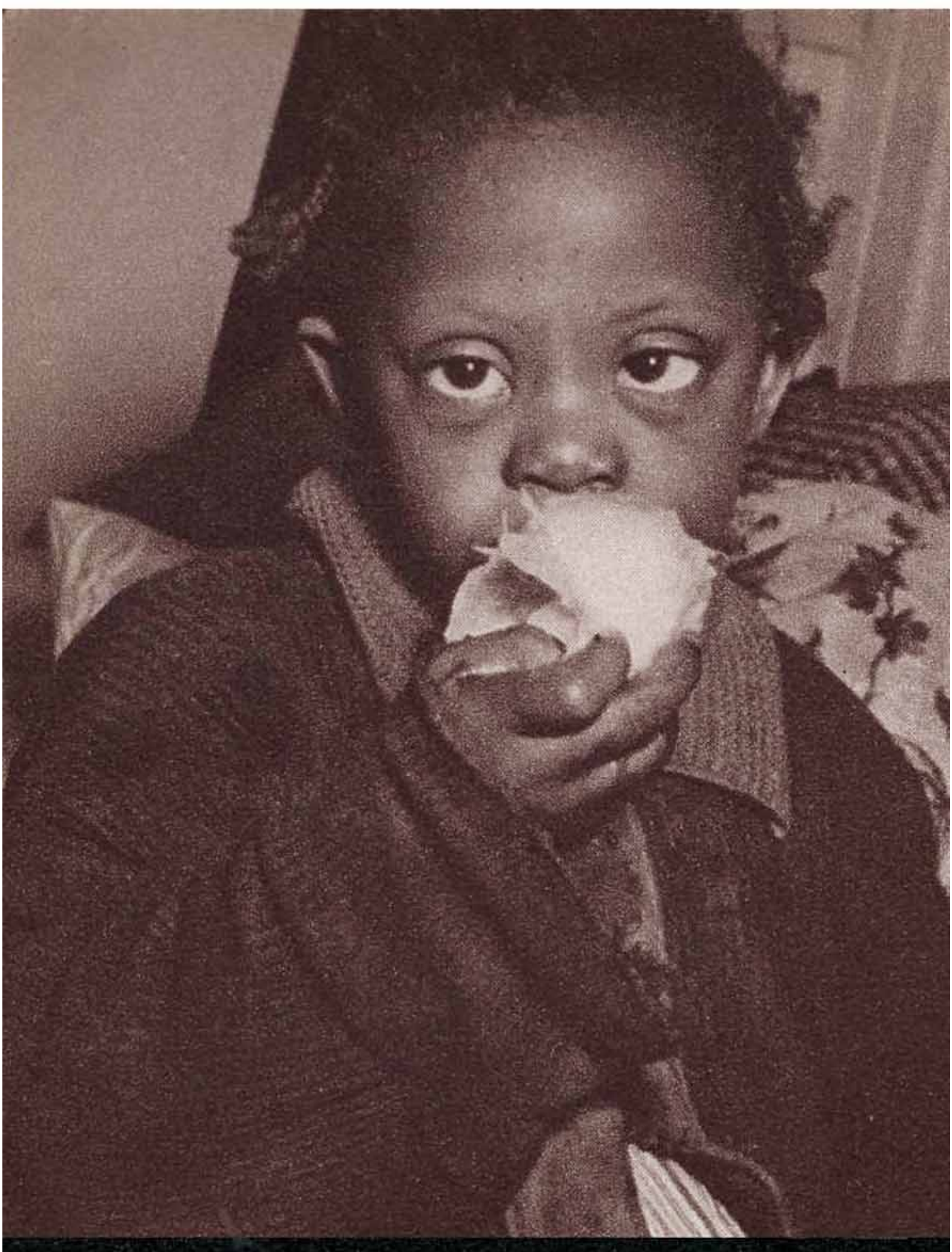
And so our adoration of color goes not into murals, but into green, red, yellow and blue clothes, not into education, but into laughter and songs.

Our Songs and Prayers

DESPITE our new worldliness, despite our rhythms, our colorful speech and our songs, we keep our churches alive. Only when we are within the walls of our churches are we wholly ourselves. In our collective outpourings of song and prayer, the fluid emotions of others make us feel the strength in ourselves.

Our churches are centers of social and community life, for we have virtually no other mode of communion and we are usually forbidden to worship God in the temples of the Bosses of the Buildings. Our churches pro-

BLACK VOICES



But your mammy's heart'll ache
As she watches you grow

vide social activities for us, cook and serve meals, organize baseball and basketball teams, operate stores and businesses, conduct social agencies. Our first newspapers and magazines were launched from our churches.

In the Black Belts of the Northern cities, our women are the most circumscribed and tragic objects to be found in our lives, and it is to the churches that our black women cling for emotional security.

Outside of the church, many of our black women drift to ruin and death on the pavements of the city; they are sold, by white men as well as by black, for sex purposes. As a whole, they must go to work at an earlier age than any other section of the nation's population. For every five white girls between the ages of 10 and 15 who must work, 25 of our girls must work; for every five white mothers who must leave their children at home in order to work, 25 of our black mothers must leave theirs.

Many of our children scorn us; they say that we still wear the red bandanna about our heads, that we are still Uncle Toms. We lean upon our God and scold our children and try to drag them to church with us, but just as we once, years ago, left the plantation to roam the Sou h, so now they leave us for the city pavements.

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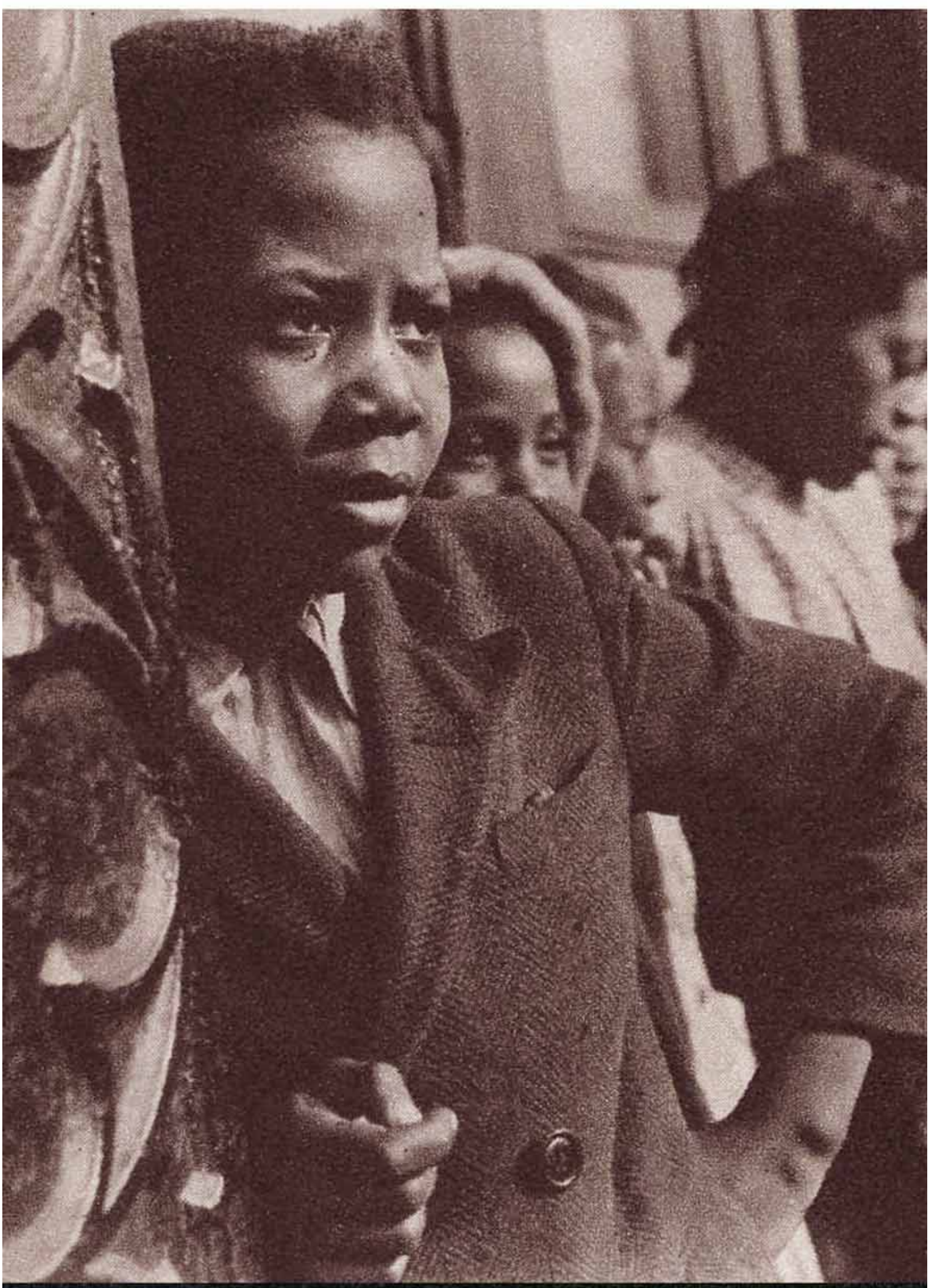
BLACK VOICES



An' your moods will bust her open
'Cause she loves you so

We watch strange moods fill our children, and our hearts swell with pain. The streets, with their noise and flaring lights, the taverns, the automobiles, the poolrooms claim them—and no voice of ours can call them back. They spend their nights away from home; they forget our ways of life, our language, our God. Their swift speech and impatient eyes make us feel weak and foolish. We cannot keep them in school. We fall upon our knees and pray for them, but in vain. The city has beaten us, evaded us.

Our tired eyes turn away from the tumult of the battle. . . .

"We Shall Be with Them!"

WE ARE the children of the black sharecroppers, the first-born of the city tenements. There are millions of us, and we are moving in all directions. Some of us feel our hurts so deeply that we feel it futile to hope in terms of American life. Our distrust is so great that we form intensely nationalistic organizations and advocate the establishment of a forty-ninth state for us.

There are even among us groups that forlornly plan a return to Africa.

A few of us have money. We make it as the white folks make theirs, and our standards of living approximate

BLACK VOICES

An' she'll hate to see you hungry
An' hate to see de day

those of middle-class whites. But the majority of us still toil on plantations, work in heavy industry and labor in the kitchens of the whites.

We say now: if we black folk had been allowed to participate in the vital processes of America's growth, America would have been stronger and greater!

We say that we, our history, our present being, are a mirror of all the manifold experiences of America. What we want is what America *is*. And if we perish, America perishes.

What do we want?

We want the right to share in the upward march of American life.

The Lords of the Land say: "We will not grant this!"

We answer: "We ask you to grant us nothing. We are winning our heritage, though our toll in suffering is great!"

The Bosses of the Buildings say: "Your problem is beyond solution!"

We answer: "Our problem is being solved. We are crossing the line you dared us to cross, though we pay in the coin of death!"

We are with the new tide. We stand at the crossroads. We watch each new procession. Voices are speaking. Men are moving. *We shall be with them!*