INTRODUCTION

New York is a city of culture and commerce, skyscrapers and bustling crowds, opportunity and deferred dreams. There are many ways to know this city, but being acquainted with its artists, especially if they are artists who are concerned with the complex lives of ordinary people, is particularly illuminating. Such artists help us understand New York’s particularities while also giving voice and vision to universal feelings: fear and longing, trepidation and possibility. Through them we experience the city: navigate its crowds, walk its streets, and ride its subways. We see how they relate to those who share their environment and how they address—or ignore—the social and political concerns of the day. Attending to the artists and their work helps us to remember that people are always bigger than the theories, narratives, and histories that seek to explain, define, narrate, and contain them.

The generation of artists who lived and worked in New York, especially in Harlem, during and immediately following World War II understood that people could not be contained or fully explained by academic or political theories. The stories
of three such artists drive the narrative of *Harlem Nocturne*, an exploration of politics and culture in New York during the 1940s: choreographer and dancer Pearl Primus, writer Ann Petry, and composer and pianist Mary Lou Williams. Although they are not well known to contemporary readers, Primus, Petry, and Williams were among the city’s most celebrated artists in that decade. Each was inspired by her times to produce highly innovative art that communicated the aspirations of everyday people.

None of these women were native New Yorkers. Petry, a fourth-generation New Englander, was born in Old Saybrook, Connecticut, in 1908. Williams was born in Atlanta in 1910 and migrated with her family to Pittsburgh when she was a girl. Primus was born in Trinidad in 1919 and came with her family to New York when she was three years old. Primus spent her teenage years in Harlem. Petry arrived there as a newlywed in 1938. Williams settled in Harlem in 1943, after over a decade on the road.

Primus and Williams would become friends and collaborators while both were working at Café Society, the politically leftist jazz club that presented some of New York’s most important and exciting talent. Surely Petry, the loner, was aware of them, but there is no evidence that she knew them personally. However, this is not a group biography. Primus, Petry, and Williams are bound together by a place and a time, and together they give us an understanding of the relationship between artistic endeavor and political aspiration. During the 1940s all three women were producing celebrated art, actively promoting progressive causes, and working to merge their political and aesthetic concerns. Each sought to expand the contours of the American ideal of democracy to include the most marginalized peoples. Each commented upon and critiqued the limited practice of American democracy. And each strove to contribute to American culture by bringing to it the perspective, history, and traditions of its citizens of African descent.

Importantly, all three women were recognized by their peers and by the arts establishment as significant artists. They also shared an extraordinary sense of themselves, a belief in their capacity and a willingness to build upon their natural talent through intense preparation, practice, and learning. In addition to being artists and activists, each was also an intellectual who critically engaged questions about her chosen art form.

The first half of the decade offered these women unprecedented opportunity. This would change by decade’s end. By that time in each woman’s experience, the range of opportunities was narrowing, the result of changing politics and shifting aesthetic sensibilities. By the early 1950s, Petry, Primus, and Williams had all left New York. Primus, who had been traveling in West Africa, returned to the United States to find herself under investigation by the FBI. Williams toured Europe and wouldn’t return for two years; it would be decades before she reached heights similar to those of the earlier years. Petry spent the rest of her life in New England. Still, they all continued to be productive artists in spite of these changes.

Although *Harlem Nocturne* focuses on individual women, it also seeks to place them in the context of the city and the
organizations and institutions that helped to shape them and their art. The war years offered a brief period of possibility and hope for many, especially for white women and black Americans of both genders. These years tested the capacity of the United States to live up to its democratic ideals. During this time, a new group of gutsy, confident, and insistent black people joined a generation of progressive whites who were committed to a vision of their nation as a place of potential, a place capable of change and worth fighting for. Many of this generation would later be challenged and silenced by Cold War politics, or would capitulate to those politics, but not before laying the groundwork for the militant activism that exploded in later decades. Tactics that we most often associate with the civil rights movement in the fifties and sixties—sit-ins, freedom rides, economic boycotts, and mass marches—originated in the forties. The first March on Washington was to have taken place in 1941, and the plans for it became the blueprint for the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom.

The forties are a period of great importance in American history and culture. In popular history, it is the time of "the Greatest Generation"—those young men who served their country in the armed services and in so doing helped to free the world for democracy. But the idolization of these young men also highlighted a central contradiction: as the "Greatest Generation" was fighting for freedom abroad, women and African Americans were still lobbying for equality at home. So for American women, it was also the era of Rosie the Riveter and the emergence of the "woman's film," when women's narratives first hit the silver screen. For African Americans, it was the age of Double V—or Double Victory—where black Americans fought not only overseas for their country but also to be recognized as citizens at home (Victory at Home and Abroad). In American music, it was the time when the swing era gave way to bebop and rhythm and blues.

Throughout the 1940s, Primus, Petry, and Williams experienced a particularly fecund period of creativity, taking advantage of a brief era of openness and opportunity. Four factors contributed to creating the conditions for the social and artistic movement of which these women were a part: World War II, the Double V Campaign, the Second Great Migration of African Americans, and the Popular Front in politics, art, and culture that first coalesced during the Great Depression, but continued through the war years.

Because of the absence of men, many US women were afforded greater opportunity during the war years than they had seen in earlier times—or would see in the times immediately thereafter. This flowering of opportunity reached black women, too. Though most black women continued to work as domestic servants, some began to find work as clerks, nurses, teachers, and seamstresses. Those who entered the war industry were relegated to the most menial, labor-intensive tasks. A few black women in the skilled trades fought their way into newly integrated unions.

Petry, Primus, and Williams were profoundly influenced by the Double V Campaign. Through Double V, African Americans insisted upon their social and civil rights while at the same time committing themselves to the war effort. For black people, the war provided an opportunity to accelerate their
demands for equality. As the nation fought a war against fascism, a war for democracy, it also sought to present itself as a land of equality and opportunity for all of its citizens. Black Americans highlighted the distance between this ideal of America and the reality of ongoing racial inequality, often through the black press and civil rights organizations.

The Double V Campaign was part of a larger social movement whose ultimate goal was the destruction of Jim Crow and the dismantling of the infamous 1896 Plessy v. Ferguson decision, which legalized and helped to institutionalize racial segregation in public accommodations. The movement focused on segregation in the armed services and reached its apex with the March on Washington movement in 1941, organized by civil rights leader A. Philip Randolph, founder of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters union, and political strategist and organizer Bayard Rustin. The march, which was planned in order to protest discrimination in the defense industries, had its beginnings in May of that year when Randolph issued a “Call to Negro America to March on Washington for Jobs and Equal Participation in National Defense” on July 1, 1941. Within a month it was estimated that 100,000 protesters would attend. President Franklin D. Roosevelt appealed to Randolph and Rustin to call the march off, hoping to avoid the embarrassment of a mass protest against racism in the midst of a war against Nazism. When they refused, he issued Executive Order 8802, establishing the President’s Fair Employment Practices Committee, which barred discrimination in defense industries and federal bureaus. Only then did Randolph call off the proposed march. But even though the march never happened, Randolph and Rustin’s proposal marked the beginning of the modern civil rights movement, the long, slow road to Brown v. Board of Education and beyond. For while the Double V Campaign used the war to focus on the armed services, it also concerned itself with segregation and discrimination in housing and employment.

The political activism evident in the Double V Campaign was undergirded by the tremendous growth of black urban populations during the war years. Between 1916 and 1930, approximately 1.5 million African Americans moved to northern cities in response to the call for industrial laborers. The Second Great Migration was larger and more sustained than the first. Between 1940 and 1970, over 5 million black southerners migrated north and west. By the end of World War II, the majority of African Americans were urban, and they were transforming the face of American cities politically, economically, and culturally. The migrants were often the subjects of Primus’s and Petry’s art, and they provided a significant portion of Primus’s and Williams’s audiences. Each woman aligned her art with the aspirations of migrants: the desire for equal citizenship, for adequate housing, for access to educational and economic opportunity, and for freedom from racial violence and police brutality.

Finally, the political and aesthetic sensibilities of these women were encouraged by a number of left-leaning organizations and institutions. The Popular Front was a program initiated by the Communist Party in response to the economic crisis of the Great Depression and the rise of fascism. At its Seventh World Congress in 1935, the Comintern—the inter-
national association of Communist organizations created by V.I. Lenin in 1917—replaced its call for a proletariat-led global revolution with a call for a “broad People’s Front” coalition of liberals, radicals, trade unionists, farmers, socialists, blacks and whites, anticolonialists and colonized. In an effort to unify this broad constituency, the party simultaneously inaugurated a campaign to promote what it had come to call “people’s culture.” On February 14, 1936, a coalition of black groups met in Chicago at the National Negro Congress and vowed to support black artists who challenged stereotypical representations of black people. This effort, called the Negro People’s Front, included a number of organizations, individuals, and institutions from diverse ideological beliefs: churches, civil rights organizations, black women’s clubs, fraternal groups, politicians, students, union members, and the black press. Although 1939 marked the official end of the party’s Popular Front period, the idea of a Popular Front would continue throughout the war years. Without Popular Front venues like the Café Society, or publications such as PM, a leftist newspaper, it is doubtful that Petry, Primus, and Williams could have met with such success. Popular Front initiatives focused on culture as an especially important forum for educating and mobilizing audiences in support of an antifascist agenda.1

Ann Petry and Mary Lou Williams were part of what one of America’s most important philosophers, Richard Rorty, identified as the Reformist Left, though he did not name either of them as being members of that group. According to Rorty, the Reformist Left included a diverse array of Americans who fought within the framework of constitutional democracy to ensure the rights of the nation’s weakest citizens. Such activists represented a broad range of progressive stances, from those calling themselves communists and socialists to those who eschewed political labels altogether.2

Borrowing a phrase from writer James Baldwin, Rorty used the term “achieving our country” to explain the work of the Reformist Left. This group of progressive intellectuals, artists, and activists sought to make the nation live up to its founding principles of liberty and equality for all. While they did not forget the brutality of our nation’s past, they maintained that it was a continuous work in progress, one that had demonstrated and would continue to demonstrate its ability to become a better place.3

The three women of Harlem Nocturne sought to achieve America by directly confronting its legacy of white supremacy. Primus, Petry, and Williams consistently confronted the darkness of our nation’s soul. They were critical of white supremacy and the excesses of American capitalism. Yet, their art and their activism also denoted a firm belief in the transformative nature of social change. They were agents, not spectators. They advocated for access to education, jobs, and adequate food and shelter. They were concerned with both racial and economic equality. They walked the streets of Harlem during the time that a young Baldwin walked those same streets. They saw what he saw, were angered and inspired by the people, forces, and sensibilities that would give rise to his own sense of rage, purpose, and justice. As with Baldwin, these women were not
willing to forget or wholly forgive America’s historical transgressions, but they were devoted to helping this nation “achieve” itself. They did so in a variety of ways and in a variety of contexts.4

The Communist Party was one venue through which some Americans tried to help their nation “achieve” itself. Pearl Primus was a member of the Communist Party. Of the three women, she was the most articulate about the struggle to make the United States a true democracy; for her the racial problem in America was a problem of democracy. All three women were politically engaged, though to differing degrees and along different points of the spectrum. Primus was the most politically radical of the three, sitting at the nexus of the Reformist Left and the Black Radical tradition. Although she worked for change within US borders, her concerns were always transnational, extending beyond the boundaries of the United States to include Africa and the Caribbean.5

Williams was rumored to have hosted Communist meetings in her apartment; she often offered her home up as a kind of intellectual and artistic salon to the people and causes she loved, admired, and supported. She was never a member of the party. Williams, long before her conversion to Catholicism, was instead largely driven by spiritual concerns that informed her strong sense of social justice. Petry was an editor of the People’s Voice, and in that position she was surrounded by Communists. While she had respect and admiration for individual Communists, she protested any attempt to categorize her as such. She discounted the centrality of Marx to her own thinking, noting instead that biblical ethics informed her sensibilities. Whereas Williams sincerely sought meaning in her sense of spirituality, Petry may have been seeking to demonstrate the way her political views were steeped in values of the Judeo-Christian tradition that preceded Marxism, and would have distanced herself from the kind of radical politics that eventually fell out of favor.

Although each of these women lived in Harlem at some point during the period under consideration, their work took them throughout the entire city and ultimately throughout the nation and the world. By following them as they navigate Manhattan, we acquire a unique vision of the city during and immediately following World War II. New York sits at the center of this narrative. The city enabled and influenced their creativity. It facilitated their emergence as significant artists. It provided the social, cultural, and political context that laid the foundation for their careers.

In the 1940s, Harlem and New York were vibrant, glamorous, and exciting places, brimming with creativity. A new generation of artists ushered the transition from swing to bebop, tended the birth of rhythm and blues, questioned the continuing significance of social realism, experimented with abstraction, and sought a seat at the center of the national narrative. The forties differed from the better-known Harlem Renaissance and the Jazz Age in a number of important ways. Although the Harlem Renaissance produced Zora Neale Hurston, Nella Larsen, Jessie Fauset, Bessie Smith, and Josephine
Baker, among others, each of these women found her voice—or her stride—in an earlier time, and black women never received as much attention and acclaim for their work as they did during World War II. Furthermore, many of the women who emerged during the forties more explicitly linked their art and their public profile to a political movement.

Other women’s voices contributed to this generational shift as well: the poets Gwendolyn Brooks and Margaret Walker, entertainers Hazel Scott and Lena Horne, and dancer Katherine Dunham, for instance. Lady Day was the Queen of 52nd Street, and Ella Fitzgerald was “Flying Home.” Sarah Vaughan, first hired as a pianist for Earl “Fatha” Hines, soon left to join Billy Eckstine’s band with Miles Davis, Kenny Dorham, Art Blakey, Lucky Thompson, Gene Ammons, and Dexter Gordon. And then there was the new queen of the blues, queen of the black jukebox, Miss D herself—Dinah Washington, whose Chicago-inflected, Harlem-based sound reflected the national postwar optimism and a newfound African American confidence. Through their art, Ann Petry, Mary Lou Williams, and Pearl Primus documented these times and in so doing helped to shape the history of a city and its people by presenting perspectives that were absent from official records.

New York fed each woman’s art, providing inspiration, material, and venues for performance and publication. However, the city was no utopia; nor was it free of obstacles to black freedom. As late as 1940, 90 percent of New York State’s defense plants refused to hire black workers. The nearby Fox Hills Army Camp in Staten Island was a segregated military base. Furthermore, a number of restaurants and bars did not serve black patrons. Though subjected to these laws and customs, none of the women examined in this book lived racially segregated lives. Each claimed black and white friends, and Primus and Williams especially operated in racially integrated milieus. The tension between these restrictions and the sense of possibility with which they lived their own lives made them acutely aware of and committed to fighting against racial injustice.

Despite the obstacles they endured in New York, these women were prominent artists. Through major works they also gave back to the city that enabled their art. Pearl Primus danced for soldiers and students. She became a favorite of New York Times dance critic John Martin, who covered all of her performances and, as a respected arbiter of taste, helped to cement her reputation. Among black dancers, only Katherine Dunham rivaled her. Ann Petry sits alongside Richard Wright and before Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin; through her work she presented complex, engaging, working-class black women in American fiction for the first time. She provided one of the first fully imagined portrayals of working-class Harlem in her 1946 novel The Street, which became the first book by a black woman to sell 1 million copies; it was widely reviewed in the black, left, and mainstream press. Mary Lou Williams became a major figure in the birth of bebop and challenged notions that women contributed to jazz only as vocalists. She was not simply the nurturing “godmother” of younger musicians such as Thelonious Monk and Bud Powell. In 1945, she had her own weekly radio broadcast, Mary Lou Williams’s Piano
Workshop, and premiered her **Zodiac Suite** to diverse audiences at two of the city's most prestigious venues: Town Hall and Carnegie Hall.

All three women volunteered for causes they believed in, organized people and events, and taught younger artists. Their art was driven by a fierce passion for social justice and an insistent drive to create. Petry, Primus, and Williams were also included in anthologies and performances with some of the brightest talents of their generation. Their names frequently appeared in the press, and they were well known to culturally literate New York audiences.

Who were these women? Where did they acquire their confidence and their ambition? As was the case with many other American women, their youth, their marital statuses, and the absence of children gave them the freedom to focus on their careers. Petry and Williams were both in their early thirties during the war years, while Primus was in her early twenties. During this time none of them had children. Both Petry and Primus later became mothers, with one child each, but Williams remained childless throughout her life. Petry was married, but her husband was away at war for most of the time under consideration. Williams was separated from her second husband, the trumpeter Harold Baker, and Primus would not marry until the end of the decade.

Each of these women was highly intellectual and had prepared well for the path she pursued. Petry and Primus had gone to college. Williams, a child prodigy who began playing piano by ear at age two, went on the road before completing her formal education, but as the pianist, composer, and arranger for one of the most famous swing bands of the day (the Andy Kirk Orchestra), she was highly trained in her medium. All were avid readers and deep thinkers. In many ways each benefited from the struggles to open doors of opportunity for women and African Americans that had taken place during the earlier decades of the twentieth century. They all were cosmopolitan sophisticates, and before the end of their lives, they all had international reputations (Williams and Primus even lived outside of the United States for extended periods). They were recognized for their contributions to the arts. Unlike so many women artists, none of them died unappreciated and unknown. This is largely due to the efforts of members of younger generations, themselves inspired by the social movements of the sixties, especially the Black Power and Black Arts movements and the feminist movement, who, in their own search for foremothers, rediscovered these three pioneers.

By the early 1950s, the window of opportunity that had given these women the freedom to flourish had been shut, as Cold War politics and anti-Communist fervor took aim at the institutions that had supported them. Faced with these new limitations, each woman eventually left New York. Petry returned to Old Saybrook with her husband to raise her daughter. She would write two more novels, a number of short stories, and several books for children and young adults. Mary Lou Williams went to Paris, where, following a religious conversion, she gave up playing and composing music until she was encouraged to do these things again by her spiritual mentors. She returned to New York in the mid-1950s and eventually experienced a career resurgence in the 1970s. Williams
continued to be involved with the most innovative forms of music until her death. With the rise of McCarthyism, Primus came under governmental surveillance. A grant from the Julius Rosenwald Foundation allowed her to travel to West Africa, and for the rest of her career she devoted her efforts to bringing West African dance to the world stage.

While the anti-Communist furor did not target Petry or Williams, by targeting the institutions, venues, and individuals supporting their art, it nevertheless helped to destroy the milieu that nurtured them. However, during the war years and the years immediately thereafter, each woman produced vibrant, creative, and important work that spoke to the centrality of humanity, documented its suffering and striving, and insisted upon a world where both justice and beauty could thrive.

Herein, these three women's stories are told in terms of "movement" in its multiple meanings. Literally, it means a change in position or place, as in the movement of those black and Latino people who were migrating to New York in record numbers. "Movement" is also an important concept in the arts, one that applies to diverse art forms. In dance it may simply mean a change of position or posture, a step or a figure. In music it signifies the transition from note to note or passage to passage, or it may refer to a division of a longer work. In literature, "movement" signals the progression or development of a plot or a storyline. Finally, there is the "political movement," defined as a series of actions on the part of a group of people working toward a common goal. Black people were on the move in the 1940s, migrating, marching, protesting, walking, dancing. These artists sought to imbue their work with this sense of mobility as well.

*Harlem Nocturne* moves through time by opening each chapter with an event from the year 1943 and following each woman through decade's end. The year 1943 was pivotal for many reasons in the lives of the women and in the life of the nation. Each woman experienced a major event that year: Primus appeared before thousands of spectators at the Negro Freedom Rally, Petry lived through the Harlem Riots, and Williams moved to New York. It was also the year that saw race riots in Los Angeles; Beaumont, Texas; and Detroit and coincided with the height of World War II. Each chapter focuses on one representative work of the period and closes with the artist's departure from New York as late as 1952 when Williams set sail for Europe. Throughout, we walk, ride the subway, and dance with them.

And yet, oddly enough, as much as the times and the women themselves experienced multiple meanings of movement, there was also a sense of confinement that was evident in their lives and their work. Primus and Petry both confronted and challenged the debilitating limits of Jim Crow. The social movements of which they were a part faded away. In the case of Primus, she was constantly under surveillance, and her passport was revoked, thus severely limiting her own freedom of movement. This was a central paradox of the times: confinement within mobility—a frustrating tension that characterizes the narrative of black life in the United States.
Nonetheless, the benefit of hindsight shows us that though slow and incremental, the change for which Primus, Petry, and Williams fought and yearned continued to unfold. Hindsight also teaches us of the continued need for the kind of commitment, dedication, and discipline demonstrated by the women of Harlem Nocturne.

CHAPTER ONE

PEARL PRIMUS:
DANCING FREEDOM

On June 7, 1943, as World War II raged overseas, over 20,000 people gathered at Madison Square Garden for the second annual Negro Freedom Rally. Most of them came to be entertained, but they also had a sense of the event’s importance: a communal call to fight Hitler abroad and Jim Crow at home. The rallies, the brainchild of A. Philip Randolph, embodied the Double V Campaign, which had mobilized urban communities nationwide. They celebrated black participation in the war effort and called for racial and economic equality in the United States. With the outbreak of World War II, black Americans saw a particular irony in the continued existence of racial discrimination and segregation within the nation’s borders, even as black soldiers risked their lives in a war against fascism abroad.

During World War I, black leaders had called upon black Americans to support the war effort and had suspended vociferous protests against racial inequality. They hoped that by
while Pearl Primus was bringing the plight of black southerners to the New York stage, Ann Petry was addressing the concerns of black urbanites, especially the inhabitants of Harlem, in her writing. Primus danced in venues throughout New York; Petry spent most of her time uptown, where she lived and worked from 1938 until the mid-1940s. Harlem provided Petry with ample material and inspiration, and she created a body of work that earned her an international literary reputation.

Petry used fiction to map Harlem, both as a space constructed by forces outside of its control and as a place created by its inhabitants. The two were necessarily at odds with each other. While Harlem the place fought against racism, the space existed as a black neighborhood because of forced residential segregation. It grew into a global black cultural and political capital because of the creativity and determination of those who
lived there. In Petry’s fiction, the space is plagued by substandard housing; the place was filled with individuals trying desperately to create meaningful lives for themselves and their children. Like the characters about whom she wrote, Petry walked the streets of Harlem. She navigated them as an activist, journalist, and writer of fiction. These combined roles informed her work, ensuring that her writing possessed a sense of urgency, realism, and artistry. The Harlem she documented changed constantly; it was made and remade by walkers, who in turn were shaped by the streets they walked.

When *The Crisis* published her short story “On Saturday the Siren Sounds at Noon” in its December 1943 issue, Petry quickly emerged as an important up-and-coming writer. All the elements that would characterize her later work can be identified in this riveting tale. The tensely woven story, only two pages long, was based on a newspaper article about two children who met their deaths in an apartment fire while their parents were at work. Petry focused on the children’s father, who, in a series of flashbacks sparked by an air-raid siren, recalls the day he found his burned children. Petry tweaked the facts as she transformed the account into fiction. In her version, the children are left home alone by the man’s adulterous wife. The story brought her to the attention of an editor at Houghton Mifflin in Boston, who encouraged her to write a novel. In 1945, she received a Houghton Mifflin Literary Fellowship so she could complete that novel, *The Street*.

A native of Old Saybrook, Connecticut, Ann Petry was the descendant of four generations of African American New Englanders. Born on October 12, 1908, Anna Houston Lane was
the second daughter of Peter Clark Lane and Bertha James Lane. The Lanes were one of fifteen black families who lived in Old Saybrook, a small town located where the Connecticut River meets the Long Island Sound. Petry’s father owned the local drugstore and worked as a pharmacist; her mother was a licensed chiropodist—one who treats corns and bunions. Imbued with an entrepreneurial spirit, Mrs. Lane also worked as a beautician and barber and was the owner of Fine Linens for Fine Homes, a business that employed a number of Irish immigrant women as makers of handmade linen and lace tablecloths and napkins. As such, the Lanes were solidly middle class—in status if not always financially.

A bookish, chubby child, Petry lost herself in reading and from a young age aspired to be a writer. Her family had other plans for her. Upon graduating from Old Saybrook High School, she first enrolled in the historic Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute in Virginia, where other members of her family had gone. Petry’s aunts and uncles who had attended Hampton were adventurers, college administrators, and successful professionals. One of her aunts, Anna Louise James, was a licensed pharmacist. Petry’s own aspirations were more intellectual and artistic than business oriented, so she felt Hampton was not a good fit. She attended Hampton for a year and a half before returning to Connecticut. She never went back to the school and never spoke publicly about her time there. According to her daughter, Elisabeth, Petry was “dissatisfied with her courses in meal preparation and management of household expenses” and wanted to learn about more than the domestic sciences. Booker T. Washington had also attended Hampton, acquiring his philosophy of industrial education there. Building upon this foundation, Washington later developed a disavowal of protest politics. Hampton became the model for Washington’s Tuskegee Institute in Tuskegee, Alabama.

Unlike Washington, Petry actively engaged in protests at Hampton. It appears that she may have even been involved in a student strike. After her death, Elisabeth discovered a copy of student demands insisting that “teachers needed apparent education’ above that of the students and that the teachers in the trade school should possess at least a high school diploma.” Eventually, Petry transferred to the University of Connecticut, where she earned a degree from the College of Pharmacy in 1931. Following in the footsteps of her father and her beloved aunt, Anna Louise, who had been the first black woman to receive a degree in pharmacy, Petry worked for a number of years in the family’s Old Saybrook store before managing their other property in Old Lyme.

Petry seemed to resent her parents’ decision to send her to Hampton and to pharmaceutical college. Her older sister, Bertha, had been sent to Pembroke (Brown University’s sister school), but the Lanes’ ambitions for their younger daughter seemed decidedly different from those they’d had for their elder daughter. When Petry transferred to the University of Connecticut, she encountered daughters of the black elite who, according to Elisabeth Petry, “were being groomed for race leadership.” One friend, Jane Bolin, was the daughter of
the first black graduate of Williams College and went on to become the first black woman judge in New York State. While Petry met lifelong friends at the University of Connecticut, she nonetheless felt very insecure about her prospects. In a journal entry from 1945, she wrote, “In comparison to all these people I was fat, with no perceptible waistline, had no clothes, no money, no boy friends—and of course all the other social figures were slender, extremely well-dressed, knew how to giggle and be coy and were well-supplied with funds.”

Petry felt like an outsider when she was among the daughters of the black bourgeoisie, although, given her own family’s businesses and educational pedigree, she was not entirely out of her league in terms of status. Though not wealthy, the Lanes were an important black New England family; they were property owners who had been freeborn for generations before the end of slavery. She also grew to be a very attractive woman. Later, her ability to gain entry into black bourgeois circles would prove to be most helpful as she wrote her weekly “Lighter Side” society column for the Harlem-based newspaper, the People’s Voice. Significantly, though, the black bourgeoisie would not become the subject of Petry’s fiction. Perhaps it was because she felt like an outsider and never completely identified with the social world of the black elite. She was always drawn to novels that portrayed social problems, such as those of Émile Zola, Charles Dickens, and Theodore Dreiser, and she began to publish in an era when there was a readership for just this kind of fiction. The critical and commercial success of Richard Wright’s Native Son (1940) proved there was an audience for socially conscious, realist narratives by black writers. Petry was one of a number of young black writers who began to publish novels in the wake of Wright’s success.

Possessed of a strong sense of intellectual and artistic ambition, Petry ultimately decided to pursue her own path in spite of family objections. At home, when she was not working in the pharmacy, she read widely and deeply. She read books by nineteenth-century French, British, and Russian novelists. She read in psychology and economics. Eventually, she tried her hand at writing. Feeling terribly stifled and fearing she would never fully pursue her artistic ambitions in Connecticut, Petry soon set her sights on New York. She began making frequent trips to the city to attend the theater and visit the New York Public Library. As early as March 21, 1936, the Amsterdam News ran a small story entitled “Connecticut Druggist Likes Shows, So She Comes Here.” The piece that followed explained that the daughter of a prominent Saybrook family came to see Broadway shows; when in New York, she stayed at the Emma Ransom House, a women’s residence at the Harlem YWCA named for an early-twentieth-century black activist. Among the small, close-knit black elite of the time, Petry’s family was prominent enough for her comings and goings to be noteworthy.

New York had other attractions as well. George David Petry was born in New Iberia, Louisiana, but had been sent to New York by his father for high school, since there were few schools in Louisiana that would allow black students to attend. He and Ann (she dropped the final “a” from her name) met at the
home of a mutual friend in Hartford, Connecticut. George was an aspiring writer also. Soon after they met, and unbeknownst to Ann's family, they secretly married in a March 13, 1936, ceremony in Mount Vernon, New York; nearly two years later, on February 22, 1938, the couple held a small, elegant ceremony at her family's Old Saybrook home. Even the first date would have made Petry significantly older than most first-time brides of the period. Already, it seems, she had decided to follow a path quite different from that of her peers.

New York was exhilarating for Petry. After officially relocating to New York in 1938, she and George moved to 2 East 129th Street, just on the corner of Fifth Avenue. In New York, Petry left the pharmacy behind. She first found employment selling advertising and writing ad copy for a wig company; then transitioned to journalism, reporting for the People's Voice. Soon her schedule was full of cultural activity, reporting, and volunteer work, particularly for children's and black civic organizations. All would provide material for her fiction.

Petry also found time to enjoy Harlem's nightlife. An avid fan of jazz, she attended some of the area's legendary clubs to listen to the music. She met the composer Frances Kraft Reckling, and the two women became lifelong friends. Reckling studied at the Boston Conservatory of Music, arranged a number of songs for big bands, wrote popular and gospel songs, and taught piano. She also owned Reckling's Music Store, which was on the same floor as the People's Voice offices. Reckling held book parties and other events at her store. Years later, Petry seemed stunned by a photograph from one of her own book signings. In a journal entry on August 4, 1982, she wrote: "Frances Reckling sent me a batch of old photographs to look at ... of Langston Hughes—one of me with Langston and a man I do not remember ever having seen before ... at a reception at Frances' store—evidently Country Place had just been published—me with orchid, holding a coffee cup & cigarette. All of us smiling." If indeed the reception was for her novel Country Place, then the event would have occurred sometime in 1947, before Petry left New York for Connecticut, but after she and George moved to the Bronx. The photograph reminded her of her days as a sophisticated urbanite, one of the New York literati. Reckling would always be associated with this image of herself, one who led the exciting, artistically intense cultural life of a young New Yorker.

During her first few months in Harlem, Petry began another friendship that would prove to be influential for her. She met Dollie Robinson, a committed trade unionist and political activist, in 1938, after Petry had written a story about a union for the People's Voice. They would go on to help cofound Negro Women Incorporated, a consumers rights group that was also the women's auxiliary of Adam Clayton Powell Jr.'s People's Committee. The People's Committee mobilized Harlemites to protest and picket against a number of issues facing their community. Elisabeth Petry recalled that her mother considered Robinson "one of her guardian angels when Daddy was in the army." Petry drew inspiration from both Robinson and Reckling for her fiction. Members of Robinson's family became the
basis for characters in Petry’s third novel, *The Narrows*, and Reckling might be credited with the prominent place of music in her first, *The Street*. In fact, Lutie Johnson, the protagonist of *The Street*, sings Reckling’s “Darlin’” while sitting at the bar of a neighborhood club. While Petry and Reckling shared an interest in music, Petry and Robinson bonded over their activist commitments.

On July 3, 1943, Petry’s life changed dramatically when George was inducted into the US Army. He entered active service on July 24 at Camp Upton, New York, and remained in the military until his discharge on October 4, 1946, at Camp Pickett, Virginia. Many years later, George Petry still recalled his anger at his country for treating German POWs better than black GI’s. But one memory in particular continued to sting. He often told his daughter and others the story of his having been asked, by a priest, to leave a Roman Catholic Church in the nation’s capital. He was given a list of churches where he would “feel more comfortable.” According to Elisabeth Petry, her father “never went back to church except to attend the odd wedding.”

George’s treatment as a black man in uniform was not lost on Petry. Indeed, black soldiers and their experiences in a Jim Crow military found their way into much of her fiction. She was not alone in her concern with the “Negro soldier,” either. Much of black America expressed pride in their boys in uniform, but at the same time, they were furious at their treatment by their fellow soldiers, other citizens, and their nation. Consequently, the armed forces became a primary focus of the black press and black activism during the war years. The military was well aware of this perception. In 1944, the army created the propaganda documentary *The Negro Soldier*, directed by Frank Capra as part of his morale-boosting series *Why We Fight*. The film countered the racist stereotypes that still prevailed in Hollywood. Instead of showing blacks as cowardly servants and minstrels, it narrated a history of dignified and dedicated individuals who contributed to US military history. In reality, black enlisted men were still relegated to menial roles and subjected to harassment and worse. However, on the streets of Harlem and in other black neighborhoods, they were treated as heroes.

In her fiction, Petry portrayed a Harlem that sent its sons off to a Jim Crow military and left its daughters to fend for themselves in a world that saw them as easy prey. She also portrayed the Harlem of those who remained behind: the working poor, the southern migrants. Though more often than not, Petry saw the contradictions in the promise of American democracy and the American Dream, she nonetheless maintained a belief in her nation’s ability to change. Like other activists of her generation, she strove to “achieve” her country’s possibilities by working to consistently point out these contradictions, particularly with regard to race, but with regard to class and gender as well. She sought to remedy those problems by working with political organizations as well as within local government. Through her fiction, she sought, time and again, to demonstrate the high social costs of the most fundamental paradox of American democracy: its treatment of its black citizens. This perspective is one she may have inherited from over a century of black thought, but it was crystallized during her Harlem years, the years that inspired her most prolific period.
Petry worked closely with Communists and would later defend them. She believed they were equally devoted to resolving the contradictions of the American Dream. But, unlike Primus, Petry was never a member of the Communist Party. In fact, like a number of African Americans of earlier generations, Petry was a lifelong Republican. However, with the exception of Dwight D. Eisenhower, she voted for Democratic presidential candidates. She was active on the Old Saybrook Republican Town Committee and served on Saybrook’s Board of Education as a Republican. For a number of blacks, the Republicans were the party of Lincoln, and, like many of them, Petry could not reconcile herself to the presence of “Dixiecrats,” southern Democrats who supported segregation, in the Democratic Party.

So, let’s take a walk with Ann Petry through Harlem, circa the early 1940s—anytime before the Harlem Riot of August 1, 1943. If it is a weekday we might head to the offices of the People’s Voice, where Petry served as the “women’s editor” from 1941 to 1944. The People’s Voice offices were located at 210 West 125th, on top of Woolworth’s and across the street from the Apollo Theater, right in the heart of Harlem. As we walk west on 125th, past Lenox to Eighth, we see soldiers in their khakis and a sailor or two. Women walk swiftly, with a sense of urgency and purpose, hats on, purses held tightly, wearing round-toe heels and pumps. A group of men linger outside a record store, flirting with the young women who walk by them. There’s a particularly flirty young beauty dressed in the tightest of skirts, curls piled atop her head; she looks a little like the delightful Hazel Scott about the eyes.¹⁰

At the People’s Voice, Petry not only worked as the women’s editor but also had a weekly column, the “Lighter Side,” documenting the activities of Harlem’s elite. In addition, she wrote feature news stories and occasional profiles of civic leaders and celebrities, including an interview with the green-eyed Fredi Washington, one of America’s first movie stars and sister-in-law of the Voice’s illustrious publisher, Adam Clayton Powell Jr. He would eventually divorce Washington’s sister Isabel to marry Hazel Scott in 1945.

Along with the Amsterdam News and the New York Age, the People’s Voice was the newest of Harlem’s three weeklies. Powell, an activist, preacher, and politician, the pastor of the Abyssinian Baptist Church, and a New York City councilman, had founded the Voice in 1942. The paper ran from February 14, 1942, to April 24, 1948. Powell referred to it as “the Lenox Ave. edition of the Daily Worker.” As part of the vast network of black newspapers, the People’s Voice joined others in the black press as they insisted upon the eradication of segregation in housing, access to education and wartime jobs, an end to lynching, and, most importantly, the desegregation of the armed services. One government report found that although most blacks in New York listened to the same radio stations and read the same newspapers as whites, especially the New York Daily News, the black press had a tremendous impact on black public opinion. According to the report, “the overwhelming majority of blacks—more than eight out of ten—
read some black newspaper, usually either the *Amsterdam News* or the *People's Voice.*"\(^{11}\)

In fact, the government was especially interested in the black press during World War II because of its vocal critique of American racism and its commitment to Double V. Such criticism of American society and government was seen as potentially subversive to the war effort. A number of newspapers were under investigation; J. Edgar Hoover felt that the Roosevelt administration should use wartime sedition powers to indict members of the black press. While there were no indictments, black newspapers were encouraged to tone down their critiques of racism and racial segregation. The *People's Voice* was a special concern for Hoover. He observed that although the paper claimed to support the war effort and the administration, it nonetheless published articles that he felt "contributed to the breach and extreme feeling between white and colored races." Hoover was expressly troubled about an editorial cartoon depicting a black soldier who represented 450,000 black servicemen. There were chains on his wrists to dramatize the way blacks were kept from combat. The paper was also considered pro-Communist because of the tone of its editorials and the presence of Communists on its staff.\(^ {12}\)

Without question, the *Voice* was the most radical of the Harlem papers. Upon its founding, Powell, whose political campaigns had been supported by progressives, liberals, and members of the Communist Party, immediately hired a number of important black Communist intellectuals. By the end of the decade, he would fire all of them as part of a Communist purge encouraged by the growing influence of Senator Joseph McCarthy, and by what Powell saw as a threat to his own political ambition. But initially, the paper's editorial leadership was largely Communist. It included Executive Editor Doxey Wilkerson (who later left to become editor of the *New York Daily Worker*), reporter Max Yergan, and the "de facto" managing editor, Marvel Cooke. Civil rights and union activist Wilkerson worked for Roosevelt's Advisory Committee on Education and was also a columnist for the *Daily Worker*. He served on the national committee of the Communist Party, but resigned in 1957 following revelations about Stalin's atrocities, which shook much of the American Left and undermined their commitment
to the party. Activist and journalist Marvel Cooke was the first woman journalist at the Amsterdam News and the first African American or woman reporter at the white Daily Compass. Her well-regarded investigative piece “I Was a Slave” was published in the Compass in 1950. It focused on the exploitation of black domestic workers at the Bronx Slave Market, the name given to the corner where white women hired black domestic workers to clean their homes for the day. Max Yergan was a highly regarded leftist activist who served as president of the National Negro Congress, a coalition of African American labor, religious, and fraternal organizations.

The leftist politics of the paper’s leadership is evident in an early editorial announcing the paper’s mission: “We are men and women of the people. The people are ours and we are theirs. . . . THIS IS A WORKING CLASS PAPER.” The editorial went on to pledge support for the trade union movement and to fight for lower rent, better housing, and equal access to health facilities and schools. Finally, the editors asserted: “We are against Hitlerism abroad and just as strongly against Hitlerism at home.” This statement linked the paper to the larger Double V Campaign, though the editors were concerned with a much broader platform than Double V, which was largely focused on segregation in the military.

The People’s Voice editorial gives insight into Petry’s own politics, which were clearly informed by the heady radicalism of her work and extracurricular environments. Her reporting, writing, and activism focused on many of the issues taken up by the newspaper: housing, segregation, equal opportunity, and the fight against white supremacy at home and abroad. Petry’s challenge would be to translate this political stance into a set of aesthetic principles; she did so by situating working-class protagonists at the center of her fiction, creating a language that expressed the urgency and tension of Harlem streets, and demonstrating the psychological complexity of the urban poor. Her own political and aesthetic interests would lead her to focus on gender as much as she did on class and race.

As women’s editor, features writer, and columnist, Petry was involved in every aspect of the newspaper and worked very closely with other editors in shaping the paper’s editorial policy. Her coworkers included the political cartoonist Ollie Harrington and the photographer Morgan Smith—who, with his twin brother, Marvin, chronicled Harlem’s residents, newsmakers, artists, entertainers, leaders, and athletes. Like those of Smith and Harrington, Petry’s aesthetic approach and political opinions are evident in her work at the People’s Voice. They were shaped by what she observed and experienced in Harlem. While at the People’s Voice, she reported on events held by the Harlem elite. The ladies of her “Lighter Side” columns might have been the daughters of the women depicted in the novels of her Harlem Renaissance predecessors Nella Larsen and Jessie Fauset: they were light-skinned, civic-minded clubwomen, often the glamorous wives of Harlem’s businessmen, politicians, and entertainers. But she also wrote an open letter to New York City mayor Fiorello LaGuardia in May 1943 requesting that he reopen the Savoy Ballroom, which had been closed in the spring of 1943 as a “base for vice.” LaGuardia claimed that 164
servicemen who had met women there had contracted venereal disease. Walter White of the NAACP argued that if this was the case, then the Waldorf Astoria should have been closed as well. Many, including Powell, insisted that the real reason for closing the Savoy was “race mixing.” Petry asserted in her letter that the Savoy was not only an important site of entertainment for Harlemites and other New Yorkers, but also “a place for civic organizations like the NAACP and the National Urban League [to hold] events that benefit the community.”

Petry also petitioned for funding for the Harlem Arts Center as an important place for after-school programs for children. She covered the activities of the many organizations in which she was involved, announcing soirees, fundraisers, and public events in the Voice. She wrote feature-length stories on the federal government’s warnings to white GI’s about Harlem’s black prostitutes, including responses from some of Harlem’s women. Another feature focused on the trial of three Puerto Rican youths charged with murdering a white man who had solicited prostitutes in their neighborhood.

The relationship between racist stereotypes of black women’s sexuality and the public policies and practices that resulted from them also informed Petry’s fiction, especially her best-selling novel The Street. The novel’s protagonist, Lutie Johnson, is constantly assaulted with opinions about and expectations of her sexuality simply because she is a black woman. While working as a domestic in Connecticut, Lutie is frequently insulted by her employer’s friends, white women who insist that black servants are sexually promiscuous. In New York she is often offered money or other favors in exchange for sex. Ultimately, she is the victim of sexual harassment by both black and white men—and two attempted rapes. The vulnerability of black women to sexual abuse and exploitation is a recurrent theme in the novel.

Petry’s interest in the children of working-class mothers is evident in both her activism and her fiction. During this time, she also worked for the Laundry Workers Joint Board, preparing programs for the children of laundry workers, and in 1943 she joined Harlem’s Play Schools Association Project at Public School No. 10 as a recreation specialist. Petry helped to develop a program for the children of working parents at the school, which was located at St. Nicholas Avenue and 116th Street. She was acutely aware of “latchkey” children, who appeared in Harlem long before they became evident nationwide. While Petry’s work and activism sought to provide safe space for these children during the hours between the end of school and the end of their parents’ workday, her fiction demonstrated the perils, such as gangs and exploitative adults, that awaited them on the streets of Harlem when such programs were insufficient.

In her fiction, then, Petry sought to give a fuller, more complex picture of the social problems she encountered as a reporter; in her activism, she sought to address these problems through organizing. It’s not surprising that her journalism reported both the issues and the efforts to address them. Her fiction elaborates upon the human cost and resulting frustration, but it rarely gives life to activists’ efforts. In an interview with
the Daily Worker, Petry noted, "I feel that the portrayal of a problem in itself, in all its cruelty and horror, is actually the thing which sets people thinking, and not any solution that may be offered in a novel."17

Still on our tour of Harlem's streets to see what Petry saw, we might accompany her, after leaving the offices of the People's Voice, to any number of civic or artistic meetings or events. If the Harlem Riverside Defense Council, where Petry was assistant to the secretary, was not meeting, we would attend a meeting of the National Association of Colored Graduate Nurses, where Petry served as publicity director. She was in the thick of the association's efforts to become part of the National Association of Graduate Nurses and to integrate the wartime nurses corps.

The war provided African Americans a perfect opportunity to challenge every aspect of segregation. Jim Crow laws and practices were seen as the primary challenge to American democracy, especially during the war years, when America's claims to freedom and equality were in the spotlight. Because black people had been barred from professional organizations such as the American Medical Association and the American Bar Association, they founded their own, the National Medical Association and the Negro Bar Association. The National Association of Colored Graduate Nurses was founded in 1908 in response to the exclusion of black women from white professional associations and their lack of access to education and state licensing. In 1948, the American Nurses Association (ANA) became integrated. Unfortunately, black women still

found themselves denied leadership positions in the ANA, and their contributions were rarely recognized. In 1971, during another period of heightened militancy, black nurses founded the National Black Nurses Association. But in the early 1940s, black professionals were still dedicated to the fight to integrate American society. Petry, like others of her generation, was never a separatist; she believed in and fought for integration.18

While still actively involved in civic organizations, Petry soon began to devote most of her time and energy to a new organization that she helped to found with Dollie Robinson: Negro Women Incorporated. In fact, the organizing meeting was held in the offices of the People's Voice. The organization seems to have been the outgrowth of an earlier effort, the Harlem Housewives League, for which Petry served in a number of administrative capacities. The newer, more militant group was, according to its founding document, "a Harlem consumer's watch group that provide[d] working class women with 'how-to' information for purchasing food, clothing, and furniture." In fact, the organization sought to do much more than provide women with information. Other founding documents noted that it would "organize women for mass participation in the war effort." One event, "Negro Women Have a Vote—How Shall They Use It?" was an effort to encourage black women to recognize themselves as political agents. The speakers included prominent black women liberals and leftists, including Communist journalist Marvel Cooke, Civil Rights Congress leader Ada B. Jackson, and the Communist city councilman, Ben Davis Jr.19
An invitation to the Negro Women Incorporated's first meeting appeared in the May 2, 1942, edition of the People's Voice:

War economy upsets and dislocates everything. First Aid, Nutrition—[we want] a community alert, consumer information centers, [we] believe in fighting for the rights of Negro women, Fighting rising food cost, disseminating info on women's organizing in Harlem. Deluge LaGuardia with postcards and letters protesting the end of children's art classes at the Harlem Art Center. IF YOU ARE INTERESTED IN YOURSELF AS A WOMAN, IN HARLEM AS A PLACE TO LIVE DURING AND AFTER THE WAR IS OVER, COME TO THE FIRST MEETING. LET'S GO PLACES!

What is striking about this invitation is that it was a call to build a movement and was filled with language demanding active, forward-moving momentum. The invitation acknowledged that the war economy had left women—many of whom were fighting these battles alone while their husbands were fighting overseas—with a sense of flux, of chaos. But in chaos is possibility, the invitation intimated, and chaotic energies organized can generate constructive movement, action: "Deluge" LaGuardia, "protest," "fight"—and the final call, which could serve as the mantra of black America at this time—"Let's Go Places!" Thousands of blacks were migrating from the South and the Caribbean into Los Angeles, Detroit, Chicago, Philadelphia, and New York for wartime jobs; hundreds of thousands were serving as soldiers overseas; and untold numbers were willing to march and protest segregation at home, even threatening to march on Washington. The invitation captured a sense of movement, action, confidence, and political optimism, for agents of change were finally on the move. It was the same spirit that was embodied by campaigns like the "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work" protests led by Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Through these efforts, Harlem streets were stages for political theater; street-corner speeches, protest marchers, and rallies all energized the neighborhood.

Nonetheless, Petry was acutely aware that large numbers of black people had not yet been swept up in this sense of possibility. For them, the changes and the pace of the movement only brought a sense of overwhelming disruption. If her journalism focused on the movement, on the possibility, if her civic and political work tried to organize this energy, her fiction focused on those ordinary Harlemites whose lives escaped the containing narratives of organized protest. The people of her fiction are mobile, walking in crowds and riding on buses, subways, suburban commuter trains. The pace of her fiction is fast, and yet there is no sense that her urban characters ever transcend the limitations placed upon them and "arrive."

Petry's emerging ideas about her art were not informed by her journalism and her activism alone. She also found herself becoming part of a community of activist-oriented artists. Some evenings she jumped on the subway or walked up to the New York Public Library at 135th Street, where the American Negro Theater (ANT) rehearsed. Petry joined this troupe shortly after Abraham Hill and Frederick O'Neal founded it in
1940. For one year she performed as Tillie Petunia in Hill's *On Strivers Row*, a social farce set in Harlem and centered around the debut of a young socialite, Cobina. The role of Cobina was played by a young, aspiring actress named Ruby Dee. As Tillie Petunia, Petry was a hypocritical, class-conscious gossip columnist. Dee eventually earned fame for her role in the 1961 film *A Raisin in the Sun*. In 1980, she and her husband, Ossie Davis, would produce a series of programs for PBS, one of which was based on Petry's early short story "Solo on the Drums." Hill and O'Neal sought to create a community-based theater that would present plays about black life. Of her American Negro Theater experience, Petry would later write: "We put 'On Strivers Row' on three nights a week. And there were a lot of famous people who had their start, you know, in that theater... Ruby Dee, Ossie Davis, Harry Belafonte." Like Petry's fiction, *On Strivers Row* focused on Harlem's growing class divide, though it centered on the elite even as it critiqued them. Petry would focus on the working class that animated the play in less prominent, though still important, roles.

Belafonte and the young Sidney Poitier took classes and workshops at the actor's studio at the American Negro Theater. The playwright Alice Childress and the director Lloyd Richards worked there as well. The theater's most famous production, *Anna Lucasta*, was later produced on Broadway. The American Negro Theater was a financial cooperative where members shared both expenses and profits. Members who worked in productions outside of the ANT contributed 2 percent of their salaries to the cooperative. At the ANT, Petry was in the center of black theater and surrounded by a number of politically minded young black artists. By decade's end many of her colleagues in the theater would be marked as Communists. Some were under investigation or had been asked to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee.

In addition to making connections in the theater, Petry also acquired techniques that would help her to hone her craft as a writer. Petry later recalled, "Acting didn't really interest me—but what did interest me was to experience firsthand the way in which dialogue in a play furthers action." She used every opportunity to enhance her craft. For instance, in the novella *In Darkness and Confusion*, she used dialogue and fast-paced narrative to change her readers' perceptions: what appears to be a mob becomes a crowd made up of individuals who express their frustration and anger at the conditions they face on a daily basis.

After the run of *On Strivers Row* ended, Petry once again had her nights and weekends free, but not for long. She took piano lessons and advanced courses in tailoring and taught an elementary course in writing business letters at the Harlem branch of the YWCA. She also took painting and drawing classes at the Harlem Community Art Center. At the center, located at 107 West 116th Street, Petry was no doubt exposed to the highly charged political energy of new fellow artists, and her desire to create complex portrayals of ordinary black people would likely have been nurtured and encouraged there. Her instructors might have included great black artists such as Aaron Douglas, Norman Lewis, and William H. Johnson, who...
all taught there. The Harlem Community Art Center opened on December 20, 1937, under the directorship of sculptor Augusta Savage. The painter Gwendolyn Bennett led the center from 1939 to 1944. Within a year of its opening, the center had enrolled more than 3,000 students.

Like the South Side Community Art Center in Chicago, the Harlem Community Art Center was one of the venues established by the Federal Art Project of the Works Progress Administration. Both centers played an important role in developing young black artists. A young Jacob Lawrence took some of his first classes at the Harlem Community Art Center. Romare Bearden found his way there as well. Petry recalled that as an art student she concentrated on “people, landscapes . . . everything.” Petry’s Connecticut landscapes and Harlem street scenes in her novels seemed to benefit greatly from her visual training at the art center. Her later novels are almost cinematic, and in the fifties she would go to Hollywood to write a screenplay, That Hill Girl. Commissioned by Columbia Studios, the film was to have been a vehicle for Kim Novak, but it was never produced.

Black spaces were not the only ones that furthered and supported Petry’s artistic efforts. She also attended Mabel Louise Robinson’s workshop and course in creative writing at that other august Harlem institution, Columbia University. Petry recalled: “George was in the army; I was working for the People’s Voice and trying to write short stories, and I was just getting back rejection slips.” Following advice that she found in Arthur Train’s autobiography, My Day in Court, she applied for admission to Robinson’s writing workshop. Robinson’s Columbia workshops were legendary. She taught them for twenty-six years, and students who came through Robinson’s class published over two hundred books. Petry later said: “There were only five people in that class, and they were all females; all the men had gone off to war. And so we literally did have her undivided attention. . . . She was truly interested in us, truly committed to our becoming writers.”

According to Petry, she learned many things from Robinson, the most important being how to incorporate “true” events into fiction. “They can’t just be stuck in like raisins or plums or something. They have to be mixed in,” Petry wrote. This is a lesson she learned well; many of her stories and novels include incidents that she covered as a journalist or that were inspired by newspaper stories she read. Petry recalled that Robinson encouraged her students to read plays and go to the theater because plays told stories only in terms of dialogue. But most importantly, Petry credited Robinson’s class with teaching her how to critique her own writing. The experience was to have a profound influence on her writing and her career. She dedicated her third and last novel, The Narrows, to Robinson.

While in Robinson’s class, Petry finally began to publish her short stories. The network of black and left-wing magazines that published her first short stories helped to develop her reputation as a young writer before and immediately following the publication of The Street in 1946. The 1940s witnessed the birth of a number of very important little magazines that published the work of established and emerging black writers.
Among these were *Negro Quarterly*, for which Ralph Ellison served as managing editor; *Negro Story; Negro Digest; and Harlem Quarterly.* Petry’s fiction appeared in these magazines throughout the 1940s as well as in established publications like *The Crisis* and *Opportunity*. She also published in Popular Front publications such as *Common Ground, PM, and Cross Section*. These journals furthered the Popular Front’s mission to produce a people’s art.

Ann Petry was a prolific writer of short stories, and it was within that genre that she first sought to make her name. She began writing in the midst of an explosion of black short fiction. Black authors often chose to write short stories in the 1930s and the 1940s in an effort to target black audiences, since they believed that short stories appealed to black working-class readers with little time for reading full-length novels.

It was still the golden age of the short story in the mainstream press, with top magazines like the *Saturday Evening Post* paying top dollar for pieces by the luminaries of the day. In the black press, short stories were published in “little magazines.” Like the more radical newspapers of the black press, little magazines helped to create a critical, even oppositional sensibility. A number of Petry’s short stories appeared in these publications. And, like her contemporaries, Petry used the form to give voice to ordinary working people. A brief inventory of Petry’s short fiction reveals three that were inspired by newspaper stories. Three are integrationist race-relation stories set in New England. Three are Harlem implosion stories where racial frustrations lead to violence turned inward, and one is a jazz story.

When Houghton Mifflin discovered Petry and encouraged her to write a novel in 1943, she applied for the publishing house’s literary fellowship. Houghton Mifflin granted her $2,400 in 1945. With this money and the $50 monthly stipend she received from her husband’s allotment check, Petry quit her various jobs in order to devote her full attention to writing. George’s absence gave her the time and space she needed to acquire training and to write, and his financial support helped to subsidize her efforts. She later recalled, “I began my first novel, writing every day from 9:00 a.m. to noon, and then stopping for an hour for lunch and writing from 1:00 p.m. to 2:30 or 3:00 P.M. every day.” Some days an idea or an image would appear as she rode the subway. According to her daughter, “[Petry] said it might have been the jolting of the subway cars on the long ride but the information seemed to ‘pop into my head.’” Once she was home, a passage would unfurl from that simple image or idea. Petry’s husband sometimes teased her that late-night subway trips always resulted in “some drunk” pouring out his life story to her.

Petry wrote the first chapter of *The Street* directly on the typewriter without revising anything. The rest of the book went through several drafts. As Petry later recalled: “I went over . . . the rest of it over and over and over again, simplifying it, testing the dialogue, the descriptions of people and places. I put all of my feelings, my sense of outrage into the book. I tried to include the sounds and the smells and sights of Harlem. I wanted a book that was like an explosion inside the head of the reader, a book that you couldn’t put down once you’d started reading it. I tried to create a vivid sense of balance.” The result
was a novel unlike any other in American literary history. From the very first page, Lutie Johnson, the novel's protagonist, is under assault by the natural and built environment, by white and black individuals, and by economic and political systems that have been historically built upon the exploitation and domination of people like Lutie.

Lutie is a Harlem resident who walks the same streets Petry walked, though she tends to spend more time below 125th than above. She is an ambitious single mother and domestic servant trying to move up in the ranks of civil servants. She believes in the American Dream and is certain that economic success and security await her if only she works hard enough. Lutie has chosen Benjamin Franklin as an intellectual ancestor and mentor, and as she walks the streets of Harlem, she contemplates the guidance Franklin offers in his Autobiography. Much of the novel documents her growing awareness that the ideas and ideals posited by Franklin and other Founding Fathers not only did not include her, but were based upon a foundation that depended upon her enslavement. It's no coincidence that one of the figures who helps to bring about Lutie's demise is named Junto, a name inspired by a mutual improvement society founded by Franklin in 1731. The Junto's membership was limited to white males, who not only helped to educate one another, but also helped each other gain financial independence. By engaging Franklin's Autobiography, Petry was asserting that Lutie's difficulties were not caused by a lack of work ethic, personal responsibility, or ambition; instead, it was white supremacy that had prevented women like Lutie from achieving the American Dream.

As Lutie—and Petry herself—realized, the fraught relationship between race, class, gender, and the founding principles of American democracy played out daily in the small, seemingly insignificant challenges of life in Harlem. For instance, Lutie is a consumer who is fully aware of the issues that Petry outlined in her call for Negro Women Incorporated—such as lack of access to adequate food and housing—but no such organization appears in the story. Petry put her own personal observations into Lutie's experience of Harlem. Lutie walks Eighth Avenue as Petry herself walked it, taking in the small stores along the way. Lutie notes, "All of them—the butcher shops, the notion stores, the vegetable stands—all of them sold the leavings, the sweepings, the impossible unsalable merchandise, the dregs and dross that were reserved especially for Harlem." Harlem residents were forced to consume cheap goods, and as such they were also treated as if they were "the dregs and dross" of society. Finally, not only were they encouraged to buy this merchandise, but they were also encouraged to sell themselves cheaply as laborers and as sex objects.

Although Lutie first has the personal experience and then later the critical awareness of the larger overarching structures that limit her choices in consumer goods, housing, job opportunities for herself, and educational opportunities for her son, she does not have the opportunity to channel either that experience or that consciousness into organized political activity. She is too preoccupied with survival: an extra job, studying for a civil service exam, taking care of her child. Eventually she will think her talent for singing might be a way out. Singing is portrayed as an option for black women outside of prostitution.
and domestic service, and yet containing remnants of both—a form of serving white audiences by entertaining them and putting one's sexuality on display.

Lutie's concern with survival keeps her from meetings like those of the Harlem Riverside Defense Council or Negro Women Incorporated, if she is even aware of their existence. Petry allowed her character a limited experience of Harlem, certainly one that was far narrower than her own. Lutie walks a very circumscribed map of central Harlem confined by 116th and 125th. She never visits Sugar Hill or Strivers Row. She sees the cheap stores on Eighth Avenue, but she does not visit the open-air market that Petry would later describe in an article about Harlem. She never encounters an activist preacher like Adam Clayton Powell Jr., or people like Dollie Robinson, Louise Thompson, Esther Cooper, and Ella Baker.

Petry refused to portray these failures as an indictment of Lutie and her nonfiction sisters, but instead pointed out a basic reality: the most committed organizations and individuals were not always available to the people who needed them. And the forces that both confronted were ultimately far more powerful than the efforts of individuals or organizations. Petry's commitment to realism insisted upon a portrayal of Harlem life as it was experienced by most of its residents, not just well-known artists and members of the black elite. She was the sensitive activist, the ever-aware artist who was concerned with the people who may not have been touched by her activism or her art. Petry realized that for characters like Lutie, there was no way out. Lutie's circumstances demanded a fundamental change in the economic and political structure.

Petry portrayed Lutie's failures as the result of all the formations set up against her, those put into place without consideration for her well-being by people who could imagine her as nothing more than chattel. The contemporary society she inhabits is one that has inherited the very worst of the principles advanced by the Founding Fathers. Though formal slavery is over, Lutie is still viewed as a commodity for sale. She is the fictional sister of the large number of black women who, between 1940 and 1944, left domestic service and took advantage of the opportunity to pursue work as low-level civil servants or war industry workers. The number of black women employed as domestic servants decreased from 60 percent to 44 percent during this period as more varied jobs opened up for women in the war industry. Nonetheless, those who found work within the war industry were most often given custodial positions that mirrored domestic labor.

Although The Street is primarily concerned with a single mother, black men are never far away. Petry, ever cognizant of George's experience in the military, gave voice to black men's frustration, especially during wartime. Boots Smith, Petry's fictional character, is not George Petry. A bandleader and Lutie's potential love interest, he lives outside the mainstream, refusing to participate in a straight and narrow life. Boots has worked as a Pullman Car porter, a highly coveted and politicized profession for black men, but chooses the life of a musician because of its relative freedom compared to other options available to black men. Like real-life figures such as Malcolm X and Dizzy Gillespie, Boots does not join the military. When asked if he wants to go to war, Boots responds, "Why should I?" He goes
I:

on to explain, “They hate Germans, but they hate me worse. If that wasn't so they wouldn't have a separate army for black men. . . . Sending a black army to Europe to fight Germans. Mostly with brooms and shovels.” George Petry’s experiences confirmed this view of what it meant to be a black soldier. He later asserted that German POWs were treated better than black soldiers. Nazi prisoners of war who were held on US military bases were allowed to dine with white soldiers in racially segregated mess halls. When Lena Horne performed at a southern camp, the audience was segregated and black soldiers were seated behind German POWs. Horne stepped off stage, walked down the aisle past the whites, and sang directly to the black men in her audience.

Boots gives voice to Petry’s disdain for the segregated military. While her new husband enlisted, served in a Jim Crow military, and suffered the daily humiliations that most black servicemen faced, Petry imagined a character, an outlaw figure, who dared to avoid the draft. But Petry acknowledged, even in her fiction, the diverse range of political thought among black Americans. Lutie uncritically believes in the American Dream and all of the national myths that accompany it. Boots, meanwhile, possesses a level of cynicism that makes it impossible for him to believe that the country is worth fighting for.

While many young black men in real life may have felt the same way Boots, Gillespie, and Malcolm X did about the US military, most, like George, went on to serve in the military and displayed great loyalty while doing so. David Dinkins, mayor of New York City from 1990 to 1993; heavyweight boxing champion Joe Louis; and writer Albert Murray are but a few of the well-known African Americans who served with distinction. But there were just as many unknown and unnamed who would never fully get over the trauma of attending boot camp under the direction of racist officers or the treatment they received at home and abroad at the hands of bigots. These types of young men would appear in Petry’s fiction—and the difficulties they faced would preoccupy most of black America throughout the war years. National civil rights organizations like the NAACP and the National Urban League joined the black press in an organized campaign against racial segregation in the military.

The Street eventually sold more than 1.5 million copies, becoming the first book by a black woman to surpass 1 million books sold and launching Petry as a literary celebrity. The novel was widely reviewed, and a number of articles and interviews with Petry appeared in the black and mainstream press. Given the success of novels such as Richard Wright’s Native Son, Houghton Mifflin was optimistic, putting its full weight behind the novel. The publisher, expecting the book to attract a primarily black audience, created an extensive publicity campaign targeting black periodicals such as Negro Digest, Ebony, Opportunity, and Phylon. Petry’s picture appeared on the cover of Opportunity, and Ebony published a glossy photo layout. Copies of the book were sent to a number of national organizations, including the National Council of Negro Women, the Brotherhood of Railroad Trainmen, the Council Against Intolerance in America, and the NAACP. The Urban League promised to...
issue pamphlets on Petry, and three of Harlem's bookstores held signing parties, including the National Memorial Bookstore, the Frederick Douglass Bookstore, and the Frances Reckling Book and Music Store. The same year, one of Petry's short stories, "Like a Winding Sheet," was selected for *The Best American Short Stories*, and the collection was dedicated to her. The New York Women's City Club honored her for her "exceptional contributions to the life of New York City."  

Following the publication of *The Street*, Petry became identified with a group of African American artists who were drawn to social realism, an aesthetic that expressed a leftist political philosophy and focused on working-class people and their concerns. Although social realism has been viewed as a phenomenon of the Depression era, African American artists and writers continued to work within this aesthetic well into the early years of the Cold War. These artists believed it was their responsibility to raise the democratic consciousness of their readers. Among Petry's social realist contemporaries were visual artists John Biggers, Charles White, Hale Woodruff, Elizabeth Catlett, and Ernest Crichlow; poets Gwendolyn Brooks, Sterling Brown, Langston Hughes, Melvin Tolson, and Margaret Walker; and novelists William Attaway, Lloyd Brown, Willard Motley, and Richard Wright. The novelists saw fiction as the form that could best serve to educate and reform society.

In this way they inherited a great deal from earlier artists such as Zola, Dickens, and Dreiser, who were all among Petry's most cherished authors. Richard Rorty includes American writers like Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis, and John Steinbeck as part of the literary legacy of the American Left: they were writers who depicted social problems as a means of encouraging readers to address and alleviate them. If Lutie claimed Benjamin Franklin, Petry could claim all of these writers as her own literary ancestors.

Black social realists did not profess that the working classes were class-conscious or revolutionary, although, during the course of their novels and stories, their protagonists do seem to acquire a degree of critical consciousness. They portray them as a population with the potential, if they were enlightened and organized, to become revolutionary. Petry differed from her contemporaries in a few important ways, most notably in her willingness to provide a number of viewpoints in order to counter any sense of a monolithic black community, even among the working poor. Furthermore, her attention to gender, especially to the specific nature of black women's oppression, brought a new perspective to those marginalized black women who had been ignored or stereotyped in earlier black fiction and in the work of her male contemporaries.

During her years in Harlem, Petry began to develop her own aesthetic—an aesthetic she would elaborate upon more fully in an essay entitled "The Novel as Social Criticism" that appeared in *The Writer's Book* in 1950. In this essay, her most sustained critical statement, Petry defended the "sociological novel," which had come under great scrutiny during the years following World War II, especially because of its overt leftist politics. Just one year before her essay was published, a young James Baldwin had published his scathing critique of Harriet
Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as well as *Native Son* by Wright—who was his mentor. According to Baldwin, the focus on protest in these novels took away from the creation of emotionally and psychologically complex black characters.

Petry addressed critiques like Baldwin's head-on in "The Novel as Social Criticism." She wrote, "Being a product of the twentieth century (Hitler, atomic energy, Hiroshima, Buchenwald, Mussolini, USSR) I find it difficult to subscribe to the idea that art exists for art's sake. It seems to me that all truly great art is propaganda, whether it be the Sistine Chapel, or *La Gioconda*, *Madame Bovary*, or *War and Peace*." Petry argued for the continuing significance of sociological fiction, identified its deep roots in Western culture, and distanced it from charges of Marxist propaganda, but without denying the significance of Marxism. "Not all of the concern about the shortcomings of society originated with Marx," she wrote. "Though part of the cultural heritage of all of us derives from Marx, whether we subscribe to the Marxist theory or not, a larger portion of it stems from the Bible." Petry situates Marx in the context of Western thought, saying his thought had influenced Western society in much the way Freud's had—one need not have read either to have experienced their influence. The same might be said of the Bible—although most westerners were even more familiar with the stories of the Bible than they were with the ideas of Freud or Marx, especially the Bible stories meant to inform our behavior and morality. And certainly, especially during the Cold War, even the most right wing of readers would not argue with the importance of biblical injunctions.

From here, Petry argues for the importance of sociological fiction in a number of ways. First, she grounds the tradition in the Bible, particularly the Old Testament story of Cain and Abel, whereby Cain asks God, "Am I my brother's keeper?" Petry also argues against art for art’s sake while insisting upon the importance of craft, especially in the development of full, complex characters. According to Petry, that which distinguishes successful novels from their more didactic cousins is craftsmanship and the author's development of characterization and theme: "Once the novelist begins to manipulate his characters to serve the interests of his theme they lose whatever vitality they had when their creator first thought about them." "The Novel as Social Criticism," like Zora Neale Hurston's essays of the thirties, was an important early presentation of aesthetic theory by a black woman thinker. Along with Hurston, Petry helped to pave the way for novelist-critics like Toni Morrison.

In spite of Petry's protests, the novel of social criticism did fall out of fashion with the emergence of writers such as Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin, whose first novels were published in 1952 and 1953, respectively. Baldwin and Ellison wrote formally complex, modernist works that focused on the individual psychology of their characters. Furthermore, in keeping with a rightward, more conservative, anti-Communist shift in American political life in general—and the mainstream civil rights movement in particular—neither writer launched major left-leaning critiques. Publishing companies and white liberal intellectuals found this work more to their liking, and the window of opportunity for the social realists quickly closed.
The Street is perhaps Petry's most complete literary example of what she argued for in "The Novel as Social Criticism," but the aesthetic principles she outlined there are apparent in all of her fiction. In one of her most highly crafted but least appreciated short stories, "In Darkness and Confusion," published in 1946, she tackled one of the most significant events to happen in New York during the war years—the Harlem Riot of 1943.

Suppose the day we spent walking through Harlem was Sunday, August 1, 1943. It was hot. That morning we read a story in the Amsterdam News about a black sergeant in Georgia who was executed because he'd gotten into an altercation with a state police officer. Say we have heard a number of stories about the mistreatment of black servicemen in the racist South. We may have attended services at one of the many Harlem churches—maybe the Reverend Adam Clayton Powell Jr.'s Abyssinian Baptist Church—but the pastor didn't preach because he was out of town. After church, we may have gone to see Stormy Weather with Lena Horne and Bill "Bojangles" Robinson at the RKO Alhambra at 126th and Seventh. Horne was becoming famous for the title song, which had previously been sung by Ethel Waters and Billie Holiday. Horne was the bronze pin-up for the brown boys overseas. In fact, they so loved her that the Marines of the 51st Defense Battalion named a gun after her in 1945. She was later considered for the role of Lutie in the film version of The Street, which was never made. Or, since this was Sunday, our day to relax, maybe we had planned to catch Cootie Williams and his band at the Apollo on 125th Street. Williams's band played both bebop and rhythm and blues, and this made it an embodiment of the transitional nature of black urban life during the war years—a life still grounded in the advances and traditions of the first Great Migration and the New Negro movement but sitting on the verge of something new and consequential.

By seven, just before dusk, it is still very hot, and we start to hear a new rumor. It is about a soldier who has been shot and killed by a white cop at the Braddock Hotel on West 126th and Eighth Avenue. We knew the Braddock, because it is a favorite haunt of musicians, who sometimes rehearse downstairs. Carmen McRae and Sarah Vaughan are frequently there, and even stars like Dizzy Gillespie.

But tonight, mobs begin to form. Riots have already taken place in Los Angeles (the Zoot Suit Riots), Detroit (at the Sojourner Truth Houses), and Beaumont, Texas. We will later learn that the soldier, Private Robert Bandy, didn't die. He had been with his mother when he saw a white policeman, Officer James Collins, trying to arrest a young woman, Marjorie (Margie) Polite. The officer hit the young woman and Bandy intervened on her behalf. Collins shot Bandy in the shoulder. Bandy was taken to Harlem Hospital, where he was treated and released. But the rumor of a white cop shooting and killing a black soldier in uniform is unstoppable. It quickly spreads, igniting a powder keg of resentment over police brutality, maltreatment of black soldiers, residential discrimination, and a myriad other ills suffered by black Harlemites. Before the end of the day, it will take close to 7,000 New York City police officers and military police, along with as many members of
the National Guard and a number of volunteers, to quell the riot. Mayor LaGuardia will ride the streets of Harlem throughout the night, speaking to the rioters through a bullhorn. He will close off the streets, order a curfew, and close bars and nightclubs. A number of black ministers will join him.

After two days of rioting, property damages were estimated at over $5 million, hundreds were arrested, and six people, all black, were dead. The streets were filled with debris from broken windows and looted stores. Communist leader Benjamin Davis proclaimed that Harlem’s residents had “perfectly legitimate grievances” and sufficient reasons for the revolt, including the prevalence of police brutality on the streets of Harlem, even while the nation fought a war against fascism. Rev. Powell issued a statement blaming the riots on the “blind, smoldering and unorganized resentment against Jim Crow treatment of Negro men in the armed forces and the unusual high rents and cost of living forced upon Negroes in Harlem.” A coalition of black leaders from politically moderate organizations, including the National Urban League, met with city officials in the days following the riots. While they agreed that the disturbances had turned into “outbreaks of hoodlumism,” they nonetheless called attention to the social and economic conditions that led to the rioting.41

Ralph Ellison wrote about the riot in the New York Post in 1943, and then famously fictionalized it in Invisible Man, published in 1952. James Baldwin wrote about it in a 1955 work, Notes of a Native Son. And Langston Hughes penned a poem inspired by it, “The Ballad of Margie Polite,” which appeared in the Amsterdam News just two months after the riot. It was a thirteen-stanza poem. Stanzas 1, 3, 5, and 7 were as follows:

If Margie Polite
Had of been white
She might not’ve cussed
Out the cop that night.

...A soldier took her part.
He got shot in the back
By a white cop—
The soldier were black.

...They taken Margie to jail
And kept her there.
DISORDERLY CONDUCT
The charges swear.

...She started the riots!
Harlemites say
August 1st is
MARGIE’S DAY.

About the riot, Petry later recalled, “I can remember walking through 125th Street when the street was filled with the shattered glass from the store windows. It made a crunching sound. I can still hear it.”42
Ann Petry: Walking Harlem

Petry used these vivid memories to inform her fictional account of the riots and the events that led up to them. William Jones, the protagonist of “In Darkness and Confusion,” shares an apartment with his obese churchgoing wife, Pink, and her teenage niece, Annie May, a southern migrant who is discovering all the temptations of the city. Annie May was inspired by the young women Petry encountered in Harlem who were a bit younger than Lutie Johnson but, like her, also absent from the organizational meetings to which Petry devoted her time. However, young women like Annie May made their presence known on the streets of Harlem. Approaching three of them, Jones describes them with a tone of disdain:

As far as he could see, they looked exactly alike. All three of them. And like Annie May. Too thin. Too much lipstick. Their dresses were too short and too tight. . . . He knew too, that [Annie May] didn’t earn enough money to pay for all the cheap, bright-colored dresses she was forever buying. Her girl friends looked just like her and just like these girls. He’d seen her coming out of the movie houses on 125th Street with two or three of them. They were all chewing gum and they nudged each other and talked too loud and laughed too loud. They stared hard at every man who went past them.

Might these “too-too girls” be female counterparts of Ellison’s zoot-suit-wearing jitterbugs that his protagonist encounters on the subway platform in Invisible Man? In an unsigned editorial just after the Harlem Riot of 1943, Ellison suggested that black leadership fails if it does not seek to solve the riddle of the zoot. He wrote, “Much in Negro life remains a mystery; perhaps the zoot-suit conceals profound political meaning; perhaps the symmetrical frenzy of the Lindy-hop conceals clues to great potential power.” This is a riddle he himself seeks to unravel in Invisible Man, and one that would occupy brilliant thinkers after him. The Lindy Hop and the emerging sound of bebop, according to Ellison, embodied the energies and frustrations of these young men—frustrations that led to the chaos and discontent of wartime race riots.

But let’s linger a bit longer with the young women, the “too-too girls.” We might ask, Who are they? What are their hopes, aspirations, dreams, and frustrations? What is their style? What songs do they sing as they work throughout the day to ease heartbreak or express a heart’s longing? What music plays through their heads as they dress for a night out? What rhythms inspire their work? Imagine them: a flirtatious glance here, a familiar gesture there, hands on hips, head tilted. The spirit of black urban life was embodied by not only the zoot suiters, but also by the “too-too girls.” With only a short passage in her story, Petry introduced them to the fictional page. She dared to represent them, and in so doing asked new questions about her time, place, and people.

For Jones—and in all likelihood, for Petry’s readers—the young women are unfamiliar, unreachable, foreign, and just wrong. The refrain “too” suggests he resents their insistence, their exploding beyond the boundaries, their stepping outside the lines, their taking more from life than it tells them they
dare have. They are boldly sexual, which he finds distasteful. He despises their dismissal of proper behavior and respectability. He contrasts them with his upstanding only son, Sam, a scholar athlete who first works as a redcap before joining the military. (Redcap was the nickname given to railroad porters who wore the red hats as part of their uniforms. Most railroad porters were black men. They were also members of the Union of Sleeping Car Porters founded by A. Philip Randolph. These were prestigious, sought-after jobs. Redcaps were greatly admired and respected in black communities throughout the United States.) Sam, the story's Negro soldier figure, is stationed down south in Georgia.

In Petry's story, Jones's son becomes a stand-in for Private Robert Bandy. After learning that his son has been court-martialed for shooting a racist officer, Jones, fed up with the streets he walks, his job, and Annie May, goes to a Harlem bar in an unnamed hotel on a hot August night in 1943. Petry doesn't name it, but this fictional hotel is based on the Braddock. Once there, Jones looks out into the lobby of the hotel and sees a black soldier in uniform, who reminds him of Sam, confronting a white police officer. He witnesses the event that provokes the Harlem Riot. Shortly thereafter, he finds himself in the crowd.

Here Petry's story becomes the story of the crowd, and Jones merely our touchstone to the larger entity. As the crowd continues to move, Jones turns to spot a young thin girl and realizes it's Annie May holding a nude mannequin by the waist and hurling it through the air. Looking at Annie May, "He felt now that for the first time he understood her. She had never had anything but badly paying jobs working for young white women who probably despised her. She was like Sam on that bus in Georgia. She didn't want just the nigger end of things." In darkness and confusion, Jones identifies with Annie May and he abolishes the distinction he had been making between them—between the "good" Sam and the "bad" Annie May. Similar fates awaited both of them; neither of them had any future. Both of them are only guilty of trying to assert their dignity, of standing defiantly in the face of old racist practices that confront them on a daily basis. Petry makes the ordinary, anonymous participants of the Harlem riots the central figures of literary fiction. This is her major contribution as an artist: to give voice and complexity to those people who remain nameless in official accounts. She portrays their humanity, their frustrations, their anger and fear. She gives them names. Many people wrote about the riots. Few wrote about the rioters with such compassion and detail.

Young men and women like Sam and Annie May represented a new generation of African Americans. They were unwilling to tolerate second-class citizenship, unwilling to wait for the slow process of incremental change. Annie May is a fictional representative of the women described by a New York Times article that appeared on August 3, 1943, entitled "500 Are Arraigned in Harlem Looting: 100 Women Among Prisoners Crowding Courts After Night Disorders." The story's first line reads: "More than 500 prisoners, among them 100 women, many of them carrying the loot they had at the time of
their arrest, were arraigned during the day and evening yesterday... Many of the defendants were youths. Several wore zoot suits. Records from the Harlem Magistrate's Office do show that more young women, like Hughes's Margie Polite, were arrested for "disorderly conduct" on the night of the riot than on any other night preceding or following it—however, I have not been able to locate a record of the 100 women reported arrested by the Times. Perhaps they were arraigned in different magistrates' offices, but they seem to have quietly disappeared into the Harlem night.44

Although Petry wrote "In Darkness and Confusion" just after the riot, she could not find a publisher for it until 1946. She initially submitted it to The Crisis, a journal that had previously published her fiction. However, the editor, James Ivy, rejected it because of the language, which he encouraged her to keep while she sought other venues for publication.45

Harlem would not immediately recover from the riot. A number of businesses never reopened. Harlem nightlife especially took a hit: fewer white New Yorkers were now willing to risk a trip to Harlem's famed nightclubs and ballrooms. Finally and most importantly, many members of the black middle class also began a quiet exodus to the outer boroughs.

Petry lived in Harlem for only a few years after the riots. Some time after George's return from the army, the couple relocated to Bronx Park East. Many middle-class African Americans began to leave, relocating, like the Petrys, to the Bronx, or to Queens. Petry would continue to write, and she still set many of her stories in Harlem, but her next two novels would be set in New England.

Early critics considered Petry part of the Richard Wright school of naturalist black fiction—a designation she deeply resented. Wright was the towering black literary figure of the time, and the success of his work certainly created the audience and market that would read Petry's work. He never served as her mentor, and he never seems to have read her work for publishing houses, as he did Gwendolyn Brooks's poetry. Petry later noted that while she read and admired Wright, Baldwin, and especially Ellison, she had never met any of them. She was part of a group of writers whose reach went beyond that of Wright. Petry, like Chicago's Gwendolyn Brooks,
found inspiration in the lives of ordinary working-class black people, especially migrants and women. To modernist, urban landscapes, these writers added black women as walkers of the city.46

Petry's introduction of figures like Lutie and the "too-too girls" helped to give voice to black women who remained invisible to much of American society. As such, her fictional characters might join the sound of the young Dinah Washington in giving us a more textured understanding of the time. The epitome of the too-too girl, singer Dinah Washington—Miss D—was a child of the Great Migration and the Great Depression. Deeply steeped in gospel, she was first dubbed a blues singer and then a rhythm and blues pioneer. She was both and more. She was a capable interpreter of the blues, country and western, pop tunes, and jazz standards. She joined the Lionel Hampton Orchestra and eventually made Harlem her home. Like Petry with her "too-too girls," Washington exploded beyond genre and category. Hers was a sexually confident, insistent, and bold voice. In her music and her style, Washington captured the energy, the spirit, and the setting that animate Petry's fiction.

Even though she left Harlem soon after the war ended, Petry's most prolific decade was clearly the result of her deep involvement in and engagement with the neighborhood. Her literary celebrity soared with the publication of The Street. When her essay "The Novel as Social Criticism" appeared in the Writer's Book, she was published alongside the likes of W.H. Auden, Pearl S. Buck, and Lionel Trilling. Translations of The Street appeared in a number of languages including Spanish. The interest of foreign readers is evidence of Petry's widespread literary significance during this time. Petry recalled, "I became famous, a celebrity, almost overnight." However, she grew to disdain the fame she'd acquired. "After the publication of The Street," she said, "I began to feel as though I were public property. I was beleaguered by all the hoopla, the interviews, the invitations to speak." She left New York, and, to a certain degree, the center of her literary life, when she and George returned to Old Saybrook in 1948. There they purchased an old sea captain's house, built in 1790. Petry gave birth to her only child, a beautiful baby girl named Elisabeth, the following year. Petry would live, write, and raise her daughter in Old Saybrook until her death in 1997.47

Petry never suggested that her departure from the limelight and from New York may have been influenced by the nation's changing political climate. There is no FBI file on Petry, and she doesn't seem to have been personally sought out by Hoover or by the House Un-American Activities Committee. The very fact that she was hired by Hollywood to write a screenplay for That Hill Girl, a feature-length vehicle for blonde bombshell Kim Novak, during the height of the Red Scare suggests that no one believed her to have been a Communist. However, many of her former colleagues, contemporaries, and friends were. Adam Clayton Powell Jr. broke all ties with his Communist allies in 1947. Benjamin Davis, the black Communist city councilman from Harlem for whom Petry expressed support as late as 1949, was sent to prison under the Smith Act, and Marvel Cooke, her friend and colleague
at the People’s Voice, was subpoenaed by Joseph McCarthy in 1953. Two of the men Petry most admired, W. E. B. Du Bois and Paul Robeson, both lost their passports and were harassed by the FBI.

Harlem had lost some of its glitter; like many other black urban communities, with the Housing Act of 1949 the Black Mecca fell victim to urban renewal, which included the development of high-rise housing projects and the destruction of a number of neighborhood institutions. A heroin epidemic ensued. Harlem lost much of its radical and intellectual leadership and much of its middle class. After the war, middle-class African Americans met with increased opportunity for mobility as other areas of the city opened up to black residents, and many of those who could move did so. Those who moved found opportunities for homeownership and entry into the middle class.

The American Left and the black poor did not fare well during the Cold War. McCarthyism and the Red Scare changed African American politics in New York, as figures such as FBI director Hoover and Senator McCarthy targeted the radical wing of the Left. They challenged the coalition between the labor and civil rights movements, tempered the call of black leaders for economic justice, and sought to silence vocal street protests and grassroots organizing. With the rise of McCarthyism, calls for economic justice often were deemed Communist propaganda. Urban renewal efforts to redevelop areas by “eliminating blight,” “clearing slums,” and building high-rise public housing projects also led to the disruption of the community’s networks and the isolation and immobilization of many of its poorer members.

Petry’s final piece of writing to come out of her Harlem years would be the gorgeously illustrated essay “Harlem” that appeared in Holiday magazine in 1949. Written after she’d left Harlem, the essay closes with a pessimistic vision of New York, a place upon which the sun seemed to have set:

Harlem has been studied and analyzed by sociologists, anthropologists, and politicians. It has been turned and twisted, to the right and to the left, prettied up and called colorful and exotic, defamed and labeled criminal. Sometimes its past has been glorified, more often it has been censured. But looked at head on, its thousand faces merge into one—the face of a ghetto. In point of time it belongs back in the Middle Ages. Harlem is an anachronism—shameful and unjustifiable, set down in the heart of the biggest, richest city of the world.

Here Petry contributes to a “Harlem as Ghetto” discourse that dominated mainstream representations of the neighborhood for decades. Alternatively, a new generation of activist artists like Lorraine Hansberry, Maya Angelou, Abbey Lincoln, Louise Merriwether, and Toni Cade Bambara followed in Petry’s footsteps and found inspiration in the Black Mecca’s social complexity, cultural vibrancy, and political energy.