PART III

1918–1927

To "get along" and to obtain what he wanted from white people, he acquired the necessary demeanor and verbal skills. He learned "to humble down and play shut-mouthed." —Leon F. Litwack (2000)[1]

The rise of the "New Negro" from 1918 to 1927 was a response to prevailing racial stereotypes that existed throughout the nineteenth and even into the early twentieth century. The New Negro was, in short, the flip side of the racial coin, the "'New Negro' and his doppelgänger," in Henry Louis Gates's words. The "black Sambo" and the "New Negro," Gates explains, established an "antithetical relationship as surrogates in a simmering but undeclared race war." With "Sambo art" assisting white racists in expressing the negated black identity, the New Negro Renaissance sought to create an individual who was "a truly reconstructed presence in the face of white hostility."[2] Performers and playwrights facilitated the transformation of the image of African Americans from minstrelsy to a new, modern representation.

Minstrelsy, aside from being pernicious, was persistent, and had to be challenged. As James Weldon Johnson pointed out as late as 1930, minstrelsy was "a caricature of Negro life" that had "not yet been entirely broken." It reified the tradition of the African American as merely an "irresponsible, happy-go-lucky, wide-grinning, loud-laughing, shuffling, banjo-playing, singing, dancing sort of being."[3] The minstrel image that had dominated the stage became embedded in the American consciousness. In response to this minstrel image, the Harlem Renaissance experienced a concerted effort to end the stereotype. This assault did not always succeed; at times, images clashed within the same play, performance, or public

event. Nellie McKay underscores the difficulty facing black actors on and off stage, noting that "in the white American mind," minstrelsy and its implications of "lazy, comic, pathetic, childlike, idiotic, etc.," codified "an image that was disastrous to the advancement of serious black theater, and one not easily reversed."[4] Performers unfortunately inherited a minstrel vocabulary and discourse that was thoroughly saturated with various forms of racial reductionism. Reversing pejorative depictions required a substitution of images through a unified approach. As one *New York Age* editorial reported in 1923, the "need for a real constructive program in building up racial solidarity is therefore insisted upon as a vital necessity."[5] Seeking security in collective identification, African American artists at the time sought control over cultural representations by establishing this "New Negro" ontology.