

African American Migration Narratives of the Harlem Renaissance: Jazz as a Symbol of Racial Uplift, “Low-Down” Migrants, and Black Feminism

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INTRODUCTION

Mobility has been a central theme of African American literature from its inception. Its expression has taken various forms, from the slave narratives or neo-slave narratives that describe fugitive slaves escaping from the Southern plantation to Northern freedom to the migration narratives that highlight the characters of migrants moving from the South to the North for better civil and economic opportunities during the Great Migration and on to the black Atlantic and diaspora literature that traces international migration in the broader historical context of the Middle Passage, Pan-Africanism, and contemporary globalism.¹ During the Great Migration, beginning in the early twentieth century, black music genres—blues and jazz—also emerged as a version of migration narrative that was nurtured and enjoyed by migrants. Given this thematic overlap, it becomes apparent that the genres of migration narrative and blues/jazz literature have been closely intertwined throughout the African American literary tradition.

In this essay I examine migration and blues/jazz as represented in the literary and sociological works of the Harlem Renaissance, an African American artistic and literary movement that emerged in the early twentieth

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century. The Harlem Renaissance was the period when the themes of migration and blues/jazz became most prevalent in both literary and sociological works. First, this movement itself was the product of the Great Migration that brought African American populations to Harlem and established that place as an artistic mecca; second, many of the writers of the movement, for example, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Claude McKay, and Nella Larsen, were also migrants or born to immigrant parents and had firsthand experience of dislocation; and finally, these writers and elite intellectuals found blues/jazz symbolic of the dramatic changes brought by the Great Migration and attempted to discover the cultural and social significance of this black music. Elite intellectuals started to establish a sociology of black music as an area for scholarly inquiry, and innovative writers variously experimented with literary forms by incorporating black vernacular idioms, including blues and jazz.

Although African American literary studies have long investigated the interaction of the genres of migration narrative and blues/jazz literature in this period,² the focus has often been on male “avant-garde” modernist writers who openly celebrated blues/jazz. As a result, relatively few studies have attempted to survey “rear-guard” conservative intellectuals and women writers and their ambivalent relations to migration and blues/jazz. The Harlem Renaissance was known as the era of “jazz controversy,” in which one’s judgment of blues/jazz revealed what kind of aesthetic principle a person believed in (Ogren 3–10). In other words, the controversy over the meanings of blues/jazz explicated the diversity of aesthetic positions within the black community. In order to better grasp the diversity of how each writer differently conceived of migration and blues/jazz, I propose a method of comparative analysis of various texts that transcend the borders of genre, class, and gender, rather than a close reading of a single text. The works compared in this essay include not only poetry and a novel (the blues and jazz poems of Sterling A. Brown and Langston Hughes; Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand* [1928]) but also sociological or autobiographical essays (Alain Locke’s “The New Negro” [1925] and *The Negro and His Music* [1936]; Zora Neale Hurston’s “How It Feels to Be Colored Me” [1928]). I believe that this method of comparative analysis will offer expansive yet nuanced interpretations of the various aesthetic discourses of the Harlem Renaissance in relation to the themes of migration and blues/jazz.

In this essay I argue that, in each work, the portrayal of migration and blues/jazz establishes a site that expresses its distinctive aesthetic value

and that, taken together, the comparison of these works brings to light the three competing and coexisting modes of artistic ideas and ideals of the Harlem Renaissance. The first aesthetic idea is based on the elite ideology of racial uplift, which equates geographical mobility with the upward social mobility of migrants into the middle-class and artistic sublimation of black folk music into high-art music (Locke); the second challenges the elite ideology of racial uplift and instead values more realistic representations of working-class migrants and their “low-down” culture, including blues and jazz (Brown and Hughes); and the third associates blues/jazz with women migrants’ experiences of sexual objectification as well as black feminist aesthetics (Larsen and Hurston). These competing and coexisting modes of artistic ideas and ideals expose the inadequacy of a black/white binary that presupposes homogeneity of the black artistic community, which highlights that the very heterogeneity of the artistic positions was itself a fertile ground for the construction of African American aesthetics in the 1920s.

The following section provides a historical overview of the Great Migration and theoretical framework of the African American migration narrative studies. After the topic was initiated by Robert Stepto, studies of African American migration narratives were developed during the 1990s by such scholars as Charles Scruggs, Farah Jasmine Griffin, and Lawrence Rodgers. In 2011, James Smethurst reconsidered migration narratives within the field of modernist studies, arguing that African American migration narratives and their portrayals of “fragmented subjectivity and urban alienation” were the roots of American modernism (215). I build on and hope to add to these studies of migration and modernism by focusing on the representations of blues/jazz, which I identify as quintessential migrant and modernist culture. The subsequent three sections offer details on how each migration narrative expresses the above three aesthetic ideas and ideals.

I. THE GREAT MIGRATION AND ITS IMPACT ON AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERARY TRADITIONS

The Great Migration is a pivotal event in African American history after the Emancipation. From 1890 to 1914, it is estimated that roughly five hundred thousand African American people migrated from the rural South to the urban North (Downs 438) and eight hundred thousand in the 1920s (Singh 897). Many historians have indicated two main “push” factors: racial oppression and the poor agricultural conditions of the South. Driven by

the feeling of insecurity caused by racial oppression and lynchings, which were justified by the Jim Crow laws, and economically devastated by poor harvests due to the boll weevil epidemic, soil depletion, and flooding of the Mississippi River, migrants flocked to Northern cities in search of better civil and economic opportunities. “Pull” factors included the US entry into World War I and subsequent immigration restrictions of the 1920s. As many white male workers left their jobs to join the armed forces and the streams of European emigrants to the US decreased, defense industries in the North began to face an increasing need for labor and started to recruit black Southerners to work in cities. In this way, World War I accelerated the Great Migration, drastically transforming the economic and social landscape of the Northern cities.

The Great Migration had an impact not only economically and socially but also culturally and artistically. It became a central factor in the creation of the migration narratives that “portray the movement of a major character or the text itself from a provincial (not necessarily rural) Southern or Midwestern site (home of the ancestor) to a more cosmopolitan, metropolitan area” (Griffin 3). Charles Scruggs’s *Sweet Home: Invisible Cities in the Afro-American Novel* (1993), Farah Jasmine Griffin’s “*Who Set You Flowin’*”: *The African-American Migration Narrative* (1995), and Lawrence Rodgers’s *Canaan Bound: The African-American Great Migration Novel* (1997) are the pioneering studies, providing insight into the migration narrative tradition from post-Reconstruction works to such contemporary writers as Toni Morrison. In their attempt to investigate the genre of migration narrative, these studies commonly build on Roberto Stepto’s *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative* (1979). Stepto is known for his introduction of the South-North axis to African American narrative studies. In Stepto’s view, a migrant character’s journey is not only a literal geographical movement but also a symbolic one. Tracing the narrative patterns of the slave narratives, he argues that slaves’ movement to the North (“ascent”) means their symbolic journey to literacy, freedom, and individual identity, while their movement from the North to the South (“immersion”) means their symbolic journey toward “tribal literacy” and “group identity” nourished in folk communities (167).

Frederick Douglass’s slave narrative best represents the “narrative of ascent,” in which Douglass’s actual movement to the North possesses a series of symbolic values associated with the conventional imageries of the rural South and the urban North. As James Smethurst aptly suggests, Douglass’s journeys were both “physical and spiritual, literal and

symbolic,” including “the movement from the Eastern Shore of Maryland (by way of Baltimore) to New Bedford, Massachusetts, from slavery to freedom, from slave/brute to man, from orality to literacy, from the margins to the mainstream, from common man to representative man, from mass man to individual, from a backward past to gleaming modernity” (101). Here, it is important to note that Douglass’s migration symbolizes his upward social mobility from a “slave” to “man,” as well as his linear temporal movement from “backward past” to “modernity.” His migration narrative, then, can be situated within the Western Enlightenment discourse, in which his geographical mobility means the upward linear progression into enlightenment and modernity.

Stepto’s narrative of ascent reveals another important fact about the migration narratives; that is, those migrants to the North, like Douglass himself, are required to forsake Southern collective culture associated with slavery and oppression to create an enlightened self that internalizes the Western idea of individual self-development. As Stepto suggests, the “hero or heroine of an ascent narrative must be willing to forsake familial or communal postures in the narrative’s most oppressive social structure for a new posture in the least oppressive environment—at best, one of solitude; at worst, one of alienation” (167). It is only through accepting the individualization, solitude, and alienation in the symbolic North that migrant characters can transform themselves from second-class citizens to enlightened political leaders. The climax of the narrative of ascent thus is the protagonist rising to a higher status as a role model for the entire race, while, at the same time, becoming separated from his or her communal South.

II. THE NARRATIVE OF ASCENT AND THE IDEOLOGY OF RACIAL UPLIFT

The narrative of ascent has a structural similarity with the ideology of racial uplift, the idea that educated middle-class African Americans, often labeled as the “Talented Tenth,” are responsible for the social and moral advancement of the entire race. W. E. B. Du Bois’s essay “The Talented Tenth” (1903) best represents such an attempt:

Can the masses of the Negro people be in any possible way more quickly raised than by the effort and example of this aristocracy of talent and character? Was there ever a nation on God’s fair earth civilized from the bottom upward? Never; it is, ever was, and ever

will be from the top downward that culture filters. The Talented Tenth rises and pulls all that are worth the saving up to their vantage ground (46–47).

Du Bois believed that the task of the Talented Tenth members is to rise high on the social ladder and to pull those who are at the bottom rung. According to Kevin K. Gaines, this sort of uplift ideology was widespread among the African American middle-class: “Reflecting both their desire for social mobility and the economic and racial barriers to it,” aspiring members “described themselves since the post-Reconstruction era as middle-class through their ideals of racial uplift, espousing a vision of racial solidarity uniting black elites with the masses” (2). By this attempt of “class differentiation,” they attempted to create a sense of “self-affirmation” and a “positive black identity” that could be accepted by white society (3).

This somewhat assimilationist principle of racial uplift, however, worked to widen the gap between the middle-class and working-class blacks rather than uniting them. Ironically enough, the members of the black middle-class were afraid of being (mis)identified with working-class masses, which led them to further internalize and promote the values of the Anglo-American bourgeoisie such as self-help, temperance, thrift, chastity, patriarchal authority, and the accumulation of wealth, which have long sustained racial, class, and gender differentiation. As a result, they ended up replicating the racist and sexist logic of the oppressive society (Gaines 3–4). Here, I would suggest that the idea of racial uplift is parallel in its structure to that of the narrative of ascent. In both, while an educated few can exercise geographical and social mobility to be accepted by white people, they must lose a physical and spiritual connection to working-class people, becoming alienated or consciously separating themselves from the struggles of those who are at the bottom of society.

The Harlem Renaissance can be analyzed against the background of this class hierarchy and disparity within the African American community. Being initiated by the Talented Tenth represented by Du Bois and Alain Locke, the Harlem Renaissance was as much a middle-class movement as a racial one. In 1925 when Harlem was emerging as a promised land that attracted migrants from both within and without the US, Locke published *The New Negro*, a critical anthology that informed the beginning and the various definitions of the Harlem Renaissance. Although this anthology is not usually considered as a migration narrative per se, it nevertheless includes many literary and sociological works that examine the impact of

the Great Migration.³ Locke's own essay "The New Negro," for example, contextualizes the Great Migration within the discourse of racial uplift. He claims that as the "migrant masses, shifting from countryside to city, hurdle several generations of experience at a leap" (4), the task of artists is to transform the racial stereotypes of inferiority into new images of racial pride and dignity. Locke goes on to argue that, through various artistic endeavors, the images of the "Old Negro," such as "aunties," uncles," "mammies," "Uncle Tom," and "Sambo" of the Southern premodern plantation, can be radically transformed into images of the "New Negro" that reflect middle-class, urban, and modern values (5). By presenting the possibilities of recreating racial identity, Locke establishes his elite version of the migration narrative; in this version, the Great Migration embodies a sociocultural upward mobility for progress accomplished through conscious breakaway from images of the oppressive South.

Within this elite version of migration narrative, blues was despised as a vulgar music associated with Old Negro stereotypes, but spirituals and jazz became the target of cultural "ascent" and "uplift." Locke's *The Negro and His Music* (1936) retrospectively details the possibilities of upward class mobility found in these genres:

If Negro music is to fulfill its best possibilities, Negroes must become musical by nurture and not rest content with being musical by nature. They must build upon two things essential for the highest musical success; a class of trained musicians who know and love the folk music and are able to develop it into great classical music, and a class of trained music lovers who will support by appreciation the best in the Negro's musical heritage and not allow it to be prostituted by the vaudeville stage or Tin Pan Alley, or to be cut off at its folk roots by lack of appreciation of its humble but gifted peasant creators. (4)

Locke encouraged African American classically trained musicians to adapt black folk materials to transform them into high-cultural forms—opera and symphony—that are comparable in their artistic quality to that of Western classical music. The primary purpose of this musical elevation was to challenge existing vulgar stereotypes of black music produced by commercial entertainments such as "the vaudeville stage," the hybrid of black music and minstrel-like shows, and Tin Pan Alley, a white-owned commercial music industry.

Locke firmly believed in black music's socio-aesthetic upward mobility.

Nevertheless, the above passages also show his ambivalent attitude toward folk music, on one hand, and commercial music, on the other. As for folk music, Locke seemed to appreciate Southern “peasant creators” as bearers of the folk tradition, but his appreciation was a form of “rural folk romanticism,” which led him to “interpret black folk culture less as a living reality than as residue from a fast-receding past” (Anderson 172). For Locke and other elite leaders, “the folk” was a conceptual product of their romantic imagination and not actual working-class people who were the true living inheritors of the folk culture. Locke’s elitism also prevented him from openly appreciating jazz. Locke himself was a strong advertiser of some big band jazz organized by respectable band leaders such as Duke Ellington and Fletcher Henderson, which, he believed, could be elevated into a high artistic form. However, he consistently took a critical stance toward its commercialization. He distinguished the “healthy and earthy expression in the original peasant paganism” of jazz from “its hectic, artificial and sometimes morally vicious counterpart which was the outcome of the vogue of artificial and commercialized jazz entertainment.” In so doing, he articulated his concern that new “decadently neurotic” stereotypes were developing around the entertainment jazz scenes while elite members were struggling to fight against the Old Negro stereotypes (*The Negro* 86).

As we have seen, Locke’s arguments of migration and jazz reflected the conservative nature of black middle-class uplift ideology. Written within the narrative traditions of “ascent” that valued upward mobility, his sociological migration narrative presented an aesthetic ideal of assimilation into Western cultures. For this purpose, it was necessary to disconnect both migrants and jazz from the oppressive and backward imageries of the South and from vulgar working-class and commercial origins.

III. THE NARRATIVE OF IMMERSION/DESCENT AND “LOW-DOWN” MIGRANTS

From the mid-1920s, younger generations of African American writers started to create migration narratives that focused on the working-class migrants whom Langston Hughes called the “low-down folks” (“The Negro Artist” 1312). In contrast to the elite version of “ascent” and “uplift,” the working-class version of migration narratives was that of “immersion” and “descent.” As Stepto theorizes, in the “narrative of immersion,” those isolated and alienated “ascent” characters decide once again to immerse in the symbolic South in search of their communal ties. Griffin

reconceptualizes Stepto's symbolic South as a space of the "ancestor," where newly migrated people can be reconnected with their communal heritage (3). As we will see later, the work of Sterling A. Brown represents this narrative of immersion.

In addition to the narrative of immersion, I would suggest that the working-class version can be also characterized as a "narrative of descent," by which I hope to highlight the moral and social decline of those who have migrated to urban areas. Although Harlem and other Northern cities were imagined as the promised land by migrants, in reality, these urban spaces turned out to be ghettos where newly arrived migrants were "drawn into the sporting life of sex, drinking, gambling, and ragtime." As a result, migration narratives of the 1920s were filled with the "sense of melancholy," in other words, the "sense of the urban ghetto as simultaneously new home, refuge, trap, and exile" and as a "destroyer of black culture and racial values" (Smethurst 111–12). Hughes's blues and jazz poems are examples of a narrative of descent, realistically depicting the urban jazz music scene as a site of downward mobility into ghetto and vice.

Importantly, the working-class version of migration narratives often incorporates blues/jazz not in their high-art forms but in their original folk or entertainment forms, which leads us to consider that blues and early jazz were also migration narratives that reflected the living reality of "low-down folks." Therefore, before examining the works of Brown and Hughes, let us take an overview of the tradition of migration narratives in music. In the African American musical tradition, the theme of migration and dispossession appeared in the sacred music known as "slave spirituals." As the song title "A Long Way from Home" implies, lyrics of the spirituals were often about the imaginary journey to "home," a metaphor for heaven, where slaves could be liberated from bondage (Wall 31). Unlike spirituals, secular blues tradition called for freedom of mobility in the real world. As William Barlow claims, the blues singers "acted as proselytizers of a gospel of secularization in which the belief in freedom became associated with personal mobility—freedom of movement in this world here and now, rather than salvation in the next" (5). Because many rural blues musicians were themselves migrants, they were "in the forefront of the exodus; they were the oracles of their generation, contrasting the promise of freedom with the reality of their harsh living conditions" (6).

Under the influence of the blues and other music traditions, jazz was born in New Orleans and played in the red-light district called Storyville. In 1917, the US Navy closed Storyville, and many jazz musicians started

migrating along the Mississippi River toward Chicago and eventually New York. During the 1920s, when the Jazz Age and the Harlem Renaissance were at their peaks, jazz became popular both among black audiences, who mostly consisted of recently arrived migrants, and white audiences, who flocked to Harlem for exotic entertainment. Blues and piano jazz (stride piano) were performed in rent parties for black working-class people, and the more sophisticated big band jazz became spectacular performances for white audiences in cabarets, saloons, and nightclubs. Despite their popularity, due to their contiguity to morally questionable activities such as drinking, gambling, bootlegging, prostitution, and working-class commercial culture, they were despised by elite blacks as a source of moral anxiety and threat.

Within this cultural context in which African American elite and working-class values are competing each other, no one articulated the need for appreciating the vitality of “low-down folks” and their culture more thoroughly than Hughes. Hughes famously criticized elite blacks’ class-bound approach to art in “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” (1926). Here, Hughes accuses the black middle-class of being an aristocracy that, under the rhetoric of racial uplift, shows an assimilationist tendency: “But this is the mountain standing in the way of any true Negro art in America—this urge within the race toward whiteness, the desire to pour racial individuality into the mold of American standardization, and to be as little Negro and as much American as possible” (1311).

Rather than shying away from “low-down” traditions, Hughes believed that new generations of artists should celebrate them as a unique racial heritage. Hughes’s statement “Let the blare of Negro jazz bands and the bellowing voice of Bessie Smith singing the Blues penetrate the closed ears of the colored near-intellectuals until they listen and perhaps understand” (1314) thus became the manifesto that encouraged other writers to write about blues/jazz and migration from working-class perspectives. McKay, Brown, and Hurston were among those who perhaps most agreed with Hughes’s artistic stance. These writers created migration narratives that self-consciously broke with the ideology of racial uplift and turned instead for inspiration to the vernacular, black bohemian, and modernist idiom. This resulted in a series of migration narratives—*The Weary Blues* (1925), *Fine Clothes to the Jew* (1927), *Home to Harlem* (1928), *Banjo* (1929), and *Southern Road* (1932), each of which, by incorporating blues and jazz into literary forms or contents, explored the lives of working-class migrants. In these works, geographically upward movement (“ascent” to the North) and

symbolically downward movement (“immersion” in the symbolic South or “descent” into vice) are typically juxtaposed to challenge the elite uplift narratives that tended to deny the latter aspect.

Brown’s blues/jazz poem “Cabaret” included in *Southern Road* is one example that portrays a downward movement (“immersion” in the symbolic South). The poem is set in a cabaret in Chicago, illustrating a jazz band and the chorus girls performing for a white audience. Although these chorus girls are marketed as the “Creole Beauties from New Orleans,” they are migrants coming from many places “[by] way of Atlanta, Louisville, Washington, Yonkers.” After describing these girls’ “shapely bodies naked save / For tattered pink silk bodices, short velvet tights” (111), the poem goes on to introduce a parallel setting on the Mississippi River watershed in Arkansas, where “*Poor half-naked fools, tagged with identification numbers, / Worn out upon the levees, / Are carted back to the serfdom*” (112). These lines refer to the black sharecroppers and convicts who were forced into relief work to shore up the levees with their number tags attached so that they would not try to evacuate from the flood. Here, the poem juxtaposes the Northern chorus girls’ “naked” bodies with the Southern laborers’ “*half-naked*” bodies to show that the flood was one of the causes of migration. In addition, the parallel realities are designed to defy the idea of racial uplift that requires migrants to break with the oppressive South. In “Cabaret,” even though migrants are physically separated from the South, they cannot psychologically abandon it. As “the jazz band unleashes its frenzy” and the chorus girls start to sing Bessie Smith’s blues song “Muddy Water” (111), they cannot help but immerse in the oppressive reality of the South described in the blues song. Soon after the poem describes the situation of the Southern laborers, “*Now that the floods recede, / What is there left the miserable folk?*,” the chorus girls sing the lines, “Still it’s my home, sweet home” (112). “Cabaret,” as a narrative of immersion, in this way, foregrounds the shadowing presence of the South as a symbolic “home” within the background of the urban jazz scene.

Hughes’s *The Weary Blues* and *Fine Clothes to the Jew* are called “nomadic” works that present the themes of dislocation, migration, and diaspora (Hogan 188). As if to challenge the folk romanticism of the black elite, Hughes’s blues and jazz poems in these collections present a realistic portrayal of the downward movement (“descent” into vice), showing how the geographical dislocation causes the depression of working-class migrants that eventually invites them into vice activities. The poem “The Weary Blues” depicts a blues musician, presumably a migrant, who sings

a melancholy blues song about loneliness: “Ain’t got nobody in all this world, / Ain’t got nobody but my self. . . . And I wish that I had died” (*The Collected* 23). Although this poem does not name the reason for his depression, other blues poems included in *Fine Clothes to the Jew* give a hint. “Bound No’th Blues” shows that the sense of depression is caused by migration: “Hates to be lonely, / Lawd, I hates to be sad” (*The Collected* 114), and “Po’ Boy Blues” writes, “Since I come up North de / Whole damn world’s turned cold” (*The Collected* 79). These alienated migrant characters seem to resemble the elite protagonists of the narrative of ascent who have been separated from the South, but, unlike the elite characters who achieved upward social mobility in the North, Hughes’s working-class characters lack a desire for upward mobility. Instead, in order to cope with their sense of depression, these working-class migrant characters descend into a vice district where they can find nightclubs. As “Harlem Night Club” illuminates, these characters ask the jazz band to “Play, plAY, PLAY!” because, for them, “Tomorrow. . . . is darkness.” All they can do is “Joy today!” (*The Collected* 29). Rather than romanticizing the folk, Hughes’s poems shed light on the living reality of the urban working-class migrants who frequented blues and jazz places in search of a brief release from their depressed feelings.

As these examples show, in a working-class version of the migration narrative, blues/jazz scenes are the literary device used to address the simultaneous movement in two opposing directions. Geographically relocated upward to the urban North, working-class migrants are, at the same time, psychologically drawn back to their symbolic home in the South, and, at the same time, they have morally fallen to the bottom of society, which is implied in these poems by the presence of an urban vice district, prostitution, poverty, and economic exploitation of black music for white entertainment. In this way, the working-class version articulates its aesthetic ideal—and social imperative—of realistically portraying the psychological and moral downward movement of the working-class people rather than ignoring or romanticizing them.

IV. WOMEN’S MIGRATION NARRATIVES —IMMOBILITY, SEXUALIZATION, AND BLACK FEMINISM

Despite the controversy over blues/jazz that reflects the class disparity among the black community, the elite and the working-class versions are similar in that both mainly reflect men’s migration. That means, in the genre

of migration narrative, women's mobility is less visible or even absent. In fact, during the Great Migration, "many of the opportunities were first offered to men, women were often last to leave the South." Furthermore, "as mothers and caretakers of the family, they often felt obliged to remain in the South until they had enough money to establish a new life in the North" (Downs 439). According to Hazel Carby, women's blues often visualizes such female immobility. For example, "Freight Train Blues," recorded by both Trixie Smith and Clara Smith in 1924, reads, "When a woman gets the blues she goes to her room and hides" and "When a man gets the blues he catch the freight train and rides." Here, the rhymed "opposition between women hiding and men riding" shows the gendered nature of the Great Migration ("It Jus'" 477).

Many of the migration narratives take women's immobility for granted; however, black feminist scholars have taken the analysis in new directions by tracing women's mobility represented in female blues songs and writings. Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* and Zora Neale Hurston's "How It Feels to Be Colored Me" are important literary examples. In order to reconsider black women's (im)mobility represented in these works, let us first look at the social situation of female migrants during the Great Migration.

In reconsidering the history of black women's mobility, the existence of female blues singers cannot be overlooked. According to Carby, in an era when most women were immobile, female blues singers were the exception, since, as traveling entertainers, they possessed mobility. For female singers, it was too dangerous to travel using freight train cars. Thus, they chose a popular entertainment culture, such as traveling tent shows and vaudeville, as a medium for their mobility. The female blues performed in these traveling entertainment venues were called classic blues, which is regarded by feminist scholars as one of the inceptions of black feminism, precisely because the "physical mobility of these women" in "Classic Blues" symbolized the possibility of transcending the limits of conventional gender roles ("In Body" 180).

Northern entertainment industries gave geographical mobility not only to female blues singers but also to young black women by offering jobs as dancers and chorus girls in urban cabarets and nightclubs. This, however, produced the negative effect of objectifying black female bodies as both morally dangerous and overtly sexual. First, women's migrating bodies "generated a series of moral panics" among middle-class members of the black community. As young migrant women found jobs in urban entertainments, middle-class blacks started to view this as a threat to

female respectability, and, as a result, migrant women were often viewed as candidates for fallen womanhood who were “sexually degenerate” and “socially dangerous” (Carby, “Policing” 739). Second, the moral panic was further compounded by the sexualization of women’s bodies in entertainment venues. From the mid-1920s, jazz was marketed as an entertainment show called “jungle music,” which was meant to evoke imageries of the uncivilized South and exotic Africa by means of displaying the exposed bodies of the chorus girls, who consisted of light-skinned dancers under twenty-one years of age. Jazz and its staging of primitivism were complicit with the objectification of these women’s bodies as overtly sexual, uncivilized, and primitive.

Given these aspects, during the 1920s, blues/jazz possessed two symbolic meanings—women’s mobility and objectification. Within this historical context, Larsen and Hurston respectively offered feminist responses to jazz in their migration narratives. In both narratives, primitive jazz is represented as a site of descent into female moral degeneration; however, while Larsen’s protagonist rejects jazz and the sexual objectification of her body, Hurston’s accepts the objectification to transform the very oppressive site into an empowering site for reconstructing and reclaiming her racial and sexual identity.

Larsen’s migration narrative *Quicksand* expresses the female protagonist’s ambivalent attitude toward migration and jazz. The protagonist Helga Crane is an immigrant who journeys from a black school somewhere in the South where she works as a teacher to Chicago and then to New York, Copenhagen, and eventually to Alabama, hoping to discover a place where she can belong. Helga’s desire for belonging derives from her loneliness. Born of a Danish immigrant mother and a West Indian father, Helga is neither white nor black, which prevents her from belonging permanently and completely to any conventional community. In short, *Quicksand* documents Helga’s “be/longing”—her constant longing to belong somewhere.

As an endless migration narrative, *Quicksand* shows that Helga’s difficulty with permanent belonging derives from the constant sexualization of her body that mirrors her exotically attractive subject position as a young and beautiful mulatto and as an international migrant. For example, soon after she arrives in Denmark, the home of her mother, Helga realizes that her body becomes an exotic object. Helga’s Danish uncle insists that Helga is “a foreigner, and different,” saying that “[y]ou must have bright things to set off the color of your lovely brown skin. Striking things, exotic things”

(84). After leaving Copenhagen, Helga returns to New York and finds solace in a storefront church where she meets Reverend Pleasant Green, an Alabama preacher, and decides to marry him and return to the South. However, her sexuality is exploited by her husband. After delivering four children in rapid succession, Helga experiences profound disillusionment, and yet, because of her weak health, she is unable to move any more. *Quicksand*, as a feminist novel, is written within and against the narrative traditions of both “ascent” and “immersion” to critically expose the ways in which a young black woman’s geographical mobility—whether it is “ascent” or “immersion”—does not guarantee her social upward mobility nor her spiritual connection with Southern communal values. On the contrary, the novel cautions that women’s migrating bodies are constantly faced with the danger of objectification whenever they are exposed to others’ gaze. As a result, just as the title *Quicksand* implies, women migrants degenerate in a downward spiral and, at worst, into an oppressive immobility implied by Helga’s social death.

The scene of the New York cabaret is designed to elaborate the theme of women’s objectification. In the cabaret, Helga is absorbed by the sound of jazz:

She was drugged, lifted, sustained, by the extraordinary music, blown out, ripped out, beaten out, by the joyous, wild murky orchestra. The essence of life seemed bodily motion. And when suddenly the music died, she dragged herself back to the present with a conscious effort; and a shameful certainty that not only had she been in the jungle, but that she had enjoyed it, began to taunt her. She hardened her determination to get away. She wasn’t, she told herself, a jungle creature. (89–90)

In this memorable scene, the narrator of this novel calls jazz music a “moving mosaic” and a “motley” that includes “Africa, Europe, perhaps with a pinch of Asia” (90). Despite jazz’s association with mobility and heterogeneity, which arguably becomes an apt metaphor for Helga’s migrating life, Helga is ashamed of the way she has “enjoyed” jazz, the “jungle,” and she consciously estranges herself from it. Helga sees herself as a respectable woman, so when she says to herself that she is not “a jungle creature,” this can be interpreted as a rejection of being overtly sexualized as a primitive being. Here, Helga is faced with what Carby calls “moral panics.” Larsen’s elaboration of the jazz scene is actually much more

complex than the above interpretation, given the differing perspectives of the narrator and Helga, but, for now, suffice it to say that *Quicksand* foregrounds the perspective of the middle-class woman, and, as such, it has to reject jazz as being a site of sexual degeneration.

Helga's denial of jazz implies that, in order to be respectable, she has to repress her inner desire and sexuality, which are about to erupt in the cabaret. Hurston's "How It Feels to Be Colored Me" presents another option for a black woman; that is, to reclaim her inner desire and sexuality, which are usually policed to be repressed. Hurston's approach is different from that of Larsen, and one of the reasons for this difference is "suggested by the affinity between Hurston's aesthetic and that of the blues singer" (Wall 140). In a period when the representations of black women's sexuality were taboos, "the blues constitute a privileged discursive site" for expressing female desire and sexuality (Davis xvii). Just like the female blues singers who identified their mobility and sexuality as "a tangible expression of freedom" (Davis 8), Hurston links her character's geographical mobility with her freedom to reconstruct and reclaim women's inner desire and sexuality.

The protagonist of "How It Feels to Be Colored Me" is Zora, a fictionalized version of Hurston, who is born in the "little Negro town of Eatonville, Florida" (1030) and transfers to a school in Jacksonville, an inter-racial city. She spends her college years in Barnard, a white college in New York City. Zora's migration from Florida to New York, as well as her transition from a black-only town to an inter-racial city to a white-only university, is designed to reveal that her racial identity is differently constructed as she migrates. Just as Zora explains, "I remember the very day that I became colored"; it is not until she arrives at the inter-racial city of Jacksonville that she recognizes her racial identity as an African American (1030). When she enters the white college, she says that "I feel most colored" being "thrown against a sharp white background" (1031). By showing how Zora is differently "colored" in different geographical locales, the essay reveals that racial identity is not a biological essence but a social construct.

The jazz scene also reveals the constructed nature of racial and sexual identity. In "The New World Cabaret," where Zora visits with her white friend, she is immersed in the jazz music:

This orchestra grows rambunctious, rears on its hind legs and attacks the tonal veil with primitive fury, rending it, clawing it until it breaks

through the jungle beyond. I follow those heathen—follow them exultingly. I dance wildly inside myself; I yell within, I whoop; I shake my assegai above my head, I hurl it true to the mark yeeeooww! I am in the jungle and living in the jungle way. My face is painted red and yellow and my body is painted blue. My pulse is throbbing like a war drum. I want to slaughter something—give pain, give death to what, I do not know. But the piece ends. The men of the orchestra wipe their lips and rest their fingers. I creep back slowly to the veneer we call civilization with the last tone and find the white friend sitting motionless in his seat, smoking calmly. (1032)

As many have argued, in the above scene, Hurston's language is filled with primitive and atavistic imageries. Jazz and its uncivilized blackness are contrasted with the whiteness of the "veneer we call civilization." Moreover, Zora's heathen dance and yell evoke the stereotype of black women's rampant sexuality. With all these descriptions, Hurston's jazz scene seems to replicate the negative "Old Negro" stereotypes ascribed to African American people from slavery.

As Barbara Johnson suggests, however, one can also argue that, in her writing, Hurston intentionally staged and performed the primitivism that her white readership expected. To prove this, Johnson focuses on the passage, "My face is painted red and yellow and my body is painted blue," claiming that the "colors that come in the passage are skin paint, not skin complexion: red, yellow, blue, and purple," and this indicates that "the move into the jungle is a move into mask; the return to civilization is a return to veneer. Either way, what is at stake is an artificial, ornamental surface" (283). Following Johnson's argument, here again, the essay emphasizes that one's racial identity is an artificial construct rather than biological essence.

The same thing applies to the portrayal of Zora's sexuality. As we have seen, Zora's atavistic performance recalls the stereotypes of black women's uncivilized sexuality. At the same time, however, her performance works to disclose the strategically staged and performed aspects of these stereotypes. In other words, the images of black women's sexuality have been artificially constructed by others, but, just like racial stereotypes, these images can be modified and redefined not by others but by Zora herself. In this line of reading, the phrase "I want to slaughter something" can be interpreted as a declaration to bring death to the conventional black woman's stereotype. Another phrase, "I am in the jungle and living in the

jungle way,” highlights the necessity of transcending the narrow social definition of race and gender and living with the possibility of reclaiming one’s identity as freely as possible. Here, the “jungle” no longer indicates an objectification of women’s body; rather it signifies an alternative site where black women’s sexuality is reconstructed and reclaimed. In fact, after this jazz scene, Zora mentions that the “cosmic Zora emerges. I belong to no race nor time. I am the eternal feminine with its string of beads” (1032). The “cosmic” self that is defined as neither “race nor time” alludes to a new form of self-identification that is released from the history of racist and sexist discourses imposed by others.

Larsen’s migration narrative critically reveals the sexual objectification of migrating women from a middle-class perspective, and Hurston’s work attempts to reconstruct and reclaim women’s sexuality from a blues feminist perspective. Although Larsen and Hurston seem to offer different options for dealing with women’s objectification in the scenes of jazz, their works similarly problematize the highly gendered nature of mobility and jazz, providing the framework for developing their black feminist aesthetics.

CONCLUSION

Through the comparative analysis of literary and sociological works, which simultaneously explore the themes of migration and blues/jazz, in this essay I have mapped three competing aesthetic discourses of the Harlem Renaissance. In these works, migration and blues/jazz constitute a symbolic site that expresses the idea of racial uplift (Locke’s narrative of “ascent”), the living reality of “low-down” migrants (Brown’s and Hughes’s narrative of “immersion” and “descent”), and black feminist sensibility (Larsen’s and Hurston’s feminist interpretations of migration narratives). As a conclusion, I would add that these three aesthetic discourses are not always clearly distinguishable, since, sometimes, these different views overlap and coexist with one another even in a single work.

From a broader historical perspective, these competing modes of aesthetic discourse were passed on to the later migration narratives that incorporated blues/jazz. To name a few, Ann Petry’s *The Street* (1946), Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952), James Baldwin’s “Sonny’s Blues” (1957), Ishmael Reed’s *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972), and Toni Morrison’s *Jazz* (1992). Of course, to grasp the whole genealogy of the interaction of the genres of migration narrative and blues/jazz literature is beyond the scope

of this essay. However, as part of my larger research project related to constructing the historiography of migration and blues/jazz narratives, this effort to map the diversity of the aesthetic positions of the 1920s serves as a necessary first step. It was during this crucial era that both the Great Migration and jazz (as popular music) were initiated and reached one of their peaks.

NOTES

¹ For a discussion of black Atlantic and diaspora literature, see Gilroy and Birdsong and Nwankwo.

² For a discussion of migration narratives, see Stepto, Griffin, Rodgers, Smethurst, and Scruggs. For a discussion of blues/jazz literature, see Anderson, Baker, Carby, Grandt, Jimoh, Lowney, Pavlić, Vogel, and Werner.

³ *The New Negro* includes both migration narratives and sociological studies on migration: Rudolph Fisher's "The City of Refuge" and "Vestige" and Jean Toomer's vignettes "Carma" and "Fern" foreground the theme of migration. Charles S. Johnson's "The New Frontage of American Life" and James Weldon Johnson's "Harlem: The Cultural Capital" include sociological analysis of the Great Migration.

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