“Where’re you bound?”
Migration in Search of Home and Identity
in *Home to Harlem, Quicksand, and Their Eyes Were Watching God*

by
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To the loving memory of

Svein Gardsjord

1914-2004

~

Margareth Heide Solheim

1919-2004

~

Ola Gjul

1919-2005
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- Tone
Rosendal, April 2005
Introduction

“Ago, better than stand still, keep going.”

African American history is one of families and homes being torn apart, of dislocation, and of alienation. Ever since the first African slaves were transported across the Atlantic to the American east coast in the early sixteenth century, movement and migration has been an essential component of African American life. Forced into the institution of slavery, migration continued to characterise the African American reality as domestic slave trade became the extension of an already intolerable, rootless existence. In addition, repeated efforts by slaves to regain their freedom by fleeing northwards or to different areas of the South also produced some migration. The fact that some runaway slaves actually succeeded in their quest for freedom, created hopes of salvation in the enslaved majority of African Americans remaining in the South. Consequently, the excruciating adversities they were forced to endure when crossing the Middle Passage, and later as an enslaved people in a strange country, have indeed influenced the development of African American culture and identity.

James Grossman observes that “[s]laves suffered both restrictions on their freedom of movement and coerced migration within the South, and many blacks came to regard the ability to move as . . . ‘the most psychologically dramatic of all manifestations of freedom’” (qtd. in Scruggs 17). Thus, movement and travelling has become perhaps the most essential theme in African American culture. First, the theme of migration occurred in the numerous

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1 Claude McKay on leaving America in 1922 (qtd. in Watson 39).
2 Johnson and Campbell write that it “has become customary to date the beginning of traffic in Africans to the year 1502. In that year the first references to blacks appear in the documents of Spanish colonial administrators. . . It is believed that the first African slaves to arrive on what is now the Unites States mainland were brought by Lucan Vasquez de Ayllon in 1526” (7).
Negro Spirituals, work songs, and folk stories produced in order to keep hope alive in the enslaved African American population waiting for the regaining of their long lost freedom. Later most all African American cultural expressions such as the blues, jazz, literature, and painting have been influenced by the theme of migration. Closely connected to African American migration and consequently also dislocation and alienation, is the quest for selfhood and identity. This theme also recurs in a variety of African American cultural expressions, and it is the manifestation of an attempt to come to terms with their communal displacement. This quest was enabled by the freedom of movement which African Americans gained after the Emancipation.

After the Civil War and the emancipation of slaves, an immediate problem occurred throughout the South, namely the disposition of the many landless and moneyless freed African Americans. Furthermore, “[r]econstruction failed to bring about any significant changes in their basic civil, social, or economic status” (Johnson and Campbell 49). This did not, however, lead to a mass migration northward as many had expected. Conversely, the majority of those who migrated moved to the southern urban centres. Nevertheless, during the last decades of the nineteenth century African American migration continued in small waves or streams of movement. Some migrated within the South, others headed north. Northwards migration increased after the turn of the century and reached its peak as World War I seriously altered the job market around 1916. As the War led to great labour demands at factories in the big industrial cities, African American migration northwards accelerated and by 1920 nearly one million African Americans had left the South. The high migration numbers continued throughout the 1920s, as post-war prosperity encouraged more African Americans to leave families and the South behind in search of a promised land in the North. The period from around 1916 to 1930 is often referred to as the Great Migration.
In most ways the Great Migration resembles previous streams of movement north, and may thus be seen as a continuation of earlier migrations. However, the enormous increase in numbers is what makes this period stand out in history as a phenomenon of major importance. As a consequence of the dramatically increased migration rates, African American demographic patterns were seriously altered. According to Johnson and Campbell the African American population was by 1920 10.4 million, which equalled 10 percent of the total American population. Furthermore, they assert that in this period “the black urban population increased 46 percent” (77). The growing numbers of African American rural migrants soon became part of the urban population and the urban culture. Interestingly, however, not only did the city and its rapidly developing mass culture influence and change the African American migrants, they would also contribute largely to the making of that culture.

The massive influx of African American migrants to the northern cities created the foundation for an African American urban culture. An African American urban middle class saw the light of day, and an African American urban working class emerged, giving birth to significant cultural features such as jazz and the urban blues. In the middle of this growth, the Harlem Renaissance surfaced. Charles Scruggs points out that “[the Great Migration] was a phenomenon unlike any other migratory movement in American history. . . . Inevitably it became the central fact in Afro-American literature after World War I: that migration was the important circumstance behind The New Negro and the writing referred to as the Harlem Renaissance” (14). It is necessary to view the Harlem Renaissance in relation to its historical setting and backdrop in order to fully appreciate its uniqueness. Although New York was just one of the northern cities which received a flow of migrants during the Great Migration, the vibrant culture which emerged in Harlem stands out as something incomparable, both in magnitude and in appearance.
Whereas the open and flourishing urban culture was essential to the survival of the newly arrived migrants, that culture also represented possible dangers and difficulties. This duality is one of the cornerstones in Scruggs work *Sweet Home: Invisible Cities in the Afro-American Novel* (1993). The phrase “invisible cities” is a comment on the lurking dangers of urbanity, and “refers to aspects of urban life which are both ‘there’ and ‘not there’” (3). It is evident, then, that the northern cities were not always the “safe havens” they were made out to be, contrary to the belief held by most African Americans in the South. Their dreamlike images of the North were not groundless, however. The many blues lyrics portraying the North as a place of salvation and opportunity represent only one type of the numerous descriptions presented to the southern African American population. In her “Northbound Blues,” Maggie Jones typically proclaims to be going north “[w]here there ain’t no hardships like in Tennessee” (Barlow 146).

Nonetheless, city life was hard. Migrants often ended up alone and moneyless, struggling to survive. Living conditions were poor and working conditions hard. Hence, the pursuit of communal safety similar to what they had known within the African American communities in the South was urgent. In the city, however, this community feeling was to be found in other arenas than it traditionally was. Firstly, family structures were different. Many had left their families behind and now needed to pursue safety outside the boundaries of the family and the home. Despite the fact that families sometimes moved together and at times, even whole communities, family ties and community bonds were put to serious tests and challenges. What the migrants found in the city was “what other alien urban immigrants have always found: poverty, loneliness, disconnection, a confusion of sights and sounds, a new intensity of both economic and social pressure” (Scruggs 18). Secondly, living conditions were also a part of the new structure. People rented rooms in apartments they had to share
with a number of different people they hardly knew, thus the meaning of home was turned upside down.

Nightlife, juke joints, cabarets, speakeasies and rent parties were all vital parts of the new urban culture. These features became for migrants a substitute for what the old rural community once represented, and in order to overcome the initial disappointment and loneliness the big city imposed on them, participation was crucial. Yet, the city could remain an intricate labyrinth and a hostile place to many. The relationship between migrants and their new home is thus best described as an ambiguous one, representing both freedom and restriction.

Farah Jasmine Griffin has in “Who Set You Flowin’?: The African-American Migration Narrative (1995) thoroughly examined the representation of migration across a wide range of genres in African American culture. In her study, she systematises the phenomenon of migration in different African American cultural expressions, and on the basis of that she manages to create a generalisation which typically describes what she refers to as the African American migration narrative. Griffin establishes that “the migration narrative emerges as one of the twentieth century’s dominant forms of African-American cultural production” (3). In this thesis migration will be the common denominator. And in addressing Claude McKay’s Home to Harlem (1928), Nella Larsen’s Quicksand (1928), and Zora Neale Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937) from a migratory perspective, Griffin’s definition of the term “migration narrative” will form the basis of my discussions.

The migration narrative generally portrays a movement from the South to the North. According to this pattern Griffin identifies four pivotal moments which characterise the presentation of migration in African American art. Still “[the] narratives are as diverse as the people and the times that create them” (Griffin 4), and that is illustrated by the fact that not all of the characteristics need to be present in a text in order to make it a migration narrative.
Moreover, even though Griffin presents the moments in chronological order, they may occur in any given order within the narrative. In moving the action from the South to the North this conventionally also includes a shift from a rural setting to a distinctly more urban one. Hence, the narratives frequently express an exploration of urbanism and modern urban power. In the literary migration narrative the movement may be presented through a main character. Alternatively, the text itself may “move” north without connection to a specific character, as in Jean Toomer’s *Cane* where the movement is linked only to the construction of the text and not to its characters. In Toomer’s narrative the first and the last sections are set in the South, whereas the middle section is set in the urban North.

The first characteristic of the migration narrative is that starting in a rural, southern setting it generally offers a catalysing factor which spurs the action northwards. There are a number of different reasons for leaving the South. While some writers stress the depressed economical situation in the South, others emphasise the psychological and physical oppression inflicted on African Americans through lynching, beating, and rape. The majority of writers, however, share that they all present the South as a site of terror and oppression. Griffin further points out that the South plays an additional role in several African American migration narratives, namely as the site of “the ancestor” (5). Griffin has borrowed the term “ancestor” from Toni Morrison who writes that “these ancestors are . . . sort of timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive, and protective, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom” (343). Morrison asserts further that “whether the novel [takes] place in the city or in the country, the presence or absence of [the ancestor] [determines] the success or the happiness of the character” (343).

After having left the South, the next central moment is the migrant’s initial encounter with the urban landscape. In most cases this confrontation is portrayed as hard and lonesome. The third moment Griffin identifies is that the migration narrative portrays how the migrant,
once situated in the city, navigates his or her way through the urban landscape. Feelings of dislocation and alienation, as well as material and spiritual impoverishment are recurring themes. Scruggs also discusses the relationship between the urban culture and the rural migrants and how this is portrayed in African American literature in *Sweet Home*. Both Griffin and Scruggs stress the adversities which most migrants experienced when arriving in the city. In order to survive those adversities, some migrants are able to construct “safe spaces” where they are able to avoid or hide from the most devastating effects of urban life.

Patricia Hill Collins first employed the term “safe spaces” as a definition of “places where women ‘speak freely’ and where domination does not exist as ‘hegemonic ideology’” (Griffin 9). According to Collins “such sites ‘house a culture of resistance’” (Griffin 9). Griffin argues, however, that hegemonic ideology may well exist in spaces of resistance. She continues to argue that safe spaces have a conservative function of preservation, more than primarily of resistance. Griffin does not believe that sustenance and preservation are in themselves acts of resistance, but rather that they are “necessary components of resistance” (9). In migration narratives safe spaces are, according to Griffin, available both to female and male characters, and

> [a]t their most progressive, they are spaces of retreat, healing, and resistance; at their most reactionary, they are potentially provincial spaces which do not encourage resistance but instead help to create complacent subjects whose only aim is to exist within the confines of power that oppress them. In many instances these spaces contain both possibilities. In some cases safe spaces are sites where the South is invoked – not just in its horror, terror, and exploitation, but as a place that housed the values and memories that sustained black people. The South emerges as the home of the ancestor, the place where community and history are valued over Northern individualism. . . . Literal safe spaces in the city are places where rituals can be enacted to invoke the presence of the ancestor in the North. (Griffin 9)

Consequently both the presence of an ancestor and the construction of safe spaces are crucial for the migrant in order to succeed in the hostile environment of the northern city.

The final element of the African American migration narrative as Griffin presents it is “a consideration of the sophisticated modern urban power, an evaluation of the consequences
of migration and urbanization, and a vision of future possibilities” (10). The final resolution to
the migration narrative is as diverse as the genre itself. In some cases the migrant is able to
overcome the adversities of migranthood. Then again, continued migration and restlessness is
an inevitable outcome in other cases. Finally, some characters turn to countermigration. For
some the hope of cultural redemption is kept alive and may even be realised, while for others
their complex search for identity, belonging, and an existence free of oppression and
restrictions results in hopelessness and despair.

Countermigration implies return migration to the site which the migrant initially left
behind, and represents a reversed migratory pattern which is important in the discussion of the
African American migration narrative. Closely connected to countermigration is the narrative
form which Robert B. Stepto characterises as the immersion narrative. In *From Behind the
Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative* (1979), Stepto identifies two major narrative
patterns in African American literature which he respectively refers to as the ascent narrative
and the immersion narrative. The ascent narrative typically portrays movement to the North,
either physically or symbolically. Oppositely, the immersion narrative describes a journey to
the South, also here either physically or symbolically. I will return more thoroughly to
Stepto’s discussion of the ascent versus the immersion narrative in my treatment of Hurston’s
*Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Also in Larsen’s *Quicksand* the South is presented as the
protagonist’s end stop, but the pictures Hurston and Larsen paint of the South are completely
different. However, Larsen additionally portrays another alternative pattern of migration
which McKay also employs in *Home to Harlem*. In both novels Europe is presented as a
possible destination for the African American migrant, thus another final vision of the
migration narrative is offered.

Also discussing the Great Migration and African American literature, Lawrence R.
Rodgers argues convincingly in *Canaan Bound: The African-American Great Migration*
Novel (1997) that “the process of migration is indelibly tied into the broader quest for identity” (4). To a certain extent I agree with Rodgers. However, the ambiguity of this statement must not be ignored. First of all, there have been different push and pull factors throughout history leading to African American migration, as I have illustrated. Moreover, the tragic part of African American migration history is that the predominant form has been forced or impelled migration. This implies that the persons who move or are moved from one area to another have no or very little choice as to whether they should migrate or not. Now, as for the quest for identity, the journey in itself may become a means in the search for belonging and self. More importantly, however, is the fact that repeated movement may precisely be where the loss of identity and alienation originates. Consequently, this will be what necessitates a search for either a new identity or the retrieval of an old one, or even more likely, the combination of both according to Stuart Hall’s definition of identity.

Hall’s definition of identity is constructed in relation to postcolonial studies and the postcolonial experience. In it he includes the concepts of change and difference. As the African American identity problem resemble the postcolonial one in several respects, Hall’s discussion of identity is also relevant to my discussion. He argues that cultural identity is “a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’. . . . Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation” (Hall 112). The African American experience is inevitably part of the colonial and ensuing postcolonial experience, at least to a certain extent. Similar to central themes within African American studies, the “key elements in colonial and postcolonial discourse and criticism have always been questions of belonging, of identity, of expressing, and explaining and analysing contemporary and earlier attitudes to peoples and cultures including our own” (Lothe et al 10). The key element in my discussion will in addition to migration, most definitively be questions of belonging and identity.
Rodgers’s presentation of the African American Great Migration novel shares similarities with Griffin’s migration narrative. However, his analysis restricts itself only to literature which relates in some way or another to the Great Migration and not so much migration as a phenomenon in African American history. Now Griffin’s study also evolves around the Great Migration, yet she identifies a pattern of migration which is more general than Rodgers’s. Nevertheless, Rodgers’s work must not be ignored as it is both interesting and relevant. I believe, however, that through my discussions I will at times reach different conclusions than Rodgers does. This is not necessarily because I find his conclusions incorrect, but because his perspective is somewhat different from mine. I am interested in migration as a phenomenon in African American history, and then particularly in African Americans’ psychological reactions to their history of migration. Hopefully, I will manage to illustrate this in my thesis by comparing and contrasting *Home to Harlem*, *Quicksand*, and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

My interest in the African American migration narrative derives from studies of the Harlem Renaissance writers of the 1920s. Claude McKay, Nella Larsen and Zora Neale Hurston were all prominent members of the Harlem intelligentsia of the period. Additionally, they were all migrants themselves, and have in different ways included and presented multiple issues concerning migration in their works. They were not alone in doing so, and one may argue that I ought to have included several more of the Harlem Renaissance writers in this thesis. That might have illustrated how diverse the Renaissance writers were in their presentation of the theme. Yet, my belief is that my choice of primary texts is representative of this pluralism. In addition, I am able to take into account questions of class, gender, sexuality, and race as each novel represents a different social scene. Consequently, as the migration narrative is a phenomenon which is present in all social strata, and which may appear in a number of forms even within literature, my selection of texts should illustrate this.
Claude McKay’s *Home to Harlem* and Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand* may appear at first sight to have a lot more in common with each other than either text has with Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. And in many ways they do. Not only is Hurston’s novel written a decade later than the other two, it is also set in an all-black South, and the movement which takes place only carries the protagonist, Janie, further into the Deep South. Both *Home to Harlem* and *Quicksand*, on the other hand, address traditional issues of the migration narrative such as exploration of urbanity and urban alienation. Still, both novels are far from conventional migration narrative, something which makes them all the more interesting.

In *Home to Harlem* McKay has portrayed a male dominated lower class Harlem society. Helga Crane, the protagonist in *Quicksand*, is a middle class woman, if not economically then certainly attitudinally. The clean and conventional Harlem Larsen describes is hardly recognisable when compared to the living, vivid, and yet at times filthy and seamy picture we meet in McKay’s novel. Furthermore, the protagonists in the two novels have different backgrounds. Jake Brown is as far as we know a migrant from the South and comes from an all-black family and thus represents the traditional African American migrant. Helga Crane, on the other hand, is of mixed racial parentage. The only child of an African American father and a white mother of Danish descent, she suffers greater and more agonizing identity problems than any of the other characters we encounter in these three novels. Nonetheless, she is a migrant just as are Jake, Ray, the other main character in McKay’s novel, and Hurston’s Janie. Consequently, my ambition is to justify why I find that these three novels may be categorized as migration narratives. In doing so I will, however contradictory it may seem, focus on how it is the seeming differences between these novels which ultimately make them related. Hence, hidden similarities will hopefully be revealed.
In relation to the study of African American migration and literature, the sociologist Victor Turner’s study on *liminality* and *communitas* is highly relevant. Originally studied in relation to religious or cultural transition rites, first named “rites de passage” by Arnold van Gennep, liminality and communitas characterise the second of three transitional phases. Van Gennep’s initial focus was restricted to ritual behaviour. However, Turner later discovered that van Gennep’s tripartite division of symbolic movement may also apply to other non-ritual, non-religious processes. Hence, social changes and processes of significant symbolic meaning may be discussed in the light of this paradigm.

In the first phase of transitional rites the *initiand* is separated from its normal social setting through specific symbolic or ritual behaviour which signifies the detachment. The initiand then enters the liminal period, the second phase, which is a symbolic domain holding few or none of the attributes or characteristics of the normal social structure known to the initiand. It is at this stage communitas, which may be characterised as an extraordinary community feeling, emerges. Finally, as the initiand has passed the transitional passage he is ready to re-enter the social structure, now with a new status. Turner’s field of interest was predominantly the liminal phase, and it is this concept which is relevant to the discussion of migrants, migration narratives, and the Harlem Renaissance – both the writers and their products. The Harlem Renaissance literature was produced in a time of great social change by “a group of people, socially as well as spatially marginalized in society” (Lenz 312). Both as migrants and as participants in the Harlem Renaissance, the African American writers in the 1920s may be said to have held a liminal or marginal position in society. Hence, coinciding with the search for community and identity was an additional longing or search for communitas.

The two terms *structure* and *anti-structure*, which form the basis of Turner’s study and it is crucial to distinguish between them. In all societies there is a contrast between “the notion
of society as a differentiated, segmented system of structural positions, and society as a homogeneous, undifferentiated whole” (Turner 297). The first model is what Turner refers to as “social structure” where the units in society are divided into statuses and roles, and the “individual is segmentalized into roles which he plays” (237). The second model is anti-structure. The liminal phase is anti-structural, and in liminality everyone are free and equal, a situation which enables the emergence of communitas:

In liminality, communitas tends to characterize relationships between those jointly undergoing ritual transition. The bonds of communitas are anti-structural in the sense that they are undifferentiated, equalitarian, direct, extant, nonrational, existential . . . relationships. Communitas is spontaneous, immediate, concrete – it is not shaped by norms, it is not institutionalized, it is not abstract. Communitas differs from the camaraderie found often in everyday life, which, though informal and egalitarian, still falls within the general domain of structure, which may include interaction rituals. . . . Structure, or all that which holds people apart, defines their differences, and constraints their actions, is one pole in a charged field, for which the opposite pole is communitas or anti-structure. . . (Turner 274)

Society in general represents what Turner calls structure; it is a structured society. Class, gender, race, sexuality, and other social denominators divide and categorize everyone in society. Once entering a liminal phase, where communitas is possible, those divisions are no longer relevant or valid. In the industrialised, urbanised, and secularised society which has emerged and developed since the industrial revolution, liminality manifests itself more metaphorically. Turner calls these phenomena liminoid, meaning liminal-like, processes. In Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society (1974), Turner separates between three different but related terms concerning cultural aspects “well endowed with ritual symbol and beliefs of non-social-structural type” (231), respectively liminality, outsiderhood, and structural inferiority. Also, there is in his discussion a fourth term, resembling outsiderhood, namely that of marginality. Liminality is an ambiguous state; one is neither here nor there, it is a place and state in and out of time, betwixt-and-between. Those who are in a liminal state are stripped of outward attributes of structural position, thus they are in a state of equality regardless of their social status prior to entering the liminal phase.
Outsiderhood, as opposed to liminality, denotes “a condition of being either permanently and by ascription set outside the structural arrangements of a given social system, or being situationally or temporarily set apart, or voluntarily setting oneself apart from the behavior of status-occupying, role-playing members of that system” (Turner 233). Marginals share characteristics with outsiders, only that they are simultaneously members . . . of two or more groups whose social definitions and cultural norms are distinct from, and often even opposed to, one another. . . . These would include migrant foreigners, second generation Americans, persons of mixed ethnic origin . . . migrants from country to city, and women in a changed, nontraditional role. What is interesting about such marginals is that they often look to their group of origin, the so-called inferior group, for communitas, and to the more prestigious group in which they mainly live and in which they aspire to higher their status as their structural reference group. . . . Marginals like liminars are also betwixt and between, but unlike ritual liminars they have no cultural assurance of a final stable resolution of their ambiguity. (Turner 233)

Turner’s discussion of marginality is not only in relation to the migration narrative in general, but to the different, yet somehow similar, situations the main characters in my three selected novels are in.

Finally, structural inferiority may be a permanent or a transient matter like liminality and outsiderhood, and refers to those at the bottom of a social structure without status qualifications or characteristics. Above all, this is relevant in caste or rigid class systems where we have the problem of the lowest status, the outcast, and the poor who are often despised and rejected (Turner 234). Thus it is evident that structural inferiority corresponds to the situation of African Americans in the American society. Both during slavery and for decades following the Emancipation, African Americans were forced into a situation of structural inferiority. Until the Civil Rights era in the 1960s, legal segregation through so-called Jim Crow legislation continued to restrict African Americans’ existence in America.

The relationship between Turner’s study and African American migration, the Harlem Renaissance, the migration narrative, and the quest for identity and belonging is a complex one. Nevertheless, my aspiration is to clarify this relationship by systematising the different
ways in which these aspects and phenomena correlate. Ultimately, however, it is all intertwined. To begin with, the Harlem Renaissance may be considered to be a manifestation of communitas. The African American inhabitants in Harlem were no longer enslaved or oppressed by southern plantation owners, they were no longer living under the fear of being lynched or violently harassed by the racist southern population. On the other hand, they were not a part of the dominant white urban society in the North either. Hence, the creation of a black community and a black culture separate from the white was inevitable given the historical and social conditions at the time.

When a white landlord in the early 1900s turned to African American tenants to let rooms whites did not want due to the “combination of a national depression, overbuilding in Harlem, and a murder within the apartment house” (Watson 11), Harlem rapidly turned into what was to be known as the “black belt.” In no more than a decade Harlem was transformed from “a bourgeois German-style enclave to [a] multicultural haven for Southerners, West Indians, and African blacks” (Watson 11). As a consequence Harlem became a city within the bigger city, a parallel universe where African Americans were, at least to a certain degree, free from white supremacy. The vibrant culture which surfaced in Harlem was unprecedented in the history of African Americans. The majority of the African American population in the “black belt” were not yet fully initiated in the urban society and may be said to have held a liminal, or liminoid position. Thus what they experienced as members of this culture in a community, which one may refer to as a liminal place, could be characterised as communitas. However, there are certain conditions which deviate from the definitions of liminality and communitas which need to be taken into consideration.

First of all, despite the fact that the majority of Harlem dwellers in the 1920s were rural migrants, a part of the black population was living in the city prior to the Great Migration. Those were unquestionably better equipped for survival in the urban labyrinth.
Hence, the newly arrived migrants were, and probably felt like outsiders also in the black urban milieu. In relation to Turner’s discussion of outsiders, then, the migrants may be said to have been set outside, not only the structural arrangements of the white American society like all African Americans, but also the internal social structure of Harlem. By this I do not primarily mean that they were not accepted by the urban community. Rather, I am thinking of internal problems of identity and belonging, as the city culture initially represented the unfamiliar, something they could not properly relate to. Thus alienation and outsiderhood became a problem for many. For the lucky ones the state of outsiderhood was a temporary situation, while for others less fortunate, it remained permanent.

According to Scruggs African Americans were “always outsiders by virtue of their race” (3). Through segregation, racism, and racial prejudice, they were set outside the social structure in the entire country, though less aggressively and with less violent measures in the North than in the South. In a macro-perspective, then, African American communities in general, and Harlem in particular, may be characterised as anti-structure in Turner’s words. At a micro-level, on the other hand, the African American community represented its own structure. Particularly so in Harlem where intellectuals, middle-class, and working class blacks lived side by side in a very small and densely populated area. Migrants not yet completely incorporated in this structure thus represented a local anti-structure.

In relation to the African American experience and to the selection of novels which I am going to analyse, it is possible to construct five dichotomies based on Turner’s discussion of marginality. Two dichotomies, which both relate to the Great Migration, are respectively the relationships between the rural and the urban, and between the North and the South. Both have already received some attention, and they do to a certain degree concern the same matter. Accordingly, I do not find it necessary to distinguish between the two unless it is important to the point I am making. However, there is one comment yet to be made
concerning this issue. In McKay’s *Home to Harlem*, a corresponding dichotomy to that of south-north is introduced, namely between Haiti, or the West Indies, and America. This dichotomy explores mostly the same issues as the traditional pairing of the South versus the North. Ray is a Haitian migrant in Harlem, and it is actually through him that the most traditional reactions to migration are portrayed.

Helga Crane’s mixed racial background enables the construction of a third dichotomy related to marginality. Helga is caught in-between two worlds, as she is neither black nor white. She is not fully accepted in either world, if she lets her secret out in the open. Her white uncle in Chicago used to accept her. However, when she later returns to him for aid she finds him remarried and influenced by his racist wife’s attitudes, and thus without the ability or determination to let anyone see his relation to her. To mend his bad conscience, he later sends her money and a letter with a sorry excuse. What is more, in Harlem Helga deliberately avoids mentioning that her mother was white, as she was warned by her former employer Mrs. Hayes-Rore not to mention that her people were white: “Colored people won’t understand it, and after all it’s your business” (41). In Denmark the opposition between black and white remains an issue, although it manifests itself differently. In Copenhagen she becomes something of a mascot; she is exotic, different, and interesting. Helga Crane is aware of the fact that her black skin is an exotic feature which she may exploit to receive attention and popularity. Nevertheless, however exotic or out of the ordinary she might be, she remains in Denmark as in America a marginal figure, not part of any dominant group.

Helga Crane repeatedly searches for communitas in the African American communities. She looks to the white European society in order to achieve a higher status within a more prestigious structural reference group after a period of unsuccessful searching for communitas in Harlem. Helga is a highly self-conscious person, thus whether her sensation of being an outsider in Harlem was generated by attitudes in the African American
community or by her own self-consciousness, is difficult to establish clearly. Noticeably, she seems unreasonably critical of her fellow Harlem dwellers. Thus her own, inner identity conflict about where to belong seems to generate dissatisfaction just as much as, if not more than, the prejudices in the African American community against those of mixed racial background.

The fourth dichotomy of marginality, which is the one Janie in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* confronts, is that of the traditional woman versus the non-traditional woman. Janie is first forced into a traditional gender role pattern, but she eventually manages to break the pattern and acquires a voice and selfhood. In such a perspective, Janie’s journey may be said to be an internal one. Janie looks to the inferior group both for communitas and eventually also for social structure, strength, and status. However, the strength and status which she acquires on the Muck with Tea Cake is not viewed favourably by the more prestigious structural reference group in Eatonville from which she voluntarily has separated herself. Thus outsiderhood is a relevant term to employ in Janie’s situation as well.

I might add that at different stages of the novel, Janie is both a marginal, a liminal, and an outsider. Her marginality and her position as an outsider have already been mentioned. However, before meeting Tea Cake she was also an outsider, though not by her own will. She is set outside the community in Eatonville by her husband for the simple reason that she is the Mayor’s wife, and she should therefore not participate in such common activities. Furthermore, the Muck may be characterised as a liminal place and her social experience there definitely shares similarities to that of communitas. She undergoes change and ultimately initiates herself into the Eatonville community, with a new status as a liberated woman – something which would be admired by some and fiercely detested by others.

The fifth dichotomy of marginality is heterosexuality versus homosexuality which is primarily relevant to my treatment of *Home to Harlem*, corresponding to the theme of
migration in sexual space. This is a different angle of approach to migration which is irrelevant to the historical events of slave trade and later the Great Migration. It is not, however, irrelevant to the discussion of the literary migration narrative in a broader perspective. It is necessary, I find, to allow a broader approach to the theme of migration. Additionally, as I have decided to limit my investigation to novels written by members of the Harlem Renaissance, it seems inappropriate to exclude a theme which was addressed by several writers during this era. It functions as a subplot in McKay’s novel, and is eventually linked to migration, though of a different kind. Ultimately, my assumption is that there are significant parallels between the psychological reactions to physical migration and sexual migration.

Finally, a return to the starting point and the relevance of structural inferiority will serve to conclude this introduction to Turner’s study and its connection with African American studies. I briefly mentioned that African American communities such as Harlem may be characterised as parallel universes to the standard white American society, and they are consequently governed by a separate social structure. In Their Eyes Were Watching God an all-black Southern universe is portrayed, and its ultimate expression is Eatonville, which in reality was the first incorporated black town in America. In the South more than in any other part of the nation, African Americans were considered to be below the white social structure. Consequently, their communities represented anti-structure compared to the white norm. African American communities such as Harlem and Eatonville may be considered as manifestations of communitas. However, ignoring the white dominant community, these places represent their own social structure. Thus Helga, Janie, and Ray, and even Jake to a certain degree, are all representatives of anti-structure, either as liminals, outsiders, or marginals. Consequently, these terms and characteristics will recur throughout my thesis as they help both to explain these characters’ mental situations as African Americans,
Americans, and migrants, and their actual situations in the society offered by the world of the narrative.
Chapter I

“I got ramblin’ on my mind”: Searching for Home in Claude McKay’s *Home to Harlem*.

“Take me home to Harlem, Mister Ship! Take me home to the brown gals waiting for the brown boys that done show their mettle over there. Take me home, mister Ship. Put your beak right into the water and jest move along.” (McKay 9)

Claude McKay’s explicit and honest descriptions of the seamier sides of African American urban life in the early twentieth century makes *Home to Harlem* (1928) a part of what one often refer to as “the cult of the primitive.” Accordingly, this aspect of the novel has certainly been the more discussed issue, receiving both praise and harsh criticism. However, as it is Griffin’s discussion of the African American migration narrative which forms the basis for my treatment of the text, I will be exploring the novel from a different angle. Despite the wide and extensive selection of texts Griffin discusses in “Who set you flowin’?” , she has chosen not to include *Home to Harlem*. This aside, I am not the first to approach this novel from the perspective of migration.

In 1975 Robert Bone published *Down Home: A History of Afro-American Short Fiction from Its Beginnings to the End of the Harlem Renaissance*. In his investigation of the literature of the Harlem Renaissance, he argues that even though most of its literature is typically pastoral in its expression, initially there was a trend towards the picaresque. *Home to Harlem*, he writes, is typically an example of the picaresque mode. Originally, the picaresque novel was a Spanish phenomenon which appeared during the Renaissance. It was a new literary mode which, in reflecting the emergence of the Spanish bourgeoisie and their struggle
to emancipate themselves from the stasis of feudalism, particularly stressed mobility. Bone highlights that a literary form based on the theme of mobility was “singularly appropriate to the historical experience of black Americans, as they broke away from the confining racial customs of the feudal South and undertook their northern journey” (118). Bone further reminds us that in the African American struggle to overcome the barriers of the racist caste system in the American society, this form of expression was of particular relevance: “For caste imposes immobility upon its victims, freezing them in the social order by teaching them to ‘know their place’” (119). Subsequently he identifies the picaresque form as the initial expression of the African American literary elite following the Great Migration.

The essence of the picaresque novel is the journey which the so-called pícaro, picaroon, or questing hero, undertakes. This journey is ultimately a quest for experience and spiritual freedom. Hence the pícaro is typically an adventurer. Through the course of the journey the protagonist manages to reclaim the possibility of experience, which in the closed and rigid society he left was not an alternative. In being typically an orphan or an illegitimate child, the questing hero “is cut off from the past and tradition; there is no ancestral fortune to sustain him; he is entirely on his own, and must survive as best he can” (119). Consequently, “[s]elf-reliance is the central virtue of the pícaro” (119). The pícaro certainly shares important characteristics with the typical African American migrant in literature. Only, the conventional migrant is not first and foremost an adventurer; rather it is a person who struggles to survive and to create a new home as he or she has left home and family behind.

It has been mentioned that majority of the members of the Harlem intelligentsia were themselves migrants, yet none of them can be said to represent the common African American migrant. Representing a small elite which during the twenties were better off than the majority of African American city dwellers, Bone may be right in arguing that “[t]he authors of the Harlem Renaissance were adventurers, breaking with the fixity of things” (119). They were in
an advantageous situation which allowed them to be adventurers and explorers, and that is visible through their writings. Similarly, Jake, the protagonist in McKay’s *Home to Harlem*, is both a migrant and an adventurer and thus shares characteristics with the traditional picaro. Moreover, the picaresque novel and the African American migration narrative have several features in common. The African American migration narrative is an alternative approach to migration compared to the picaresque reading Bone advocates. My belief is that it embraces and describes a wider range of issues distinctly more African American than those originally offered by the picaresque novel.

Migration is visible both through the geographical structure of *Home to Harlem*’s setting, and through its different characters. Through the course of the story, the geographical setting is in flux. As we are introduced to Jake, he is on a freighter on his way from Cardiff to New York. Prior to that he has been a soldier in France, and after deserting from the army he lives in London for a while. Then, however, he decides to return to New York and Harlem, and thus signs on as a stoker on a ship. Interestingly, then, at the start of novel Jake actually finds himself in a setting which is *in motion*. A similar in-motion-setting reappears when Jake is working on the Pennsylvania Railroad. We learn that “Jake had taken the job on the railroad just to break the hold that Harlem had upon him” (125). When Jake falls ill, this takes us back to Harlem again for the second time. And this remains the scene of action until the end of the novel, when Jake and Felice prepare to leave Harlem behind in order to give Chicago a try, as Felice has heard “it’s a mahvelous place foh niggers” (333).

Despite the extensive movement and change of geographical scenery found in the novel, it must be pointed out that in some ways *Home to Harlem* diverts from the traditional migration pattern of the African American migration narrative. The greatest difference is that there is no “south” which influences the cause of events in McKay’s novel. However, Jake
comes from Petersburg, Virginia, and a few times he refers to his sister back home. Once there is even a reference to his childhood and adolescence in the pastoral South:

He thought of the surging of desire in his boy’s body and of his curious pure nectarine beginnings, without pain, without disgust, down home in Virginia. Of his adolescent breaking-through when the fever-and-pain of passion gave him a wonderful strange-sweet taste of love that he had never known again. (280-81)

This is not, however, a location which plays a crucial part in the story, nor in the development of the characters as we follow them through the novel. In fact, the sequence above appears very late in the novel and thus acts more like a moment of nostalgia than a pivotal moment of self-realisation contributing to change Jake’s fate or character. Obviously, the South has played a part in making Jake who he his, shaping his existence prior to the act of migration. Moreover, it is where his family is, thus it probably has a sentimental influence on him still. Nonetheless, the South is not presented as a locus of fatal influence on Jake’s life in the period portrayed in the novel.

In addition to portraying the South as a place which significantly influences the further development of events, the traditional migration narrative in most cases also draws a negative portrait of the South. This negative image in turn conveys to the readers an understanding of the southern living conditions as a reason for leaving. In Home to Harlem, no reasons are given to explain why Jake left. Additionally, the occasional glimpses of his background which are given in the novel do not give us the impression of Jake’s South as a site of horror or depression. We know that the threat of violence towards the black communities exercised by the white oppressive society in the southern states were one of the chief reasons for migrating in the beginning of the twentieth century, as were poor working conditions and living standards. We may thus assume that these were at least contributing factors in Jake’s decision to migrate. Furthermore, the fact that the South is not even mentioned as a possible site for return must imply some kind of negative relationship between the protagonist and his former
home place. This becomes more evident when one considers how he without much ado travels from one place to the other and back again, but never travels back to the South.

As the South is not an obvious part of the text, it may be present through the presence of an ancestor which presents what Morrison refers to as timelessness. This timelessness embodies the spirit of the African American cultural heritage which is supposed to protect and instruct the alienated migrant. In *Home to Harlem* Felice’s lucky charm which her grandmother gave her when she was born, serves for her the function of the ancestor. Except for adding tension and excitement to the ending of the novel, however the charm does not contribute to the development or actions of the main characters, Jake and Ray. On the contrary, when Felice secretly runs off to find her charm, she not only jeopardizes her own well being, but she also risks losing Jake again. Indirectly, then, the charm is actually in danger of ruining Jake’s relationship to his long lost girl, instead of providing guidance. Hence I find Felice’s ancestor of little relevance to this particular analysis, although it clearly functions as one for her personally. The lack of ancestral figures in the narrative, in addition to the absence of other references to the South, implies that the South does not play an important role in the novel.

Focus on the migrant’s initial confrontation with the urban landscape typically characterises the migration narrative. Griffin notes that the “confrontation with the urban landscape – usually experienced as a change in time, space, and technology as well as a different concept of race relations – results in a profound change in the way that the mechanisms of power work in the city” (5). The “confrontation often shapes the fate of the South (embodied in the migrants themselves, the ancestor, and any retention of the South) in the city” (5). Even though Jake is a southern migrant, there are no references to his initial meeting with the modern urban city. Within the frame of the narrative Jake knows Harlem, he knows the urban labyrinth. That his first encounter with Harlem is not referred to may signify
that he easily managed to become a part of the modern culture and that the shift from southern
culture and power mechanisms to the northern one went rather smoothly. Jake, however, is a
character with an extraordinary personality. His is talkative, open, and adaptable. Moreover,
being an adventurer, new settings and new cultures appeal to him. Conventionally, however,
African American southern migrants would be more intimidated by the impersonality of the
northern city than Jake seems to have been.

The contrast between Ray’s vivid memories of his childhood in the pastoral Haiti and
his first hard winter in Harlem is more compatible with the picture Griffin paints of the
migrant’s harsh confrontation with urbanity. Thus, in *Home to Harlem* the southern migrant
may just as well be represented in Ray, although he is a Haitian immigrant. In a chapter which
stands apart from the rest of the narrative, Ray tells a story from when he first came to New
York. Although the theme of his story is not his own struggle to survive, we get the
impression life was hard when he first came to Harlem. Ray starts his story by saying that
“[i]t was in the winter of 1916 when I first came to New York to hunt for a job. I was broke. I
was afraid I would have to pawn my clothes, and it was dreadfully cold. I didn’t even know
the right way to go about looking for a job. I was always timid about that. For five weeks I
had not paid my rent” (245). Ray’s landlady manages to get him a job, and although he does
not earn much money, he manages to pay the rent. Nonetheless, life is still hard and merciless.
Ray never manages to settle in Harlem or appreciate its freedom like Jake does, thus the
hardships he first encounters seem to be symptomatic of his ensuing life in the “capital of the
New Negro.”

The third pivotal moment of the migration narrative, which questions how the migrant
navigates the urban landscape, is a central issue in McKay’s novel. Griffin identifies this as
the main theme within the migration narrative form, and Charles Scruggs follows Griffin in
saying that since the beginning of the twentieth century a major theme in African American
writing has been a coming to terms with the northern urban experience following the Great Migration. He points out that “[o]ften migrants, always outsiders by virtue of their race, they [the black city dwellers] may see the city as a labyrinth, a system of false leads, dead ends, pointless circling” (3). At one point Scruggs also says that for many urban African Americans at the bottom of society, “street life, alley life, and juke joints made the city bearable. . .” (23). Even though McKay shows the importance of this life in his characters in *Home to Harlem*, it is also portrayed as a contributory factor as to why Jake, and later Ray, are in need of a break from the city. This makes McKay’s description of African American city life more complex and interesting. McKay shows the ability to recognize the ambiguity many migrants felt towards their urban experience.

When discussing the migration narrative and the depiction of the migrant’s navigation of the urban landscape the concept of “safe spaces” is central. Safe spaces may be a number of things, but they have in common that they may function as migrant-controlled spaces. They may function as spaces where the urban power cannot suppress the migrant, as it does in other areas of everyday life. They take a variety of manifestations, such as oral tradition, music, church communities, dreams, and theatres. Dreams and thoughts which both Jake and Ray have, referring to their backgrounds, potentially function as safe spaces as they provide shelters from reality. In the Pittsburgh scene where Ray is unable to sleep, he tries unsuccessfully to invoke his memories of Haiti as a safe space in order to escape the dreadful sleeping quarters. His failure to find a safe space in turn leads him to take the opium in Jake’s pocket. The drugs thus appear as a symbol of the lurking dangers of the powers of modern urbanity, which Ray is ill equipped to handle. The episode results in an overdose and he is sent to hospital.

There are also physical places in the novel which may function as safe spaces. Firstly, Harlem functions in itself as a safe space for African Americans in that it provides them with
a place where they are seemingly in power. Hence it is a place where the rules of the
dominant white community do not restrict them as they do elsewhere in American society.
The numerous bars and restaurants in Harlem may through their names invoke memories of
back home, but for Jake in particular. Places such as Uncle Doc’s and Aunt Hattie’s provide
the new urban dwellers with a lifeline to their families and their cultural background. They are
places where only the happy memories of their past are present. Harlem, the city within the
city, thus becomes an alternative universe which constitutes what Victor Turner refers to as
anti-structure, where society is “a homogeneous, undifferentiated whole” (297). Safe spaces in
general resemble Turner’s anti-structure as they are spaces where “domination does not exist
as a ‘hegemonic ideology’” (Griffin 9). Patricia Hill Collins originally defined safe spaces as
spaces where hegemonic ideology did not exist so that black women could speak freely.
However, Griffin transfers the phenomenon of safe spaces to something which may exist for
African Americans as a shelter from the dominant and oppressive white society, or for
migrants as a shelter from the dominant urban culture. Thus the term also has significance
regardless of gender.

At different points both Jake and Ray migrate to Europe. This is an aspect of migration
which also exists in other African American migration narratives. According to Griffin, it
serves as a substitute for a possible return to the South. There are two different aspects of this
in Home to Harlem. Firstly, Jake went to Europe as a soldier to fight for the United States in
the First World War, thus he attempted to create or partake in an American national identity
crossing the colour line. The South, then, with its Jim Crow laws and its economic depression
was naturally not an attractive alternative for him. Instead Jake joined the army, trying to be
an American, in addition to an African American. As it turns out, the mask he puts on in order
to fit into an artificially created identity is not an abiding state of mind for Jake:

“Why did I ever enlist and come over here?” he asked himself. “Why did I want to
mix mahself up in a white folks’ war? It ain’t ever was any of us black folks’ affair.
Niggers am evah always such fools anyhow. Always thinking they’ve got something to do with white folks’ business.” (7-8)

Consequently Jake returns to New York and Harlem and “the brown gals waiting for the brown boys” (9).

The second aspect of Europe as an alternative to returning home is Ray’s decision to sign on a ship taking him first to Australia and then to Europe towards the end of the novel. Being a migrant from Haiti, the South would not be a place of return in any respect for Ray. Haiti, on the other hand, would for him play the role the South has in the traditional migration narratives. Still, a return to Haiti does not appear as a viable alternative, due to the situation on the island at the time. Furthermore, Ray took the job on the railroad just because he needed money as his family back home in Haiti could no longer support him economically. He could not be content in such a situation, as he is as “[a slave] of the civilized tradition. . . .” (263). Furthermore, “he was scared of that long red steel cage whose rumbling rollers were eternally heavy-lipped upon shining, continent-circling rods. If he forced himself to stay longer he would bang right off his head” (16). Just as the railroad becomes a setting where Ray does not feel comfortable, so does Harlem. Regardless of the brutality and vulgarity of Harlem that Ray cannot identify with, his feelings towards it are still ambiguous:

Going away from Harlem. . . . Harlem! How terribly Ray could hate it sometimes. It’s brutality, gang rowdyism, promiscuous thickness. Its hot desires. But, oh, the rich bloodred color of it! The warm accent of its composite voice, the fruitiness of its laughter, the trailing rhythm of its “blues” and the improvised surprises of its jazz. He had known happiness, too, in Harlem, joy that glowed gloriously upon him like the highnoon sunlight of his tropic island home. (267)

Obviously, like Jake, Ray also acclaims the glorious and unique sides of Harlem life, and it is obviously what attracts them both to this city in particular.

Harlem represents a place where they at times feel at home, yet they are alienated from the city as migrants. We see this most clearly in Ray’s character. Additionally, it appears as if Ray’s memories of home are more vivid and of greater importance to him than Jake’s
relationship to Petersburg, Virginia. That is at least one of the reasons why he has a harder
time coming to terms with urban working-class life than Jake does. The result for both turns
out to be that they decide to seek their luck in Europe. Whereas Jake’s attempt turned out
unsuccessfully, Ray’s quest has not yet reached a result. Whatever the outcomes of their
travels are, they symbolise a search for possible escape from their displacement.

In the oral tradition, and then reappearing in blues culture, the railroad typically
represents migration and freedom of movement. When the railroad was introduced to the
southern rural regions in the late nineteenth century, many African Americans were inspired
to explore new horizons and this is reflected in blues culture. Furthermore, many blues
musicians were known to be vagabonds, and their music “depict[s] the restless lifestyle of the
vagabonds who rode the rails and their boundless enthusiasm for the mobility it gave them”
(Barlow 64). Mobility and migration thus became a metaphor for personal freedom. It has
been pointed out that the significance of the railroad is different from male to female blues. In
female blues, the sound of the train whistle blowing invokes fright and sadness, as it
symbolises the loss of a lover, of family and the ensuing loneliness. In male blues, on the
contrary, the train is a symbol of escape, of the enabling of dreams, and of the journey
towards a better life in freedom (Carby 335).

Jake and Ray meet each other working on the railroad and so two restless souls find
company on a symbol of migration. Considering Ray’s partial discontent with life on the
railroad in relation to the difference of symbolic meaning in male and female blues, his
discontent implies a presence of femininity in his character. What is more, compared to the
meaning of the railroad in traditional blues, working there does not bring Jake or Ray to any
particular place at all. Instead they travel from place to place, and although they stay
overnight in different towns they always end up in Harlem, where they got on the train in the
first place. They do not migrate in the traditional sense, they roam around aimlessly in order
to escape Harlem and to earn money. Thus the traditional symbol of possibilities in the northbound blues has been transformed into a symbol of Jake and Ray’s shared restlessness. Symbolically the railroad also comes to represent segregation. The 1892 Supreme Court case of Plessy v. Ferguson established Jim Crow legislation legal according to the constitution. Plessy had been arrested and found guilty of violating state law after refusing to ride in a Jim Crow car on the train. Thus, the railroad which was “the principal conveyance for carrying generations of freedom-seeking migrants northwards was also, ironically, the country’s most potent symbol of their continued oppression” (Rodgers 45).

Another blues symbol which occurs in McKay’s novel is the ship. In blues, a ship on the sea is traditionally a symbol of the aimless drifting of a person who does not seem to belong anywhere in particular. At the beginning of *Home to Harlem*, we encounter Jake on a ship on his way to Harlem. At first he seems very determined, and Harlem appears to be his unquestionable home. As we get to know him, we learn that there is more to it than that. Later in the text, Ray also decides to sign on a ship, contradicting Jake’s advice. Hence, the ship appears as a symbol of the two friends’ constant drifting in search of identity. What normally triggers the blues singer into a drifting condition is the loss of a girlfriend and the loneliness which follows: “I’m driftin’ and driftin’, just like a ship out on the sea. / Well I ain’t got nobody in this world to care for me.”

Interestingly, then, just as the traditional meaning of the railroad symbol is transformed in connection to Ray, so is the ship. Instead of losing his girlfriend, Ray decides to leave on a ship in order to escape from Agatha, his girlfriend.

Even though both Jake and Ray at times feel alienated from their surroundings, Ray is the typical outsider of the two. Ray is not an American, not an African American, but a so-called monkey-chaser, a West Indian. He is also an intellectual in the midst of an uneducated community. Hence he experiences little understanding from his surroundings. He is a migratory subject struggling for power not just against a dominant white society, but also

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against the dominant black community in which he finds himself. Economically Ray is not middle class, but his intellect makes him perhaps better suited to the black intellectual middle class milieus portrayed in several other Harlem Renaissance works. Ray’s situation and his qualities make him resemble a character in some African American migration narratives which Griffin and others refer to as “the stranger” (7).

The German-Jewish sociologist Georg Simmel argues that in a European perspective the stranger is “a figure whose membership within a group involves being at once outside and within its boundaries” (Griffin 7). Simmel also argues, among other things, that the stranger is a cosmopolitan figure and that he brings qualities into the group that the members did not possess prior to his arrival. Griffin further explains that “[i]n relation to the dominant white society, all migrants are strangers – foreigners driven by persecution to wander in search of a new home. However, within the context of the African-American community, the stranger is that figure who possesses no connections to the community” (7). Apart from being a West Indian, and not a particularly cosmopolitan figure, the image McKay has drawn of Ray fits that of the stranger in many respects. Ray is an educated and enlightened man and he introduces Jake to some of his knowledge, hence he adds another quality into their friendship. Furthermore, Ray is simultaneously a member of, as well as not a member of, both the Harlem community and the railroad community.

The sociologist Robert Park employed Simmel’s “stranger” in his creation of the so-called marginal man. I will return more thoroughly to Park’s discussion of the marginal man in my treatment of Helga Crane in Nella Larsen’s Quicksand, but the fact that Ray also resembles the marginal man needs mentioning. The marginal man is a man on the margin of two cultures and two societies which never completely interpenetrate and fuse (Park 354). Like the stranger, the marginal man is typically a cosmopolitan figure. However, the major problem which separates the marginal man from the general immigrant is that the sense of
cultural and personal ambiguity tends to be a permanent matter. The marginal man lives “permanently in a state of transition in the big city, as though the act of migration that [brought] him or her there remained his existential condition” (Scruggs 53). Hence, the conflict of “‘the divided self,’ the old self and the new” (Park 355) is an irresolvable conflict disordering the marginal man’s mind, which eventually will become a part of his personality. Ray’s situation as an immigrant makes him an outsider also within the African American community in Harlem. He is like the marginal man on the margin of two societies; both the one which he has left and the new one which he has come to - something which also corresponds to Turner’s discussion of marginality which was discussed in the opening chapter. Additionally, Ray is marginal in that he does not feel comfortable in the rough, lower class milieu he has become a part of in Harlem. Simultaneously, however, it is that particular society which offers him social support through his valuable friendship with Jake.

Personality-wise, Jake appears to be Ray’s opposite. Thinking of Ray, he once points out that “[w]e may all be niggers aw’right, but we ain’t nonetall all the same” (159). They are very different in a number of ways. Nevertheless, their restlessness and search for identity connects them. However, this is not a problem they are explicitly aware of. Still, at times they distance themselves from the society around them, both mentally and physically, and through this they find common ground. Jake is portrayed as an attractive young man with great social skills. He is outgoing, talkative, and charming. Additionally he is honest and hardworking. These qualities make him fit for the colourful and intense Harlem society. Thus he manages to navigate the urban scene with ease. Nevertheless, he is not completely satisfied or content. This dissatisfaction leads him to leave Harlem time after time. At a point in the novel after Ray’s girl Agatha has been to see him, he expresses his uneasiness with the role he has taken on in Harlem and his constant restlessness:

It gave him a little cocky pleasure to brag of his conquests to the fellows around the bar. But after all the swilling and boasting, it would be a thousand times nicer to have
Ironically as it may seem, Jake does not settle down when he finally meets his “mysterious little brown of the Baltimore” (212). On the contrary, together they set off from Harlem only a week or so after they at long last meet again. Jake is constantly on the search for a feeling of belonging, but he does not seem to find it anywhere. This implies that for Jake the feeling of home is not to be found in the exterior world, but within himself.

Functioning as a subplot in McKay’s novel is migration in sexual space. One might argue that sexuality is a disruptive factor throughout the novel. The homoerotic subplot in the novel may be a contributory reason as to why Ray and Jake experience a recurring dissatisfaction, which they are unable to remove or come to terms with. Their attempts to find a place to belong are never completely successful. Interestingly, the only character in the novel who seems more or less content is Billy Biasse. Billy is not blind to the conventions of Harlem society which are problematic to both Jake and Ray, only he is able to distance himself from them. By living his life the way he wants to, he has reached a level of insight that Jake and Ray obviously have not.

Desire is a key term in *Home to Harlem*. Jake desires women very explicitly, and he seems to think finding the right woman will put an end to his restlessness. Ray, on the contrary, shows curiously little interest in women, even in his pretty girlfriend Agatha. Between Jake and Ray a special bond of mutual respect, understanding, and admiration develops. Although, their relationship is strictly platonic as far as the readers are informed, the intensity of this mutual attraction is not to be underestimated, and may be characterised as desire. However, they both seem incapable of developing the relationship further, even though that might be the answer they are both looking for. Finding a peaceful place in the exterior
world is impossible unless you have found peace within yourself. If the restlessness originates from within, both Jake and Ray will be searching in vain if they keep looking on the outside. Billy Biasse, on the other hand, McKay has portrayed as an open homosexual. And he is also, as mentioned above, the one of the three who has managed to find his place in society.

Justin D. Edwards points out that “McKay’s novel . . . moves away from conventional conflations of home and domesticity. McKay chooses to present ‘home’ as a sexualised space where all desires and appetites may be satisfied” (157). The absence of a domestic sense of home is a striking feature throughout the novel. The only characters we meet who attempt to create some kind of a domestic home are Congo Rose and Susy. However, as they both want a “sweet man” whom they can support, they bring an element of masculinity into the home which emasculates their men. Hence, when Jake decides to leave Rose and when Zeddy leaves Susy, they reclaim and confirm their masculinity. Nevertheless, this does not necessarily mean that Jake and the other male characters we encounter do not associate home with a domestic place separated from the public sphere. There are references in the novel, as mentioned before, that Jake seems to think that his restlessness might come from the absence of a stable relationship, hence a stable sexualised space. However, in order to be able to find peace in such a home, he must not be deprived of his masculinity, as Rose attempted to do.

Jake and Ray are both in lack of a proper homes in Harlem, a factor contributing to their constant restlessness and frustration. That none of them manages to construct a home, may actually symbolise that rather than keeping on searching in the exterior world, they should be searching within themselves, as I discussed. As a substitute for domesticity, there are places in Harlem which invoke a sense of home, such as Uncle Doc’s saloon or Aunt Hattie’s cookshop, which is according to Jake “the best place for good eats in Harlem” (269). The smell and taste of homemade food are traditional connotations of home. Moreover, homemade food is also what makes “Gin-head” Susy more than just a sad drunken woman.
Even Jake admits to that: “She may be fat and ugly as turkey, thought Jake, but her eats am sure beautiful” (78). Food and restaurants as substitutes for domesticity are recurring symbols throughout McKay’s novel.

Two years after Griffin’s “Who set you flowin’?” was published, Lawrence R. Rodgers issued his *Canaan Bound: The African-American Great Migration Novel*. In some respects his discussion resembles Griffin’s and they discuss several of the same issues related to migration and African American literature. However, Rodgers’s “Great Migration novel” is not as wide a term as Griffin’s “migration narrative,” something which restricts Rodgers to address only a few of the works which could really be of interest to him. Moreover, whether the creation of such an exclusive term was necessary to the understanding of African American migration literature is debatable. Even though Rodgers’s investigation of the relationship between literature and the Great Migration as a separate historical phenomenon is interesting, the term he has constructed comes across as slightly artificial. Considering that Griffin identifies migration as a major theme in most all African American cultural expressions prior to, during, and after the Great Migration, another categorisation comparable to the migration narrative in most ways seems superfluous.

Rodgers claims that his “willingness to define a work as a migration novel is not limited to whether it snugly fits within [a] unidirectional structure” (5, my italics). Rather, he has “also included novels where the Great Migration plays a less conventional but no less important role” (5). Considering his willingness to include works which deal with the Great Migration in a less traditional manner, then, I expected him to include a discussion of *Home to Harlem* in his chapter on the Harlem Renaissance, as indeed he has. However, Rodgers appears to have misunderstood, or forgotten, central underlying facts in the novel. In writing that “[a]lthough the novel is not a part of the migration novel form, it covers similar ground by replacing the South with the Caribbean as McKay’s genus loci. . .” (80, my italics), he
overlooks the fact that the protagonist of the novel is a southern migrant. It seems strange to me that Rodgers should ignore Jake and his experience as a participant in the Great Migration completely, given the fact that he establishes that the act of migrating north may actually figure in the narrative’s past. Certainly, the novel explores a different form of migration than merely that from south to north in that Ray is a West Indian migrant, as Rodgers points out, and through making Europe an alternative goal of migration. Nonetheless, as I have been trying to illustrate that consequences of migration – such as alienation, fragmentation, and identity problems – are present in both Jake and Ray, I can see no reason why Rodgers should disregard this.

Another aspect of Rodgers’s treatment of *Home to Harlem* which I find questionable is his comment on Jake’s relationship to Harlem. He argues that “[t]hroughout *Home to Harlem*, McKay’s protagonist, Jake Brown, is physically and spiritually liberated by the urban setting’s vitality” (79). In my opinion Rodgers’s view is not entirely correct. Jake’s relationship to Harlem is not a simple one, and the novel cannot simply be understood as a celebration of the city. Several of the characters in the novel leave Harlem because they needed “to break the hold” the city had on them, like Jake when he left Congo Rose: “he felt that he ought to get right out of the atmosphere of Harlem. If I don’t git away from it for a while, it’ll sure get me, he mused” (125). Similarly Felice left Harlem a week after she first met Jake because she thought he broke her heart, and additionally she was “jest right down sick and tiahd of Harlem” (303). Ray has an even more difficult and ambiguous relationship to Harlem, as previously noted. All this goes to show that despite the colourful and fascinating portrayal McKay draws of the “negro capital,” he is also highly aware of the different effects the city might have on its inhabitants, and especially on its newcomers. McKay shows this through the portrayals of his characters, including Jake who in spite of his
ability to navigate the urban scene elegantly does not completely avoid the negative effects of migration.

The excerpt from Robert Johnson’s classic blues lyric “Ramblin’ on My Mind”\(^4\) in the title of this chapter summarises Jake and Ray’s shared restlessness in the words of African Americans’ own culture. It is partially through this constant urge to go “somewhere” that these two characters find mutual understanding. One important issue in this respect is that the portrayals of Jake and Ray are positive ones, despite their inability to settle down. Wayne F. Cooper points out in the foreword to the 1987 edition of *Home to Harlem* that “McKay believed that the black folk wisdom brought to the nation’s cities in the Great Migration northward that began in his days were exemplified in men like Jake...” (xxx). Cooper’s observation might enhance our understanding of Jake and his split identity. The wisdom he embodies is like a tool helping him to navigate the urban scene or interact with different kinds of people. Simultaneously, however, it is the fact that he is a migrant which partially makes him unsatisfied with his situation, time and time again.

The words “home to Harlem” in the title of McKay’s novel convey an interesting ambiguity which in many ways sums up the essence of my discussion. Though the course of the story it becomes evident that McKay has chosen the wording of his title carefully. Even though Harlem at the time was characterised as “the home of the New Negro,” it did not constitute a proper home for Jake and Ray. Thus the title includes the tragic irony of going home to a place which is not really one’s home. At the same time, Harlem is a place both main characters love and relate to in one way or another. Consequently they are able to feel a certain sense of belonging there. Furthermore, the use of “home to” in the title implies travelling. Only, travelling home means going in the opposite direction of traditional migration. African American migrants left their homes in search of new and better ones. For Jake, then, the journey from Europe to Harlem, and his following life there, is a second

search for a new home. A search conducted in a place he has already migrated to, and left, once before. The title, *Home to Harlem*, thus proposes not only the theme of migration, but also the consequences migration had for the migrant’s ensuing life; the threat of alienation, the endless search for a place to settle down, and the search for identity. All of which are recurring elements of the African American migration narrative, as they equally are in this particular novel.
Chapter II

“Coming for to carry me home”: The Illusion of Belonging in Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand*

“Those wailing undertones of ‘Swing Low, Sweet Chariot’ were too poignantly familiar. They struck into her longing heart and cut away her weakening defenses. She knew at least what it was that had lurked formless and undesignated these many weeks in the back of her troubled mind. Incompleteness.” (Larsen 92)

The initial journey of migration usually implies leaving home, and life afterwards includes the search for a new one. In Claude McKay’s *Home to Harlem* the protagonist’s search for home is in vain. However, despite alienation and restlessness Jake manages to maintain a certain zest for life. Nella Larsen’s portrayal of Helga Crane, the protagonist in *Quicksand* (1928), tells a different story. Helga’s life is characterised by loneliness and despair. Her ongoing search of identity and belonging drags her into a spiral of continuous movement. Lawrence R. Rodgers observes that “Helga’s migration is less connected with the physical and economical liberation conventionally found in other works of fiction than with the drive to be emancipated from her inner turmoil” (91). Nonetheless, migration is an important aspect of Larsen’s novel and reading *Quicksand* as a migration narrative underlines the tragedy of the novel; for no matter where she goes, Helga Crane seems to be travelling without moving.

We know that a common phenomenon in the majority of migration narratives is that at some point in the text, the action is transferred from a Southern setting to a Northern one. However, aside from the fact that Larsen’s novel opens in the South and that the protagonist soon migrates to the North, the setting which is portrayed and the protagonist’s reasons for
migrating deviate to a certain extent from Griffin’s definition. Typically, the move from the South to the North includes a shift to modernity and urbanity, and so is Helga’s arrival in the North. The South which she leaves behind, however, is not similar to that which is traditionally portrayed in the migration narrative. Griffin claims that the white psychological and physical violence towards the black southern population is most often presented in one way or another as the catalysing factor which spurs the action northwards. With Helga Crane, the situation is slightly different.

At the opening of the novel we encounter Helga Crane as a teacher in a prestigious college for African Americans in Naxos, Mississippi, “the finest school for Negroes anywhere in the country, north or south” (3). However, the excitement Helga felt when she first started to teach there has disappeared and her fascination has turned into dislike of the pretentiousness which she feels pervades the school: “The South. Naxos. Negro education. Suddenly she hated them all” (3). Furthermore, she realises that not only is she dissatisfied with the school and its administration, but with the teachers and the students alike:

This great community, she thought, was no longer a school. It had grown into a machine. It was now a show place in the black belt, exemplification of the white man’s magnanimity, refutation of the black man’s inefficiency. Life had died out of it. It was, Helga decided, now only a big knife with cruelly sharp edges ruthlessly cutting all to a pattern, the white man’s pattern. Teachers as well as students were subjected to the paring process, for it tolerated no innovations, no individualisms. (Larsen 4)

Helga’s irritation is escalating into discontent and finally reaches its culmination in her decision to leave Naxos. The reason Helga’s discontent reaches a peak is a visit from a white preacher to the college which “had been more than usually crowded with distasteful encounters and stupid perversities. . . . And annoying beyond all other happenings had been that affair of the noon period, now again thrusting itself on her already irritated mind” (2). Thinking of “the banal, the patronizing, and even the insulting remarks of one of the renowned white preachers of the state” (2), Helga Crane feels a “surge of hot anger and seething resentment” (3).
Nonetheless, it is the people around her at the college who are her true irritants. Hence, apart from contributing to, or provoking, Helga’s decision to migrate North it, is not primarily the white population which she is fleeing from, it is “the general atmosphere of Naxos, its air of self-righteousness and intolerant dislike of difference” (5). Helga considers everyone at Naxos, except herself, to be like a flock of sheep, or like identical products spewed out of a machine. Hence, not only were the preacher man’s remarks patronizing, they were also somewhat true. The human products of Naxos were all conformed to “the white man’s pattern” (4). Consequently, from the white man’s perspective it was a simple conclusion to reach that “if all Negroes would only take a leaf out of the book of Naxos and conduct themselves in the manner of Naxos products, there would be no race problems, because Naxos Negroes knew what was expected of them. . . . They knew enough to stay in their places. . . .” (3).

Robert Bone’s comment in connection to the picaresque novel where he asserts that “caste imposes immobility upon its victims, freezing them in the social order by teaching them to ‘know their places’” (119) echoes the white preacher man’s speech. Clearly, the black people at Naxos are where he wants them to be, and because of their self-satisfaction that is where they will remain. The white southerner additionally “dared any Northerner to come South and after looking upon this great institution to say that the Southerner mistreated the Negro” (39). With sarcastic irony Larsen displays the racist attitudes present not only in the southern lynching mobs which receives Griffin’s main attention, but in most every white southern community.

Griffin writes that “lynching was used by the dominant white culture of the South to evoke fear in the hearts of African-Americans and in so doing to help maintain social order” (47). She moreover asserts that “[w]hen the image of lynching appears in the texts of African-American artist it is not used to inflict a sense of inactivity, but instead to provoke activity:
either it is a catalyst to Northern migration or it provides the foundation for staking a racial claim on the South” (47). In *Quicksand*, however, the narrator criticises the self-satisfaction in the educated middle class at Naxos which pacifies them and prevents them from realising the extent to which they are still oppressed. By constructing an institution where African Americans learned “to stay in their places” (3), lynching was made redundant in that a more sophisticated oppression was invented. That the well-educated and well-bred Naxos products fail to comprehend that they are fooled both disappoints and annoys Helga. As this underlying or sophisticated racism is presented to us as an “alternative” to lynching it participates, as already mentioned, in catalysing the action of the novel northwards. The rest of the staff and students at Naxos, on the other hand, are left stagnating in their illusive freedom. Seemingly happy, migration to them seems unnecessary, and similarly so, racial struggle.

*Quicksand* is by no means unique in the sense that Larsen has ignored lynching or the fear of it as an important factor in initiating migration, for as Griffin underlines, the choice not to use the lynching sign is as significant as the choice to use it (47). Yet, Griffin goes on to identify the reasons why the image of lynching is left out of blues lyrics and migrant letters, which are her examples, as follows: “First, this image is one which constructs them as victims, a status they choose not to claim. Second, the absence might be evidence of silence and hence a very present and real fear of violent repercussion which characterize black lives in the South” (47). It is more likely, however, that in *Quicksand* the image of lynching is absent because Larsen is predominantly criticising factors within the African American community, namely the pretentiousness and double-standards in the educated black middle class. In order to do that, her focus had to be altered compared to traditional migration narratives.

In her discussion of the sexual politics of women’s blues in the 1920s, Hazel V. Carby affirms that “migration had distinctively different meanings for black men and women. . . .
Migration for women often meant left behind. . .” (334). She further asserts that the journey in itself held particular dangers for women. Additionally, if a family was able to save money for a train ticket it was usually the man who was sent northwards. Nonetheless, as Carby points out, some women were able to migrate to the northern cities, such as the blues singers who recorded their songs in Chicago and New York. These women “were able to articulate . . . the possibilities of movement for women who ‘ha[d] rambling on their minds’ and who intended to ‘ease on down the line’ for they had made it – the power of movement was theirs” (335). Helga too, possesses the power of movement. Helga Cane is an educated and economically independent woman, features not characteristic of migrants in general in the Great Migration era, and certainly not of female migrants. Her privileges thus provide different and better opportunities as for the actual possibility of migrating.

Typically, African Americans migrated to the North out of economical and social desperation, often in order to be able to support their family or in order to reunite with family members who had already left the South. Helga migrates more out of a wish or a need for a change of scenery, and her economical independence allows her to do so. Also, her economical situation even allows her to pay her way out of a Jim Crow car on the train to Chicago. She thereby avoids some of the adversities African Americans in general, and African American women in particular, met on their journeys northwards. Not only can she afford a ticket, but also a bribe in order to travel more comfortably. For many people, jumping on freight trains in the middle of the night would be the only possibility to escape the confinements of the South.

Exploration of urbanism characterizes the migration narrative. In the process of exploring the encounter with urbanity and later the navigation of the urban landscape are central issues. I mentioned that the shift from a rural southern setting to northern urbanity is “experienced as a change in time, space, and technology as well as a different concept of race
relations” (Griffin 5). The result of the migrant’s initial confrontation with urbanity usually decides his or her fate in the city. There are two factors to consider in relation to *Quicksand* in this respect. Firstly, Helga’s arrival in Chicago is not her maiden voyage into the urban landscape. On the contrary, Helga Crane grew up in Chicago and is returning to the city of her childhood after spending years elsewhere. Nevertheless, Chicago does not represent home to her, both her parents are dead and she was sent away from her stepfamily’s home at the age of fifteen. The second factor of interest is that her confrontation with urbanity is ambiguous in its result.

Helga’s plan upon arrival in Chicago is to call upon her uncle who was “the only relative who thought kindly, or even calmly, of her” (6) and ask for a loan. Things have changed, however, and Uncle Peter has married a woman who does not look as favourably on the family ties with Helga as he does. As a consequence Helga is sent away from their house when she seeks her uncle, but instead finds his new wife home alone and unwilling to acknowledge any relation to her at all. Despite the harsh dismissal, she soon afterwards feels a strange excitement as she becomes a part of a crowded Chicago street:

> [A]s she stepped out into the moving multi-coloured crowd, there came to her a queer feeling of enthusiasm, as if she were tasting something agreeable, exotic food – sweetbreads, smothered with truffles and mushrooms – perhaps. And, oddly enough, she felt too, that she had come home. She, Helga Crane, who had no home. (30)

Helga Crane’s reencounter with the northern city in itself arouses in her a positive sensation which separately could be a symbol of a bright future. On the other hand, the rejection from her uncle’s wife which also includes the loss of her only friendly family relation in America, suggests a more uncertain future.

The urban culture suits Helga Crane in several ways. She is a modern, independent woman, a consumer, and a materialist, all of which are features corresponding to the modern city culture and the modern urban power which emerged in the 1920s. The crowds of people, the high buildings, the sound of cars whizzing by and the atmosphere of efficiency and
anonymity which she first feels in Chicago, suits her in the beginning. But it doesn’t take long before she feels lonely and unhappy again. When her employer, Mrs. Hayes-Rore, a “prominent ‘race’ woman” (36), offers to take Helga to Harlem, she does not hesitate to seize the opportunity. However, when arriving in New York she at once feels the city’s “aggressive unfriendliness. Even the great buildings, the flying cabs, and the swirling crowds seemed manifestations of purposed malevolence” (40). For a brief moment Helga even considers going back to Chicago: “she was awed and frightened and inclined to turn back to that other city, which, though not kind, was yet not strange. This New York seemed somehow more appalling, more scornful, in some inexplicable way even more terrible and uncaring than Chicago. Threatening almost. Ugly. Yes, perhaps she’d better turn back” (40). Still, the wave of anxiety passes and when the first year has passed her opinion of the city has changed:

New York she had found not so unkind, not so unfriendly, not so indifferent. There she had been happy, and secured work, had made acquaintances and another friend. Again she had that strange transforming experience, this time not so fleeting, that magic sense of having come home. Harlem, teeming black Harlem, had welcomed her and lulled her into something that was, she was certain, peace and contentment. (43)

Unfortunately, Helga’s certainty is mistaken once again. Fascination and content is soon transformed into irritation and discontent.

The fact that there are no ancestral figures and no safe spaces in Larsen’s Quicksand is a major cause of the misfortunes of Helga Crane. In the struggle between their southern background and the modern urban power, migrants often need to evoke the presence of an ancestor which might provide support, guidance, and protection. The ancestor might be a person, but most often it is something abstract which is present in “ritual, religion, music, food, and performance” (Griffin 5). The ancestor maybe said to represents the wisdom of the southern black culture and the roots and background of the migrant. Griffin establishes that “rejection of the ancestor [often] leads to further alienation, exile, the status of stranger, or sometimes death” (8). She further asserts that the ancestor is “a site of negotiation for the
construction of a new self. . . [which] may be one of the most crucial aspects of resistance to the complexities of the North” (8). The sites where the ancestor might be evoked and places which in other ways may provide a shelter from the negative effects of urbanisation are what Griffin refers to as safe spaces. If not being the place where the ancestor is evoked, safe spaces present more or less the same function as does the ancestor in the formation of the migrant’s new self. Safe spaces are places where elements of a southern background, which otherwise is suppressed, may surface.

Evoking or calling forth the presence of an ancestor proves to be difficult for Helga Crane. Her problem is that there is no one thing or memory which for her could represent her background or her ancestral roots. There is no cultural background for her to seek for guidance or protection. Her past holds nothing for her except sorrow and misery, neither do her parents’ backgrounds represent anything known or safe to her. On the contrary, their cultural, national, and racial backgrounds only led to fragmentation and incompatible racial and cultural dualism in Helga. Similarly, she is also unable to find any safe spaces for the same reasons. As Helga has never experienced the comfort of home, she does not have the ability to evoke any helpful associations of home or background. Thus, the mediums which for most migrants provide a sort of retreat from the challenges of everyday life in the city are not available to her. Consequently, at this point one of the main differences between Helga Crane and the southern migrant typically portrayed in the migration narratives is exposed.

The identity conflict experienced by most migrants contains a complex relationship between the new and the old self, and between the new and the old culture. The migrant might be overwhelmed by the new urban power and completely lose his or her connections to the “old world,” thus an important and valuable part of his or her personal history will fail to be a part of the new identity. In turn this might result in an identity crisis due to alienation and fragmentation. Those who are capable of establishing either a relationship to an ancestor or
retire to a safe space for relief may be able to diminish such identity problems as they more likely will manage to construct a combination of the old and the new self. Helga suffers from a different kind of identity conflict, and her most challenging problem is the lack of protective family roots to seek comfort in. Helga’s alienation and identity problems originate in a fragmented childhood and background and the absence of a place or a person to seek for the retrieval of such a background. Because of this she was not able to formulate an identity or a relationship of belonging to somewhere before, and she is still not able to do so.

Charles Scruggs and Griffin both mention the relevance of Robert Park’s seminal study of the “marginal man” in relation to African American migration, especially in relation to the migrant in the city. I mentioned in the previous chapter that Park employed Simmel’s definition of the “stranger,” initially designed to describe the situation of the Jew living in Diaspora. The stranger, as well as Park’s marginal man, is a man on the margin of two cultures and two societies which never completely interpenetrate and fuse (Park 354). Furthermore, the situation of the immigrant Jew in the American cities “seeking to find a place in the freer, more complex and cosmopolitan life” is characteristic of the story of the marginal man (Park 355). Thus, both the stranger and the marginal man are typically cosmopolitan figures. The cultural conflict which arises in the situation of the immigrant, Park determines, is ultimately “the conflict of ‘the divided self,’ the old self and the new” (355). Park further notes that

[s]omething of the same sense of moral dichotomy and conflict is probably characteristic of every immigrant during the period of transition, when old habits are being discarded and new ones are not yet formed. It is inevitably a period of inner turmoil and intense self-consciousness. (355)

The major problem of the marginal man, different from that of the general immigrant, is that the sense of cultural and personal ambiguity tends to be a permanent matter. The marginal man lives “permanently in a state of transition in the big city, as though the act of migration that [brought] him or her there remained his existential condition” (Scruggs 53). Hence, these
irresolvable conflicts and differences disordering the marginal man’s mind will eventually become a part of his personality.

Park’s theory is relevant in my discussion of Larsen’s *Quicksand* and the migration narrative in two respects. In addition to Simmel’s creation of the concept of the stranger, it is the experience of the urban migrant in particular which creates the backdrop for Park’s theory of the marginal man. Hence, in relation to what Griffin refers to as the migrant’s navigation of the urban landscape, Park’s discussion creates a useful tool in the process of understanding the migrant’s psychological reactions to urbanity. Additionally, the marginal man is typically “a mixed blood, an Eurasian, mestizo, or mulatto, i.e., a man who by the very fact of his racial origin is predestined to occupy a position somewhere between the two cultures represented by his respective parents” (Park 370). Helga Crane, then, might be characterised as a “marginal woman” as her mother was Danish and her father a West Indian.

Helga’s complexion is too dark for her to be able to “pass” as white. She therefore stood out from the rest of her family by the mere virtue of her appearance when her mother remarried a white man after Helga’s biological father left them. Unfortunately, Helga was never accepted by her stepfather and when her mother died, her uncle Peter who felt some responsibility for the unfortunate young girl, sent her to a school for black girls. At school Helga realised that “because one is dark, one [is] not necessarily loathsome, and could, therefore, consider oneself without repulsion” (Larsen 23). Despite a feeling of happiness she had never before experienced, Helga always sensed a “feeling of strangeness, of outsideness” (23). As Helga “grew older, she became gradually aware of a difference between herself and the girls about her” (24), and even though she was happier than she had ever been before she was “still horribly lonely” (24). Being a marginal woman Helga is also an outsider, and as an outsider she is always lonely.
The marginal man is supposed to have gathered unusual insights from his marginality. Park argues that as the situation of the marginal man compels him to live in two worlds at the same time, he inevitably becomes the “individual with the wider horizon, the keener intelligence, the more detached and rational viewpoint” (376). As a marginal woman, Helga may be said to possess such extraordinary insights concerning the double standards in the respective communities in which she lives. The ability she has to see and express to herself the hypocrisy of the middle-class ideology of racial uplift is an example of her intelligence as well as of her knowledge of social structures, moral standards, and race attitudes on both sides of the so-called colour line. Concerning her own situation, on the other hand, Helga’s viewpoint is neither detached nor rational. Thus her horizon can only be said to be wider and her intelligence keener concerning external matters, not internal ones.

Closely connected to Park’s thesis of the marginal man is Victor Turner’s discussion of liminality and communitas which was thoroughly introduced in my introductory chapter. I mentioned in relation to liminality that Turner also introduces several terms which resemble the state of liminality and yet they describe different states, and marginality is one of them. Turner’s definition of marginality corresponds to Park’s discussion of the marginal man, and is thus relevant in connection to Helga Crane. Turner’s description of the state of outsiderhood also corresponds to Helga’s situation. Outsiderhood denotes a “a condition of being either permanently and by ascription set outside the structural arrangements of a given social system, or being situationally or temporarily set apart, or voluntarily setting oneself apart from the behavior of status-occupying, role-playing members of that system” (Turner 233). Due to her racial dualism Helga is set outside both the structure of the African American society and the white American society. Similarly, she is also an outsider in Europe, but there she travels knowing that she will be one. However, she does not know the perspective the Europeans have on her outsiderhood.
Turner’s discussion of marginality facilitates the construction of three sets of dichotomies which both describe Helga’s situation in the American society and her relationship to migration. One is the opposition within her due to her racial duality, which causes discomfort both in white and black communities. Moreover, she also embodies the opposition between the traditional and the modern, nontraditional woman. However, she reverses the typical development. The unexpected ending, where she travels back South to live a life married to the provincial village’s minister, Mr. Reverend Pleasant Green, eventually only represents sacrifice to Helga. Hoping to achieve what she has been searching for through her continuous quest for identity, contentment and stability, she sacrifices her education, her freedom, and her independence. Sadly, her sacrifices are in vain. She ends up exhausted from numerous childbirths, trapped in a stifling southern hell unable to escape or flee from her unhappiness and confinement.

The novel also sets up a dichotomy between the South and the North, the typical feature of the migration narrative. However, the description of the South and the migrant’s relationship to the region is nontraditional as oppression and prejudices are described within the black community. In addition, Helga is not originally a southerner and the South does not in any respect represent home to her, nor does it represent ancestry or cultural heritage. The final dichotomy in *Quicksand*, which also describes the marginality of the protagonist, is the class perspective. Helga Crane is on one side a member of the middle class, however, she does not have the correct family background which the middle class considers to be important. This Helga is highly conscious of: “Negro society, she had learned, was as complicated and as rigid in its ramification as the highest strata of white society. If you couldn’t prove your ancestry and connections, you were tolerated, but you didn’t belong” (8). What is more, the day Helga resigned from Naxos, Dr. Anderson urged her to stay by calling her a lady, claiming that she had “dignity and breeding” (21). Determined not to become
another spineless product of the Naxos machinery Helga forcefully cried that “[i]f you’re speaking of family, Dr. Anderson, why, I haven’t any. I was born in a Chicago slum” (21).

In Neither White Nor Black: The Mulatto Character in American Fiction, Judith R. Berzon writes about the mulatto character that “[w]hile he wants very much to be defined in terms of a white middle-class image, he is still excluded from the white group. Furthermore, his prejudice toward other blacks often produces feelings of guilt” (14). Berzon also asserts that “the mulatto is defined in terms of his marginal position within the culture” (13) and furthermore she quotes Everett Stonequist who established that this marginal figure is “poised in psychological uncertainty between two social worlds, reflecting in his soul the discords, and harmonies, repulsions and attractions of these worlds” (14). These are all characteristic features of Helga Crane’s personality. It is natural to associate Helga not only with the mulatto character but also with the tragic mulatto, which is the most frequently portrayed stereotype in mulatto fiction. However, despite the fact that Helga shares characteristics also with the tragic mulatto, she is not one.

The tragic mulatto character is typically the product of white-authored fiction (Berzon 99). Moreover, the tragic mulatto character in American literary fiction typically passes as white and does not discover his or her “touch of impurity” (99) before he or she is grown up. Nonetheless, there are some features of the tragic mulatto which resemble Helga Crane; hence an element of the tragic is perhaps traceable in her after all:

The tragic mulatto character is an outcast, a wanderer, one alone. . . . Rejected out of fear and hatred by the dominant group, he is often rejected out of envy and hatred by the lower caste as well. In addition, the tragic mulatto character is usually depicted as being ambivalent toward the two castes. (Berzon 100)

Helga is an outcast, at least in her own family during her childhood. She is also a wanderer and one alone. As has been illustrated previously in this chapter, she is certainly ambivalent towards the two “castes” which she equally belongs and equally does not belong to.

Moreover, she was rejected out of fear and hatred by her stepfather, representing the dominant
group. Yet, she is not rejected as such by the African American society. Rather she sets herself outside it by virtue of her self-consciousness and her sensitivity towards internal racism in the African American community.

The intellectual elite in Harlem, as well as the administration and teachers at Naxos, “purported to represent the interest of ‘the race’” (Carby, “It Jus Be’s Dat Way Sometime” 331). The constant concern with the ideology of racial uplift frustrates Helga Crane. Most importantly, she despises the inconsistency between arguments and attitudes. The intellectuals claim hatred towards the oppressive white American society on one hand, on the other however, their ways of living are copied from that particular society which they appear to hate so much. Additionally, they were hardly representatives of the more common African Americans whether in the South or in the North, nor were they representatives of the new African American urban working class which emerged during and after the first World War. It is especially through Helga’s friend Anne Grey that Larsen illustrates the ambiguity in the intellectual elite’s self-claimed representative voice on the question of improving the conditions of African Americans:

[Anne] hated white people with a deep and burning hatred, with the kind of hatred which, finding itself held in sufficiently numerous groups, was capable some day, on some great provocation, of bursting into dangerously malignant flames. But she aped their clothes, their manners, and their gracious ways of living. While proclaiming loudly the undiluted good of all things Negro, she yet disliked the songs, the dances, and the softly blurred speech of the race. Towards these things she showed only a disdainful contempt, tinged sometimes with a faint amusement. (48)

Her contempt, “tinged sometimes with a faint amusement” (48), implies that not only does Anne prefer a sophisticated way of life for herself, she also displays a patronizing attitude towards the more common member of the race she proclaims to fight for.

In relation to postcolonial discourse, Franz Fanon developed the idea of the “comprador class,” an elite “who exchanged roles with the white colonial dominating class without engaging in any radical restructuring of society. The black skin of these compradors
was ‘masked’ by their complicity with the values of the white colonial powers” (Ashcroft et al. 99). Fighting their oppressors, the black intellectual elite of whom the majority in the 1920s were living in Harlem, included in their fight imitation and adoption of values, manners and attitudes characteristic of the white dominating community. Thus they rejected, unintentionally perhaps, their own cultural heritage. As Larsen portrays in *Quicksand*, they did not do so explicitly, yet their silent admiration and ensuing incorporation of white social structures were apparent. One might claim that they mimicked white standards in order to be acknowledged by the white audience and eradicate the racist image of African Americans as primitive and promiscuous. According to Carby, Larsen also critiques the Harlem intellectuals for their glorification of “a black folk culture while being ashamed of and ridiculing the behaviour of the new black migrant to the city” (“It Jus Be’s Dat Way Sometime” 332). Consequently, due to their ambiguous approach towards things African American and by discriminating against their own, they may be said to have developed into what Fanon referred to as the comprador class.

Even though her behaviour is not exactly hypocritical, Helga also displays highly ambiguous attitudes towards African Americans. She does not partake in the middle-class engagement in the uplifting of the race, as explained. Nor, however, does she participate enthusiastically in the flamboyant cultural life characteristic of the “Negro capital” during the Harlem Renaissance. Conversely, she is displeased with the rawness and voluptuousness of Harlem nightlife. Yet she, as everyone else, gets carried away by its captivating magnificence:

They danced, ambling lazily to a crooning melody, or violently twisting their bodies, like whirling leaves, to a sudden streaming rhythm, or shaking themselves ecstatically to a thumping of unseen tomtoms . . . And when suddenly the music died . . . 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. (Larsen 59)

Helga’s resentment towards Harlem and Harlemites is a result of her estrangement, alienation, and the feeling of not being totally accepted in the African American community. She is also
a victim of incorporated white prejudices and moral standards. Helga Crane is terrified of engaging in any activity which may confirm white prejudices. The aloofness she imposes on herself towards the moving mosaic in the jungle of the Harlem night club, and the shamefulness she feels after having enjoyed the immersion in music and rhythm at the dance floor, demonstrates her incorporated attitudes of the African American urban culture as primitive and savage. And she, Helga Crane, dreads the possibility that she herself could be such a “jungle creature” (59).

Shortly after the nightclub episode, Helga Crane leaves New York and sails to Copenhagen. On the boat she expresses to herself what she has come to feel for Harlem and its people:

Leaning against the railing, Helga stared into the approaching night, glad to be at last alone, free of that great superfluity of human beings, yellow, brown, and black, which, as the torrid summer burnt to its close, had oppressed her. No, she hadn’t belonged there. Of her attempt to emerge from that inherentaloneness which was part of her very being, only dullness had come, dullness and a great aversion. (Larsen 63)

The claustrophobic sensation invoked by the great masses of people in Harlem, by the hot summer and finally the culmination of it all, by the atmosphere of the nightclub, provokes in Helga a negativity towards the mere presence of African Americans. This she also expressed when day-dreaming of her new forthcoming life in Copenhagen where there would be “no Negroes, no problems, no prejudice. . .” (Larsen 55). Consequently, the black middle class is not the only place where internal racial prejudice or distaste is a reality. Helga too dislikes lower-class African Americans to some extent. Hence, there is a lurking sense of aversion towards African Americans in general inside her.

In her attempt to escape American prejudices and black middle-class hypocrisy, Helga trades Harlem for Copenhagen and thus deliberately puts herself in a situation where she knows she will stand out from everyone. After an unsuccessful attempt to find her place in a community she was supposed to fit in, she chooses for her ongoing search for self a social
setting inhabited only by white people. In Copenhagen Helga finds a society without the incorporated race prejudices and attitudes which reign in both the white and black communities in America. During most of her sojourn in Denmark Helga is only able to sense a fascination in the Danish society for the exoticism which she represents. Helga treasures and nurtures the basis for their admiration, as she lets her relatives dress her up in bright coloured clothes and jewellery. It is at times as if they were preparing someone who is about to be a part of an exhibition:

“Haven’t you something lively, something bright?” And, noting Helga’s puzzled glance at her own subdued costume, [Fru Dahl] explained laughingly: “Oh, I’m an old married lady, and a Dane. But you, you’re young. And you’re a foreigner, and different. You must have bright things to set off the colour of your lovely brown skin. Striking things, exotic things. You must make an impression.” (68)

Consequently, she becomes a pet for everyone to gaze at. However, Helga does not mind this at all. In fact she likes it, she likes that for the first time in her life she experiences something unknown which she finds attractive and pleasing. Thus the thought which she has had so many times before, almost every time she arrives at a new destination, once more enters her mind: “This, then, was where she belonged. This was her proper setting” (67).

Too late, Helga realises that the Danes’ admiration is not for her as Helga Crane, but for her as an objectified grotesque Other which “wasn’t she” (89). Striving towards sustaining the admiration she had enjoyed so, she has been an accomplice in the construction of that Other. The sweet spell is gone and she is again alienated and unhappy. Strangely enough, she finds herself “homesick, not for America, but for Negroes” (92). At a concert where “Dvorák’s ‘New World Symphony’ had been wonderfully rendered” (92) the “wailing undertones of ‘Swing Low, Sweet Chariot’” (92) had become too familiar as if they came forth to carry her home. The irony is conspicuous. Once more Helga is caught in the illusion of belonging, and she thus longs for what she some months before escaped from.
Back in New York she once again enjoys the change of scenery and thinks to herself that “[h]ow absurd she had been to think that another country, other people could liberate her from the ties which bound her forever to these mysterious, these terrible, these fascinating, these lovable, dark hordes. Ties that were of the spirit. Ties not only superficially entangled with the mere outline of features or color of skin. Deeper. Much deeper than either of these” (95). Despite the sudden identification with African Americans she still observes the Harlem population from a distance which proves that even though she claims to finally have discovered where she belongs, it is the same old illusion which has manifested itself once again. She makes herself believe she is content because the setting is still new and fresh: “She liked the sharp contrast to her pretentious stately life in Copenhagen. It was as if she passed from the heavy solemnity of a church service to a gorgeous care-free revel” (96). That feeling, however, is exactly the same she felt when she first arrived in Copenhagen. The tragic irony is that soon Helga manages to steer her life into something which resembles a lasting solemn church service which eventually will lead to her death, if not literally then certainly metaphorically.

One night at a party Helga reencounters Dr. Anderson whom she has felt a suppressed desire for ever since she left Naxos. Dr. Anderson has married Helga’s friend Anne Grey, but the tension between them leads to a silent and passionate kiss. Weeks pass until finally one evening Dr. Anderson again approaches her, however instead of declaring his love for her, he excuses his behaviour and blames it on the alcohol. Helga’s “sense of elation had abruptly left her” (107) and having thus acknowledged her desire she had let Dr. Anderson belittle and ridicule her. Instantly a “sort of madness had swept over her” (107), and ultimately that madness, or heartbrokenness which it really is, drives her into a delirious encounter with a church meeting:

She was unconscious of the words she uttered, or their meaning: ‘Oh God, mercy, mercy. Have mercy on me!’ But she repeated them over and over. From those about
her came a thunder-clap of joy. Arms stretched toward her with savage frenzy. . . . The thing came real. A miraculously calm came upon her. Life seemed to expand, and to become very easy. Helga Crane felt within her a supreme aspiration toward the regaining of simple happiness, a happiness unburdened by the complexities of the lives she had known. (114)

For a brief moment Helga feels that she has reached salvation, she believes that she has managed to escape the complexities in real life and traded them in for an untroubled life in a realm of sanctity where such issues are irrelevant. Desperately clinging onto that feeling, she marries a southern reverend and moves to the South. As before, however, Helga’s discontent soon surfaces as she realises that she again is trapped in a setting where she does not belong.

Griffin points out that the final vision of the migration narrative sometimes includes countermigration back to the South. Most often, then, the South is portrayed as a site of racial and cultural memory. The migrant character’s return is not necessarily portrayed as his or her final resting place, and it is not necessarily a positive experience. However, a journey of immersion into the South and southern folk culture is still of great importance in the questing figure’s development as it constructs a reconnection with home and heritage. Helga Crane’s journey to the South, on the other hand, is nothing of the kind. Instead of presenting the African American folk as life giving power, Larsen has chosen to portray the village community which Helga is married into as “the deluded” (Carby, Reconstructing Womanhood 174).

When Helga awakens from the initial ecstasies of salvation and then marriage, she decides that religion had “robbed life of its crudest truths. Especially it had its uses for the poor – and blacks. For the blacks. The Negroes. And this . . . was what ailed the whole Negro race in America, this fatuous belief in the white man’s God, this childlike trust in full compensation for all woes and privations in ‘kingdom come’” (133). This understanding of religion which Helga bitterly asserts “[b]ound them to slavery” is also what first appealed to her. Religion had become for Helga “a kind of protective coloring, shielding her from the
cruel light of an unbearable reality” (126). By the time she realises that she is really unhappy, however, it is too late. Numerous childbirths now chain her to the rural South, and the freedom of movement which used to be her only solution to discontent and unhappiness is no longer an option. Thus, as Griffin points out, Helga’s “return to the South signals her metaphorical death” (146).

In her essay “Passing for What? Aspects of Identity in Nella Larsen’s Novels,” Cheryl A. Wall establishes that “Larsen’s most striking insights are into psychic dilemmas confronting certain black women” (97). Wall further asserts that in order to dramatize these insights the characters in Larsen’s novels are “by virtue of their appearance, education, and social class, atypical in the extreme” (97). Certainly, it is this “atypicalness” which imposes on Helga Crane a number of challenging issues concerning her identity. However, Helga does not know how to confront her problems and she ends up fleeing time and time again from something which she cannot explain. She herself expresses concern about the unexplainable when on the train to Chicago she ponders over her discontent and instant urge to leave Naxos:

She had looked forward with pleasant expectancy to working in Naxos when the chance came. And now this! What was it that stood in her way? Helga Crane couldn’t explain it, put a name to it. She had tried in the early afternoon in her gentle but staccato talk with James Vayle. Even to herself her explanation had sounded inane and insufficient. . . (24)

Related to the atypicalness Wall refers to is the unfortunate circular pattern in Helga Crane’s behaviour. As I have illustrated, the sudden urge she felt to leave Naxos is far from a singular phenomenon. On the contrary, it is a recurring one throughout the novel.

Wherever she is, Helga will eventually find herself overpowered by discontent. Thus, time after time she leaves one place in favour of another and rather naively seems to believe that things will improve. Yet, her naivety is not completely groundless. She does retrieve her enthusiasm every time she arrives in a new place, and for that reason she allows herself to believe that she is happy. Helga Crane, however, is not happy. Nevertheless, she continues to
fool herself and when her lurking discontent again reaches the surface, she mentally constructs a new and far more attractive life somewhere else, and in turn she decides to travel there. In doing that, Helga glorifies what the future might have in store, ignoring both facts of her own personality and of the societies which she travels to. As she discovers that the attractiveness is in her head only and that she has not, after all, reached the safe haven she first assumed it to be, disillusionment is inevitable. Thus, it seems that escape from atypicalness “in the extreme” (Wall 97) is not a viable option for Helga Crane.

The gloomy description of Helga’s journey towards her final demise is as suffocating and tragic as the title suggests. However happy or satisfied Helga feels when entering a new social scene, the transformation of satisfaction into discontent always takes place. Every time her mind goes through the process of transformation, she ends up more miserable than ever. Through the course of the novel, Helga Crane’s discontent intensifies. As the imagery of suffocation and asphyxiation becomes more evident, we realize that the more frantically Helga attempts to establish a setting of peacefulness and security, the more lost she becomes. As a matter of fact, she seems only to experience true happiness when she is in-between places. When in the state of in-between places, her uneasiness concerning her “in-betweenness” in all other areas of life is at ease. For others, safe spaces provide a connection to “home” or the South in some way or another. I have therefore argued that Helga is incapable of finding safe spaces. Yet there is one place which may possibly serve as such for Helga, namely the condition where she is neither here nor there, places which are connected to no-one, like she herself is. Hence, in the state of moving or travelling Helga is most likely to experience happiness and content. The ending, then, certainly holds nothing for her but misery, torment, and ultimately death.
Chapter III

“Back down South”: Immersion and Countermigration in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

“Ah done been tuh de horizon and back and now Ah kin set heah in my house and live by comparisons.” (Hurston 284)

The exuberant nightlife characterising the Harlem Renaissance era, which is an essential constituent of Claude McKay’s *Home to Harlem*, is nonexistent in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). Absent from Hurston’s novel is also the hypocrisy of the emerging black middle class, which Nella Larsen criticises in *Quicksand*. Moreover, Hurston completely ignores the North as a setting in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. She also ignores the modern urban power which most Renaissance writers could not, and would not, disregard in their writings. Furthermore, Hurston ignores in her novel the recently arrived masses of African American migrants to the northern cities who struggled harder than ever as the roaring twenties turned into the Great Depression. Nonetheless, in this chapter I intend to show that even though Hurston’s novel appears to lack every typical feature of the migration narrative, it is definitely so.

Griffin’s identification of the four pivotal moments which characterise the migration narrative does not easily apply to a discussion of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Hence one might be tempted to dismiss such a reading of the novel, claiming that the text does not only deviate from, but oppose the principles which lie as a foundation in the foregoing chapters. However, that is what the essence of my analysis is: *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is a reversal of points which alone or together signify a migration narrative, and that is
paradoxically what makes it a just that, a migration narrative. Lawrence R. Rodgers’s observation in *Canaan Bound: The African-American Great Migration Novel* supports this contradiction in terms. Rodgers claims that Hurston’s novel “is decidedly not about migration” (92), yet that it is “a fascinating variant on the migration novel form” (92). This time I agree with him, and I am intrigued by the fact that Rodgers, who failed to see the importance of migration in *Home to Harlem*, has decided to include a discussion of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. As I see it, this novel is certainly a much more controversial member of what he labels the Great Migration novel form than McKay’s *Home to Harlem*.

I have in the previous chapters made it clear that Griffin points out that all four moments which she has identified are not necessarily all present in a migration narrative. Moreover, they may occur in any given order within the structure of the narrative. The fourth characteristic of the migration narrative is that it provides “a vision of the possibilities or limitations of the Northern, western, or Midwestern city and the South” (Griffin 3) and “an evaluation of the consequences of migration and urbanization” (10). Griffin continues to note that for many artists “the North ensures the death and demise of the migrant; for others migration is one step on the road to a cosmopolitan status. Still others . . . require a return to the South as a means of acquiring racial, historical, and cultural redemption” (10, my italics). For Janie, the protagonist in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the journey commences in the South and then takes her further into the Deep South and African American folk culture. Hurston’s novel may thus be considered an extended version of the fourth pivotal moment of the migration narrative.

*Their Eyes Were Watching God* was written a decade later than *Home to Harlem* and *Quicksand*, which were both written in 1928. Thus after having discussed two novels which were written while Harlem was still in vogue, I have now turned to a novel which was written and published at a time when the New Negro Movement had succumbed to the Depression.
That is not, however, visible in the novel. As a matter of fact, considering Hurston’s choice of setting for this novel one could easily believe it to have been written some decades earlier. Separately, the setting gives us the impression of pastoral tranquillity and harmony, and Richard Wright amongst others complained “bitterly about the minstrel image that he claimed she was perpetuating” (Hemenway 241). Such criticisms fail to recognise why Hurston chose such a setting for her story; what lies beneath the seemingly pastoral scenery?

As I see it *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is a response to a call set forth by works published in the 1920s. Novels like *Home to Harlem* and *Quicksand* reflect the times they were written in. One may detect in the novels a fascination with the growing numbers of migrants entering the northern cities. They mirror and sometimes praise, other times criticise, the African American urban culture which emerged as a consequence of the Great Migration in particular. Simultaneously, however, even novels such as *Home to Harlem*, which initially seem to celebrate the urban culture, recognise the negative effects of migration such as alienation, restlessness, and perhaps most importantly, rootlessness. Furthermore, they recognise not only how these problems affect the individual, but also how the entire African American urban culture suffers under the pressure of housing a population of rootless city dwellers. Thus in addition to presenting freedom of movement as the ultimate symbol of freedom, the Harlem writers were aware of and also warned their audience of the negative consequences of repeated migrations.

In his momentous work on Signifyin(g) Henry Louis Gates, Jr. asserts that “[r]epetition and revision are fundamental to black artistic forms, from painting and sculpture to music and language use” (xxiv), and that Signifyin(g) “is repetition and revision, or repetition with a signal difference” (xxiv)⁵. Having experienced the explosive urban culture

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⁵ Gates distinguishes between the African American vernacular “Signifyin(g)” and the standard English “signifying.” As I am discussing signification in an African American perspective and using Gates’s definition I have decided to use his particular spelling. Gates signifies “the difference between these two signifiers by writing the black signifier in upper case (‘Signification’) and the white signifier in lower case (‘signification’).
herself and being familiar with the migration narratives of the Harlem Renaissance, Hurston realised the need for an alternative, and in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* she presents one. In describing an alternative setting, an alterative community, and an alternative journey, Hurston is in one way repeating and in another revising. Thus from a migratory perspective, Hurston may be said to Signify with *Their Eyes Were Watching God* upon earlier migration narratives, exemplified in this thesis by *Home to Harlem* and *Quicksand*.

Griffin focuses predominantly on the importance of ancestors and safe spaces for the southern migrant in the city. However, all migrants are vulnerable and “out of place,” thus the importance of ancestors and safe spaces are in an African American context important for any migrant character. Toni Morrison notes in her essay “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation,” that what struck her when studying contemporary African American fiction “was that whether the novel took place in the city or in the country, the presence of [the ancestor] determined the success or the happiness of the character” (343). Consequently, just as the presence of an ancestor is crucial in the northbound migrant’s initial confrontation with urbanity and later navigation of the urban landscape, the ancestor is also essential for Janie on her southbound journey towards self-realisation.

Initially one might think that Nanny represents the ancestral figure which is to instruct and protect Janie. Nanny, the grandmother, represents the old African American generation who has experienced slavery and thus has seen the inhumane, oppressive, and violent regime which through the white population of the South pacified African Americans. Nanny does in some ways protect her grandchild, but her protection is misguided, and she fails to realise the negative consequences of her so-called protective measures. Moreover, as Sandra Pouchet Paquet argues, Nanny has lost touch with her ancestral roots and her ancestral trust is abandoned (503). She tells Janie that “honey, us colored folks is branches without roots.”

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Similarly, [he has] selected to write the black term with a bracketed final g (‘Signifyin(g)’) and the white term as ‘signifying.’ The bracketed g enables [him] to connote the fact that this word is, more often than not, spoken by black people without the final g as ‘signifyin’” (Gates 46).
(31), but rather it is she who has become “the standing roots of some old tree that had been torn away by storm. Foundation of ancient power that no longer mattered” (26). As Janie struggles to free herself from Nanny’s opinions, wishes, and commands, she realizes that her people are not as rootless as her grandmother made her believe.

Tea Cake is the character who introduces Janie to the “restorative power of folklore” (Paquet 499), and Tea Cake is the character who represents the timelessness of the ancestor. Through marrying Janie and allowing her to immerse herself in the rural folk culture as an independent being, he provides her with a special kind of wisdom. He is “benevolent, instructive, and protective” (Morrison 343), but he is not overprotective, overpowering, or oppressive. Nanny and Janie’s two first husbands were all instructive and protective of Janie in their different ways, but they were not benevolent in the sense that they wanted Janie to find out for herself what was best for her. Rather they forced her into a role which suited themselves and their definitions of what was acceptable and respectable for a woman to do and not do.

Migration symbolizes different things for men and women. Hazel V. Carby notes that “[m]igration for women often meant being left behind” (“It Jus Be’s Dat Way Sometime” 334). David Krasner writes that “[f]or black women travel was risky business and few cared to take their chances. A black woman traveling alone was a tempted target for any predator. Because one moved through unfamiliar terrain, travel presented dangers” (543). Nonetheless, women did have access to the road, and characters like Helga Crane and Janie are examples of women who explored the possibilities the freedom of movement offered. Some argue that travelling women in African American fiction conduct their quests within close boundaries and that their journeys were more often internal than physical migrations on land (Davies 131). Janie’s journey, however, is both external and internal, and it is her physical act of migration which facilitates her internal voyage.
That the character which functions as Janie’s ancestor is a man, might be criticised as a flaw in Hurston’s otherwise feminist portrayal of a female migrant. That Janie always travels side by side with a male character certainly diminishes the threat of Janie being exposed to the dangers migration held for women. Janie would not have reached “the Muck” without Tea Cake. She would not have become a part of the egalitarian migrant worker community in the Everglades had it not been for her relationship to Tea Cake. That does not necessarily lessen the exceptionality of her accomplishment, however, because Janie fights for her right to partake in everything on equal grounds. Shortly after they marry, Tea Cake suddenly disappears. Janie is both angry and worried when he finally returns. Trying to explain why he had not brought Janie with him, Tea Cake reveals that he is highly conscious of the class-difference between them:

“Dem wuzn’t no high muckty mucks. Dem wuz railroad hands and dey womenfolks. You ain’t useutuh folks lak dat and Ah wuz skeered you might git all mad and quit me for takin’ you ’mongst ‘em. But Ah wanted yuh wid me jus’ de same. Befo’ us got married Ah made up mah mind not tuh let you see no commonness in me. When Ah git mad habits on, Ah’d go off and keep it out yo’ sight. ’Tain’t mah notion tuh drag you down wid me.” (186)

Janie, however, decided before she married Tea Cake that “Ah done lived Grandma’s way, now Ah means tuh live mine” (171). Nanny had wanted Janie to “[g]it up on uh high chair and sit dere” (172), but Janie is through living that life and she thus tells Tea Cake that “‘if you ever go off from me and have a good time lak dat and then come back heah tellin’ me how nice Ah is, Ah specks tuh kill you dead. You heah me?’” (186).

Tea Cake is no less untraditional than Janie. In response to her forceful reaction to his nightly escapade without her, Tea Cake replies: “‘So you aims tuh partake wid everything, hunh? . . . Dat’s all Ah wants tuh know. From now on you’se mah wife and mah woman and everything else in de world Ah needs’” (186-87). The equality within their marriage is unconventional, especially because Tea Cake expects Janie to participate on equal grounds. At their first meeting Tea Cake teaches Janie to play checkers, and he treats her like any other
opponent player, and that is symptomatic for his treatment of Janie in general. Additionally, being the ancestor in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Tea Cake represents the timelessness Morrison describes. Embodied in this timelessness is perhaps also absence of gendered expectations and prejudices towards the character which the ancestor is to protect and instruct. Thus Tea Cake is the manifestation of the African American folk culture, of African American heritage and identity. He is not, on the other hand, the manifestation of the African American male dominance within the African American community.

Being brought up in a white family’s yard by a grandmother whose belief in ancestral heritage had vanished, Janie’s self image was an alienated one at an early stage of life. That she at the age of six was not able to “recognize dat dark chile” (21) on a picture as herself, whereupon “Miss Nellie . . . pointed to the dark one and said ‘‘Dat’s you, Alphabet, don’t you know yo’ own self?’” (21), illustrates the lack of identity in the child. Moreover, she tells Pheoby that “‘Dey all useter call me Alphabet ’cause so many people had done named be different names” (21). That the orphaned child does not even have a proper name only enhances the need for the girl to establish her own identity.

Despite the bad starting point, Janie’s attitude towards life is different from Helga Crane’s, who is also alienated from her self and her heritage. Whereas Helga suffers greatly from being of mixed racial parentage, Janie does not allow her confusing background to bother her to the same extent, mainly due to the fact that she meets an ancestral figure. Hence, whereas elements of the tragic mulatto are traceable in Helga’s character, they are not in Janie. She is also of mixed racial parentage, but her racial duality never seems to bother her. That there is no ancestor in Larsen’s *Quicksand* underlines Helga’s desperate situation. That there is one in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, on the other hand, adds to the life-giving quality of African American heritage and folk culture which the novel advocates. Additionally, Helga’s search for identity is an unsuccessful one, Janie’s the opposite. That
corresponds to Morrison’s observation about the presence of an ancestor determining the fate of the protagonist.

Safe spaces exist on two levels in Their Eyes Were Watching God. Reading the novel as Signifyin(g) upon earlier migration narratives, the South in itself is presented as a safe space on an external level, beyond the frame of the narrative. The fictional South Hurston has created serves to provide African Americans with an alternative option to the North. In the 1930s the absolutely most common route of migration was still the northbound one. Only some were able to succeed in the North. The majority, however, soon realised that the North was not the Promised Land or the safe haven which it had come to symbolise. Myths turned to reality and for some migrants the solution to the new hardships which faced them in the North became countermigration. In Their Eyes Were Watching God the South is presented as a safe space where the failed migrants might restore his or her self image and identity through the restorative power of the folk. At the time Their Eyes Were Watching God was written, Hurston was alone in portraying the South as the final resting place for African Americans as a people. Other writers, such as Jean Toomer and W. E. B. DuBois, believed that through the “journey of immersion to the South [was] a necessary stop for the African-American intellectual; it [was] not, however, his ultimate destiny” (Griffin 146). Other presentations of the South, like in Quicksand, were dominated by either disbelief in the African American rural folk culture, or characterised by racial horror and oppression.

Also within the frame of the narrative there are safe spaces. Janie is a marginal figure moving from a traditional female role to an untraditional one. Consequently, like other migrants are dependent upon safe spaces in order to survive in hostile environments, so is Janie. In her marriage to Jody Starks and in Eatonville Janie’s selfhood is strictly limited. Jody considers Janie to be his possession and he restricts her actions by deciding what she may and may not do. She is not allowed a voice in the tale-telling gatherings on the front
porch of Jody Starks’s general store, and she has to cover her beautiful long hair so that no one will desire her beauty except him. Recognising Janie’s suppressed intelligence and wit, he starts mocking and scorning her in order to keep her in his power.

After an episode where Jody ridicules Janie’s looks in front of the group of men sitting on front porch of the store, Janie finally stands up for herself:

“Stop mixin’ up mah doings wid mah looks, Jody. When you git through tellin’ me how tuh cut uh plug uh tobacco, then you kin tell me whether mah behind is straight or not. . . . Naw, Ah ain’t no young gal no mo’ but den Ah ain’t no old woman neither. Ah reckon Ah looks mah age too. But Ah’ m uh woman every inch of me, and Ah know it. Dat’s uh whole lot more’n you kin say. You big-bellies round here and put out a lot of brag, but ‘tain’t nothin’ tuh it but yo’ big voice. Humph! Talkin’ ‘bout me looking old! When you pull down yo’ britches, you look like de change uh life.” (122-23)

Realising that “Janie had robbed him of his illusion of irresistible maleness that all men cherish” (123), Jody hits Janie and drives her away from the store. Janie is left wondering why he had to be so angry with her for making him look small “when he did it to her all the time” (124). The answer is that being the wife of the town’s leading citizen she is denied self, voice, and sexuality, and when claiming all three so powerfully, she threatens Jody’s position in their relationship and in the smalltown community.

Jody’s position in Eatonville does not diminish after Janie’s outburst, however, and after his death his importance is not easily forgotten by the members of the community. Hence within the village borders Janie is too confined by the judgments of the community to achieve an independent voice. Consequently, as she meets her ancestor, she gets the incitement to leave. Together Tea Cake and Janie travel down on the Muck “‘down in de Everglades round Clewiston and Belle Glade where dey raise all dat cane and stringbeans and tomatuhs’” (192), and that is the most important safe space in the narrative. There Janie is introduced to an including folk culture where she partakes as an equal participant and thus finds the space to develop further and restore her own belief in herself. Recalling that safe
spaces are “places where black women ‘speak freely’ and where domination does not exist as a ‘hegemonic ideology’” (Griffin 9) it is also exactly what the Muck signifies for Janie.

Initially Janie stays at home while Tea Cake is working in the fields. Soon, however, Tea Cake tells her that “‘Ah gits lonesome out dere all day ’thout yuh. After dis, you betta come git uh job uh work out dere lak de rest uh de women – so Ah won’t be losin’ time comin’ home’” (198). Working there on the field with all the other migrants is a new experience for Janie. She who had been totally isolated from the general community in Eatonville rapidly becomes a part of the comradeship between the workers once they realise that she is one of them:

There was a suppressed murmur when she picked up a basket and went to work. She was already getting to be a special case on the muck. It was generally assumed that she thought herself too good to work like the rest of the women and that Tea Cake “pomped her up tuh dat.” But all day long the romping and playing they carried on behind the boss’s back made her popular right away. It got the whole field to playing off and on. (199)

Hence Janie has finally managed to enter a community where she is accepted and respected for whom she is. She even participates in the so-called lying session in front of their house in the evenings, “she could listen and laugh and even talk some herself if she wanted to” (200).

The unique fellowship Janie experiences on the Muck may be characterised as a manifestation of what Victor Turner refers to as *communitas*. Turner argues that communitas emerges in the state of liminality, “if not as a spontaneous expression of sociability, at least in a cultural and normative form – stressing equality and comradeship as norms” (232). When Janie starts working on the field together with the other migrant workers she resembles the initiand of transition rites and thus enters the state of liminality and becomes like the others “divested of the outward attributes of social position, set aside from the main arenas of social life in a seclusion lodge or camp, and reduced to an equality with [her] fellow initiands regardless of their preritual status” (Turner 232). The migrant workers’ status prior to working on the Muck is irrelevant as long as they participate in the work like everyone else, and when
they do, they are internally among the workers all treated equally, regardless of gender and class. That is a new situation to Janie and she enjoys her new social position which is far from “sittin’ on porches lak de white madam” (172) which to Nanny “looked lak uh mighty fine thing” (172).

Nanny belonged to a different time than Janie and her opinion on what a good life is differed from Janie’s. Moreover, Nanny had lacked the belief in Janie’s ability to take care of herself, and she said to Janie when she forced her to marry that “[’t]ain’t Logan Killicks Ah wants you to have, baby, it’s protection” (30). Nanny’s ideal of a good life came from watching the white middle- and upper-class women and how they lived their lives, and she wished for Janie to achieve what they have. According to Nanny, if Janie would achieve that, all her struggles would be worthwhile: “Ah been waitin’ a long time, Janie, but nothin’ Ah been through ain’t too much if you just take a stand on high ground lak Ah dreamed” (32). However, Nanny also tells Janie that “Ah was born back due in slavery so it wasn’t for me to fulfill my dreams of whut a woman oughta be and to do. But nothing can stop you from wishin’” (31). Paradoxically, Nanny does not realise that just as slavery robbed her of her autonomy, she is now robbing Janie of hers. Luckily, Janie does not stop wishing, and on the Muck she reaches what she wished for.

When Tea Cake dies, Janie decides to leave the Muck: “They had begged Janie to stay on with them and she had stayed a few weeks to keep them from feeling bad. But the muck meant Tea Cake and Tea Cake wasn’t there” (283). The community which awaits her in Eatonville is a different one from the one on the Muck and on her return to her house the Eatonville community, still loyal to the memory of Mayor Starks, sit “in judgment” (10). In Patricia Felisa Barbeito’s words, they read her return to the village as “another tragic story of female abandonment and failure” (380). Carol Batker argues in an essay on the sexual politics of Their Eyes Were Watching God, the classic blues, and the black woman’s club movement,
that Hurston inverts class biases when “the ‘moral’ working class stand in judgement of Janie” (205). Their judgment is not only motivated by class attitudes of what is respectable however. When Janie returns to Eatonville after a year and a half with Tea Cake down on the Muck, the afternoon porch sitters sit in judgment also because “[s]eeing the woman as she was made them remember the envy they had stored up from other times” (Hurston 10). Thus when Janie returns in overalls and “firm buttocks like she had grape fruits in her hip pockets; the great rope of black hair swinging to her waist and unraveling in the wind like a plume; then her pugnacious breasts trying to bore holes in her shirt” (11) both women and men feel both envy and desire. Finding a decent channel for such feelings is difficult, and judgement is a secure path in order to maintain your own respectability within the community. Moreover, the legacy of Jody Starks lives on in the village and its inhabitants judge Janie for what they believe he would have considered unrespectable and immoral behaviour for a woman of her social standing.

On her journey into the Deep South Janie has developed and changed. She has formed an identity and achieved a voice. Furthermore, in Eatonville she owns a house and she is economically independent, as she and Tea Cake never used the money she inherited from Jody. Thus returning to Eatonville does not really impose any threat to her selfhood. Her house is a safe space and a shelter from “Mouth-Almighty,” Janie’s nickname for the community’s common voice with which she mocks its God-like authority. She passes the porch-sitters as herself not the mayor’s wife and leaves them in speechless disarray. Then she enters her safe haven where she may continue to live her life her own way, regardless of the community’s restrictions. Consequently it is the fact that Janie has the possibility to enter a safe space in Eatonville, which enables her return.

That Janie may actually settle in a home where there is room for her to live according to her own wishes, a constant space which is hers and which will remain so, separates her
from the other questing figures I have discussed. Jake, Ray, and Helga all share a restlessness and alienation which they cannot remove in any way because they have no place to call home. They have no place to settle which serves as their natural place of return as their journeys come to an end. That is why Jake and Ray’s roaming does not reach an end, and that is why Helga’s tragic stop in the South signifies her metaphorical death. Helga’s final resting place is not her home; it is a confining space where life for her is impossible. Janie, on the other hand, has performed a successful journey and returns to a final resting place which is life-sustaining. While she has been away, the meaning of the house has changed from being a symbol of confinement, which it was during her marriage to Jody, to a safe space which protects her from prejudices and oppression.

*Their Eyes Were Watching God* is an extensive journey of immersion into the South and southern folk culture, and Hurston, like Larsen, presents a South devoid of a threatening white power. Had it not been for Janie’s grandmother, a former slave who worked for white people her whole life, the oppressive relationship between white and black Americans would not be a subject in the novel at all. After Nanny dies, her warnings of the white oppressive power, based on her own experiences, live on in Janie’s mind only: “de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out. Maybe it’s some lace way off in de ocean where de black man is in power, but we don’t know nothin’ but what we see. So de white man throw down de load and tell the de nigger man tuh pick it up” (29). However, as Janie slowly liberates herself from Nanny’s strong opinions on how to live her life, the legacy of the previously oppressed slave disappears in a manner which almost suggests the disappearance of white supremacy. If not so drastically, it definitely implies a decline of white oppression into that of insignificance to the protagonist.

In *Home to Harlem* McKay portrays an all black community, something which underscores the exceptionality of the pulsating Harlem scene. Similarly, the all black
community Hurston depicts in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* exists for a purpose. Hurston portrays a woman’s journey towards selfhood and love, two ambitions which in themselves may be difficult to achieve, combined even more so. Had there existed a white oppressive power in the novel it would have overshadowed Janie’s search for self and voice within a male-dominated African American community. Being an unconventional woman herself, Hurston was probably not unfamiliar with the limitations imposed on women also within the African American community. Robert E. Hemenway notes in his biography on Hurston that “[t]he novel culminates the fifteen-year effort to celebrate her [Hurston’s] birthright which came through the exploration of a woman’s consciousness, accompanied by an assertion of that woman’s right to selfhood” (232).

The journey of immersion is the key concept in Griffin’s discussion of southern countermigration. Robert B. Stepto was the first to systematise the concepts of ascent and immersion in relation to African American literature. In *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative* (1979), he defines the immersion narrative as follows:

> [T]he immersion narrative is fundamentally an expression of a ritualised journey into a symbolic South, in which the protagonist seeks those aspects of tribal literacy that ameliorate, if not obliterate, the conditions imposed by solitude. The conventional immersion narrative ends almost paradoxically, with the questing figure located in or near the narrative’s most oppressive social structure but free in the sense that he has gained or regained sufficient tribal literacy to assume the mantle of an articulate kinsman. As the phrase “articulate kinsman” suggests, the hero or heroine of an immersion narrative must be willing to forsake highly individualized mobility in the narrative’s least oppressive social structure for a posture of relative stasis in the most oppressive environment, a loss that is only occasionally assuaged by the newfound balms of group identity. (167)

Stepto remarks, however, that *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is both a narrative of immersion and ascent. The ascent narrative resembles the traditional migration narrative as presented by Griffin and it must be pointed out that in several ways, Janie’s final journey of ascent is not a traditional one. Conventionally the ascent narrative ends with the questing figure situated in the least oppressive environment offered by the narrative, and “free in the
sense that he or she has gained sufficient literacy to assume the mantle of an articulate survivor” (Stepto 167). The phrase “articulate survivor” suggests, according to Stepto, that the hero or heroine must be willing to forsake familial or communal postures in the narrative’s most oppressive setting for a new position in the least oppressive one. Stepto adds thereto, “at best, one of solitude; at worst, one of alienation” (167).

Janie’s journey of immersion starts at the same time as her conscious life commences at Nanny’s gate, when Nanny catches her kissing Johnny Taylor. Terrified by the dawning sexuality of her granddaughter, she forces her to marry the much older Logan Killicks in an attempt to make a respectable woman out of her. Nanny hopes that the marriage will rescue Janie from the ill fate she herself and Janie’s mother suffered. For Janie, however, “Nanny’s words made Janie’s kiss across the gatepost seem like a manure pile after a rain” (27) and she exclaims “‘Naw, Nanny, no ma’am! Is dat whut he been hangin’ round here for? He look like some ole skull-head in de grave yard’” (28). Nanny will not hear Janie’s objections and shouts “‘[s]o you don’t want to marry off decent like, do yuh? You just wants to hug and kiss and feel around with the first one man and then another, huh? You wants to make me suck the same sorrow yo’ mama did, eh?’” (28). Later she laments that “‘[d]e nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see. Ah been paryin’ for it to be different wid you [Janie]. Lawd, Lawd, Lawd!’” (29).

Nanny has internalised the white prejudices against black women and their sexuality, and that is why she pushes Janie into marriage. She believes that it is necessary to shelter Janie from her own sexuality in order to maintain her respectability. Batker argues that “Nanny . . . represents Janie as libidinous and . . . uses middle-class respectability as a strategy of containment” (205). She further asserts that positioned as Janie’s moral guardian, Nanny “justifies her rejection of Janie’s working-class sexual experimentation as a form of ‘protection’” (205). Hence Batker identifies a close connection between class-consciousness
and attitudes towards sexuality, and that in a “controversial move, the text establishes
woman’s sexual ‘morality’ as an issue within the African American community, reproducing
a version of white racist ideology” (205). Again we see that attitudes from the dominant
community are copied by certain circles within the oppressed community in order to stand
above others in their own community. The middle-class hypocrisy which Larsen debates in
*Quicksand* is thus also present in Hurston’s novel, only it is Nanny who really is a working-
class woman who has adopted these values.

Janie does marry Logan Killicks, but soon elopes with the citified and stylish Jody
Starks, and thus her journey of immersion continues as they travel to Eatonville. After Jody’s
death she once again resumes her travelling and immerses herself into the Muck with Tea
Cake, which becomes the final stop on her southbound journey. According to Stepto the
questing figure in an immersion narrative seeks those aspects of tribal literacy which
ameliorate or obliterate the conditions imposed by solitude, and that is exactly what Janie
does. On the Muck she becomes a member of a group where all the members share one
characteristic; they are all migrants and the only reason they are on the Muck is the work and
the companionship. Thus the feeling of unity has taken over for loneliness.

The positive experience on the Muck provides Janie with the strength and power to
perform a final act of ascension back to Eatonville after the trial following Tea Cake’s death,
and that is also the ultimate confirmation of the individualised mobility she has gained.
However, in returning to Eatonville she forsakes that mobility as her life from then on most
likely will become one of physical stasis. Only this time her posture of stasis will be of her
own choice, and therefore another symbol of her achieved individuality. It is not an imposed
stasis forced upon her by people trying to control her life, like Nanny, Logan Killicks, or Jody
Starks did. Janie has become an independent woman: psychologically, physically, and
economically, and that complete independence allows her to choose to end her migration.
Nonetheless, that she chooses to return to Eatonville may not necessarily come across as the wisest choice. For even though her house serves as a safe space where the social structure of the community is eradicated, Eatonville still represents the most oppressive social structure in the novel.

The Eatonville community, “Mouth-Almighty,” represents possible containment and oppression on Janie’s return. Taking that into consideration it rather complicates the relationship between *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Stepto’s definition of an ascent versus an immersion narrative. According to the final act of ascension, Janie should at the end of the novel find herself in the least oppressive social structure afforded by the world of the novel, not the most oppressive one. However, if the novel as a whole is considered to be only an immersion narrative, Janie’s location at the end is in coherence with Stepto’s definition as she does almost paradoxically return to “the narrative’s most oppressive social structure” (167). At the same time she is also free because she has obtained freedom and voice in the sense that she has gained the sufficient tribal literacy to become an articulate kinsman, like the hero or heroine of the immersion narrative. Now, Stepto does not consider the novel to be only an immersion narrative, and I agree with him, but Stepto does not question the fact that the ascension at the end of the narrative complicates whether the novel fits the pattern he has constructed or not.

Simultaneously as Janie has become an articulate kinsman, she has also gained sufficient literacy to assume the mantle of an articulate survivor, as in the ascent narrative. She is on her return to Eatonville a survivor in several aspects. Janie has survived the hurricane and the flood on the Muck, she has survived Tea Cake’s madness and his attempt to murder her, and she has survived killing the man she loved and the trial which followed the shooting. Additionally, she has also survived repeated oppressions. Yet after her immersion
into the South guided by Tea Cake, she arises as a strong woman conscious of her own
identity and her cultural heritage.

In reading Janie’s return migration as a switch from immersion to ascent, Eatonville
becomes a symbolic North and the village may be said to represent the values of the urban
city. Compared to the Muck, Eatonville has a structure which may resemble urbanity.
Moreover, Jody Starks typically represents the northern migrant full of personal ambition. He
is independent, egocentric, and in search of success and power – similar to the ideal of the
American Dream. We have just established that Janie should find herself in the least
oppressive environment of the novel at the end of the story. Eatonville, however, is the exact
opposite. Now, reconsidering that statement and focusing on her return to her own house
rather than to the village, it is possible to argue that she finds herself in the least oppressive
setting of the novel. The house, which once was the very symbol containment during Janie’s
marriage to Jody, has transformed its symbolic meaning. Now, the house stands as the icon of
her newly gained independence and that also correlates with my reading of the house as a safe
space where social structure and community hierarchy seizes to exist. Janie herself even
notices the difference in the meaning of the house and tells her friend Pheoby after her return
that “’[d]is house ain’t so absent of things as it used tuh befo’ Tea Cake come along. It’s
full uh thoughts. . .’” (284).

It is fair to say that Their Eyes Were Watching God is both a narrative of ascent and
immersion, only not a conventional one. Similarly, I think that to identify the novel as a
migration narrative is accurate, only its pattern of migration is unconventional. African
American migration within the United States has more often than not been from the South to
the North. In Their Eyes Were Watching God, on the other hand, the North is not presented as
an alternative aim of migration, to Janie the North as a possible place of escape does not exist.
Moreover, whereas the direction of a traditional countermigration would be southbound,
Janie’s short but important journey back is northbound. Finally, she has survived the journey towards selfhood and she has successfully gained a voice within her community, and that is not a conventional ending to a migration narrative. Sadly, many migrant characters are left to continuous wanderings and restless searches for identity within hostile and strange communities where “home” is nonexistent. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God* “home” comes to exist after a series of challenges has been fought and conquered, just as Janie’s identity does.

Janie’s status in her home in Eatonville will most likely become one of solitude, but not of loneliness. She has her friend Pheoby whom she both trusts and inspires so much that after Janie has finished telling her story she exclaims “‘Lawd!’ . . . ‘Ah done growd ten feet higher jus’ listenin’ tuh you, Janie. Ah ain’t satisfied wid mahself no mo’. Ah means tuh make Sam take me fishin’ wid him after this’” (284). Furthermore she brought with her from her journey of immersion a package of garden seeds which “Tea Cake had bought to plant. The planting never got done because he had been waiting for the right time of the moon when his sickness overtook him. . . . Now that she was home she meant to plant them for remembrance” (283). In addition to her house, her independence, and her selfhood, then, Janie has also the valuable memory of the egalitarian love between Tea Cake and herself. Thus at the end of the novel a positive hope for the future of the protagonist has been established. Before she goes to bed in her own house for the first time in a year and a half, Janie notices that “the place tasted fresh again. The wind through the open windows had broomed out all the fetid emptiness of absence and nothingness” (285).
Conclusion

“Where’re you bound? / Bound for Canaan Land”

Throughout my thesis I have employed Farah Jasmine Griffin’s discussion of the four pivotal moments of the African American migration narrative as a starting point and as a basis for comparison. I knew prior to starting on this project that none of the texts I wished to address would correspond directly to Griffin’s identified characteristics of the migration narrative. Yet, I also knew that migration was a phenomenon which was important in all the three novels I wanted to include. Realising the novels appear to be very different, my impression was that the novels still shared significant characteristics and issues, and that those issues were most certainly related to migration. Thus my intention was to establish that my presumption was correct; that *Home to Harlem*, *Quicksand*, and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* could well be characterised as migration narratives, though perhaps unconventional ones.

Now, I must mention that Griffin does discuss Nella Larsen’s novel *Quicksand* in light of migration, but predominantly in connection with what she identifies as the fourth and final moment of the migration narrative. In my approach to the novel, however, I wished to examine it more thoroughly.

In *Home to Harlem* Claude McKay portrays Harlem in a manner which in some ways confirms the widely held prejudices about how people lived in the capital of the New Negro. At the same time there is nothing inhuman or primitive in his portrayal of the characters we encounter. Rather, McKay has managed to address universal issues of loneliness, friendship,

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and love in a most subtle and elegant manner. Also, in his main characters he has portrayed
the psychological consequences of repeated migrations, a phenomenon which in this
perspective is strictly related to the African American experience. Whereas Larsen’s novel
displays a middle-class environment which is exclusive, cold, and almost hostile, McKay’s
Home to Harlem paints a picture of an African American working class which despite its
poverty, is inclusive, warm, and loyal. Even though Helga Crane experiences absolute
loneliness and exclusion to a degree which neither of the main characters in Home to Harlem
does, they all share a restlessness which generates continuous movement. Yet, the final vision
of Home to Harlem is far from as gloomy and bleak as that of Quicksand. Neither Jake, nor
Ray is able settle down in Harlem, but the final outcomes of their journeys have not yet been
settled and both characters are positive in their hopes for the future. Helga, on the other hand,
most likely has no future at all.

In addressing the final moment of the migration narrative, Griffin asks “To Where
from Here?” However, after having read and discussed Quicksand, which Griffin discusses in
connection to that question, I still wondered “To Where from Here?” Thus I found it apt to
provide an additional answer to the final destination of the migration narrative. Therefore I
presented Zora Neale Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God as a response to both Home
to Harlem and Quicksand, as neither of the novels managed to present an alternative to
restlessness and alienation. Different from those two novels in many respects, Hurston’s novel
still questions the same issues, such as identity formation, restlessness, aspiration for a
different life in a different place, and migration. Still, Janie Crawford is the only one who
finally manages to create an identity she is comfortable with, who has a home, and through
travelling manages to find a place where she settles – content, independent, and free.

In the title of this thesis I ask “Where’re you bound?” The Negro Spiritual from which
this question is taken from answers the enquiry with “Bound for Canaan Land.” Only, the
speaker has “trials here below” which presumably have to be settled before his “race is run.”

To the slaves in the United States, Canaan Land held a specific spiritual meaning. Canaan Land, or the Promised Land, was a metaphor for Paradise. It was not, however, a specific geographic place. Moreover, salvation meant escape or rescue from the torments and agonies of living. According to the Negro Spiritual, then, “Bound for Canaan Land” does not imply a worldly journey, but a spiritual one to the other side where awaiting them was salvation in the Kingdom of God.

Both during slavery, when slaves in the South heard stories of successful escapes to the North, and later when slavery was abolished and African Americans gained freedom of movement, death was no longer the only way to reach salvation. Thus as a metaphor in African American culture, Canaan Land changed its symbolic meaning from implying only spiritual salvation to including also the hope of physical liberation. The term became a secular metaphor. Travelling to Canaan Land, then, was no longer just a spiritual journey, as was suggested in the Negro Spiritual; it is a physical journey towards freedom in this life. The freedom of movement thus altered African Americans’ belief in the possibility of social uplift.

The new belief in the possibility of creating a new and better life somewhere else generated movement to the North, which became the new Canaan. However, the emergence of a secular Promised Land also embodied an indefiniteness which set hurdles for the questing figures’ searches for salvation. The North as Canaan Land did not more exactly specify a place. Furthermore, in a secular African American perspective Canaan land is not a term with a specific set of characteristics. Rather it is a phenomenon which could be best described as the manifestation of freedom. How that manifestation manifests itself, however, depends on each individual’s perception of freedom. Consequently, the indefiniteness embodied in such a widely held hope complicated the likelihood of discovering the Promised Land in the North.
The characters which I have studied in this thesis are all bound for the Promised Land. They are searching for home, identity, and belonging – something to free them from their loneliness and alienation. However, the indefiniteness of the secular Canaan Land makes it too easy for the characters to transfer their visions of Canaan from one place to another. When they realise that what they thought would be their Canaan Land is not after all such a heavenly place, they dream of a better life somewhere else and decide to travel there. Helga Crane is the extreme example of this, but also Jake, Ray, and Janie dream of better lives in different places time after time.

I mentioned that Canaan Land could perhaps best be described as the manifestation of freedom. There is one additional characteristic, however, which is crucial in order to establish a lasting sense of having reached the Promised Land, namely the creation of home. The characters in *Home to Harlem* and *Quicksand* are not able to do that. Janie, in Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, on the other hand, is. Janie is able to create both an identity and to establish a home in freedom, and the reason she manages to do that is mainly due to her encounter with an ancestral figure. Through the ancestral figure Janie enters an African American community where she is introduced to her cultural heritage, and she is allowed to participate in it. As she realises where she comes from and that there is a rich African American cultural tradition, she creates both a cultural and a personal identity which enables her to liberate herself from loneliness and alienation.

In *Canaan Bound: The African American Great Migration Novel*, Lawrence R. Rodgers writes that the “challenge of completing a successful migration is invoked in [his] book’s title. The phrase *Canaan bound* intentionally foregrounds the promise embodied in the migrants’ destination and also recognizes that the effort to fulfil this promise has remained very much in process” (ix). Just as migration has been a theme of recurrence in African American cultural expressions, the term *Canaan* or *Canaan Land* has become a conventional
metaphor for the North in African American migration literature. However, the North has not often been portrayed as the land of Canaan or the Promised Land, but the characters have frequently been portrayed as believing that it is. Of the three novels I have addressed, it is only Hurston’s novel which portrays a character who is able to reach a Promised Land where she obtains both physical and spiritual salvation. Ironically, that is through countermigration within the South and through an encounter with the restorative power of southern folk culture. Through her novel, then, Hurston cleverly presents an alternative symbolical meaning to the African American literary metaphor Canaan Land.
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