Policing the Black Woman's Body in an Urban Context

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The problem of the unemployed negro woman in New York city is probably more serious than that of any other class of worker. She is unquestionably shut out from many lines of occupation, and through her increasing inefficiency and desire to avoid hard work, the best households and hotels and restaurants are gradually supplanting her with whites. This means in many instances that she must rely upon odd jobs and employment in the questionable house. . . .

Negro women who are led into immoral habits, vice and laziness, have in too many instances received their initiative from questionable employment agencies. . . . Some preventive measure must be taken for the colored girl going to work for the first time, and for the green helpless negro woman brought up here from the South—on promises of “easy work, lots of money and good times.”

—Frances A. Kellor, “Southern Colored Girls in the North”

The migration of black people to cities outside of the Secessionist states of the South in the first half of the twentieth century transformed America socially, politically, and culturally. Of course, the migration of black people is not a twentieth-century phenomenon. In the antebellum period the underground railroad was the primary conduit out of the slave-holding states; in the late 1870s there was significant black migration to Kansas and in the 1880s to Oklahoma. Before 1910 there were major changes in the distribution of the black population between rural and urban areas within the South. The proportion of black people in southern cities more than doubled between 1870 and 1910 and, consequently, the
proportion of the black population that continued to live in rural areas decreased significantly from 81 to 70 percent. Historians and demographers seem to agree that what is now called the Great Migration needs to be viewed in the context of these earlier migratory patterns and in light of the fact that black people were becoming increasingly urbanized before they left for northern cities.

When considering the complex cultural transformations that not only accompany but are an integral part of these demographic shifts, it is important to challenge simplistic mythologies of how a rural black folk without the necessary industrial skills, untutored in the ways of the city, "green" and ignorant, in Frances Kellor’s opinion, were exploitable fodder for the streets of New York, Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland, Philadelphia, and Pittsburgh. Certainly, male and female black migrants suffered economic and political exploitation, but it is important to separate the structural forces of exploitation from the ways in which black migrants came to be regarded as easily victimized subjects who quickly succumbed to the forces of vice and degradation.

I am going to argue that the complex processes of urbanization had gender-specific and class-specific consequences for the production of African-American culture, in general, and for the cultural representation of black women, in particular. The movement of black women between rural and urban areas and between southern and northern cities generated a series of moral panics. One serious consequence was that the behavior of black female migrants was characterized as sexually degenerate and, therefore, socially dangerous. By using the phrase “moral panic” I am attempting to describe and to connect a series of responses, from institu-


2. Carole Marks argues two important points in her recent book. The first is that the majority of migrants at this stage of migration were from urban areas and left not just to “raise their wages but because they were the displaced mudsills of southern industrial development.” Second, the level of a laborer’s skill was less important “than institutional barriers in determining migrant assimilation and mobility.” While there is a dispute about whether the majority of migrants were from rural or urban areas in the South it is clear that a significant number of migrants were urbanized and had previous experience of wage labor, skilled and unskilled, and that a number were professionals following their clients (Carole Marks, Farewell—We’re Good and Gone: The Great Black Migration [Bloomington, Ind., 1989], p. 3). See also Johnson and Campbell, Black Migration in America, p. 79.

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tions and from individuals, that identified the behavior of these migrating women as a social and political problem, a problem that had to be rectified in order to restore a moral social order. These responses were an active part of a 1920s bourgeois ideology that not only identified this moral crisis but also produced a language that provided a framework of interpretation and referentiality that appeared to be able to explain for all time the behavior of black women in an urban environment. Kellor’s indictment of the sexual behavior of black migrant women registers the emergence of what would rapidly become a widely shared discourse of what was wrong with black urban life.

Frances Kellor was the general director of the Inter-Municipal Committee on Household Research in New York City, and her “Southern Colored Girls in the North” appeared in Charities, “A Review of Local and General Philanthropy.” Her article provides important evidence that as early as 1905 the major discursive elements were already in place that would define black female urban behavior throughout the teens and twenties as pathological. The subjects of Kellor’s article are migrating black women who are looking for work, and she implicitly assumes that these women are alone, either single or, at least, without men. Therefore, according to Kellor, they need “protection.” On the surface, it looks as if Kellor is inciting moral alarm in defence of the rather abstract quality of female virtue, but it is quickly evident that she does not believe that black women have any moral fiber or will of their own that can be mobilized in the defence of their own interests. On the contrary, she believes that they become prostitutes because they are unable to protect themselves. Kellor’s report makes a strong case for the creation of an alternative set of institutions to police the actual bodies of migrating black women. While Kellor is apparently condemning the existence of employment agencies that create a situation of economic dependency and exploitation in order to channel black women into houses of prostitution, she is actually identi-


societies appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods of moral panic. A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to; the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible. Sometimes the object of the panic is quite novel and at other times it is something which has been in existence long enough, but suddenly appears in the limelight. [Stanley Cohen, Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers (London, 1972), p. 9]

fying the “increasing inefficiency and desire [of black women] to avoid hard work” as the primary cause of the “problem.”

Kellor has three major recommendations to make in addition to the establishment of more respectable and law-abiding agencies. First, she suggests the use of “practical and sympathetic women,” like those on Ellis Island “who guide and direct the immigrant women,” to “befriend” and act as “missionaries” toward black women when they arrive from the South. Second, she advocates the institution of a controlled system of lodging houses where black women can be sent at night and kept from going off on their own into the streets. Finally, she argues for the creation of training schools to make black women “more efficient.”5 This discourse, however, establishes a direct relationship between the social supervision of black women migrants and the control of their moral and sexual behavior, between the morally unacceptable economics of sex for sale and a morally acceptable policing of black female sexuality. In other words, Kellor characterizes the situation not as the lack of job possibilities for black women with the consequent conclusion that the employment market should be rigorously controlled, but, on the contrary, as a problem located in black women themselves, who, given the limited employment available to them and their “desire to avoid hard work,” will sell their bodies.6 Therefore, the logic of her argument dictates that bodies, not economic markets, need stringent surveillance.

The need to police and discipline the behavior of black women in cities, however, was not only a premise of white agencies and institutions but also a perception of black institutions and organizations, and the black middle class. The moral panic about the urban presence of apparently uncontrolled black women was symptomatic of and referenced aspects of the more general crises of social displacement and dislocation that were caused by migration. White and black intellectuals used and elaborated this discourse so that when they referred to the association between black women and vice, or immoral behavior, their references carried connotations of other crises of the black urban environment. Thus the migrating black woman could be variously situated as a threat to the progress of the race; as a threat to the establishment of a respectable urban black middle class; as a threat to congenial black and white middle-class relations; and as a threat to the formation of black masculinity in an urban environment.

Jane Edna Hunter, who was born in 1882 on the Woodburn plantation in South Carolina and trained as a nurse in Charleston and then at the Hampton Institute, arrived in Cleveland in May 1905 with little money. In an attempt to find accommodations she mistakenly arrived at a brothel, and her search for a place to live, she says, gave her an insight into the con-

5. Ibid., p. 585.
6. Another unspoken assumption here, of course, is that selling sex is not hard but easy work.
ditions that a black girl, “friendless and alone,” had to face. Hunter reflects that at home on the plantation she was well aware that some girls had been seduced, but she was totally unaware of what she calls a “whole-sale organized traffic in black flesh” (NP, p. 68). When she goes to a dance she is shocked to see that the saloon on the first floor of Woodluff Hall is “the resort of bad women,” and that the Hamilton Avenue area is the home of “vice.” Hunter’s discovery of what she identifies and criticizes as organized vice is interspersed with a description of her own difficult search for legitimate employment. Although highly trained she cannot find a doctor who wants to employ a black nurse, and she depends on a cousin to find cleaning jobs for her. Eventually, Hunter alternates work as a domestic with temporary nursing assignments until she finds a permanent position in the office of a group of doctors.

In her autobiography, *A Nickel and a Prayer*, Hunter states that her experiences led her to conclude that “a girl alone in a large city must needs know the dangers and pitfalls awaiting her” (NP, p. 77). While Hunter never situates herself as a helpless victim she carefully creates a narrative that identifies and appears to account for the helplessness of other black migrating women, and as she does so she incorporates Kellor’s analysis, strategies, and conclusions. Hunter turned the death of her mother, from whom she had become estranged, into a catalyst to devote her life to political and social activity on behalf of the black women she designated as helpless. As a young woman Hunter was forbidden to see the man she loved, and she blamed her mother for forcing her into marriage with a man forty years older than herself. However, she walked out of the marriage fifteen months later and went to Charleston to find work, declaring that “a great weight rolled from my mind as I left him, determined to find and keep the freedom which I so ardently desired” (NP, p. 50). Hunter’s mother died in 1911, after Hunter had lived in Cleveland for four years, and the realization that reconciliation was now impossible occasioned deep despair. In the midst of contemplating suicide Hunter found herself asking the question: “how could I best give to the world what I had failed to give her?” (NP, p. 81). Hunter’s self-interrogation resulted in her making her mother, rather than herself, a symbol for the helplessness of all migrant women. Hunter characterized her mother as both “immature and impulsive” and imagined that her mother would have been totally helpless if she had been a migrant. What Hunter cannot explicitly acknowledge is that a figure of such helplessness stands in direct contrast to the way she writes with confidence and self-determination about her own need to gain and

7. Jane Edna Hunter, *A Nickel and a Prayer* (Cleveland, 1940), p. 67; hereafter abbreviated NP. I am very grateful to Darlene Clark Hine for telling me about Hunter, her autobiography, and her papers.
8. Hunter maintains that she was one of only two black professional nurses in Cleveland. See NP, p. 87.
retain her freedom through urban migration. But the designation of her mother as helpless enables Hunter to occupy the absent maternal space. The daughter becomes mother as Hunter listens to the strains of a spiritual and is moved by the words, "ah feels like a motherless child." At this moment she decided on her "supreme work," dedicating her life to helping "the young Negro girl pushed from the nest by economic pressure, alone and friendless in a northern city; reduced to squalor, starvation; helpless against temptation and degradation" (NP, p. 83).

The fruit of Hunter's labors and the institutionalization of her maternal role into that of a matriarch is the formation of the Working Girls' Home Association, which later became the Phillis Wheatley Association, with Hunter as president. The Phillis Wheatley Association was the equivalent of the "controlled system of lodging houses" that Kellor recommended in her report, but under black not white control. In cooperation with the National Association of Colored Women other similar institutions were established in cities across the country with Hunter as chair of the Phillis Wheatley department of the NACW. The board that was established in 1913 to oversee the home included white as well as black patrons, and Hunter argued that the Phillis Wheatley Association was "one of the strongest ties between the Negro and white races in America" (NP, p. 165).

It was not only at the level of management, however, that Hunter was proud of the association as a model of interracial cooperation. The home was a training ground to prepare young black women for domestic service, and one of Hunter's aims was to improve relations between white mistress and maid by producing a happy and efficient servant. As Hunter states:

The most important factor in successful domestic service is a happy and human relation between the lady of the house and the maid—on the part of the maid, respect and affectionate regard for her employer; on the part of the employer, sympathy and imagination. Perhaps it is not going too far to say that the lady of the house should stand in the relation of a foster mother to the young woman who assists her in the household tasks. . . .

The girl who is fairly well-trained and well-disposed will become interested in the life of the family that she serves, and will be devoted to its happiness. [NP, pp. 161–62]

Hunter asserted that the Phillis Wheatley Association was "an instrument for [the] social and moral redemption" of young black women (NP, p. 157). A prerequisite for this redemption, Hunter maintained, was surveillance over all aspects of the lives of the girls in the home:

In fact it was necessary at all times to guard our girls from evil surroundings. I kept a vigilant ear at the switchboard in my office to catch conversations of a doubtful character, and to intercept assigna-
tions. No effort we made to restrict tenancy to girls of good character could exclude the ignorant, the foolish, and the weak, for these had to be protected as well. In the company of a policeman whom I could trust, I would sometimes follow couples to places of assignation, rescue the girl, and assist in the arrest of her would-be seducer. [NP, pp. 128–29]

There are extraordinary contradictions present in this narrative reconstructing the life of a woman who when young had declared her independence from both the patriarchal power of her husband and the maternal power of her mother by walking away from both of them to “find and keep the freedom [she] so ardently desired,” only to find herself in her mature years thwarting the desires of other young women by lurking in hallways to eavesdrop on their telephone calls and marching off into the night accompanied by the police to have their lovers arrested. And, yet, Hunter clearly tries to establish a maternal framework to disguise and legitimate what are actually exploitative relations of power. Exploitation becomes nurturance when Hunter describes the white mistress acting as a “foster mother” to a young black domestic worker and when she herself dominates the lives of her charges in the Phyllis Wheatley Association. Hunter, remembering her own mother as weak and helpless, created the association as a matriarchy that allowed her to institutionalize and occupy a space of overwhelming matriarchal power over younger black women.

Although Hunter is uncritical of and, indeed, manipulates and abuses the possibilities of matriarchal power, she is explicit in her criticism of the ways in which an abusive patriarchal power becomes embedded in the corrupt legal and political machinery of city governance. Hunter is trenchant in her analysis of the mutually beneficial relations between “unscrupulous politicians,” the “rapacity of realtors,” the creation of the segregated ghetto, and organized vice in Cleveland. But urban blacks are situated as merely the victims of the forces of corruption: the politicians, Hunter felt, played “upon the ignorance of the Negro voter to entrench themselves in office, and then deliver[ed] the Negro over to every force of greed and vice which stalked around him” (NP, p. 121).

Hunter utilizes the forces of matriarchal power to declare war on what she feels to be her most formidable enemy, “commercialized vice.” She describes her battle in the most epic of biblical language, a battle in which she joins with a “dreadful monster . . . spawned by greed and ignorance . . . hideous to behold. ‘Out of its belly came fire and smoke, and its mouth was as the mouth of a lion . . . and its wages were death’ “ (NP, p. 120). Corrupt city politics enables and maintains the monstrous network that feeds on the young female souls in Hunter’s charge, but at its heart is a single patriarchal figure whom she refers to only as “Starlight.”9 If

9. This figure was Albert D. “Starlight” Boyd, whom Katrina Hazzard-Gordon refers
Hunter sees herself as the matriarchal savior of young black women, she describes "Starlight" as the "Great Mogul of organized vice." He is the epitome of the seder of young black women whom he manipulates, betrays, and then drags as "prisoners" down into the depths of "shame and degradation" (NP, p. 122). But, although the war is figuratively between these forces of patriarchal power and maternal influence, Hunter's matriarchal power is aimed directly at other women. Black female sexual behavior, because according to Hunter it is degenerate, threatens the progress of the race: threatens to "tumble gutterward," in her words, the "headway which the Negro had made toward the state of good citizenship" (NP, p. 126).

Dance halls and nightclubs are particular targets of Hunter's reformist zeal, and she identifies these cultural spaces, located in the "heart of [the] newly created Negro slum district[s]," as the site of the production of vice as spectacle: "Here, to the tune of St. Louis voodoo blues, half-naked Negro girls dance shameless dances with men in Spanish costumes. . . . The whole atmosphere is one of unrestrained animality, the jungle faintly veneered with civilized trappings" (NP, pp. 132-33). Places of amusement and of recreation for black people are condemned as morally dangerous and described as being filled with "lewd men and wretched women" (NP, p. 132). Nightclubs where black women perform for a white audience threaten the very foundations of Hunter's definitions of acceptable interracial relations:

Interracial co-operation built the Phillis Wheatley Association and is carrying on its work; a co-operation of Negroes and whites for worthy purposes; which can gauge the spiritual contribution the Negro has made to American life, since his arrival in America. But in the meeting of blacks and whites in night clubs . . . there is to be found only cause for regret and head-hanging by both races. On the one side an exhibition of unbridled animality, on the other a blase quest for novel sensations, a vicarious gratification of the dark and violent desires of man's nature, a voluntary return to the jungle. [NP, p. 133]

There are deep fears being expressed in this passage in which the exploitation of black women is only one concern among many. These fears haunt the entire narrative and are also embedded in Kellor's account of young, black migrating women: fears of a rampant and uncontrolled female sexu-
ality; fears of miscegenation; and fears of the assertion of an independent black female desire that has been unleashed through migration. If a black woman can claim her freedom and migrate to an urban environment, what is to keep her from negotiating her own path through its streets? What are the consequences of the female self-determination evident in such a journey for the establishment of a socially acceptable moral order that defines the boundaries of respectable sexual relations? What, indeed, is to be the framework of discipline and strategies of policing that can contain and limit black female sexuality? These are the grounds of contestation in which black women became the primary targets for the moral panic about urban immorality.

St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton in their history of Chicago, *Black Metropolis*, describe how the existence of residential restrictive covenants made middle-class neighborhoods in Bronzeville “the beach upon which broke the human flotsam which was tossed into the city streets by successive waves of migration from the South.” They also describe the deep ambivalence in the attitudes of the black middle class toward the black working class who, as Drake and Cayton insist, perform “the essential digging, sweeping, and serving which make Metropolitan life tolerable” (*BM*, p. 523). This ambivalence, they argue, caused the black upper class to live a contradictory existence. On the one hand they defined their social position by emphasizing their differentness from the lower class:

> But, as Race Leaders, the upper class must [also] identify itself psychologically with “The Race,” and The Race includes a lot of people who would never be accepted socially. Upper-class Negroes, too, depend upon the Negro masses for their support if they are business or professional men. The whole orientation of the Negro upper class thus becomes one of trying to speed up the processes by which the lower class can be transformed from a poverty-stricken group, isolated from the general stream of American life, into a counterpart of middle-class America. [*BM*, p. 563]

Hunter, clearly, lives this contradiction: her self-definition and her right to control her own behavioral boundaries are beyond question. But, by positioning herself as part of the emergent black bourgeoisie, Hunter secures her personal autonomy in the process of claiming the right to circumscribe the rights of young black working-class women and to transform their behavior on the grounds of nurturing the progress of the race as a whole.

What Drake and Cayton fail to recognize, however, is the extent to which the behavioral transformation of this lower class was thought to be
about transforming the behavior of black working-class women. Hunter's accounts of the women who represented the success stories of the Phillis Wheatley Association, for example, are narratives of the transformation of the behavior of migrant working-class black women to conform to middle-class norms of acceptable sexual behavior while actually being confirmed in their subordinate, working-class status as female domestics. These success stories represented the triumphant fulfillment of the mission of the Phillis Wheatley Association, a mission that declared itself to be "to discover, protect, cherish, and perpetuate the beauty and power of Negro Womanhood," but which was primarily concerned with shaping and disciplining a quiescent urban, black, female, working-class population.

The texts that draw on aspects of this discourse of black female sexuality as a way to respond to northern urban migration are multiple and varied. In two important novels about Harlem during the twenties, Carl Van Vechten's Nigger Heaven (1926) and Claude McKay's Home to Harlem (1928), both authors use their female characters as the terrain on which to map a relation between the sexual and class politics of urban black life. While neither author appears to be overtly interested in prescribing a program of social engineering, both novels are fictions of black urban classes in formation. Central to the success of the emergent black middle class in these two novels is the evolution of urban codes of black masculinity. In each text representations of urban black women are used as both the means by which male protagonists will achieve or will fail to achieve social mobility and as signs of various possible threats to the emergence of the wholesome black masculinity necessary for the establishment of an acceptable black male citizenship in the American social order.

The first part of Nigger Heaven focuses on Mary Love, a figure of virginal purity. The failure of Byron Kasson, the male protagonist, to recognize the worth of Mary to the social security of his own future leads directly to his social disintegration. Van Vechten, a white patron of black culture and black artists, describes Mary as "cold":

She had an instinctive horror of promiscuity, of being handled, even touched, by a man who did not mean a good deal to her. This might, she sometimes argued with herself, have something to do with her white inheritance, but Olive [her friend], who was far whiter, was lacking in this inherent sense of prudery. At any rate, whatever the cause, Mary realized that she was different in this respect from most of the other girls she knew. The Negro blood was there, warm and passionately earnest: all her preferences and prejudices were on the side of the race into which she had been born. She was as capable, she

11. See Carl Van Vechten, Nigger Heaven (New York, 1926), hereafter abbreviated NH; and Claude McKay, Home to Harlem (1928; New York, 1987), hereafter abbreviated HH.
was convinced, of amorous emotion, as any of her friends, but the fact remained that she was more selective. Oh, the others were respectable enough; they did not involve themselves too deeply. On the other hand, they did not flee from a kiss in the dark. A casual kiss in the dark was a repellent idea to Mary. What she wanted was a kiss in the light. [NH, p. 54]

Van Vechten appears to dismiss, or put in doubt, the classic nineteenth-century literary explanation of blood “admixture” for these opposing aspects of Mary’s fictional personality in favor of using a more contemporary, and urban, explanation that uses Mary’s “horror of promiscuity” as a sign of her secure class position.

Mary’s middle-class existence is initially defined through her job; she works as a museum curator gathering together collections of African art. But Van Vechten also carefully defines her differentness from migrant and working-class black women in a variety of more complex ways. When Mary attends a rent party, for example, she is figuratively defiled by the gin and juice that is spilled over her and stains her clothes. When she regretfully wonders why she danced at this party until two in the morning Van Vechten has her mentally discipline herself by reflecting on a long, directly quoted passage from Gertrude Stein’s “Melanctha.” The passage is an extended reflection on the dangers of “colored people” getting excited and “running around and . . . drinking and doing everything bad they can think of” instead of “working hard and caring about their working and living regular with their families and saving up all their money, so they will have some to bring their children up better” (NH, p. 57). Mary carefully differentiates herself culturally and ideologically from the black working class. On the one hand, she defines spirituals, which deeply affect her, as a cultural form produced from “real faith,” which has the power to “touch most of us . . . and make us want to cry or shout.” But on the other hand, she sees the culture of “servant girls and the poor” as being very different. The latter, she is convinced, don’t really “feel faith—except as an escape from the drudgery of their lives. They don’t really stop playing Numbers or dancing on Sunday or anything else that their religion forbids them to do. They enjoy themselves in church on Sunday as they do in the cabarets on week-days” (NH, pp. 60, 59). Mary’s disdain of sexual promiscuity is firmly embedded, by Van Vechten, in a middle-class ideology of endlessly deferred gratification.

The counterpoint to Mary is a character called Lasca Sartoris, who uses her sexuality to negotiate her way through her life. Unlike Mary, who has never even been to the South, Lasca, the daughter of a country preacher, “began by teaching school in the backwoods down in Louisiana” and then migrated north when an uncle left her an inheritance. In the city Lasca is said to “cut loose” dancing, playing the piano, and singing in Harlem clubs all night (NH, pp. 83–84). Lasca’s sexuality ensnares a rich
and much older husband whose death leaves her a rich heiress. Van Vechten uses Lasca as a figure of overt and degenerate sexuality whose behavior is absolutely outside of all moral boundaries. She attracts, then physically and emotionally destroys and discards a series of male lovers, including Byron Kasson, having embroiled them in an intense bacchanalia of alcoholic, drug, and sexual abuse. For Byron, the would-be intellectual and writer, his choice of the influence of Lasca, rather than Mary, brings a certain end to all his hopes and ambition.

Claude McKay has a rather more subtle but, for women, an equally damning approach to the relation between black sexual politics, masculinity, and the securing of social position. McKay’s protagonist, Jake, is ultimately saved by Felice, the woman he loves, in an interesting narrative sleight of hand that transforms Felice from the position of prostitute to a figure of wholesome sexuality. Jake arrives in Harlem and meets Felice in a bar. He spends the night with her, pays her, and leaves the following morning thinking he will never see her again. Wondering if he can afford breakfast Jake discovers that Felice has returned all his money to his pocket, thus proving that her sex is not for sale. This gesture convinces Jake that he must return to Felice, but he is quickly lost in the unfamiliar city streets, and it takes the whole course of the novel for him to find her again. On the journey back toward this “true” woman, however, Jake has to negotiate the vice and temptations of the city, which are embodied in a series of other women that he meets.

McKay has a much deeper, richer, and more complex understanding of the cultural forms of the black urban landscape on which he draws than Van Vechten. But, despite this formal complexity, McKay situates his female figures in a very simplistic manner in various degrees of approximation to an uncontrolled and, therefore, problematic sexual behavior. For Jake’s journey is not just a journey to find the right woman; it is, primarily, a journey of black masculinity in formation, a sort of Pilgrim’s Progress in which a number of threatening embodiments of the female and the feminine have to be negotiated. The most significant of these female figures is Rose, a nightclub singer at a cabaret called the Congo. As its name implies, the Congo is “a real throbbing little Africa in New York. It was an amusement place entirely for the unwashed of the Black Belt... Girls coming from the South to try their future in New York,” McKay stresses, “always reached the Congo first” (HH, pp. 29–30). These “chippies [that] come up from down home,” a male friend of Jake’s advises him, represent “the best pickings” in Harlem (HH, p. 35). Felice, of course, is never seen there. At the heart of what McKay describes as the “thick, dark-colorful, and fascinating” Congo, he situates the blues and Rose, the blues singer (HH, p. 36). As far as Jake is concerned, Rose is “a wonderful tissue of throbbing flesh,” though he neither loves nor feels “any deep desire for her” (HH, pp. 42, 114). The assumption of the novel is that male love and desire could not be generated for, or be sustained by,
a woman like Rose, who is characterized as bisexual because she lacks the acceptable feminine qualities of “tenderness . . . timidity . . . [and] aloofness.” Indeed, Rose’s sexual ambiguity is positioned as a threat to the very existence of black masculinity, reducing Jake to the role of a “big, good slave” (HH, pp. 42, 41). McKay proposes that only a pathological and distorted form of masculine power could exist in such a relationship when Rose makes masochistic demands that Jake brutalize her, confirming his belief “that a woman could always go further than a man in coarseness, depravity, and sheer cupidity” (HH, p. 69). Jake’s refusal to beat Rose is a triumph of wholesome masculinity over the degenerate female element and allows Jake to proceed on his journey to become a man.

The dance hall and the cabaret, in the texts that I have been discussing, are the most frequently referenced landscapes in which black female promiscuity and sexual degeneracy were described. In William H. Jones’s sociological study of black urban recreation and amusement (1927), the dance hall was a complex and a contested social space. Jones could not condemn the dance hall as an “essentially antisocial institution” because it was possible that a dance hall could be a place in which “romantic love of the most idealistic type” could blossom. But dance halls encouraged a quick intimacy that could also lead the young “on the downward path to crime.”¹² What Jones condemned without compromise was the dancing that took place in the dance halls. He saw modern dances as nothing more than “sexual pantomimes. They are similar to many of the ancient and primitive methods of publicly arousing human passions in preparation for lascivious orgies.” He asserted that the results of his “careful investigation disclosed the fact that . . . a large amount of illicit sex behavior is unquestionably the natural sequence of certain modern forms of dancing” (RA, p. 122).

Jones reserved his greatest vehemence for the cabaret, where excess in dancing, jungle laughter, and semi-alcoholic beverages are characteristic features of their life. Here, jazz music is carried to extremes. In general, there is more abandon achieved by the dancers than in the formal dance hall, and more of a tendency toward nakedness on the part of the female entertainers. [RA, p. 131]

What Jones particularly feared was what he called “social demoralization.” He designated these recreational social spaces as places where “the most powerful human impulses and emotions are functioning,” impulses and emotions that threatened the deterioration of the fragile social fabric of the black urban community (RA, p. 122).

The existence of dance halls and cabarets was particularly dangerous
to the moral health of the black middle class, Jones maintained, because of
"the rapidity and ease with which the anti-social forms of dancing spread
upwards into and engross the so-called higher classes." He viewed the
social fabric of the black urban community as fragile because of the lack of
"adequate bulwarks against the encroachment of such behavior forms
upon the life of the more advanced groups of Negroes" (RA, p. 122).
"Class stratification" within the black community, Jones continued, only
"seems to be strong." If black middle-class public opinion could generate
disapproval of "the vulgar, sexually-suggestive modern dances . . . they
would be compelled to confine themselves to the lower anti-social cultural
groups in which they originated" (RA, p. 123). His appeal to the mobiliza-
tion of social disapproval appears to be as much about generating a black
middle-class ideology of solidarity and coexistence as about challenging
threats to the social mores of that group. If middle-class hegemony could
be established in the black community it could more effectively discipline
the black working class through the implementation of what Jones refers
to as "mechanisms of control whereby forces which tend to disintegrate
and demoralize the higher forms of culture may be excluded or annihi-
lated" (RA, p. 123).

Between Kellor’s report for Charities and Jones’s book the moral
panic about the lack of control over the sexual behavior of black women
had become absorbed into the fundamental assumptions of the sociologi-
cal analysis of urban black culture, which thus designated many of its
forms of entertainment and leisure “pathological” and in need of greater
institutional control.13 Kathy Peiss, in her recent analysis of white
working-women’s leisure and recreation in New York, describes how
white reformers in the early decades of the twentieth century believed
that “the primary purpose of reform for working women was to inculcate
standards of respectable behavior.” Perceptions of “a rising tide of promis-
cuity and immorality” and panics over “white slavery and commercialized
prostitution,” she argues, motivated Progressive reformers whose prime
target was increasingly “the growing menace of commercial
amusements.”14 But the black urban community was constructed as patho-
logical in very specific ways. Black urban life was viewed as being inti-
mately associated with commercialized vice because black migrants to

13. Jones acknowledged his greatest debt to Robert E. Park and others of the Depart-
ment of Sociology at the University of Chicago.
New York (Philadelphia, 1986), pp. 178–79. The focus of my analysis is rather different than
Peiss’s. She describes her book as “a study of young working women’s culture in turn-of-
the-century New York City—the customs, values, public styles, and ritualized inter-
actions—expressed in leisure time” (p. 3). Not only am I concentrating on black women
rather than white women, but also I am most interested here in the black women for whom
the site of leisure was a place of work rather than recreation.
cities were forced to live in or adjacent to areas previously established as red-light districts in which prostitution and gambling had been contained. The existence of restrictive covenants enforced black residential segregation and limited the expansion of what became identified as black urban ghettos.\textsuperscript{15} It was within the confines of East St. Louis, the south side of Chicago, the tenderloin in Kansas City, and Harlem in New York that an entertainment industry that served both a white and a black clientele was located and from which an urban blues culture emerged.

On the eve of the depression black women who had migrated to urban areas were still overwhelmingly limited to employment in domestic service and as laundresses. In Chicago, for example, between the First World War and the onset of the depression, over 40 percent of white women workers but only 5 percent of black women workers who entered the labor force obtained “clean” work (see BM, pp. 220–29). The category “clean” work referred to jobs like office secretary and department store clerk; “clean” work was the type of employment from which black women were rigorously excluded. From the biographies and autobiographies of the black women who eventually became entertainers it is clear that joining a touring vaudeville troupe or tent show was an important avenue of geographic mobility for young black women who were too poor to pay for train fares and for whom hopping a freight car was dangerous. In addition, being a member of a vaudeville show or performing in a nightclub was not attractive primarily because it offered a mythic life of glamor but because it was a rare opportunity to do “clean” work and to reject the life of a domestic servant.

When she was eight years old Josephine Baker started her first job and discovered that working as a maid for a white mistress was not “the happy and human relation” that Jane Edna Hunter maintained it should be. Baker was assured by her mistress, Mrs. Keiser, that she loved children, and she promised Baker the shoes and a coat that her own family were too poor to provide. However, Baker had to start to work at five in the morning so she could be at school by nine, and when she arrived home in the afternoon she had to work again until ten o’clock at night when she was sent to bed in the cellar to sleep with the dog. One day when Baker made a mistake Mrs. Keiser punished her by plunging the little girl’s arms into boiling water. This story and Baker’s account of how she watched white people murder and torture her relatives and neighbors during the East St. Louis riot of 1917 are situated in her autobiography as the preface to her decision to leave St. Louis when she was thirteen years old and get on a train with a vaudeville troupe called the Dixie Steppers.\textsuperscript{16}


Alberta Hunter left Memphis when she was thirteen because she had heard that young girls in Chicago were being paid ten dollars a week to sing. In 1912 she started working in a club called Dago Frank’s, singing to an audience of pimps and prostitutes, and then moved to Hugh Hoskins, a club for “confidence men and their girls who were pickpockets.” In many ways Alberta Hunter’s story of her early years in Chicago epitomizes the life from which Jane Edna Hunter wanted to save young black women in the name of maternal protection. But Alberta Hunter emphasizes how she found maternal care and nurturance from the prostitutes in her audience and describes how “the prostitutes were so wonderful, they’d always make the ‘Johns’ give me money you know. . . . They’d go out and buy me little dresses and things to put on me so I’d look nice.”

Ethel Waters agreed to join the act of two vaudevillians she met in a Philadelphia saloon because she was offered ten dollars a week playing the Lincoln Theatre when she was “getting three fifty a week as a scullion and chambermaid [at the Harrod Apartments] and a dollar and a quarter more for taking home some of the guests’ laundry.” Waters grew up in the red-light districts of Philadelphia, and in her autobiography she asserts that she “always had great respect for whores” (H, p. 17). Like Alberta Hunter she utilizes the language of maternal nurturance when she describes how her friendship with a young prostitute blossomed:

Being hardly more than a child herself, Blanche often played with me, read me stories, and sang little songs with me. Her beauty fascinated me. I loved her. There was a great camaraderie between us, and that young prostitute gave me some of the attention and warm affection I was starving for. Whenever I tipped off the sporting world that the cops were just around the corner I felt I was doing it for Blanche and her friends. [H, p. 18]

Waters reveals a consciousness of being part of a world in which women were under surveillance and has little hesitation in declaring her allegiance. The images and figures of the sources of both exploitation and nurturance in the lives of these young black women are in direct contrast to and, indeed, in direct conflict with the attempts of the black middle class to police and discipline female sexuality.

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Black women blues singers, musicians, and performers dominated the black recording industry and vaudeville circuit throughout the twenties, and they are the central figures in the emergence and establishment of an urban blues culture. However, in order to acknowledge their roles as the primary cultural mediators of the conditions of transition and the producers of a culture of migration we have to challenge the contemporary histories of the formation of a black urban culture as a history of the black middle class. The dominance of the conceptual paradigm of the Harlem Renaissance with its emphasis on the practices of literature and fine art relies on a belief that the black middle class did, in fact, accomplish and secure its own cultural and political dominance within black America. However, as Houston A. Baker, Jr., argues, what is called the Renaissance actually marks the historical moment of the failure of the black bourgeoisie to achieve cultural hegemony and to become a dominant social force.  

The contradictory nature of the culture that was produced in black urban America between the teens and the depression has not been retained or absorbed within black urban cultural histories. The twenties must be viewed as a period of ideological, political, and cultural contestation between an emergent black bourgeoisie and an emerging urban black working class. The cultural revolution or successful renaissance that did occur stemmed from this terrain of conflict in which the black women who were so central to the formation of an urban blues culture created a web of connections among working-class migrants. The possibilities of both black female liberation and oppression were voiced through a music that spoke to the desires which were released in the dramatic shift in social relations that occurred in a historical moment of crisis and dislocation. 

Women's blues was not only a central mechanism of cultural mediation but also the primary means of the expression of the disrupted social relations associated with urban migration. The blues women did not pass-

21. Virginia Yans-McLaughlin argues that the new scholarship in immigration and migration studies has moved away from questions about individual and group agency toward the social relations of exchange. So, instead of individuals assimilating or achieving, we have group strategies and networks. What we might call a network-exchange theory seems to be emerging as a potential alternative to assimilation and human-capital theory. In network-exchange theory, an ethnic group’s human capital is not simply transported from one place to another by individuals who fold their riches into the American system. Although it is true that the groups are sometimes portrayed as holders of assets, these are transformed to new purposes; indeed, immigrant groups seem capable of creating new advantages for themselves. The network structure that originally functioned as the grid connecting Old World kin might, for example, transform itself in ethnic subeconomies to provide jobs, housing, or even business opportunities. [Virginia Yans-McLaughlin, introduction, Immigration Reconsidered: History, Sociology, and Politics, ed. Yans-McLaughlin (New York, 1990), p. 12]

Using such a methodology Suzanne Model argues that because of their very limited access
sively reflect the vast social changes of their time; they provided new ways of thinking about these changes, alternative conceptions of the physical and social world for their audience of migrating and urban women and men, and social models for women who aspired to escape from and improve their conditions of existence. I have already described how hopping freight cars, because of the inherent dangers associated with that form of travel, was not a viable option for women and that travelling tent shows and vaudeville on the Theater Owner’s Booking Association circuit (TOBA) offered an alternative way to achieve mobility for young women—Mamie Smith, for example, started dancing when she was ten, and Ida Cox left home to join the Black and Tan Minstrel Show when she was fourteen. This increase in their physical mobility parallels their musical challenges to sexual conventions and gendered social roles. However, the field of blues history is dominated by the assumption that “authentic” blues forms are entirely rural in origin and are produced by the figure of the wandering, lone male. Thus the formation of mythologies of blues masculinity, which depend on this popular image, have obscured the ways in which the gendering of women was challenged in the blues. The blues women of the twenties, who recorded primarily in urban centers but who employed and modified the full range of rural and urban blues styles, have come to be regarded as professionalized aberrations who commercialized and adulterated “pure” blues forms. But as Chris Albertson insists, the blues “women were all aggressive women [who] knew what they wanted and went after it.”

The blues women brought to the black, urban, working class an awareness of its social existence and acted creatively to vocalize the contradictions and tensions of the terrain of sexual politics in the relation of black working-class culture to the culture of the emergent black middle class. In doing so they inspired other women to claim the “freedom [they] so ardently desired.”

to the job market black migrants were unable, or failed to establish such a system of mutual assistance. Although it is clear that networks of exchange did indeed exist within black urban migrant enclaves my argument here is that network-exchange theory is unnecessarily limited if it is applied only to access to the labor market and to alternative economies that existed within migrant communities. I would argue that urban blues culture could profitably be regarded as a network of exchange or web of connection rather than as a conglomeration of individual achievement. See Suzanne W. Model, “Work and Family: Blacks and Immigrants from South and East Europe,” in ibid., pp. 130–59. It would seem to me that the role of the Chicago Defender would be important in writing a history that documented the system of mutual exchange in black communities that provided information about and access to the job market. See, for example, Emmett J. Scott, “Letters of Negro Migrants of 1916–1918,” Journal of Negro History 4 (July 1919): 290–340, and “Additional Letters of Negro Migrants of 1916–1918,” Journal of Negro History 4 (Oct. 1919):412–65.
