

The Great Migration and the Literary Imagination

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In his short story “With Malice Toward None,” novelist Chester Himes explores the troubled mind of Chick, a black W.P.A. employee who toils in Cleveland’s city hall copying old records in the depths of the Great Depression. As Chick readies himself for a night on the town with his wife to celebrate his birthday, financial worries, not the joy of the occasion, occupy his thoughts. The apartment’s meager furnishings—a “greasy drab overstuffed chair,” a “reedy sounding radio,” and a lamp “that burnt out bulbs faster than he could buy them”—all bought in the afterglow of their recent marriage, now appear as “junk from a credit store” that constantly reminded him of the six dollar monthly payments he could not afford. Gazing at his wife as she struggles through “the cautious ceremony” of putting on her stockings without putting a run in them, he could only think that he “had been a fool to marry her” without the means to “even buy the stockings she needed.” No longer noticing his wife’s good looks, he had now “worked up an intense resentment toward” her and her need for “so Goddamn many things.”

Cleveland’s night spots offer the young couple little relief from the pressures of living on the margin. Chick’s wife reminds him that they have only three dollars to spend for night, but as they leave, he quietly pockets an extra five dollars set aside for the rent that will come due the next day. As they distance themselves from their squalid apartment, Chick begins to “feel huge and superior.” Giving the taxi driver a generous tip as they exit at the elegant Terrace Garden makes him feel flush, but only for a moment. The “furs and top hats” of the “expensively groomed couples” make him “feel shabby again.” Abruptly, he rushes his wife to the Cameo Club—a place that “wasn’t so high”—in time to catch the last floor show. There, he spies Tom Aubrey, an old acquaintance whom Chick describes as a big shot politician earning a “colossal salary” on a city government appointment. When Aubrey invites the couple to join his friends, Chick refuses to admit that he is on public work and feigns a prosperity that fools no one. Feeling “stiff and self-conscious” in Aubrey’s presence, Chick makes one more vain attempt to conceal his hard luck by picking up the

tab over Aubrey's objections. Chick must use the five dollars reserved for rent to pay the bill, leaving the couple with just enough change to cover car fare home. The story concludes as the couple eats in "strained silence" the next morning. Chick suggests that they take a short-term loan from an uncle to cover rent. His wife offers to scale back on the food budget. They will make it, she promises, but they will have to miss this month's furniture payment. Confronting the reality of perpetual sacrifice, Chick leaves for work filled with bitterness and remorse.<sup>1</sup>

Himes's story, written in 1937, captures the anxieties of thousands of African Americans of meager means who struggled to build their lives amidst the elusive abundance of the American City in the era of the Great Migration. Himes was one among several black novelists who pioneered a new literary realism in the 1930s and 1940s that rejected portrayals of black migration north as an exodus to a promised land. Writers such as Himes, Richard Wright, William Attaway, Ann Petry, George Wylie Henderson, and Dorothy West chronicled the everyday frustrations and failures of migrants in their confrontation with the urban North. Often informed by their own unhappy experience with migration, these writers portrayed a world of alienation, entrapment, oppression, and exploitation that awaited black migrants in the North. They criticized the literature of the Harlem Renaissance as socially irrelevant to the black masses for its failures to confront the harsh realities of black life in the North. Urging black novelists to adopt a social consciousness and new responsibility, Richard Wright advocated a black literature, directed to an audience of black readers, that turned to the expansive experiences of blacks in the period since World War I for its subject matter. He insisted upon a literary style that not only honestly conveyed a sense of the oppression

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<sup>1</sup>Chester Himes, "With Malice Toward None," in *The Collected Stories of Chester Himes* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1990), 48–55.

that blacks endured but that also gave “meaning to blighted living” and sustained a commitment to the “necessity to build a new world.”<sup>2</sup>

The themes that informed the social consciousness of the literary realists of the 1930s and 1940s do not figure prominently in recent histories of the Great Migration. As the historian James Gregory recently remarked, the literary realism of that era reads like “fictionalized sociology.”<sup>3</sup> Indeed, many of the literary realists found inspiration—and subject matter—for their work in the investigations conducted by the black sociologists of the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s. Influenced by the environmentalist approach to the study of urban life pioneered by Robert E. Park and Ernest W. Burgess, scholars such as Charles Johnson, Horace Cayton, St. Clair Drake, and E. Franklin Frazier compiled impressive empirical studies that located the sources of black urban poverty and social disorganization in the structural environment of the expanding ghettos of the north. With their focus on place rather than people, they concluded that ghettos produced maladjusted communities populated with marginal men.<sup>4</sup> And there was no man more marginal than Richard Wright’s Bigger Thomas, the protagonist of his novel *Native Son*. In the 1960s and 1970s, historians took interest in the Great Migration as part of their broader concern with the history of ghetto formation in the first four decades of the twentieth century. These important studies of black neighborhoods in northern

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<sup>2</sup>Richard Wright, “Blueprint for Negro Literature,” in *Amistad: Writings on Black History and Culture*, edited by John A. Williams and Charles F. Harris (New York: Vintage, 1971). For expert analysis of the Great Migration in black literature, see Farah Jasmine Griffin, “Who Set You Flowin’?” *The African American Migration Narrative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); and Lawrence Rodgers, *Canaan Bound: The African-American Great Migration Novel* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997). See also, Charles Scruggs, *Sweet Home: Invisible Cities in the Afro-American Novel* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

<sup>3</sup>James N. Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora: How the Great Migrations of the Black and White Southerners Transformed America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 75.

<sup>4</sup>Chicago Commission on Race Relations (written by Charles S. Johnson), *The Negro in Chicago: A Study of Race Relations and a Race Riot in 1919* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1922); St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City*, 2 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1945); and E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Family in Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1932).

cities echoed the themes of social disorganization theory, measuring the impact of de facto segregation on black residents and documenting the manner in which a pervasive white racism circumscribed the development of black communities in the first four decades of twentieth century.<sup>5</sup>

By the 1980s, this interpretation of black migrants as entrapped victims of a dehumanizing ghetto began to fall out of favor. Historians became increasingly sensitive to the implications, indeed political consequences, of the narrative choices that they made about black migration and black urban life. As historian Adam Green reminds us, to emphasize the “harsh realities of proscription” runs the risk of portraying black migrants as “history’s victims, rather than its makers.” The unintended consequences of such an approach were evident in journalist Nicholas Lemann’s widely read *Promised Land*. Primarily interested in locating the origins of the so-called urban underclass, Lemann argued that the black migrants who came north transplanted a culture of dependency that was rooted in the racial order of the rural, sharecropping South that sapped them of the initiative and ambition to succeed in the urban north. Deprived of the skills, values, and work ethic needed to survive the pressures of modern, urban life, black migrants fell victim to substance abuse, criminality, high rates of teenage pregnancy, and welfare dependency. Critics charged that if Lemann’s analysis went unchallenged, it would validate behaviorist explanations of urban poverty and its emphasis on the social pathologies of urban black culture. This culture of poverty

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<sup>5</sup>Gilbert Osofsky, *Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto, 1890–1930* (1963; rev. ed., New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1971); Gilbert Osofsky, “The Enduring Ghetto,” *Journal of American History* 55, no. 2 (September 1968): 243–55; Allan H. Spear, *Black Chicago: The Making of a Negro Ghetto, 1890–1920* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1967); David M. Katzman, *Before the Ghetto: Black Detroit in the Nineteenth Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1973); Kenneth L. Kusmer, *A Ghetto Takes Shape: Black Cleveland, 18970–1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1976); and Thomas Philpott, *The Slum and the Ghetto* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).

synthesis—pervasive in contemporary media and political dialogue—informed and gave political legitimacy to the conservative assault on the welfare state in the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>6</sup>

To counter the persistence of the racial stereotypes that sustain the culture of poverty thesis, a new generation of historians has reconsidered the impact of the Great Migration on twentieth-century American social and political history. Many of these scholars see themselves as engaged, at least in part, in a search for a usable past to refute the intellectual foundations of contemporary neo-conservative public policy. Because they saw echoes of the marginal man thesis in Lemann's work, revisionist historians did not look to migration-era ghetto studies—in either their sociological or literary form—for answers. Instead they shifted their focus away from place and onto people. By doing so, they portrayed black migration as a grassroots social movement orchestrated by the migrants themselves through their own family and community networks rather than characterizing migrants as dupes lured by devious labor agents or as irrational actors pushed and pulled by economic forces beyond their control. With a focus on the agency of the migrants, historians became more interested in how migrants transformed the city than on how migrants adjusted to it. By considering migrants as southerners rather than as urban dwellers, historians revealed how migrants drew upon the cultural resources of the South to forge a common identity, build new communities, and sustain folkways. Families survived rather than disintegrated. Migrants reinvented Christianity. They built impressive urban institutions. They launched various media that spurred a national African American consciousness. They created entertainment zones that gave

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<sup>6</sup>Adam Green, *Selling the Race: Culture, Community, and Black Chicago, 1940–1955* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); and Nicholas Lemann, *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How It Changed America* (New York: Knopf, 1991). Another influential work that contributed to the underclass debate was William Julius Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), which emphasized the structural conditions of urban ghettos, not the culture of dependency migrants brought with them, as the source of black urban poverty. For critiques, see Michael B. Katz, ed., *The "Underclass" Debate: Views from History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

blacks wider cultural visibility that enabled a broader Afro-Americanization of American culture. Careful demographic studies reveal southern black migrants not as shiftless, dislocated sharecroppers but as proud and ambitious men and women of modest economic accomplishment. These historians have so documented the creativity, vitality, fluidity, possibility, and integrity of the black migrant world that the enduring image of the typical black migrant as a dislocated sharecropper-turned-maladjusted ghetto dweller no longer seems tenable. Little wonder then that historian James Gregory prefers journalist Roi Ottley, who penned a hopeful and breezy celebration of Harlem in 1943, as a more reliable tour guide to the Black Metropolis than Bigger Thomas.<sup>7</sup>

But if we now see the Black Metropolis that black migration built as “a site of creativity rather than constraint,” as a “space of imagination as much as one of brute force,”<sup>8</sup> we have lost the ability, I believe, to come to terms with the frustrations and fears of Chester Himes’s character Chick in “With Malice Toward None.” Revisionists have recreated a world that Chick and his wife would have found unrecognizable. Chick’s night on the town suggests no possibility for self-transformation. Rather than finding the Cameo Club a refuge from the “perils of everyday life,”<sup>9</sup> Chick found that the cabaret only confirmed them. Rather than feeling “big time” in “an overlooked moment of social respectability,”<sup>10</sup> Chick’s encounter with Tom Aubrey only made him more self-conscious of his own inferiority. Rather than a nurturing, cooperative cultural ethic

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<sup>7</sup>Gregory, *Southern Diaspora*, 75–76, 115–16. This literature is vast; for my own favorable and more detailed assessment of it, see Steven A. Reich, ed., *Encyclopedia of the Great Black Migration*, vol. 1 (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2006), xxxv–xlvi. Important works that are part of this larger historiographical project that appeared since the publication of the *Encyclopedia* include Gregory, *Southern Diaspora*; Green, *Selling the Race*; and Davarian L. Baldwin, *Chicago’s New Negroes: Modernity, The Great Migration, and Black Urban Life* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

<sup>8</sup>Green, *Selling the Race*, 2.

<sup>9</sup>Shirley Ann Wilson Moore, *To Place Our Deeds: The African American Community in Richmond, California, 1910–1963* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001),

<sup>10</sup>Baldwin, *Chicago’s New Negroes*, 47.

transplanted from the rural South sustaining his family's stability, a pervasive and corrosive consumer culture exposed his poverty, eroded his sense of self-worth, and threatened his marriage. Chick found little in Cleveland open for negotiation and possessed few resources that he could leverage into spaces of opportunity.

The revisionist emphasis on the agency and creativity of migrants, despite its achievements in expanding our understanding of black migration, urban life, and African American culture, evades the questions about black migrant life that so troubled novelists such as Chester Himes. It is time that migration studies return to those older concerns, and I propose that there is no better place to start than by turning to the black literary realism of the 1930s and 1940s as a source of inspiration. In doing so, I am in no way recommending that historians resurrect discredited interpretations that emphasize the social pathologies of black migrants. In fact, the sociological studies of black migration conducted in the 1920s and 1930s never intended to advance an analysis that blamed black migrants' behavior for the social problems of the ghettos. Their work always offered a mixed assessment of black migration that balanced a degree of hope for political empowerment and economic betterment against the undeniable realities of crime, prostitution, juvenile delinquency, alcoholism, unemployment, and racial violence. In the same way, black literary realists never intended to confine their characters to an imaginary prison or to tell merely tales of woe of the victims of American racism and capitalism. They envisioned a more ambitious goal. They hoped to disturb readers and to urge within them the development of a more critical social consciousness and social awareness.

Literary realism's relevance to the historian lies in its capacity to elevate deeper, disturbing, moral issues. Historians might have good cause to doubt the utility of literature to their craft. The characters that novelists invent, after all, are usually atypical and not representative of the broader



classes of the population that historians study. Historians work with evidence, and novelists, well, write fiction. Historians aspire to detached, rational argument, and novelists cultivate the imagination and stir emotion. But as legal scholar and philosopher Martha Nussbaum has argued, “history simply records what in fact occurred,” whereas “literatures focuses on the possible” and invites readers “to wonder about themselves.” Good literature disturbs “in a way that history and social science writing” do not. As Nussbaum explains

Because it summons powerful emotions, [literature] disconcerts and puzzles. It inspires distrust of conventional pieties and exacts a frequently painful confrontation with one’s own thoughts and intentions. One may be told many things about people in one’s society and yet keep that knowledge at a distance. Literary works that promote identification and emotional reaction cut through those self-protective stratagems, requiring us to see and to respond to many things that may be difficult to confront.<sup>11</sup>

Central then to the power of the literary imagination, Nussbaum contends, is the way in which it engages the emotion, imagination, and empathy of the reader, an activity that she finds critical for elevating public thinking. That same insight can also advance historical thinking. The most fundamental principle of historical awareness, writes historian John Tosh, is that of difference, or the “recognition of the gulf which separates our own age from all previous ages.” To develop a rigorous sense of historical empathy, then, requires to have the “imagination needed to penetrate past mentalities which are irremediably removed from anything in our experience.” Nussbaum’s understanding of the power of the literary imagination is especially useful for helping historians develop historical empathy because it demands readers to enter “imaginatively into the lives of distant others and to have emotions related to that participation.”<sup>12</sup> Keeping Nussbaum’s advice in

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<sup>11</sup>Martha C. Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 5–6. My thanks to Kevin R. Hardwick for alerting me to Nussbaum’s work.

<sup>12</sup>John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History: Aims, Methods and New Directions in the Study of Modern History*, 3d ed. (Harlow, England: Pearson Education, 2000), 6, 7, 19–22; and Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, xvi.

mind, I propose to reexamine some of the themes and topics that revisionist historians of the Great Migration have explored—urban night life, migrant families, and the southern cultural roots of migrants—by turning to the insights of the black literature of the era. In doing so, I hope to demonstrate how literary realism inspires a more rigorous historical empathy with the migrant world. Ultimately, it can lead to a more compelling critique of the central assumptions of culture-of-poverty interpretations than the recent morality tales revisionists have offered as antidotes to the work of Nicholas Lemann and others.<sup>13</sup>

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Many recent histories of the Great Migration seek to recover the virtues of a black urban culture by drawing our attention to an assortment of leisure spaces where black patrons affirmed values at odds with those that dominated their everyday working lives. Migrants flocked to nightclubs, we learn, because they offered social and cultural sanctuary. Clubs not only offered food, alcohol, and entertainment, but acted as social centers that helped orient newcomers to the city. Inspired by lyrics that conveyed their frustrations and aspirations, patron-activists used clubs for planning collective campaigns to better their lives. Patronage of the clubs was always mixed sex, and the places were free of the gender constraints found elsewhere in the city. Women visited,

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<sup>13</sup>Two sources inspire my use of the term *morality tale*, both of which come from critiques of the excessive use of agency and the tendency toward sentimental romanticization in recent historical scholarship, one in the writing of American labor history and the other in the writing of the history of American slavery. On labor history, see Eric Arnesen, “Passion and Politics: Race and the Writing of Working-class History,” *The Journal of the Historical Society* 6, no. 3 (September 2006): 323–56; on slavery, see Peter Coclanis, “The Captivity of a Generation,” review of *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slaves*, by Ira Berlin, *William and Mary Quarterly* 61, no. 3 (July 2004): 544–56.

performed, and even owned clubs, which were important places of female entrepreneurial activity.<sup>14</sup> Likewise, houses of prostitution, or the more informal buffet flats that enterprising madams operated, functioned like social centers that “offered shelter and recreation” to overworked migrants. These places, according to one recent account, attracted migrants “searching for a collective experience through which to mediate” the city and offered an “alternative arena” for expressing “aspirations and desires.” By not looking at buffet flats through the lens of middle-class reformers these establishments appear not as dens of corruption but as cooperative enterprises in which “madams and female employees pooled their resources to run highly lucrative establishments that blended images of home and workplace.”<sup>15</sup>

We have already seen how Chester Himes portrayed the nightclub as a socially destructive rather than affirming environment. Ann Petry’s debut novel *The Street*, published in 1946, offers further opportunity for using literary imagination to assess the revisionist interpretation of nightlife in the Black Metropolis.<sup>16</sup> Petry tells the story of Lutie Johnson, a “young and extraordinary good-looking” (p. 276) single mother from Harlem who struggles to provide a comfortable and nurturing environment in which to raise her eight-year old son, Bub. Lutie clings to the values of thrift, industry, and enterprise that she maintains will enable her to secure the American Dream. Little in her life seems to justify such optimism. While she worked as a live-in maid for a rich, white family in Connecticut, her unemployed husband took up with another woman. She returned to New York City to take custody of her son and moved in with her sottish father and his blowsy girlfriend. She

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<sup>14</sup>Moore, *To Place Our Deeds*, 131–40; Baldwin, *Chicago’s New Negroes*, 45–52; and Gregory, *Southern Diaspora*, 135–42.

<sup>15</sup>Baldwin, *Chicago’s New Negroes*, 165; and Victoria Wolcott, *Remaking Respectability: African American Women in Interwar Detroit* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 107.

<sup>16</sup>Ann Petry, *The Street* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1946). Page references cited in the text refer to this edition.

endured four years of living in their small house filled with roomers, smoke, and gin, working in a steam laundry by day and going to school at night until she secured an appointment as a file clerk. Anxious to remove her son from the intemperate environment of her father's place, she signs a lease to a dark, dirty three-room, top-floor apartment on 116<sup>th</sup> Street.

Financial security proves as elusive for her on 116<sup>th</sup> Street as it did at her father's place on Seventh Avenue. Soon, she finds herself amidst the world of loose women and riotous living that she thought she had left. Mrs. Hedges, an amazonian black migrant from Georgia, operates a brothel on the first floor of Lutie's apartment building. We learn that Mrs. Hedges is in business with Junto, the local white power broker who owns the neighborhood bars, cabarets, and nightclubs as well as the apartment building that Lutie rents. It was Mrs. Hedges who long ago advised Junto on how to subdivide an apartment building so that it would generate greater income. Drawing upon her knowledge of the street, Mrs. Hedges convinced Junto that there was more money to be made catering to people's vices than in renting them slum apartments. "People had to dance and drink and make love in order to forget their troubles," she counseled him, and therefore, "bars and dance halls and whorehouses were the best possible investments" (p. 251). With Junto's support and a combination of industry, enterprise, street smarts, and deceit, she soon converted that first floor apartment into a "prosperous, efficient, enterprise" (p. 250). When Lutie moves in, Mrs. Hedges constantly tries to lure her into prostitution, forever eyeing the "great possibilities for making money" the new tenant could offer (p. 256). Lutie appears to catch a break when Boots Smith, a local black bandleader, "discovers" her musical talents at a neighborhood watering hole. She had gone to Junto's Bar and Grill that night so that "she could for a moment capture the illusion of having some of the things she lacked" (p. 144). When Boots Smith hears her singing to herself over the beer she could hardly afford, he offers her a chance to sing in his band at the casino. After a

successful debut, she has renewed hope, confident that the professional singing job will deliver her and Bub from the apartment on 116<sup>th</sup> Street. Boots, however, cannot offer her the security she craves because he works for Junto, who ordered Boots not to pay her in cash, only with expensive presents, as part of his own plot to lure Lutie into a sexual liaison.

Only if we detach ourselves from the world of buffet flats and casinos and write about them from the safety of temporal and spatial distance could we celebrate Mrs. Hedges as an industrious entrepreneur who offered recreational escape and lucrative employment to Harlem's struggling black masses.<sup>17</sup> Petry pleads for a different evaluation. She unsettles the sensibilities of her readers by thrusting them into intimacy with the alien world of whorehouses and night clubs. She will not permit her readers to sanitize these spaces, which appear in the novel as neither safe nor liberating. Mrs. Hedges uses her keen knowledge of the street, not to make common cause with Harlem's impoverished people, but to identify customers and employees for her enterprise. The street was full of men "who knew vaguely that they hadn't got anything out of life and knew clearly that they would never get it . . . men who had to find escape from their hopes and fears, even if it was for just a little while. She would provide them with a means of escape in exchange for a few dollar bills" (p. 250). Nor was there a shortage of young women willing to work for her enterprise. The street was full of girls who had either been married or "whose men had deserted them" (p. 252). Mrs. Hedges easily identified "lonesome, sad-looking girls just up from the South" who "didn't have the money to buy all the things they wanted" (p. 252). Mrs. Hedges was there to offer them an easy chance to earn some extra money for the things they desired. Similarly, Boots Smith's commitment to his own self-interests prevent him from courting Lutie. When Junto commands Boots to keep his hands off

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<sup>17</sup>For one literary critic who reads the novel along these lines, arguing that Mrs. Hedges is a subversive figure who redefines the American Dream to fulfill her own version of it, see Keith Clark, "A Distaff Dream Deferred? Ann Petry and the Art of Subversion," *African American Review*, 26, no. 3 (Autumn 1992): 495-505.

Lutie because he “has other plans for her,” Boots complies (p. 262). No matter how much he might desire her, Boots reasons that she is not worth the price of returning to a life of servility as a Pullman porter. Junto had made his career as a bandleader possible, and he could destroy it in an instant. And Boots’s past experiences with women leave him with no confidence that Lutie would ever faithfully wait for him at the end of a Pullman run.

If Petry shows us how nightclubs, bars, and buffet flats may have made the city more liveable for migrants, her literary imagination urges us to confront the social costs of that livability. She alerts us that men and women like Mrs. Hedges and Boots, even as they acted in service of their own interests, did so in ways that did not build community or lead to new, empowering identities. Boots’s position of authority as Junto’s right-hand man secures for him only a vicarious power that reinforces rather than challenges his racial subjugation. Once he comes to the realization that he is no less servile than he was as a Pullman porter, he resolves to even the score with Junto, not directly, but by attempting to rape Lutie in the novel’s climactic scene. As literary critic Hilary Holladay observes, “victimizing a woman of his own race emerges as the pervasive black male response to racial subjugation” in the novel.<sup>18</sup> The authority that Mrs. Hedges attains in partnership with Junto is just as fleeting. Her financial security is purchased at the cost of devaluing the lives of the men and women who inhabit the street. She enriches herself on the insecurities of others. No amount of wealth or prosperity that she accumulates, though, can bring her happiness. She migrated from Georgia in search of love and marriage. But a house fire that burned her hair and disfigured her body left her with no hope of ever having any man’s love. By turning all of her energy to her business ventures, she and Junto “made plenty of money. Only none of it had made her hair grow back. None of it had erased those awful, livid scars on her body” (p. 252). Wealth

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<sup>18</sup>Hilary Holladay, *Ann Petry* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996), 57–58.

gave Mrs. Hedges no more fulfillment than it did the Chandlers, the dysfunctional “filthy rich” white family in Connecticut for whom Lutie worked as a live-in maid before she moved into the apartment on 116<sup>th</sup> Street.<sup>19</sup>

Recent historians of black migration have marveled at how black migrant families “remained remarkably intact” throughout the migration era. Economic imperatives and the structural discrimination of the labor market, not a southern black cultural predisposition to a culture of dependency, fragmented families, forcing husbands, wives, and children to seek work away from home for indeterminate periods. Migration, we learn, “became a family decision,” requiring “extensive family involvement.” Families, in these accounts, act in concert and harmony out of a collective commitment to the household economy. To survive long periods of physical separation, families developed new “strategies to maintain economic and emotional connections.” Migrant women, especially, created cooperative child-care arrangements, opened their living spaces to boarders in order to meet both economic and emotional needs, sustained friendship networks over distances through visiting and letter-writing, and developed patterns of sharing and caring that enabled them to forge new friendships, secure help from strangers, maintain family stability, and establish permanent communities. These new patterns of mutuality and reciprocity demonstrate to historians the elasticity of black migrant households that enabled them to survive the transition to the North.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>For critical appraisals of *The Street*, see Vernon E. Lattin, “Ann Petry and the American Dream,” *Black American Literature Forum*, 12, no. 2 (Summer 1978): 69–72; Richard Yarborough, “The Quest for the American Dream in Three Afro-American Novels: *If He Hollers, Let Him Go*, *The Street*, and *Invisible Man*,” *MELUS* 8, no. 4 (Winter 1981): 33–59; Clark, “Distaff Dream Deferred?”; Holloday, *Ann Petry*, 45–63; Griffin, “*Who Set You Flowin’*,” 114–18; and Heather Hicks, “‘This Strange Communion’: Surveillance and Spectatorship in Ann Petry’s *The Street*,” *African American Review* 37, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 21–37.

<sup>20</sup>Kimberley L. Phillips, “‘But It Is a Fine Place to Make Money’: Migration and African-American Families in Cleveland, 1915–1929,” *Journal of Social History* 30, no. 2 (Winter 1996): 394, 395. See also Earl Lewis, “Afro-American Adaptive Strategies: The Visiting Habits of Kith and Kin among Black Norfolks during the First Great Migration,” *Journal of Family History* 12, no. 4 (1987): 407–20; Darlene Clark Hine, “Black Migration to the Urban Midwest: The

A less hopeful portrait of the ability of black migrant families to reconstitute themselves in the urban North emerges in the work of black literary realists. Ann Petry's *The Street* is once again instructive. Lutie and her husband Jim adopt what the historians might consider a family strategy of survival that temporarily fragments the family. She leaves home to work as a live-in maid in Connecticut just so that she and her husband could keep meeting the mortgage payments on their own house. As Petry's story makes clear, fragmented families were seldom secure, and men and women often acted against the interest of family stability. As Lutie realizes, she had no choice but to clean "another woman's house" and look "after another woman's child while her own marriage went to pot" (p. 30). Jim's infidelity brings Lutie rushing back from Connecticut and sets in motion the chain of events that eventually brings her to the apartment on 116<sup>th</sup> Street. Lutie finds no one in Harlem capable or willing to give her unconditional support. She has no time to forge friendships at work in the clerk's office or in the neighborhood on 116<sup>th</sup> Street. Her family's resources are woefully insufficient to help. Working seems the only path to the financial freedom she needs, but toward the novel's end, she perceives the destructive web of race and economics that destroyed her marriage and that of so many others like her.

The women work because the white folks give them jobs—washing dishes and clothes and floors and windows. The women work because for years now the white folks haven't liked to give black men jobs that paid enough for them to support their families. And finally it gets to be too late for some of them. Even wars don't change it. The men get out of the habit of working and the houses are old and gloomy and the walls press in. And the men go off, move on, slip away, find new women. Find younger women (pp. 388–89).

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Gender Dimension, 1915–1945," in *The Great Black Migration in Historical Perspective: New Dimensions of Race, Class, and Gender*, edited by Joe William Trotter, 127–46 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991); Jacqueline Jones, "Southern Diaspora: Origins of the Northern 'Underclass,'" in *The "Underclass" Debate: Views from History*, edited by Michael B. Katz, 27–54 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); and Gretchen Lemke-Santangelo, "'Women Made the Community': African American Migrant Women and the Cultural Transformation of the San Francisco Bay Area," in *African American Women Confront the West, 1600–2000*, edited by Quintard Taylor and Shirley Ann Wilson Moore, 254–75 (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003)



The larger truth that Petry suggests is that family and friends—the communal sources of caring and sharing so often emphasized in recent historiography—were in short supply in a world inhabited by people “too preoccupied with survival to give much thought to other people’s problems.”<sup>21</sup>

William Attaway’s neglected proletarian novel *Blood on the Forge*, published in 1941, further alerts us to the fragility, rather than the resiliency, of black migrant families.<sup>22</sup> Attaway seeks to transform readers’ consciousness about the dehumanizing power of American industrialization through his vivid, lurid portrayal of the depraved social and cultural world of the post–World War I steel mills of western Pennsylvania. Set in 1919, the novel opens as the three Moss brothers—Big Mat, Melody, and Chinatown—struggle to eke out a living sharecropping on a worn out stretch of land in the red hills of Kentucky. When Big Mat attacks the white riding boss in a confrontation over a mule, the three brothers flee to the north on a freight train arranged by jackleg labor agents. The decision to abandon the farm fragments the Moss family. Mat must leave his wife Hattie standing “barefoot . . . in the doorway” (p. 44) because the labor agents only need menfolks and are unwilling to transport women. Big Mat vows to send for her later, once he saves up enough money to arrange for her passage. The hyper-industrial environment of the Pennsylvania steel mills, the Moss brothers quickly learn, is as infertile as the tired southern soil that they fled. The relentless heat and pace of work, “pit bosses who raised hell” (p. 69), twelve-hour shifts, the ever-present danger of death and injury, and the crowded barracks erode human bonds and destroy families. The diverse throngs of men—southern blacks (“niggers”), Irish (“micks”), Hungarians (“Hunkies”)—that populate the mill town, hunger for community but find release available only in the form of corn whiskey, gambling, dog fighting, and prostitution. The Moss brothers befriend Zanski, an old Slav

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<sup>21</sup>Holladay, *Ann Petry*, 49.

<sup>22</sup>William Attaway, *Blood on the Forge* (New York: Doubleday, 1941). Page references cited in the text refer to this edition.

who expresses the futility of recreating the comforts of home in this industrial hell. “Feller from long way off die like a plant on rock. Plant grow if it get ground like place it come from” (p. 99). As the Moss brothers soon discover, the industrial social environment yields only stunted plants for children; the Slavic kids gang-rape ten-year-old girls and engage in incest in the bushes. Zanski’s own daughter, Rosie, resorts to prostitution by the end of the novel, catering to the scabs, the only people in town with money, in order to support the men in her family who are on strike. After Mat receives word from Hattie that she miscarried yet another child of his, he turns to corn whiskey and the prostitutes of Mex Town for comfort. He makes an ill-fated attempt to recreate the world of home, leaving the barracks for a little a shack with Anna, a hapless prostitute from Mexico. Anna sees love in terms of material possessions and aspires to Americanization through consumption. She finds herself attracted to Big Mat because he spends the money he saved for Hattie on the high heel shoes and fancy dresses that she craves. The shack with Anna that he has purchased here cannot replicate the home in Kentucky with Hattie; the spiritual emptiness of the relationship soon devolves into physical abuse, Anna herself is a source of jealous contention between Melody and Big Mat, which corrupts the brotherly bonds among the three Moss boys.<sup>23</sup>

William Attaway’s passionate protest against the alienation of industrial labor compels him to create characters who find the transition to the industrial north bewildering. Awakened at four in

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<sup>23</sup>For critical appraisal of *Blood on the Forge*, see Philip H. Vaughan, “From Pastoralism to Industrial Antipathy in William Attaway’s *Blood on the Forge*, *Phylon* 36, no. 4 (1975): 422–25; Edward E. Waldron, “William Attaway’s *Blood on the Forge*: Death of the Blues, *Negro American Literature Forum*, 10, no.2 (Summer 1976): 58–60; Cynthia Hamilton, “Work and Culture: The Evolution of Consciousness in Urban Industrial Society in the Fiction of William Attaway and Peter Abrahams,” *Black American Literature Forum*, 21, no. 1 and 2 (Spring–Summer 1987): 147–63; Rodgers, *Canaan Bound*, 110–17; Stacy I. Morgan, “Migration, Material Culture, and Identity in William Attaway’s *Blood on the Forge* and Harriete Arnow’s *The Dollmaker*,” *College English* 63 (July 2001): 712–40; and Mark Noon, “‘It Ain’t Your Color, It’s Your Scabbing’: Literary Depictions of African American Strikebreakers,” *African American Review* 38, no. 3 (Autumn 2004): 429–39.

the morning for their first day of work, the Moss boys find that rural measures of day and night and the passing of time do not apply to the industrial world.

Outside, the light had not pierced the morning smoke cloud. Through the windows the men saw the red ball on the horizon. It was strange waking to a muted sunrise. It was hard to realize it was morning (pp. 64–65)

Finding everything “too strange . . . to comprehend,” the brothers are “herded” to the steel mill, checked in, and then plunged into work at places “where strong backs were needed to do the work too small for the great machines” (pp. 65, 67). Melody even wonders “if the Judgment turn out to be jest a steel mill” (p. 68). Reading such passages it might be tempting to conclude that the Moss brothers were merely passive victims of impersonal forces far beyond their control. But I think that would miss Attaway’s larger point. Rather, he reminds us that these migrants from Kentucky, like hundreds of thousands of others, had only a limited capacity to resist the conditions of their exploitation. The Moss brothers exercised plenty of agency as they negotiated the new world of the industrial north, but as Attaway makes clear, migrant agency can be destructive as well as creative, it can lead to despair as much as survival, and can reinforce rather than contest exploitation. One of the novel’s great strengths for historians, like that of Petry’s, is that it draws our attention not to the resilient caring and sharing networks that black migrant families summonsed to remain intact as they fragmented amidst the demands of the economic imperatives of the racist labor market, but to the realities of abandonment, physical abuse, infidelity, and divorce so often overlooked in revisionist historiography.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>A further point that I would raise here is that many historians in portraying family strategies of migration and family strategies of survival amidst the structural forces of the labor market, only consider families as a singular unit with a singular identity. Seldom do we see men and women, wives and husbands, children and parents, contesting each other’s vision of family survival and what is in the best interest of the household economy. Conflicts over migration often pulled individuals within families apart, resulting in divorce and abandonment, a point that becomes clear when we look at the divorce petitions of working-class families. For my own investigation of this kind of evidence from one working-class region and my initial thoughts on its significance, see Steven A. Reich, “Matrimony on the Move: Lumbering, Labor Migration, and Family Conflict in Southeast Texas, 1900–1920,” Paper Presented before the Southern

Recent historians of the Great Migration do not share Attaway's preoccupation with the failures of a rural peasantry to adjust to life in an urban industrial setting. With good reasons, historians find that such interpretations exaggerate the break between the rural South and the industrial North and that they sustain enduring views of migration north as a decisive, irrevocable break from the South and from the past. Rejecting images of migrants as uprooted, displaced, or transplanted, they now see migrants as cultural transformers who left an indelible impact on local culture in the urban North and West. Historians now look for evidence of how black migrants brought the South to the city and document the southernization of American urban life. Migrant tastes in speech, worship, music, food, and dress infiltrated the regions in which they settled. Migrants carried with them an activist political spirit sharpened through years of struggle against Jim Crow, which soon revolutionized urban and national politics. The South thus emerges in these accounts as a rich cultural resource upon which migrants drew to recreate the trappings of down home, challenging the image of black migrants as culturally unassimilable guest workers.<sup>25</sup>

Literary realists explored the depths of black migrants' relationship to their southern roots and the cultural heritage of home. Their fiction, however, offers a more qualified assessment that portrays the relationship between migrants and their southern past as more tortured, which should

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Labor Studies Conference, Birmingham, Alabama, April 16, 2004.

<sup>25</sup>Two of the earliest works to consider black migration within the wider context of southern history were Peter Gottlieb, *Making Their Own Way: Southern Blacks' Migration to Pittsburgh, 1916–1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987); and James R. Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989). Some of the notable works that drew upon the questions and the framework that Gottlieb and Grossman proposed, include Gretchen Lemke-Santangelo, *Abiding Courage: African American Migrant Women and the East Bay Community* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Kimberely L. Phillips, *AlabamaNorth: African-American Migrants, Community, and Working-Class Activism in Cleveland, 1915–45* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999); Shirley Ann Wilson Moore, *To Place Our Deeds: The African American Community in Richmond, California, 1910–1963* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); Josh Sides, *L.A. City Limits: African American Los Angeles from the Great Depression to the Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Wallace Best, *Passionately Human, No Less Divine: Religion and Culture in Black Chicago, 1915–1952* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); and Gregory, *Southern Diaspora*.

give historians reason to pause at becoming too exuberant in their celebration of southern black survivalisms in the urban industrial North. Attaway was the among the most pessimistic in envisioning southern black migrants recreating a home in the North. The Moss brothers certainly express no affection for the rural South, which has lost its capacity to nourish. At the novel's opening, the Moss brothers' mother had recently been dragged to death "through the damp, rocky clay by a mule trained never to balk in the middle of a row," Hattie has had repeated miscarriages, and the "land done got tired" (pp. 7, 44). As Melody remarks, "sharecropping and being hungry went together" (p. 1). But the environment of the steel mills subverted nature, so blotting out the sun and choking the air with smoke that it seemed an improbable home for three boys raised so close to the soil. Even so, Melody vows that "someday the mills would be his and big Mat's home."

Mat had faced a mick who said the word that passed only between black men. Back in Kentucky everybody had called them "nigger." It was something for Mat to have so soon unlearned that. He himself had unlearned a lot of things. The old music was going. Now when he took down his guitar he felt the awe of a night—white with leaping flames. Sure the mills would be their home. But the mills couldn't look at China's gold tooth and smile. In the South he had worn that tooth like a badge (pp. 100–01).

The struggle to make Pennsylvania their home makes the novel as much a tale of cultural loss as it is a work of proletarian fiction. Making it in the North requires forging a new identity, and each brother loses the one thing—Melody's lyricism, China's humor, and Big Mat's strength—that gave them individuation in the South. Attaway reminds us that not all migrants could draw upon their southern past as a source of strength and spiritual nourishment. In many places, the agrarian values of the past were powerless to help one negotiate industrial space.

The struggle to replicate the communal, folk culture of the South amidst the materialism of the North emerges as a theme of other works of literary realism. George Wylie Henderson, whom literary critic David G. Nicholls has described as "one of the chief popular voices of the black

migrant,” explored in his fiction how migrants confronted the tension between the temptations of the city and a commitment to the values of the rural past. In his short story “Harlem Calling,” Obelia fancies a move away from the crowded, dirty apartment on Fifth Avenue for the serenity of Sugar Hill. Even though she admired the folks in her neighborhood as good people—“just like the people she had known down home”—she longed to live where “everything was so nice and quiet.” The people on Sugar Hill, she had heard, “were different, so refined-like, and there weren’t any children at all to speak of. They gave nice parties and played bridge, and went down to Broadway to the big theaters and things. Lovers’ paradise for Harlem—young Harlem!” When Obelia and her husband move there, their new neighbor, Sarah Bixley, throws a welcome party in their honor. The “precious-looking women” and men in dark suits who come to the party did not arrive until well after midnight. The party, filled with booze, live music, dim lights, and dancing came to an abrupt end when a man, whom Obelia mistakenly assumed to be Sarah’s husband, made a sexual advance on Obelia in the dark haze of smoke and alcohol. A week later, Obelia and her husband move back to the familiar neighborhood on Fifth Avenue, where she felt “she was standing on solid ground once more.” Although Henderson asserts the moral superiority of down-home folks over the superficiality of the smart set on Sugar Hill, his fiction captures the ambivalence that many southern migrants felt about their southern past.<sup>26</sup> Ann Petry’s *The Street* also offers an example of the fragility of folkways in the urban North. Mrs. Hedges advises Min to consult the Prophet David for folk remedies that could help her thwart the sexual obsession her live-in boyfriend, the building superintendent, has with Lutie. But root remedies have become one more commodity for sale in

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<sup>26</sup>David G. Nicholls, “Introduction,” in *Harlem Calling: The Collected Stories of George Wylie Henderson, an Alabama Writer of the Harlem Renaissance*, edited with an introduction by David G. Nicholls (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2006), 1; George Wylie Henderson, “Harlem Calling,” in *Harlem Calling*, 68, 70, 75. Henderson’s novel *Jule* (New York: Creative Age Press, Inc., 1946) also explores these themes. For critical analysis, see David G. Nicholls, *Conjuring the Folk: Forms of Modernity in African America* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 101–11.

Harlem's consumer marketplace. Mrs. Hedges warns Min not to let the prophet "see them bills all at one time. Root doctor or not, he's probably jest as hungry as you and me" (p. 120). When Min calls upon the prophet, she finds that she must wait in line as the doctor does a brisk business with repeat customers, selling potions and powders to desperate women seeking deliverance from their woes. Rather than part of some sort of community health care system rooted in a southern female cultural tradition, folk medicine, Petry reveals, was another enterprise in which schemers such as Prophet David profit off the insecurities of the urban masses.<sup>27</sup>

Like Henderson, Dorothy West, in her 1948 novel *The Living Is Easy*, explores the struggles of black migrants to reconcile their emotional attachment to their southern past with their aspirations for social mobility in the urban North.<sup>28</sup> The novel suspends its protagonist, Cleo Judson, between the elusive easy living of the northern black middle class and the idyllic image of easy living evoked in George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*. A black migrant to pre-World War I Boston, Cleo aspires to the comforts, wealth, and prestige of a bourgeois existence by marrying an entrepreneur twenty years her elder, whom she continuously manipulates for money and material possessions. She expresses her middle-class pretensions by disparaging the migrant masses and their children that she passes on Boston's streets.

These midget comedians made Cleo feel that she was back in the Deep South. Their accents prickled her scalp. Their raucous laughter soured the sweet New England air. Their games were reminiscent of all the whooping and hollering she had indulged in before her emancipation. These r'aring-tearing young ones had brought the folkways of the South to the classrooms of the North (p. 5).

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<sup>27</sup>For the former view, see Lemke-Santangelo, *Abiding Courage*, 141–44; and Moore, *To Place Our Deeds*, 128–29. For a recent study that explores the connection between northern black migration and the commercialization of folk medicine, see Jeffrey Elton Anderson, *Conjure in African American Society* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005).

<sup>28</sup>Dorothy West, *The Living Is Easy* (1948; reprint, New York: The Feminist Press, 1982). Page references cited in the text refer to this edition.

As literary critic Farah Jasmine Griffin notes, Cleo is resentful of the other migrants she encounters because she identifies herself within them. They represent the past that she had thought that she escaped but that remained with her. As Griffin explains, this “odd combination of disdain, identification, and need” defines her tortured relationship with the South. Her search for balance leads her to develop a scheme to bring her three younger sisters and their children to live with her in her lavish Boston home as a way to recreate the comfort and bonds of her southern childhood. To do so, however, she must resort to the skills—competitiveness, manipulation, connivery—central to middle-class strivers. Once she surrounds herself with the memories of home and childhood, she refuses to confront or to identify with the horrors of the southern past. At a dinner party she hosts, her guest of honor, a dean of a black southern college, appeals for contributions to the legal defense fund for a southern black laborer falsely accused of murder. Cleo refuses to assist because the case reminds her of the racial heritage she would rather forget. “Just because she was from the South didn’t make Robert Jones any nearer or dearer to her than anyone else in the room” (p. 260). Like Petry’s portrayal of Mrs. Hedges in *The Street*, West leaves readers with a character whose pursuit of wealth and prestige in the North has left her unfulfilled and has come at the expense of sustaining any meaningful identification with her southern and racial past.<sup>29</sup>

This essay has tried to illuminate how the literary imagination of some of the leading black literary realists of the 1930s and 1940s can help historians rethink their approach to the Great Migration. I would like to conclude by suggesting how that literary imagination might also lead to a more useful critique of culture-of-poverty thinking that still sets much of the scholarly agenda on the subject. Here it is useful to remind ourselves of Martha Nussbaum’s advice that novel-reading

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<sup>29</sup>Griffin, “*Who Set You Flowin’*”, 85; see also, Rodgers, *Canaan Bound*, 144–56.



creates an empathy in readers that “can be a bridge both to a vision of justice and to the social enactment of that vision.” A renewed history of the Great Migration informed by the literary imagination forces us to confront the darker realities of the world that blacks both made and endured in American cities during the migration era in hopes of achieving the kind of empathy Nussbaum envisions. It is not sufficient to challenge behaviorist explanations of the historical roots of black urban poverty by sanitizing the seamy underside of urban night life, by asserting how remarkably intact black families remained, or by celebrating how women converted northern kitchens into “sites of resistance” through the exchange of cornbread recipes and other southern foodways. Novelists from William Attaway to Dorothy West did not shy from exploring the grimmer truths of the urban, migrant world as critical subject matter for their work. As Richard Wright advised, African American “writers should not hesitate to tell the truth about their people for fear of harming them, or for fear that these truths may be used by belligerent whites against them.” Those fears for too long have preoccupied historians, producing the kind of sentimentalism Wright warned against. A “cowardly sentimentality,” Wright understood, made poor material for creating the kind of empathy necessary to envision a more hopeful American city. As literary critic Charles Scruggs has observed, black urban literature aspired to a dialogue that “sets the city of the imagination, the city that one wants, against the empirical reality of the city that one has.”<sup>30</sup>

Let me turn to one last example to illustrate what might be gained by adopting the kind of honesty that Wright urged so long ago. David Simon’s five-season, sixty-episode dystopian epic of the post-industrial American city, *The Wire*, just concluded on HBO this past March. Critics have celebrated *The Wire* as the greatest show in the history of American television, claiming that it is the only television drama that favorably compares to great literature. As one critic wrote, “if Charles

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<sup>30</sup>Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, 12; Wright, “Blueprint for Negro Literature,” ; and Scruggs, *Sweet Home*, 3.

Dickens were alive today, he would watch *The Wire*, unless, that is, he was already writing for it.”

Simon, a former crime reporter for the *Baltimore Sun*, and his collaborator, Ed Burns, a former Baltimore cop and schoolteacher, created a fictional Baltimore in which they explore the social costs of deindustrialization and the failure of American postindustrial institutions to respond. They, with the help of acclaimed novelists such as Richard Price, George Pelecanos, and Dennis Lehane, who all wrote episodes for the show, bring to life a complex web of characters from the street, police department, port, city hall, schools, and city newspaper. We become deeply invested with a complex web of characters, including the druglords who rule the streets, the thugs who enforce their edicts, the kids on the corner who push the heroin, the users who battle addiction, the underemployed port workers who smuggle the drugs into the city, the cops who investigate the drug syndicates, the schools who try to teach the kids, the city politicians who pressure the police and the teachers for effective results they can sell to the voters, and the newspaper reporters who cover the city. One of the show’s underlying themes is its relentless and effective critique of the drug war as public policy. The writers advance their point not by portraying drug traffickers as misunderstood heroes or as innocent victims of an overly aggressive police force. Neither does Simon glamorize the drug trade, but exposes it for what it is: unencumbered, ruthless capitalism. Rather, the source of the show’s narrative power lies in the empathy it creates for the characters, in compelling viewers to identify with people they would never meet and would otherwise quickly demonize. As Simon explained in an interview, it has been the utter lack of empathy, and the demonization of those who live in the inner city, that has transformed what began as a war against a dangerous narcotic into a war against people. The literary imagination of Simon and the other writers for *The Wire* have created the very kind of empathy that Nussbaum envisioned as elevating new understanding of social justice to inform a critique of an unjust public policy such as the drug war. Perhaps there is a lesson herein

for historians as well. If we think for a moment on Chick, Lutie, or the Moss boys, we might develop not only greater historical awareness about the Great Migration but lay the foundation for a more reliable, usable past that might help us to imagine and build the more hopeful American city that the literary realists once envisioned.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup>Nicholas Kulish, "Television You Can't Put Down," *New York Times*, September 10, 2006; David Simon, interview by Terry Gross, *Fresh Air*, WHYY, Philadelphia, broadcast on March 6, 2008; and Ed Burns, Dennis Lehane, George Pelecanos, Richard Price, and David Simon, "The *Wire*'s War on the Drug War," *Time*, March 5, 2008.