SOUNDING THE GREAT MIGRATION (1910-1970):
SONIC-AFFECTIVE MOVEMENTS AND MODES OF BLACK RESISTANCE

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ABSTRACT

This project reframes the Great Migration (1910-1970) as a sonic-affective formation comprised of Black migratory experiences. Migrations are shaped by sound, silencing forces, and the embodied listening practices that structured life in the twentieth-century United States. Across scholarly and general accounts, the Great Migration has often been narrated as a demographic movement from the rural South to the urban North. This study explores Black migratory movements as affective multi-directional journeys through shifting sonic environments. Drawing primarily from Black Studies—with contributions from Sound Studies, Deaf Studies, and literary criticism—the project attends to activism, literature, music, and memoirs through the notions of attunement and amplification. Attuning to sonic and multimodal dimensions of migrations reveals how experiences are structured through modes of listening and sounding. It also foregrounds how Black migratory epistemologies and expressive forms are moving sites of resistance.

Central to this study is the distinction between disquieting structures of racism and (dis)quieting modes of migratory resistance. Through close investigations into activism, literary narratives, blues musical traditions, and Black Deaf memoirs, the dissertation demonstrates how migrations involved both navigating and reshaping environments saturated with audism, racism, and silencing. Attending to sounds, quieting forces, and multimodal forms of expression—including the socio-linguistic heritage of Black American Sign Language (BASL)—the dissertation amplifies how forms of Black migratory affect and knowledge exceed conventional historical archives.

Keywords: Black American Sign Language (BASL); d/Deaf; Great Migration(s); Migratory Epistemologies; Multimodal Listening

DEDICATION

It can be easy to ignore the quiet sound of willpower, because listening to it demands more than hearing. This work is dedicated to the hardworking scholars and students around me—those who labored through grief, found the courage to speak, and persisted in the face of systemic disadvantage or injustice.

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World War II and Afterward (2005). These books offered me my earliest glimpses of what “Deaf Gain” could mean, long before I had any sort of theoretical language to describe it.

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INTRODUCTION: Resonant Departures, Arrivals Underway

The Great Migration (1910-1970) is commonly distilled into a grand story—about more than six million Black Americans who journeyed away from the U.S. South over most of the twentieth century. It was among the largest internal migrations in U.S. history, with far-reaching demographic, political, and socio-cultural impacts. As it unfolded, sociologists and historians initially began to study how these mass movements refigured socio-cultural conditions across the nation (Scott 1920; Johnson 1934; Frazier 1939; Drake and Cayton 1945). Joe William Trotter Jr. raises the stakes for contemporary scholars by claiming that studying Black movements during the Great Migration, "requires an appreciation of the established scholarship as well as a variety of new sources and approaches" (1991, 17). Classic investigations privilege empirical social science methods and largely overlook the lived sonic dimensions of migrancy. How do prevailing Great Migration narratives change when the socio-cultural dimensions of sound, music, and deafness are brought to the forefront of scholarship? This dissertation puts forth an interdisciplinary listening method to explore how activism, literature, music, and d/Deafness shaped the expressive epistemologies and emotive realities of migrancy.

Emmett J. Scott's *Negro Migration During the War* (1920) was the first landmark sociological and demographic account of what became known as the Great Migration. At the time he was writing, Scott was the highest ranking Black official in the federal government, so the tone of his writing was bureaucratic. He framed the migration as a socio-economic phenomenon rather than a collective indictment towards southern racial violence and segregation. Still, Scott's work occasionally leaves measured sociological

language behind in favor of more grounded and poetic descriptions of migratory movements:

> Workers, returning home, scrambled aboard the trains for the North without notifying their employers or their families. The crowds that blackened the pool rooms and 'hangouts' faded away as the trains continued to leave. Wild rumors about the North crept into circulation and received unquestioning credence. Songs about Pennsylvania, the spontaneous expression of anxiety and joy over the sudden revelation of a new world, floated about on the lips of the children (Scott 1920, 38).

Scott intimately describes rhythms of train travel or echoes of unquestioned rumors and recounts them into joyous or anxious tones of migrants' experience. While not framed explicitly as such, Scott's book is perhaps the earliest to record sonic experiences linked to migrancy in an academically rigorous and valuable way. Later projects, such as Isabel Wilkerson's *The Warmth of Other Suns* (2010), extend Scott's experiential focus by placing greater emphasis on the affective, sensory, and experiential dimensions of Black mobility. Wilkerson foregrounds the lived intensities of migration in arguing that millions of unique migration journeys were bound together by a "back-against-the-wall, reluctant yet hopeful search for something better, any place but where they were" (2010, 15). The Great Migration was not only a demographic shift, but a formation structured by disquieting oppression and (dis)quieting resistance.

Migrancy was lived and felt before the Great Migration was formally named. Migrants set forth from the South on earth-shaking, steam whistling locomotives. Armed only with hope for new opportunity, migrants searched for new homes in every direction. All along their journeys, migrants produced social movements, literature, music, and memoirs. I explore migrancy through listening to twentieth century forms of Black cultural expression. By centering these expressive archives, this dissertation reframes the

Great Migration, not only as movement across space, but as mobile sonic-affective formations. I argue that twentieth-century Black migratory experiences were structured by sonic listening practices and expressive forms of cultural production. Sound is lived, felt, and expressed across migratory experience. Consequently, the project identifies migratory epistemologies to account for how sonic expression and emotive embodiment carry liberatory forms of resistance that reinforce survival. My ethos of attunement and amplification emphasizes how migrants navigated disquieting regimes; specifically, by generating (dis)quieting forms of expression to oppose them.

Chapter 1 focuses on politicized expression—from the music of James Weldon Johnson to the speeches of Marcus Garvey—while assessing how the activist movements they mobilized appealed to migrant publics. Chapter 2 compiles literary narratives to analyze the sonic textures of migratory experience represented within. Chapter 3 amplifies how blues music functioned as a dynamic migratory epistemology carried through the guitar fretboard cartographies and voices of itinerant performers or listeners. Chapter 4 centers Mary Herring Wright's memoirs, exploring how her multimodal approach to listening reconfigures socio-cultural productions of migratory meaning. These novels, music, memoirs, and politicized movements are expressive archives that register migrants' subjection to oppression along with their mobile resistances.

Great Migration Historiography

Twentieth-century scholarship on the Great Migration has been shaped by several dominant historiographic approaches that warrant scrutiny. First, the most widely accepted historical frame involves dividing the period into two phases: the First Great

Migration between 1910–1940, and the Second Great Migration between 1940–1970 (Frazier 1939; Myrdal 1944; Lee 1966; Gregory 2005). Most projects have focused on the early twentieth century phase where mass movements exploded from intensifying pressure under Jim Crow Segregation and increasing rates of racial terror. Secondly, there are many examples of early books published between 1910–1970 which advance oversimplified demographic assumptions about the supposed South-to-North linearity of Black movement. During the first migration phase of early twentieth century, prospective migrants moved to the urban North hoping to arrive at an ideal "promised land" of freedom (Lemann 1991; Griffin 1995; Rodgers 1997). For many millions of migrants, mobility was non-linear and involved moving to midwestern, northeastern, and southern adjacent industrial cities. Finally, most existing work describes the period as a racialized exodus from the South which ended by the early 1970s. This project navigates the tension between macro-historical accounts and micro-histories of lived narratives documenting migrancy. In doing so, I reframe the Great Migration as shaped by sonic dimensions of listening, feeling, and socio-cultural expression.

Historical accounts of the Great Migration are moving away from sweeping demographic sociology towards heightened focus on lived migratory experiences. The Great Migration unfolded gradually across time and space; a mass movement that was unguided by any single identifiable leader (Wilkerson 2010, 9). However, it is necessary to acknowledge that the Great Migration followed notable demographic and geographic trends or patterns across the twentieth century. For example, Wilkerson outlines relatively predictable eastern, central, and western streams of Black movement (2010, 178). Gregory's tri-partite approach expands on the traditional two-phase model by designating

an interwar interlude between 1930–1940, which saw northbound movements decline and returns to the South increase. He also accounts for multi-racial influx of white migrations during the second phase between 1940–1970. (Gregory 2005, 23–39). By the early 1970s, Black migrants had established significant presence across nearly all major regions of the nation. When research adopts overly rigid timeframes or maintains simplistic assumptions about linear South-to-North movement trajectories, the discourse ignores how migrations unfolded through aural and sonic conditions. With those historiographic trends in mind, this dissertation produces deeper attunements with the aural sides of migrants' cultural production.

Emily Thompson claims that "the African Americans who migrated from rural southern counties to large industrial cities would have experienced an aural transformation far more dramatic than that experienced by virtually any other group of Americans at this time" (2002, 131). She rightfully identifies how migration had extraordinary psychic and material sonic-affective implications. Migrants were enveloped in worlds of mechanized, musicalized, and vocalized sounds in the North, which was a stark contrast to southern rural settings. Millions who left the South gradually carried their voices, embodied rhythms, and instruments along with painful silences inherited from living under Jim Crow Segregation Laws. Yet, they made heartbreaking choices to leave relatives, friends, and life routines behind in a hostile environment. Migration meant more than looking to the North, as moving also involved looking backwards whenever sounds or sights triggered memories. As much as aural transformations were distressing for migrants, the sounds of collective Black movements generated new forms of creative expression that altered the tempo of the nation.

Conceptual Frameworks and Sonic Lexicon

What does it mean to migrate, and in what ways does the Great Migration differ from diaspora? As the most central term in this dissertation, migration refers to spatial acts of movement, or relocations across regions and borders. Diaspora names a condition of dispersal under which displaced communities feel bound to multiple homelands across generations. Migration and diaspora might appear interchangeable, at a glance, but each term holds its own distinct historic and theoretical weight. Across the dissertation's interpretive frame, migration is framed as movement within U.S. borders, while maintaining a focus on the longer arc of diaspora illuminates the intergenerational backdrop shaping Black life. Migrants were part of a much longer history stretching back to transatlantic slavery and displacement from Africa. Wherever possible, I make efforts to use the term Black instead of the nationally bound connotation of African American to emphasize how identity is shaped by diaspora and racialization. Dionne Brand proposes that diasporic consciousness is a product of confronting genealogical fractures and archival silences (2001, 28-29). From living in these irreparable ruptures, migrants refined aural traditions and used sonic vessels for preserving memories. Thus, attending to the Great Migration as a diasporic formation involves reading sound as a key medium for carrying and transforming Black life across space.

Although this dissertation listens to Black movements across the United States, thinking through diaspora and legacies of transatlantic slavery is still a crucial part of contextualizing the Great Migration. Stuart Hall reminds us how diasporic subjects speak from within historical moments: "We all write and speak from a particular place and time, from a history and a culture—which is specific. What we say is always 'in context,'

positioned" (1990, 257-258). Without introducing or positioning diaspora, the Great Migration risks getting depicted as a fully self-contained national phenomenon. Instead, diasporic readings foreground epistemic ruptures or socio-cultural continuities that influenced mass displacement from the U.S. South over the twentieth century. We must consider how these movements are shaped by continuations "in the shadow of the Black diaspora— 'in the belly of the beast'" (Hall 1990, 258). For Lily Cho, diasporic thinking "responds to this urgency. Diaspora offers one powerful way of thinking through the displacements engendered by colonialism" (2007, 13). Particularly, diaspora names far more extensive historical and epistemic conditions that transcend U.S. nationalism, as the process of racialization is inherently transnational.

Once migrations had waned by 1970, Black resistance in the post-Civil Rights Movement era became more audible, and across more diverse forms of sound art and activism than ever before. Allie Martin reminds us of how, "Afro-diasporic ways of knowing often prioritize the sonic, which is both a mechanism of cultural retentions as well as a response to histories of enslavement and oppression" (2025, 17). The music, stories, artworks, and memories articulated by migrants represent how Black aurality went through collective transformations over this broad stretch of U.S. history. By working from a critical ethos of attunement and amplification, I construe aurality, movements, and migratory epistemologies as integral modes informing Black migrants' cultural production. Attunement involves seeking deeper awareness of the affective intensities of migrants' experiences through listening efforts. Amplification refers to the general foregrounding of sensory textures or epistemologies largely muted within most existing discourse about the Great Migration. Through thematic motifs of attunement and

amplification, this historical moment becomes more than a demographic shift, but an affecting multimodal paradigm replete with liminal identity and intersectional concerns.

The words disquieting and (dis)quieting are critical terms deployed throughout this project. I use the former to expose racialized forms of silencing, and the latter to amplify the sounds of resistance in migratory formations. The term disquieting fortifies awareness of "the wake", which Christina Sharpe defines as "the ongoing problem of Black exclusion from social, political, and cultural belonging" (2016, 14). In the context of the twentieth century United States, disquieting captures unsettling sensory conditions through which Black sounds and presences are suppressed. While disquieting names the structural and systemic conditions of racialized silencing, this project turns more sustained attention to the term (dis)quieting to sound out liberatory impulses animating migratory movements. (Dis)quieting expression is embedded within migrants' participation in activist movements, use of literary language, and in their musical productions. Sharpe explicitly incorporates the term "sonic" to underscore what constitutes resistance under oppression: "At stake is not recognizing antiblackness as total climate. At stake, too, is not recognizing an insistent Black visualsonic resistance to that imposition of non/being" (2016, 21). She further emphasizes how Black survival is an enduring, multimodal process—wherein "visualsonic affective language" communicates, "what Black people felt, how or why they moved, and countless other resonances of their ongoing survival" (2016, 62). Migrants' sonic experiences generated epistemologies of (dis)quieting resistance, which influenced activism, literature, and music. Therefore, this project tunes into "visualsonic affective language" as a (dis)quieting mode of migratory expression (Sharpe 2016).

I calibrate several key terms to clarify the sonic conceptual and thematic terrains of this study. The sonic does not refer to specific sounds or hearing alone, but to a far more expansive field of phenomena exceeding language: tones, textures, reverberations, and resonances. Thus, Jonathan Sterne encourages us to think of the senses as somewhat co-dependent because "there is no scientific basis for asserting that the use of one sense atrophies another (2003, 16). When sound-interested scholars cling to binaries, like divorcing the sensory processes of seeing from hearing, they obscure intersensory complexities of lived experience. Sterne claims that: "Sonic imaginations denote a quality of mind, but not a totality of mind" (2012, 9). Therefore, I treat sound as multimodal—as entangled with other senses—also with racial and racialized sensibilities like migration, surveillance, resistance, or silencing. For this reason, sound is rarely the principal focal point of this work. Instead, I explore how migratory experiences are representationally expressed in songs, speech, and language. Affective experiences are mediated through the harmonies and dissonances felt between bodies amid their environments with surrounding socio-historical conditions. Registers of affect are inherently shaped by conditional relations and processes taken up in listening. Migrancy was shaped by affecting emotions: determination, exhaustion, terror, hope, relief, uncertainty, grief, and southern memories. In some cases, this dense field of affective forces were symptomatic of struggling to listen under oppressive constraints, while in other cases they affected forms of resistance. Both sides of affect accompanied migrants' movements across racialized space. Migratory epistemologies are not fixed forms of knowledge, but new ways of knowing shaped, disseminated, and remade in mobility. Songs, stories, languages, gestures, and memories are repositories for migratory epistemologies. The

term “sonic-affective” is often hyphenated throughout this study, as this suggests the difficulty in separating sounds or aural from feeling, which was especially true for travelling migrants.

Interdisciplinary Methodology: Archival, Diasporic, and Intersectional Listening

Most existing work on the Great Migration under-examines how sounds and listening influenced migrants’ everyday life. Yet, the blend of disciplines in this work may seem unusual in working from Black Studies, Deaf Studies, and Sound Studies. When it comes to exploring a dynamic topic like migration, however, the critical priorities and thematic emphasis in each of these fields converge productively. Black Studies centers racialized embodiment, diasporic mobility, and resistance in the afterlives of slavery; Deaf Studies interrogates normative assumptions about auditory perception and linguistic communication; Sound Studies beckons for deeper scholarly examinations of listening practices as well as the socio-political or socio-cultural valences of sound. When operating alone, the dominant frameworks in each field overlook certain dimensions of sound and sonic affect. Holding these fields together amplifies sonic-affective registers of migratory experiences, while also placing sustained emphasis on d/Deaf and women’s intersectional perspectives.

Pauline Oliveros offers a useful distinction between listening and hearing: “Prompted by experience and learning, listening takes place voluntarily. Listening is not the same as hearing and hearing is not the same as listening” (2005 xxi). Although Oliveros develops “deep listening” as a deliberate compositional practice, her distinction helps to clarify my interdisciplinary method of listening to the Great Migration. I approach listening as a multimodal practice of attending to archival, diasporic,

intersectional, and d/Deaf dimensions of migration. I amplify sensory dimensions of Black movements through case studies attuned to politics, literature, music, and Deaf culture. Meaningful listening, in this project, depends upon sustained attention to multiple modes of perception rather than exclusively on auditory hearing.

A constellation of thinkers across Black Studies and Sound Studies further influences how I put listening into practice. Don Ihde equates listening with striving to understand: "Listening begins with the ordinary, by proximately working its way into what is as yet unheard" (2012, 23). Ihde's conception of listening as interpretive striving informs the general purpose of why I mobilize listening efforts into a multi-faceted methodology for amplifying the sonic-affective migratory experiences. In addition, Houston A. Baker Jr. articulated the term "sounding" in *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (1987) to insist that embodied sounds, music, and sound art are inseparable from the mass migrations, social movements, and political struggles. I extend Baker's schema by approaching sounding as a means for tracing and tuning into migratory epistemologies or affects related to forms of sonicity. In this sense, sounding is not limited to music alone, but encompasses voice, practices or manifestations of silencing, embodied kinetic expressions, and other forms of gestural expression as well as literary representations of sound. These sonic-affective expressions or traces register and transmit forms of migratory knowledge inherently shaped by movement, displacement, and the strive for liberation. Jennifer Lynn Stoever's *The Sonic Color Line* (2016) augments our awareness of how sound and listener experiences, particularly, are racialized. She contends that "sound functions as a set of social relations and as a compelling medium for racial discourse" (2016, 7). Consequently, her overarching concepts of "the sonic

color line" and "the white listening ear" encourage scholars to imagine "whiteness as an auditory construction" (Stoever 2016, 18). Stoever's approach outlines migratory experiences as being shaped by sonic-affects grounded in white-supremacist listening regimes. Where Baker outlines "sounding" as expressive modes of knowing, I draw from Stoever to rethink listening, aural expression, and multimodal perceptions as sites where color lines become enforced and unsettled. In this project—sounding the sonic color line brings both registers together—attuning to how disquieting racialized conditions that govern listening, and to how migrants generated (dis)quieting modes of resistance in response.

The Great Migration unfolded alongside the invention and development of major auditory technologies like the telephone (1876), phonograph (1877), and early electric hearing aids (1898). The emergence of commercial recording in the early 1900s transformed sound into a reproducible and circulatory commodity. These technologies were not neutral innovations as they were material infrastructures that curated, mediated, and surveilled the sounds of Black cultural production. To some extent, technologies enabled liberatory possibilities for migrants' communication and expression. Radio enabled communal leaders to broadcast their speeches to wider audiences, recording technologies allowed musicians to preserve compositions which may have otherwise been lost, and telephones allowed for information to be disseminated more quickly. However, these emerging sound industries intensified racialized market segmentation and enabled new modes of sonic surveillance and control. Alexander Weheliye (2005) furthers awareness of how new aural technologies had transformative implications for Black communities living with the consequences of diaspora. His work compels us to

consider sonic technologies as racialized and filtered by forms of mediation that govern Black subjectivities. It follows, then, that sounding the Great Migration should involve efforts to consider how migrants were entangled with material infrastructures for amplifying, recording, and commodifying sound. In doing so, this project positions sonic technologies as dualistic sites. Sound technologies circulated forms of Black cultural production on a widespread global scale, but at the same time, they regulated what sounds could travel and mediated how they were heard.

Navigating interdisciplinarity is challenging, however, especially within the ever-evolving terrains of Sound Studies, which Michele Hilmes considers to be "always emerging, never emerged" (2005, 249). From the early inceptions of Sound Studies in the 1980s, the field has disproportionately represented white Eurocentric positions as the dominant authorities on sonic discourse. However, Alex Corey notes how, over the last twenty years, significantly more projects are critically re-positioning sonic terms to explore how different modes of categorizing sound "produce, conceptions of race" (2019, 100). As such, several questions surface when Sound Studies intersects with Black Studies. What do critical and socio-political listening practices bring to the study of race or migration? How can sound-informed methods like *listening* and *sounding* be used as interpretive tools that provide critical insights about the Great Migration that build on existing discourse? I use listening and sounding as analytic frameworks to foreground socio-political valences of how Black movements are heard, felt, and mediated through forms of expression and in cultural representation. Sounding and listening are interventions that rethink and reposition sounds as constitutive forces influencing Black movements and modes of resistance during the Great Migration. In the paragraphs below,

I outline a listening methodology attuned to migrants' sonic-affective conditions, practices, and aural transformations over the twentieth century.

Every migration story involves profound visual-sonic affective movements that reshaped perceptions, transformed identities, and generated new ways of knowing. Throughout the project, I examine these movements through four interconnected modes of inquiry: archival listening, diasporic listening, intersectional listening, and listening d/Deafly.[1] Although these modes are not always explicitly signposted, they provide a flexible method for attending to distinctly migratory materials, forms of cultural production, and sensory experiences examined throughout the dissertation. Together, listening practices illuminate how Black migrants' visual-sonic affective perceptions hold significant critical observations about collectively felt conditions, such as racism or "audism," which Tom Humphries defined as any notions "that one is superior based on one's ability to hear or behave in the manner of one who hears" (1977, 12). Since physics or audiology alone cannot explain sonic experiences under racialized conditions, my methodology approaches listening as critical, relational, and multimodal engagements with migratory conditions or sensory experiences. Ultimately, this interdisciplinary constellation of listening practices enhances awareness of how migrants construed and communicated meaning through sonic, embodied, or expressive practices.

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[1] For related formulations of these listening practices, see Katherine McLeod, "Archival Listening." *ESC: English Studies in Canada* 46, no. 2 (2020): 325–31; V. Jo Hsu, *Constellating Home: Trans and Queer Asian American Rhetorics* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2022); Allie Martin, *Intersectional Listening: Gentrification and Black Sonic Life in Washington, DC*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2025).

I deploy the term archival listening to assess how migratory histories resonate, become distorted, and get rearticulated. According to Katherine McLeod, "archival listening is listening to archives while reflecting on how you are listening and how you intend to share what you have heard" (2020, 325). In this dissertation, listening to an archive involves attending beyond preserved voices to the conditions that produce omissions and distortions in whose knowledge becomes audible. Numerous interdisciplinary scholars in Black Studies engage archives as sites of critical erasure and creative practice (Brooks 2021; Campt 2017; Hartman 2019; Moten 2003; Sharpe 2016; Trouillot 1995). In their respective investigations, these scholars' critical methods attend to knowledge beyond archival boundaries. Through Black Studies scholars' interventions in archival studies, I build upon the term "archival listening" to attend to how archives are sites structured by colonial powers and silencing forces. I then extend these critical practices into Great Migration studies by examining how Black migratory knowledge persists across forms of language or cultural productions, like political activism literature, visual arts, music, or performance.

Within my framework, archival listening theorizes how migration produces alternative archives; namely, not stable institutional repositories or documents, but dispersed formations of sound, memory, and expressive practice. More precisely, migratory archives are non-stable repositories of knowledge replete with absences, distortions, and exclusions. Black Studies centrally inspires this practice of listening to archives, as scholars have illuminated how the Eurocentrism of Western archives has been shaped by racial capitalism (Brand 2001; Campt 2017; Hartman 2007; Weheliye 2005). Fred Moten's notion of "the break" sharpens the listening framework in this

project through positioning moments of rupture within archives as more generative rather than lacking (2003). Across texts and many other expressive forms of cultural production, sonic traces of Black experience gesture to diasporic or migratory histories: “Where shriek turns speech turns song—remote from the impossible comfort of origin—lies the trace of our descent” (Moten 2003, 22). Here, Moten argues that Black expression emerges as a process of becoming, through which transformative sonic forms resist stable origins. Yet, as opposed to signalling total absence, the aural discontinuities of migrancy enable creativity, refusal, and resistance to become possible. Over the course of this project, archival listening pushes deeper investigations of how migratory forms of cultural production sound out oppressive conditions while enacting sonic-affective resistance as modes of survival.

Diasporic listening is a methodology for tracking the transformative powers of sound, which has remarkable acoustic capacities to bend, echo, and travel around geographic or architectural barriers. Migrants embraced sonic forms as a means of remapping fractured or liminal socio-cultural identities, and to build senses of belonging in motion. In the context of the Great Migration, sounds were carried and continually remade across geographic transitions. When sounds travel they acquire new tones, sensibilities, and meanings. Diasporic listening, then, is concerned with building awareness of aural transformations within the broader Black diaspora. As Paul Gilroy notes in *The Black Atlantic*, music is a mobile diasporic formation which preserves and rearticulates cultural memory (1993, 72-110). Thus, diasporic listening remains attuned to the transformative, anthemic properties of Black sonic practices. When analyzing literary representations of sound, my method strives for attunement not only to musical

references, but to ambient or embodied sounds like breathing, train whistles, and urban noise. All of these ambient, embodied, and musicalized sonic conditions are echoes of diasporic conditions such as displacement, adaptation, and resilience.

Patricia Hill Collins (1990) demonstrates why intersectionality—as articulated by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989)—is a foundational framework for Black feminist thought. Until recently, Black women's lives have been almost completely underrepresented in most Great Migration literature (Hunter 1998; Wilkerson 2010; Chatelain 2015; Hartman 2019). Still yet, Saidiya Hartman construes "beautiful experiments in living free" to position Black women's very lives as resistances (2019, 17). My listening efforts through a critical intersectional lens, examines how Black women's migrations generated activist, artistic, musical, and literary forms of expression in response to compounding injustices.

Allie Martin's concept of "intersectional listening" provides an important framework for articulating this dissertation's intervention (2025). Martin describes intersectional listening as an exploratory process of striving to acknowledge aural conditions that are "created and maintained in the service of Black life" (2025, 24). Attending to these conditions reveals how women's aurality gives rise to distinct tones of everyday resistance across the twentieth-century United States. Intersectional listening functions as a sustained mode of attention through which I sound out women's roles in shaping migratory epistemologies during the Great Migration. I extend Martin's framework in Chapter 4, where Mary Herring Wright's memoirs demonstrate that d/Deaf intersectional listening is a lived practice of navigating audism, racism, sexism, and displacement. More broadly, intersectional listening provides a guided commitment to

tracing how overlapping structures of oppression shape the unique resistances embedded in migratory cultural production.

Chapter 4 theorizes a narrowed-down mode of intersectional listening which I call listening d/Deafly, to assess sensory identity alongside migration. Listening d/Deafly involves reorienting the sonic as a multimodal phenomenon rather than narrowly confining sound to hearing or auditory perception. This practice was inspired by a similar methodology called "Listening Deafly", which was recently introduced by Sarah Mayberry Scott, who aims to show "how sound can be understood in multimodal ways, how someone can have voice in the absence of speaking, and how, listening is not wholly dependent on the sense of hearing" (2023, 2-3). My approach complicates James Woodward's traditional binary model, where lowercase "deaf" refers to the audiological condition of not being able to hear, and uppercase "Deaf" designates someone who belongs to a distinct socio-linguistic signing community (1975). However, my method of listening d/Deafly embraces Brenda Jo Bruggeman's notion of "in-betweenity," to specifically account for how movement across space reinforces senses of liminality (2009, 3). This guides my interpretations of the memoirs of Mary Herring Wright, whose life narrative reflects shifting affiliations across hearing and Deaf cultures. In other words, she registers how the evolutions of d/Deaf identity are heavily shaped by movements across spaces or institutions. Herring Wright's migrations—from leaving home in the South to North Carolina's School for the Black Deaf and Blind, and on to Washington D.C. after graduation—conveys how sensory identity is continually refigured through spatial, individual and institutional movements. Ultimately, listening d/Deafly reframes sensory identity as strongly influenced by migratory experiences.

Chapter Breakdown and Ethics of Attunement

Chapter 1, "(Dis)quieting Black Activism and the Onset of Mass Movements", examines the dawn of the early twentieth century Black activism through an interdisciplinary approach to listening informed by critical perspectives in Black Studies and Sound Studies. The chapter analyzes major figures, organizations, and notable sonic events which were integral to social movements in the early-twentieth century. After World War One, Black mobility entered broader public consciousness, and new enigmatic leaders began to turn up volumes on their calls for justice and equity. These leaders worked across mediums to amplify "freedom dreams", inspiring many others to take up mantles of activism (Kelley 2002). Some harnessed the power of the news press while others hosted live gatherings or public protest demonstrations. Black newspapers were sometimes inaccessible, and many migrants had poor literacy skills. Thus, spoken words were essential for generating social cohesion—especially before the age of mass media and the internet. By the early 1920s, James Weldon Johnson had just started leading the NAACP, and Marcus Garvey's UNIA had amassed millions of members worldwide. Therefore, activists significantly inspired the Great Migration. They were often migrants themselves who leveraged their experiential qualifications to denounce racism. By sounding out how Black leaders embraced sonic mediums, used silence as a mode of protest, or hosted public events with high-profile speakers, this chapter amplifies sonic-affective practices which reimagined radical new possibilities for claiming freedom. I position integrationist and Black nationalist modes of activism not as uncompromising opposites, but as transitory, (dis)quieting resistance movements.

Chapter 2, “Literary Echoes of Migrancy in Great Migration Narratives,” interprets representations of sound in what Griffin refers to as “Great Migration narratives” (Griffin 1995). Since literature is not outwardly sonic as an artistic medium, it can be easy to overlook the socio-cultural and political significances behind literary representations of sound. Writing can at least partially capture acousmatic and rhythmic echoes of people on the move. I engage in close readings of four Great Migration narratives: James Weldon Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912/1927), Jean Toomer’s *Cane* (1923), Richard Wright’s *The Man Who Lived Underground* (1942/2021), and Ann Petry’s *The Street* (1946). I break down why each text constitutes a Great Migration narrative, and sound out how literary texts encode racialized listening, silences, and migrants’ inner audition. Furthermore, I argue that literary narratives are not merely passive representations of social conditions, as they actively model new ways of listening. The stories exhaustively detail the destabilized breathing patterns or heartbeats of migrants along with their blues-inflected cadences of inner-audition and voice. Through incorporating “visualsonic affective” aesthetics into written language, authors penned narratives which archive migrants’ sonic-affective experiences. This pushes readers into deeper awareness of how Black authors represent literary sound.

Chapter 3, “Blues Unbound: Fretboard Cartographies and Migratory Blues Epistemologies”, reinterprets blues music as a dynamic epistemology forged through living in diaspora. Blues epistemologies thrive on displacement, improvisation, and itinerant lifestyles. Much of the earliest influential work about the blues was produced between 1930-1970. Chapter 3 considers some major fallacies in early blues scholarship,

including the erasure of blues women, the romanticization of personal hardship, the politics of authenticity, as well as longstanding tendencies to mythologize Mississippi as the singular birthplace of the blues. Notwithstanding, the shifting power dynamics in twenty-first-century post-secondary institutions have renewed compelling new currents in blues scholarship. Foregrounding Black Studies, Sound Studies, and Critical Disability Studies, Chapter 3 examines blues musicians as itinerant performers. They sang transgressive lyrics, played through uncharted fretboard cartographies, and constructed semblances of community to resist the ethos of dislocation lingering nationwide.

Chapter 4, "(Dis)quieting Black Deaf Migrations: Listening d/Deafly Through Mary Herring Wright's Memoirs", extends the scope of my dissertation to represent Black Deaf memoirs about movement and migration. I engage in close readings of two memoirs by Mary Herring Wright: *Sounds Like Home* (1999) and *Far From Home* (2005). Both books sound out Deaf gain, movement, and resistance. Herring Wright's narratives are some of the only known accounts of Black Deaf education, community, and migratory experience. I develop a method of intersectional listening which is informed by Black feminism and Black American Sign Language. I situate Herring Wright's accounts of forced and voluntary migrations alongside critical perspectives put forth by Kimberlé Crenshaw and Saidiya Hartman. Herring Wright's *Sounds Like Home* documents how Black American Sign Language (BASL) emerged from segregated schools as a form of resistance. In her second memoir, *Far From Home*, Herring Wright details how Northward dispersal caused Black Deaf communities to become fragmented. This final segment contends that Black Deaf memoirs are indispensable to scholarship about the Great Migration because they reframe migrating as a multi-sensory experience.

I more specifically argue that Herring Wright's memoirs challenge the assumption that hearing is a precondition for listening, and in doing so, they demonstrate how mobility, memory, and racialization get mediated through multiple senses.

Throughout researching the U.S. Great Migration, I continually return to a key question: why is it important to address migration through Humanities oriented writing? Archival, intersectional, diasporic, and d/Deaf modalities of listening offer compelling answers—by illuminating what it means to migrate beyond demographic or sociological accounts. In using this interdisciplinary approach to interpreting migratory stories, sounds, and memories, I build awareness of how Black identity was formed, felt, and negotiated over the twentieth century. Migration operates as a constitutive course of action throughout Western modernity. Therefore, this project emphasizes the importance of listening to implications of mass migratory movement, upheaval, and resistance. As Dionne Brand suggests, migration unfolds from "no one place but a collection of places," rendering the reverberations of Black movement an embodied and inherited condition passed through generations (2001, 18). Whether migration stories are encountered through lived testimony or represented in cultural artefacts, echoes of movement and mobility deserve attention. The remaining chapters launch case studies of narratives, sonic-affective forms, and historic moments to amplify consequences of migrations; especially, the disquieting oppressive forces and modes of (dis)quieting resistance.

CHAPTER 1

(Dis)quieting Black Activism and the Onset of Mass Movements

This chapter centers on the works and sonic politics of James Weldon Johnson (1871-1938) and Marcus Garvey (1887-1940) as comparative focal points for studying activism at the onset of the Great Migration. Johnson and Garvey were contemporaries and migrants themselves who relocated to Harlem, New York. Their legacies were forged through harnessing sound and voice into socio-cultural forms of expression that sought to (dis)quiet white supremacy in the United States. As two of the most influential activists of the era, each leader encouraged aural forms of collective engagement with politics. Johnson's musical compositions and the rhetoric of the 1917 Silent Protest March sounded out an integrationist approach to activism. Garvey's voice announced a more uncompromising rhetoric of Black nationalism based on separatism. Their respective leadership styles underscore two major ideological currents in Black activism. Racial uplift was grounded in U.S. integration, whereas Garveyism functioned as a global, political, economic, and cultural movement emphasizing Black self-determination. Despite their political differences, Johnson and Garvey both addressed displaced migrants as a racialized public with shared political interests.

This chapter traces sonic-affective trajectories of early twentieth-century Black activism. I focus on three case studies, beginning with the migratory anthem "Lift Every Voice and Sing" (1900). I then examine two instances of sonic activism in practice: the 1917 Silent Protest Parade organized by the NAACP and the oratorical rhetoric of Marcus Garvey's speeches. Approaching early twentieth-century activism through sound foregrounds the sensory and affective conditions through which politics became

perceptible for migrants. By emphasizing sound and listening, I move beyond simplistic ideological comparisons between racial integration and nationalism—and attend to newspapers, anthems, disciplined restraint, and oratory speech—as multimodal forms of activism. Both activist traditions challenge what Jennifer Lynn Stoever terms the "sonic color line," the racialized order governing the auditory regulation of Black bodies (Stoever, 2016). Drawing from Stoever's concept, I argue that both activist traditions intervened in the racialized listening practices which regulated migratory mobility. These emergent activist traditions encouraged migrants to contest white-supremacist codes that rendered Black public presences excessive, threatening, or noisy.

Between 1887 to the start of World War One, Southern legislatures overturned many of the transformations which prioritized civil rights for African Americans during Reconstruction (1865-1877). Manning Marable's indispensable work on social reform movements confirms: "Between 1882 and 1902, over 2060 Black people were lynched" (2022, 9). In response to this growing climate of fear and violent intimidation, mass defection from the South gained traction. Once this exodus from the rural South started, the racial demographics of the U.S. shifted. As Black populations relocated, migrants encountered competing ideological and activist responses to racial oppression. The resonant sounds of speeches, songs, newspaper gossip, and public gatherings were some of the most powerful aural conduits through which migrants carried these competing political ideologies. Through print and performance, the sounds of activism spread along with migrants who moved.

The language and speech issued by the U.S. government disciplines and silences Black expression from a position of institutional authority. Under the "separate but

equal" regime enforced by the supreme court decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), racial domination increasingly regulated who could speak and be heard in public. While the existence of segregation preceded the ruling, it routinized and normalized white supremacy through legal mechanisms. All the while, Black newspapers played institutional roles in reverberating ideological seeds of resistance. As more positive letters or word of mouth stories of better Northern living conditions swept the South, more ears were uplifted by the sounds of stories which attested to increased economic opportunities and better social conditions in Northern cities.

As Manning Marable notes: "Between 1865 and 1900, to take a single example, over 1,200 [B]lack-owned newspapers were established" (2022, 8). From the late nineteenth century to early onset of the Great Migration, the Black press "frequently ran uplifting and positive messages and played up the best things [B]lacks did" (Washburn, 2006, 36). Even though Black newspapers became more outspoken by the end of Reconstruction, print mediums were comparatively quiet as a mode of expression. Indeed, copies could be concealed, distributed, and read, even in segregated contexts. Churches, schools, and community centers in the South became significant focal points for distributing newspapers and their messages.[2] Under surveilled conditions where Black dissent carried dire risk, written words enabled political ideas to circulate. Many articles celebrated migration as an avenue for liberation.

By the late-nineteenth century, *The Chicago Tribune* published many antilynching titles, and voices from *The New York Times* "provided some of the earliest denunciations"

2 See *The Black Press: Soldiers without Swords.* Directed by Stanley Nelson, California Newsreel, 1998. This is an acclaimed documentary offering a detailed account of the circulation and development of Black newspapers from the Antebellum South to the onset of the Civil Rights Movement.

within the white press (Perloff 2000, 323). The Black Press, however, framed lynching as racial terrorism long before the 1880s. Ida B. Wells-Barnett famously used her newspaper to publish *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases* (1892), insisting that: "The strong arm of the law must be brought to bear upon lynchers in severe punishment, but this cannot and will not be done unless a healthy public sentiment demands and sustains such action" (20). Wells-Barnett openly claimed that migration is a revolutionary strategy, as withdrawing Black labour from lynching localities in the South "could many times effect a bloodless revolution" (1892, 21). Movement was cast not as retreat, but as politicized refusal. While mass migration intensified, Black leaders amplified (dis)quieting forms of resistance which extended beyond print mediums into sonic-affective modes of political expression.

"Lift Every Voice and Sing": A Sonic Affective Anthem of Migratory Resilience

James Weldon Johnson was raised in Jacksonville, Florida before moving to New York City at thirty years old in 1901. Before the move, he collaborated with his brother John Rosamund Johnson, to compose a song for an Abraham Lincoln birthday celebration at the Stanton College Preparatory School in 1900. "Lift Every Voice and Sing" confronts the failures of the Reconstruction Era to convey a faith driven narrative of movement—at the threshold of the Great Migration:

> Lift every voice and sing,
> Till earth and heaven ring,
> Ring with the harmonies of Liberty;
> Let our rejoicing rise
> High as the list'ning skies,
> Let it resound loud as the rolling sea.
> Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us,
> Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us;

(James Weldon Johnson, set to music composed by John Rosamond Johnson)

Although the lyrics do not openly precipitate mass migration, the song makes affective gestures toward movement on a thematic level. Johnson's lyrics resonated with the experiences of hundreds-of-thousands of prospective migrants eager to escape Jim Crow Segregation, to move from a "dark past" to a more hopeful present, as the lyrics suggest.

The popularity of "Lift Every Voice and Sing" bloomed through socio-cultural participation in collective performance at the onset of the Great Migration. It was first performed on February 12th, 1900, by a chorus of five hundred Black schoolchildren. Over the twenty years following this first rendition, more school and gospel choirs in the South staged performances of the song, and it gained public exposure as an anthem which celebrated racial pride. As Eileen Southern documents: "It was almost always sung at large, formal gatherings, such as NAACP banquets and other gatherings to honor race heroes. During the 1950s or 60s, African Americans began singing the song in gospel style, renaming it the Black National Anthem" (1997, 274). The political valences surrounding each performance are highly dependent on the context, tempo, and improvisational or vocal cadences. For example, within the context of NAACP gatherings, performances of "Lift Every Voice and Sing" tuned bodies and voices, priming their collective willingness to engage in civil rights reform missions. The ritual of performing the anthem bolstered migrants' civic listening engagements and reinforced the NAACP's institutional legitimacy through collective vocal presence.

Imani Perry defines "Black formalism" as "ritual practices with embedded norms, codes of conduct, and routine, dignified ways of doing and being" (2018, 7). Within this framework, "Lift Every Voice and Sing" operates as a formalized Black

communal practice—requiring strict standards for tempo and posture in performance. Black formalism stabilized collective presence as a response to migratory upheaval, while still permitting the hymn to circulate beyond its institutional affiliation. “Lift Every Voice and Sing” increasingly entered non-denominational congregations. The anthem resonates strength through ritualized performance and repetition. By contrast, Chapter Three will expand on how blues and ragtime music were more mobile and less formalistic. Consequently, migratory blues epistemologies reverberated the dissonant ethos of migration through “call-and response” invitations for listeners to participate in real time.

Noelle Morrissette describes voices emanating outwards as a “process that occurs through the body” (2013, 96). As a memorized, vocally reproducible form of collective action, “Lift Every Voice and Sing” traveled wherever performers or audiences moved and assembled. Its endurance was generated by embodied repetition and improvisation as opposed to musical literacy or recorded preservation. In his autobiography, *Along This Way* (1933), James Weldon Johnson professes that hearing the song performed by Black children brought him a sense of satisfaction that none of his other works could comparably bring (156). Choirs and congregations sung the hopeful anthem proudly, and within a nation that routinely denies Black expression. In this manner, each performance was a transformative migratory practice of collective voicing, sounding out commitment to civic reform.

“Lift Every Voice and Sing” accrued significant communal resonance for displaced migrants who sung the anthem ever more widely as migrations surged. Yet, Jon Michael Spencer notes how disagreements surfaced over the song’s national anthem label “as early as the late 1930s, but it was only after the 1960s that the many members of the

emerging Black middle class during the first half of the twentieth century were against the notion of a separate national anthem" (1992, xii). Timothy Askew further explores this lack of "consistent attitude" surrounding Black civic duty throughout U.S. history, as early migrants seemed unable "to decide if they should affirm a mainstream American identity or if they should proclaim a strong sense of African American racial allegiance" (1996, 163). Johnson's neutralism evidences the paradox of struggling to secure Black independence from white supremacist hierarchies of domination while staying committed to U.S. assimilation. In this sense, the song's racially neutral lyrics partially clash against the Black National Anthem designation—at times, deferring and muting the politics of Black pride. Even so, Johnson's neutral diction helped to ensure that "Lift Every Voice and Sing" was also circulating into predominantly white churches or schools.

Lyric centered readings of "Lift Every Voice and Sing" tend to foreground the ideological ambivalence and its tether to assimilationist racial uplift politics. These readings risk overlooking how the political force of the song is construed through collective singing, and more so than textual meaning. Recent work on the song has therefore sifted attention to what the song does in performance. In *Anthem* (2013), Shana Redmond highlights the anthemic properties of the song as a method for spurring action, community, participation, and social change. Redmond situates the song within a critical anthemic tradition that "grew and conjured new projects and structures of identification that challenged, at various moments, white supremacist modernity, Western empire, two-party politics in the United States, settler colonialism, patriarchy, and capitalism" (2013, 7). When heard through the framework of collective performativity, the racially neutral lyrics are not void of political charge. Communal performances exemplified how

displaced Black migrants assembled affective worlds of solidarity during the disorientations of urbanization. While migratory instabilities and liminalities reinforce unsettling affective registers of struggle against urbanization, the Black national anthem opened alternative ways for migrants to "build community, establish fellowship, play and laugh, and plant seeds for a different way of living, a different way of hearing" (Kelley 2002, 11). In this sense, "Lift Every Voice and Sing" functioned as a migratory sonic practice through which Black institutions facilitated semblances of community in publicized performances—rehearsing belonging.

Voices and bodies comprise the most integral thematic messages at the performative core of "Lift Every Voice and Sing". Angela Davis Johnson proposes that engaging "space as an artist is to challenge perceptions by interrupting and disrupting social environments with your voice and body" (2015, 27). This formulation is important because it encourages thinking about the anthem as more than a static text, but as an event which materializes politically through collective voice. This indicates how Black communal performance holds powers even beyond the Great Migration. Performances are organizational strategies "bound together by African derived performance techniques, Western art traditions, attachments to social justice organizations, iconic performers and performances, relationships to exile, and collective visions of freedom" (Redmond 2013, 3). It follows that "Lift Every Voice and Sing" serves as a major outlet for improvisational creativity and social participation. These improvisational and embodied elements of the song challenge Enlightenment sensibilities about what elements or forms of art can achieve archival protection as culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant. Black formalism coalesces with the improvisational character of

performances of “Lift Every Voice and Sing”, and both forces have worked together in complimentary fashions, ensuring that the song retains important roles in Black U.S. life. In *May We Forever Stand* (2018), Imani Perry opens by recounting when she came home one evening to hear her son singing “Lift Every Voice and Sing” (Perry 2018, xi). Despite their 31-year age gap, her son learned the same song through public education; this reveals a continuity about how the anthem has been sustained across generations as a living practice.

There are ongoing twenty-first century debates about whether “Lift Every Voice and Sing” should be performed and introduced as a national anthem. In 2021, House Representative Jim Clyburn made legislative efforts to file a bill which would recognize the poem as the official hymn of the United States, but this has not been passed. As a part of their Inspire Change initiative, the NFL included “Lift Every Voice and Sing” in the Super Bowl program, starting with Alicia Keys’ pre-recorded performance in 2021. For Super Bowl LVI in 2022, it was performed by gospel duo Mary Mary and accompanied by the Youth Orchestra of Los Angeles. Sheryl Lee Ralph performed the song alongside a choir and ASL performer Justina Miles on the field before Super Bowl LVII in 2023. The tradition continued into 2024, when Andra Day took the field to sing with ASL interpreter Shaheem Sanchez—marking the first instance in which its performance was paired with on-field ASL interpretation. On February 9, 2025, for Super Bowl LIX, Grammy-winning soul and R&B artist Ledisi performed the song with an ASL accompaniment by Otis Jones IV. Most recently, at Super Bowl LX on February 8, 2026, Coco Jones delivered a performance of the anthem with ASL interpretation by Fred Beam. Jones’ performance was backed by an eight-member

orchestra of stringed instruments rather than the typical choir. This choice carries symbolic weight, as the orchestral strings hold Euro-American sonic connotations while offering Jones a deeper harmonic space—heightening her vocal phrasing and emotional nuance. Jones' solo singing performance further illustrates how sonic restraint can be modelled strategically. Still, all the performances comprising this recent tradition were broadcast during the pre-game commentary when many viewers were not yet tuned in. The power of these twenty-first century performances lies not necessarily with institutional recognition, but in communal uptake. Long before it earned its anthem label, active singers and involved listeners circulated the song through migratory networks.

Rejecting Racist Oral-Imperatives through the 1917 Silent Protest March

Racial violence reached a disquieting boiling point in the final years of World War One. On May 15, 1916, Jesse Washington, a seventeen-year-old farmhand falsely accused of rape, was convicted by an all-white jury in Waco, Texas. Though widely publicized by photographers and media coverage, Washington's extra-legal murder was more of a norm than anomaly. Terence Finnegan reminds us that the "typical Black lynching victim was far from an outcast in Southern society" (1998, 241). On October 21, 1916, a farmer named Anthony Crawford was dragged out of jail and hung in Abbeville, South Carolina. Crawford had as much as 600 acres of land while his net worth of around 25,000 dollars made him one of the richest men in Abbeville County. He also founded an industrial union dedicated to Black economic and intellectual advancement. His contemporaries observed how he operated under the belief that it was unacceptable to endure physical abuse from white people, and his children were raised with similar convictions. Crawford's economic independence and refusal to submit made him

dangerously audible within white supremacist listening regimes in the South. White listeners enforced silencing on economic, political, or social sonic fronts. Any (dis)quieting stirrings of refusal were met with the demented sounds of lynch mobs shouting, chanting, and jeering.

In the Jim Crow South of the early twentieth century, white listeners routinely constructed hostile constraints—weaponizing rumors, extralegal accusations, and overheard speech—against Black life. The voice of white allegations could initiate wrongful convictions or lynching. In turn, this imposed regime functionally enacted visual-sonic social control. Richard Wright's *Black Boy* (1945) captures this dynamic in recalling his childhood experiences, which reveals communal memories of racial terror surfacing when Black subjects are perceived to know too much or say too much. Wright recalls how the morning after he was exposed to the reality of racial terrorism through overhearing adult conversations, his mother called him into the kitchen and ominously warned "that I must never mention what I had seen and heard, that white people would kill me if they even thought I knew" (66). Here, Wright demonstrates how terror evolves out of listening under white supremacist complexes, which systematically reproduces the silencing of Black voices out of survival instinct. In addition, the auditory echoes of these sounds in memory comprise what Saidiya Hartman theorizes as an afterlife of terror (1997). Her concept explains how violences of slavery continue beyond formal abolition to persist, especially as inherited memories or affective states. Sonically, these afterlives endure in self-censored states of enforced quiet, where sounds or sonic memories carry residues of terror. Whether in the South or the North, people were conditioned to existing under "the sonic color line" (Stoever, 2016). On the other hand, the management of one's

own ability to speak or remain outwardly silent also became a method that James Weldon Johnson reassembled into an inherently sonic mode of collective protest.

The phrase "East St. Louis Riots" circulated largely though white owned newspapers in the summer of 1917; contemporaneously, newspapers like the *Chicago Defender* described the events as a massacre and act of racial terror. The term "riot" is increasingly contested as a racialized descriptor. Read within the rhetorical context of a newspaper editorial, the word "riot" pathologizes Black crowds as noisy, chaotic, unpredictable, and violent. In its place, scholars have adopted terms such as "rebellion" or "uprising" to foreground the deliberate and intentional dimensions of Black collective action. This discursive shift is more evident across multiple fields as well as in public-facing journalism.[3] For those lucky enough to escape with their lives, the remaining Black population of East St. Louis was displaced by the fires which razed businesses and homes. Black resistance took shape in the wake of East St. Louis as (dis)quieting migratory action. In the North, the NAACP channeled outrage into public protest. James Weldon Johnson developed the idea for a Silent Protest March as a non-violent protest strategy with Oswald Garrison Villard, following their earlier discussions at the historic Amenia Conference in 1916. NAACP organizers formed coalitions between clergy, community leaders, and migrants of all ages and genders to (Johnson, 1933, 320).

On the scorching hot day of July 28th, 1917, an estimated ten-thousand Black demonstrators marched down Fifth Avenue in New York City to protest in solidarity

3 See Elizabeth Hinton, America on Fire: The Untold History of Police Violence and Black Rebellion Since the 1960's [2021]; Kathleen Bartzen Culver and Douglas M. McLeod, "'Anti-Riot' or 'Anti-Protest' Legislation? Black Lives Matter, News Framing, and the Protest Paradigm." [2023]; and Katy Steinmetz. "'A War of Words.' Why Describing the George Floyd Protests as 'Riots' Is So Loaded." TIME, 8 June [2020].

against lynching, segregation, and racial violence (see Figure 1). The marchers advanced to the muffled rhythm of drumbeats and footsteps, led by a group of children wearing white, followed by women in white, and anchored at the rear by men wearing dark suits (Morand, 2020). Although New York City had hosted many protest demonstrations since the start of WW1, none of them had so fully mobilized the surging migrant population in the city. The Silent Protest March issued a collective counter-audible refusal through withheld speech. It consequently disrupted white listeners' expectations at a time when Black presences in cities were dismissed as noise.

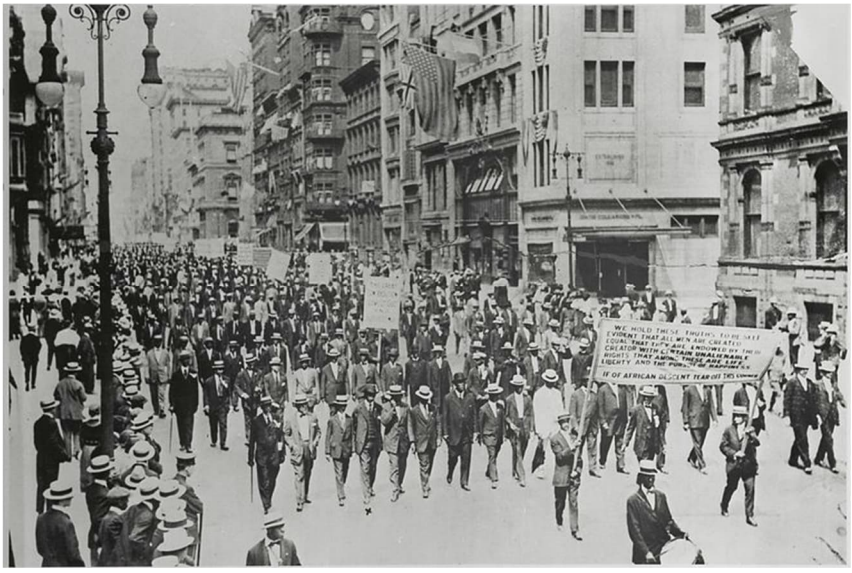


Image 1.
Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Photographs and Prints Division, The New York Public Library. *"Silent Protest parade on Fifth Avenue, New York City, July 28, 1917, in response to the East St. Louis race riot."* The New York Public Library Digital Collections. 1917.

For Tina Campt, listening to images, and photographs specifically, are a means for imagining new levels of "audibility, many of which register at lower frequencies", and these levels transcend the thresholds of hearing (2017, 41). Based on Campt's understandings of what constitutes audibility and listening, Figure 1 reverberates the

notion that participants are not mute or silenced. The photo echoes with (dis)quieting tones of collective presence, announcing what Yoganathan describes as a "Black radical tradition of silent embodied resistance" (2022, 295). Marchers organized under a multimodal sonic rhetoric which emphasized embodied mass occupation of public space. Their strident but plaintive slogans displayed on banners functioned as collective voice.

Participants were rhythmically and rhetorically propelled by drumbeats and footsteps of fellow marchers carrying banners and signs plastered with slogans. James Weldon Johnson describes how written words and slogans played key roles in conveying (dis)quieting sensibilities spurring activism:

> They carried banners; some of which read:
>
> Mother, Do Lynchers Go To Heaven?
> Give Me A Chance to Live.
> Treat Us So That We May Love Our Country.
> Mr. President, Why Not Make America Safe For Democracy?
>
> Just ahead of the man who carried the American flag went a streamer that stretched half across the street and bore this inscription: Your Hands Are Full Of Blood (1933, 321)

This protest relied upon visual, sonic, and vibrational registers to sound out the visualsonic affective presence of racial solidarity. Judith Butler's account of public provisional assembly further clarifies why wordless action is a powerful mode of political expression: "Asserting that a group of people is still existing, taking up space and obdurately living, is already an expressive action, a politically significant event, and that can happen wordlessly in the course of an unpredictable and transitory gathering" (2015, 18). The Silent Protest March assembled collective speechlessness into a call for justice.

How might silence function as a mode of political expression? Ana Maria Ochoa Gautier suggests that "silence is lived as one of the most intense experiences across

cultures" (2014, 183). But the notion of silence remains enveloped by multiple meaning, and so its rhetorical capacities demand careful consideration. In *Listening Deafly and the Rhetoric of Sound* (2023), Sarah Mayberry Scott cautions us about antiquated presuppositions and rhetorical fallacies because neither "silence and sound nor hearing and deafness are binaries" (2023, 1). Moreover, Cheryl Glenn's *Unspoken* (2004) appropriately pluralizes silence's rhetorical capacities: "Silence can deploy power; it can defer power. It all depends" (47). Barry Brummett similarly theorizes that while "silence is all around us, not all of it is strategic. Silence becomes strategic only when talk is expected. Silence is strategic when someone has pressing reason to speak, but does not" (1980, 289) Accordingly, the 1917 Silent Protest March should not be construed as a soundless, or even wordless, protest.

White listeners within public institutions interpreted the Silent Protest March as an exemplary display of civility. A *New York Times* article described it as "in all respects one of the most quiet and orderly demonstrations ever witnessed." [4] But, framing disciplined restraint as compliance minimizes the revolutionary sonic force of the protest. Wallace S. Golding challenges assumptions about the politics of civility, and disputes how "we view civility and its supposed opposite, incivility, as normative universal categories" (2022, 30). Such simplistic readings of civility also overlook how the environment in which the march took place was thoroughly saturated by the noise of racial terrorism. Anti-Black violence resounded through gunfire, the disturbing sounds of white lynch mobs, and the constant re-telling of violent spectacles committed in

4 "NEGROES IN PROTEST MARCH IN FIFTH AV.; 8,000 Men, Women, and Children Demand That Discrimination and Oppression End. TELL WOES ON BANNERS Parade in Silence While Thousands of Their Race Look On with Never a Cheer." The New York Times, 29 July 1917.

newspapers and public-facing media accounts. In this context, the collective act of occupying public space with accusatory banners was a calculated form of disruption—with silence as the sonic force of indictment against racial violence. Indeed, Chad Williams argues that the Silent Protest March generated enough traction to set the stage for over forty years of non-violent protests and legislative battles (2017).

The notion that speech dominantly carries reason within the public sphere has roots in the European Enlightenment project. In Mónica Brito Vieira's words, "the heart of our logocentric culture lies the understanding of speech as the hallmark of reason" (2021, 289). The Silent Protest March, however, was a staged act of civil disobedience that rejected racialized and ableist primacy of the spoken word in the West. Sophia Hatzisavvidou emphasizes how keeping silent operates as protest which "disrupts the primacy of language as means of communication of political demands, as well as the association of political participation with speaking" (2015, 510). By channeling migrants' dislocation into a non-violent, civil demonstration, NAACP organizers advanced a novel sonic protest that was grounded in the refusal to abide by logocentric imperatives to speak aloud. As Daniel Fischlin argues, the "non-verbal power to signify affectively" is central to political rebellion because every "holdback is as important as the shout-out" (2021, 17). By enacting the (dis)quiet of Black refusal, the Silent Protest March dismantled the hegemonic expectations of white listeners.

Black leaders organized the march under the psychological constraints of "double consciousness" (Du Bois 1903). DuBois explains that: "Such a double life, with double thoughts, double duties, and double social classes, must give rise to double words and double ideals, and tempt the mind to pretence or revolt, to hypocrisy or radicalism"

(1903, 205). For Du Bois, this psychological conflict can cultivate critical awareness that can propel active resistance. Shelby R. Crow (2023) elucidates how "double consciousness" manifested into "an outward rhetorical strategy" through the Silent Protest March (330). Crow asserts that the demonstration expressed "the rhetorical ploy of collective doubleness" because protestors made a double appeal to critique U.S. racism while playing up national pride (2023, 332). Demonstrators outwardly performed wordlessness as a mode of peaceful expression. The marchers' collective rhetorical voice indicates how "double consciousness" influenced Black activism that was both (dis)quietingly subversive and deliberately restrained in its preventative anticipation of white listeners, for whom the full force of the protest was not actually intelligible.

The Silent Protest March reveals how sound and silence operate as interchangeable politicized instruments which could be tuned to calibrate protests in the face of white listeners. While public speaking and oration may be more recognizable as the aural traditions most central Black political activism, silence was another crucial sonic method which comprised the repertoire of public protest. Through the synchronized footsteps sounding out collective presence, the march restrained speech to audibly expose the perilous conditions under which voicing identity was dangerous. Nevertheless, this strategic silent occupation does not displace the centrality of oration for more radically uncompromising modes of Black rebellion. Speaking continued to serve as a more predominant sonic-affective everyday practice which gathered and organized migrant listeners as the Great Migration stretched onwards. In the same early twentieth century New York context where the NAACP and marchers staged silence as refusal, Marcus Garvey and the UNIA politicized the oratory amplification of Black pride.

Speaking Garveyism: Public Oration and the Collective Sounds of Black Pride

Wilson Jeremiah Moses influentially identified "classical Black nationalism" as "the ideology that argued for the self-determination of African Americans within the framework of an independent nation-state" (1988, 9). During and after World War One—a period of U.S. history marked by heightened racial violence and migratory upheaval—the political ideal of Black self-determination acquired renewed urgency. Marcus Mosiah Garvey became the most internationally audible advocate for Black nationalist separatism and emigration. However, Garvey's rhetoric did not invent the "Back to Africa" idea so much as it amplified a longstanding tradition within Black political thinking. John Henrik Clarke reminds us of how this "Back to Africa idea has been a recurring theme in Afro-American life and thought" (1974, xviii). There were African migration movements extending back to early nineteenth-century projects, like Paul Cuffee's privately funded emigration efforts and the founding of the American Colonization Society (1816). Hence, most longstanding scholarly discourse has emphasized the conceptual instability of Black nationalism, and Garveyism specifically. Mark Newman proposes that "there is no uniformly accepted scholarly definition of Black nationalism" (2018, 2). To avoid flattening Garvey's legacy, Black nationalisms deserve a more general formulation: as politicized movements with fundamentally shared, albeit differing, commitments to Black pride and collective self-determination. Garveyism reorganized Black collective listening in the early twentieth century through migratory practices of speaking and sounding which challenged white supremacist systems and structures.

The formation of Garveyism did not take place in the United States. Garvey was born in Jamaica on August 17, 1887, when it was still under British colonial rule. He was an ambitious reader but felt curtailed by an underfunded education system with no access to a university, so was compelled to leave in search of opportunity (Martin 1983a, 3). Tony Martin notes how socio-economic barriers in the late nineteenth-century Caribbean propelled emigration "in their tens of thousands in search of new opportunities for employment, education, and political and social improvement" (1983a, 5). After leaving school to learn the printing and newspaper business at fourteen years old, Garvey became involved with anti-colonial trade unions and was forced to leave Jamaica. This pushed him into relocations across the Caribbean, Central America, and Britain. While living in Costa Rica in 1910, Garvey started working on banana plantations controlled by U.S. corporations, where he witnessed West-Indian migrant laborers subjected to violent racial terrorism (Elnaiem, 2021). For Garvey, these formative years of travel produced familiarity with geographic dislocation and consequent disillusionment with Western political structures. Motivated to enact political change that had been heavily influenced by his experiences of migratory displacement, he moved to Harlem in 1916, voicing ideas that inspired Black migrant audiences to overcome their struggles in a nation continually disregarding them.

Garvey's political imagination challenged the Western reasoned respectability of James Weldon Johnson's politics. Whereas Johnson preferred a restrained tone to normalize gradual reform through institution-facing policy efforts, Garvey depended on expansive vocal amplification to mobilize the disaffected, dislocated, and disorganized masses of Black migrants. This comparison is not meant to construe Johnson and Garvey

as rivals. Indeed, Adam Ewing reminds us of why Garvey scholarship should re-consider "the integrationism-nationalism dyad that has been obscured in recent work" (2018, 401). Thus, Garveyism should not be dismissed as a failed extreme, or labelled as the Black nationalist counterpoint to Johnson's integrationist politics. When too much emphasis is placed on the structural conflict between integration and nationalism in twentieth century Black political thought, we ignore how Garvey's speaking connected with migrants whose diasporic struggles were unheard. Garvey's rejection of DuBois's elitist "Talented Tenth" racial uplift model recast working-class migrant audiences as the primary site of political transformation. This case study investigates how Marcus Garvey's political imagination appealed to migrant listeners.

Sympathy for Garvey's rhetoric escalated in the years after World War One, mainly because Garveyism mobilized Black self-determination through public speaking. Between 1916 and 1922, Garvey was speaking on the streets of Harlem at least multiple times a week, and sometimes daily during peak moments. Beyond calling for Black nationalist separatism, Garvey's preachings ultimately celebrated Black identity more than anything else. His speeches were full of collective pronouns, with the words "we" and "ours" serving as strong rhythmic anchors. As such, speaking Garveyism aurally sparked deeper global commitments to the shared purpose of Black pride. Since Garvey's messages comforted migratory anxieties and attempted to mend diasporic existential dislocation, it is no coincidence that his ideas surged to new heights of popularity in the U.S. at the time.

Despite limited archives of Garvey's public speaking, it is still possible to listen to fragments of his voice without veering too far into abstract speculation. Two studio

recordings of Marcus Garvey's voice exist today. They are usually identified as "Universal Negro Improvement Association" and "Look for Me in the Whirlwind"—residing on opposite sides of the same 78 rpm record dated to July 1921. These recordings offer the most direct soundings of Garvey's intense cadence and pacing, but they retain only partial traces of what made his open-air oratorical performances so special. Under the mediating technological structures of the recording studio, Garvey was deprived of his usual crowd connection and forced into delivering the monologues within fixed time limits (Millard, 2005). Despite scant archives of Garvey's live performances, the cadences of his voice are partially curated by Amy Jaques Garvey's formalized drafts of his speeches in *The Philosophy and Opinions of Marcus Garvey* (1923;1926). She was an astute listener who played constitutive roles in preserving some of the affective aural dynamics behind Garveyism. He voiced repeatable and catchy Black pride rhetorics with rhythmic cadence and unapologetic volume. Thus, Garvey's two recordings, *The Philosophy and Opinions of Marcus Garvey*, and other writings all contributed to spreading traces of Garveyism's aural legacies.

The philosophy of Garveyism was voiced with a commanding preacherly cadence, and this oratorical style appealed to geographically and culturally diverse Black listeners, Colin Grant uses visualsonic terms to describe Garvey's enigmatic allure as an orator:

> To the discerning ear it would have been easy to recognize Marcus Mosiah Garvey's own Jamaican accent but, as he declaimed from the top of a Harlem soapbox, it was masked by a style of speech that reminded Southern migrants of the forceful preachers in their 'shouting churches' back home. The genius of Garvey lay in his early ability to reach out to both native and foreign-born groups (2008, 91).

His vocal flourishes evoked strong responses from crowds of listeners. Garvey's oratorical style transmitted deep critical awareness of the historical struggles of slavery

and diaspora. Ula Yvette Taylor offers another key description of Garvey's sonic charisma: "His commanding voice could be heard several blocks away. More important, though, was his message, which struck a chord with disgruntled Harlemites who had been disappointed" (2002, 23). The performative power in Garvey's voice transformed dispersed individual migrants through welcoming them into some semblance of shared community. However, Garvey's oratory operated in tandem with visual spectacle. In public appearances and rallies, he was often draped in elaborate military uniforms.

UNIA parades and NAACP demonstrations both mobilized visualsonic affective logics to announce political presence and expose injustice. There were sharp contrasts between the spectacles of Garveyite rallies and the restrained sonic strategy of the 1917 Silent Protest March. In the NAACP's Silent March demonstration, withheld speech and restrained sound functioned as a counter-sonic strategy which indicted racism. UNIA parades and rallies embraced loud volumes and collective chanting of political slogans which transformed streets into political arenas for affirmation of pride through amplification. These contrasting strategies illuminate two vastly different oscillations between loud and quiet forms of Black political expression.

Garvey's political voice, including the views expressed within his large body of letters, were also shaped not only by the technological limits of recording, but the spatial and aural limits of incarceration. He was imprisoned in the Atlanta Federal Penitentiary between 1925 and 1927, where he extensively authored articles and pamphlets which functionally extended the views expressed in his public speaking. In the forward to *The Tragedy of White Injustice* (1927), Garvey explains that the work "was written during a time of leisure in jail in 1927, in the peculiar form in which it appears. It is not verse,

neither is it orthodox prose, but it is a kind of mean adopted for the purpose of conveying the desired thought" (1). His description foregrounds how hybrid rhetorical forms were shaped by confinement, and how writing could be an aural surrogate for public speaking.

At the onset of the Great Migration, the U.S. prison industrial complex was one of the most predominant faces of institutional racism in the North. Dan Berger conceptualizes Black incarceration as migration enforced by the state, which "typically runs along an urban-to-rural axis—and it moves them from prison to prison" (2014, 2). Indeed, sociological data from the Great Migration confirm an alarming causal relationship between Black movement to the North and increased rates of imprisonment. Eriksson's analysis works from the 1940 United States Census data, where the numbers reveal that Black migrants were two "percentage points more likely to be incarcerated in 1940, roughly double the probability than if they stayed in the South" (Eriksson, 2019, 527). Saidiya Hartman furthers awareness of how non-criminal status offences like loitering or vagrancy charges disproportionately skewed rates of imprisonment. She argues: "Status offenses were critical to the remaking of a racist order in the aftermath of Emancipation, and they accelerated the growing disparity between Black and white rates of incarceration in northern cities at the beginning of the twentieth century" (Hartman 2019, 243). Black activists endured the silencing experience of incarceration but still managed to amplify their rhetoric in the process. Garvey's prison writing generated more widespread attention to the racialized character of the prison industrial complex while exemplifying how persecuted Black migrants could take up writing as an alternative form of vocal circulation and protest.

Garvey's imprisonment, therefore, did not terminate his oratorical voice. Instead, it

redirected it into quieter registers of print, albeit still capable of wide circulation. These prison era writings were disseminated by Garvey's followers and still read aloud in certain public forums or within UNIA institutional contexts. Even from within the intensely surveilled panoptic confines of the U.S. prison industrial complex, his prison-era writings started to draw more public attention. His output during incarceration proved that prison writing was an effectively (dis)quieting platform for reclaiming agency. As Angela Y. Davis observes, public recognition for Black authored prison writing has historically coincided with larger social movements calling for prison reform (2003, 50). Garvey's prison writing played an innovative role in announcing his imprisonment as a manifestation of racial injustice, which he incorporated into his broader campaigns. President Calvin Coolidge commuted Garvey's prison term and deported him back to Jamaica in 1927, effectively halting the momentum of the UNIA's activities in the United States. The *Negro World* newspaper continued to be published until 1933. Judith Stein elucidates how "racial leaders—Malcom X and Michael Manley, Muslims and Communists, businessmen and politicians—testify to Garvey's continuing influence" (1986, 1). The aural politics of Garveyism involves refusing to silence emphasis on Black pride, collectively speaking.

On December 18, 1927, Garvey gave an autoethnographic speech at the Ward Theater back in his hometown of Kingston, Jamaica: "My Advent, Work, Persecution, Indictment, Conviction, Appeal, Imprisonment and Liberation in the United States of America—The Land of My Friends and My Enemies." Over detailing his itinerant movements across at least thirty-eight U.S. states, his personal narrative sounds out the prideful essence at the core of Garveyism: "The world has made being Black a crime, and

I have felt it in common with men who suffer like me, and instead of making it a crime I hope to make it a virtue" (Martin 1983b, 233). Within the United States, Garvey's words about racial pride issued the most (dis)quieting challenges to racism at the onset of Northern mass migration. Even though speech was subjected to arguably unparalleled levels of repression under the "sonic color line" during this "Red Scare" period, Garvey amplified awareness of racial injustice as a collective condition and experience. After facing trials and tribulations for his outspokenness, Garvey defiantly reflects on how "I offered no apology then when I spoke in Harlem and I offer no apology now (hear, hear)" (Martin 1983b, 228). But Garvey closes this same speech in saying that "my mission is not to create disturbance among mankind. My mission is to plead the cause" of Black pride (Martin 1983b, 247). Garvey deserves recognition—not primarily as an advocate for the "Back to Africa" emigration movement—but as the outspoken leader who delivered words that empowered displaced Black subjects in the United States and beyond. Garveyism globally empowered semblances of community by offering outlets for social, economic, and spiritual nourishment.

Amy Jacques Garvey recounts the pressing political questions of governance that shaped Marcus Garvey's thinking when he was an itinerant transnational migrant and aspiring activist:

> Where was the Black man's government strong enough to protect him? A Black man seemed to have only one true passport, and that was his Black face; no matter what other passport he presented as a subject or citizen of any country in which he was born, his Black face finally decided the way he should be treated, and that was usually as less than a white man. (1963, 10).

The problems of statelessness and exclusion were racialized migratory conditions that Garvey sought to address with pride-filled rhetorics. Garveyism was a global movement, but it found popularity in the United States, which was undergoing the largest racial reorganization of population in the twentieth century. The Great Migration registered the diminishing hope that Black citizens could secure the rights and freedoms promised to white citizens (Leeuwen, 2000). In this context, Garvey's philosophy—especially the "Black is Beautiful" mantra—was serving a greater rhetorical purpose beyond boosting self-esteem. Garvey rhythmically deployed this saying in speeches, at rallies, and it was plastered onto uniforms or UNIA iconography. Its aural circulation had profound implications as a (dis)quieting collective denunciation of white supremacy.

Garvey's philosophy was both self-fashioned and primed to circulate beyond national borders through migrant audiences. Garvey framed Garveyism as a global movement, but it found its most concentrated early emergence through the surge of Black relocations within the United States. In practice, speaking Garveyism had numerous cultural, political, and socio-economic implications during the Great Migration. As Charles Willis Simmons notes, Garvey's insistence on being proud of skin color "might have been the source of a new concept of color" (1961, 35). Before Garvey's rise, consumer goods either featured branding catered to white people or racist caricatures. By the late 1930s and into the middle of the century, however, alternative modes of affirming racial pride emerged. New products—art prints, calendars, clothing, home décor, dolls for children, as well as blues, jazz, or soul records—gave Black consumers more abilities to make purchases to announce their pride than any other point in U.S. history. The founding of magazines like *Ebony* (1945), and its weekly sister publication *Jet* (1951),

further extended this representational shift. Garveyism did not create these shifts in material conditions, and they remain structured by capitalist inequities and exploitative logics. However, Garvey's oration influenced how "Blackness" became more multimodal and affirmable as a public-facing identity over the Great Migration. Likewise, Robert A. Hill underscores how Garvey's speech affirmed dignity, beauty, and collective strength, which is how Garveyism contributed to reshaping socio-cultural consciousness for people in transition (1983, 14).

While organized political support for Garveyism had largely faded by the late 1960s, its ideological and rhetorical messages reemerged in Jamaican reggae culture. During the 1970s, a perceptible number of Jamaican musicians audibly celebrated the Black pride of Garveyism in some of their famous hit songs. Artists including Steel Pulse, Burning Spear, Mighty Diamonds, and of course the legendary Bob Marley, make direct reference to Garvey. Hill and Blair propose, accordingly, "that the memory of Garvey is a vital force—daily oral-musical performance has transformed the historic Garvey into a symbolic image that lives on in the popular imagination" (1987, xvii). Bob Marley's "Redemption Song" sounds out lyrics inspired by Garveyism: "Emancipate yourself from mental slavery. None but ourselves can free our minds," nearly mirroring language from his 1917 speeches (1980). Reggae is another auditory archive which preserves Garveyism's emphasis on pride and collective self-determination through repeated migratory acts of listening and live improvisational performance. The enduring influence of Garveyism on reggae demonstrates how it functioned as a portable sonic resource that could be reactivated wherever displaced migrants gathered to hear and remember. Whereas uplift-oriented anthems sought harmonious integration and

recognition, Garveyism, like reggae after it, amplified registers of refusal which voiced pride beyond the liberal politics of respectability.

Rather than seeking to resolve historical or ongoing concern over Garvey's politics, specifically, the viability of his "Back to Africa" program, this case study has approached Garveyism through the unsettled socio-cultural conditions enabling its wide audibility. Garvey's significance lies not only in the empowering philosophies of his ideology, but in how his voice galvanized migrant listeners into taking political action. Garvey's public speaking unsettled the assimilationist rhetoric espoused by Western liberal brands of leadership. As Cronon notes, Garvey seemed to position his unrestrained voice against the institutional respectability of all other Black rights organizations in his day (1973,124). Garveyism unsettled dominant modes of liberal respectability through spoken insistence that political transformation must occur through resonant speech directed at those most dislocated by migratory patterns provoked under racialized capitalism. The legacies of speaking Garveyism emerge not as a failed separatist movement, but as a sonic project that mobilized Black pride, globally forged collective senses of diasporic belonging, and retrained demoralized migrant audiences to hear themselves as historical agents of change.

Sounding Black Women's Activism: Migrations, Survival, and Sonic Upheaval

The structural focus of this chapter has emphasised Black activism through the contributions of James Weldon Johnson and Marcus Garvey. Considering the male-centric organizational foundations of the NAACP and UNIA, it is necessary to emphasize how female migrants played integral roles in this activism. Women were instruments of expressive advancement, as community figures, and even in political organization. For Black women living under intersecting oppressions, it was more difficult to negotiate Southern societal norms, and the challenges of Northern urbanization were also exacerbated. Cheryl D. Hicks sounds out how women's migration anxieties did not end in the North, as they encountered many difficulties in New York City (2010, 24). The situation was not much better in the North—Black women endured poor working conditions, long hours, and abysmal payment—overwhelmingly within domestic sector jobs like nannies, maids, and cooks. Jacqueline Jones confirms that "the paid labor of Black women exhibited striking continuity across space—urban areas in the North and South—and time—from the nineteenth to the early twentieth century" (1985, 161). All while facing overwhelming systematic barriers in the South and North throughout the Great Migration, Black women played foundational roles in social justice advocacy. They were leading voices for causes of abolitionism, women's suffrage, education, and social reform. Ida B. Wells proved that women were behind irreplaceable anti-lynching campaigns and were advocates for the emancipatory potential of migratory movement.

Due to the excessive intersectional constraints of oppression in the rural South, women migrants felt some degrees of empowering changes: moving North granted capacities to associate freely with more people or communal organizations than they

could previously imagine. In Marcia Chatelain's words, "When families planned on migrating, they might never have anticipated the ability to select places of leisure or worship so easily, but even the most casual reader of the *Defender* knew that there were far more educational opportunities for their girls" (2015, 96). Joe William Trotter Jr. argues that Black women in the South were, women were "enmeshed in Black kin and friendship networks", and they were often at the forefront of organizing and encouraging friends and family to move North (1991, 32). As Cilli's case study of activism in Pittsburg insists: "Black women reformers provided specialized services, defined by their gender, that buffered migrants against the physical manifestations of racial discrimination" (2021, 39). Women's (dis)quieting actions audibly resisted the intersecting grains of white supremacy and patriarchy, whether through formal organizations or through more subtle educational or nurturing roles. For example, Saidiya Hartman retells the December 1919 noise protest led by the imprisoned women of the Lowell Cottage wing at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility. As an instance of (dis)quieting sonic upheaval, "the women in Lowell Cottage made their voices heard even if no one wanted to listen" (2019, 278). While early twentieth century activist movements saw speechless solidarity mobilized by citizens in the silent march protest, other activists—even those who were imprisoned—embraced louder means of decrying racial injustice. Hartman imagines this protest through sonic upheaval as an active claim to freedom: "The chorus spoke with one voice. All of them screamed and cried about the unfairness of being sentenced to Bedford, being arrested in frame ups, the three years of their lives stolen" (2019, 279). Whether they were imprisoned, disenfranchised under

systematically oppressive Northern socio-economic institutions, or both, Black women's voices refused to be silenced amid the disquieting climate of racism, nationwide.

Visually and sonically demarcated by the white gaze and white listening ear in the South, migrants moved North seeking freedom from the constraints of "double consciousness", only to perceive how institutions and social logics of the North threatened to silence their hopes and dreams. In "Harlem," Langston Hughes' asks an ominous question: "What happens to a dream deferred?" (1951). For those who arrived North during World War One, every individual experience with migration is punctuated with the existential weights of their crushed hopes and dreams. Thankfully, leading activists became preoccupied with responding to the institutional structures, behaviors, and attitudes constraining migrants along their collective struggles with living in transition. Northern currents of activism promoted communal production and expression amid unsettled urban cities. On their Bowery Boys history podcast, Greg Young and Tom Meyers argue that the 1917 Silent Protest March was among the earliest and most resonant historical precedent for Black-led civil protest demonstrations (2020).

Robin D.G. Kelley accounts for how revolutionaries of the post-migration era committed to actions which could be described as a reverse migration, or a return to the South. In *Freedom Dreams* (2003), Kelley offers special praise to Nelson Peery's short book called *The Negro National Colonial Question* (1972). Written and published in the full swing of the Black Power movement (1966-1980s), Peery's text found acclaim in radical Marxist circles, as it advanced important arguments about how the Southern states must also be recognized as key sites of self-determination. Peery and other radicals

increasingly embraced the position that U.S. Black nationhood "includes a historically evolved, stable community with its own unique culture, language (or rather dialect), and territory—the Black belt counties and their surrounding areas, or essentially the thirteen states of the Old Confederacy" (2002, 133-34). Migrations were usually routed in search of sanctuary from violent persecution and in search of more opportunities for self-determination at the beginning of the twentieth century. Every migrant felt disquieting traumas from their exposures to "the sonic color line" (Stoever, 2016), but they also embodied (dis)quieting resistances against sonic forms of white supremacist surveillance. Racial terrorism in the rural South remained incomprehensible for most native Northerners; they remained sheltered by detachment from within the cosmopolitan comforts of sky-high apartments. In the second half of the twentieth century and beyond, more migrants and their children returned South because they grew tired of listening to the unsettling sounds of Northern indifference. While "double consciousness" functioned as a disquieting psychic obstacle for anti-racist activism, migratory activism sounded out (dis)quieting tones of resilience and solidarity.

Rather than argue that twentieth century Black activism was ideologically divided between two narrow brands of assimilationist or separatist forms of action, this chapter has engaged in a more expansive assessment of sonic commonalities. Migrants carried echoes of terror and hope in memories, and activism became a way of re-aligning migrants into common outlets of collective action. For these individuals coping with the disruptions of movement and migration, there were many sonic forces spreading senses of empowerment. As migrants were coping with loss and geographic disorientation, the sounds around them—at nearly every stage of the journey—could spread sensations of

cohesion. The sounds of Black movements spread through circulation of newspapers, collective singing, mass displays of silent solidarity, and passionate speakers who spread emancipatory messages to all willing listeners in the streets.

CHAPTER 2

Literary Echoes of Migrancy in Great Migration Narratives

Readers typically engage writing through the eyes, primarily, but this does not mean writing is a soundless medium. Linguistic boundaries do constrain sound, at least when sound is defined from the purely physical standpoint of vibrational perception. In Jürgen E. Grandt's words, "literary language cannot make us see, just as it cannot make us hear—other than its own, muted echo as speech, that is" (2020, 132). So, to explore representations of sound in literature, readers must step outside purely visual, or auditory, modes of interpretation. Writing has auditory dimensions, even though literature is outwardly non-sonic. Literary texts, of all types and genres, can be classified as forms of linguistic expression which evoke the aural. Scholarly texts such as Carter Mathes' Imagine the Sound: Experimental African American Literature After Civil Rights (2015), Nicole Brittingham Furlonge's Race Sounds: The Art of Listening in African American Literature, and Anthony Reed's Soundworks: Race, Sound, and Poetry in Production (2021) sit at the intersection of Black Studies, Sound Studies and Literary Criticism and examine how sounds represented in literature have a variety of functions which hold atmospheric, expressive, socio-cultural, and political significances. Authors have powerful motives to write sonic topographies, because, when represented in literature, sounds can propel deeper reader engagements with questions about perception, embodied experiences, and cultural production or collective memory. Reed (2021) importantly reminds us that "to listen requires reflexively engaging the time that frames the experience" (3), and so while I pointed earlier to work that sits at the intersection of Black Studies, Sound Studies and Literary Criticism, my work turns specifically to the

Great Migration to listen for the ways representations of sound shape migratory writing. There are many forms of sound representation and musico-literary interplay. In this chapter, I maintain that migrant authors are like composers of acousmatic sounds and voices. Authors of Great Migration narratives capture everyday auditory experiences or sonic imaginations of migrant protagonists in narrative form. I analyze how James Weldon Johnson, Jean Toomer, Richard Wright, and Ann Petry use visual-sonic language to amplify two socio-cultural circumstances endemic to the United States: first, the visual-sonic omnipresence of segregation, and second, the resonant sounds of Black resistance.

Over the last decade, there has been an explosion of interest in exploring how sound and other sonic phenomena influence the content and form of writing. Literary sound studies is an emerging interdisciplinary area within the broader field of sound studies. New work challenges assumptions that literature is a soundless medium and that sound is secondary to the visual in writing. Jason Camlot and Katherine McLeod attribute the growing prominence of literary sound studies to the increased digitization of literary recordings and audio archives, as well as to new convergences between methods in literary studies and sound studies (2020). For Camlot and McLeod, as well as other scholars in this emerging field, literary sound studies entail reconceiving literature as an intermedial or multimodal form. [5] Rather than approaching literature as a silent medium

[5] For recent anthologies, methodologies, and developments in literary sound studies, see Jason Camlot and Katherine McLeod, "Introduction: New Sonic Approaches in Literary Studies," *ESC: English Studies in Canada* 46, nos. 2–4 (2020): 1-18; Anna Snaith, ed., *Sound and Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Anthony Reed, *Soundworks: Race, Sound, and Poetry in Production* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021); Nathalie Aghoro, ed., *The Acoustics of the Social on Page and Screen* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021); Helen Groth and Julian Murphet, eds., *The Edinburgh Companion to Literature and Sound Studies* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2024); and Yasser Elhariry and Liesl Yamaguchi, eds., *Literature as Sound Studies* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2025).

that merely represents sound, literary sound studies investigate how the sonic dimensions of silencing, voice, rhythm, and acts of listening contribute to narrative meaning and readers' interpretations. Sonic dimensions of literature are produced and circulated across print, performance, recordings, and other archival media.

I thereby extend this methodological expansion by examining how Great Migration narratives organize voice, music, noise, silence, listening, rhythm, and other sonic phenomena within literary content and form. I situate these representations within the racialized and embodied conditions that necessitated Black mobility and produced aural transformation during the Great Migration. Thus, my work contributes to literary sound studies' growing concern with the sonic by examining how four different Great Migration narratives by Johnson, Toomer, Wright, and Petry incorporate Christina Sharpe's notion of "visualsonic affective language" (2016). Sharpe's term allows me to direct deeper attention to how authors incorporate visual description, sonic imagery, and details about embodied affects or subjective listening perspectives. The authors of Great Migration narratives use "visualsonic affective language" to represent disquieting pressures and (dis)quieting resistances shaping Black migrants' movements. My intervention moves beyond identifying references to sound to consider how literary narratives amplify the affective, embodied, and racialized conditions of Black mobility.

I selected Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man,* Toomer's *Cane*, Wright's *The Man Who Lived Underground,* and Petry's *The Street* because they all span distinct periods and experiences of Black migration. In addition, each of these authors makes sonic-affective experiences central to the narrative meanings of their respective texts. Johnson foregrounds musical performance and the narrated voice of a racialized

migrant; Toomer constructs hybrid literary vignettes of voices, silences, and remembered sounds to register broad mass-movements between the rural South and urban North; Wright emphasizes Black breathing and its silencing under police surveillance or under systemic racism most broadly; while Petry examines how listening, singing, and engagements with material sound technologies—like the radio or jukeboxes—influence the racialized, gendered, and economic pressures confronting different generations of migrants and their offspring. All these authors explore the powerful potential of sound in facilitating aural transformation, while also exposing the limits of sonic practices as means of securing refuge, agency, and upwards mobility in twentieth-century U.S. cities.

Jennifer Lynn Stoever conceptualizes the "sonic color line" to delineate racial power dynamics as being reinforced through auditory perceptions (2016). While Stoever's notion of the "white listening ear" offers useful critiques of how white supremacist ideologies shape listening practices and sound production, I expand on her "sonic-color line" framework to advance a multimodal understanding of the visual-sonic color line. Chapter 2 listens accordingly—not only to textual representations of music, speech, or noise—but also to the visual and sonic cues inviting reader interpretation. My interdisciplinary approach to literary analysis works from Black Studies and Sound Studies to theorize how Great Migration narratives articulate challenges towards conventionally separate sensory experiences of hearing, seeing, and feeling. I foreground the visual-sonic affective language employed by notable authors to amplify embodiments, memories, rhythms, and silencing forces encompassing migrant experiences. Each migrant's journey is multi-directional and too complicated to be exhaustively documented or neatly categorized in accordance with sensory experience.

This chapter establishes links between the multimodal aesthetics of Great Migration literature and the echoes of aural transformation in the twentieth-century United States.

Awareness of the Great Migration's impacts on literature grew from the early-to-mid 1990s. Farah Jasmine Griffin and Lawrence R. Rodgers, comprehensively outlined "the Great Migration novel" as a literary genre (Griffin 1995; Rodgers 1997). Griffin adopts an interdisciplinary and flexible criterion for conceptualizing Great Migration narratives around four stages which may or may not appear in any order: 1) A catalyst encourages movement from South to North; 2) detailed representation of migrants' initial conflict with Northern settings; 3) explanations of migrants' attempts to negotiate and resist negative effects of urbanization; and 4) reflections about the possibilities or limitations of urban cities and the South (1995, 3). Griffin's broad framework guides my multimodal approach to listening for the socio-cultural and political valences of sound within the literary content and form of narratives that primarily feature Black movements or migrancy

Brandon LaBelle's deeply individualized contextual approach to listening beckons for us to consider how sounds of "belonging and migration, of environmental and political conflict, swarm through everyday life and touch the smallest corners of so many places" (2010, xviii). As such, the everyday sounds underlying migrants' experiences are deserving of more critical attention because Black cultural production and resistance in the United States extend far beyond the scope of music. In Emily Thompson's words, "the African Americans who migrated from rural southern counties to large industrial cities would have experienced an aural transformation for more dramatic than that experienced by virtually any other group of Americans" (2002, 132). By listening to

literary representations of sound, scholars can illuminate how auditory experiences shape identity formation, memory, and movement patterns, particularly for migrants navigating new environments. Johnathan Sterne suggests that sonic histories are intimately connected to socio-cultural phenomena outside sound: “Capitalism, cities, industries, the medicalization of the human body, colonialism, the emergence of a new middle class, and a host of other phenomena turn out to be vital elements of the history of sound” (2003, 343). I listen, accordingly, to migration narratives as archives of sonic relations between migrants and white listeners, and to how they represent the sounds of Black resistance.

I selected *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912/1927), *Cane* (1923), *The Man Who Lived Underground* (1942/2021), and *The Street* (1946) because they provide four distinct narratives set against the backdrop of the Great Migration. They span the emergence of the Great Migration, the Harlem Renaissance, and the expansion of Black social realist writing during and after World War Two. Most importantly, each text makes the changing twentieth-century conditions underlying Black mobility especially audible in prose. While a rich body of scholarship has examined the sonic and affective dimensions of Black music, poetry, and short fiction from this period, this chapter turns to the novel to consider what longer narrative forms make possible. When it comes to longer narratives, these works engage in extended narraton that do more than represent the sound accompanying Black migration. They reveal how sound is perceived, remembered, interpreted, and given social meaning as characters move through new environments. Great Migration novels make audible the everyday acts of listening that accompany migration itself.

Each of the four texts approaches migrancy through a different literary form and Black social position. Johnson's narrator is a musician whose performances and listening ears expose how racial identity is heard, misheard, silenced, and negotiated through passing. Toomer moves between many forms to show how Black sound, memory, and identity are fragmented and remade through the liminal process of migration. Wright uses Black breathing amid Chicago's industrial noise, underground acoustics, and fugitive listening as sonic motifs that register the embodied pressures of racial surveillance. Petry centers a first-generation urban subject born in New York City whose practices of listening, singing, and fugitive movement sound out the disquieting pressures shaping Black women's mobility. Taken together, these texts demonstrate how literary narratives make sonic and affective conditions of Black movement more audible to readers.

At halfway through the twentieth century, James Weldon Johnson, Jean Toomer, Richard Wright, and Ann Petry had already published novels or texts with literary characters shaped by mobility. Indeed, Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912/1927), Jean Toomer's *Cane* (1923), Richard Wright's *The Man Who Lived Underground* (1942), and *The Street* (1946) by Ann Petry are significant Great Migration narratives according to scholarly consensus. This assortment of texts captures moments from the turn of World War One, to the Harlem Renaissance, and after the start of World War Two, when the sociological realism literary movement took off. Chapter 2 continues listening to individual migratory movements and collective memories, but this time, in the embodied echoes of literature. I examine "visual-sonic affective language" in migratory narratives to peel back layers of how each author frames Black abjection as a socio-cultural consequence of white surveillance across the U.S. nation (Sharpe, 2016).

Johnson, Toomer, Wright, and Petry conclusively share at least two things in common. First, their writing casts acousmatic sounds as oppressive white noise in a critical socio-political sense. Second, they amplify the voices, sonic experiences, and inner audition of migrant protagonists to emphasize their aural modes for advancing (dis)quieting resistance. Wherever Great Migration narratives affectively re-tell aural imaginaries or embodied sonic experiences—like breathing, laughter, and inner voice, or phantom sounds—each respective author imbues collective memories of oppression and (dis)quieting modes of embodied resistance into sensory language.

An Ex-Colored Musician: White Listeners and Musicalizing Double Consciousness in James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912/1927)

The Harlem Renaissance took off in the early 1920s, with the Black intelligentsia seeking to provide platforms for citybound migrants who arrived in New York with literary, musical, and artistic ambitions. W.E.B. Du Bois and Alain LeRoy Locke forged key partnerships with wealthy white philanthropists like Carl Van Vechten and Charlotte Osgood Mason. They funded writers among the likes of Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, Zora Neale Hurston, and Ann Petry. The voices of younger artists brought up during the Harlem Renaissance leveraged white money to archive African American heritage on its own terms, securing cultural capital in the process. But Du Bois operated on the "Talented Tenth" concept, which proposed that an elite group of educated Black artists and thinkers should empower racial advancement in the United States. The classist elitism of Du Bois's "Talented Tenth" would be challenged by the likes of Booker T. Washington and Marcus Garvey, who promoted anti-classist models for racial uplift instead. This elitist spark both ignited the Harlem Renaissance and threatened to sideline its racial uplift philosophy at once. However, the younger writers associated with the movement struck a balance between catering to upper-middle class sensibilities while producing texts with broader popular appeal.

James Weldon Johnson's career was influenced over correspondences with Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois. As a young adult, Johnson liked Washington's pragmatic emphasis on skilled trade education. Washington even helped him secure a teaching position at the State College for Colored Students in Jacksonville. He grew disillusioned with the individualistic scope of Washington's philosophy and moved to New York with his brother in 1901. The Johnson brothers moved there to

pursue diverse careers in music composition and writing. Harlem would eventually become an enclave for migrants who had artistic ambitions. After he joined the NAACP in 1916, some board members expressed skepticism about Johnson's "Bookerite" involvements, but W.E.B. Du Bois quickly became his steadfast supporter and mentor. They believed in similar courses for racial uplift, like securing equal civil rights, access to liberal arts education, and the cultural capital of artistic creation. *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) deeply influenced Johnson's literary strivings to represent links between musical forms like spirituals, ragtime, or blues, and African American heritage. David Levering Lewis reminds us of how Du Bois and Johnson were early and influential pro-migration advocates who "had written prescient articles in the early twenties about the seismic consequences in store for the race and the nation from the surging exodus out of the South: power through the ballot, prosperity through decent jobs, due process in the courts, decent public education" (2000, 164). Alain LeRoy Locke's *The New Negro* (1925) would build upon earlier contributions by Du Bois, JWJ, and Emmett J. Scott. [4] Locke's volume was among the earliest interdisciplinary compendiums of migrants' cultural production.

Johnson's ambition to write fiction partially extends from his mentor's belief in the importance of promoting more socio-cultural production through the arts. Karen W. Mullins recognizes how Johnson's role as an artist in action made him a special literary figure with a "unique philosophy on gaining Black equality and combating racism that scholars contrasted with views of other Black intellectuals" (2023, 7). In 1920, James

[4] For the first comprehensive scholarly account of Black experience in the early years of the Great Migration, see Scott, Emmett Jay. *Negro Migration During the War*. No. 16. Oxford University Press, 1920.

Weldon Johnson wrote letter to his friend Anne Spencer, a prolific writer and first African American woman to be published in the *Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry* (1973). That letter contains some of his reflections about artistic form: “Still, there must be form. There can be no real art without form. But form for you does not mean lines measured off into lengths of just so many feet in each, with an anticipated rhyme at the endings” (Johnson 1920). A virtuoso musician and lifelong patron of the arts, Johnson developed an expressive poetic style; he used rhyming couplets often and as a formal measure to engage the minds and ears of audiences. In an editorial called “Writers of Words and Music”, Johnson claimed that “sound has a wider appeal than sense”, and this claim reveals his affinity for music and song as powerful elements of expressive culture. [5] He gave an impassioned commencement speech to the Georgia State Industrial College for Colored Youth, and one of his statements appealed to audiences through multimodal sonic-expressive language: “The things I want to say to you are written in no book, they are the things that are in my heart, the things that are sure to find a vibrating response in yours” (1916). Johnson’s rhetoric reveals his attentiveness to the sensory nuances of the ear, but his commencement address seemingly suggests that book narratives do not convey the degrees of directness held in the expressive forms of poetry, speech, and song. His speech suggests that he was ambivalent and uncertain about the more aurally introspective and reflective subject matter of his only novel, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912). Salim Washington confirms how JWJ’s many roles as an “educator journalist, political activist, diplomat, creative writer, literary critic, musician, and composer, all inform his masterful text” (2002, 234). He was initially concerned about

[5] “Writers of Words and Music.” New York Age, March 2, 1918, In Selected Writings of James Weldon Johnson Volume 1: The New York Age Editorials (1914-1923), Edited by Sondra Kathryn Wilson, p. 289.

how the novel would be received by audiences, and his decision to publish it anonymously confirms his cautionary outlook. But Michael Nowlin explains how even after Johnson's rise to political prominence in the NAACP, he "hardly abandoned his literary aspirations; they became subsumed, rather, under his worries about the collective literary situation of African Americans" (2013, 504). He eventually grew more comfortable with his novel and re-issued it under his real name in 1927.

The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man relays the life of an anonymous narrator who aspires to create music which can transcend racial divisions in the United States. Masami Sugimori links general socio-cultural anxieties about Black mobility to the "simultaneous refutation and affirmation of clear-cut racial classification in James Weldon Johnson's novel" (2011, 37). As the bi-racial narrator grows into adulthood, he increasingly broods over feeling existentially suspended between the white-supremacist racial binary. The novel destabilizes race, illuminating how dominant white supremacist ideologies functionally operate though outlining abstract categories of purity. To undiscerning readers, it may seem like the theme of migration in Johnson's novel constructs an oppositional depiction of the Southern state racism versus Northern freedom. However, Johnson's representation of his narrator's racial passing critically denounces the notion that Northern cities are havens of freedom. We should recall how the narrator's migration from small-town Georgia to living with his mother in Connecticut happens after his father's death in early childhood. Born in the South, but raised predominantly in the North, the narrator has remained insulated from aggressive Jim Crow Segregation laws. Although his mother imparts Southern heritage through embodied aural, oral, and musical traditions, his musical education is not enough to

inspire the narrator to take up anti-racist civic duties. After witnessing a harrowing murder by the hands of a white lynch mob, the narrator's anti-heroic response is to take up the guise of passing for a "white" man and abandoning all his commitments to racial uplift. In the opening and closing passages of the novel, the narrator conveys why preserving his anonymity is a grave necessity. Johnson bookends these paranoic anxieties, revealing the narrator's status as a tragic mulatto, and migrant. The narrator's existential predicament has no meaningful resolution; his outward body is insulated from racism, but this is not genuine liberation from "double consciousness".

The inherently musical trajectory of the narrative reverberates through its protagonist's career as a musician. Johnson ponders whether African American music could earn formal recognitions of "greatness" amid nationwide attitudes and beliefs constructing Black sounds as "other." Noelle Morrisette affirms how the novel "explored whether the assimilation of Black Americans could be traced through the evolution of its music," which is an idea that has traceable roots back to Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* (Morrisette 2013, 15). Furthermore, Eric Weisbard cites *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* as a key "songbook" to proclaim Black modernity by navigating complex racialized politics of popular culture and music in the United States (2021, 51-52). For instance, the novel uncovers chrono-political distinctions between ragtime—with its migratory emphasis on rhythmic and improvisational timing—and classical music—with its Eurocentric emphasis on thematic and melodic timing. According to Bruce Barnhart: "A key part of the narrator's movement from his childhood with his Black mother to his existence as a "white" real estate speculator is his passage from improvising ragtime performer to classical composer" (2006, 551). Johnson weaves this matrix of

musical traditions and transitions into the novel's core to amplify how the U.S. constructs Black music as "other."

Johnson's "signifying riffs" on socio-cultural themes like racial advancement and civic responsibility "clash with the ideological position that the narrator must espouse to justify his own politically charged identity choices" (Andrade 2006, 257). There are musical implications surrounding both major acts of violence in the novel: when a white woman gets shot at a Ragtime club, and when the narrator witnesses a lynching in the South. The latter event pushes the narrator to pass for "white" and abandon his aspirations to compose ragtime music. Through significations which celebrate "improvisation" and "rhythm" in particular, Johnson subversively suggests that African American musical expression can challenge "the sonic color line" (Stoever 2016). Ruotolo convincingly points out that the novel engages "with a historical moment when the visually policed 'color line' was being challenged not only by light-skinned Blacks "passing" as white but also by Black music straying into the forms, styles, and sounds of 'whiteness'" (2000, 251). The novel searches for a resolution in the ex-colored migrant's ambition to promote racial uplift by composing a musical masterpiece that merges rhythmic elements of ragtime with Eurocentric classical music. Barnhart suggests this approach is rooted in "mishearing the essence of music in substantive rather than relational terms" (2006, 558). But *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* leaves readers with no determinate conclusions about whether Black sonic-expressive forms can earn recognition as part of the fabric of U.S. national identity. The musicalized registers of Johnson's novel led to deeply reflective, but ambiguous, conclusions about the roles of music on racial uplift.

The divisive politics underscoring twentieth-century music in the United States is an undeniably central focus in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*. However, the sonic aesthetics of James Weldon Johnson's literature also represent non-musicalized socio-political valences of sound and listening. In other words, Johnson's fiction and non-fictional life-writing represent aurality from Black migrants' perceptions. Across the novel and his autobiography, Johnson negotiates racial identity through the migratory lenses of liminality and mobility. Even though Johnson places sustained emphasis on auditory perception, the sonic scope of his writing extends beyond music and into politicized dimensions of noise, which he represents as a perceptual experience from the perspective of racialized migrant listeners. This hybrid sensory focus clarifies Hardack's line of thought about how the ex-colored narrator re-produces a "sub-text of modernist hybridity" (2015, 237). The narrator is a hybrid listener—continually engaged in a mobile process of making, re-making, and "combining rather than imitating, which helps further remove him from the Southern paradigms of duals [and] binaries" (Hardack 2015, 237). Furthermore, Johnson's hybrid visual-sonic prose exemplifies what Roxanna Pisiak describes as "the ability of language to create, define, control, limit, oppress, and distort such things as opinion, custom, law, culture, and identity" (1993, 83). These critical insights illuminate how Johnson's sonic attentiveness is not just musical, but also, critically tuned into the valences of racialized listening environments.

Noelle Morrissette suggests that Johnson displays immense contextual and environmental concern for describing sound (2013, 3). *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* illuminates how the "white listening ear" (Stoever, 2016) influences Black migrants across Northern urban and Southern rural contexts. There are two striking sonic-

affective passages in the novel where white listeners produce and reinforce disquieting sounds which destabilize Black embodiment and identity. Shortly after the narrator's arrival in New York, he enters a cabaret where Black performers play ragtime for affluent white patrons. The narrator listens intently: "It was music of a kind I had never heard before. It was music that demanded physical response, patting of the feet, drumming of the fingers, or nodding of the head in time with the beat" (Johnson, 67). The passage celebrates an improvisatory sense and the embodied vitality of the music. Yet, a deeper critical force emerges in the passage through the presence of white listeners. Within a controlled interior environment, white listeners gain exposure to Black sonic aesthetics of improvisation and syncopation. However, they were insulated from the migratory realities which influenced the sounds. This scene contains Johnson's most subtle critique of white indifference to racial precarity in the urban North.

Set in the rural South, the lynching scene is the major turning point in the novel, wherein the narrator's belief in racial uplift becomes silenced under the sonic force of white violence. This scene can be read as a violent inversion of the insulated mode of white listening staged in the New York cabaret. The lynching takes place right near the railroad station and tracks, which symbolically negates the supposed liberatory promises of mobility. The acutely vigilant racialized narrator listens to the white terrorism unfold as a cacophony of angry white voices: "The men who at midnight had been stern and silent were now emitting that terror-instilling sound known as the 'rebel yell'" (Johnson, 127). The "rebel yell" was a piercing high-pitch battle cry shouted by confederate soldiers in the U.S. Civil War. By detailing this auditory threat, Johnson reveals the enduring sonic residues of confederate ideology. Such collective mass vocalizations—

notably intimidating and psychologically demoralizing for Black southerners—are an instance of weaponized sound. Johnson's narrator is intimidated into helpless complacency as he recalls the "cries and groans that I shall always hear" (Johnson, 127). Johnson's phrasing clarifies how oppressive sounds become spectral auditory memories. No amount of migratory movement can negate the lingering phantom sounds of Black pain held in the confines of one's sonic consciousness. In turn, Johnson's focus on the "rebel yell" conveys whiteness as a collective voice which recasts a disquieting acoustic regime in the United States. The novel amplifies how sonic intimidation strategies constrain migrants' mobility and necessitate hyper-vigilant listening as a practice of survival.

Johnson's autobiographical literature also details the sounds of the rural South and the urban North. Such descriptions of acousmatic sound hold a great deal of critical significance. For example, *Along This Way,* details Johnson's life-threatening encounter with National guard militiamen who were occupying his hometown of Jacksonville, Florida in 1901. Johnson's autobiography details how he befriended a journalist who was passing as "white" when he was a young adult. Johnson's sonic-affective language retells how, on one evening, nearby white listeners mask the idyllic sounds of nature and project disquieting sounds:

> The scene was one of perfect semi-tropical beauty. Watching it, I became conscious of an uneasiness, an uneasiness that, no doubt, had been struggling the while to get up and through from my subconscious. I became aware of noises, of growing, alarming noises; of men hallooing back and forth, and of dogs responding with the bay of bloodhounds. One thought, that they might be hunters, flashed through my mind; but even so, there was danger of a stray shot. And yet, what men would hunt with such noises, unless they were beating the bush to trap a wild, ferocious beast? I rose to go, and my companion followed. We threaded our way back. The noises grew more ominous. They seemed to be closing in. My pulse beat faster and my senses became more alert. I glanced at my companion;

> she showed no outward sign of alarm. Suddenly we reached the barbed wire fence. There we stopped. On the other side of the fence death was standing. Death turned and looked at me and I looked at death. In the instant I knew that the lowering of an eyelash meant the end (1933, 166-167).

Morrissette reflects upon how "the sense of sound pre-empts the visual" in the passage above (2013, 34). Johnson uses affecting visual-sonic motifs to re-tell his own near-death encounter with a white racist mob in Florida. His language conveys the prospect of being lynched as a lived threat announced by noises emanating from white people. Thus, Johnson's migration narratives convey racism as something of a vibrational essence. It is an always present threat in Southern states. The author amplifies how hyper-acute auditory awareness drains the livelihood out of his existence in Florida, pushing his migration to New York City.

Jean Toomer's *Cane* (1923): Sonic Affective Vignettes of Migrations

Jean Toomer was born in Washington, D.C. in 1894, where he spent nearly all his formative years growing up within an upper-class interracial family. He was a migrant who moved suddenly and frequently throughout different points in his life, but not in the traditional fashion which saw most African Americans following the move from the rural South to the urban North. Toomer usually moved across different cities instead, from New York, to Chicago. But in 1921, he ventured away from his Northern roots; effectively severing his association with the blooming Harlem Renaissance movement in New York. During a time when almost all migrants were moving North, Toomer forged a reverse migratory connection to the rural South after taking a short-term job as a principal and teacher in the small town of Sparta, Georgia. Toomer's personal coming of age story is, as a result, characterized by a personal struggle to feel any substantial sense of

belonging within one racial category as well as to any singular artistic, intellectual, or spiritual tradition.

A prevailing claim about *Cane* is that it encapsulated the artistic spirit of the Harlem Renaissance, specifically, in its most productive years between 1918 to 1929. But *Cane* holds a crucial place in my dissertation project for its significant emphasis on sounding-out the individual and collective experiences behind the Great Migration. As Francisco E. Robles argues: "*Cane* is a text of migration, and its particular moment is post-World War I Great Migration race and class relations, particularly as they intersect with increasing urbanization and shifting understandings of gender and sexuality" (2020, 7). Toomer had an astute ear for sounding out the existential crisis of liminality which affected hundreds of thousands of migrants. The tripartite division of *Cane* is mobilized around individual vignettes which depict erratic migratory movements through Toomer's detailed sonic-affective geographic juxtaposition. Locations in the text range from the deep South in the first section, to the mid-Atlantic region of Washington, D.C. and far North to Chicago in the second section. Then, the third and final section returns to the South, following a Northern born teacher named Ralph Kabnis, who struggles to confront the haunting specters of collective racial trauma. Thus, Toomer strove to represent sonic dimensions of Black migrants' embodied experience. My approach to the text will thus raise awareness of how Toomer employs affecting visual-sonic language to present migrants' collective experience as replete with socio-cultural liminalities. Toomer's visual-sonic affective language critically captures some complicated elegiac tones. He engages in a sounding-out of the aural spirit of Black transformations, "whether through amalgamation, migration, or murder" (Nunn 2015, 134). Representations of sound and

music in *Cane* negotiate embodied and psychological modes of migration. Toomer depicts sonic dimensions of moving North as well as migrants navigating the noise of urban life. *Cane* sounds out liminal identity and geographic dislocation as Black collective experiences punctuated with individual nuance and complexity. I listen to the stories, which scholars often describe as vignettes, that specifically revolve around Toomer's characters.

In section one, two vignettes called "Karintha" and "Becky" depict the segregated rural South as a traumatic location. Toomer characterizes them as emblems who signal-out alienation, corruption, and exploitation within lyrical landscapes that resonate with Southern beauty. Both women are ostracized characters whose broken bodies issue (dis)quieting calls for resistance. Griffin makes a thought-provoking claim, that: "Toomer is the artist most responsible for establishing violence on the [B]lack body as a trope to signify the violence of the South and as the major catalyst for migration" (1995, 25). Toomer represents a wide spectrum of sonic and vocal expression, and the result is that the Black voices and listeners represented in *Cane* often transcend traditional expression through speech as well as traditional auditory perception through hearing. Fred Moten's seminal work, *In the Break,* theorizes how Black radical aesthetics gesture to the interplay between speech, sound, writing, and song: "Where shriek turns speech turns song—remote from the impossible comfort of origin—lies the trace of our descent" (2003, 22). Moten outlines what might be described as an aural continuum, one which disrupts conventional notions of beginning and fixed identity. Likewise, Toomer challenges Eurocentric privileging of rational discourse over affective, embodied, or

kinetic expressions. *Cane* invokes sonic cadences, accordingly, to frame migratory bodies as constantly moving sites of epistemic rupture and resistance.

Cane opens with "Karintha", whom Toomer casts as a beautiful woman with ambitions that get corrupted by the men in her Georgia community. Toomer's prose reveals, suggestively, the implications of Karintha's subjection to misogynistic sexual abuse in the South: "Young men go to the big cities and run on the road. Young men go away to college. They all want to bring her money. These are the young men who thought that all they had to do was to count time. But Karintha is a woman, and she has had a child" (9). Although she is victimized by Southern circumstances, Toomer likens the sounds which emanate from Karintha's body to natural, organic expressions of naturalistic, acousmatic sounds. For example, Toomer recounts how Karintha was not like the other ordinary children through describing the sounds of her running body: "Karintha's running was a whir. It had the sound of the red dust that sometimes makes a spiral in the road" (8). This description subtly, but surely, likens the titular character to an aural emblem of the beautiful, low-fidelity acousmatic sounds of Southern rural winds and whirling dust. Although her running body is described as a sonic force that is un-hearable, Toomer's poignant lyricism also details how Karintha's listening ears are exposed to vicious cycles of sexual exploitation. Karintha "had seen or heard, perhaps she had felt her parents loving" (9). While the sounds of her running body are not described as artificial, Karintha's attempts to resist her patriarchal environment are silenced by the dehumanizing enterprises of racism and misogyny.

When it comes to sound of Karintha's represented voice, Grandt reminds us how readers "can hear it, only figuratively, in the singing that Toomer's literary text both

reports and mimics" (2020, 132). He further recognizes that the sounds of the spiraling dust do not "converge with Karintha's own voice, as she herself remains mute" (Grandt 2020, 135). In this case, Karintha's running feet stir up a dust storm, a subtle parallel to the kinetic sounds of migrants' widespread movement over the Great Migration. Grandt listens to the swirl of red dust as "a literary swirl stirred by Afro-kinesis… a form of coiling motion that improvises modalities of transaction with and in new-old sonic topographies, and in the process limns an aural modernity that constantly reinvents itself" (2020, 134-140). Karintha's kinetic motion produces sonic forms of dispersal, wherein her body does not own sound, but disperses it as a texture of migratory displacement.

"Becky" tells the story of a white mother of two Black sons living in an unspecified region of the South. She faces silencing and scorn from her community because she had an interracial relationship. Consensual interracial relationships were intensely stigmatized in the South, and they remained taboo across the nation despite being relatively commonplace. Becky's two sons face limited socio-economic opportunity and are psychologically afflicted with a perpetual sense of liminality: "White or colored? No one knew, least of all themselves" (14). Becky's non-racialized status in the community is what prevents her or her sons from being lynched immediately. She is pushed to the margins of society. Their home is cut off from the township, and it occupies a symbolic migratory location in being located near the railroad tracks. Toomer represents silence and train sounds in ways which underscore how the dynamics of interracial tension propelled many people to board trains and migrate North. There is no representation of spoken dialogue from Becky or her sons. Instead, their lives are filtered through the collective conditions of loss and discrimination. Toomer sounds-out

intergenerational trauma here, and migration is the only open-ended conclusion which he offers readers in *Cane*. Becky's sons have no choice but to become fugitive migrants to stay alive: "Becky was the white woman who had two Negro sons. She's dead; they've gone away. The pines whisper to Jesus. The Bible flaps its leaves with an aimless rustle on her mound" (16). The sound of the bible flipping in the wind as it rests on the mound of dirt covering Becky's body resonates with poignant bitterness towards the institutions which sanctioned atrocities "in the wake" of slavery (Sharpe, 2016). Frederick Douglass draws a distinction "between the Christianity of this land, and the Christianity of Christ" (1845, appendix). The passage above echoes Douglass' criticism of religious practice and institution in the rural South, albeit in a more abstract fashion. Throughout the Great Migration, "[s]ome of the movements that emerged in this period rejected religion altogether in favor of radical secular political organizing, while others thought to mobilize religion in new ways to effect a reimagined Black future" (Weisenfeld 2008, 8). Toomer's relationship with organized religion evolved over the course of his life, and *Cane* evidences a period of his disillusionment with the institution of Christianity. Toomer embraces the indirection of visual-sonic description to contrast the spirit of God's biblical word against the mound of Becky's unmarked grave. Toomer juxtaposes naturalistic imagery of pine trees whispering to Jesus, which signals the injustice of Becky's death. While the pine trees whisper to Christ himself, the abandoned bible flapping powerlessly in the wind serves as a reminder of the atrocities sanctioned through the social control of religious institutions in the United States. Toomer gestures ambiguously to the resistive possibility flowing from migration. Movement is the means through which Becky's sons manage to live another day.

Toomer's shift to Northern urban settings over part two registers reorganizations of sonic life for migrants. The familiar communal rhythms of the South, like church and spirituals, give way to the white noise of industrial sounds and racial surveillance in the urban North. William H. Rice notes how part two of Toomer's text relays sights and sounds marking "the beginning of assimilation, the scattering of the group, the breakdown of the slave culture, the end of old patterns" (1989, 596). In vignettes like "Avey" or "Bona and Paul," migrant characters are exposed to acoustically dissonant environments. Ties to Black community were ruptured in urban environments. In cities, record players and instruments become dominantly racialized sonic technologies that replace the southernized communal voice of gospel singing. Paul's experience in "Bona and Paul" is very telling. As a young migrant from Georgia attending university in Chicago, Paul becomes romantically involved with a white female student named Bona. When his white friend Art plays jazz piano at a social gathering, Paul listens under the pressure of surveillant white listeners around him. He reflects: "I've got to get the kid to play that stuff for me in the daytime. Might be different. More himself" (101). Paul's desire to hear the music in daylight suggests that he is unsettled by the mediating presence of white spectators in a nocturnal setting saturated with jazz. Thus, Toomer socially ungrounds how racialized listeners get affected by feelings of being evaluated or judged by the "white listening ear" (Stoever, 2016). Jazz does not sound like liberation or unification here. Instead, Toomer discloses how listening becomes racialized through Paul's liminal migratory perspective.

Cane represents differently abled sonic imaginaries and multimodal forms of listening. For example, Toomer turns to deafness and blindness as figures through which

unconventional modes of perception are explored. Thus, liminal and non-conforming listening sensibilities inspire the content and experimentation with form in Toomer's writing. His insistent refusal to commit to categories or binary oppositions is further reflected in his sustained interest in non-conforming listeners and their unconventional practices. Two questions guide the analysis of the following paragraphs. How do Toomer's non-conforming listeners reject hearing-centric, audist norms? What are the epistemic and cultural implications when deafness operates metaphorically, most notably in "Harvest Song"? Furthermore, I argue that two of Toomer's non-conforming listeners in "Kabnis" deserve recognition for imparting multimodal sensibilities onto his brand of literary modernism.

Although the title might suggest that Toomer is writing song lyrics, "Harvest Song" is not as overtly lyrical as some of his other ventures to represent work songs, like in "Cotton Song" for example. "Harvest Song" is instead, "a song which strains against the very idea of song, but which contains the seeds of a new song" (Rice 1989, 598). This formal tension between narrative and song signals out Toomer's broader modernist experimentation because genre itself becomes unstable. Within this context, deafness does not function as literal representation of Deaf people or Deaf cultures, but more as a figurative literary device shaped by the dominant cultural logics of ableism and audism. "Harvest Song" has been described as either a free verse poem or a prose poem, and it is narrated from the point of view of a harvester—identified as deaf—who reaps sugar from the cane fields. The poem depicts the aural experiences of deprivation, exhaustion, and frustration encompassing deaf bodies: "My ears are caked with dust of oatfields at harvest-time. I am a deaf man who strains to hear the calls of other harvesters whose

throats are also dry. It would be good to hear their songs ... reapers of the sweet-stalk'd cane, cutters of the corn ,... even though their throats cracked and the strangeness of their voices deafened me" (95). The harvester's deafness is framed less as a medical condition than as a figure of symbolic lack, as his dust caked ears are shaped by environmental circumstances. So, if deafness is read metaphorically here, it resonates with complex cultural and affective sensibilities. According to ableist and audist logics deafness does figure alienation and dispossession, but Toomer's representation of the oppressed harvester's subjection to the Southern plantation labor regime is equally important. It follows that the deaf harvester's feelings of disillusionment and alienation are not merely an individual case. Toomer renders the condition of deafness as a figure of symbolic absence—one that parallels the U.S. collective consciousness of Black abjection.

Elsewhere in *Cane,* Toomer presents non-conforming deaf listeners as destabilized and disoriented, but still capable of relational and imaginative sonic perception. "Kabnis" features a second passing representation of a deaf body in *Cane*. It is easy to miss because it is presented to readers through a conversational exchange between Carrie K. and Kabnis: "Kabnis: Th old man is a good listener. He's deaf; but he's a good listener. An I can talk t him. Tell him anything." Carrie K.: "He's deaf an blind, but I reckon he hears, and sees too, from th things I've heard (161). This small segment of *Cane* portrays Kabnis and Carrie K. as two characters who refuse to uphold prejudiced beliefs or stereotypes which undermine the aural capacities of deaf bodies. While their discussion acknowledges a body afflicted with differently abled sensory capacities, they refuse to constrain the old man's visual-sonic affective capacities as a listener. Toomer's subject matter represents how (dis)quieting, non-binary, and multimodal accounts of what

it means to see, hear, and listen. In addition, Toomer's stylistic refusal to adhere to normative spelling and linguistic expectations is another means through which *Cane* (dis)quiets socio-linguistic aural expectations facilitating silencing socio-cultural dimensions of ableism and racism in the United States. As non-conforming listeners, Ralph, Kabnis, and Carrie K. demonstrate heightened multimodal awareness.

Taken together, these portions of "Harvest Song" and "Kabnis" respectively gesture to "non-cochlear dimensions of sound" and auditory experience (Riddoch, 2012). *Cane* illustrates how there can be disconnects between the physical worlds of sound and one's own subjective perceptions of "the sounds themselves", which is an individual process that involves "biomechanically derived cochlear vibration" (Riddoch 2019, 58). Toomer's anti-audist imagination is particularly visible in his representation of the "auditory imagination", which Riddoch locates as one of at least three non-cochlear dimensions of sound. The auditory imagination is an inner world "replete with auditory perceptions that have no direct cochlear or somatic input although undoubtedly they have an analogue in electrochemical patterns in the brain" (2012, 13). Much like how he complicates the U.S. binary of migration and racial identity, Toomer's deaf subjects complicate the centrality of hearing within dominantly aural socio-societal frameworks. By underscoring how sound and listening operate differently across unconventional listening subjects, *Cane* confirms that one need not be "hearing" in the scientific sense to be listening.

Laura Doyle's *Bordering the Body* (1994) makes claim to the significance of how *Cane* "abandons progressive plotting and organizes narration spatially, tracing instead the liminal positionality of the mother figure and her sons" (81). Toomer often refuses to

position race or gender in accordance with traditional binaries. *Cane* amplifies the ways in which both Southern and Northern contexts became marginal and liminal spaces during the Great Migration. By dislodging the geographically structural border zones of North and South, Toomer's text seeks to discover those figures who resist traditional reproductions of racial, sexual, and even aural borders. Where Toomer represents deaf bodies in "Harvest Song" and "Kabnis," I argue that these depictions challenge the exclusionary borders of aurality and aural culture within the United States. Aurality broadly refers to the reception, production, and interpretation of sound, but aural processes of speech, language, and musical expression have been traditionally conceived of through able, bodied, hearing-centric, and audist perspectives. Consequently, deaf bodies are subject to an oppressive paradigm called "audism" (Humphries, 1975). Toomer makes two concerted efforts to amplify and challenge the displacement of deaf bodies within *Cane*. Both segments of the text which represent deafness have received far less attention from scholars compared to other sonic-affective dimensions of Toomer's writing, such as his lyricism and musicalized language. The significance of Toomer's deaf bodies resonates beyond representing displacement, and into actively challenging readers to listen (dis)quietingly. (Dis)quieting listening can refer to any resistive modes of listening outside the default audist parameters of normalizing hearing.

The Great Migration resonated as journeying through liminal consciousness. The growth of Black defection from the South applied socio-economic pressures which gradually shifted the character of U.S. national identity. The explosion of artistic production during Harlem Renaissance helped to generate more ideological shifts away from the color-coded and ableist binaries of Southern law, and towards the shallow ideals

of progress and which insulated the systemic operation of racism across the urban North. Toomer's works and days demonstrate strong commitments to rejecting singular labels, and so, perpetual uncertainty and in-betweenness reverberates through *Cane*. Though Toomer's non-linear hybrid blend of prose and poetry, *Cane* makes multimodal linguistic interventions and conveys visual-sonic affective experiences of migration. Even if there is no explicit mention of the Great Migration in *Cane*, the disjointed, fleeting forms of his text emphasizes how Black individuals or communities were largely in a transition phase of consistent movement throughout the twentieth century. Case studies and oral histories of northward migration collected by Frederick Douglass Opie confirm that "Their stories illustrate the point that most often families and networks of extended families migrated North with time spent in more than one city before they settled" (2008, 92). There were difficult emotional and psycho-affective consequences of living in transition, or in a perpetual state of what Brenda Bruggeman refers to as "in-betweenity" (2009, 3). Toomer's resolute willingness to embrace movement, and the in-between, is at least partially symptomatic of interracial and migratory socio-cultural dynamics at work. Toomer's multimodal language in *Cane* captures fleeting sonic essences of oppression and resistance.

White Noise, Black Breathing, and Restless Blues in Richard Wright's *The Man Who Lived Underground* (1942/2021)

Literary realism emerged in the nineteenth century as a response to romanticism. Early realist writers tended to operate within an idealized liberal humanist framework. Over the decade of the Great Depression, African American writers increasingly turned towards forms of literary realism. Richard Wright structurally and sonically retooled

realism into a mode of critique by representing protagonists struggling against forms of sensory enclosure. I argue that Wright's attention to depicting white noise and Black breathing patterns, subsequently, expose the lived effects of racial capitalism, migration, and the confining sensory pressures of urban segregation. Wright had an astute writerly ear for rendering the embodied kinetic sounds and inner auditory perceptions of migration. He was a migrant himself, after all, who left Mississippi at nineteen. Fifteen years later, he completed the rejected novella and condensed it into a short story. Wright's critical vision became more desolate over this period: "Completely pessimistic, it reveals the extinction of the Black Boy's American dream" (Everette 1974, 326). His fiction establishes systemic racism as the causal factor of fugitive displacement in the North, which further challenges the traditional linear transition from the pre-modern agrarian South to the industrial modern North. As Lawrence R. Rodgers explains, post-Harlem Renaissance fugitive migration novels did not include any redemptive visions or "fondness for southern pastoral nostalgia" (1997, 98). Wright's fugitive narratives cynically contest and undermine utopian visions of the urban North as a promised land. Notwithstanding, we should recall how Isabel Wilkerson's described Wright as the "bard of the Great Migration" and a writer who "gave voice to the fears and yearnings of his fellow migrants (2010, 13). In the introduction that Wright wrote for *Black Metropolis: A Study of Life in a Negro City* (1945), he confirms his dualistic and complex outlook on Chicago life, the city where he lived for a decade: "There is an open and raw beauty about that city that seems either to kill or endow one with the spirit of life. I felt those extremes of possibility, death and hope, while I lived half hungry and afraid in a city to which I had fled with the dumb yearning to write, to tell my story" (Wright, 1945, xvii).

Wright also published *12 Million Black Voices* (1945), which specifically accounts for the Great Migration in photographs and prose.

Part three of *12 Million Black Voices* is titled “Death on the City Pavements”, and it opens with Wright summarizing the mass precarity of migrants’ confrontations with the urban North: “Perhaps never in history has a more utterly unprepared folk wanted to go to the city; we were barely born as a folk when we headed for the tall and sprawling centers of steel and stone” (Wright 1941, 93). This example is Wright’s most direct sounding of migrancy, which he described as, “the [collective] beginning of living on a new and terrifying plane of consciousness” (1941, 99). According to Jeff Wimble’s recent assessment: “Wright employs a highly formalized style of writing, unique among his works, using elements from the African American oral tradition as the basis of a new literary modernism” (2024, 28). However, Wright’s *The Man Who Lived Underground* (2021) also deserves more attention as his most formally experimental and abstract narrative. My case study of Wright’s “lost text” listens to how it employs visual-sonic language to accentuate Northern confrontations with systemic racism, and the corresponding tones of hope and despair.

Wright was working on *The Man Who Lived Underground* around the same time he was becoming a rising literary star. When it was completed in 1941, Wright struggled to find a publisher willing to print his authoritative preferred edition. Harper & Brothers deemed it too bleak for readers, despite printing *Native Son* (1940) just a year earlier. Wright was forced to improvise, condensing a portion of his text into a short story which was published in Edwin Seaver’s edited anthology *Cross Section: A Collection of New American Writing* (1944). Wright’s experimental masterpiece was largely overlooked in

the nearly eighty-years since it was published in partial form. After Wright's intended edition was restored and published by his family, *The Man Who Lived Underground* posthumously entered the New York Times bestseller list in 2021, featuring an afterword by Malcom Wright, the late author's nephew. Journalists and scholars noted how this new edition was re-published on the same day that a jury convicted former police officer Derek Chauvin of the murder of George Floyd (Coats 2021; Martin 2021; McLemee 2021; Ramsey 2021; Seymour 2021). The unequaled global surge of Black Lives Matter protests and accompanying growth of scholarship about police brutality lifted *The Man Who Lived Underground* into an unprecedented spotlight. Popular interest in the text continues to surge with celebrity endorsements, notably from Stephen Curry, who listed it as one of twenty-seven selections for his "Underrated" book club in 2023.

By the early 1990s, the brief body of academic criticism about *The Man Who Lived Underground* largely emphasized its existential themes. Patricia D. Watkins explains how the paradoxical structure of the novella is rooted in "the story's simultaneous existence as a naturalistic (thus deterministic) fable and an existential (thus anti-deterministic) fable" (1989, 767). As the novella condemns police brutality and racialization, it affirms collective traumas with confronting insulated systemic racism in Northern cities. Cappetti draws out comparative links between the existential flair of Wright's narrative and Dostoyevsky's *Notes from the Underground* (1864), and she compares the story to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902) considering how both books geographically suspend their protagonists in atmospheric darkness (2001). Gilyard suggests that Wright's experimental aesthetics in *The Man Who Lived Underground* disproved the critical opinions of those who dismissed his novels as "mere protest writing

devoid of true artistry" (Gilyard, 1985, 158). Hostile receptions to Wright's work emerged from his own contemporaries. James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, and Zora Neale Hurston were famous for questioning whether there was any artistic value in Wright's work. However, contemporary scholarship has now widely agreed that Wright was far more than the protest writer that his critics dismissed him as. He was a deeply affective writer who prioritized writing architectural sound and inner voice with a highly innovative style.

More scholars are now re-considering Wright's innovative use of visual-sonic language in general, but also within *The Man Who Lived Underground* specifically. Robin E. Preiss convincingly argues that "Literary depictions of echo and other sonic effects including reverberance, envelopment, distortion, and fidelity perform crucial sensory and metaphorical roles within *The Man Who Lived Underground"* (2022, 129). Preiss also accentuates Wright's use of sonic metaphor to outline the "political legacy he desires for his literary career," which he imagined specifically, through "using echolocation to assemble words into a bridge for connecting the hearts of readers with the realities of social life" (2022, 128). Wright's descriptions of how Chicago's sounds welcome deeper thinking about wider ranging social and politicized valences of sound. My project listens for layers of Richard Wright's use of visual-sonic language in *The Man Who Lived Underground*.

First, I analyze how the novella represents implications of the "the sonic color line" through Wright's dualistic division of Chicago, which represents sounds on the street-level surface, and amid the underground sewers (Stoever 2016). Noises like sirens, traffic and construction pollute the surface of Chicago's streets, but within the

underground sewer, the “whispering rush of the water now droned louder, creating an illusion of another world with other values and other laws” (53). The sewers operate as a non-materialistic sonic economy wherein once familiar noises like cars passing overhead “seemed so strange and unreal” (54). As Fred Daniels survives through this shift in auditory perspective, his subterranean listening re-conditions his awareness of how industrial modernity enacts an acoustically enforced racial order. Second, I consider how Wright represents the phantom sounds of “double consciousness” as an inner voice which troubles Daniels. I specifically amplify restlessness is an affective and kinetic consequence of migratory, or fugitive lifestyles in the United States. Finally, I examine how Wright portrays breathing as a kinetic affirmation of resistance within the larger literary frame of his stark realism, which ultimately amplifies the silencing of breathing—in a literal physiological sense and in an epistemic or existential sense—as the outcome of U.S. systemic racism.

Richard Wright’s *The Man Who Lived Underground* captures the existential, sonic-affective layers of racialized fugitive movement in Chicago. By the mid-twentieth century, the conventional South-to-North migration narrative had become somewhat prominent as a literary sub-genre. Yet, Wright shifted focus exclusively to the urban North, and to the oppressive sounds which signal constraint of opportunities for migrants. The core of this novella revolves around Fred, “Freddie” Daniels, a working-class Black man framed for a murder he did not commit. He is forced into a fugitive lifestyle just to keep breathing amid a world which reinforces his existential insecurities, liminalities, and total abjection until death. Wright expresses a musicalized ethos which I term *restless blues*, and Daniels is the main conduit through which Wright’s novella expresses a bluesy

vernacular. Through exhaustively using visual-sonic language to cast aural representations of sound and silence, Wright details Daniels' descent into the underground, on both affective and critical terms. This analysis explores how Wright amplifies oppressive sonic qualities over his divided geography of the surface and the underground. The multimodal aesthetics in *The Man Who Lived Underground* are influenced by the affective ethos of *restless blues*, through which Wright brings forth a complex and poignant condemnation of systemic racialization in urban modernity.

The novella begins with Daniels returning home from a long day at work. He anticipates a quiet evening with his pregnant wife Rachel, but this moment is violently disrupted when two white police officers apprehend him. He is interrogated at the station, where it becomes apparent that the officers are willing to resort to any means, including psychological torture and gratuitous violence, to coerce a confession from Daniels. Within the interrogation passage, Wright exemplifies how police discretionary powers operate as a silencing systemic apparatus which dehumanizes by force. He reveals how the violence of the officers has sonic dimensions: "The policemen did not reply. Perhaps his voice had not been heard? Perhaps he had only imagined that he had spoken?" (38). Daniels' voice is entirely silenced, foregrounding the broader dynamics of what Stoever calls the "sonic color line" and "the white listening ear" amid the urban North. The officers escort Daniels back home to discuss the crime scene at the neighbor's house, but everyone is astonished to find Rachel going into labor on arrival. While they offer to take them to the hospital, Daniels is separated from his wife. He is reminded of how "he made a bargain" by signing the papers which bound him to an extralegal confession. With the officers are distracted by the unexpected moment of Rachel's giving birth, Daniels is

overcome with “an impulse, not a thought, but just a vague gathering of all the forces of his body urged him to escape, to run off while there was time” (47). Alice Goffman’s *On the Run* (2014) presents the concept of fugitive evasion as a necessary means of embodied resistance. In Goffman’s words: “A young man concerned that the police will take him into custody comes to see danger and risk in the mundane doings of everyday life. To survive outside prison, he learns to hesitate when others walk casually forward, to see what others fail to notice, to fear what others trust or take for granted” (2014, 23). This description parallels Daniels’ fugitive impulse and restless hypervigilance. There is also an unbelievable strength which pushes Daniels to move resiliently despite having to leave his wife and newborn child behind.

It could seem easy to presuppose that Wright’s fugitive narrative suggests that running away from the police is a liberatory act, an interpretation which ignores the everyday psychological burden of being a fugitive. The fight-or-flight response is Daniels’ only means of holding onto a sliver of hope for the prospect of reuniting with his family. His escape, however, pushes him into deeper entanglements with systemic oppression. The initial triumphs of fugitive liberation are short-lived, as he leaps from the hospital window and meets the unforgiving pavement: “a sheet of white flicked past his eyes and for a moment he was completely out, though his eyes were open and gazing directly into the sun” (47-48). This description of whiteness exemplifies a recurring multimodal motif across Wright’s books, wherein whiteness becomes a multi-sensory force from which Daniels cannot escape. The fleeing Daniels remains acutely aware of the surveilling “white listening ears” enforcing the insulated racial boundaries of the city.

By positioning Chicago's industrial noise as inseparable from racism, Wright's novella presents sound management as a learned, conditioned response to threats of racial surveillance. In the early phase of Daniels's retreat to the sewers, one of the only thoughts resonating through his head is, "Don't want to make no noise…" (Wright, 67). This self-imposed anxiety—that sound carries risks of exposure—transforms silence into a fugitive condition which migrants adopted for the purpose of survival opposed to by choice. This hyper-acute paranoia continues later in the chapter, when Daniels worries if "the noise of the falling box make someone come down and investigate?" (Wright, 69). For migrant or fugitive subjects, seemingly benign material conditions can carry potentially devastating consequences for those trying to escape the surveillance of white listening ears. Near the end of the novella, however, Wright registers a profound shift in his protagonist's perception. Daniels passes under a manhole and hears the rumbling noises of traffic once more, "but paid it no heed; life aboveground was now something less than reality, less than sight or sound, less even than memory" (Wright, 105). This moment of complete sensory collapse is Wright's most radical gesture towards abject social death. Daniels manages to survive in the underground, but only through paying the devastating cost of near totalizing existential nihilism. These scenes demonstrate how the noisy industrial regimes of modern cities compel racialized migrant subjects to regulate their audibility in ways which fundamentally reshape—and erode—community and identity.

In addition to sound, silence plays significant roles as a sonic signifier which amplifies tragic absence and loss. Wright's more famous works also make a noticeable effort to represent the aurality of sound and silence. Within the 430-page first edition of *Native Son*, he invokes the word "sound" 100 times and uses "silence" about half as

much, at 54 times. Despite being a fraction of the size at 159 pages, *The Man Who Lived Underground* mentions "sound" seventy-eight times while "silence" is included only eleven times. These approximate numbers thence establish how Wright fully embraced his preoccupation with detailing sonic phenomena within *The Man Who Lived Underground*. Up to this point, most of my attention has been directed to analyzing sound, but silence also plays notable roles as a potent literary device. Wright tends to invoke silence, particularly, to sound-out existential despair as well as the unspoken or unheard voices lost to racism. Six out of the eleven total references to silence occur within part two, which is the most isolating and alienating portion of the narrative. Wright communicates his grim, pessimistic messages through invoking the totalizing dimension of silence: "He paused again, struck by the strange silence. It was as though he has traveled a million miles away from the life of the world" (60). Daniels rarely speaks aloud in the underground because his voice is contained there as that of an entirely unheard other.

Wright definitively embraces visual-sonic language to project critical social commentary, but the musico-literary crossings are more ambiguous in Wright's texts, including *The Man Who Lived Underground.* The novella still emphasizes a musicalized ethos of restless blues on its author's bleak non-musicalized terms. Emily J. Lordi's *Black Resonance* (2013) challenges two longstanding assumptions about Wright over comparing his writing to Bessie Smith's classic blues: "The first is that, as feminist critics have long pointed out, Wright consistently denigrates Black female authority. The second is that he does not value African American music" (Lordi 2013, 29). It is true that musical themes and intertextual references to music do not animate Wright's texts as often, or

directly, as they do in the works of his contemporaries. Ralph Ellison comparatively argues that the Blues "express both the agony of life and the possibility of conquering it through sheer toughness of spirit" which is much like Wright's *Black Boy* (1945), "with its refusal to offer solutions" (Ellison 1945, 211). Blues musicians from the first half of the twentieth century tended to avoid writing blatant protest lyrics in favour of introspective and emotive reflection about individual levels of loss, loneliness, and (dis)quieting resilience. All three of these dynamics inform *The Man Who Lived Underground*. According to Ellison, Wright's language "is filled with blues-tempered echoes of railroad trains, the names of Southern towns and cities, estrangements, fights and flights, deaths and disappointments, charged with physical and spiritual hungers and pain" (199). The style of Wright's language becomes restless over detailing Daniels' fight through flight, whilst the overarching plot expresses its most sorrowful blues bends through the futility of the protagonist's introspective quest for existential meaning. Daniels' revelation is what leads him to an untimely death by gunfire on the streets.

In his enduring classic of cultural criticism, *Blues People* (1963), Amiri Baraka breaks down the evolutions of blues music conventions alongside the history of people who pioneered blues expression through struggle and resilience. Baraka acknowledges the deeply individualistic and improvisational nature of blues performance, and that performers focused on conveying personal stories. Withal the emphasis which blues places on the personal and individual, there is also truth in how its principal themes like alienation, loss, survival, sadness, resilience and joy capture collective Black experiences in the United States. As Woods illustrates: "The men and women who performed the blues were sociologists, reporters, counselors, advocates, preservers of language and

customs, and summoners of life, love, laughter, and much, much more" (1998, 17). He also makes a key pointed claim about how Wright identified two institutions which instilled migratory epistemologies: "Both the Black church and the blues emerged in rural areas where Black political and economic institutions were subjected to constant surveillance and often destroyed" (1998, 32). Based on the foundational blues scholarship, and Wright's own input, the blues should therefore be considered a distinctly individualized expression of collective migratory sensibilities. Houston A. Baker's *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature* (1984) posits "bluesiness" as an expansive, fluid, and expressive vernacular form which holds significance, not merely as a musical genre, but as an ethos which informs literary aesthetics. For migrants, blues became a crucial aural modality of collective criticism and affective force for generating more equity and social change. Fred Daniels epitomizes at least three elements of the restless blues ethos: the insistence to facing suffering on one's own terms, improvisational resourcefulness, and searching for revelation through introspective reflection.

Part two opens with Daniels descending into the subterranean wasteland of the sewers. From here, "the rustling, watery blackness of the underground," the text ventures more deeply into the existential and metaphysical (52). While away from surface realities, sound, listening, and vision under dim lighting become the only aspect of Daniels' reality: "life aboveground was now something less than reality, less than sight or sound, less even than memory" (105). Thus, Wright's multimodal attention to rendering Daniels' auditory experiences is the main aesthetic literary intervention which makes *The Man Who Lived Underground* an existentially and politically complex portrayal of inner-city fugitive life. Wright's representations of sound often illuminate the unsettling

existential quest for agency which propelled millions of vulnerable migrants into fugitive lifestyles. Wright's protagonist on the run exposes confrontations with systemic racism on cold city pavements—a disquieting everyday reality ushered by the Great Migration. But how does Wright thematically amplify psycho-social implications of systemic oppression through a main character who rarely speaks? One plausible answer to this difficult question is rooted in the author's attention to detailing the kinetic patterns and disruptions of Daniels' breathing.

Breathing is among the most foundational sonic affirmations of existence that is expressed, kinetically, through respiration. Taking a breath is an irreplicable life-affirming act, but breathing patterns are also surrounded by sounds or noises which hold broader communal, epistemic, spiritual, and socio-political valences. Wright's emphasis on describing Daniels' breathing to emphasizes danger, fear, and existential reflection. One of the most resonant examples, an abrupt change in Daniels' breathing pattern, occurs in conjunction with the blaring police siren which punctuates his arrival underground. The sound of the siren invokes paranoia, and its presence or absence lessens and worsens respiratory instabilities. It is audible for what feels like eternity: "But even here in the underground, above the droning rush of water, he was amazed to hear again the faint blare of the siren, penetrating with needle-point sharpness into the hot, close air of the sewer" (54). Breathing is a sonic-kinetic instinct which gets inherently influenced by the aurality of bodily movement, and especially so for impoverished fugitives who do not own private property to mediate the excessive acousmatic and environmental noise in cities. The heavy "breathing subsided" as the noise of the police siren fades, and Daniels realizes that "he felt that he was safe for the first time in many

long and weary hours," despite the inherent hostility of the sewer (54). The present threat of drowning in wastewater does not constrain breathing as much as boundless threats of surveillance and arrest.

Fred Daniels embodies differential forms of breathing around the presence of whiteness, wherein breathing becomes anxious, restrained, and silenced under the pervasive surveillance of white listening ears. For example, when he is being relentlessly interrogated, "Blood pounded in his temples and his heart and lungs sagged heavily in his chest. He could barely breathe" (20). Wright consequently sounds-out Daniels' kinetic breathing response to the horrors of police interrogation, and it resembles a northern urban parallel to southern lynchings. Here, the erratic patterns of Daniels' breathing mannerisms also function to amplify readers' critical attention to the psychic dimension of "double consciousness" (Du Bois, 1903). Although Daniels is a healthy twenty-nine-year-old, Wright employs precarious descriptions of the protagonist's breathing and voice, reducing them to nothingness by the police and urban noises which drown out the kinetic preconditions of human existence. For example, while the police violence most directly disrupts Daniels' breathing, urban noise also reverberates in silencing ways: "His voice died as the car yammered over the asphalt. The absurdity of his being carted off to jail made him want to laugh, but he checked himself" (10). The many instances where Daniels stifles his desires to vocalize emotions constitute instances of code-switching self-censorship in anticipation of how words, or sounds, will be received by white listeners. Therefore, Wright sounds-out disturbed breathing and refusals to speak aloud as underrecognized sonic-affective manifestations of "double consciousness."

In the opening passage of Part Two, Daniels struggles to adjust to the harsh acousmatic sounds of his new home underground: “With aching chest, he stood knee-deep in the pulsing current, breathing heavily in utter darkness, filling his lungs with the sharp smell of warm, yeasty rot. But even here in the underground, above the droning rush of water, he was amazed to hear again the faint blare of the siren, penetrating with needle-point sharpness into the hot, close air of the sewer” (Wright, 54). As he retreats into the sewers, a kinetic “tremor of relief went through his body and he dropped to his knees” (52). Wright dovetails visual-sonic motifs over detailing Daniels’ descent underground. The sewer becomes an unlikely place of refuge where he hopes to feel some respite from “listening to the siren that seemed to be howling at him from the very rim of the manhole” (53). He is thrashed around by the aggressive currents and flails his arms to narrowly avoid injury or death. Notwithstanding, Daniels seems most severely unsettled by streams of industrial noise: “The siren hooted directly above his head, deafening him; then he heard a prolonged screech of brakes. The siren song died. He stood with his muscles flexed against the rushing water and looked upward through the manhole…He held his breath and gritted his teeth” (53). Daniels holds his breath as an inherent physiological response governed by biological necessity to avoid drowning. By contrast, Wright reveals how the sirens, metal clangs, and screeching brakes passing overhead trigger a distinctly racialized state of enforced breathlessness, one which becomes activated by fears of surveillance or capture.

After Daniels adjusts to the sensory conditions of the underground, he follows his ears to familiar sounds which he eventually realizes is a choir: “he had to run and hear that singing. Then the identity of the singing burst upon him; it was a church service!”

(61). The lyrics become audible: “Jesus, take me to your blessed home above and wrap me in the bosom of thy love…” (62). Wherever Daniels listen to lyrics which evoke the Church based communal identity of the pastoral South, readers perceive how, in Malcom Wright’s words, his grandfather’s lost novel “had poetically distilled the rewarding and dangerous condition of Otherness” (2021, 213). With this hymn resonating from “a colored folks’ church down in one of them sunken basements”, Daniels feels excited “to observe the church service without being seen, without being a part of it” (62). This voyeuristic approach to listening brings a strong, irreconcilable wave of nihilism into his mind: “When he had sung and prayed with his brothers and sisters in church, he had always felt what they felt; but here in the underground, distantly sundered from them, he saw a defenseless nakedness in their lives that made him disown them” (63). Daniels’ subterranean vantage point—detached entirely from the conventional Judeo-Christian moral values shaping U.S. socio-legal and political frameworks—enables Wright to project a complex and ambivalent outlook on religion for readers. To some extent, Daniels identifies with the strong sense of community he felt while singing and praying in church. Yet, after listening from the underground, Daniels confronts the hypocrisy of strict religious dogma. The lyrics idealize a “blessed home above,” which Daniels rejects as an absurd form of consolation. In addition, we should recall how, when Daniels is subjected to the torturous interrogation in Part One, he beckons for the officers to “call Reverend Davis… I teach Sunday School for ‘im. I sing in the choir and I organized the Glee Club” (8). Despite his pleas to have his name cleared by Reverend Davis, the police officers admonish Daniels’ roles in Chicago’s Black religious community. Wright

accordingly issues a critical message about how organized religions are unable to address roots of systemic oppression.

As part two veers to its inevitable conclusion, Daniels is haunted again by the sounds of choir song. He is transfixed by the singing, brooding alone in “the lyrical dark” (120). This time the lyrics, “Glad, glad, glad, oh, so glad I got Jesus in my soul”, surge through his ears four times (119-121). As the choir song gets louder with each passing moment, Daniels is overwhelmed with a sense of guilt so strong that he questions how guilt could ever feel “so seemingly innate, so easy to come by, to think, to feel, so verily physical?” (120). The atmosphere around Daniels resonates with guilt on multiple levels, as the choir singers “were pleading guilty, wallowing sensually in their despair” (120). Wright sounds out the choir as a collective Black expressiveness, perhaps suggesting that spiritual practice can fill existential voids in a racialized society. Yet, the sanctimonious tone of the choir song also makes Daniels feel guilty. Wright’s sonic-affective description, therefore, offers no redemptive outlook for oral culture or the folk traditions of the pastoral South. The choir song makes Daniels feel totally estranged from communal outlets for the first time since moving underground. He also embodies guilt because committing the crime of theft makes him feel ashamed by what society has reduced him to. As he runs to “tear himself away” from the musical sounds of the choir, the only thing he can do is stop to catch his breath. Wright suggests that “physical exertion afforded him respite from tension” but that breathing offers no antidote for existential dread: “Well, what was there left for him to do? He did not know” (121). Wright invokes the communal spirituality of gospel music to amplify how migratory sensibilities, like liminality and restlessness, caused fugitives to wrestle with guilt.

By the time Daniels' journey returns to the surface at the start of part three, Wright has fully committed to stylizing aurality as multimodal entanglements of fleeting silences, luminous imagery, and disruptive or dehumanizing sound. His experimental approach to blurring the binary between sound and silence underscore his critical awareness. For Wright, migrants' voices are suppressed under the systematic and acousmatic conditions of their respective cities. For Daniels the inhospitable atmosphere below the surface is more frequently depicted as polluted by industrial noise. When the protagonist seriously contemplates returning to the surface, he amplifies the impossible liminality of his fugitive predicament: "He stood between that terrifying world of life-in-death above him and this dark world that was death-in-life here in the underground" (133). Daniels is torn but still chooses to face the incomprehensible fear surrounding his inevitable persecution. Wright describes fractures and precarities of Black life through visual-sonic emphasis:

> There came to him a crash of sound and he looked into a hot glare of sunshine through which moved blurred shapes. Fear scalded him and he dropped back into the sewer's pallid current and stood paralyzed in the shadows. A heavy car rumbled past overhead, warning him to remain in this world of dark light, jarring the steel manhole cover back into place with an imperious clang (133).

Joseph L. Lewis unpacks the literary and cultural meanings beheld through Wright's juxtapositional imagery: "Wright uses the concept of "dark light" throughout Daniels' journey; so much so, that he reverses the preconceived values of blackness and whiteness" (2012, 169). Darkness often symbolizes the unknown, or absence of clarity and fear. Daniels is, ironically, only able to recover some semblance of existential clarity underground while completely enveloped by the darkness.

Chicago's once familiar streets feel surreal and foreign, but he follows his intuition in deciding to "go to the station, clear up everything, make a statement. What statement? He did not know. *He* was the statement" (135). Daniels bravely faces his tormentors, and the three police officers who apprehend Daniels appear awe-struck upon hearing how he hid in the sewer for three days: "The three police men looked at one another in silence" (150). This moment affirms the radical spirit of resistance from which Daniels' awe-inspiring resilience emerges. Almost immediately, the brief absence of voice is disrupted by the sounds of sadistic laughter: "Johnson burst into a sudden laugh that ended quickly" (150). Wright conveys how the revelations which push Daniels to re-surface are incomprehensible to everyone, including himself. Thus, Daniels' paradoxical entrapment between "life-in-death" and "death-in-life" echoes the collective experience of dehumanization affecting millions of Black migrants.

By the mid-1940s, a good deal of Black literature had already established the typical migration narrative convention of leaving the segregated South in pursuit of Northern freedom. Even though *The Man Who Lived Underground* is among Wright's most formally experimental texts, all his fictional efforts amplify real migratory experiences felt and perceived around him. He was an eminent literary progenitor of voicing the affective and kinetic anxieties of being a Black fugitive in U.S. cities during the twentieth century. *The Man Who Lived Underground* offers tragically relevant depictions of police brutality, fugitive movement, and dehumanization. In 2020, George Floyd exclaimed, "I can't breathe" as he was murdered on national television. Floyd's last claim that he was suffocating echo Eric Garner's final words in July 2014 when his life was claimed by police through excessive force. Ashon T. Crawley situates Garner's final

words “as a rupture, a disruption, and ethical plea regarding the ethical crisis that has been the grounds for producing his moment, our time, this modern world” (2017, 1). Notwithstanding, Crawley also maintains that “breathing air is constitutive for flight, for movement, for performance” (2017, 33). Breathing is an embodied, kinetic, and sonic-affective process which sounds-out oppression and resistance at once in *The Man Who Lived Underground*.

A new generation of artists, activists, and writers are restlessly decrying this ongoing injustice louder and in more diverse ways than ever before. “I can’t breathe” was fashioned into something of a rally call for an unprecedented global surge of “Black Lives Matter” advocacy and protests in the wake of Floyd’s murder. Christone “Kingfish” Ingram is an award-winning contemporary guitarist and vocalist who is passionately helping to keep Blues traditions alive into the 21st century. Ingram and Big K.R.I.T.’s collaborated on a track called “Another Life Goes By.” This restless, haunting blues number which addresses the nation in similar fashion to Wright’s writing: “Why does doing something right; Something right take so long; We need to pay attention to the helpless cries; We gotta stop the madness; Before another life goes by” (Hambridge & Ingram, 2022). Ingram’s message is a contemporary counterpart to Wright’s blues ethos which condemns the suffocation and breathlessness against the backdrop of the Great Migration. *The Man Who Lived Underground* embodies bluesy restlessness in Daniels’ resilient willingness to confront his own profound alienation under some of the most dehumanizing conditions imaginable. It is worth closing this analysis with an important critical observation about Wright’s works: they notably fail to significantly represent women’s subjectivities.

From Harlem Singer to Fugitive Migrant: Disquieting Movements and (Dis)quieting Black Feminism in Ann Petry's *The Street* (1946)

My final literary case study in this chapter listens to how Ann Petry's visual-sonic affective storytelling offers readers more nuanced outlook on Black women's urban experiences of the mid-twentieth century. Barbara Christian (1985) and Patricia Hill Collins (1990) contribute indispensable frameworks that should be used to promote deeper attunement with women's literature and livelihood. Christian underscores the resilience of Black women who "are often prevented from being all they can be" (1985, xii). She also traces the impact of how they sought new opportunities only to find that "the substance remained the same, though the apparel looked different" (1985, 8). The substance Christian refers to here is the racialized socio-economic relegation of women to domestic labor, which is a continuation of exploitative systems from the South. She argues, further, that Ann Petry's *The Street* (1946) first signaled a literary shift away from Southern stereotypes and towards the realist complexity of "the urban Black women's existence" (Christian 1985, 11). Christian acknowledges that Wright's Bigger Thomas and Petry's Lutie Johnson became archetypical Great Migration characters, and she specifically celebrates Petry's work for breaking ground in representing Black motherhood.

Patricia Hill Collins identifies how Black feminism navigates the problems of subjection to an intersectional "matrix of domination," which provokes forms of resistance—often grounded in "the context of lived experience" (1990, 22-43). Collins' framework and ideas inform my decolonial and intersectional reading of *The Street.* Over the following case study, I re-read *The Street* as containing Black feminist critiques with meanings inseparable from Petry's authorial attention to detailing urban sounds. I listen,

pointedly, to Petry's use of aural motifs such as listening, singing, and movement. With Lutie Johnson navigating Harlem's noise-polluted environment, *The Street* reveals how urban conditions operate in both silencing and liberatory ways.

The Street was the first novel authored by an African American woman to sell over one million copies and was a bestseller shortly after its release. It won the Houghton Mifflin Literary Fellowship Award and cemented Petry's radical legacy as an author while generating broader acceptance and recognition for aspiring Black writers. Keith Clark offers another summary of Wright and Petry's unparalleled significance for the African American protest novel: "While Richard Wright is considered the "father" of the genre, and Native Son (1940) its quintessential document, Ann Petry emerged as another strident voice—a progenitor or native daughter" (1992, 495). Petry's novels added feminist dimensions to the male-centric, and sometimes blatantly misogynistic, social realist literary conventions heralded by Wright. But much like Wright, Petry "unfortunately is often branded as a mere protest writer" (Parray & Gupta 2024, 1033). Over the last decade, however, more scholars who have listened carefully to Petry's representations of sound or sonic motifs have challenged longstanding presuppositions about Petry being a one-dimensional protest writer. The narrative content of Petry's novels lash out at capitalism, exposing it for the deceptive racist and sexist socioeconomic calculus that it is. Nevertheless, most scholars overlook the extent to which Petry's literary form employs sound as a structural and stylistic device. She treats everyday sound and noise as a narrative archive of migratory and urban pressure.

Daphne Brooks' *Liner Notes for the Revolution: The Intellectual Life of Black Feminist Sound* (2021) argues that "active forms of listening both produce and record

modern life" (2021, 13). Brooks' thought-provoking idea encourages deeper consideration of how listening empowers the sonic content and intellectual labor of *The Street.* Petry sonically depicts Harlem as intrusive and hostile, and she voices racialized single motherhood through Lutie Johnson. On levels of literary content, listening becomes a mobile act of Lutie's survival. Through her extensive focus on Black women's listening, singing, and movement, Petry engages in what Brooks describes as "sonic curation" (2021, 14). Through Lutie's listening, the novel curates sonorous moments of Black women's vigilance, fatigue, expression, and restraint. In what follows, I analyze how Petry foregrounds the interior of Lutie's sonic imagination to show how Black women's musicality and movement oppose silencing noises of the North.

Petry's narrative is deliberately attentive when it comes to representing sonic details about Harlem and some people living there. There is usually at least one visual or sonic signifier on nearly every page of the novel. Disquieting sonic descriptor words detail how Harlem sounds throughout the novel: the word "silence" appears forty times and the word "noise" appears twenty-nine times. Further descriptions of embodied sounds often surface near Petry's descriptions of the disquieting sounds around Lutie. The words "breath," "breathe," or "breathing" surface forty-two times, versions of the word "scream" appear thirty-three times, and "voice" is detailed over one-hundred and twenty-seven times. The novel commits to sonic realism through conveying layers of architectural sound, musical sound, and ambient noise onto the page. These sounds tend to exude unpleasantness because Petry strategically conveys predatory listeners around Lutie and her son Bub. Boots Smith and Mr. Junto seem to be always listening to every

movement she makes. Predatory listeners enforce the patriarchal sides of racism, which suppresses Lutie's socio-economic opportunities.

The Street is about Lutie Johnson, a young single mother who stands as Petry's most complete literary feminist heroine. Lutie is cast into Harlem's harsh-sounding urban street in the early 1940s, where she is the sole provider and parent of her eight-year-old son Bub. Set against the backdrop of World War Two, readers follow Lutie's struggles as she navigates and resists the oppressive urban sounds of Harlem. Since Petry's efforts to represent sound are extensive and deliberate, Chapter Two concludes with listening to the sonic modalities of Black feminism in *The Street.* This calls for more sustained attention to the embodied practices of listening and singing, as well as to the sonic and acoustic contours encompassing fugitive migration. I analyze select passages where Petry deploys sonic-affective language to render disquieting senses of racial oppression. Just as Petry gestures to represent the sounds of Harlem, she filters these sounds through multiple racist or liberatory perspectives. Lutie's roles as a listener and singer are the two specific aural modes of radical Black feminist resistance. I propose that Lutie Johnson sounds out Black feminist responses to misogyny and racism in at least three (dis)quieting ways which would have been common amongst migrants.

Nicole Brittingham Furlonge makes a case for the significances of sound representation for and within the Black literary tradition: "In its most influential and foundational texts, sound—whether a spoken or sung voice, talking book or singing drum, the blues, trains, or hambones—functions as a key metaphoric, structural, and epistemic site of black cultural identity" (2018, 7). Yet, it is also hard to separate the force of sound from acts of listening, as individual listeners make interpretations of sound

meaningful. Petry renders listeners' perspectives through third-person omniscient narration which occasionally emphasizes different aural points of view other than Lutie's. While most of the narrative is told through Lutie's inner-auditory perspective as a listener, readers encounter other people's thoughts and perspectives, including Mr. Jones and Boots Smith. Petry uses stream of consciousness descriptions to render several of her characters as attentive listeners, and each listening character has their own aural sensibilities. There are two listener archetypes in *The Street*: first, the disquieting misogynistic listeners who strive to exploit Lutie, and second, the protagonist herself who embodies astute listening and singing to protect her son and (dis)quiet the predatory desires around them.

Listening is an everyday practice of self-preservation featured prominently in *The Street*. Variations of the word "listen" surface seventy-five times in the narrative. Joe Varghese Yeldho's "Sounding Harlem: Ann Petry's *The Street* and the Experience of Dwelling" (2020) is a newer contribution to burgeoning scholarship focused on sound and its representations within literature. He argues that listening practices shape and define our engagements with spaces and places, and that "the influence wielded by the social practice of listening cannot be underestimated" (Yeldho 2020, 70). For Petry's protagonist Lutie Johnson, listening functions as a force which drives for self-preservation more than for the preservation of cultural memory and identity. As a newly single mother trying to provide a future for her son, Lutie becomes more reliant on her listening ears. She increasingly relies on listening to assess surroundings for threats and pursue opportunities to attain upward mobility.

Significantly, Petry's protagonist was born and raised in New York City rather than migrating to Harlem directly from the rural South, as more than a million Black Americans had done by the early 1940's. *The Street* therefore evokes the Great Migration without narrating a conventional journey from the rural South to the urban North. Instead, *The Street* examines the social conditions of poverty and racialization that were awaiting Black Americans within Harlem, perhaps the most prominent destination for migrants at the time. Harlem functions as a site of lost hopes, disappointments, and broken dreams. Harlem's streets contain the aspirations of people like Lutie, who were not first-generation Southern migrants and did not experience the defining South-to-North journey. Thus, listening through second-generation experience further reveals the failed promises of South-to-North migration. The racialized conditions Lutie encounters beyond any extensive firsthand experience with geographic relocation demonstrate racism's persistence as a structural force in the United States.

Lutie temporarily relocates to Connecticut as a domestic housemaid for the Chandler family. She makes this temporary move to make ends meet for her and Bub after her husband Jim loses his job. She moves in search of upward mobility—desperately grasping for what her mind registers as opportunity. Yet, her hard work and movement ultimately fail to protect her family from structural poverty, gendered violence, unemployment, and dilapidated housing delimiting Black life in the North. Thus, Lutie's movement between New York and Connecticut establishes *The Street* as a nontraditional migration narrative. Instead of moving from the rural South to the urban North, she moves within and between northern urban spaces already shaped by the Great Migration. Her movement reveals that relocation within the North does not guarantee

social or economic advancement, even for urban-born Black subjects and for other descendants of Southern migrants. After returning to New York and dealing with the aftermath of separating from Jim, Lutie moves Bub into a small apartment in Harlem, where listening becomes an extremely important act of resistance and survival.

Within these conditions, listening becomes an important practice of self-preservation. The radio provides Lutie with some limited degrees of control over managing her auditory environment, temporarily distancing herself from the socio-economic pressures around her. The word "radio" appears thirty-five times in *The Street*, which places it among the novel's more notable sonic outlets for listening. Many characters are actively hearing or listening to radios at points in the story, but Lutie's attunements to the radio are most extensive and pronounced in the novel. As a result, Petry's portrait of a Black woman's struggle against Harlem's oppressive systemic forces also happens to be "a rare representation of [B]lack radio listeners from the "golden age" one that emerged from a regular, lively discourse about radio in [B]lack newspapers and journals that actively resisted limited mainstream white understandings of [B]lack listenership" (Stoever 2016, 262). *The Street* offers a Black feminist perspective on what listening to the radio could mean through Lutie's comprehension.

Specifically, Lutie's engagements with the radio reveal a listener-driven process akin to what Mack Hagood calls "orphic mediation" (2019). Auditory technologies of the twentieth century function as (dis)quieting outlets through which individuals can control some of what they hear. Lutie exercises limited control over her auditory environment by turning to the radio and raising its volume to purposefully mask the noises of socio-economic impoverishment around her. Although she cannot control the content of the

broadcast beyond the immediate act of changing stations, her act of sonic mediation offers momentary respite from unrelenting and unwanted noise. Petry focuses on the excessive noise of Harlem, but the high-decibel pangs of industrialization were surely bleeding through the thin walls of city apartments across all major Great Migration cities:

> All through the house radios went on full blast in order to drown out this familiar, frightening, unbearable sound. But even under the radios they could hear it, for they had started crying with her when the sound first assailed their ears. And now it had become a perpetual weeping that flowed through them, carrying pain and a shrinking from pain, so that the music and the voices coming from the radios couldn't possibly shut it out, for it was inside them (272-73).

Petry's radios often function as orphic devices. Mack Hagood explains further that "film, radio television, and digital media orphically channel affective desires and modulate our sensory and attentional engagement with our environment and one another" (2019, 23). In this instance Lutie sonically self-regulates through listening to the radio. Petry represents how the practice of listening to radios is a form of orphic mediation. By listening to the radio Lutie attempts to exert some sonic sense of self-control, but the radio is not always successful in drowning out the violent, intrusive noises resonating through her apartment building.

At the same time, Petry also raises critical volumes around the limitations of what the listening to the radio can do for struggling Black single mothers. As early as chapter 3, Lutie reflects on the hopelessness of her situation while listening to the radio: "Again she was aware of the silence under the sound of the radio…. Listening to the music she thought she couldn't possibly go on living here with nothing to look forward to" (58). This passage demonstrates how the radio might acoustically cover or mask Lutie's distress on the outside, but also, that it cannot drown out the inner turmoil of her lived socio-economic reality.

On one stressful night late in the story, Lutie turns off the radio and instead tunes into an auditory memory of her grandmother: “She was always humming. It was a faint sound, part and parcel of the darkness. Going to sleep with that warm sound clinging to your ears made fear impossible” (282). Lutie feels burdened by thinking about she grew up hearing her grandmother’s singing voice, which instilled a sense of fearlessness in her as a young girl. She comes to the realization that the urban noise around them might prevent Bub from feeling comforted by her voice. This same evening, Lutie realizes that “tomorrow she wouldn’t go to work. Instead, she would go to the Children’s Shelter and see Bub” (282). Consequently, Petry presents the sounds of the radio as impersonal, even if Lutie uses it as a sonic device to filter her immersion within Harlem’s intrusively noisy environments. In *The Street*, radio could never replace the sounds of parental voice, which granted Lutie “a sense of security that Bub had never known” (283). As financial desperation forces the parental guidance of Lutie’s voice further away from Bub, Petry suggests that the radio is incapable of masking the isolation of being home alone.

While listening to the radio is depicted as a privatized domestic affair, Lutie also engages in public, communally mediated listening to the jukebox in the Junto bar. The word “jukebox” surfaces about six times in the novel. Although the jukebox receives less attention in the plot than the radio, both technologies reproduce commercially distributed music. It can therefore be easy to equate them as being sonic machines that do the same thing, but this would obscure the vastly different social significance of each device. Petry assigns the jukebox a very different role from the radio. Unlike radio broadcasting, the jukebox permits listeners to select recordings from a limited catalogue, which seems to grant some measure of agency over the music collectively heard in the bar. However, the

agency associated with selecting a song on the jukebox is constrained by the small commercial selection available, as well as by the racialized, gendered, and surveillant conditions of the bar.

Listening to the jukebox represents a very different attempt to escape the oppressive confines of Harlem for Lutie. The Junto Bar is a controlled public space owned by Mr. Junto. Within this public context, Petry demonstrates how the jukebox offers Lutie momentary respite because it drowns out disquieting presences of predatory male listeners around her: “Then she forgot about him, for the juke-box in the far corner of the room started playing “Swing It, Sister.” She hummed as she listened to it not really aware that she was humming or why, knowing only that she felt free here where there was so much space” (103). Listening to the jukebox helps Lutie momentarily forget about the ominous domineering presence of Mr. Junto, “sitting there alone, watching everything—the customers, the bartenders, the waiters” (103). Yet, Petry reveals how her feeling of being able to forget Mr. Junto’s presence is extremely fleeting. While the sounds of music temporarily mask hyper-vigilance, “the sonic color line” becomes inherently reinforced by the jukebox on a material level. More specifically through its mechanical and commercial features, jukeboxes commodify and restrict the circulation of sound within public settings. The jukebox allows Lutie to feel momentarily free without enabling her to escape racialized and gendered economic conditions that delimit her mobility, keeping her trapped.

Second, Lutie ‘s voice sounds out her willingness to resist oppression when she becomes temporarily employed as a singer performing at the Junto, a bar down the street from her apartment. The word “music” appears twenty-nine times, “singing” twenty-three

times, and “song” at least thirteen times, because some specific songs are also named. These musical moments in the novel’s content amplify Lutie Johnson’s emergence as a feminist heroine, as her singing offers her a means to structure her life amid Harlem’s predatory, misogynistic listeners. In “Music to the Eyes,” David Howes takes up ethnographic case studies of how singing “coordinated collective action, mediated gender relations, and structured the experience of space, time, and personhood” for some communities (2017, 161). For Lutie, singing is the “sound art” through which she temporarily lifts her voice above the socio-economic intergenerational wealth gap entrapping her and Bub. Petry represents music as “produced out of the racial slavery which made modern western civilization possible,” as Gilroy puts it (1993, 80). Readers may feel inclined to hold out hope for Lutie after she becomes a local performer. Yet, as Petry’s narrative unfolds, Lutie’s agency as a sound artist is increasingly threatened.

Black musicians became opportune targets for club owners and record industry executives looking to capitalize, and especially in popular Great Migration cities like New York, Chicago, and Detroit. Through the character portraits of Boots Smith and Mr. Junto, *The Street* critically represents dimensions of racial exploitation through sociological and socioeconomic lenses of the music, entertainment, and showbusiness industries. This becomes a major focus in the story beyond chapter six. Petry sounds out the ways Lutie’s singing career is shaped and derailed by racialization and misogyny, simultaneously. While having an evening drink at the Junto nightclub down the street Lutie crosses path with Boots Smith, a popular local performer who asks her to come try out for the band the following night. Lutie immediately begins fantasizing about an idyllic future: “A singing job would mean she and bub could leave 116th street. She could

get an apartment some place where there were trees and the streets were clean and the rooms would be full of sunlight" (107). Before giving her answer, Lutie listens to Boots Smith's body language and realizes that "he had placed a piece of bait in front of her—succulent, tantalizing bait" (107). Even though Boots is the one to give Lutie an offer, Petry subtly reveals how her relations with other musicians in Harlem are constantly filtered through the power and ulterior motives of Mr. Junto. Urban dwelling musicians were easily coerced by white business owners like Mr. Junto. Boots Smith recalls how there were limited "places a colored band could play and Junto could fix it so he couldn't find a spot from here to the coast" (184). Despite almost immediately suspecting that a singing job was too good to be true, Lutie cannot refuse his offer. This inability to choose or reject job offers is another indication of how visual and sonic color lines constrain creative autonomy. For example, Nina Simone had extensive classical piano training in childhood and wanted to be a concert pianist. But her ambitions derailed when she was denied admission from Philadelphia's Curtis Institute of Music. Simone and Lutie Johnson were both forced to take singing jobs at a small bar to make ends meet. Both women attempted to take their talents outside the regressive standards of the white eurocentrism which controlled the U.S. recording and performing industries.

Music and singing are affective outlets which allow for regulating negative emotions, but for the average working-class migrant, music offered no immediate promise of upward socio-economic mobility. The radio is a musicalized sonic medium through which Lutie mediates ominous forms of silencing or pervasive noise. She does not necessarily enjoy listening to the radio, but it "provides a portal to other times, places, experiences, affects, and moods" (Stoever, 2016, 264). Her listening habits are therefore

driven to mask the despotic white noise of U.S. racism. Petry does not necessarily suggest that music could be a collective solution for racial liberation and upward mobility. Lutie's singing mirrors the dramatic socio-historical changes in auditory technology, and yet, Petry also refuses to frame a music career as "a way out—the only way out of here" for the protagonist and her son (131). Lutie's dreams of singing her way to a better life for Bub are crushed over the novel's final chapters. Lutie's voice is "Othered" under the power dynamics of "the sonic color line," which are especially strong in the urban North. As a single mother and feminist, Lutie is always "performing the unspoken vibrational work of racial production" (Stoever, 2016, 77). As Petry opens aural streams of Lutie's consciousness for readers, her protagonist's resolute self-determination to keep moving and listen beyond racial capitalism is what resonates the loudest as alternative, feminist, modes of empowerment.

Finally, through Lutie's final desperate action to board a train and move to Chicago, Petry amplifies how migration is a self-preserving sonic expression. Lutie's final act of (dis)quieting resistance involves fleeing Harlem, New York for Chicago where she hopes that the city "would swallow her up" (303). Petry's stark realism announces the futility of migration—even movement in general— as emancipatory forces: "She stumbled against a chair and sat down in it, shivering. She would never get out of this room. She would never, never get out of here. For the rest of her life she would be here with this awful faceless thing on the sofa" (302). The uncompromising language in this passage reveals how Lutie is affectively constrained from any possible respite or escape from the room where she commits murder in self-defence. Petry's final description of fugitive movement holds multimodal registers: "The snow fell softly on the

street. It muffled sound. It sent people scurrying homeward, so that the street was soon deserted, empty, quiet" (305). *The Street* concludes with heavy snowfall, and Petry casts the snow as a silencing force which locks Harlem into racially stratified apartments. In this case, the snow symbolizes the insulated socio-economic impoverishment blanketing the North. The sounds of Lutie's radical act of self-defence fade to a painful memory as she steps into the blizzard. As the snowy whiteness overtakes the garbage and grime littering the streets, all signs of life fade. With the spirit of Lutie's defiance masked under the muzzle of snow, her final train ride sounds more like whisper of desperation than revolutionary outcry.

Petry's novel subverts dominant narratives about race and gender, while simultaneously calling into question some popular myths and misconceptions about Black music. *The Street* offers fugitive migration as Lutie Johnson's only choice, which does challenge the commonly held presupposition about music being the only career opportunity through which upwards mobility could be attained. The middle to late phases of the Great Migration attest to how searching for freedom is an ongoing cycle of relentless movements. Migration does not guarantee freedom, but moving is an integral strive for equity and opportunity. Movement allows migrants, and those with diasporic backgrounds more generally, to momentarily continue breathing. Although Lutie's future in Chicago looks bleak, her survival is a quiet confirmation of empowerment against seemingly overwhelming odds. Every sound which emanates from and around Lutie in the final passages affirm Petry's dwindling optimism about whether emancipation can ever be achieved in the United States. Hence, Lutie's final act of fugitive migration signals the endurance of what Walcott calls the "false promise of emancipation" (Walcott

2021). This final act of departure distinguishes mobility from liberation. While movement permits her immediate survival, it does not deliver the ostensible promise of freedom which resonated widely, especially during the early onset of the Great Migration.

In the first wave of the Great Migration, approximately half a million Southerners left between 1916 and 1920, another million departed by the late 1920's (Grossman, 1989). But the second wave was much larger, with more than four million people leaving between 1940-1970 (Gregory, 2005). WW2 had transformed labor demands and agricultural mechanization further accelerated displacement from the South. When *The Street* is read against its post-WW2 backdrop of accelerating migrations, Black mobility sounds like a condition of ongoing instability. Just as the novel refuses closure with Lutie's fugitive escape, Petry announces the ongoing reality of disillusionment and escalating migrations in the post-WW2 era.

This chapter has traced how Johnson, Toomer, Wright, and Petry rely on visual-sonic language to represent affective dimensions of migration narratives. Each author represents migrations as both individual movements in all imaginable directions and as embodied conflicts with visual-sonic color lines. James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* attempts, unsuccessfully, to foreground music as key sites for racial identity and community. Instead, the anonymous narrator functions as a listener who operates within the liminal, double conscious, and moving space of racial passing. Jean Toomer's *Cane* was among the earliest texts to fragment the grand narrative of the Great Migration into a series of sonic-visual vignettes. Toomer's multimodal language renders the voices, kinetic movements, noises, and embodiments of silencing across rural and urban contexts. Richard Wright's *The Man Who Lived Underground*

magnifies oppressive noises of the urban North. Institutional powers operate as a realistic silencing force; the protagonist's breathing is extinguished and the sonic preconditions for voice are erased. Restlessness is the sonic-affective blues ethos which thoroughly permeates the novella's bleak depiction of being a fugitive. *The Street* amplifies Harlem's oppressive white noise: a prescient environmental force which constrained agency, for women in particular. At the same time, the novel refutes Wright's overwhelming pessimism. For Petry, women's self-mediated listening and deliberate movements are (dis)quieting modes of resistance. All these authors use multimodal language to compare migratory conditions against socio-cultural facets of U.S. racism. However, their texts also represent literary sounds alongside the sonic practices and abilities of migrant characters. By that means, Great Migration narratives sound-out listening and movement as individual coping mechanisms or survival strategies amid the white noise of U.S. surveillance culture.

The immense aural transformations of the Great Migration inspired Black authors, at least partially, to experimentally represent "visualsonic affective language" (Sharpe, 2016). As mass exodus from the South granted more opportunities, Black U.S. literature increasingly captured visual-sonic interplays of space, place, as well as racialized senses and or perceptions. For that reason alone, there is more room for scholars to listen for visual-sonic layers of migratory narratives. All four textual case studies in Chapter 2 demonstrate how Great Migration narratives do not merely describe sound— but rather, they detail how migrants are entangled with socio-political valences of embodiment and collective memory. Wherever migrants' literature gestures to sonic expression, it strives to resists the white noise of racialized surveillance on individual and collective levels.

CHAPTER 3

Blues Unbound: Fretboard Cartographies and Migratory Blues Epistemologies

Through emphasizing diasporic and migratory epistemologies, this project conceptualizes the mass movement of millions of people as profound reorganizations of Black sound. Sonic engagements foreground modes of knowing, learning, and transmission. In essence, Chapter Three explores blues music as an indispensable socio-cultural formation for Black migrants. Many scholarly projects emphasize romanticizing the Southern U.S. pastoral elements of blues, and traditional musicology which I argue tend to narrowly describe it as an idiomatic African American folk-genre. However, these rigid understandings about blues origins are antithetical to Gilroy's proposal that the "Black Atlantic" is a "rhizomorphic, fractal structure of the transcultural, international formation" and that music is a foundational aspect of it (1993, 4). Attending to how blues drifts across geographies and through networks of listeners reveals departures from static conceptions of roots, genre, or origins. Migratory music, like the blues, reverberates with weariness and many other discordant or dissonant feelings. The idiomatic surface feelings of blues are partially consequences of enduring too many unsettling movements or disquieting social conditions. At the same time, blues players were influencers who composed community building sounds amid the immense socio-political transformations of the twentieth century United States. The far-reaching works and itinerant lifestyles of blues musicians set forth sonic epistemologies centering around improvisation, critique, and endurance. Countless migrations were carried through the affective registers and epistemic force of the blues.

My focus on the blues is not intended to position it as the only musical form shaped and refined by the Great Migration. For example, jazz music also provides a valuable forum for studying the sounds and aural transformations of the Great Migration era as the development of jazz was profoundly shaped by the movements of Black musicians beyond the South. Rather, I focus on the blues because it offers useful, distinct microhistories of musicians who moved between regions and recording economies throughout the twentieth century. The case studies assembled in Chapter 3 extend beyond the interpretation of song lyrics. While lyrical analysis remains important, my approach listens more closely to guitar techniques, vocal textures, and performance practices. This focus on the sounds beyond the lyrics attunes us to how geographic movements and cultural memory become embedded in musical practices in ways that lyrics cannot express. In other words, I acknowledge how guitar playing techniques, vocal expressions, and performance style can all carry powerful registers of the embodied experience of moving between regions.

I conceptualize these embodied relationships between musical and geographic movement through what I call fretboard cartographies. Fretboard cartographies function as a theoretical framework, and as a method for understanding how embodied knowledge was produced and transmitted throughout the Great Migration. I use the term to describe how the geographic movements of itinerant blues performers also influenced their embodied movements as guitarists—across strings and frets, between tunings, and through regional techniques. I specifically explore how bottleneck slide playing, syncopated fingerpicking, string bending, and improvisation function as embodied migratory epistemologies. Fretboard cartographies make migration audible by treating the

fretboard as a mobile site for retaining, adapting, and sharing musical practices. Although some blues songs feature explicitly critical political messages, fretboard cartographies also register forms of Black resistance. Musicians asserted creative autonomy through embodied performance, and they created expressive forms which resisted segregation and the exploitative structures of the commercial recording industry.

Against this backdrop, blues and jazz have been prized and overly enthused by scholarly and popular accounts of African American history. Notwithstanding, assessing the sounds of the Great Migration era requires some sustained efforts to listen to blues, which is a cultural praxis of embodiment, movement, and cultural production. Ronald Radano's *Lying up a Nation* (2003) outlines the dominant story which the U.S. listening public tends to adopt: "Black music garners its strength and power from the integrity of a greater African American culture forged under circumstances of enduring racial oppression" (xii). In recognizing that this presiding idea has been widely accepted by scholars and the public, Radano and Bohlman argue for the importance of avoiding positivist tendencies in musicology to construct "race music" as a coherent, stable, or unchanging category (2000, 3-5).

The African diaspora and the Great Migration are socio-cultural factors which caused Black music to become geographically hybridized both within the United States and globally over the twentieth century. Still yet, the blues has several distinct ties to the Southern United States. Erich Nunn proposes that "the South, both actual and imagined, provides a crucial idea of thinking about the interrelations of music and race" (2015, 4). Blues players were often migrants or itinerant performers displaced from the South. As such, southern resonances and dissonances surface through in the critical, spiritual, or

technical elements of their migratory blues epistemologies. Bill Ivey's thought-provoking essay, "Border Crossing: A Different way of Listening to American Music" (1998), exposes the powerful myth that the South is an inherently musical region, as histories of the Southern musical imagination are inherently racialized because of the borders of Jim Crow segregation laws. Due to the Great Migration, the South's musical heritage became increasingly heterogenous and non-monolithic.

Chapter Three argues, accordingly, that the blues operates as a migratory epistemology suspended between a transatlantic musical imaginary and a nationalistic U.S. framework. Thus, blues functioned as a portable modality of knowledge—not only as a vessel for idiomatic expression—but also as an epistemic outlet. To emphasize the critical dimensions which enabled the internal mobility of the blues across the United States, I draw from Clyde Adrian Woods' *Development Arrested* (1998), which outlines an African American "blues epistemology" operating "as a theory of social and economic development and change" (1998, 20). For Woods, "This form of explanation finds its origins in the processes of African American cultural construction within, and resistance to, the antebellum plantation regime" (1998, 25). Gilroy also underscores how "music—a non-representational, non-conceptual form, raises aspects of embodied subjectivity that are not reducible to the cognitive and the ethical" (1993, 76). Matthew D. Morrison conceptualizes the role of blues performativity along similar lines, "as any resonance (vibrations that are translated into audible or discernable frequencies) that is produced, manipulated, and/or interpreted by a body or an instrument" (2017, 15). Thus, I draw from his concept of "Blacksound," which he employs "as a theory of historical embodiment to trace the ephemerality and materiality of the sounds produced by Black

bodies within the history of popular music in the United States" (2017, 18). Where blues lyrics or guitar techniques are read as embodied and critical sonic epistemologies, they become construed as strivings to transfer and preserve cultural memories in the aftermath of diasporic rupture.

Though blues retains individualism through sonic contours of idiomatic expression, the music is perpetually entwined with collective conditions of racialized alienation and displacement from the South. Colin L. Anderson breaks down the late-nineteenth century period between 1870-1900, as a moment where "sheet music was one of the most, if not the most, dominant forms of popular culture in the last half of the nineteenth century, and songs that romanticized the south were extremely popular" (2019, 582). Once more Black musicians overcame barriers to record music by the 1920s, blues songs reconfigured dominant sentiments about the South that were archived by the dominant sonic imaginaries of sheet music. Julia Simon alludes to the fundamental senses of mobility which empowered blues forms: "Unlike in other genres, in which the written score is understood as the work of art, the blues is first and foremost sound. This conception blurs the boundaries between composition and performance" (2023,120). As Jeffry P. Berry reminds us, even the earlier early twentieth century blues artists avoided presenting clear cut geographic divisions of "the evil South versus the righteous North" (2012, 114). Countless migrants were energized by the sonic and vernacular "blues matrix" of play, performance, and improvisation (Baker, 1984). From the waves of mass migration initiated by WWI, and throughout six decades to the early 1970s, blues epistemologies were often not formally transcribed, preserved, or geographically refined. Blues was influenced, masked, and silenced by commodified, exploitative structures of

the U.S. recording industry. The music generally evolved from rural acoustic to electric sounds, but blues always thrived through "call-and-response" traditions. Eminent scholars have generally defined and outlined the importance of "call-and-response" for Black diasporic musical traditions (Baker Jr. 1984; Gilroy 1993; Davis 1998; Moten 2003; Brooks 2006). Moten indirectly theorizes sonic epistemologies as, "a venerable phonic propulsion, the ontological and historical priority of resistance to power and objection to subjection, the old-new thing, [and] the freedom drive that animates Black performances" (2003, 12). I thereby construe blues migrants as dynamic singers, guitar players, and experimental listeners who reconfigured "sonic color lines" through subverting expectations of white listeners (Stoever, 2016). Blues lyrics and guitar playing techniques echo lived realities of millions of migrants who refused subjection to segregation or sharecropping in pursuit of freedom on their own journeys in all directions.

With inspiration from Baker (1984), Morrison (2017), Moten (2003), Stoever (2016), and Woods (1998), I shall address complicated blues cartographies of displacement, improvisation, and resistance. I turn away from positivistic analysis of musical structures in favor of considering how performers critically express "blues epistemologies" and embody "Blacksound." Both these conceptual objectives direct primary concern to migratory experience and resilience. I loosely situate regional guitar techniques like bottleneck slide playing, syncopated fingerpicking, and experimental rhythms as fretboard cartographies of movement and survival. As Lawson asserts, "blues music became a documentary of the Great Migration" advanced through the works and days of itinerant singer-guitarists (2010, 88). As a visualsonic-affective form of cultural

production, the mobility of the blues was symptomatic of the collective senses of displacement and rootlessness. On a related note, I fill some gaps in discourse through speculative critical observations about how sensory conditions like blindness have shaped "blues epistemologies" (Woods 1998). Intersectional listening informs my studies of figures like Blind Lemon Jefferson, Elizabeth Cotten, and Reverend Gary Davis. I argue that musicians living under intersectional oppression developed uniquely sonic-affective migratory blues epistemologies. I strive to listen deeply to how blues lyrics and instrumentation register the acousmatic or lived conditions of migration—echoing migratory sounds like trains, street corners, or juke joints—in embodied forms of Black performance.

Blues operates throughout the Great Migration as at-once a migratory and sonic epistemology. Stuart Hall's work in "Race, Articulation and Societies Structured in Dominance" accounts for racism as not "a general feature of human societies, but with historically specific racisms, beginning with an assumption of difference, of specificity rather than of a unitary, transhistorical universal" (1980, 234). Thus, racism sustains systems of dominance, not merely through overt segregation or violence, but also in systemic tandem with specific industries and cultural structures of the United States. I listen accordingly to blues epistemologies alongside notions of migration and improvisation, as well as to the aural contours of call-and-response traditions. It is also important to address and question the disproportionately white archival or scholarly contexts which have shaped abstractions about the blues—including white liberal romanticism and nostalgia. Contemporary scholarship has increasingly put forth re-visionist perspectives that re-claim the music and musicians, as living epistemic

embodiments of Black diasporic rupture, improvisation, and social critique. My work contributes a literature review of what intellectuals and scholars have said about the lived stakes surrounding "Blacksound," and through analyzing how disabled or gendered bodies enable unique migratory blues epistemologies (Morrison 2017).

Cultural Politics, Blues Historiography, and Black Sonic Worldmaking

Mid-twentieth century blues scholars and musicologists often tried to pinpoint the emergence of blues back to specific moments or singular persons and places. Following the rise of Black Studies and other critical disciplines in the 1980s, scholars have continued moving away from codifying the blues into singular origin stories. It is hard to argue against there being distinctly Black and diasporic expressive elements of Blues because its twentieth-century popular emergence in the United States is well-documented in pioneering texts about Black music (Baraka 1963; Southern 1971; Levine 1977; Floyd 1995). But the music which drew commonplace recognition as the secular genre of blues by the 1920s has a much longer history. The individualized and call-and-response aspects which came to characterize the blues was under development in the pre-civil war antebellum South, extending back to the ballads, field hollers, and work songs of enslaved people (Levine, 1977). Amiri Baraka's acclaimed cultural history, *Blues People (*1963), explains how it "was largely a functional music; and it emerged from a music, the work song, that did not exist except as a strictly empirical communication of some part of the Black slave's life" (1963, 105). In that same work, Baraka also describes mass departures from Southern states as a decisive "psychological realignment" which propelled the expansive influences and evolutions of blues music (1963, 103). However, the Great Migration was far from the only source of inspiration for musicians. Their

music was composed from several traditions, mainly West African rhythms and "call-and-response" traditions, but it was also influenced heavily by European harmonic structures. Many scholars have established strong links between the blues and West African musical heritage: "Throughout the nations of western Africa, traditional music features polyrhythmic or layered beats, call and response (and improvisational) lyrics, and use of stringed and wind instruments" (Lawson 2010, 4). All these musical elements were transferred onto twentieth century U.S. music. These prominent studies have established how and why blues music holds numerous aesthetic, diasporic, embodied, epistemic, regional, and racial dimensions.

Edward Said frames academic work as a space which promotes imaginative travel, where scholars, like migrants, are "able to discover and travel among other selves, other identities, other varieties of the human adventure" (2000, 403). A musician and music critic himself, Said's comparative approach emphasizes curiosity, mobility, and critical engagement in complex webs of alterity and difference. These migratory sentiments hold strong relevance which aid scholars along the vast interpretive demands of listening to blues. Rather than conforming to essentialist readings, blues scholarship can thrive through what Houston A. Baker calls a "matrix" of "unlimited play" (1984, 10-11). Baker's "blues matrix" challenges stable meanings and fixed origins in favor of embracing principles which breed musical or analytical improvisation. Vinz furthers Baker's idea by encouraging scholars to strive beyond objectives to hear, read, or see the blues. Instead, research can blossom into more fruitful findings through immersion in tangled socio-cultural networks of affect, experience, and transformation (Vinz 1999, 400). As more migrants overcame socio-economic barriers to acquire guitars, they

became sonic tools enabling mobile expression, improvisational re-invention, and communal exchange.

While blues music can be studied partially through concepts and theory, the practice of listening to blues is emotive and non-conceptual as a lived modality of cognitive engagement. Thus, more complex accounts tend to position blues as liminal, diasporic sites of identity formation and cultural production. While migration has been a subject that is discussed at length, music writers interested in blues, "have seldom given sufficient attention to the impact of these patterns of migration and their attendant economic influences on the evolution of regional performance styles" (Gioia 2008, 208). In fairness, perhaps, this lack of attention is because broader theoretical frameworks of diaspora and migration are more crucial for the interdisciplinary analysis of blues. The music is ultimately a byproduct of Black diaspora, migration, identity formation, oppression and resistance. Blues performers sounded-out migratory sensibilities through not only their lyrics but also their performing conventions. Angela Y. Davis (1998), Houston A. Baker Jr. (1984), and Fred Moten (2003) are a solid handful of thinkers who have proven that blues lyricism raises critical questions about gender, race, and class. But there is still room to listen for valences of instrumental sound. A guitarist's approach to the fretboard is a deeply embodied element of "Blacksound" with critical resonances as migratory blues epistemologies (Morrison 2017).

How has blues historiography been framed, contested, mediated, and misunderstood by archivists and scholars? Wherever blues is archived and historicized, U.S. racialization influenced how it was recorded and archived. In Steven C. Tracy's words: "In the case of the blues, we are dealing primarily with oral "texts," the authors of

which are frequently indeterminate, and the transmission of which is frequently informal, undocumented, and variable in form" (2015, 11). For those reasons, blues was excluded from the academic boundaries of literary studies and musicology before that started changing in the 1990s. Since then, influential projects have utilized the either the lens of diaspora or migration as modes of listening to blues epistemologies (Keil, 1966; Gilroy 1993; Woods 1998). When blues is conceptually positioned as a migratory epistemology, more balanced assessments of how the music simultaneously preserves southern cultural memories while sounding out Black displacements endemic to the era. In Mazzarri's words, "songsters expressed movement not as a choice, but as a response to any crisis, whether flood or plague or trouble of any sort" (2011, 6). For example, Barlow explains how, for these early twentieth century migrant-musicians, "The blues were part of a widespread cultural response to renewed white oppression. They infused the [B]lack oral tradition with a new assessment of the urgency of the situation and a mandate to change it" (Barlow 1989, 7). Early blues musicians lived itinerant lifestyles of recreation and enjoyment, rebelling from the norms of segregation and sharecropping.

Chicago and Detroit were hot spots of economic and industrial opportunity for Southern migrants. Yet, as with New York City, Chicago and Detroit also provided migrants with a terminus through which blues evolved. Urban dynamics contributed to growing audibility and visibility of the blues compared to the South. Black cultural institutions in the South, especially the church and schools, framed the sounds of blues music as vulgar and immoral. As Isabel Wilkerson puts it: "migrants could see Ma Rainey at the Regal or just melt into the neon anonymity of city life without a watchful uncle or jackleg preacher knowing about it" (2010, 269). Thus, blues forms were

innovated by restless performers who embraced the need to move to escape the especially strong Southern manifestations of "the sonic color line" (Stoever, 2016). Migrants were still subject to many forms of spatial separation and police surveillance in urban contexts, but the Northern metropolis was a site where blues enjoyed relative freedom from structures of intense sonic confinement in the South. Moten convincingly describes performance as "the ongoing improvisation of a kind of lyricism of the surplus—invagination, rupture, collision, augmentation" (2003, 26). Migrants found a surplus of new socially acceptable opportunities for music performance, including in the growing proliferations of Black-owned venues or even on crowded public street corners. As musicians were empowered with more places to play the blues, more diverse audiences listened to the new sounds reverberating into public earshot.

Urban popular culture emerges at the junctures of enhanced printing, recording, and radio broadcast technologies, which all became more audible in the early twentieth century. Blues historians and archivists often try to pinpoint the explosion of the genre's popularity alongside W.C. Handy's "Memphis Blues" (1912), which quickly became a popular hit. Handy's tune is now credited for announcing a new genre, as it was among the earliest blues composition to make its way into the archivable realm of printed sheet music. By the 1920s, "most of the people listening and dancing to blues seem to have thought of it as a new style" (Wald, 2010, 12). Indeed, W.C. Handy has been labelled "the father of the blues," and Handy partially embraces this label, as foretold by the eponymous title of his book, *Father of the Blues: An Autobiography* (1941). While scholars have established that any claims to the definitive origins of blues are dubious, Handy's autobiography offers critical socio-cultural observations about material socio-

economic conditions which facilitated the 1920s popularization of blues music. Handy describes his childhood desire to buy and play guitar. He came to believe that, with a guitar, "I would be able to express the thigs I felt in sounds. I grew impatient as my small savings grew. I selected the instrument I wanted and went often to gaze at it lovingly through the shop window" (1947, 9). Handy also documents how white musicians and record industry executives privileged Eurocentric standards, thereby reinforcing the idea that Black musicians "should stick to the banjo and guitar" and would be wasting their time to try and learn any other instrument (1947, 56). Similar veins of discriminatory thought about the guitar emerged from white music industry executives who reinforced "the sonic color line," dictating the politics of "how and why certain bodies are expected to produce, desire, and live amongst particular sounds" (Stoever 2016, 7). Thus, although early blues singer-guitarists embraced stringed instruments and wielded them in extraordinarily creative ways, emerging migrant musicians were entangled with the silencing noise of dominant Eurocentric standards governing U.S. academic institutions and the recording industry.

During the early 1930s, white ethnomusicologists and folklorists— notably, the Lomaxes, and Paul Oliver—were extensively travelling in the South to record and preserve blues history for the Library of Congress. They used labels like "authentic Black folk expression," "the devil's music," and "primitive," which illuminates tendencies to romanticize, insulate, and manage the way blues music is historicized or remembered. O'Connell notes how Paul Oliver and other blues scholars of the folk revival period during the 1960s-1970s advanced questionable "pervading folkloric perceptions" about authenticity, primitivity, and the Mississippi Delta. However, this sort of blues writing is

not necessarily devoid of value, but "should be interpreted as one of the underlying features of the reception of African American music in this period" (O'Connell, 2015, 50). Likewise, while early scholars in Oliver's vein have probable cause to mythologize individual innovation—or more appropriately "genius"— as central to the blues, it is also not the only element which produced the music. Networks of migration and communal exchange were equally, if not more important, to the production and amplifications of blues epistemologies. For instance, Jon Michael Spencer's *The Blues and Evil* (1993) advances important critiques of how these white archivists, folklorists, and scholars made dubious associations between the blues, satanic panic, or moral relativism. He also points out how "the blues has an elusive cultural element that defies their attempts at representation (description, transcription, and analysis) (Spencer, 1993, xvi). Consequently, the labels of rural authenticity, secularity, and raw primitivism attached to blues were manufactured, and mythologized further, by this small bastion of white ethnomusicologists and folklorists.

Rather than decline in popularity after the turn of the twentieth century, the stereotypical bigotry of minstrelsy was absorbed and reconfigured across new forms of entertainment. As vaudeville shows started to hook the interests of more diverse urban audiences with their fast-paced mix of acrobatic, musical, and comedic performances, they also carried forward and repackaged minstrel conventions. Thus, the earliest commercially popular blues performers in the United States were mostly women. The classic blues queens—which often includes the trio of Mamie Smith, Ma Rainey, and Bessie Smith— fashioned themselves into highly marketable vaudeville performers. They were captivating racially mixed middle-class audiences with their powerful voices, well

before 1925, which was the paradigm shifting moment when microphones became widely used to amplify sound for live audiences. Angela Y. Davis confirms that travel was a major element of blues feminism, as: “Although women generally were not socially entitled to travel on as wide a scale as men, significantly, blues women overcame this restriction” (1998, 20). Despite all the triumphs of vaudeville blues queens, their blues feminism was socio-economically and culturally silenced by the unstable market conditions and consumer patterns of the post-depression interwar period. Baraka outlines how the stock market crash of 1929 signaled the onset of the Great Depression, and recording opportunities for female singers and rural musicians had almost completely dried up by the start of WW2. Yet, “blues naturally enough continued. Classic blues suffered irreparably because to a certain extent its popularity was based on an *economic* principle, as is all popular theater” (Baraka, 1963, 126). How could the blues have continued then? Our answers reside in listening to how commercialized, mechanized, and racialized city environments coerced blues to take new forms after the relatively short-lived heyday of classic blues and the roaring twenties.

The intellectuals and writers of the Harlem Renaissance, who were either established intellectuals or younger aspiring writers, wrote about blues music throughout the 1920s. The old-garde like W.E.B. Du Bois and Alain LeRoy Locke tended to reject ideas that the blues could be a musical model which could establish and secure racial equity. Angela Y. Davis explains how blues models for Black expression came to be “associated with working class Black life—which, fatally, was seen by some Renaissance strategists as antithetical to the aims of their cultural movement—their music was designated as “low” culture” (1998, xiii). But Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston

were the younger Harlem Renaissance writers who rejected the elitism of Du Bois and Locke. In a polemical essay, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” (1926), Langston Hughes’ call for more recognition of how blues expounds Black pride—expressively: “Let the blare of Negro jazz bands and the bellowing voice of Bessie Smith singing blues penetrate the closed ears of the colored near-intellectuals until they listen and perhaps understand” (1926, 4). Paul Allen Anderson describes Hughes’ essay as a “secular manifesto,” which should not be overlooked because most foundational work on blues construes the music as breaking away from the sacred (2001, 176). The assumption that blues is a strictly secular genre has been a point of contentious debate.

Classic and contemporary works of blues historiography have furthered awareness of the migratory sensibilities embedded in the music. In the early twentieth century, blues musicians in the South “lived in an alternative Black culture” (Lawson, 2010, 79). Lawson delineates why their music “did not echo ‘I’m Black and I’m proud’ nor even ‘Black is beautiful’. If anything, the blues culture was for those who held little hope for better opportunities, especially in the South” (Lawson 2010, 79). Once migrants started leaving in waves, this blues counterculture sounded out lyrics which expressed transformational aspirations for urban opportunity. Blues instrumentation developed into equally important vehicles for performative and sonic innovation. Guitars played a key role in transforming early-twentieth century blues counterculture because they were portable instruments. Migrants overcame financial barriers to acquire guitars, which both symbolized their economic resourcefulness and simultaneously provided them with alternative streams to supplement their income. Richard Wright’s *12 Million Black Voices* (1941) is foundational Great Migration history. Wright describes the transformational

significance which Black music undergoes through migrations: “On the plantations our songs carried a strain of other-wordily yearning which people called ‘spiritual’; but now our blues, jazz, swing, and boogie-woogie are our ‘spirituals’ of the city pavements, our longing for freedom and opportunity, an expression of our bewilderment and despair in a world whose meaning eludes us” (Wright, 1941, 128). Wright’s classic evaluation of blues refuses to construe the music as an authentically Southern and secular Black-folk music. Owing to the migratory lifestyles of early performers, “blues escaped the South where it was rooted in rural folksong and made its own slow march northward” (Jackson, 2017, 3). These assessments lend credence to the idea that blues enjoyment and influence extended far beyond the rural South. The music moved with migrants into cities where it would be recorded and circulated—amplifying freedom and survival.

Sound Studies has furthered our critical perceptions of the massive early-twentieth century growth of interest in Black music. Alex Ross summarizes how sonic inventions shaped music in the early twentieth century: electronic recording, live radio, and sound being synchronized into motion pictures (2007, 286). Gramophones, phonographs, radios, and telephones propelled the social and political economy of music to new heights over the twentieth century. Notwithstanding, we should recall Jacques Attali’s argument that “Recording has always been a means of social control, a stake in politics, regardless of the available technologies” (1977, 87). This critical angle encourages deeper awareness of how Blues was popularized through corporate imperatives to appropriate, micro-manage, and insulate Black expression. The roughly four-year period between 1925 and the onset of the Great Depression saw the global explosion of vernacular folk and country music recordings. Michael Denning

conceptualizes how more recording and commercialization of phonograph records coincided with greater public insistence on anticolonial activism and critical thinking. (2016, 39). Thus, vernacular recordings operate as mobile forms that moved with Black musicians to carry new ideas across borders. The migrants who consequently played and performed music "can be extrapolated by analogy as evidence of a foundational human impulse toward liberation and self-determination" (Edwards 2016, 278).

During Reconstruction, banjos, harmonicas, and guitars increasingly found their ways into more people's hands. Bastin identifies the importance of "an increasing availability of the instrument which was to become most closely associated with the new music—the guitar" (1995, 11). Due to gradually increasing production and commercial availability from the late nineteenth-century and onwards, guitars were a central instrument for blues. As the instrument most readily available, guitars—acoustic, and eventually electric— became a definitive portable outlet for blues artists. Within migratory settings like trains or city streets, the sociocultural conditions of displacement, mobility, improvisation, and resilience could be conveyed and felt through the fretboard stylings of blues guitar. Guitar players established their own fretboard cartographies that echo vast industrial sounds around them. I use the term fretboard cartography to name an embodied practice through which blues guitarists navigate and map their own migratory experiences or epistemologies onto the instrument itself. While pianos were accepted within Eurocentric standards of urban white middle-class respectability, guitars and banjos were the racialized instruments which principally sounded-out anti-sharecropping "blues epistemologies." David Evans builds a strong case for the influence of piano on emerging blues styles: "By the 1920s and 1930s guitarists such as Blind Lemon

Jefferson, Blind Roosevelt Graves, Leadbelly, and Robert Johnson were incorporating boogie woogie and walking bass patterns into their guitar work" (2001, 21-2). The guitar's portability is what initially enabled players on the go to translate their surrounding acousmatic sounds into newly expressive fretboard cartographies. In addition, guitarists were able to overcome the racialized connotations of their instruments through absorbing melodic, harmonic, or rhythmic elements of the piano.

Some elements of bluesy guitar playing—like using glass bottleneck slides, finger bending, palm muting, or scraping fingernails along the strings—are mimetically linked to sonic-affective dimensions of trains or railroads. Floyd (1995) explores "the trope of the riding train" which many blues artists integrated into their songs through instrumental modes of sonic signification. His analysis of Peetie Wheatstraw's "C and A Blues" (1937) and Bukka White's "Panama Limited" (1939) concludes that "singing passages, in addition to expressing textual content, serve simultaneously and ingeniously as imitations of train whistles. The guitar, too, has its whistling imitations, made by ringing elided and graced notes" (Floyd 1995, 221). Most notably, the sounds of a glass bottleneck sliding to distort the sound of notes plucked on guitar strings can resemble the "whooo-whooooo" wail of a distant steam whistle, as well as its pressure modulated "ooooooooeeeee" glissando sound. In these ways, guitar players make pronounced, but understudied, acousmatic gestures to socio-cultural sensibilities of the Great Migration.

The blues transcends structural dimensions of music and is thereby registered in countless visualsonic-affective ways. For example, the word blue makes visual gestures to coloration, and specifically, to a color which evokes idiomatic feelings of melancholy or sadness. Rather than being purely auditory or visual, it follows that blues music

constitutes a visualsonic-affective paradigm of cultural production. Although “the blues” designates a musical tradition, it is not always defined by coherent musical structures or forms, since “blues has sometimes been treated like a homogeneous expression, with the 12-bar scheme declared as paramount, along with the so-called blue notes” (Kubik 2008, 15). The 12-bar blues form was far from universal in how it was deployed. Stoia recounts how, by the middle of the twentieth century, “the urban environment engendered a corresponding creative explosion of new variants on the traditional twelve-bar form, many of them characterized by faster textual pacing, greater phrase rhythmic density, and elaborate stylization” (2023, 286). Thus, variations to the traditional scheme will become audible over my close analysis of Blind Lemon Jefferson’s more elastic rhythmic phrasing, and of Reverend Gary Davis’s gospel embellishments which stretched or compressed phrasing in ways that eschewed the 12-bar structure. In addition, musicians like Elizabeth Cotten ventured even further away from the 12-bar blues form, so her guitar work intersects strongly with the improvisational sensibilities of itinerant blues performers.

Imani Perry’s book *Black in Blues: How A Color Tells the Story of My People* (2025) colors blue into a transcultural and multi-sensory diasporic frame. Rather than make arguments about the definitive musicological parameters of a blue note, Perry beautifully describes how musicians and enslaved people embodied “blue note living” (2025, 83). Although musical sound is often organized by genre, musicological frameworks can only begin, barely, to approximate significances held in blue notes: “A sound could be released to attest to all of that, a sound to make the hairs on the back of a body’s neck stand up. A sound without words but fully imbued with meaning. Held but

never possessed" (2025, 84). The ongoing lack of consensus about what constitutes a "blue note" further demonstrates how the blues resists confinement to formal musicological structures or analysis. Instead, the blues is improvisational and charged through visualsonic-affective forms of expression and performance. Perry's words remind us of how migratory blues epistemologies are construed through lived experiences, which constitute visual and tactile feelings as much as auditory sensibilities.

Listening to Migratory Sensibilities Embodied in Regional Blues Variants

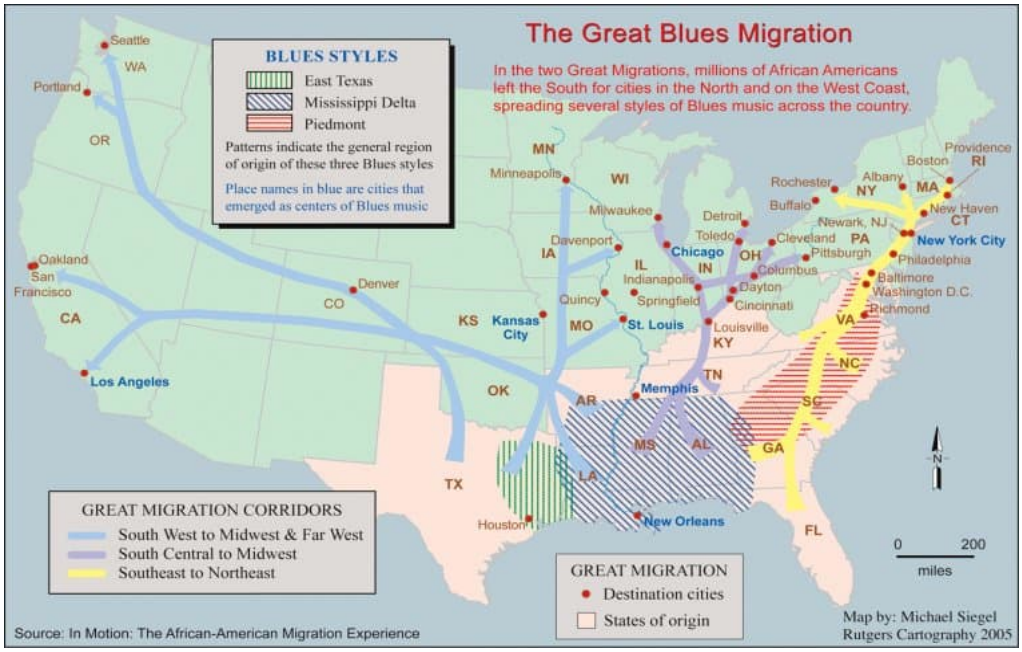


Image 2.
Siegel, Michael. *The Great Blues Migration.* New York Public Library Digital Collections, 2005.

By the late 1970s, scholars began to establish and accept the notion that blues guitar stylings have discernable similarities based on geographic regions. Michael Siegel's map of "The Great Blues Migration" indicates how it is possible to trace general streams of how blues moved through different geographic regions alongside mass racial

demographic shifts (Rutgers Cartography, 2005). In figure 2, Siegel visualizes the circuitry of blues was set abound from three general regions: the Mississippi Delta, Texas, and Piedmont. The map is not linear. It traces dense crossings, winding paths, and countless cities outside of Mississippi and Texas where blues epistemologies were forged. It outlines a schematic index of mobility largely based upon railroad networks and urban industrial hubs, which were undeniably influential migratory infrastructures. Siegel's cartography risks privileging the material routes of transportation because it cannot represent the embodied strains of migrants—anxiety, exhaustion, waiting, and disability—which inspired blues lyrics and guitar techniques.

I further examine how fretboard cartographies—guitar playing—encompasses "Blacksound" (Morrison 2017). There are certain technical approaches to the guitar which became popular over the twentieth century, and they have loose, but somewhat traceable regional influences. There is some data to suggest that individual approaches to fretting hand posture, rhythmic timekeeping, and fingerpicking are rooted in regional boundaries of East Texas, Piedmont, and the Mississippi Delta. These include the bottleneck slide playing popularized in the Mississippi Delta, the experimental rhythms from east Texas, and syncopated fingerpicking methods of eastern Piedmont regions. However, Andrew M. Cohen rightfully problematizes the word style: "One may speak of a regional style (analogous to dialect), a local style (analogous to a patois), or a personal style (analogous to idiolect). Understanding is impeded when the term is applied to a genre ('blues style') or a format" (2008, 154). Furthermore, blues epistemologies are fundamentally mobile, and any distinct regional boundaries of blues were at least partially destabilized by mass movements. For Titon, the Texas, Delta, and Piedmont

"stylistic distinctions do not always correspond to geographical ones; hence, their superimposition must be taken only as a rough and general guide" (1977, 47). While working with this general guide, I do not frame blues as a static Southern genre, but as mobile lyrics and guitar fretboard cartographies shaped by the Great Migration and broader Black diasporic movement. It is impossible to assess all artists who have used blues music as a repository for Great Migration narratives, but Robert Johnson, Blind Lemon Jefferson, Elizabeth Cotten, and Reverend Gary Davis are pivotal figures. The lyrics and guitar playing of each individual artist offers sonic testimony to improvisation, shifting geographies, and the ongoing search for freedom as migratory blues epistemologies.

A) The Delta Blues

Mississippi was the poorest and among the most aggressively segregated states in the nation throughout the entirety of the Great Migration. The Mississippi Delta encompasses approximately seven-thousand square miles of fertile alluvial plains replete with swampy bayous, and the blues epistemology thrived with a special intensity there. Numerous blues legends hailed from the delta: Charley Patton (1891-1934), Blind Willie Johnson (1897-1945), Son House (1902-1988), Skip James (1902-1969), Howlin' Wolf (1910-1976), Robert Johnson (1911-1938), Muddy Waters (1913-1983), and finally, B.B. King (1925-2015). The Delta region holds undeniable significances for the historical development of blues, especially blues guitar. Nevertheless, notions that the blues is singularly rooted in Delta soil remain unfoundedly gendered, mythologized, and romanticized. The roster of bluesmen listed above falsely suggests that early-twentieth century blues is exclusively masculine, which is a common presupposition that obscures

women's central role in the urban classic blues tradition. Memphis Minnie (1897-1973), Elizabeth Cotten (1893-1987), and Sister Rosetta Tharpe (1915-1973) were innovative and influential women guitar players. Moreover, the blues was not exclusively from Mississippi, as many other artists launched formative and influential careers from East Texas and the broader Piedmont region spanning across six states.

The general story of how Delta blues passed its rural acoustic influences to urban electric sound between 1910-1970 has received a great deal of academic and popular interest since the 1940s. Some influential scholarly treatments romanticize the Mississippi Delta as a poverty-stricken geographic cradle of African American musical authenticity (Charters 1959; Oliver 1968; Palmer 1981; Lomax 1993).[6] The legacies of guitar playing bluesmen hailing from Mississippi are far-reaching, but Jon Michael Spencer also acknowledges that "the mythology surrounding the lives of blues singers is more interesting than their reality" (1993, xiv). For example, the mythos of Robert Johnson making a deal with the devil at the crossroads is indispensable to blues lore. While the songs of Delta musicians and the mythos of their lived experiences are undoubtedly iconic, the blues did not enjoy a linear or direct path out of Mississippi. Grossman further questions the misleading sentiment that migrating was a linear, South to North phenomenon, as many migrants "who tarried in a southern town or city usually did so because they could afford to go no farther" (1989, 111). Some journeyed directly North, but most others were forced to stop in towns and cities to earn enough money to

[6] The following books lend disproportionate authenticity to the Mississippi Delta as being the supposed African American geographic origin of blues music: Samuel Charters, *The Country Blues*. (New York: Rinehart,1959); Paul Oliver, *Screening the Blues: Aspects of the Blues Tradition.* (London: Cassell, 1968); Robert Palmer, *Deep Blues*. (New York: Viking Press, 1981); Lomax, Alan. *The Land Where the Blues Began*. (New York: Pantheon, 1993).

pay for the rest of the trip. John Scanlan describes a ubiquitous migratory sentiment amongst people living in the Mississippi Delta, which was “to forget everything and go somewhere else” (2015, 15). In addition, Delta bluesmen “sang songs that alluded to the numerous torments that assailed a bluesman on the road, lending their music an undeniable existential potency that could be communicated across time and distance” (Scanlan 2015, 18). For blues musicians, migratory movements were arduous, poorly documented, and anything but a simple solution. Delta bluesman spent most of their lives struggling to translate their songs into marketable records, as their musician personas were solidified over years of economic impoverishment, movement, and performing in obscure rural bars, juke-joints, and street corners.

Robert Johnson’s “Sweet Home Chicago” (1936) is a call to migration in musical form that positions the city of Chicago as a place of promising opportunity. Although the title gestures to one city, the lyrics conflate the destinations of Chicago and California in a confounding way:

Baby don’t you want to go

Back to the land of California

To my sweet home Chicago

These lyrics illustrate why Johnson’s blues anthem is not a simple celebratory tribute to the city of Chicago. “Sweet Home Chicago” crystalizes the geographic liminality surrounding the Great Migration. Blues musicians thereby documented how travelling away from the South was a meandering, spontaneous, and uncertain process for migrants. Several of Johnson’s contemporaries embraced nicknames and personas which reflect themes and motifs that invoke transportation and movement. William H. Wiggins Jr.

draws an interesting parallel between the performer Richard “Big Boy” Henry and Richard Wright’s migration themed short story, *Big Boy Leaves Home* (1936). He also notes how Jimmy “T-99” Nelson and James “T-Model” Ford went by nicknames which directly evoke automobiles and highways, not necessarily by chance, but because road travelling was a way of life for itinerant musicians and migrants alike (Wiggins Jr., 1998, 13-14). Through embodying mobility and singing lyrics that confounded stable conceptions of space and place, blues musicians voice a restless weariness.

Delta musicians engaged in music making through mentorship. They often passed aural traditions down to younger students, but not every artist was an eager teacher, “especially when they thought songs ‘belonged to them” (Titon 1977, 47). Figures like Son House, Charley Patton, and Willie Brown developed reputations as renowned teachers who, formally or informally, taught their younger disciples among the likes of Muddy Waters, Howlin’ Wolf, and B.B. King. On the other hand, Robert Johnson and Skip James earned reputations as aloof and elusive figures—not known for teaching others the craft of playing blues guitar. Johnson and James earned countless admirers through recordings, but their reluctance to experientially mentor younger blues guitarists was an exception rather than the norm. By the 1950s, Waters, Wolf, King, and company were shaping the sonic aesthetics of electrified urban blues-rock. This often ventured far from rural Delta blues signatures like haunting vocals or acoustic guitar playing. While they eventually ventured into post-delta electric sounds, younger bluesman like Waters and King embraced the values of musical collaboration and mentorship through learning from elder Delta peers.

Scholars have spoken of Delta blues guitar as an expressive "call and response" dynamic between performers, their instruments, and musical co-collaborators. The earlier musicians to refine Delta signatures were itinerant performers. Delta blues guitar is a sonic socio-cultural repository for migration narratives because musicians used their instruments to evoke senses of in-betweenness. Hence, Delta guitarists championed a haunting, intimate, and percussive brand of sound. Also, players like Charley Patton and Son House treated their acoustic guitars as a repository for bottleneck glass slide sounds. Adam Gussow acknowledges of Charley Patton's innovative slide guitar playing exemplifies one key instrumental side of call and response: "These instrumental vocalizations serve to separate and comment on the singer's repeated vocal lines, when not simply doubling those lines outright. The result is a call-and-response melodic tissue supported by polyrhythmic repetitions" (2002, 102). Riffing and melodic soloing were often woven into the rhythm of the songs, as if the guitar was speaking to listeners in a different voice. Marybeth Hamilton's *In Search of the Blues* (2007) discusses how the interactions between early blues guitarists and their instruments blur boundaries between individual performance and community engagement. Singing evokes dialogic relationships with audiences, and lyricism is the aural form through which music most directly appeals to the shared experiences of audiences. But a lot of blues scholarship makes key efforts to address how the instrumental sounds of the Delta blues guitar playing strongly appeals to the shared racialized experiences of migrant-listeners.

Before the Great Migration, sacred sounds of religious belief and worship in the South were carried by spirituals and gospel music, which transmitted sacred sounds of hope and salvation throughout Black communities. While radio tended to

compartmentalize genres into cleanly separated categories like blues and gospel, guitar playing singers fused influences they gleaned from other musicians. John M. Giggie traces how early blues artists from the Delta played a crucial role in producing "train songs" which, "joined the growing assortment of railroad metaphors, narratives, visions, dreams, prayers, and chanted sermons" (2007, 53). Indeed, there are many parallels between blues lyrics about trains, mass migrations, and the biblical narratives of Exodus. Well outside the Delta, two musicians from Arkansas recorded versions of "This Train Is Bound For Glory", which was a traditional gospel song with unknown origins that became popular during the 1920s. Sister Rosetta Tharpe, a groundbreaking musician from Arkansas who cross-pollinated sacred themes and lyrics with blues guitar influences, moved to New York City in the late 1930s in search of recording opportunities. She achieved a modest commercial debut after recording six songs with Decca records on January 10th, 1939. "This Train" (1939) was a notable early acoustic recording of Tharpe's, and she would later release an electric guitar driven version with Decca on July 1st, 1947. The earlier version opens with the lyrics:

> This train is bound for glory, this train
> This train is bound for glory, this train
> This train is bound for glory
> Don't ride nothin' but the righteous and the holy
> This train is bound for glory, this train

Tharpe showcases her radical fuse of sacred themed lyrics with syncopated swing rhythm sections and expressive vocal melisma. Her singing typically stretched the syllables of words like "glory" and "train", enacting migratory themes within the sonic confines of an

upbeat tempo that invites movement itself. Female guitar players were rare then, and practically non-existent within gospel music traditions. Tharpe's later version resonates with bent notes and vibrato on the electric guitar to convey a more dynamic conversation between voice and instrument. On the folk-revival era album *Big Bill Broonzy Sings Folk Songs* (1962), Broonzy version of "This Train" includes more politically inflected lyrics:

> No Jim Crow and no discrimination on
> This train is bound for glory, this train
> This train don't care if you white or black on this train

Broonzy reframes "This Train" from a heavenly symbol of salvation into a secular metaphor grounded in racial solidarity, social liberation, and the egalitarian ideals of the emergent Civil Rights Movement. Tharpe's version carves out a trailblazing sonic space for secular guitar language to co-exist alongside sacred gospel lyrics and melismatic vocals. Moreover, Broonzy's bluesy interpretation exemplifies how singing and guitar playing were re-mixed to amplify differing messages about Black political struggles across different times and geographies**.**

B) Texas Blues

Other regions outside the Mississippi Delta played crucial roles in facilitating migratory blues epistemologies. David Dicaire explores some defining elements of Texas blues, a strain of music which helped popularize "driving rhythms, hard-rocking guitar licks, and ingenious lyrics" (2001, 121). From the end of WW1 and throughout the interwar period, guitar players active in the Texas region tended to favor light sounding guitar melodies and sophisticated melodic phrasing. The Texas guitar sound notably departs from the signature heavy sliding and percussive attack of Delta blues guitar,

because individual players embraced more intricate fingerpicking, which led to more distinct single-note guitar leads. Moreover, a fluid approach to rhythm and open tunings encompass some of the most influential sonic aspects of Texas blues. As Texas bluesmen experimented with rhythmic time signatures, their guitars amplified displacement and disruption through improvisation mimicking mobility. Thus, the unpredictability of Texas rhythm is a sonic hallmark of migratory blues epistemology.

As Alan Govenar explains: “There are numerous contradictory accounts of “where Jefferson lived, performed, and died” (2000, 7). Census records have indicated that Blind Lemon Jefferson was born in Couchman, Texas sometime around 1893.The youngest of seven children, Blind Lemon Jefferson was blind from birth. He showed interest in music from a young age, which solidified his legacy as “the first popular star of folk or ‘country’ blues”, at least, as far as a guitar-playing singers go (Evans 2000, 83). Indeed, blues guitar on record starts in 1925, with Jefferson’s “Match Box Blues.” Jefferson’s played guitar with an unpredictable, somewhat improvisatory, approach to rhythm. His intricate picking patterns alternated between bass and treble strings to produce layered sounds, with his thumb plucking notes on the low e string and several of his fingers picking out articulate notes and melodic flourishes in the pauses between vocal lines. Jas Obrecht offers useful accounts of what made Jefferson unique: “Piercing enough to be heard above the clang and din of city streets, Jefferson’s wailing vocals set him apart from his contemporaries. His guitar became a second voice that complemented rather than repeated the melodies he sang” (2015, 39). It is also not unusual to hear Jefferson deviate from the rigid standard form of the twelve-bar blues. He was known to “play elaborate solos that extended beyond a strict bar count” (Obrecht 2015, 3).

“Matchbox Blues” (1927) is full of Jefferson’s resonant tendency to linger on melodic lines, thereby adding measures of spontaneity and emotive expressiveness to his guitar work.

While Jefferson’s work on the fretboard led him to produce records which projected sounds that were unprecedented, his sly lyrics were vocalized strategically, and in ways that evoke migratory sensibilities. For example, Jefferson employed double-entendres to mask sexual innuendos, as exemplified by the phallic metaphors in “Black Snake Moan.” (1927). The bawdiness of blues lyrics operates as another mobile expressive strategy. Coded sexual innuendos resisted surveillance while remaining very intelligible, especially to those within shared vernacular traditions. In addition, his lyrics about travelling in “Matchbox Blues.” (1927) also make coded references to the heavy emotional toll of mobility for migrants—carried along with the lived socio-economic realities of material dispossession:

> Standing here wonderin’ will a matchbox hold my clothes
>
> I’se sittin’ here wonderin’ will a matchbox hold my clothes
>
> I ain’t got so many matches but I got so far to go

Through questioning whether a matchbox will hold all his clothes, Jefferson is speaking to the collectively felt migratory conditions of extreme poverty and desperation. It was not uncommon to see hitchhikers trekking on the side of a road or highway with all their belongings crammed into pillowcases. Between the early-to-mid twentieth century, being on the run was rarely fleeing from a single event. Instead, going on the run is better understood as a restless condition of fugitivity or itinerancy. Clyde Woods (1998) articulates “the blues epistemology” as a practice of survival forged under U.S. social,

political, and economic structures which sought to make Black life illegal, illegible, or both. With the prospect of movement being inevitable, the lyrics also hint at the importance of improvisation as the only means of overcoming financial destitution and surveillance entrapments or excessive policing.

Rather than amplifying overt political commentary, early blues lyrics relied on indirection, metaphor, and double entendre to critically address capitalism, policing, racism, and other modes of institutional oppression. In a similar vein of indirection, blues songs rarely encouraged migration directly. Early blues records, from approximately 1920 to 1940, did not explicitly promote migration, but as Louis Mazzari argues, "blues songs exuded the attraction of freedom and movement that fueled migrants' determination to take a strange and uncertain path" (2011, 8). Yet, during this same period, migratory movement was made more precarious by growing legal mandates to criminalize Black mobility.

More specifically, vagrancy and loitering laws started to become more intensely implemented in the post-emancipation era. They were not neutral statutes that governed public order equally, but rather calculated responses to the threat of mass movement. Although the legal architecture of vagrancy and loitering laws were somewhat present around the nation since before the Civil War, they became even more racialized after Emancipation. During President Andrew Johnson's Presidential Reconstruction (1865-1867), new bodies of legislation, like the Black Codes, were implemented in former confederate Southern states to discipline, punish, and restrict Black existence. But vagrancy laws intensified and became a pervasive nationwide problem during the Great Migration. Around the same time blues recording exploded in the 1920s, urban schools of

criminology established dubious links between increasing Black mobility and worsening crime rates. In response, vagrancy and loitering laws swept many Northern cities like Chicago—where Black poverty, unemployment, and lingering in public became crimes punishable by law.

Under such socio-legal conditions, remaining in once place felt disquieting and often downright dangerous for migrants. Unsurprisingly, the classic blues standards of the interwar years grew more preoccupied with motifs of departure like trains, roads, highways, leaving, running, or searching for ideal destinations. These themes did not merely romanticize travelling; they registered and resisted legal constraints upon migrants. They became more heavily policed and surveyed within urban contexts, blues epistemologies sounded out the legally fraught realities of itinerancy and mobility. Blues musicians, accordingly, were not itinerant by choice, but because legal and social constraints compelled movement. As the twentieth century wore on, blues sentiments confirmed why Black movements were necessary, albeit more legally precarious.

By the late 1920s, more blues songs started to sound out overt criticisms of oppressive legal institutions. Mark Allan Jackson traces emerging anti-capital punishment sentiments among blues artists of the late 1920s, observing that when "the blues began to embed itself into the pop-culture consciousness of the nation, the electric chair became firmly established as the means of carrying out the ultimate punishment in the former confederate states" (2017, 5). Bessie Smith's "Send Me to the 'Lectric Chair" (1927) and Jefferson's "'Lectric Chair Blues" (1928) demonstrate tonal shifts in blues lyricism. Their lyrics make the state sanctioned machinery of death sound starkly audible. The repetitive plea in Smith's song, "Judge, judge, please mister judge/ Send me to the 'lectric

chair…/Let me go away from here," is a devastating indictment of a morally bankrupt justice system. The lyrics expose how the legal system offers Black defendants no justice, only differing speeds of eradication. Jefferson's "'Lectric Chair Blues" tells a deliberately unstable and fractured narrative. The lyrics reveal the collective impacts of execution from at least four perspectives: people facing execution, witnesses to execution, grieving partners, and children confronted with the executed bodies of close relatives. While Smith stages the courtroom as an absurd theatre, Jefferson maps out the lasting implications of juridical death. Both songs proved that blues voices could call out racialized social chains of trauma. By translating state sanctioned structures of violence into more recognizable everyday scenarios, Smith and Jefferson pushed the boundaries of what blues lyricism was allowed to address without abandoning the commercialism of the record industry.

As more blues lyrics confronted the abjection circumscribing Black migrant life, the emergent archetype of the Black and blind blues performer testified to how difference and disability were aestheticized and commodified. Romanticized myths about blind blues performers circulated widely over the Great Migration. Elijah Wald confirms that some of the earliest commercially successful songs thematically amplify blindness through lyricism. For example, W.C. Handy's "Beale Street Blues" notably "referred to 'the blind man on the corner who sings the Beale Street blues'" (Wald 2010, 12). Record industry executives increasingly cast performers as tragic heroes or doomed geniuses to boost sales, and such capitalistic motives have caused figures like Blind Lemon Jefferson to be remembered through reductive, mythologized, or romanticized presuppositions about blindness. By complicating sensory experiences with historical and medical

perspectives, we can push against oversimplifications and confront complexities of listening in relation to lived sensory experiences—especially vision and hearing. Luigi Monge wades through the covert themes of blindness in Jefferson's music, and anecdotal evidence from those who knew him, to suggest that had some residual ability to see and was not totally blind with no light perception (2000, 43). As So Yeon Lee et al. confirm: "Only about 15% of people with eye disorders have total blindness, and the majority of those with visual impairment have some level of vision (2024). Hence, the claim that Jefferson likely had residual vision is thereby grounded in personal anecdotes, and clinical data. Recognizing the nuances of lived auditory or visual experiences offer modes of challenging the commodified or mythologized archetypes of blues performers. In this case, Jefferson's life serves as a key turning point wherein blindness and blind performers were more frequently performed, perceived, and marketed.

Jefferson was living proof that a Black musician could become heard under the excesses of intersectional silencing from ableism and racism. Stella Bolaki recapitulates the scholarly consensus that "disability has always been racialized and how race has been conceived as disability" (2011, 48). More than twenty Black and blind performers with recording opportunities adopted the "blind" moniker into their stage personas during the first half of the twentieth century. They were mobile and inspirational conduits of sonic ingenuity. Bearing this marginalized but audible demographic in mind, the intersections of race and disability hold strong relevance when it comes to early blues musicians. Alfredo J. Artiles encourages us to listen more deeply into how disabilities are "constituted discursively, culturally, and institutionally across multiple contexts, ultimately revealing that disability is a protean notion that requires situated scrutiny with

sociocultural and historical imaginations" (2013, 339). Joseph Witek takes up Artiles' imperative to situate intersectional thinking in his discursive explanation of two commonly perpetuated blindness mythologies. The first myth is "that of the blind genius, doomed and gifted by fate to trade eyesight in return for artistic talent", while the second "casts blindness as the mark of a cruel fate which caps the singer's degradation" and extreme alienation (Witek 1988, 178). Music gave blind musicians unique paths into mobile and autonomous forms of self-employment on the one hand. Careers in the performing arts, though uncommon at the time, could bypass structural inequities limiting the opportunities for differently abled people in conventional domestic or industrial workplaces. On the contrary, when blind musicians moved into working within exploitative institutional boundaries of the U.S. recording industry, executives romanticized blindness as a branding strategy. Both social dimensions of blindness influenced trajectories of success and tragedy in Blind Lemon Jefferson's life. He was an original performer who openly advertised his blindness, successfully drawing more mystique and attention to his musical innovation. But his death from acute heart failure at thirty-six exposes how tragedies could be caused by migratory mobility itself. Blindness was a systematic barrier that made it significantly more exhausting for him to navigate cities, trains, and venues. While Jefferson was relatively able bodied, he needed to put higher degrees of thought and daily effort into navigating the world around him. Although mobility spurred Jefferson's career, the constant travel took immense physical and psychological tolls. He navigated ableist and racist landscapes without a support infrastructure necessary to ensure his safety.

There are unmistakable traces of Jefferson's influence on the progenitors of electric blues guitar. His social lineage was deeply bonded with some of the more influential early electric players. At Jefferson's live shows in Texas, he was sometimes accompanied a boy named Aaron Walker, a family friend who served as a sight guide. The ten-year-old Walker helped Jefferson navigate to gigs and collected tips from audiences. The boy would eventually perform under the stage name of T-Bone Walker and became a legend in his own right. T-Bone Walker's earliest recorded interview with Chris Strachwitz admits how Jefferson never taught him how to play songs directly.[7] Walker's warm and clean soloing set new sonic precedents for vibrato-driven bending, but Jefferson's trailblazing single-note runs reverberated melodic influences on younger contemporaries. Both set sonic precedents for playing guitar, not merely as a rhythmic accompaniment to singing, but as a secondary voice of instrumental melody. Walker's guitar playing and showmanship have since earned him accolades from highly esteemed musicians. B.B. King's autobiography expresses deep reverence for T-Bone Walker: "T-Bone's blues filled my insides with joy and good feeling. I became his disciple. And remain so today. My greatest musical debt is to T-Bone. He showed me the way. His sound cut me like a sword" (1996, 83). King channels his intuitive feelings—an embodied sense of knowing— that the global music scene and his approach to playing guitar were moving to new places. If we consider imitation to be a sincere form of flattery, then Jimi Hendrix indirectly conveyed profound admiration for Walker's

[7] The following books lend disproportionate authenticity to the Mississippi Delta as being the supposed African American geographic origin of blues music: Samuel Charters, *The Country Blues*. (New York: Rinehart,1959); Paul Oliver, *Screening the Blues: Aspects of the Blues Tradition.* (London: Cassell, 1968); Robert Palmer, *Deep Blues*. (New York: Viking Press, 1981); Lomax, Alan. *The Land Where the Blues Began*. (New York: Pantheon, 1993).

showmanship. Walker was among the earliest blues artists on film to make a show out of behind-the-head guitar playing, but Hendrix radically amplified its technical difficulty and brought the trick to global stages. Jefferson's and Walker's careers illuminate how blues guitar lineage breaks from confines of regional authenticity. Jefferson's early emphasis on sound, gesture, and embodiment carried influences across railways and records. His career proves that stage personas, fretboard cartographies, and performative flourish are the most important aspects of migratory blues epistemologies. By the 1950s, Walker similarly demonstrated how style, gesture, and embodiment—not geographic origins—are the currencies which carried blues influence across transnational circuits.

C) Piedmont Blues

Piedmont encompasses a much larger region compared to the Delta region of Mississippi or the lone state of Texas. Geographically speaking, the Piedmont plateau stretches for about six-hundred miles in the Southeastern United States —spanning New Jersey, Maryland, Virginia, the Carolinas, Georgia, and Alabama. The rolling rhythms of ragtime country music have loose but traceable influences on the signature syncopated fingerpicking of Southeastern "Piedmont" players. The piedmont blues guitarists developed an individualized and idiosyncratic approach to syncopated picking on steel string guitars, which was not widely practiced in the early years of the Great Migration. This is because Eurocentric traditions normalized the convention of fingerpicking on nylon-stringed classical guitars, resulting in a layered, fuller sound. Across the Southeastern U.S., it became more common to hear guitarists using their thumb to pluck the low E, A, and D strings to register the bass lines, while using a combination of their index, middle, and ring fingers to pluck melodic flourishes on the high G, B, and E

strings. Due to their emphasis on fingerpicking— a partially inimitable embodied playing technique— the Piedmont artists advanced a particularly unique and individualized sounding blues epistemology. As Lawrence W. Levine notes, blues was "the most highly personalized, indeed, the first almost completely personalized music that Afro-Americans developed" (1977, 221). Some of the most virtuosic syncopated fingerpickers were Arthur "Blind" Blake, Reverend Gary Davis, and Elizabeth I, but none of them were ever the most commercially successful or talked about blues artists at any given point in history. Plucking a steel string acoustic with combinations of flesh and fingernail results in a louder sonic cartography of more articulate, distinguishable, and driven single notes. Every player develops their own style of fingerpicking, which is a uniquely embodied mode of sonic expression in-itself.

Elizabeth "Libba" I was born to George Nevill and Louisa Price Nevill around 1893, based on estimates, and was the youngest of five children. She composed the lyrics to "Freight Train" when she was a child, and it would become her most recognizable signature song. On a British Broadcasting Corporation special series *Down Home* (1985), I explained the story behind writing her most iconic tune, "Freight Train." She spent many nights as a little girl listening to the sounds of the trains passing by on the tracks near her home, and these sounds bleed into her composition. Her lyrics are informed by what she would have perceived as formative sounds of the rural South in North Carolina and thereby express the instabilities of travel. Her lyrics in "Freight Train" illuminate how there were "subgenres of blues women's songs that focused on, for instance, the Great Migration" (Brooks, 2021, 162). "Freight Train" announces a blues epistemology to move anonymously, down a route that nobody knows of, searching for a better place to

live. I's difficult upbringing steered the unorthodox trajectory of her music career. She was forced to quit school and earn money as a domestic worker because her family had fallen into extreme poverty by the time she was nine. By the time she was eleven, she had saved up enough money to buy a guitar with some help from her mother. It was a dreadnought body acoustic guitar strung for righthanded players. Since left-handed guitars were not widely available, and I did not know how to re-string her steel-stringed acoustic to accommodate her dominant fretting hand, she gravitated naturally to an unorthodox style. I turned her massed produced Sears and Roebuck acoustic guitar upside down so that her dominant left hand could be used to fret the instrument. Teaching herself how to play with her low E string at the bottom of the instrument, she used her index finger to pluck the bass lines while her thumb picked out the melodies on the high strings. Andrew M. Cohen's "The Hands of Blues Guitarists" illuminates the singularity of I's approach to picking, because "although some 'right-side up players do use the thumb to play high notes, fingers are almost never used to play bass notes" (2008, 155) Her inimitable fingerpicking came to be called "I picking," but it is unclear as to whether she participated in making or using this ironic label. By using her thumb on the high strings, I sounds out articulate and distinguished melodies, almost as if she was singing words through guitar notes.

One can hear I's hallmark syncopated picking style in the call-and-response guitar melodies of "Freight Train," where she opts to pluck notes mimicking the chorus: "Freight train, freight train, run so fast." I uses her thumb to pick out the opening melodic run on her guitar's B and high E strings while, in many live performances, she uses only her index finger to produce the rolling bass notes that drive the rhythm. Her instrumental

sound resonates as a “call and response” mirroring of her lyrics. Even lesser-known instrumental compositions without lyrics, like “Washington Blues” (1967), showcase how her hallmark reversed syncopated picking style created fluid interactions between the rolling bass figures and delicate melodies. Like many other Piedmont blues musicians, I often placed emphasis on major keys, with “Freight Train” being in the key of C major. The resulting sound is that her brand of Piedmont blues tends to be more wistful, relaxing, and nostalgia-evoking when compared against the haunting minor keys of the Delta Blues. I’s repetitive grooves are registered on the low E and strings, which embodies the chugging, motoric, and cyclical sounds of locomotive motion.

While nearing the end of childhood, persistent financial need forced I to defer any dreams she may have had of being a performing musician or recording artist. As a young woman, these intergenerational poverties rooted from transatlantic slavery forced Cotton to give up playing the guitar for twenty-five years. She was working as a maid in New York City when she discovered the Seeger family by chance encounter in the 1950s, when she found the Seegers’ youngest daughter lost in a department store and helped her find her parents. Cotton started to work as a maid for the Seeger family, and to her luck, they were a musical family who gave her recording opportunities. So, she picked up the guitar again to record her music at 60 years old. I’s unlikely career as a musician was stalled due to the intergenerational effects of racism, but “Freight Train” became an iconic and influential folk song during the folk and blues revival period of the 1960s. Movement provided I with a liberatory framework and it was also a great source of thematic inspiration that pushed her sound art. She performed into her nineties, leaving behind a trove of recordings and televised performances.

It is often taken as a historical fact that several blues and folk revival movements took place in the United States between the 1960s-1970s. Yet, this revived interest in African American music during the waning decade of the Great Migration was at least partially generated by a score of songwriters and performers who had arrived in New York City in the 1930s and 1940s—including Reverend Gary Davis (Cushing, 2014, xix). Gary D. Davis was born in Laurens, South Carolina in 1896. Like many others, Davis did not move from South to North, directly, as he spent over a decade living in Durham North, Carolina. Davis pursued recording opportunities in New York City during the 1930s. He officially moved to Harlem in 1943, and the move enabled his music to be heard by much larger audiences. Reverend Gary Davis resounded a unique tonal palate through his guitar work, lyrical themes, and performative style throughout his career. His genre-crossing blues embraces the sacred and the secular at once, which in turn, amplifies another migratory liminality which was commonly felt during the Great Migration.

He lost his sight as an infant due to a set of un-confirmed circumstances, but his differently abled condition translated into unconventional auditory, tactile, and vibrational modes of knowing and engaging with music. Although there are different accounts of how Davis lost his sight, Samuel Charters notes how he “always refused to discuss the circumstances of his blindness. It certainly isn’t because he doesn’t remember what happened to him” (Charters, 1977, 158). Like many other blues artists who rose to prominence after Blind Lemon Jefferson, Gary Davis went by the stage name “Blind Gary Davis,” which was likely assigned by record label producers and would later be reinforced by promoters in the 1960s revival era. The nickname stuck despite Davis’ own preference to be addressed by his religious title of Reverend, especially after he was

ordained as a Baptist minister in 1937. By the time Davis's music circulated to wider listening audiences, there were at least two dozen other blues artists who had been pushed into adopting the blind performer label because of music industry pressures. From the dawn of the U.S. recording industry, visual impairment quickly became an externally imposed brand rather than a self-fashioned identity. It is, therefore, no surprise that Reverend Davis sought to reclaim his sense of dignity amid an increasingly exploitative tradition which tactically marketed blindness to sell more records.

In addition, Reverend Davis amplified theological connections to the divine through the content of his songs and spiritual purpose to spread God's word through his performing them in public places like street corners or urban bars. Notwithstanding, white folklorists of the revival era, and sometimes even members of religious congregations in the rural South, perpetuated the notion that blues was morally corrupt, devilish, or associated with Satan. These labels falsely construed moral panic throughout the decades—whilst the truth is that blues is enmeshed with many new age spiritual themes—along with many artists who openly discussed a monotheistic Christian God. Ian Zack's comprehensive study of Reverend Gary Davis notes how formative migratory experiences influenced his love for playing the guitar. In childhood, Davis felt a strong impulse to play guitar:

> "The first time I ever heard a guitar played, I thought it was a brass band coming through," he remembered. "I was a small kid and I asked my mother what was it, and she said that was a guitar. I said, 'Ain't you going to get me one of those when I get large enough?'" (2015, 36).

Although guitar playing may be what Reverend Gary Davis is most remembered for, Zack also details the important presence of guitar teaching in his life. The guitar

functioned both as a means of financial sustenance as well as an artistic form of engaging with locals across rural and urban communities: “Interviews with dozens of his students suggest that well over a hundred young guitarists showed up at his door in the sixties and early seventies, and the Reverend, with very few exceptions, showed them inside” (2015, 225). Whether he was playing guitar on the street, making records, or teaching younger students, Reverend Gary Davis embodied a migratory blues epistemology which thoroughly blended secular music with sacred service.

Moving Around, Rewound: Contemporary Afterlives of the Blues

I have echoed many sentiments of revisionist contemporary blues studies throughout the case studies above. The music and lived experiences of itinerant performing migrants reiterate how the blues is not simply an authentic rural African American folk tradition, but rather, a modern countercultural response to Jim Crow segregation, sharecropping regimes, and the Great Migration (Filene 2000; Hamilton 2008; Miller 2010; Schroeder 2004; Wald 2005).[8] Weissman summarizes three influential factors driving this folk revival scene. It began with many rediscoveries of blues artists who recorded during the 1920s, but had faded into relative obscurity after the Great Depression eliminated commercial recording opportunities and consumer markets waned. The second factor was the emergence of blues scholarship spearheaded by white scholars and archivists like Samuel Charters, Paul Oliver, and Alan Lomax. The third reason was the growing numbers of younger blues enthusiasts, including white musicians like John

[8] The following books lend disproportionate authenticity to the Mississippi Delta as being the supposed African American geographic origin of blues music: Samuel Charters, *The Country Blues*. (New York: Rinehart,1959); Paul Oliver, *Screening the Blues: Aspects of the Blues Tradition.* (London: Cassell, 1968); Robert Palmer, *Deep Blues*. (New York: Viking Press, 1981); Lomax, Alan. *The Land Where the Blues Began*. (New York: Pantheon, 1993).

Mayall, Eric Clapton, and Johnny Winter (Weissman 2005, 103). The blues and folk revival era testifies to how the restless movements which fueled the popular circulation of blues were not sustained after migration slowed by the early 1970s. Blues thrived as a music of transit, so, once migration settled, the blues lost its popular status and became treated as a musical relic that should be revived for archival purposes.

By the late 1970s—younger Black listeners were increasingly drawn to more danceable forms of soul, funk, early hip-hop, and rap. As Southern departures waned from 1960-1970, the once hopeful symbolisms that migration held in many early blues songs gave way to disillusionment and disappointment. This shift is evidenced in the reissued recordings of B.B. King's first cousin, Bukka White (1906-1977). In 1940, he recorded some of the last songs for Okeh Records before the escalation of WWII halted the race records industry until the 1960s folk revival movement. Amid waves of revived interest in Black music, Bukka White's initial recording sessions were re-issued into a retrospective compilation album called *Parchman Farm* (1970). On that album, the song "Black Train Blues" reverses traditional symbolisms of longing, escape and liberation attached to trains and railroad travels:

> I don't feel ashamed
> Standin' and wringin' my hands at the train
> I don't feel ashamed
> Standin' and wringin' my hands at the train
>
> I ain't the first man
> The train, left cold in hand
>
> Now the same big black train
> That put me in a strain
> That the same big black train
> That put me in a strain

“Black Train Blues” speaks of trains, not as a vehicle for racial liberation but as an ominous color-coded evocation of the alienation and economic strife linked to railway travel in the Jim Crow-era. Bukka White’s bleak sonic testimony about trains announces the Civil Rights Movement turning point. This was a time when migrants had long deferred their optimism about moving. During the folk revival, blues epistemologies increasingly shifted towards the critical sentiments about migration expressed in Bukka White’s “Black Train Blues.” Noise, policing, trains, and automobiles resonate accordingly, as sites of unresolved struggle in many blues songs of the revival era.

This chapter has emphasized how migrants’ blues epistemologies were forged through mobile and migratory sensibilities of survival, mobility, and improvisation. The blues is an embodied response to displacements facilitated under Jim Crow Segregation Laws, sharecropping regimes, and the Great Migration. In the twenty-first century, blues is often revered as an iconic part of the mosaic of music history, but not as a living genre. There are several explanations for the popular decline of blues, with one of the strongest reasons being that the improvisational and deeply expressive nature of guitar playing or soloing has not easily translated well into digitalized models of music consumption, production, and performance. Artists like John Mayer and Gary Clark Jr. have performed alongside blues legends, but they do not outright identify as blues performers. The few musicians who embrace the label more openly tend to be white blues-rock performers like Joe Bonamassa, Samantha Fish, and Larkin Poe. This twenty-first century blues scene raises new questions about the audibility of migratory epistemologies. The migratory networks once shaping bluesy sounds have been thoroughly fragmented and

transformed by digital networks. Can the mobile and racialized essences of blues epistemologies still be represented today?

Recently, the blues was construed as a sonic repository for Black memories of migratory experience in Ryan Coogler's *Sinners* (2025). Set amid the twentieth century backdrop of the Great Migration, Coogler's narrative is situated between Chicago, Illinois and Clarksdale, Mississippi. Neither location functions as a stable origin or destination because at least three central characters are depicted as mobile migrants entangled in networks of displacement, departure, and return. Michael B. Jordan anchors the narrative with his dual starring performance as the Moore twins: Elijah "Smoke" and Isaiah "Stack". After years living in Chicago, the brothers return to Mississippi to mourn the death of their mother and resolve inheritance matters. As they reunite with their younger cousin, Sammy Moore, Smoke tells him that, "Chicago ain't shit but Mississippi filled with tall buildings instead of plantations" (Coogler 2025). As such, *Sinners* refuses to advance the false binary of Southern oppression versus Northern freedom.

The plot unfolds when the brothers intend to open a juke joint to re-assert Black autonomy against white supremacist exclusion. Smoke and Stack enlist local musicians to perform at the grand opening, including their cousin Sammy. "Little Sammy" is portrayed as an aspiring blues performer and he is arguably the most sensitive listener in the film. The blues and jazz laden soundtrack amplify the powers of migratory blues epistemologies. Through Sammy Moore's character arc in particular, *Sinners* reframes the blues as a living, breathing narrative of mobility, transition, and resistance. Coogler refuses a linear teleology of progress, which suggests otherwise, that legacies of U.S. racial oppression are unresolved and come back to wound. These historical wounds are

still resonating through lingering afterlives of segregation, like inter-generational economic deprivation and racial violence.

For the entirety of the Great Migration, and beyond its conventional periodization, the blues was thriving in bars, juke-joints, church halls, small clubs, street corners, homes, or private venues. In these spaces, performers forged meaningful call-and-response relations with listening audiences. In *Sinners*, the juke joint serves as a hard-fought reciprocal space. Indeed, the juke joint was built to exist in a geography that was historically defined by surveillance and racial terror, and the very act of a Black gathering would have been a risky act itself. Although the film confirms how the socio-economic pressures which drove mass migration still existed in the South, the juke joint stages refusal. In the dance scene before the vampires show up, Coogler's mobile main characters are sounding out a (dis)quieting resistance movement to transform oppressive historical contexts. The musicians, dancers, and listeners share triumphant call-and-response bonds for a brief evening. The soundtrack of *Sinners* performs the migratory residues of displacement and endurance through Black music. The bluesier tunes of the film refuse to stage Black history according to the liberal idealist sense of advancement. The music resonates, reminding audiences that there is no simple linear progression from racial suffering to an anti-racist world. Migratory blues epistemologies amplify how moving from Southern Jim Crow Laws to Northern freedom is an illusion.

The final scenes feature a cameo by Buddy Guy as a scarred elderly version of Sammy Moore. The narrative fast forwards several decades to October 16, 1992, where Guy performs electric guitar in a Chicago blues club alongside one of his real-life protégés, Christone "Kingfish" Ingram. Guy performs his original tune "Travelin'" at the

opening of the epilogue. Beginning with a haunting guitar solo on a resonator acoustic guitar, the instrumentals pave way into lyrics:

Travelin’

I don’t know why in the hell I’m here

Travelin’

I don’t know why in the hell I’m here

It is worth noting that, Sammy Moore performs “Travelin’” two times in the film. He initially plays it in the passenger seat of Stack’s car on the same fated day the juke joint was ravaged by the vampires. A conversation reveals that Stack gave Sammy the resonator guitar before they left for Chicago, and he claims it once belonged to Charley Patton (1891-1934). After hearing this revelation that he inherited the instrument of a Delta blues legend, Little Sammy places a metal tube slide on his ring finger and plays. His pensive fingerpicking and raw unpolished slide work embodies an unfinished, mobile process of becoming. His young voice is understated but hopeful, carrying a fragile timbre and light tone. When old man Sammy plays “Travelin’” for the second time decades later, his sound carries a weathered weight. His guitar playing is louder and more declarative, as the string bending, vibrato, and sustained notes are picked with a much sharper sense of attack. He also chooses not to use a tube slide, which is why his melodic phrasing feels much more restrained and intentional. These instrumentals illuminate the years Sammy spent mastering his craft, and his voice matures into a mobile archive of Black strain and survival. This sonic shift from “Little Sammy” to Buddy Guy’s Sammy shows how the blues epistemology deepens alongside weathered years of displacement.

It is no coincidence that Sammy's resonator guitar becomes the literal weapon which kills the alpha vampire Remmick in the climatic final battle. Holding onto his damaged instrument for dear life, his face bears the weight of a brutal scar. Sammy's song ultimately refuses closure in favor of expressing grave exasperation and existential dread. The lyrics, "I don't know why in the hell I'm here," echo the ongoing crisis of dislocation which pervaded migrants' consciousness along their arduous journeys, including after their confrontations with new landscapes. As Farah Jasmine Griffin argues: "Once situated on the urban landscape, domestic street, and psychic space are all sites of contestation for migrants and the powers that seek to control them" (1995, 8). Buddy Guy's sparse and haunting lyrics are resonant echoes of migratory displacement, while his resonator acoustic playing is a tribute to the early-twentieth century musicians whose sonic inventions paved roads of artistic influence and exchange.

Sinners gestures towards re-claiming blues knowledge as unresolved epistemic displacement. However, it is a Hollywood blockbuster, which constrains some accuracies associated with its depiction of migratory blues epistemologies. The epilogue commits to narrative legibility in closing the narrative, which parallels the U.S. recording industry's exploitative logic to technologically reproduce Black sound for profit. In Guy's final performance, the blues is mobilized to authenticate some sense of closure for contemporary audiences. For twentieth century migrants, however, the blues typically resisted critical transparency and narrative closure. Despite thematically foregrounding mobility and migratory return as blues modes of knowing, the film occasionally romanticizes the supposedly Southern pastoral origins of the music. These two criticisms do not undermine this chapter's core claims about the blues. Instead, these tensions reveal

the seeming impossibilities of fully incorporating migratory blues epistemologies into cinematic or recorded archives. While *Sinners* successfully models the blues as reverberating with the weariness and dissonance of migration, it also reveals the limits of popular representation, as blues epistemologies will continue to strain against formal archives that seek to contain them.

CHAPTER 4

(Dis)quieting Black d/Deaf Migrations: Listening d/Deafly through Mary Herring Wright's Memoirs

Chapters 1-3 have traced how migratory sensibilities were expressed through activism, literature, and music. Chapter 1 examined activist movements and how they mobilized new sonic forms of protest rhetoric. Chapter 2 analyzed how writers encoded sonic-affective language to register migratory conditions in narrative form. Most recently, Chapter 3 reframed blues music traditions as dynamic migratory epistemologies which carried memories and resistance across space and place. In Chapter 4, I extend the trajectory of sounding the Great Migration by turning to explore Black d/Deaf memoirs. Here, listening operates as an intersectional practice to explain disquieting influences of audism and racism in the lives of Black d/Deaf migrants. Through the memoirs of Mary Herring Wright, this chapter examines how audism and racism are structural forms of oppression that provoke (dis)quieting movements and resistances.

My practice of listening d/Deafly participates in broader discussions happening at the intersection of Critical Disability Studies and Sound Studies. [6] Scholars working across these fields challenge the assumption that sound is exclusively auditory, along with the audist assumption that hearing constitutes the normative, superior basis for listening. For me, listening d/Deafly approaches sound as a multimodal phenomenon.

[6] For emerging research connecting disability, d/Deafness, Sound Studies, and relevant embodied listening perspectives, see Mara Mills, "Deafness," in *Keywords in Sound* (2015), 45-54; Mara Mills and Rebecca Sanchez, eds. *Crip Authorship: Disability as Method* (New York: New York University Press, 2023); Jonathan Sterne, Diminished Faculties: A Political Phenomenology of Impairment (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022); Michele Friedner and Stefan Helmreich, "Sound Studies Meets Deaf Studies," *The Senses and Society 7*, no. 1 (2012): 72-86; Steph Ceraso, *Sounding Composition: Multimodal Pedagogies for Embodied Listening* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2018); and Allie Martin, *Intersectional Listening: Gentrification and Black Sonic Life in Washington, DC* (2025).

Sounds can be apprehended through visual perception, vibration, memory, and sign language in addition to hearing. Consequently, listening d/Deafly does not treat deafness simply as auditory loss. I instead use it to attend to the gainful forms of knowledge, communication, and cultural belonging that d/Deaf people develop.

Black d/Deaf subjects are knowledge producers who participated in unique forms of social and cultural production during the Great Migration. For Black d/Deaf migrants, sensory identity cannot be fully separated from intersecting histories of segregation, displacement, and limited access to quality education or employment. I therefore use listening d/Deafly as a distinct intersectional practice for examining how audism and racism shaped Mary Herring Wright's lifelong movements between the segregated South and Washington, D.C. Her memoirs reveal how migration involved more than geographic relocation: it also involved moving between hearing and d/Deaf environments, Black and white institutions, and distinct spoken and sign language communities. Through listening d/Deafly, I seek to make these movements more perceptible.

Defining "d/Deaf" and Listening to Black d/Deaf Lives

More research into Deaf culture, the history of Deaf communities, and socio-legal issues linked to d/Deaf people has been emerging since the late 1970s. Contributors to d/Deaf studies appropriately work from non-medical definitions which complicate the socio-cultural dimensions of what it means to be d/Deaf. In "Implications for Sociolinguistic Research Among the Deaf," James C. Woodward (1972) distinguishes between lowercase "deaf," referring to the audiological condition of not being able to

hear, and uppercase “Deaf,” designating membership to a group of people who share a language. Woodward’s distinction recognizes sign language as a cornerstone of Deaf culture, shifting the focus towards the values gained in Deaf community, while medical definitions pathologically link deafness with loss. I occasionally use the word Deaf in isolation to point out any cultural hallmarks of Black Deaf culture and sometimes use its lowercase usage to reference the medical fact of hearing loss. Yet, some scholars have rightfully problematized Woodward’s convention because d/Deaf identity is always in-flux. For that reason, I mostly use a virgule to deploy the term “d/Deaf” throughout this chapter to acknowledge how it is not always possible to construe d/Deafness in accordance with either side of Woodward’s binary. An anti-essentialist axis for defining Black d/Deaf identity is more suited to tracing how migrants may identify with either or both categories of d/Deafness across their lifetimes.

Tom Humphries first defined “audism” in an unpublished 1975 article, which his dissertation formally defined it, as: “The notion that one is superior based on one’s ability to hear or behave in the manner of one who hears” (1977, 12). Audism operates through “the bias and prejudices of hearing people against deaf people” and it is also “the bias and prejudice of some deaf people against other deaf people” (Humphries 1977, 13). Rouse, Palmer and Parsons’s recent work additionally reminds us how “audist attitudes and practices around Sign Language and the Deaf community” are still pervasive (2023, 1). Sign language interpretation is not typically accessible in many contexts, and there exists a general lack of willingness to accommodate those who cannot hear. Structural oppression is shaped by audism and racism. Christina Sharpe’s *Ordinary Notes* (2023) describes “the noise of structural precarity” to resonantly outline the socio-historical

parameters of racialization and double-consciousness (169). Audism and racism were as ubiquitous as a chronic case of tinnitus in the twentieth-century United States, as migrants negotiated incessant exposures to the phantom "noise of structural precarity" (Sharpe, 2023, 169). White hearing-privilege is a mode of listening somewhat akin to wearing noise cancelling headphones, allowing listeners to insulate their auditory awareness of audism, racism, or intersectional oppressions. On the contrary, Black d/Deaf people are haunted by the phantom noise of audism and racism every day.

By contrast, Bauman and Murray re-sound deafness according to what is gained: "To many in the deaf community, being deaf has nothing to do with "loss" but is, rather, a distinct way of being in the world, one that opens perceptions, perspectives, and insights that are less common to the majority of hearing persons" (2014, xv). While this is a significant shift in perspective, cultural criticism about d/Deaf subjects typically centers a white-centric focus. What happens when categorizations and constructions of d/Deaf identity coincide with race? In "From White Deaf People's Adversity to Black Deaf gain," Rezenet Tsegay Moges centers Black Deaf history to refine unique understandings of Deaf gains (2020). The legacies of Black d/Deaf migrants have been continually ignored under an omni-present sense of audio-centric superiority in the West. It is important that we recall Stuart and Gilchrist's contention that "Deafness does not erase racism" (2005, 61). Even Deaf institutions like Gallaudet University have perpetuated injustices against Black d/Deaf subjects.

Linwood Smith's "The Way of a Hand" is a poetic love-letter to sign language which situates signing as the sonic-affective focal point of Deaf culture:

There's beauty in the way a hand

Can carve a word on the air,

There's beauty in the way a hand

Can give lift to a prayer.

There's beauty in the way a hand

Can trace a song in space,

There's beauty in the way a hand

Can light a deaf child's face.

Though we can't hear the spoken word

Or leaves rustling on a tree,

We can hear the beauty

Of a word that we can see. (Smith 1983)

Smith writes in rhythmic form with references to spoken words, sounds, and songs. Indeed, the presence of the word "hear" indicates Smith's affirmative disruption of the hegemonic hearing-versus-deaf binary. Smith's poem does not mention his Black Deaf heritage, but his ode to sign language has racial dimensions. He had experience with the systemic context of segregated Deaf schools, and with this in mind, there are implicit racialized connotations to how his poem reclaims sign language as a source of linguistic identity, sonicity, and cultural resistance. He is one among several Black and d/Deaf writers who deserve more recognition, especially considering what their perspectives can tell us about the Great Migration.

Born in 1924, Mary Herring Wright wrote two memoirs detailing her life: *Sounds Like Home: Growing Up Black and Deaf in the South* (1999) and *Far From Home:*

Memories of WWII and Afterward (2005). The first text tells a coming-of-age tale about confronting sensory loss and gaining purpose through BASL. A small but growing number of scholars have directed attention to *Sounds Like Home,* as it provides one of the most detailed surviving accounts of the conditions in Southern, segregated schools for the Deaf and Blind. As noted by Glenn B. Anderson, "Mary Herring Wright's memoir is probably the first and only autobiography authored by a Black Deaf alumna who attended and graduated from a segregated residential school for Black Deaf students" (2020, 343). Forced migration is a central component of the narrative. Herring Wright's second memoir, *Far From Home* focuses much more on representing voluntary migration, and yet, has not received even the small degree of attention that *Sounds Like Home* has. It details Herring Wright's post-graduation migration journey to Washington D.C., and her eventual return to Iron Mine, North Carolina after World War Two.

Through the lens of intersectional listening, I interpret Black d/Deaf gain as any wisdoms emanating from living against the grains of audism and white supremacy. I build on Allie Martin's framework of "intersectional listening" by approaching it as a lived practice through which Herring Wright navigates her surroundings. Both of Herring Wright's memoirs demonstrate how multimodal and intersectional listening enables Black d/Deaf migrants to navigate the overlapping pressures brought forth by audism, racism, and geographic displacement. There are four perceivable trends in how Black d/Deaf gains manifest, and in what they can teach us about the Great Migration: 1) Black d/Deaf people have a linguistic heritage which emerged in response to the segregated U.S. South; 2) Black d/Deaf thinking generates radical departures from Western audism and white supremacy; 3) Black d/Deaf migration stories offer irreplaceable guides for

accepting hearing loss, confronting inequity, and maintaining faith; and 4) Black d/Deaf people embrace multimodal methods of listening through visuality and vibration. Therefore, d/Deaf listening practices prompt hearing subjects to rethink hearing in ways that are not reducible to sound or the auditory system.

Andrea Solomon explains how Black d/Deaf people in the U.S. are "influenced by at least four distinct cultures: African American, European American, Hearing, and Deaf" (2010, 14). These overlapping formations are complicated further by the audist and racist socio-historical backdrop of the Great Migration. Thomas K. Holcomb explains how people "are born into a culture where strategies of survival are introduced to members of the community as they grow up. These strategies allow people not only to survive, but also to thrive in the environment in which they live" (2013, 17). Black d/Deaf migrants were shaped by a remarkable number of sociolinguistic and cultural influences that might be construed as Black Deaf gain. As such, the pivotal influences of migration on the twentieth century development of BASL deserves more consideration. The vast majority of severely to profoundly deaf young Black children living in the South were forcibly migrating between family homes and the segregated residential schools. After graduation, some Black d/Deaf subjects willingly migrated North. They endured loss of connection to Black Deaf communities because of migration. Migratory dislocation further destabilized Black d/Deaf identity. Black signers reported feeling lost in white signing spaces. They were forced to "code-switch" from BASL to a more standardized variety of ASL which had stricter extra-linguistic conditions around hand shape, location, palm orientation, and facial expressions.

On Listening, Intersectionally, to Black d/Deaf Women's Migration Memoirs

Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw's term "intersectionality" was initially developed for use in legal contexts, to tear down disquieting systematic inequities faced by Black female survivors of sexual harassment (Crenshaw 1989). The parameters of intersectionality are still expanding to gauge more identities vulnerable to overlapping oppressions. My approach to intersectional listening tunes into the audist and racist parameters of Black Deaf women's experiences. Crenshaw recently warned that while intersectionality tends to "get used as a blanket term" to complicate identity, this can sometimes be "an excuse not to do anything" (2017). I thereby center Mary Herring Wright's two migration-era memoirs in this final chapter of my project because liberatory movements must "generate new knowledge, new theories, new questions" (Kelley 2002, 9). Most of history is produced outside academia, through the everyday events woven into stories. Thus, Wilkerson notes how migration storytelling, "unfurled over the generations like an overwrapped present, a secret told in syllables" (2010, 46). Michel-Rolph Trouillot additionally defends "the power in the story" and declares that "the concrete production of specific narratives" are valid sites of historical information (1993, 22). The few existing Black d/Deaf autobiographies of migration have yet to be considered part of the fabric of Great Migration literature, which is why it is so important for me to bring them into conversation with the other texts in this project.

Reshawna L. Chapple considers Black d/Deaf women's narratives as sorely neglected: "Women who are Black and D/deaf are a largely understudied group and are nearly invisible in all areas of scholarship" (2018, 186). What can we learn about the Great Migration from listening to Herring Wright's memoirs? Saidiya Hartman reflects

on the importance of "witnessing" and "memory" within Black women's autobiographical writing: "What is most important here are the ways memory acts in the service of redress, not an inventory of the world lost" (1997, 122-123). As a cultural critic, Herring Wright deserves mainstream recognition for critically dismantling audism and racism, as well as for raising awareness of under-recognized Black d/Deaf migratory conditions. While listening in unfamiliar territories, the scholarly goal is not necessarily to understand, but to remain aware of the gaps in what we know compared to what has already been made known. In Herring Wright's writing, Black d/Deaf epistemologies manifest through visualsonic affective modes of "seeing and reading otherwise" (Sharpe 2016, 117). Her wisdoms emerge through acts of listening to the world through d/Deaf ears.

Herring Wright attests to the enduring influences that sound has on memory, while also revealing how BASL facilitated communal cohesion. In *Sounds Like Home* Herring Wright suffers in the disquieting silence of feeling excluded by the hearing world, but BASL strengthens her self-esteem. As a grown woman in *Far From Home*, Herring Wright no longer uses sign language daily, but she remains empowered by Black Deaf gain. She lives according to the following principle: "Deaf people were my world, but so were many hearing people, and I was not going to denounce them and just be with the deaf-Blind people" (78). She affirmed that there could be opportunities for cross-cultural exchange between all people. Thus, while BASL enables Herring Wright's d/Deaf gain, she also challenged audist preconceptions in her daily interactions with hearing people. To Herring Wright's pleasure, there were some hearing people willing to carefully enunciate their words, repeat themselves, and maintain face-to-face contact in

communicating with her. Whether she was living in Raleigh's Black Deaf community or in Washington D.C., Herring Wright's narratives dispel presuppositions about what d/Deaf people can know, remember, and communicate.

Arriving at Black d/Deaf Gain in *Sounds Like Home*

The genocidal wake of transatlantic slavery re-produces epistemic ruptures with ancestry and genealogy for Black people living in the United States. Saidiya Hartman poses an existential question that articulates the disquieting silences enveloping the historical trails of African Americans: "Were gaps and silences and empty rooms the substance of my history?" (2007, 16). Hartman directs critical attention to "the slipperiness and elusiveness of slavery's archive" (2007, 17). Furthermore, the U.S. sanctioned enterprise of chattel slavery—including continuations of slavery under sharecropping regimes and Jim Crow segregation laws—further de-stabilize of Black identities. Wilkerson recalls how migrants "did not cross the turnstiles of customs at Ellis Island. They were already citizens, but where they came from, they were not treated as such. Their every step was controlled by the meticulous laws of Jim Crow", and they "afflicted the lives of at least four generations" (2010, 9-10). Thus, the Great Migration inspires Black forms of expression that are committed to preserving memory "in the wake" of chattel slavery (Sharpe, 2016). Generations of migrant history are preserved through the memories of bodies, which sometimes get recorded in literature. In her foreword to *Sounds Like Home*, Herring Wright establishes the senses of purpose which inspired her first book: "I also decided to write my story for my many deaf friends because my story, in many ways, is also their story" (ix-x). From the writings of Olaudah

Equiano to Frederick Douglass or Harriet Jacobs— it is evident that Black autobiographies, memoirs, and journals have openly expressed ambitions to preserve the stories of their contemporaries. Herring Wright partially archived memories of d/Deaf resilience—whether through explaining her journey of overcoming the limitations of hearing loss or by commemorating the remarkable strengths of Deaf community. Herring Wright's trajectory from hearing loss to Deaf gain was guided by a rare set of sensory conditions and circumstances, relative to most migrants without profound deafness. Still yet, Herring Wright's brave departure stories echo material realities and psycho-social fragments that affected six million other movements.

While attesting to the linguistic gains of BASL, Herring Wright also documents personal experiences and feelings as linked to broader Black migratory sensibilities of the era. To say it more precisely, there are snippets of Herring Wright's personal story that will resonate for those with profound hearing loss and with people immersed in Deaf communities. But, most broadly, Herring Wright situates her personal experiences as critical examinations of wider histories of Black migratory experiences. In a conversation with Patricia J. Saunders, Hartman claims that autobiographical writing is "not about navel gazing, it's really about trying to look at historical and social processes and one's own formation as a window onto social and historical processes, as an example of them" (2008, 8). *Sounds Like Home* is not a vanity project, but a unique migration narrative that voices unspoken stories of Southern Black d/Deaf education.

Black d/Deaf activism happens on manifold grounds over the twentieth century. Some expressive efforts were openly polemical while others were detached and animated through the arts. In "Black and Deaf Movements in America Since 1960", Rittenhouse et

al. (1991) trace how Black d/Deaf legislation and political movements gained momentum during the Civil Rights Movement, and they conclude that "coalition-building, political pressure, and advocacy have become the tools for addressing the problems" (394). Black feminists were key leaders in class-action lawsuits to end segregation in d/Deaf schools. Though her legacy remains unsung, Louise Burrell Miller was a headstrong ally of the d/Deaf who legally battled to de-segregate schools. She took up the cause when her four d/Deaf sons, along with children from four other families, were refused admission at the Kendall School for the Deaf at Gallaudet University. Miller v. Board of Education of District of Columbia (1952) issued landmark victories over audism and racism. Since legal tools and legislation were rendered inaccessible through the binaries of disability and race, Black d/Deaf feminism accordingly turns to voice itself through intellectual, musical, and literary avenues. *Sounds Like Home* represents overlapping forces of audism and racism, but without an openly polemical tone. Regardless of authorial indirection, *Sounds Like Home* faithfully annotates Black d/Deaf experiences of living in residential schools. Herring Wright's books unfold to memorialize her friends and family as a form of resistance, an imperative which encompasses Collins's reminder that the racialized base of economic exploitation "simultaneously created the conditions for distinctively Black and female forms of resistance" in the U.S. (15). She also strives to report rarely seen or heard ordinary experiences hidden within the walls segregated schools. At ten years old, she embarked on a migratory journey of cross-cultural exchange wherein hearing, blind, and d/Deaf people became her friends at different periods of life.

The study of sign language has traditional ties to the field of linguistics and its related branch of sociolinguistics. It started to become recognized as an official language

after William C. Stokoe's *Sign Language Structure* (1960) proved that signed language had all the same linguistic elements of spoken language. Yet, there are still quite a few misconceptions about American Sign Language (ASL). It is a false, but common, presupposition that the hand gestures, facial expressions, and body language comprising sign languages are universal. Carolyn McCaskill dispels this common misconception: "there is no universal sign language in the sense that the questioner intends it" (2011, 2). For example, BASL is a regional dialect with unique sociolinguistic modalities of expression. Foundational work by Carl Croneberg (1965) and later research by Lucas, Bayley, Reed, and Wulf (2001) took strides to identify the lexical differences. The existence of a Black signage variant is confirmed by at least five verifiable sociolinguistic features: a larger signing space, more two-handed variants, more repetition, greater use of movement or facial expression, and different lexical signs for some concepts (McCaskill et al. 2011). In *Signing Black in America* (2021)—a groundbreaking documentary about BASL—a High School teacher named Mary Perrodin summarized the extra-linguistic features that make BASL unique: "Not only saying the word 'fierce,' but adding body language, hand snaps, pursed lips, and the head tilt. It's not like we're even trying to do it; it's just 'in us' and the features are shown naturally" (2021). Just as the extra-linguistic features of BASL emerge naturally in Black signing spaces, it inherently resists audism and racism in its countercultural form and function.

Segregated schools have been a focal point of sociolinguistic research. Ernest Hairston and Linwood Smith's *Black and Deaf in America* (1983) was an influential sociological study of Black d/Deaf educational inequity which documented "a Black way of signing used by Black deaf people in their own cultural milieu—among families and

friends, in social gatherings, and in deaf clubs" (1983, 55). Lucas et al. document how in 1869, there were seventeen state schools for Black Deaf children, or at very least there were racially separated divisions for Black students within these institutions (2015, 158). Institutions of this kind existed in the U.S. until the last remaining one in Louisiana finally desegregated in 1978. Since there were so few schools for Deaf students, local options were usually not available, so forced relocation was the norm. These segregated institutions forced young children to migrate before adulthood, and this specific type of migratory pressure is underrecognized in scholarship compared to the millions of adult movements over the twentieth century.

The predominant modes of instruction utilized for Deaf education has been a forerunning topic in Deaf culture studies since early 1980s. Many signing Deaf communities were subjected to pressures to learn through oralist methods in the twentieth century. Alexander Graham Bell is often celebrated as the inventor of the telephone, but he dedicated a huge chunk of his career to studying deafness because his father was a deaf educator. Nevertheless, his legacy has since drawn the ire of Deaf communities. From 1890-1940, he aggressively backed legislation to ban sign language education in all U.S. schools. Bell's oralist camp promoted cultural genocide through many campaigns against sign language. Indeed, Bell condemned any form of d/Deaf intermarriage due to the increased risk of having children with congenital deafness, and this exemplifies the genocidal motives underlying his oralist ideology. Clarence J. Settles (1940) was among the first to study and document information about the teaching methods in the seventeen segregated d/Deaf schools in the nation. After surveying all sixteen Black d/Deaf schools outside Washington D.C., Settles verified that "Eleven schools reported that their

methods of instruction are entirely manual. Three schools reported as following the oral method. Two stated that the work is evenly divided between the oral and manual methods" (211). Therefore, sign language was the predominant model for communication and education in Black Deaf schools over the twentieth century, whereas most White Deaf schools were instructed through lip reading and speech training.

Baynton's *Forbidden Signs: American Culture and the Campaign Against Sign Language* (1996), provides a more expansive overview of how Eurocentric values about the normalcy of spoken language set in motion popular endorsements of oralist teaching methods. Moges argues: "The history of oralism from 1890 to 1940 was not a Black Deaf experience but an element of whiteness because the oralists used the teaching method to normalize deaf schoolchildren to perform and speak like an ideal white child" (2020, 81). Carol Ertlng's (1978) pioneering work in sign language studies further advances the case for manual communication. She contends that manualism benefits identity formation and healthy self-esteem for deaf children with hearing parents, as they "do not have experience in a natural language system such as ASL," even as they remain disconnected from the orally spoken languages used by their family (144). Black d/Deaf children were also forced to leave family homes and live in segregated residential schools. However, they responded to inhumane, abusive, and predatory living conditions through creating BASL and communicating with it.

Lissa D. Stapleton more recently expands our awareness about how audism and racism work together as a dual-discriminatory forces of oppression in the educational system. She explains how racial microaggressions are intended or unintentional components of the "hidden curriculum" (2016). Black d/Deaf students experience

microaggressions in the forms of audiocentric expectations catering to hearing ways of being, and through being subjected to a curriculum which trivializes Black d/Deaf life forms. Stapleton also issues an important reminder that Black d/Deaf students manage to overcome these oppressive curriculums: “The absence of Bd/Deaf people from the masternarrative has allowed them to develop their resistance and write a story that is *for* them and *by* them” (2016, 155). Moges (2020) proposes that “the coercion of a white able-bodied homogeneity and the ideology of reforming neglected Black Deaf bodies became, in turn, a form of Deaf empowerment—an unintentional positive consequence for Black Deaf Americans” (70). This is to say that Black Deaf schools were sheltered from the adversities associated with subjection to oralist teaching standards, so their preference for manualist signed education worked in beneficial ways. Moges refers to Mary Herring Wright’s first memoir to prove that Black Deaf gain is an “experience of positive gain from the exclusivity of White Oralism” (2020, 90). BASL was born from the midst of segregated zones built to reinforce racial abjection, and oralist teaching methods were much less predominant in Black Deaf schools than they were in non-segregated residential schools. Herring Wright amplifies how Black Deaf communities shared the socio-linguistic gains of BASL as a mode of actively resisting intersecting paradigms of exclusion.

Sounds Like Home is comprised of eighteen chapters divided into two parts. “Part One: A Bouquet of Roses” recalls the author’s harrowing ordeal of childhood hearing loss. For Herring Wright, the onset of deafness started slowly at the age of eight, which is an uncommon age to encounter the profound degree of loss that she did. Before her d/Deaf identity would surface, Herring Wright lived under the racialized conditions of the

Jim Crow South. Herring Wright opens with an overview of the state of race relations in her hometown around the 1920s: “Iron Mine was a mixed neighbourhood of Black and White families. Although most families were related to each other, the kinship of the Blacks and Whites wasn’t discussed in public. Most everyone farmed or worked for someone who did” (4). Many terms in her childhood were quintessentially Southern, including attending church on Sundays, working on a farm, and encountering forms of racial segregation. However, North Carolina’s town of Iron Mine certainly had better everyday conditions than other towns in Alabama or Mississippi. Herring Wright’s childhood innocence rapidly corroded when hearing-loss brought her face-to-face with audism and racism on systemic, institutional fronts. She grappled with heightened anxiety, isolation, and forced migration extending from feeling like her closest family and friends pathologized her deafness.

The author’s hearing difficulties became profound just before the age of ten. During this pivotal turning point in her life, she recalls extraordinary difficulties with feeling suddenly incapable of engaging with the classroom of hearing students she was once able to engage with effortlessly. She gives a descriptive testimony of the psychosocial anxieties which get generated under the audist binary reinforced by her hearing classmates: “I only felt hurt and left out and sort of ashamed, as though I was somehow to blame for not being able to hear and chatter along with the other children as I once had” (110). When classmates teased and friends turned away, an already discriminatory and underprivileged education system became unbearable. Herring Wright recalls how the audist boundaries enacted by her teachers and peers left her feeling humiliated by the end of her tenure at her old school. The Deaf gain epistemologies

which would restore a sense of purpose surfaced eventually, through her bonds with the Black Deaf community at the Raleigh School for the Black Deaf and Blind.

"A Bouquet of Roses" features nostalgic representations of sounds and music through sonic-affective language. Herring Wright's sonic nostalgia characteristically resounds with uplifting rather than depressive tones. From the opening chapter to the end, she retrospectively considers how music, hearing, and sound are ongoing engagements in her life: "Another love of my life was, and still is, music. All kinds, but my favorites have always been the classics. No words, just music—loud, wild, and wonderful" (15). Her confession that she "still" loves music issues an important challenge to medical accounts of deafness which pathologize d/Deaf subjects as incapable of engaging with sound in any capacity. Thus, Herring Wright's language characterizes sound and music as an ongoing presence as opposed to absence. By making such affirmative claims about music from the position of a Black d/Deaf woman's body, she welcomes readers to think beyond the audist cultural binary ruling out d/Deaf lives as non-resonant, or non-sonic. Herring Wright does not merely document musical lyrics but instead makes consistent effort to represent the socio-cultural and familial valences of sounds and music. Herring Wright often talks about the music, people, and places she loves in close conjunction: "I loved to hear hymns and spirituals. That was the joyful part in going to church. I could sit forever and listen to our choir sing "Sweet Hour of Prayer". Mama tried to teach me hymns when we were alone. I can still see us" (46). This time she spent listening to her mother singing in the kitchen formed the bedrock of her musical memory. While sounds and music are often considered fleeting or ephemeral, Herring Wright's remembrance resisted the breakdown of her auditory system. It is remarkable that an elderly woman

writing her first memoir past the age of seventy could recount her musical remembrances with acute visual, sonic, and kinesthetic literary detail. Herring Wright confesses that she "couldn't get the notes right" as a singer, but this never stopped her from memorizing the words of her mother's favourite tunes (Herring Wright 1999, 47). The lyrics of "Oh What Glory When Our Lord Shall Come" is one of several spirituals transcribed in *Sounds Like Home*. This is yet another representation of how in Great Migration narratives, music and sound take on nostalgic undertones tied back to Southern locations and family. For Herring Wright, nostalgic sound memories resonate with sensibilities of longing, loss, presence, and affirmation. Oftentimes all these emotions or imperatives get represented simultaneously, namely in Herring Wright's cathartic affirmations of Black womanhood, family, community, and d/Deaf gain. Yet, the socio-cultural valences of musical memories are easily overlooked aspects of *Sounds Like Home*. Herring Wright's heightened sense of sonic nostalgia drives her literary efforts to preserve records of song lyrics, and specifically the ones which reinforced communal and familial cohesion in Iron Mine. Her listening ears absorbed surrounding sounds and southern contexts of her childhood. Through writing and memory, at least, Herring Wright affirms that Black d/Deaf lives are capable of meaningful engagements with sound and music.

"Part Two: A New World" is the larger segment of the memoir. It follows the onset of a major migratory pattern of Herring Wright's life, moving between her family farm and the Raleigh School. The experience of profound hearing loss in late childhood re-produces nihilistic affective states of alienation, and isolation across educational, familial, social, and cultural contexts. The ensuing existential crisis of childhood hearing loss was deepened for Herring Wright by the migratory states imposed on her. Being

forced into a residential school resulted in abrupt removal from her family, and separation from her beloved dog, Queen. The Raleigh School provided bare-minimal forms of consolation, especially considering the multi-leveled strain caused by going through such losses at a young age. As her first academic year neared its course, Herring Wright was excited to spend the summer on her family farm. Yet, she encounters a few incidents over that summer which make her feel more at odds with the hearing world. It seems as if her family forgot how to make efforts to communicate with her because these familial bonds were initially forged through spoken words and song. One day while a thunderstorm was brewing, Herring Wright continued working in the fields till the onset of thunder and lightning because she didn't hear the thunder, and nobody was there to warn her (114). Thus, although she felt welcomed back home, it was despite her deafness and not because of it. When summer ends, the prospect of going back to school does not feel nearly as bad as it did when she was forced to leave home. Herring Wright thus approaches a crossroad in life. A major turning point in her life story is when she chooses to embrace the path of camaraderie and community with her colleagues at the Raleigh school because d/Deaf "people are very distrustful of hearing people. They're always suspicious that they're being talked about or made fun of for not being able to hear and talk" (118). Herring Wright eventually realizes that the Raleigh School was a new world built by Black d/Deaf students—a community who had each other's backs. Though the Raleigh School was an oppressive environment, it facilitated unique manifestations of Black d/Deaf gain in the lives of alumni, and possibly even amongst staff.

Herring Wright started to unravel the emotionally and mentally abusive terms of the school's living environment as a twelve-year-old second year student. The school

enforced separate dormitories between Deaf students and Blind students, so their interactions were inherently limited. She had to discover the existence of the library on her own, but it became her haven of escape on weekend afternoons. To her dismay, Herring Wright uncovered the library's true administrative purpose to discipline students: "I noticed blind girls entering and leaving but did not know what for. I did not know that older children were placed in there for punishment and locked in without food or water for a whole day. It was a while before I found that out" (140). Any school's library is traditionally tasked with the crucial role of promoting education, literacy, and research initiatives. But the disquieting reality is that the library became synonymous with confinement, corporal punishment, and surveillance. Almost all the other girls referred to the place as "jail" (141). Reading offered individualistic escape. As Herring Wright ages, she responded more actively to the worsening conditions alongside her friends. *Sounds Like Home* testifies to how residential schools offered some senses of camaraderie for Black d/Deaf children who faced silencing under the hegemonies of audism and white supremacy. Herring Wright actualized creative, linguistic, communal, and intellectual d/Deaf gains shortly after migrating to her new lifestyle at Raleigh. She built meaningful, lifelong friendships over the years at the Raleigh school. Many of her closest and lifelong friends were Deaf students considering how their dorms were separated from the blind students. Perhaps partially because Herring Wright's d/Deaf identity emerged post-linguistically, she lived in ways which expressed less skepticism and distrust of those who could hear. To name one example, she found herself crossing dormitory boundaries and building friendly relations with Blind girls. Ultimately, the unstable liminality of Herring Wright's links to hearing and d/Deafness are a special component of her d/Deaf

gain. I would argue that her d/Deaf liminality enabled her to take on gainful leadership roles in protesting injustice at Raleigh. After turning fifteen, she (dis)quieted the sonic color line separating Blind and Deaf students, organizing efforts between their separated dormitories to expose and oppose their inequitable atmospheres.

Sounds Like Home depicts the impoverished structural precarities of Black State schools compared to the white ones, and it details the students' anger at feeling helplessly subjected to this racialization. During her third junior year, Herring Wright and her classmates eventually came to the realization that white Deaf schools provided much better living conditions. Her memoir exposes these infrastructural disparities and disproportionate living standards:

> Once, we went to a program in town at the school for the White blind children. Afterwards we were given a tour of their campus and the differences between their school and ours were unbelievable. Instead of long rooms with rows of beds, all with white spreads and only shades at the windows, they lived in family-type houses with only a few bedrooms to each building, and two or three to a room. Each house had a nice home living room, a dining room with white tablecloths, and china, silver, and glassware instead of the bare tabletops and metal plates and cups we were accustomed to. The bedrooms had pretty colored spreads and ruffled curtains. The auditorium was beautiful with a sloping floor, comfortable individual seats, and a stage with rich red velvet curtains and floodlights, plus a heated swimming pool and gym in another wing. Ours was a level floor with hard wooden benches and no stage or curtains (179).

Black d/Deaf students were not equipped with the resources to immediately change these structural disparities, shocking and as unforgivable as they were. They certainly tried, as "seeing such a difference in how the white children were treated and how we were treated at the Black. State school left us depressed and angry" (180). Their anger reverberates into action. In that third academic year, Herring Wright became a lynchpin for one student-led rebellion against teacher misconduct. The students' collective anger from seeing the better conditions at the white school galvanized the will to stand together in solidarity: "That's why Flossie and Hill and a very few more were willing to help the [B]lind girls with their protest" (180). Herring Wright played an especially unique role in this protest, as her late-childhood post-linguistic d/Deafness enabled her to retain vocal clarity in oratory communication. She put these skills to use by intermingling with Blind students and then relayed what they were hearing from teachers back to the Deaf students. Deaf eyes and Blind ears merged to spread awareness that caught the attention of some teachers and parents, who also became involved. Some staff members left, and Raleigh became a safer place by the time Mary turned fifteen.

Sounds Like Home also depicts Black women's resistance against the school's exploitative atmosphere. The Raileigh School was a breeding grounds for sexual assault and trauma, which Catalina McCarter outlines as a significant historical and ongoing problem affecting d/Deaf communities living at residential schools (2015). At 14 years old, Herring Wright became aware of staff misconduct and predatory sexual behaviours on the campus. One evening before bed, her roommate Percy pulled her aside behind the closed door of the bathroom and told her that she saw a man standing in their room watching them sleep at night: "We both stood there frozen with fear, wondering who and

how he'd gotten in" (180). The 2001 class-action lawsuit against the Jericho Hill School for the Deaf in Vancouver, B.C. brought forth claims of over three hundred former students who were sexually abused while living there (Teichroeb, 2001). This case against the Jericho Hill School was the first of its kind in Canada and the United States. But over the last twenty years, investigative journalism and survivors have decried the normalization of sexual abuse in North American d/Deaf residential communities. Existing quantitative information is inaccurate and incomplete because school and church officials have enough power to suppress, mask, and conceal allegations. Herring Wright's qualitative account confirms that she was subjected to the male gaze, felt afraid of unwanted advances while she was sleeping, and felt worried about consequences of speaking out against such predatory behaviors. There was a security watchman who patrolled the hallways to ensure that everyone stayed in their room, but they no longer felt protected. Herring Wright was initially afraid to speak out about what they experienced because she felt as if nobody would believe her: "Remembering how everybody scoffed and said I made up things, keeping quiet made sense" (181). Nevertheless, Percy had suspicions that other girls had similar experiences with men entering their rooms at night. In mutually feeling that speaking out was not an immediate option, they agreed to sleep in the same bed together. This strategic reliance on d/Deaf communal interdependence relieved the paranoia of worrying about not hearing possible intruders invading their room.

Sounds Like Home was published well into Herring Wright's seventies, as it was the only time of her life where she had the opportunity to take up writing as a means of sounding-out segregated conditions that would have remained otherwise unheard. These

late-life authorial efforts archived disquieting conditions behind the increasingly no-longer-standing walls of such schools. The Virginia State School for the Colored Deaf and Blind was demolished in 2017, which is one of many examples of historical erasure and silencing. But *Sounds Like Home* does more than just document forms of oppression because it positions the unique socio-linguistic heritage of Black American Sign Language alongside its Black creators and practitioners. Black women's resistance was forged through shared language for Herring Wright and her three closest friends: Flossie, Hill, and Maybur. A group of young peers in the middle of their teenage years developed new modes of communication, thereby actively promoting d/Deaf gains of sign language education. Herring Wright recalls how she and her colleagues "had to teach all of the new teachers how to sign," which testifies to the primary creative and intellectual position of Black Deaf students in segregated schools (211). By virtue of using and actively educating others through the brand of sign language they participated in creating, these women lived against the grain of audism, oralism, and white supremacy. Here again, Herring Wright amplifies Black Deaf gain through students' cohesive improvisation in enacting their own linguistic terms for education.

(Dis)quieting Movements in *Far From Home*

Unlike the forced migration at the core of *Sounds Like Home*, the story in *Far From Home: Memories of World War II and Afterward (2005)* is centered around Herring Wright's voluntary journey to a new life in Washington D.C. during World War Two. The memoir picks up where *Sounds Like Home* left off in 1941, after graduation. *Far From Home* details Herring Wright's movements between urban and rural locations. It is

markedly more individualistic and there are far less references to sign language. Oral communication and lip reading become her new primary tools for communicating with non-Deaf friends and co-workers.

It was a pivotal year in U.S. history. Franklin D. Roosevelt was in his third term, and the U.S. joined the Allies in World War Two the day after the December 7th attack on Pearl Harbor. That year, A. Phillip Randolph and Bayard Rustin organized the "March on Washington Movement" to end segregation in government departments and fight for fair working opportunities. Their efforts signaled an early start to accelerating the social change which birthed the Civil Rights Movement. All these events or figures are well documented by U.S. historians. But amidst this history unfolding, a young, single Black d/Deaf woman moved to Washington D.C., the most politically distinct area in the nation. Herring Wright knew that her presence there spoke volumes: "I felt very humble and yet very proud that I, who some people saw only as being deaf and dumb and brainless as well, was right here in the midst of all these happenings, even a part of them" (Herring Wright 2005, 39). She becomes aware of the early beginnings of the Civil Rights Movement stirring around her. Black migrants slowly started resisting segregation. It was common to see people sitting closer to the front of buses in Washington, but once on the Virginia side of the bridge, Black passengers were forced to move to the back (91). While riding the bus home one night, she witnessed a Black woman arrested after she refused to move from her seat. The bus scenes reveal how segregation is contingent upon space and place, while the process of migration exposes the fluctuations of social segregation. Due to these everyday catalysts, Herring Wright started to become more politically involved: "I started reading more about the NAACP, and one Sunday afternoon, Doretha asked me

if I'd like to ride with her to attend a meeting that was being held in Green Valley" (91). Although that meeting never actually took place due to not having enough people, Herring Wright's attempted participation is an incipient form of activism—sounding out her desire for collective Civil Rights action.

Shortly after graduating from the Raileigh School, Papa's cousin Mary Fennell pays a visit to their farm in Iron Mine. After meeting her Cousin Mary, Herring Wright took a trip North to Washington D.C. to spend several months living with her. This bond with Cousin Mary provided some stepping stones for Herring Wright's maturation and migration. Cousin Mary recommends an ear, nose, and throat specialist in Washington, D.C. with the hopes of finding a cure or solution to make hearing loss more bearable. Mama and Cousin Mary "did so much want me to hear, but I had decided long ago to make the best of my life, one way or the other" (2). These pages punctuate Herring Wright's maturing sense of d/Deaf gain. d/Deaf gain reverberates over the entire memoir through her acceptance, and ongoing refusals of hearing-aid technologies, or medical treatment. At eighteen in 1942, Herring Wright made it clear that she intended to permanently move North to Washington, albeit firmly against her father's wishes. Her move to big city life defied racist, audist, and patriarchal barriers. These disquieting barriers still caused a great deal of emotional turmoil, and they nearly stopped her from leaving Iron Mine, North Carolina. She recalls the doubts which struck as she was sitting on the Greyhound bus heading North: "Did I really want this? To leave the South that had always been my home, along with the people I knew and loved? I'd be living and working among strangers, hearing strangers at that. I knew how hurtful some of them could be. Would I be able to work? I'd had no college education" (21). These anxious

avenues of thought tell how the disquieting migratory conditions of alienation and dislocation become compounded through life in a Black d/Deaf body.

After living with Cousin Mary's family again for several months of settling in, Herring Wright endured the nerve-wracking process of writing aptitude tests, filling out forms, and dropping by employment agencies. Mary gets a desirable government job doing paperwork across the Potomac River at the Navy Annex in Arlington, Virginia. She lands a decent job because she scored very high on both aptitude tests even though they were not standardized in consideration of the common circumstances of "blackness". This is yet another manifestation of the systematic calculus reinforcing intergenerational poverty. Herring Wright's job as a typist for the U.S. navy might seem monotonous, but she worked with great pride and interest. Typist positions were feminized and framed as supportive roles despite requiring a great deal of precision and emotional resilience. Herring Wright was responsible for keeping records of soldiers aboard particular ships. She would need to account for how many people were on board or how many people were killed in battle. She started with easy reports then started accounting for Navy ships with thousands of men. The better part of her first year is spent navigating disbelief, "that this was really me, on a bus heading for a real government job, without any of my family or school people. I loved everything about it, passing so many of the places I'd only read about before" (26). Her first paychecks brought her a great deal of happiness, independence, and a sense of pride: "Farm work paid even less. So you can see, I was really proud of that check" (32). Herring Wright empowers herself through sending money to help her family back in North Carolina. *Far from Home* illuminates how living alone as a Black d/Deaf woman necessitated hyper-vigilant visual reliance to compensate

for auditory limitations in a world full of racialized predation. Yet, Herring Wright describes this time of her life as being extremely joyous and pleasurable. After settling into her new apartment, the entirety of chapter six recounts how contented she is to be a working woman, socializing with new hearing friends and work colleagues, and actualizing that "I could be independent and take care of myself" (86). That sixth chapter is appropriately titled, "Happy with My Life".

The fact that BASL was built under segregated conditions cannot be overlooked as a central feature of its sociolinguistic heritage. BASL was created in and used within the South, so its usage remained somewhat confined to segregated spaces. Yet, the Great Migration had notable impacts on Black d/Deaf communities. What became of BASL as Black d/Deaf people became affected by the sweeping circumstances of the Great Migration? If we accept the premise that sign languages are inherently inseparable from the social contexts in which they circulate, it follows that migration and movement pose a set of complex challenges for the usage of Black signing variants. Paul Gilroy makes an important argument that the musical heritage of the Black Atlantic, "gradually became an important factor in facilitating the transition of diverse settlers to a distinct mode of lived blackness", and much scholarship has explored music as a force of sociopolitical change for migrants living in diaspora (1993, 82). Nevertheless, music is not the only expressive cultural medium with restorative powers to make migrants feel as if they are part of a community. BASL is a linguistic tradition which has lesser acknowledged influences on facilitating some degrees of communal cohesion amongst communities of Black migrants. Black d/Deaf organizations started to form and establish a presence in many Northern cities from around the middle of the twentieth century and onwards.

Washington, D.C., Chicago, and Baltimore were some of the most notable destinations. Washington D.C. blossomed into special location for many d/Deaf people after World War Two, including for Black d/Deaf migrants. The Washington D.C. area was home to many d/Deaf organizations and clubs, not to mention Gallaudet University, an ongoing global leader in d/Deaf advocacy, culture, and education. More Black Deaf organizations were formed in Atlanta and Los Angeles. The mostly urban based reach of these organizations and Black Deaf clubs expanded slowly between 1950 and 1960. The usage of BASL was not wide-spread or generally accepted by established d/Deaf communities living in Northern cities like Washington D.C., as most d/Deaf organizations and clubs would have surely been operating through the more standardized variety of ASL used by white signers. They grew from being small local community driven places where people could build friendships, socialize through signing, and exchange ideas, into full-blown advocacy organizations like the NBDA (National Black Deaf Advocates) which was officially formed in Washington, D.C. by 1982. Tolnay cites Price-Spratlen's (1998, 1999) two quantitative studies outlining the attractive characteristics of popular Great Migration cities. He claims that "migrants were more attracted to areas that offered stronger "ethnogenic" support for the African American community" (2003, 217). While it is true that Washington, D.C. had strong ethnogenic socio-cultural structures for Black and d/Deaf people, Herring Wright's memoirs do not focus much on these advocacy organizations. With that said, *Far From Home* does document small socio-cultural outlets for Black and Deaf migrants living there. Herring Wright recalls having a run-in with Cora-Lee, her old classmate at the Raleigh School: "She told me where she lived and asked why I didn't come live with her. In her neighborhood, she said, there were lots of

deaf people, including a whole bunch from school who lived near her" (77). This passage provides anecdotal evidence of how small d/Deaf communities formed in the urban North. Cora-Lee's testimony is evidence of how BASL could be partially preserved by fragmented Black Deaf communities living in urban areas.

Despite Cora-Lee's confirmation that there were some Black d/Deaf migrants who stuck together, the disquieting circumstances of migration threatened its ongoing usage in the urban North, and by extension BASL's sociolinguistic history faced the possibility of total erasure. In addition, Black d/Deaf people can at times feel torn between so many cultural influences that they end up identifying with neither. [9] *Far From Home* confirms how Herring Wright became detached from all her old d/Deaf friends in the months following graduation. All her friends from bygone school days left the South for Northern destinations like Brooklyn, Springfield, Pennsylvania, and Philadelphia. For example, during the reunion with Herring Wright on the bus, their instinct is to speak in sign, but Sonny tried to speak using as few signs as possible because he feels alienated using these signs in the presence of so many hearing people: "Each time we would get quick, curious looks, and each time Sonny would stop signing and stare back at the children. I couldn't help giggling a little. He was always so uncomfortable with anyone watching him sign" (37). While some Black d/Deaf migrants were less self-conscious of signing in front of hearing people, they were forced to code-switch as a form of integrating into predominantly white signing contexts of the urban North. This was linguistic

[9] See Anderson, Glenn B., and Cynthia A. Grace, "Black Deaf Adolescents: A Diverse and Underserved Population." *The Volta Review* 93 no. 5 (1991): 73–86 for a detailed investigation of how Black Deaf individuals often face complex negotiations with intwined racial and Deaf communal aspects of their cultural affiliations.

accommodation under pressure, involving adjusting sign vocabulary, reducing the signing space, or modifying the rhythmic intensity of signing.

Migration thereby plays large roles in fragmenting the senses of communal cohesion flowing from BASL. Although presented with an opportunity to join Cora-Lee's d/Deaf community, Herring Wright makes a perplexing decision to continue living on her own. This does not necessarily imply that she abandons her heritage, but it was merely her choice of identification which emerged to the forefront of her life at this phase of early adulthood. The true marker of her individualism during the World War Two years was her act of moving into an apartment on the outskirts of the city-state. Herring Wright did not undertake the journey North with the intention of partaking in d/Deaf communities or organizations. She chose to live a very different individualistic lifestyle, separate from Black signing spaces. This necessitated that she adopt oralist forms of listening and communication, which caused a few hardships: "This may sound like my life was perfect and I was always happy, but that was definitely not the case. There were still times when I was made to feel my deafness; most of the time it wasn't intentional, but the hurt was just the same" (55). Herring Wright's literary representations of dialogue were more frequent compared to those featured in *Sounds Like Home*. She represents representing dialogic exchanges with hearing people, and for readers, these dialogues critically magnify the hidden foundations of audism for readers. One conversation reveals the audist popular misconceptions re-producing stereotypes about d/Deaf people:

> For instance, once during break time a bunch of girls were talking about the USO and the requests for women and girls to attend a dance they were having for the service boys. They needed someone to dance with and talk to. One member of the group I had seen watching me several times, as though she was curious about me or something, looked at me then and said, "You people don't dance, do you?" "Yes, we can." I said. "But how?" she asked. "With our feet," I said (55).

The woman quickly realized that her question sounded ridiculous as everyone laughed along with Herring Wright's response, but she does nothing other than stare back with a sour face. Unfortunately, d/Deaf subjects regularly get subjected to ableist rhetorical questions, figures of speech, and ideologies which are entirely predicated upon the things which d/Deaf subjects cannot do, as opposed to what they can do. Herring Wright affirms d/Deaf capacities of as a response in the face of audist abjection. Her presences in the hearing world level important functional challenges to the audist parameters which ideologically disqualify valid d/Deaf connections to sound.

Herring Wright had already experienced sociolinguistic gains from belonging to Black Deaf culture, as was represented at length in *Sounds Like Home.* Notwithstanding, there are several more modalities of registering d/Deaf gain apart from cultural or linguistic immersion. d/Deaf gain is a subjective trail of acceptance and actualization. Oftentimes epistemic and philosophical gains are realized by d/Deaf subjects over their personal odyssey through reconciling the pathological consequences of hearing loss in an audist world. Pathogenic opinions of deafness are constructed socially and institutionally, and d/Deaf people need to overcome the devastating emotional consequences associated with internalizing external understandings of hearing people. Thus, the notion of accepting d/Deafness is one of the most difficult losses, but it brings gainful experiences which make living life feel most worthwhile. *Far From Home* puts forth one of its most compelling avenues for representing Black Deaf gain within the passages which detail the author's brief use of hearing aids, leading to her eventual disavowal of them. Not too long after her arrival in Washington, Cousin Mary beckons that she goes to see the

hearing specialist Dr. Mosley, who sets her up with a hearing aid. Herring Wright was intensely skeptical about whether it would help her or not: “I really didn’t want the thing. All it did was tingle and make noises that were nerve-wracking. Mrs. Mosley and I examined it and tried to see if it helped my hearing any. It didn’t” (2005, 62). Although she had little desire to use a hearing aid, well-intentioned social and familial pressures work as a form of coercion which makes Herring Wright try it to appease her. Herring Wright writes about hearing aids from a retrospective position, detailing how her hearing aids looked in accordance with her contemporary point of view: “Compared to today’s hearing aids, this thing was monstrous. It consisted of a battery back about the size of a thick deck of cards and wires that ran from the battery back to a slightly smaller pack that was the motor, I guess. Then, there was another wire that ran from this smaller pack with a small rubber piece attached to the end” (2005, 62). The cumbersome appearance of twentieth century hearing aids dovetails with a host of social stigmatizations, and this is not to mention the physical discomforts of having to consistently carry and care for the battery pack or delicate components. Shortly after the passage above, there is another one which describes a scene that unfolded on a bus. Herring Wright decides to try wearing the hearing aid on a grocery shopping trip one afternoon on the weekend. Despite her usual preference for walking, she decides to take the bus because it was raining heavily, and battery packs are prone to corrosion. Herring Wright describes an encounter on the bus with two white boys which turned out to be the last time she ever wore a hearing aid: “Then I realized they were trying to see inside my ears. The contraption was making a noise that others could hear. I thought for a few minutes, then reached up and removed the end piece and showed it to them” (62). The condition or quality of d/Deafness is more

difficult for d/Deaf individuals to accept whenever they have contacts with those who can hear and perceive them as different. This philosophic acceptance of deafness tends to be consistently complicated, socially speaking, by contact with hearing individuals. After a few minutes of thoughtful gazing out the window, Herring Wright responds to the ostracizing gaze of these two white boys on the bus by saying: "That's a hearing aid," I said, grinning at their surprised look. "I'm deaf." I remembered my own curiosity as a child. I never wore it anywhere else again" (63). Herring Wright abandons holding onto hope that a hearing aid or surgical procedure is going to make her life better. This is another empowering refusal to depict hearing loss as something which needs to be fixed—a resonant embrace of d/Deaf gain.

Since Herring Wright's second memoir migrates away from her Southern Black Deaf community, it is understandable to see how her text reflects on the audist hardships of living in a hearing city as a d/Deaf woman compared to the oppressions she faced as a Black woman. Nevertheless, as Christina Sharpe words it, "antiblackness is pervasive as climate" (2016, 106). *Far From Home* offers consciously documents the insulated racial segregation that was pervasive in Northern cities. Just one page after she expressed feeling alienated when wearing a hearing aid on the bus, Herring Wright (dis)quiets the unspoken expectations of segregation sweeping through Northern cities:

> There were two ladies' rooms on our end of the corridor. The sign on the door only said "Ladies Restroom," without having White or Colored added. However, one was a little larger with nicer chairs and mirrors than those in the other room. The White women would use it to take breaks, smoke cigarettes, and give the Black women hard stares when we went in there. Some would even say to us, "There's another restroom further down." Most of the girls pretended that they didn't hear them and just continued to use the ladies' room. Then signs started appearing in different places saying that all facilities, restrooms, cafes, and so on were to be used by *all* government employees regardless of race, color, or creed.

> After that, no one bothered us, but we still got bad looks from a few; that didn't hurt at all (63-64).

Herring Wright records white women's racist desires for segregation to be implemented within a government building, while working for the U.S. military. As Herring Wright surveys the insulated nature of Washington, D.C.'s segregated social landscape, her observations carry symbolic resonance amid a city defined by its singular architectural and federal significance. It also happens to be geographically sandwiched between the Northeast and the South. While census tends to classify the D.C. area as a designated Southern region, its cultural identity is shaped by overlapping Southern and Northern influences. Although Washington D.C.'s urban center allegedly symbolizes national values of freedom, *Far From Home* resonantly exposed how Southern structures of racial segregation persist. Given those geographic and federal layers of her surroundings, Herring Wright exposes racial segregation as a dominant feature of the U.S. climate.

Migration memoirs expressed direct commitments to anti-racist, communist, and feminist social causes. For example, Richard Wright's *Black Boy* (1945), and both of Herring Wright's books testify as notable examples of migration stories aligned with social justice initiatives. *Far From Home* indeed outlines Herring Wright's commitments to Black feminist causes. The motifs of Black feminism are generated through the memoir's very existence. Black d/Deaf women faced an enormous amount of pressure from pervasive social expectations solidified by centuries of Eurocentric marriage traditions. Unlike many of her friends from the Raleigh School, marriage was not a concern for Herring Wright: "My mind touched on marriage and quickly jumped off again. That was something I couldn't even imagine for myself, and frankly, I wanted no part of it" (4). Herring Wright's reunion with Sonny Davis also blossoms into mutual

romantic feelings, but this is where she makes a Black feminist oriented life decision to resist the patriarchal enterprise of marriage. As Sonny asks for her hand in marriage, she responds bluntly: “I am not ready to get married. I do not want to give up my job and move to New York because I enjoy doing what I’m doing” (38). Herring Wright directs critical attention to the many young women around her who became coerced into marriage by social pressures. One passage reflects on how some young women working at Washington’s Navy Annex got married with “as many men as asked them to. They would marry one boy, and when he was shipped out, they would cry for a brief period and then marry another boy without getting a divorce” (2005, 107). Her resolution against getting married was remarkable under the enormous marital pressures women faced—especially during the historical context of the Great Migration.

Owing to the inescapability of gender expectations and social categorizations, Herring Wright’s decision to live and walk everywhere alone made people uncomfortable:

> It’s still difficult for some people to believe that I actually walked the streets of Washington, D.C, and Arlington, Virginia, alone both day and night. I have been told that cops with partners now patrol the areas where I once walked and that the cops also have police dogs with them on patrol. God was surely with me then and is with me now (99).

Herring Wright was not afraid to occupy public space, as her strong sense of faith empowered her peaceful refusal to live in accordance with patriarchal expectations of women. *Far From Home* also documents at least one scene of active resistance against predatory white male behavior. Herring Wright recounts her harrowing experience with a taxi driver one Sunday morning in July of 1944. The driver followed her as she was walking up Eleventh Street and made repeated coercive gestures to lure Herring Wright

into the car: “Again, he opened the door and told me to get in, but I walked on at an even faster pace. When I stepped off the curb and started across Tenth Street, he started his cab up without even closing the door and came roaring around the corner trying to run me down” (140-141). She thankfully never saw the man again, but the trauma of being chased influenced a more watchful consciousness against the dangerous realities of the white male gaze and listening ears.

The Great Migration was punctuated by tense prospects of departure and return. Farrah Jasmine Griffin (1995) outlines the notion of returning South as one of the major tropes of Great Migration narratives. *Far From Home* represents how migratory instabilities were compounded by World War Two, resulting in more lost lives, deferred dreams, and freedoms fractured. Herring Wright also represents World War Two from sonic angles, reflecting information about popular music she gleaned from movies and magazines, as well as from her friends Leroy and Elnora: “Most of the popular songs had lyrics that pertained to the war. The songs “The White Cliffs of Dover,” “When the Lights Go on Again,” and “Yes Indeed,” were still going strong” (2005, 93). By the final year of World War Two, something tragic happens which guides Herring Wright back home South. *Far from Home* is a Great Migration narrative which continuously deliberates the prospect of returning to the South, and so it also represents a story of reverse-migration. As the war drags on, Herring Wright falls in love with a young soldier named Maleon. While she was initially resistant to his advances, a genuine love develops between the two of them unlike any of their prior romances. They bonded over similar interests in poetry, and Maleon chose “In the Blue of Evening” as the song to represent their love for each other (2005, 100-101). Maleon tragically died at the age of twenty-

four, when a transport truck with five enlisted men was struck by a gas tanker, and the only person who survived the accident was the one who caused it. Herring Wright reveals that such instances of premature death signified the disposability of Black life within the context of the U.S. military, which was commonplace in the WWII landscape.

The trajectory of Herring Wright's life changed almost completely when she suddenly lost the person who made her heart feel whole: "With Maleon there was no need for me to hear, as we thought alike. Even with his good looks, his background, his religion, and all, he cared about me for who I was" (102). His death was the painful spark which escalated Herring Wright's desires to return South: "I wanted to go back home to stay, back to Iron Mine and to my roots. I decided that I had spent enough time away from home and from my people. If I should decide not to return to Washington, I would still be able to financially support myself" (148). This decision to move back home can be understood as a response to preserve and protect herself and her loved ones against further preventable loss.

What is a Black d/Deaf migration story and why do they matter? The main talking points in this chapter shall be synthesized in responses to each of those questions. The intersectional listening approach I put into practice over this chapter attends to the numerous ways in which Black d/Deaf migrants would have surely contended with a myriad of oppressive institutional systems and cultural binaries in the United States. While she could not publish her memoirs until later in life, Herring Wright continuously opposed forms of silencing in public, academic, and domestic contexts over her years of working, writing, and moving between North Carolina and Washington. Her experiences of working, reading, and moving between North Carolina and Washington became the

liberatory catalysts that enhanced her literary productivity later in life. Yet as a Black d/Deaf woman, it is remarkable that Herring Wright's memoirs exist at all. She was seventy-six years old when *Sounds Like Home* was published, and eighty-two when *Far From Home* was released. Both her memoirs were published more than two decades after the Great Migration ended. Nevertheless, Herring Wright achieved these literary triumphs while working against multiple structures of oppression, writing "in the wake" of a nation suppressing her opportunities and restricting her desires (Sharpe, 2016).

Herring Wright offers memories that illuminate how Black d/Deaf gains manifest into resonant, interior, liminal, and beautiful "experiments in living free" (Hartman 2019, 17). Movement was the underlying force underlying Herring Wright's forays into activism, her memoir writing, and her individual linguistic journey to Black Deaf gain. Without migrating, Herring Wright would not have lived in a segregated Deaf school as a child and would have never learned Black American Sign Language. The sign language speaking community around her enabled Herring Wright to venture towards d/Deaf gains. These were the Black d/Deaf lives who helped her fashion antidotes for audism and racism which resonate across her life-writing. Sounds get represented in Herring Wright's literary memories of North Carolina's segregated education system. She often describes the voices of those around her as major influences along the ongoing journey of her migratory movements. *Sounds Like Home* and *Far From Home* speak for intersectional experiences with "visualsonic affective language" (Sharpe, 2016). Herring Wright's Black d/Deaf epistemology reverberate through all her lived experiences, and they resonate across each living memoir. She embraced radical "experiments in freedom that unfolded within slavery's shadow" (Hartman 2019, 17).

CONCLUSION: Amplifying Great Migration(s)

Every migration story contains personal acts of listening and being listened to. Accordingly, this project developed a methodology comprised of affective and critical listening practices to amplify collective sensibilities that shaped the Great Migration. Throughout the explorations, migrants emerged, not as statistics, but as living archives who embodied sonic and multimodal epistemologies while moving through new environments. Through four strands of attunement—archival, diasporic, intersectional, and listening d/Deafly— this study emphasized how migratory experiences profoundly reorganized perceptual and embodied dimensions of Black life under racial capitalism. This dissertation has advanced how the Great Migration was built through millions of multimodal movements carried out as sonic-affective epistemologies. As initially hopeful migrants encountered disquieting realities of life beyond the South, Black sonic presence was registered and mediated but also contested by the "sonic-color line" (Stoever, 2016) and "the surveillance of Blackness" (Browne, 2015). Under these disquieting regimes, migrant activists, artists, musicians, intellectuals, and writers embraced aural and multimodal forms of cultural production in response.

Migration unfolded collectively, but it was experienced, individually, as transformations of sensory worlds. By approaching the Great Migration as an interdisciplinary formation governed by visual and sonic-affective experiences, this study has expanded on the discourse about the period through outlining the immense political, literary, musical, and socio-cultural transformations. Migrants endured these disquieting sonic shifts and produced (dis)quieting movements informed by reorientations of sensory expression. Multimodal listening practices explore migration narratives as "visualsonic

affective language”—evidencing Black oppressions and resistances in the political, literary, musical, and socio-cultural transformations of the period (Sharpe, 2016). When approached through a methodology that demands inclusive, diverse, and multimodal acts of listening, migrations become lived transformation. The sensibility of migratory listening must, therefore, involve acknowledging the profound grief of dislocation. Mobility carried hope for migrants, but it also untethered them from familiar acoustic worlds and the accompanying rhythms which once oriented their daily lives. While migrants processed the grief of disconnecting from their past, disquieting movements pushed them into re-generating empowering sensibilities. Unique modes of knowing are embedded in mobile bodies, manifesting as heightened multimodal acuity. In other words, migrants developed sensitivity for sound with resonant survival instincts.

With the musical definition of a Coda, and socio-cultural definition of a CODA in mind, I resound the sensibilities that carried Black migration. In Western classical music conventions, the coda is an added concluding section that comes after a song’s formal resolution. Through codas, composers prolong listener attention and incite new emotions from audiences. My coda revisits how Chapters 1, 2, and 3 explored the disquieting and (dis)quieting registers of Black migration. Chapter 4 centered the socio-cultural and linguistic perspectives of Black Deaf migrants to sharpen awareness of how migration journeys encompass modal experiences. I close with an alternate spin on the word “coda” to sharpen the core interventions of my project. When styled as an acronym, CODA (Children of Deaf Adults) refers to children whose parents or guardians identify with Deaf culture. CODAs live in a distinct socio-cultural position as multimodal communicators, listeners, and translators. I draw inspiration from CODA perspectives to

amplify how migrations were not just geographic, but relational and modal. Maxine Childress Brown's CODA perspective offers new awareness of how forced or voluntary Black Deaf movements unsettled audism and racism. Regardless of hearing ability, migrants were aurally shaped by mobilities and transformed through more audible exposure to growing socio-cultural movements.

Coda: Migrations as Disquieting Pressure and (Dis)quieting Production

Chapter 1 frames the onset of the Great Migration as disquieting pressures that pushed over one and a half million young Black southerners to flee in generally northern directions between 1916 and 1930 (Wilkerson 2010). This first phase of mass movement is thoroughly represented in existing Great Migration scholarship, but for good reason. Migrants were leaderless and their movements were vastly disorganized, but there was enough forward momentum to constitute a Black exodus from the South. Thus, the onset of the Great Migration was a time of immense growth in public exposure for Black newspapers, "Lift Every Voice and Sing", silent protests, noise protests, and the oratorical rhetoric of Garveyism. The anthem promoted musical performance and sonic socio-cultural cohesion as (dis)quieting resistance, whilst aligning with logics of assimilation. These (dis)quieting practices reverberated as broad avenues of Black migratory resistance over the time leading up to the Great Depression. Around the same time, Marcus Garvey was speaking to migrants crowding street corners of Harlem. They gathered in droves to listen to his booming tone. Through his preacherly cadence, Garvey rhythmically emphasized words like *we*, *us,* and *ours*—which is how Garveyism outwardly resonated as Black pride philosophy. Garvey occupied public space as a

steadfast leader, and his voice reorganized displaced migrant into a listening public standing in solidarity. Regardless of how Johnson preferred assimilation while Garvey leaned into an uncompromising Pan-African brand of Black nationalism, both spoke to migrants on aural terms that built shared activist and institutional commitments.

Migratory conditions also recalibrated Black writing—as it is not coincidental that migrant authors rendered movements and migrations through affectively charged sensory language. Chapter 2 explored representations of sound in Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912/1927), Toomer's *Cane* (1923), Wright's *The Man Who Lived Underground* (1942/2021), and Petry's *The Street* (1946). These narratives—over unfolding through migratory or fugitive movements—expose the general crisis of Black perception reverberating across the twentieth century United States. I incorporated Black Studies and Sound Studies into my literary analysis to emphasize how migration narratives recreate the perceptual pressures of migration under U.S social orders structured by racialized ways of hearing and seeing. Johnson, Toomer, Wright, Petry and their contemporaries used "visualsonic affective language" to both expose racism as a disquieting climate and amplify Black migrants' resistance to this systemic racialization (Sharpe, 2016). This chapter proved that migrant authors deliberately incorporated visual and sonic intensities of Black life into their texts, and in highly innovative ways. Great Migration novels are literary indexes of sound, music, noise, speech, and embodied listening; they disclose Black aural transformation and systematic silencing as entwined conditions of twentieth-century U.S. racial modernity.

In Chapter 3, I argued that the "blues epistemology" was a significant migratory mode of knowledge production and embodied resistance (Woods, 1998). In practice,

playing the blues is a mode of expression with critical elements— inherently shaped by migrants' acts of listening, "call-and-response" social interactions, and improvisation. The blues carries ethical and even cosmological orientations beyond typical legal or religious institutions, but without abandoning moral codes or sacred sensibilities entirely. When the blues is taken as a migratory sensibility, awareness grows of just how important it was for migrants as an embodied epistemology. The blues sounded out survival through itinerancy and improvisation, and playing the blues involved a method loosely structured around collaboration and repetition. The (dis)quieting heritage of the blues was kept alive through migrants and listeners who attuned to its musicalized methods of modeling endurance and dwelling upon troubling contradictions. Migratory blues epistemologies were powerful models of Black endurance which refused to disappear or be silenced.

Coda: Black Deaf Migrations and Multimodal Resistance

Since the musicological definition of "coda" is borrowed from classical music conventions, it is rhetorically narrow and exclusionary. Yet, what if dominant assumptions about sound and hearing imposed through the term "coda" were forced to be interpreted from an entirely different language? When it comes to sounding the Great Migration, the term CODA evokes a relational and multimodal positioning of mediation, translation, and cultural fluency. Through Black Deaf migration memoirs and the socio-linguistic heritage of BASL, Chapter 4 argued that acts of migration were multimodal in much deeper senses than what Great Migration scholarship has usually acknowledged. Black mobility was shaped by racism and audism, so Black Deaf migrations were shaped by the destructive patterns of educational segregation and linguistic rupture in the

struggle to preserve Deaf community under hostile silencing conditions. The memoirs of Mary Herring Wright make it clear that sound cannot be reduced to hearing, and that listening should be unbound from audio-centrism. The most important intervention that this dissertation has advanced in Great Migration studies is through the inclusion of Black d/Deaf migration, which is not simply included as a diversity interested case study. Instead, Chapter 4 proves that Black d/Deaf gain epistemologies can inspire scholars to listen in new multimodal ways. By refusing the assumption that sound equals hearing, CODA perspectives embrace standpoints of astute multimodal and bi-lingual awareness.

Through listening to the Great Migration in a multimodal way that conjoins the senses, scholars enhance their awareness of what it means to communicate, and what it means to listen. The turn to Black d/Deaf migration fundamentally re-orients the listening practices to sound out the experiences and embodied linguistic wisdoms of a diverse intersectional population of migrants. Eighteen segregated residential schools for the Black Deaf and Blind existed by the 1940s. Black d/Deaf children were forced to migrate between living at these understaffed and underfunded schools where harsh discipline and excessive surveillance created terrible living conditions. Herring Wright's *Sounds Like Home* (1999) offers a surviving testimony of how sexual abuse was a systematically under-documented problem within segregated schools, and abusers were almost never prosecuted. By listening to d/Deaf experiences, scholars can learn to resist audio-centric assumptions that hearing is exclusively equated to sonic phenomena.

The Great Migration is usually told through the sweeping tales of direct movements from South to North, or from agrarian to industrial labor. In these grand narratives, Southern terrorism is often depicted in contrast to Northern opportunity. These

forces can all be rightly centered as major motifs of the Great Migration. Nevertheless, when the Great Migration is read through a Black Deaf or Black CODA social positioning, these perspectives illuminate how forms of Black mobility were structured by audism as well as racism. The development of BASL was a linguistic divergence which was produced in segregated schools, and migration challenged the preservation of this linguistic heritage without erasing it. BASL signers are living archives who speak and preserve a language which emerged as survival infrastructure—both within segregated residential schools and beyond their walls. Some alumni of the segregated schools for the Black Deaf and Blind, like Mary Herring Wright, eventually grew detached from sign language speaking communities after graduating and moving to cities. Notwithstanding, Herring Wright and Maxine Childress Brown illustrated how BASL still had strong capacities to foster urban networks of Black Deaf communal exchange.

This project does not tack sound onto Great Migration studies, as migrancy during the era was lived through sonic modes of listening, silencing, voicing, kinetic movement—all major outlets of sensory reorientation. In her underappreciated memoir, *On the Beat of Truth: A Hearing Daughter's Stories of her Black Deaf Parents* (2013), Maxine Childress Brown confirms—through her CODA perspective—that Black Deaf gain flows through sign language. As with Mary Herring Wright's memoirs, *On the Beat of Truth (2013)* directs sorely needed attention to how multimodal sign language traditions have empowered disenfranchised intersectional populations. In addition, Black d/Deaf lives were not silent, as they generated distinct epistemologies which prove that sound is not reducible to hearing. Black d/Deaf stories will continue to inspire other scholars to cultivate a deeper respect for the (dis)quieting resistances of multimodal

language. As such, listening and sounding are key analytical models for exploring the Great Migration which amplify lived and embodied perspectives. Rather than argue for understanding migratory histories primarily or solely through sound, Black d/Deaf memoirs make it clear that migration is multimodal and cannot be filtered fully through hearing centric socio-cultural assumptions.

Black Deaf culture remains overwhelmingly fractured because of limited archival and socio-cultural representation. However, Mary Herring Wright and Maxine Childress Brown's memoirs prove that BASL is a living archive shaped by racialized educational policy and by unsettling journeys of forced or deliberate Black movements across regions. But these memoirs are not the only degrees of evidence which have surfaced to prove the ongoing afterlives of BASL. Chapter 3 concluded with an analysis of Ryan Coogler's *Sinners* (2025), where I argued that its soundtrack sets Black mobility and blues epistemologies against the backdrop of a Great Migration narrative unfolding between Chicago, Illinois and Clarksdale, Mississippi. *Sinners* may seem to have no formal connections to Black Deaf culture, but on June 4, 2025, it became the first film in history to be released with BASL interpretation onto the streaming platform, HBO Max. *Sinners*—as released with a powerful BASL interpretation by Nakia Smith—amplifies a unique socio-linguistic heritage while promoting wider accessibility for viewers. With interpretation presented alongside the original version, this version constructs an archive of BASL's distinct two-handed grammar, larger signing space, and pointed reliance on facial expressions. While screening *Sinners* with BASL may appeal most for members of Black Deaf communities, the cultural nuances of BASL are now more within reach for all people with the interest and willingness to listen.

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