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### **“Not South”: The Great Migration in Langston Hughes’ “One-Way Ticket”**

**Abstract I:** Nato nel 1902 a Joplin, nel Missouri, Langston Hughes divenne la personalità più significativa del movimento “New Negro”, successivamente chiamato Rinascimento di Harlem. La sua poesia “One-Way Ticket” (1949) rappresenta uno strumento ideale per approfondire il contesto culturale della Grande Migrazione, momento cruciale nel plasmare nuove identità nella comunità afroamericana. “One-Way Ticket” è un notevole esempio di poesia militante, che rappresenta tramite versi semplici ed efficaci la grande voglia di cambiamento della sua generazione. Riconsiderando l’esperienza passata e le conquiste del Rinascimento di Harlem trenta anni dopo, Hughes osservò a posteriori la spinta che aveva portato tantissimi afroamericani a emigrare dal Sud verso città del Nord. Il saggio analizza lo stile minimale di Hughes e la sua manipolazione della forma blues, elementi fondamentali nel trasmettere un nuovo spirito di forza e assertività. Considereremo come la semplicità formale e l’immediatezza di questa poesia condividano con il blues l’obiettivo di lanciare un messaggio politico in grado di generare una trasformazione ideologica all’interno della comunità afroamericana.

**Abstract II:** Born in Joplin, Missouri, in 1902, Langston Hughes became the most significant personality of the New Negro Movement, later called the Harlem Renaissance. His poem “One-Way Ticket” (1949) is an ideal means for delving into the cultural milieu of the Great Migration – a pivotal moment in shaping new identities in the African-American community. It is a remarkable example of militant poetry, epitomising in simple and effective lines the great urge of his generation. Reconsidering the past experience and achievements of the Harlem Renaissance thirty years later, Hughes looked in retrospect at the drive that pushed massive numbers of African Americans to leave the South to move to northern cities. This essay will explore Hughes’ minimal style and manipulation of the blues form as instrumental in conveying a new spirit of strength and assertiveness. We shall see how the poem’s formal simplicity and directness share with the blues the objective of delivering a political message resulting in a communitarian ideological transformation.

One of the largest mass internal movements in history, the Great Migration was a voluntary diaspora, a pivotal moment in shaping new identities in the African-American community. The contradictions of Reconstruction and the controversial mistreatment of the Afri-

can-American soldiers of the 369<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment in the Great War triggered a strong movement for change. Hundreds of thousands of African Americans moved out of the rural Southern United States to the urban North to pursue a dream that was not – as Pauline Melville has put it – “on the other side”, but within the same country<sup>1</sup>. Those who formed part of this inner diaspora aimed not only at improving their own socio-economical condition, but at least some aimed also at making another dream come true – the dream of cultivating their own creativity. Many writers, poets and artists gathered in Harlem from all over the States as well as from the Caribbean to find inspiration while fighting and protesting against Jim Crow practices.

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Reconsidering the past experience and achievements of the Harlem Renaissance thirty years later, Hughes looked in retrospect at the drive that pushed massive numbers of African Americans to leave the South to move to northern cities such as Detroit, Chicago and New York. In some ways, the Great Migration may be regarded as an American internal version of Deleuze and Guattari’s well-known global binarism of deterritorialisation/reterritorialisation, whereas the African Americans uprooting from their Southern territory are deterritorialised and simultaneously reterritorialised within the confines of their own nation, in the North of the United States, thus experiencing a complex process of mapping identity onto space. Harlem becomes a new territory, created through deterritorialisation, whereby milieu components are separated and made more autonomous, and reterritorialisation, through which these components achieve fresh meanings<sup>2</sup>. In the case of the Harlem Renaissance, moving North gave many Southern African-American writers, poets and artists a liberating feeling of disconnection and the opportunity of transfiguring such milieu elements as the trauma of segregation into a racial solidarity that fostered creativity for political purposes.

As a matter of fact, the very title, “One-Way Ticket”, exposes an ontological position demanding equal status for blacks. Buying a one-way ticket means being ready to leave the past behind even in a condition of total uncertainty about the future. This discourse suggests a set of principles and a new ideology involving a fearless outlook of self-reliance – discordant with the idea of “shut up and smile” that was so common during the slavery and Reconstruction periods. Words are weapons: once uttered, they can and will generate actions that can result in change. Hughes wrote from experience, and this made his poetry

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<sup>1</sup> “We do return and leave and return again, criss-crossing the Atlantic, but whichever side of the Atlantic we are on, the dream is always on the other side” (Melville 1990: 148-149).

<sup>2</sup> Deleuze & Guattari 1987 [1980]; Mikula 2008: 48.

even more valuable and true to life. His message thus helped in shaping a self-confident identity for the African-American community – a stimulating idea of assertiveness that would be developed with the disparate legacies of the Black Power movement and the later hip hop scene.

To this purpose, similarly to “The Song of the Smoke”, a 1907 poem by W. E. B. Du Bois that could well be used today as the lyric of a hip-hop tune, “One-Way Ticket” gives voice to all those no longer prepared to be patient in the face of injustice and discrimination<sup>3</sup>. “The Song of the Smoke” functions as a poetic counterpart to a point made at the beginning of *The Souls of Black Folk*, a passage in which Du Bois recollects a childhood incident when a white girl refused his card in an exchange, and later the young Du Bois felt he should stop ignoring the racism he had to endure on the grounds of feeling superior to such a frame of mind. Worth mentioning are also the last words uttered by Ralph Ellison’s unnamed protagonist’s grandfather on his deathbed in the novel *Invisible Man* (1952), when he declared himself a traitor for having refused to fight back against all the harassment he had had to suffer in his lifetime: “Son, after I’m gone I want you to keep up the good fight [...] our life is a war and I have been a traitor all my born days, a spy in the enemy’s country ever since I give up my gun back in the Reconstruction” (Ellison 2001: 16). As meekness is treachery, buying a one-way ticket therefore becomes a mark of determination, a Nat Palmerish call to arms, a Fanonian discourse of backlash put in practice<sup>4</sup>.

#### a. Hughes’ ‘Simple’ Poetry and the Blues Form

Although to many readers and critics alike Hughes is either one of the most eloquent American poets to have sung about injustice and discrimination or the author of verses of touching lyric beauty beyond issues of race and justice, for other readers, scholars and fellow poets Hughes’ poetry was far too simple and almost unlearned, definitely inadequate to tackle the complexities of modern life (Rampersad & Roessel 1994: 3). Hughes’ work was criticised by black intellectuals also because it portrayed an unattractive view of black life. Indeed, there has been a heated critical debate about whether his poetry was somehow overrated. Countee Cullen, for example, “wondered whether some of Hughes’ poems were poems at all”; James Baldwin noted that his unsuccessful poems “take refuge, finally, in a fake simplicity in order to avoid the very difficult simplicity of experience”; Hughes’ biographer Arnold Rampersad reported that for several critics his poetry was characterised by an intellectual and emotional shallowness<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> “The Song of the Smoke” is a vehicle for a political statement of affirmation of racial pride, as the following lines demonstrate: “I will be black as blackness can / The blacker the mantle, the mightier the man! / For blackness was ancient ere whiteness began”. See Elia 2017. As Hughes had it in his poem “Harlem”: “Here on the edge of hell / Stands Harlem / Remembering the old lies, / The old kicks in the back, / The old “Be patient” / They told us before”. See Rampersad & Roessel 1994: 363-364.

<sup>4</sup> Nat Turner (1800-1831) led one of the bloodiest slave revolts in America on August 21, 1831 in Southampton County, Virginia. Turner was eventually hanged. He became an icon of the 1960s Black Power movement. See also Jean Paul Sartre’s “Preface” to the anti-colonial liberationist discourse devised by Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961).

<sup>5</sup> See Henzy 2011: 915; Ikonne in Bloom ed. 1989: 151-167; Baldwin 1959: 6. For an overview of the criticism on Hughes’ poetry, see <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/langston-hughes> (consulted on 01/09/2018).

It is true that Hughes is no Gerald Manley Hopkins or T. S. Eliot, but this is not necessarily a fault, especially since he never really set out to write complex intertextual poetry. All told, not always is complexity a synonym of quality and simplicity of mediocrity. Hughes' poetry is simple but not simplistic<sup>6</sup>. In the same way that silence is often somehow a way of telling everything, simplicity does not inevitably suggest feelings of superficiality. Hughes' simplicity is instead the simplification of the complex: it does not precede, but follows an articulated analysis, a capacity of evaluation, of criticism, of elaborated logical processes and complex psychological routes<sup>7</sup>.

However, it should also be pointed out that Hughes' *One-Way Ticket* poetry collection occasionally reveals a peculiar stylistic complexity. For example, while describing life in the ghetto, the poem "Summer Evening" foreshadows the experimental form and structure of his next collection, *Montage of a Dream Deferred* (1951) by showing absurd combinations and unexpected realities reminiscent of T. S. Eliot's "objective correlative"<sup>8</sup>:

Mothers pass,  
Sweet watermelon in a baby carriage,  
[...] Pimps in gray go by,  
Boots polished like a Murray head,  
Or in reverse  
Madam Walker  
On their shoe tips.  
I. W. Harper  
Stops to listen to gospel songs  
From a tent at the corner,  
Where the carnival is Christian.

The bizarre juxtapositions – mothers carrying a watermelon in a baby carriage, pimps polishing their shoes with hair grease, a drinker named after the brand of his whiskey listening to Gospel songs from a church meeting in a tent – reveal fantastic realities common to black ghettos and recall the Eliotian "situation[s] and chain[s] of events that shall be the formula of that particular emotion" that Hughes endeavors to evoke in the reader.

Hughes' poetic voice – free, minimal, music-inflected, based on spoken English – displays a deliberate lack of sophistication. Despite its alleged shortcomings, his poetry is a powerful vehicle for new ideas and resonates both thematically and stylistically with the blues, a form that in Ralph Ellison's words constitutes an "autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically"<sup>9</sup>. In his celebrated essay "The Negro Artist and the

<sup>6</sup> For an analysis of Hughes' "metaphysics of simplicity", see Henzy 2011.

<sup>7</sup> These reflections on the idea of simplicity have been borrowed from theologian Adriana Zarri's memoir *Un eremo non è un guscio di lumaca*. See Zarri 2011: 143-144.

<sup>8</sup> Illustrated by Jacob Lawrence, the collection includes sixty-six poems, fifty-six of which are new, divided into ten sections. "One-Way Ticket" belongs to the eighth section titled "Name in Uphill Letters". See Eliot 1919. Patterson 2000 also noticed an affinity between some of Hughes' and T. S. Eliot's poems.

<sup>9</sup> See Ellison 2002: 66 and Patterson 2000: 661.

Racial Mountain" (1926), Hughes poignantly stressed that he admired the humor, warmth and exuberance of "low-down folks", who became his most representative subject<sup>10</sup>. Although he did not belong to these plain black people, he strongly identified with them and recorded authentically their frustrations. As Bloom has remarked, Hughes was a "very complex person, split between a sophisticated consciousness and a fierce determination to create a popular and simplified poetic art" (Bloom 1999: 10).

The stories of the Great Migration were narrated in different guises, such as poems, novels, memoirs, paintings and songs recreating intense feelings of identification. The blues was the ultimate conduit through which tales of racism, hardship and hope for a better life could be told. This characteristic mood can be detected in "Northbound Blues" (1925), one of the earliest recorded songs about the Great Migration by singer and pianist Maggie Jones:

Going North child, where I can be free  
Where there's no hardships, like in Tennessee  
Going where they don't have Jim Crow laws  
Don't have to work there, like in Arkansas.

Hughes was attracted to the blues primarily because it expressed the resilience of that African-American lower class he always identified with, but to which he never really belonged. He enjoyed both the sadness and the humor of the blues, the former because it manifested the "hopeless weariness" of an oppressed people, the latter because – as he put it – "you had to be gay or die"<sup>11</sup>. A telling example is his poem "Bound No'th Blues" (1926), where he used rhyme, repetition and rhythm to evoke the traditional blues form. Here the final lines – based on repetition to recreate poetically the length of the road – require an imaginative effort on the part of the reader to interpret the lyric as an actual blues vocalist would do<sup>12</sup>:

Goin' down the road, Lawd,  
Goin' down the road.  
Down the road, Lawd,  
Way, way down the road.  
Got to find somebody  
To help me carry this load.  
[...] Road, road, road, O!  
Road, road... road... road, road!  
Road, road, road, O!  
On the no'thern road.  
These Mississippi towns ain't  
Fit fer a hoppin' toad.

<sup>10</sup> Hughes in Levering Lewis ed. 1994: 91-95; Bloom 1999: 14.

<sup>11</sup> Chinitz 1996: 178; Hughes 1986 [1940]: 209.

<sup>12</sup> See Chinitz 1996: 182-183 and "One-Way Ticket: Jacob Lawrence's Migration Series".

### b. "One-Way Ticket": Lines "Spoken by a Friend"

As we have seen, Hughes continued to explore the issue of the Great Migration in later poems, notably "One-Way Ticket". While the rhyming pattern is different from the traditional blues AAB stanza characterised by first line, repeat line and response line, there is still a significant affinity between "One-Way Ticket" and his blues poems if one subscribes to Onwuchekwa Jemie's definition of blues composition as "one that, regardless of form, utilises the themes, motifs, language and imagery common to popular blues literature"<sup>13</sup>. In some ways, Hughes' poetic persona uses a simple style – as bluesmen do – to be able to communicate with as many people as possible, in order to deliver his message in a powerful and effective way, almost like the language used in successful mass advertising or in populist literature. To this purpose, as Rampersad and Roessel rightly noted, in order to reach his primary audience (the black masses) Hughes was prepared to write 'down' to and for them (Rampersad & Roessel 1994: 5).

In an early review of the collection *One-Way Ticket*, Creekmore (1949) was correct when he observed that Hughes' lyric, blues and folksong forms have been "stripped almost to bareness [to pursue] an even more direct and forceful method" – "the lines seem spoken by a friend", as Creekmore suggestively pointed out. Another contemporary review by Lewis Chandler highlighted the richness of Hughes' multifaceted contribution, regardless of the simplicity of style: "Chaucerian sly humor and realism, Wordsworthian simplicity, Shakespearian blending of comedy and tragedy, Emersonian individualism and precision, Whitmanesque earthiness and cosmopolitanism [...] reminding us of the dramatic monologues of Browning and Dunbar [...] the puzzling irony of Frost and Emily Dickinson" (Chandler 1949: 190).

Such speculations contradict the idea of blues as an art form that is best experienced in singing and which does not stand up well in written form. One would then agree with Chinitz (1996: 177) that Hughes often succeeded in producing compositions that manage to capture the quality of blues in performance while being effective and successful as poems (Oliver 1983: 8). As in typical blues songs, "One-Way Ticket" gives us an effective account of the sufferings not of an individual, but of a whole people:

I pick up my life  
And take it with me  
And I put it down in  
Chicago, Detroit,  
Buffalo, Scranton,  
Any place that is  
North and East –  
And not Dixie.

In the opening stanza, the first-person singular pronouns 'I' and 'me' are not personal, but Whitmanesque, that is, universal and inclusive. The narrator is forced to 'pick up' and 'take' his life elsewhere, anywhere but South, both metaphor for racism and discrim-

<sup>13</sup> See Chinitz 1996: 177 and Jemie 1976: 44.

ination and its geographical nucleus. Using the medium of an informal talk recalling the style of Robert Frost, although in a different rhythm and linguistic register, Hughes manages to convey the drama and the uncertainties of this one-way northbound journey away from Dixieland, that is, the southern states that joined the Confederacy during the Civil War (Chandler 1949: 190).

The second stanza unveils the possibility of a better future that is geographically located anywhere but South:

I pick up my life  
And take it on the train  
To Los Angeles, Bakersfield,  
Seattle, Oakland, Salt Lake,  
Any place that is  
North and West –  
And not South.

The third stanza illustrates the reasons for leaving – Jim Crow laws, lynching, prejudices, racial abuse. The South therefore becomes a marker of oppression and prevarication. It is described as a dark place where:

I am fed up  
With Jim Crow laws,  
People who are cruel  
And afraid,  
Who lynch and run,  
Who are scared of me  
And me of them.

The practice of discriminating against and segregating black people, even lynching them without legal process, was later effectively described by James Baldwin in *The Fire Next Time* (Baldwin 1963: 66): “The Negro’s past, of rope, fire, torture, castration, infanticide, rape; death and humiliation; fear by day and night, fear as deep as the marrow of the bone; [...] this endless struggle to achieve and reveal and confirm a human authority, yet contains, for all its horror, something very beautiful”. Baldwin’s final note of optimism underlines the possibility of a redemption through art and beauty, that is precisely what Hughes and other poets, writers and artists of the Harlem Renaissance were striving to achieve.

The final stanza reinforces the message expressed at the beginning of the poem. The narrator ‘picks up’ the only ‘thing’ left to him, that is, his life, and cannot do anything but take it anywhere but South, away from racism and poverty:

I pick up my life  
And take it away  
On a one-way ticket –  
Gone up North,

Gone out West,  
Gone!

Ultimately, buying a one-way ticket may be seen as a metaphorical gesture implying courage and assertiveness, a strong political act against the status quo. On several occasions, Hughes himself bought a one-way ticket, spending months travelling to West Africa and Europe. Therefore, it is significant that Harold Bloom came to the conclusion that Hughes' most important contribution had to be traced back in his entire life as a writer and author more than in a particular work, thus implicitly suggesting that perhaps it is facts (that is, Hughes' life) rather than words (that is, his works) that make a difference (Bloom 1989: 1-3). To back up this point, Bloom made reference to Rampersad's biography to show how Hughes' life was exemplary in his struggle against racial discrimination. Rampersad compared Hughes to Whitman, whose free verses Hughes had certainly been influenced by and with whom he shared the idea that one's life is the most important and authentic poem one could possibly write. As a matter of fact, Hughes' enjoyable autobiographies, *The Big Sea* (1940) and the cleverly titled *I Wonder as I Wander* (1956), confirm this idea, introducing us to a man with an enormous vital strength, always ready to launch himself into new adventures with enthusiasm (just think about his several sea voyages) and readily reacting against the many adversities hindering his journey<sup>14</sup>.

### c. Shaping identity in the Harlem Renaissance

As Alain Locke, the main promoter of the Harlem Renaissance, aptly pointed out in the 'Foreword' to *The New Negro*, in the 1920s nine-tenths of the literature was about the Negro, and only one-tenth was about him. Locke made a clear distinction between the Old Negro and the New Negro, the former being "a something to be argued about, condemned or defended, to be 'kept down,' or 'in his place', [...] harassed or patronized, a social bogey or a social burden", the latter showing instead a renewed self-respect and assertiveness, thus creating a "laboratory of a great race-welding" (Locke 2015: ix, 3, 7). It was in Harlem, then, that New Negroes found their first chances for self-expression and self-determination. Albeit in a different socio-historical context, a similar scenario of social solidarity and sense of belonging would be experienced in London by the post-World War II Windrush generation from the Caribbean. It was there and then that perhaps a West-Indian psyche was first created, because for the first time people like Moses, the Trinidadian protagonist of Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners*, met other people from Jamaica, Barbados, Guyana and other places of the Caribbean<sup>15</sup>. Siding with Du Bois in his diatribe with Booker T. Washington over the role of education for African Americans, Locke claimed that the arts and letters are crucial to "rehabilitating the race in world esteem from that loss of prestige for which the fate and conditions of slavery have so largely been responsible" (Locke 2015: 14-15). There was the

<sup>14</sup> "I Wonder as I Wander" (1933) is also a folk hymn performed as a Christmas carol and written by American singer John Jacob Niles.

<sup>15</sup> *The Lonely Londoners* (1956) is the first novel of the "Moses trilogy", involving *Moses Ascending* (1975) and *Moses Migrating* (1983). See Elia 2009: 318.



need – in Locke’s words – of a “revaluation by white and black alike of the Negro in terms of his artistic endowments and cultural contributions, past and prospective”.

It is widely acknowledged, however, that the Harlem Renaissance was no popular movement, as it was financed by white intellectual and social elites, the “Negrotarians”, as Zora Neale Hurston caustically defined figures like Carl Van Vechten, the author of the controversial novel *Nigger Heaven* (1926), who condescendingly supported the “Niggerati”, to use another ironic coinage to define black intellectuals – a phrase that for a substantial part of the white cultural establishment of that time sounded like an oxymoron. LeRoi Jones dismissed the impact of the Harlem Renaissance by saying that “the ‘Harlem School’ of writers attempted to glorify the lives of the black masses, but only succeeded in making their lives seem *exotic* as literary themes” (Jones 2002: 134, Jones’ italics); Levering Lewis likewise reckoned that the movement was “an elitist response on the part of a tiny group of mostly second-generation, college-educated, and generally affluent Afro-Americans” (Lewis 1989: xvi).

Nevertheless, as Fitts Ward has suggested, by re-appropriating the term ‘nigger’ as “an act of freedom, supplanting white supremacist connotations with notions of communal pride and solidarity”, Hurston’s use of the term “Niggerati”, if ironic, encouraged the construction of an “artistic community whose underlying political motivation was [...] to incite social and political change, and to celebrate the creation of Black art” (Ward 2017: 148-149). As briefly touched on above, the positive re-appropriation of the term ‘nigger’ by the 1960s Black Power movement, the 1970s boom of blaxploitation films to 1990s hip hop with the diffusion of the alternative spelling “nigga” brought about the affirmation of an ever-growing race consciousness. In different ways, Fitts Ward continues, both the “Niggerati” and the “Talented Tenth” – to recall Du Bois’ celebrated expression – had equal aspirations and responsibilities in supporting the cause of blacks, but while the former championed absolute artistic freedom, the latter encouraged a form of art mainly based on political propaganda<sup>16</sup>.

Although it was a very small minority who propagated this new ideology of racial assertiveness, it should be noted that poets like Hughes were deeply inspired by the sorrows of ordinary blacks, often resorting to their typical speech patterns and expressions to make their poems more authentic. Ultimately, while it is true that ordinary Negroes knew nothing about the Harlem Renaissance, the movement was still a reflection of the new race pride brought about by the Great Migration. In the 1930s, in response to the Great Depression, Hughes wrote a series of radical poems – notably “Goodbye Christ” (1932) and “Let America Be America Again” (1935) – the former was used by conservative political groups to put pressure on Hughes regarding charges of his holding Communist beliefs, which led the poet to a strategic repudiation of his political poetry on the grounds that “politics can be the graveyard of the poet”. In the post-World War II years Hughes settled in Harlem and returned to older themes – “Negroes, nature and love”, as he put it ironically<sup>17</sup>.

<sup>16</sup> For Du Bois, the ‘Talented Tenth’ was an élite of African Americans (about one out of ten) who could have led their community towards the recognition of their rights. As he stated in the essay “Criteria of Negro Art” (1926), “all Art is propaganda and ever must be. [...] I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda”. See Sundquist 1996: 304, 328.

<sup>17</sup> See Rampersad & Roessel 1994: 4. Fitts Ward (2017: 149) signals an intra-racial conflict between the Nig-

Following Du Bois' above-mentioned statement about the importance of an art exclusively aimed at political propaganda, the literary and artistic contribution of the Harlem Renaissance was crucial for the development of a new vision of opportunity, not only in social and economic terms, but also fostering a different self-reliant attitude. This innovative spirit can be epitomised in the ideas of freshness, vitality and critical spirit as they emerge in "Youth" (1925), a poem by Hughes which begins with a description of a bright future set against the past, dark allusions to the old sufferings, and then the present, a dawn, a new "dynamic phase" shaking off old stereotypes (Locke 2015: 4-5)<sup>18</sup>:

We have tomorrow  
Bright before us  
Like a flame.

Yesterday  
A night-gone thing,  
A sun-down name.

And dawn-today  
Broad arch above the road we came.

We march!

#### d. Conclusion

In his Anthology *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, James Weldon Johnson famously noted that "the status of the Negro in the United States is more a question of national mental attitude toward the race [...] nothing will do more to change that mental attitude and raise his status than a demonstration of intellectual parity by the Negro through his production of literature and art" (Johnson 1922: 7). It is this striving towards reaching not only a socio-economic improvement, but also a heightened cultural dignity that makes the Harlem Renaissance such a crucial movement fostering a spiritual emancipation that goes hand in hand with a civil emancipation.

"One-Way Ticket" is certainly a remarkable example of popular, non-elitist poetry, its simple lines looking like a stripped-down version of blues poems, even more minimal than the already skeletal blues form. As we have seen, Hughes' simplicity of style delivers an important political message conveying a new spirit of strength and assertiveness, in order, as he put it, to "express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame" (Lever-

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gerati, who openly supported an art focused on the Black working class, and the "Talented Tenth" of black intellectuals such as Du Bois and Locke, who encouraged a Black art aiming at the high art of white culture, a position dismissed by Hughes in his essay "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" as an "urge within the race toward whiteness [...] to be as little Negro and as much American as possible". See Hughes in Levering 1994: 91.

<sup>18</sup> This poem was entitled "Poem" in the collection *The Weary Blues*. For details about the different versions see Rampersad & Roessel 1994: 624.

ing Lewis ed. 1994: 95). The motivations and emotional impact of the Great Migration are powerfully presented in this poem, that thus ends up being far more complex and ambitious than it appears at first sight. As James Baldwin argued in *A Rap on Race*, “If history were the past, history wouldn’t matter. History is the present, the present. You and I are history” (Baldwin 1971: 66). “One-Way Ticket” is therefore a poem in which the African-American unstable identity that results from the conflation of past and present indicates the inescapable fact that, although one cannot escape one’s origin, it is possible through literature and art to construct a different future demanding equal recognition for blacks.

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