

Dorothy West's Re-imagining of the Migration Narrative

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This thesis explores Dorothy West's interpretation of the migration experience through her novel *The Living is Easy*. Dorothy West breaks new ground by documenting a Black female migrant's sojourn from South to North in an era in which such narratives were virtually non-existent. West seemingly rejects both a separation between North and South as well as any sentiment of condemning the North or South in totality. Instead, West chooses to settle her novel in a gray area. Moreover, in refusing to condemn the South, Dorothy West redeems the South from oversimplified negative assumptions of the region. My interpretation of Dorothy West's *The Living is Easy* as well as Cleo Judson both highlights West's contributions to the genre by complicating the assumptions of what a migration narrative contains by centering the migrating Black female body.

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General Audience Abstract

This thesis examined Dorothy West's Migration Narrative, *The Living is Easy*. Migration Narratives are a genre of African – American literature that concerns the historical period in the early 20th century in which thousands of Black Americans migrated from the regional South to the regional North and Midwest. This novel is unique in the fact that it focuses on a female character and concerns the city of Boston, both atypical characteristics. I use this information to analyze the ways in which Dorothy West adheres to and challenges the typical assumptions of the Migration Narrative. The findings of this thesis adds to the body of work on Dorothy West, as well as the male-dominated genre of Migration Narratives.

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“I wanted to write about the people I knew.” Dorothy West shared these words in a 1980s interview with Deborah McDowell (McDowell). The people West knew was the cloistered Massachusetts enclave she familiarized herself with as an adolescent. These Black people Dorothy West knew would come to inspire many of the characters seen in her first novel, *The Living is Easy*. However, what is substantial about this seemingly simple desire is not just who these people were, but what they were. *The Living is Easy* tells a story of a Black woman who migrates from South to North – a story that, at the time, was not a story often told. This subject matter made the novel controversial from its very inception. *Ladies Home Journal*, the intended publisher, feared alienating its primarily White and female readers with a Black story. The novel was, instead, eventually published by Random House to critical success; West was compared to Edith Wharton (whom she admired) and her protagonist was called a “yellow Scarlet O’ Hara.” However, despite initial critical success as well as ground-breaking content, *The Living is Easy* soon fell into obscurity and was not rediscovered until decades later when *Feminist Press* issued their republication in 1995.

The Living is Easy is one of the few novels both to feature a female protagonist and to have been written by a woman. Indeed, at the time of publication, *The Living is Easy* was one of only two¹. *The Living is Easy*, at first glance, seems to employ the basic

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The second being *Quicksand* by Nella Larsen. Marita Bonner also wrote several, although they were short stories and did not gain the popularity nor influence of *Quicksand*. See. *Who Set You Flowin’* by Farrah Griffin.

conventions of a migration narrative. Further analysis reveals, however, that the novel adds to the form through its inclusion of such themes as the unique violence against women, (threatening both their physical bodies and personhood), negative ideology regarding gender, and the stultifying institutions women participated in as well as their efforts to form subversive institutions. *The Living is Easy* pushes back against common literary conventions that demonized the South. Similarly, West creates a nuanced view of the North as neither a paradise, nor a fully impossible space for Black migrants to live. *The Living is Easy* also concerns itself with a Black woman's struggle to maintain her personal, cultural identity in an urban and continually changing environment. These aforementioned traits of the novel all tie into its concerns as a migration narrative. While previous scholarship has addressed *The Living is Easy's* feminist values and its treatment of the North, few scholars have considered the idea of the protagonist, Cleo Judson, as both a woman and a migrant within the context of migration novels. *The Living is Easy* is an important, ground-breaking migration narrative. **Dorothy West writes a migration narrative, but complicates typical expectations by addressing themes which illuminate the journey and the resistance of Black female migrants as well as reconsidering simplistic views of the North and South.**

The purpose of this thesis is to explore Dorothy West's treatment of the migration narrative. I approach the novel with several questions. How does focusing on a female character alter the typical migration story? How does Cleo's female identity shape the kinds of trials and tribulations she confronts? Lastly, how is West's representation of the South and North different from what one typically expects from a migration narrative?

I examine several elements significant in the novel: First, I analyze historical perceptions of women relevant to the time period in which *The Living is Easy* takes place and the specific institutions that *The Living is Easy* engages with throughout the novel in order to illustrate both Cleo's resistance and conformity. Next, I consider the ways in which Dorothy West addresses previously unexplored violences in the narrative as it relates to women's migration; these notions will necessarily overlap, leading into the final section, in which I address the particular struggle between North and South Dorothy West presents in the novel through Cleo Judson. I will ultimately reveal an interpretation of the novel's contribution to migration narratives as a whole.

Overview of the Novel

Originally hailing from the Carolinas, Cleo is sent from her mother, father, and younger sisters to live in Massachusetts. Once she finds herself in Boston, she tries to assimilate and conform, but only to the extent that will allow her to reap the benefits of Northern life and yet maintain the facets of Southern living and the culture of her adolescence that she values. Dorothy West crafts a raw and honest look at Cleo. As a character, Cleo Judson can sometimes be problematic and hypocritical due to her manipulative personality and dueling view towards other Black southerners. However, Dorothy West endows Cleo Judson with complexity as Cleo tries to transform herself from Southern country girl to Northern socialite.

Cleo Judson is married to the so-called "banana king," Bart Judson. Her marriage is initially used as an escape². However, Cleo learns to use her marriage to her own social

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and financial advantage. Cleo has one daughter whom she also tries to conform to the “Boston mold” (West 5). The “Boston Mold” is the cultural competency which Cleo believes is necessary to be successful in her Northern, urban surroundings. Cleo convinces her husband to purchase a new house for the family and misleads him about the rent so that she can keep the surplus. Further, Cleo lures her sisters to her new home with lies in order to spend what ultimately becomes a short time with her originally family reconnected. This lifestyle is short lived; by the end of Cleo’s story, Bart Judson's banana business has failed (due to World War One affecting the fruit trading market and Cleo's spending) and her sisters have found jobs and duties outside the home. Towards the end of the novel, Cleo hosts a successful dinner party in order to solidify herself as a member of Boston’s high society. During this dinner party, there is a pivotal scene in which Cleo and her party goers reject the South by refusing to put their support behind Simeon Binney, who is advocating on behalf of a Cleo’s brother – in –law, who has been accused of murder in the Jim Crow South they long left behind. Cleo's schemes and struggles are manifestations of the conflict between Northern and Southern culture. By rejecting Simeon Binney's plea, Cleo rejects her own past, culture and, unbeknownst to her, family.

Despite this particular rejection of the South within the context of the novel, *The Living is Easy* refuses easy categorization as a migration narrative much in the same way it refuses to agree on one particular manifestation of the North or South. West's narrative

As I will explain later in the thesis, Cleo Judson initially engages in the institution of marriage for the purpose of escaping the sexual predations of her matriarch’s nephew

seeks to arrive at a truth through the hypocritical thoughts of the protagonist, a multi-layered narrative, and depictions that marry Southern horror with an acknowledgment of the value of ancestry and traceable Southern familial roots.

Scholars have defined *The Living is Easy* in several ways. Of the already small number of scholarly articles, several acknowledge the migration narrative aspect³. This small number contributes to a dearth in the scholarship which ignores a crucial aspect of the novel. The novel is widely viewed as a critique of the North. In *Reconstructing Womanhood*, Hazel Carby calls *The Living is Easy* an “urban confrontation of race, sexuality and class” (Carby 175). The urban North is suggested to be unstable due to the ways in which it denies the South while relying on a false sense of separation from the South⁴. Scholarship has primarily focused on the restriction of women and the most feminist undertones of the novel. Jennifer Wilks states that this era's ideals of womanhood and racial citizenship “colluded” to “narrowly define women's identities” (570). The “narrowly define[d]...identities” can be argued to be from an effect that “The Cult of True Womanhood” had on Black women, forcing them to prove they were “ladies” (569). Pamela Sanders states that “Cleo...is angry and frustrated over the limitations and

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For articles that go in depth regarding the migratory aspects of *The Living is Easy*, consider Lawrence Rodger's “Dorothy West's *The Living is Easy* and the Ideal of Southern Folk Community” and *Who Set You Flowin'* by Farrah Griffin

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Lawrence Rodgers relies heavily on the argument. Cherene Sherrard-Johnson's ““This Plague of Their Own Locusts”: Space, Property, and Identity in Dorothy West's *the Living is Easy*” also references this point.

restrictions placed on women's lives.” Sander's analysis of *The Living is Easy* primarily focuses on the feminism of the novel and its availability to critique traditionally male and traditionally female spheres. Sanders highlights the masculine and feminine traits that Judson expresses and denies, respectively, arguing that, despite what other critics have concluded, the end of the novel depicts Cleo “as a woman and as a human who has reached a new level of self-definition, beyond limiting, binary gender definition” (Sanders 436). Her primary argument is that Cleo is “masculine” (or even in direct denial of her gender) due to the fact that she is assertive, competitive and doesn't fall in line with traditional Jezebel nor mammy tropes (436-437). Cleo is further suggested to be “race hating” (Rodgers 167). However, I would assert that rather than being in denial possessing hatred toward her race and gender, this thesis suggests that Dorothy west is depicting a character who is hyper aware of her race and gender (and how these they might negatively affect journey and ascension in the North) and seeks to subvert the constructs surrounding her race and gender. Therefore, instead of an inward denial, it is a refusal to be treated the way Black women migrants were treated by outside forces.

The Great Migration

In order to fully understand the context and importance of *The Living is Easy*, the reader must understand The Great Migration and Black America's history with the Southern region of The United States. Black Americans have experienced two great historical movements. The first was the initial forced removal from Western Africa throughout the 1600s until the 1800s. The second great historical movement is The Great Migration which took place in the early half of the 20th century in two large waves

occurring in the 1910s and 1920s, respectively. This movement's cultural impact greatly shifted the Northern cities which suddenly had exponential influxes of not simply Black residents, since some of these cities had small Black populations of Black residents already, but Black residents from the deep and coastal South. In a short period of time, the North was forced to deal with a large set of people who brought new definitions of culture to their respective cities and states.

Nell Irving Painter, in her introduction to *The Great Migration in a Historical Perspective: New Dimensions of Race, Class and Gender*, states that The Great Migration represents not simply “immigration,” but “freedom” as well (2). She further asserts that migration, for Black Americans, was a “decisive step towards personal autonomy,” thereby adding a layer of self-determination to the phenomenon. The concept of decisiveness and autonomy is paramount to *The Living is Easy*, as one of the novels concerns is Black women’s freedom. Cleo Judson complicates notions of self – determination by participating in a migratory journey that has moments of personal freedom and moments of restrictions

While the American South is an expansive region that is by no means homogenous, it presented Black Americans with a legion of universal issues that inspired migration to Northern or more urbanized areas. The South gained a reputation as the home of lynchings, discriminatory laws and natural disaster. The two shifts in the 20th century was comprised of approximately 500,000 Black Southerners migrating to the North and Mid-West (Hines 128). Black Americans migrated to the North for a variety of reasons, ranging from changes that blighted agriculture, job opportunities in the North,

and threats of violence from Southern Whites. Historically, many Black Americans were driven North by flooding or the boll weevil which ultimately ruined the crops they depended on for survival (Pleck 2). Ida B. Well's *Southern Horrors: Lynch Laws in All Its Phases* and *The Red Record* documented the numerous lynchings which occurred after manumission, focusing on the 1890s. Similarly, Frederick Douglass' speech *Southern Barbarism*, given in the 1880s, argues the violence of the lynch-mob that dominated the Southern justice system. Publications such as *The Crisis* published many articles that publicized extra-judicial killings from the 1910s through the 1930s. Therefore, the image of the lynching dominated rhetoric regarding the south. According to Farrah Griffin, economic strife superseded even lynchings as an impetus to move. Agriculture was transforming into a failing industry and Black Americans were forced to look to industrial jobs such as factories; these jobs often populated urban areas of the North and South.

On the other hand, the North had always been viewed as the land of opportunity. Of course, before The Civil War, the North was the metaphorical “Promised Land” for enslaved African Americans and a destination for enslaved people to escape bondage. As African American people began to move to more urban areas, they found work as domestics, in transportation, agriculture and some factory work in more industrialized areas (Lewis, Trotter)⁵. Networks further encouraged migration as family members

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It is useful to think of migration in terms of rural vs. industrial as all migration was not South to North. Because of this, the kinds of labor that migrants sought differs and cannot be pin pointed to one or two fields. For specified information, I suggest *The Great Migration in Historical Perspective: New Dimensions on Race, Class and Gender* by William J. Trotter, Jr.

coaxed their Southern relatives to join them in Northern cities.

The Living is Easy concerns Boston. In terms of migration, The Freedman's Bureau was responsible for many Black Bostonians. The Freedman's Bureau performed the largest importation of Black migrants for the purpose of employment. This occurred between 1864 and 1868 (Pleck 25)⁶. The Freedman's Bureau functioned as an employment agency, soliciting “laborers,” “farmhands” and “colored girl servants” (27) from former contraband camps (26). The city of Boston was touted as having a “great demand” for Black workers and advertised its “sympathy” towards Black Southerners (Pleck 25). Therefore, Boston, as a Northern city, provided a stark contrast to the overarching image of the South. Although there were still elements of segregation as well as structural racism in the North, the lack of overt, visible discriminatory laws in tandem with the presence of multiple job opportunities made Boston an attractive destination for those seeking relief from the south.

Boston is unique in the fact that, compared to other American cities, it always had a stable free Black community. Even before the end of slavery nation-wide, Boston had a small, functioning Black middle class. Towards the late 19th and early 20th century, they began to develop organizations:

Antebellum Boston blacks used [their] freedoms to develop a rich and

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The Freedman's Bureau consisted only of ex-slaves. It does not account for Black Americans that migrated later, nor does it include African Americans who were never slaves in Massachusetts

varied community life. Prince Hall...organized the first branch of the Masons in 1778, and several families established a society for mutual aid in 1796. Boston blacks began the African Baptist Church. By 1850 black Boston had four churches, several Masonic lodges, and a literary society (Pleck 20).

Many intellectual clubs were also founded by Black Bostonians in the face of segregation (Cromwell 40). The Black families that resided in Boston throughout the 18th century and into the early 20th century formed a rich cultural enclave.

This aforementioned information presents a simplified portrait of the North and South operating on a dichotomy of good and bad, freedom and slavery and opportunity and misfortune, respectively. Perceptions of The South were heavily influenced by the real world narratives, reports of violence and lack of economic opportunities.

Perceptions of The North were influenced by the freedman's bureau, the absence of explicit segregation or disenfranchisement laws, and the draw of family already settled in Northern cities. Further, the two regions are metaphors for opposing forces in the lives of Black Americans.

Migration narratives themselves can be read as a sequel to the slave narrative of the pre-Civil War United States. Through migration narratives, the reader is given literature that seeks to navigate the United States through the eyes of legally free Black Americans as they attempt to move and settle throughout multiple parts of the United States with a new-found autonomy. The focus of Dorothy West's novel fits well into the tradition of both Migration Narratives and more urban centered novels (as well as the

more general umbrella of Black women's fiction).

Dorothy West and Migration

A precocious author, Dorothy West began writing at the age of seven in her family's Oak Bluff home. At fourteen, she was published in *The Boston Post*. After winning a prize from the Urban League for her short story "The Typewriter," she moved to Harlem (Yarrow) to join the large number of authors, poets, singers and artists that comprised the historical explosion of Black creativity known as The Harlem Renaissance. Although she is often forgotten in discussions of the Harlem Renaissance, she was involved with key players, made contributions and wrote novels in the spirit of the era.

While Dorothy West was not a migrant herself, her life was still influenced by the migration of Southern Black Americans to Northern cities. Moreover, West displays a keen awareness of the cultural mores of her surroundings and the cultural differences held between Black Americans from various cities. Indeed her mother and father, who closely resemble the fictional Cleo and Bart Judson of *The Living is Easy*, were originally Southerners from South Carolina and Virginia, respectively (Sherrard-Johnson 18, 40). In a 1980s interview with Deborah E. McDowell, Dorothy West reveals that Cleo Judson "began with [her] mother" (McDowell 297), she also refers to her father as "The Black Banana King," a phrase that will carry on to describe the fictional Bart Judson (Sherrard-Johnson 40). Like Judy Judson (the daughter of the fictional couple), Dorothy West is the Boston – born daughter of two Southerners. This awareness and homage to her own parents bleeds into the pages of the novel and make evident her personal connection with migrants and the ways in which 19th century migration shaped her life.

Defining Migration Narratives

Migration narratives are not easily defined. Because the genre has existed since the earliest parts of the 20th century, it has come to convey multiple meanings and serve many purposes. The genre concerns so much more than a sojourn. However, for the purpose of this thesis, I will focus primarily on migration narratives contemporary to *The Living is Easy* and follow several, concise definitions.

The migrant is a somewhat frequently occurring archetypical figure in African American literature. Paul Laurence Dunbar is credited with penning the first migration narrative. The genre came to be dominated by names such as Jean Toomer and Richard Wright – by and large male authors with male subjects. The migrant has transformed throughout the years. Throughout all incarnations, he or she is an individual who represents discontent with the surroundings America has given them, be it the North or South. During the late 1930s and 1940s, the migrant had taken on the role of a fugitive, a concept this thesis will explore later.

The freedom of emancipation is met with heightened violence and job opportunities are quickly dashed by low wages (compared to the North)⁷ and diminishing agricultural possibilities. The impact of this large exodus of Black bodies was not lost on artists as migration narratives came to be a large genre of work, including fiction and

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Although Northern wages for Black laborers were still comparatively low compared to those of their White counterparts, many Black workers could expect higher pay in the North than South. For more information, please see Darlene Clark Hines “The Gender Dimension”

non-fiction, as well as visual arts and music. However, being such an important event, conspicuously, in the field of literature, most of these narratives concerned primarily the movement of men from North to South.

Female centered narratives were few. Therefore, Dorothy West's contribution to this body of work provides extra layers to an already expansive genre. The act of a Black woman writing a migration narrative about a Black woman cannot be minimized. *The Living is Easy* fills a silence. Dorothy West “charted original ground in African-American and women's narrative” through “revision” (Rodgers 165). West's so-called “revision,” lies primarily in *The Living is Easy's* inclusion of highly developed female characters and its examination of the Black Northern middle class through the employment of satire. Rodgers argues that many migration narratives, many of which he dubs “fugitive migrant novels⁸,” came to follow a similar set of tropes as the slave narrative of the 1800s. The trajectory of the “fugitive migrant” model goes as such: Typically a man⁹, must escape to freedom as a fugitive after violating a *de facto* or *de jure* law. In the case of the “fugitive migrant,” the slavery of the South is replaced with Jim Crow and the literal freedom of the North is replaced with the liberal social and legal

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The “fugitive” can be found in many works, primarily spanning the last 1930s and 1940s. Such works are: George Washington Lee's *River George*; Richard Wright's *Native Son*; William Attaway's *Blood on The Forge*; Curtis Lucas' *The Flour is Dusty*; and Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* (Lawrence 96).

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It is crucial to note that the migrant must be a man in order for this formula to function and retain its original meaning

policies of Northern, urban cities. However, the “fugitive” still fails to find solace in the North, and stays in a suspended state (99). This suspended state prevents the migrant from finding peace or self in either region they traverse. The “fugitive” represented a rebellion from more idealistic images of the South:

They contrast any display of fondness for a Southern pastoral nostalgia, including the reenshrinement of a model plantation South following the publication and screening of Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* and the fiction and folkloric studies of Zora Neale Hurston. Fugitive migrant novels also undermine the utopian connotations derived from more popular images of the North as the biblical land of Canaan (98).

Rodgers also argues that this sub – genre offers the “severest critique” of migration as a method of ascension. *The Living is Easy* does indeed critique the possibility of ascending solely by migrating from South to North. However, within this critique is also the consideration of possibilities in the North.

Rodgers considers *The Living is Easy* a “revision of the fugitive male migration novel” (Rodgers 149 – 150). I choose to expand his initial assertion as it can be applied to the more complex ways in which centering the female experience complicate the novel. Unlike the “fugitive” of the 1940s, Cleo Judson's North and South are far more nuanced (because of the novel’s focus on relationships between women), as I discuss in the final section of this analysis. Farrah Griffin suggests a point of contention in portraying the South in narratives:

Although narratives tend to represent the South as a site of terror and

exploitation, some of them also identify it as a site of the ancestor. The role of the ancestor in the Southern sections of the migration narrative is of great significance to the development of the text. If the ancestor's role is mitigated, then it is likely that throughout the course of the narrative, the South will be portrayed as a site of racial horror and shame (Griffin 5)

Dorothy West claims the South as a site of the ancestor through Cleo's veneration of her female ancestors and family. This further claims the South by not only linking it to estranged Black Americans, but by recasting it from the “site of racial shame.”

Although migration narratives have gone through slight changes throughout the past century, they maintain several primary components. I use these components as a standard to guide my analysis of *The Living is Easy*. I primarily rely on the general designs given by Lawrence Rodgers and Farrah Griffin throughout this thesis. Using their forms of the migration narrative allows the thesis to track where Dorothy West adheres to and deviates from typical conventions of the migration novel. As Lawrence Rodgers details in *Canaan Bound: The Great American Great Migration Novel*, a migration story, at its core, is:

[a narrative] in which a...journey from South to North, occurring either in the novel or figuring prominently in novel's recent past, strongly informs the protagonist's psychological constitution and his or her responses to the external environment (3).

Rodgers adds to his definition by detailing the connotations of the travel and their effect on the migrant, as can be seen with Cleo Judson:

Migration literature generally focuses on how to come to terms with the spatial, communal, and psychological differences between South and North, rural and urban, industrial and agricultural, down home and downtown. Such polarities begin to outline the range of conflicts facing displaced migrants (167).

I am employing Rodger's summary as one of the thesis' guiding definitions of migration novels due to the fact it highlights much of *The Living is Easy's* structure. The reader sees very little of Cleo Judson's actual journey; it is introduced early in the novel and explored only in several chapters. However, these few scenes prepare the reader and Cleo for much of the primary tension in Massachusetts, as she struggles to maintain her cultural identity, while still assimilating Northern culture. The second guideline I use comes from author Farrah Griffin.

Farrah Griffin, in her examination of the migration narrative, *Who Set You Flowin'?* marks the migration narrative with "four pivotal moments:"

1. An event that propels the action Northward
2. An initial confrontation with the urban landscape
3. An illustration of the migrants attempt to negotiate that landscape
4. Finally a vision of the "possibilities or limitations" of the "Northern...city and the South" (Griffin 3).

For the most part, Cleo Judson's journey follows this four step process without deviation. I believe it is in the more minute details of Judson's migration journal that West's writing turns from the common structure. Cleo's gender inflected journey calls into question

many standard migration narrative's tropes. Cleo's "push" to the North is fueled by factors which outline her lack of autonomy as a Black woman. This initial lack of autonomy requires Judson to subvert the restrictive structures around her. Her initial confrontations are framed by gender roles relating to sexuality and marriage. She attempts to negotiate the landscape by exploiting the social and gender structures within Boston in order to gain more clout. Cleo Judson schemes to reclaim her South by migrating her own sisters to Boston. Cleo consistently struggles with the cultural limitations assigned to her as a Southern-born woman who is forced to assimilate into culture that would rather forget the South and conversely a piece of her.

Defining Black Women's Narratives

Prior to the 1980s, *The Living Is Easy* sat in a canon dominated by Black men (Rodgers 167). Gender is a large component of this narrative. Darlene Clark Hines explores "The Gender Dimension" of migration in her addition to *The Great Migration in Historical Perspective*. She focuses mostly on South-to-Midwest migration. However, Hines presents universal themes that seem to crossover in many cases of Black migration. While the number of Black male migrants "far exceeded" (128) that of Black female migrants, Black women still played a critical role. Particularly, as I will explore later in this thesis, women played a large role in the "establishment of Black institutions," as is evident in Cleo Judson's relationships with Black women throughout the novel. The "Gender[ed] Dimension" of *The Living is Easy* further demonstrates aspects of the migration that were unique to women, such as reasons for leaving and restrictions on mobility and autonomy. With a female-focused view of migration also comes a female-

focused view of the South.

A *South Atlantic Review* Journal article titled “The Black Madonna: Notions of True Womanhood from Jacobs to Hurston” summarizes this struggle as follows: “In Trying to overcome a heritage of concubinage and to try to assimilate values of Victorian society... The women in their works are either depicted as sexual martyrs or saints” (Kaiser 97). The writers were, in essence, creating a counter-culture by depicting Black women who were equally as worthy of the privileges of humanity as White women. Most early work surrounding Black American women written by Black authors were grounded in tragedy or respectability. Cleo Judson opens new dimensions by largely foregoing pre-established tropes, including those grounded in minstrelsy and the politics of respectability.

As stated earlier, Dorothy West was not the first to author a female-focused migration novel. Twenty years before the publication of *The Living is Easy*, in the midst of The Harlem Renaissance, came Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand*. The novel’s protagonist, Helga Crane, is the best known female migrant in African-American literature.

To fully understand the impact of Dorothy West’s, *The Living is Easy*, we might fruitfully employ Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand* as a point of reference for female-oriented migration narratives. Larsen’s *Quicksand* is an essential novel in the lineage of Black female migration stories which *The Living is Easy* continues. *Quicksand* establishes and reveals the conventions of Black women’s migrations. Though the fundamental conflicts and confrontations of Larsen’s novel are echoed in West’s, the latter would revise many of these conventions. Larsen’s Helga Crane and West’s Cleo Judson are grounded in

conflicts that arise from decreased autonomy created by strict gendered and racial lines which intersect middle-class ideology. Both suffer from dislocation and cultural conflict in their surroundings.

Helga Crane does not comfortably sit within any of the communities she takes part in, neither a Historically Black College, Harlem, Chicago, Copenhagen nor the Black Church of Southern Alabama. *Quicksand* serves to create a type of map of Black and African history. By placing Helga Crane in several iconic regions, Nella Larsen illustrates the impossibility of Helga's life as a Black woman migrant, thereby making her a type of “fugitive” in that she violates social laws governing race, gender and sexuality. Helga Crane’s experiences, starting in Naxos, impact structures that sought to dictate Black women's bodies and identities. She is confronted with respectability politics in Naxos, a lack of a foundation in Chicago, the single-issue Black citizens in Harlem, and the legacy of colonial-authored images in Copenhagen. When Helga Crane finally ends in Alabama, she faces an oppressive Black church and a marriage that renders her body effective chattel.

Helga Crane's trajectory differs from Cleo Judson's in that she is a Midwest-born woman who travels to the South, the Midwest (Chicago), the North (Harlem), and finally ends in Alabama. Her character is vastly dissimilar in that she suffers from many of the common traits of “The Tragic Mulatta” figure who is torn between two races, hypersexualized, and unable to conform to a stereotyped identity. Since Helga Crane is foundationless, the South and North Nella Larsen depicts do not function as places of permanent refuge since each geographical location attempts to force Crane into a

preconceived notion of Black womanhood. Lillie P. Howard, in “A Lack Somewhere: Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*” suggests that Helga “spins round and round” in each region she is placed “until she is virtually bogged down inside herself” (Howard 251). Indeed, Helga Crane's search for self ultimately destroys her, figuratively and literally, from the inside-out. She is destroyed by the marriage she thought would give her sexual freedom – something she lacked in her other environments. Most relevant to *The Living is Easy*, the South is depicted as a place of oppression and it is ultimately where Helga Crane meets her doom, dying from a weakened body brought on by multiple childbirths. Helga Crane could be considered a part of the fugitive sub-genre of literary work as she operates as an outcast. Crane is unwilling to work within the confines placed on women while being unable to sit neatly within a racial box, since she is of mixed race. Therefore, she is in suspension in both the North and the South.

Cleo Judson also sojourns from one region to another and deals with marriage and life in the South. However, these are the moments in which Dorothy West breaks with convention. Unlike Helga, Cleo Judson has a defined and concrete foundation in her family and upbringing in the South. This foundation partially redeems the South by reconfiguring it not into a solely place of oppression, but a place representative of freedom and sisterhood. Dorothy West redresses the South by using Cleo Judson and her family to identify the familial ties that exist in the South for many Black Americans. Paula C. Barnes suggests in *New Voices on the Harlem Renaissance: Essays on Race, Gender, and Literary Discourse*, that *The Living is Easy* is a direct revision of several common Harlem Renaissance tropes. One of these being the Tragic Mulatta.

Similarly, Dorothy West does not adhere to the impulse of the Tragic Mulatta figure. Although her racial identity is complicated by class as well as appearance, she is far more confident in her racial identity as a Black woman.

Cleo Judson's personal conflicts are rooted in her constant attempts to reconnect with a pre-established identity, rather than attempting to navigate America while torn between two racial worlds. Dorothy West's migrant, although not completely liberated or free to choose, is not wholly a fugitive. Her consistent knowledge of self and awareness of what she wants from both the North and South protect her to a limited degree. Though not a fugitive, Cleo Judson still works at the mercy of certain pre-conceived notions of Black womanhood, like Helga Crane. However, she meets them with far more aggression, self-determination and subversion.

Ultimately, these factors (The Great Migration, migration narratives, and Black women's narratives) give context to the current that Dorothy West was figuratively swimming against in her penning of *The Living is Easy*; West was challenging pre-established conventions.

Ideology Impacting Black Women's Migration

Black women bore a heavy load sprung from the common idea in the late 19th and early 20th century that, as Deborah Cray White documents in *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894 -1994*, “A race can rise no higher than its women” (White 43). This idea was shared to the extent that even prominent 20th century thinkers such as W.E.B. DuBois repeats these words verbatim. He posited in his 1909 *Efforts for Social Betterment among Negro Americans* that this was, especially to sociologists and

“all students for the development of humanity,” a “self-evident truth” (DuBois 47).

While DuBois goes on to praise several women's clubs for their efforts (and this was even the driving philosophy behind many women's clubs), this phrase presented a two-edged sword for Black women. Du Bois's sentiment was not unique, but representative of a wider philosophy. While this provided Black women a platform and obligation for social advancements – or even a “moral superiority,” as Deborah White mentions (White 44) – it also brought on elevated scrutiny and expectations of labor. With this heightened level of scrutiny, Black women began to bear the culpability for all of the complications of the Black community and were used as a scape-goat (White 64). The idea of the Black community rising “no higher than its women,” was coupled with low expectations and views of women throughout the United States. This perception was especially applied to Southern women moving North whose (perceived) hypersexuality and values were seen as a threat to Northern normalcy. This historic perception can be used to inform Cleo Judson's initial push from the South as well as her nascent years as a Northerner.

Cleo's initial push is neither voluntary nor desired. Cleo also does not go to the South looking for opportunities or liberation; she is forced out of her home. Although no decision, whether made by men or women, was ever made free of outside influence, encouragement or even coercion, Cleo's particular push from the South is the first representation in the novel of the lack of autonomy Black women suffered because they were not just Black, but also women. Cleo Judson's sense of self is threatened because she is a Black woman living under the gendered stereotypes which manifest in the minds of those more powerful than her. As noted by Farrah Griffin's formula, the first step in

the migration narrative is an “event that propels the action northward” (Griffin 3). For Cleo, events immanent to being in a Black female body in a racist, sexist, society “propelled” her to Massachusetts.

Cleo Judson represents a microcosm of Black women suddenly thrust into the North. Although Cleo must conform to survive, she is not helpless in the face of her surroundings. She is often subversive and struggles to preserve herself. Hazel Carby recognizes female migrants as a force that the North was forced to acknowledge. However, this acknowledgment came partially in the form of what Carby coins as a “moral panic” that swept the North:

Thus the migrating Black women could be variously situated as a threat to the progress of the race; as a threat to the establishment of a black middle class; as a threat to congenial black and white middle class relations; and as a threat to black masculinity in an urban environment (Carby 741)

The Living is Easy engages with the idea of “moral panic” when the novel illustrates Cleo's conflicts with her mother's desire to contain her and restrict her free-will, as well as Cleo's time spent as a ward in various White Northerner's homes. As Dorothy West suggests with Cleo's mother, the pathologizing of Black migrants sexuality was not absent in The Black community. As a child, Cleo is unable to remain in her home because her mother fears that her “wild” personality will lead to promiscuity and Miss Peterson exploits that fear to move Cleo to Massachusetts. Cleo's mother projects her own fear of Cleo losing her virginity onto her child, not “know[ing] what minute Cleo might disgrace herself. “The wildness in the child might turn into wantonness in the girl”

(West 24). According to Hazel Carby, Black female migrants were “characterized as sexually degenerate and therefore, socially dangerous” (Carby 739). An adolescent Cleo is further sexualized by Miss Peterson. Miss Peterson's invasion into Cleo's life illustrates this; Miss Peterson's own construction of the South was that it was dangerous for a conventionally attractive young woman because of its “amoral atmosphere” (West 24) and the assumption that Black Southern women have no, as Carby phrases it, “moral fiber” or “will of their own” (Carby 740) in the face of their surroundings.

Cleo first draws Miss Peterson's attention with her beauty, “free” hair, and the bold color in her eyes and face (24). Miss Peterson is highly cognizant of Cleo's outward beauty. To Miss Peterson, both the South and Cleo are unchecked, dangerous, and must be guided and given discipline. West focuses on a particular predilection Miss Peterson has towards Cleo's young body. Because Cleo is a Black girl, Miss Peterson, as a White woman, places an emphasis on Cleo's physicality, color and vibrancy – ultimately using this to sexualize her in a malicious way. Miss Peterson's influence only served to suppress individual wants and needs. Further, Cleo's hopes of going to night school are ruined when Miss Peterson notices that Cleo is still exudes life:

She had thought she was going to night school when she reached the North. But her conscientious custodian, seeing that Cleo looked just as *vividly alive* in Springfield as she looked in South Carolina, decided against permitting her to walk down darkened streets alone. There were too many temptations along the way in the guise of coachmen and butlers and porters [emphasis mine] (West 25).

Miss Peterson consistently projects her own beliefs of Black female sexuality onto Cleo under the guise of a paternalistic sense that she is protecting Cleo from Cleo's own "temptation." Miss Peterson's ire at Cleo being still "vividly alive" suggests a desire to, then, kill Cleo symbolically. The interactions and details concerning Cleo in her youngest years in the North show that there were indeed still oppression and struggle in the North. For the female migrant, the oppression was highly complicated by both race and gender.

Cleo is also depicted musing about impossible dreams, such as becoming a stage actor – further suggesting that she intends to wear a proverbial mask. Although this passage is short, the details West divulges reveal a common assumption (Black women have little mental fortitude) and response (they must be restricted and trained) concerning Black women's sexuality. Miss Peterson's restriction of Cleo's wants and needs further suggests that the North was not conducive to the goals of all Black Americans. Miss Peterson is distressed that Cleo still looks "alive," therefore her goal must be to symbolically kill her. These moments not only address Northern opportunity, but illustrate forms of violence to the self.

Many critics of both literature and history document the so-called "push" that drove many Black migrants out of The South. For many authors, the physical violence of the lynching was a common centerpiece in their writing. While lynching as a historical matter was not exclusive to men, Black women were also lynched and assaulted by mobs, it can be seen as a male-centered issue within the context of literature due to the fact that many of the authors who recorded it were men and depicted male victims. Lynching is a "dominant symbol of the South" in fictionalized accounts given through novels, songs

and paintings. (Griffin 15). In the field of literature, Farrah Griffin cites the image and scene of the lynching, as “the dominate literary image” and “single most important event” (24) that forced fictional Black Southerners to make the decision to leave their homes for the unknowns and possibilities in the North. The lynching, regardless of historical accuracy, serves as a symbol for the oppression that drove Black men from the South. It is a particular symbol of the violence that has been orientated towards Black American men. *The Living is Easy* poses a question regarding the kind of violence a migrant faces when she is female. Lynching as symbol is no longer sufficient.

Dorothy West addresses two forms of violence. One of which, Darlene Hines suggests is a “rarely explored push factor” out of the South; the desire to escape sexual exploitation, be it from White men or within their families (Hines 130, 138). Despite the fact that this violence confronts Cleo when she is already in Springfield, it is still what drives her from Springfield to her final urban destination of Boston as she is forced to engage in the institution of marriage with Bart Judson in order to escape Miss Boorum's predatory nephew. Dorothy West also upsets assumptions that the North was safe for Black women compared to Southern cities, as she depicts the possibility of sexual assault when White men gain access to close quarters with Black women in domestic situations. The second violence that Cleo confronts (and this threat is sustained throughout the novel) is that which affects her personhood. Because this form of violence is not does not have immediate bodily impact, it might be harder to identify as violence compared to sexual violence or the lynching motif. However, it highlights further the ways in which Dorothy West upsets conventions by depicting a woman who does not readily conform to the

social and sexual respectability which was common in Black women's literature.

Dorothy West depicts Cleo Judson integrating herself into the Black bourgeoisie during a time in which many in this group were attempting to reestablish and codify a new concept of family in the wake of manumission and the end of reconstruction. According to Paula Giddings, this familial structure was heavily reliant on the submission of women (Giddings 61). Black women were met with patriarchal expectations to marginalize themselves in the presence of men. “The Cult of True Womanhood” (coined by historian Barbara Walters in the 1960s) dominated middle-class culture across all cultures throughout The United States. Black women battled perceptions that they were a depraved group by engaging in the politics of respectability. For the purpose of this thesis, I am defining the politics of respectability as behavior that relies on traditional or conservative values for the sake of appearances. “The Cult of True Womanhood” dictated that women were to be pious, pure, domestic, and above all submissive to the men in their lives, especially their husband. This way of living was created to describe middle to upper class White women. It separated them from slaves, immigrants and the poor, whose social placement and poverty could not afford them the opportunity to focus on these so-called lady-like qualities. Pamela Sanders calls Cleo's characterization “ris[ing] above” stereotypes that revolved around passivity or cooperation (Sanders 570). The purpose of this “Cult” was not entirely malicious or designed to only to oppress. Although it reinforced divisions of class and gender and was rooted in patriarchy, for Black women, “The Cult of True Womanhood” acted as a defense mechanism.

The prose describing her behavior and manner of speech does not fit that of the

traditional middle class housewife. As Pamela Sander suggests, Cleo Judson is a character who has reached a “new level of self-definition, beyond limiting, binary gender definition” (Sanders 436). She is describe as hissing fiercely, looking mad, speaking passionately, frigidly, and rolling her eyes at her husband. She never cries as a child and is only depicted as crying twice as an adult (both incidents are in relation to the death of a parent). She is deceptive, but intelligent and business savvy. Cleo is aggressive and forceful when she wants to get her way; she schemes for money in power in a way that would be considered appropriate for men, such as her businessman husband but inappropriate for middle-class housewife. However, Cleo is not as entirely one dimensional as this would suggest. By subverting binaries that would either classify her as either submissive or dominant, an Angel of the House or a Sapphire, she becomes a far more complex character who is not completely without weaknesses or moments of genuine care for another human being. For instance, Cleo is heavily reliant on her sister's presence, she deeply mourns her father and mother, and feels pain and fear when her husband leaves at the end of the novel. The closing pages of the novel consists of a panicked Cleo begging, “Who will love me best?” As her creator Dorothy West admits, “Cleo uses all these traits that make us hate her for a very positive end to make conditions better for future generations” (McDowell 297). This quote clarifies the fact that Cleo Judson is a complicated character with impulses that may appear both negative and positive; these impulses further separate Cleo Judson from simplistic literary archetypes.

Institutions Concerning Black Women's Migration

Personal violence is met with a nuanced resistance throughout the novel. The

ways in which Cleo engages with particular institutions undermines their seeming totalitarianism. The first institution that I will address is what I will refer to as the “lodging system” for the purpose of this thesis. The second is the institution of the marriage, and the final is Dorothy West's analogy to Black women's social clubs, which is seen in the second half of the novel with Cleo Judson's social dinner party.

Throughout *The Great Migration*, many Black women found it necessary out of practicality and safety to lodge with willing White Northerners or organizations such as the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) or the National Association of Colored Women (NACW). Some served as domestic workers, while others simply used the services offered by the organizations. Dorothy West illustrates a situation analogous to the historical reality of the lodging system with Miss Peterson and Miss Boorum. While this service sprung out of a practical need, it also served an ulterior purpose which West heavily emphasizes. Cleo Judson's time in the houses of these two women also articulate the more atypical aforementioned forms of violence that Black women faced and resisted.

Cleo's mobility is limited in *The North* in ways that are both physical and economic. She is essentially confined to both Miss Peterson and Miss Boorum's house and only allowed to leave during the day time. What little physical mobility she does have, is augmented by Miss Boorum's nephew's gift of a bike. The bike gives the guise of more free moment. It is, in reality, a symbol of restriction due to the fact that it was given to her in an attempt to groom her and lure her into an eventual sexual assault. The mobility is fragile and fleeting in the fact that her bicycle is eventually, literally broken,

and the mobility is taken away. The bike serves as a metaphor for the fact that Cleo is, temporarily, trapped. She only escapes this arrangement at the behest of Bart Judson's marriage proposal.

Cleo Judson marries Bart Judson initially to escape Miss Boorum's nephew. Her decision to marry cannot be divorced from the history surrounding middle class Black women, perceptions of sexuality, and the institution of marriage. As a group with, as phrased by Paula Giddings, a “history of sexual exploitation,” Black women were put in a position in which they were pressured to collectively provide evidence that they were “ladies.” Black ladies' societies struggled with adherence to problematic Victorian ideals of womanhood, while still recognizing its pragmatism in their mission (Giddings 49). Therefore, the specific choice to depict Cleo Judson entering the institution of marriage has historical ramifications relating to middle-class women establishing themselves as women with inherent value.

Ever manipulative, Cleo does not directly conform to the gender roles that her position as Bart's wife demands. She realizes that she can manipulate her union with Bart Judson for financial and social gain; eventually, this will allow her to purchase a house for her sisters. Therefore, throughout her marriage, she deliberately resists “True Womanhood” and replaces it with her own, individualized performance of womanhood. Her marriage occurs under the duress of sexual predations, but it is not depicted as a controlling force. As Wilks asserts:

The negotiation and contestation that mark Cleo's familial relationships likewise inflect her interest in the true woman pursuit of "household

management" Because her status as a woman of the early 20th-century African American bourgeoisie identifies the home as her rightful place, Cleo intends to manipulate that sphere with absolute authority (Wilks 573)

Cleo Judson refuses to be confined to the role of being responsible for constantly giving birth to children. Cleo takes claim over her own body by abstaining from sex with her husband (and eventually relegating him to a separate room). She exploits her position as a financially helpless housewife who is locked out of the economic sphere in order to create a consistent cash flow from her husband. She further manipulates her position as matriarch to run her household as she sees fit by hiring Judy's tutor, purchasing a house, and inviting her sisters to live with her. These minor resistances to the conventional middle-class marriage illustrate an exercise of power as well as a push back against traditional views of marriage.

The relationship between the North and Black women was not confined to only moral panic or attempts to control the body as mentioned earlier in the thesis. Cleo Judson's relationships with other women throughout the novel harken to the history of women's clubs and attempts at social uplift within groups of women. Although no organizations such as the National Association of Colored Women or specific Black sororities are mentioned by name, clearly demonstrated is the politics and potential power of Black women in the North. According to Paula Giddings, Black women at the end of reconstruction, prepared "to create organizations and institutions that inflected their feminist concerns" (75). Both Paula Giddings and Deborah White document the ways in which White women's clubs were anti-Black and did not address the needs of Black

women. Additionally, many prominent Black men openly spoke out against Black women who had found center stage.

The Living is Easy introduces a diverse collection of women that collaborate, destabilize gender roles, and represent a certain type of power. This power is not overt, however, it still exists to drive the women forward. Cleo Judson, Lenore (“The Duchess”) and Althea all perform their own role. As Jennifer Wilks asserts, each woman represents different modes of womanhood. Wilks positions Althea Binney as “the least assertive, least engaging member of West's triumvirate” (576). Althea is, then, a traditional, conventional housewife. Cleo and Lenore operate similarly as they both display an interest in handling money and business. Although the characters remain problematized by West, all three, by existing side-by-side, offer multiple views of Black women as opposed to simplified archetypes, if any at all. Further, the women are not without power within their own circles. Althea Binney serves as a tutor for young Judy Judson. By tutoring Judy, she can ensure that the young Black girl (and daughter of a migrant) will eventually grow with the tools necessary to operate in Boston. Similarly, Cleo Judson relies on the women of Boston to initiate her into their high-society through her dinner party. She recognizes their influence will allow her to become and “integral part” (West 266) of Boston's elite social class. By depicting Cleo operating in this enclave of women, *The Living is Easy*, is emphasizing the influence and authority women could exercise in the migration.

North and South

Historical records suggest that the North offered reprieve from the overwhelming

violence and oppression of the South. Migration narratives are typically expected to depict the migrant struggling in their respective settings. At the point in which *The Living was Easy* was penned, migration narratives followed a pessimistic impulse that critiqued the impossibility of existing in both the North and the South. Lawrence Rodger's posits *The Living is Easy* as an “alternative to [the]” common “dismissal of the South” (87). Cleo Judson's reverence of her nuclear family in tandem with her memories of female ancestors make the South more than simply a place to flee from – it is also a place of stability and family. These factors in and of themselves also signify a turn away from Lawrence' “fugitive” novels which provided no positive sentiment towards the South. Instead, the South is presented as a necessary aspect of the migrant's identity.

However, the South does not exist solely as a place of refuge. Cleo Judson's idealistic childhood is juxtaposed with the grim reality of her brother-in-law's attempted lynching. Unlike other novels, the attempted lynching is not the novel's linchpin, nor is it centered. In actuality, the White violence serves as more of a commentary on the apathy needed for the North to maintain its image as a utopia. The critical lens that West examines the South with, then, becomes more complicated than a simple depiction of Southern horror. Although the North is oppressive, it is not entirely without opportunity. The Northern United States allows Cleo to practice her business acumen and become a socialite in a way that her more pastoral South Carolina would not. Her oppression exists with her resistance in the North.

Throughout the majority of the novel, Cleo Judson struggles with the perceived dichotomy between the North and the South. Lawrence Rodgers suggests that the North

made a concerted effort to “ignore their racial heritage” (170). The “racial heritage” Rodgers refers to is the Northern community's history and culture in the South before migration. Therefore, by ignoring this “racial heritage,” the North is marginalizing Cleo Judson's presence as she was born in the South and still has active ties to the South through her family and memory. As I detail throughout the thesis, there are people and structures that seek to suppress and silence Cleo. However, unlike her predecessors, such as Larsen's Helga Crane, Cleo is not rendered passive nor submissive within these attempts at her person-hood. The North as a stable, oppressive structure is undermined and questioned by Cleo's schemes. By conjuring her Southern childhood through her sisters and her subversion of Northern middle-class culture, she is making the North mutable, unstable and weaker.

Perhaps it is tempting to judge Cleo Judson negatively throughout *The Living is Easy* not only due to her conniving and deceitful ways, but also due to her constant degradation and dismissal of her Southern-marked neighbors. However, Cleo's opinions and actions are not so easily analyzed. West suggests an ambivalence in Cleo towards the South through West's often hypocritical and ever-changing opinions towards Southerners. This is first demonstrated through the juxtaposition of the first two chapters. As the reader is introduced to Cleo, she openly scoffs at the children of Southerners who only recently migrated to the North and have not yet assimilated into the culture, calling them “knotty headed niggers” and “midgets” who “ruin her peace of mind” (West 5). Farrah Griffin argues that “Cleo sees herself in the children,” thereby leading to a “resentment” (85). Further, it can be argued that because Cleo has a disdain for the

children, other might develop a disdain towards her if they recognize her as a Southern woman. Griffin's assertion can be used to explain the following chapter which creates a contrast as it sheds light on Cleo's own childhood in her simple, folksy South, further establishing her psychological conflict and her own liminal standing. This seemingly ambivalent attitude towards the South is a production of Cleo's heightened awareness and fear of being othered.

Cleo maintains several positive sentiments toward the South. In regards to Simeon Binney, she muses,

The thing about Simeon was that he didn't know the South and its don't-care-nohow people. You had to be born there... and when you were, her thinking ran dreamily, all you remembered were the happy days of your childhood, when being alive was a wild and glorious thing (West 143).

Despite her nostalgia, Cleo fears being exposed as a Southerner or being associated with other Southerners as it will threaten her own social standing in the North. As an adolescent while Cleo works as a domestic in Miss Peterson's home, she knows that “This was the period of instruction that was preparing her for adulthood. Yet she knew she was not changing” (West 28). Where Cleo refused to, as the narrator words, “walk the chalk line” of her mother's childhood rules, she instead walk a chalk line in Boston; Cleo replaces complete assimilation with guile that will allow her to survive amidst a culture that is not her own and seeks to reject her. She recognizes this and puts on performances such as “training her tongue in a Northern twist” and “learning to laugh with a minimum show of teeth” (West 25). Still, she realizes that, “Sometimes you felt

like cutting the fool for the hell of it. Sometimes you hankered to pick a bone and talk with your mouth full” (West 44). Cleo is made to censor herself. This task does not come with ease as West highlights Cleo's displacement in her daily life. Ultimately, Cleo attempts to succor this sense of displacement by luring her sisters to Boston.

Cleo’s construction of the South is based on women. Her mother, sisters, and she constitute the land. Her experiences with men are limited to her father. When she is in the process of moving to Springfield, Massachusetts, she states her fear of losing her sisters because they remind her of her mother. As she already begins to plot bringing them with her, Cleo notes, “They would be her remembering of her happy, happy childhood (West 22). Whenever she remembers her childhood, she uses positive, reverent language. She alludes to the title of the novel in a conversation with Bart by telling him she wants to be able to see her sisters while “the living is easy.” The title of *The Living is Easy* conjures up allusions to the aria “Summertime” composed by George Gershwin for *Porgy and Bess*.

Summertime, and the livin' is easy
Fish are jumpin' and the cotton is high
Oh, your daddy's rich and your ma is good-lookin'
So hush little baby, don't you cry
One of these mornings you're gonna rise up singing
And you'll spread your wings and you'll take to the sky
But 'til that morning, there ain't nothin' can harm you
With Daddy and Mammy standin' by

“Summertime” captures an image of the American South full of freedom, possibility, and familial love. “Summertime” speaks to Cleo's own impression of Southern living and childhood because it centers on freedom and security. The line “One of these mornings you're gonna rise up singing/ And you'll spread your wings and take to the sky” echoes Cleo's sentiments of the wildness that Southern life afforded. The line “Summertime and the livin' is easy” parallels Cleo's notion of the South's “don't-care-nohow people” (West 143) and the reference to “daddy” and “ma” and the idea that “there ain't nothing can harm you/ With Daddy and Mammy standin' by” mirrors Cleo's fond and idealistic memories of both her mother and father. Like many writers of The Harlem Renaissance proper, Dorothy West evokes images of a folk-like and modest Black American culture in the South which operates free of the societal pressures of the strict urban North. Her attachment to the women in her family extends beyond her immediate family to long dead female relatives that she has essentially mythologized.

There was time enough for Judy to know that the North and South were not indivisible, with liberty and justice for all...Let her learn to walk proud like the Jericho women that lived before her...The old time Jericho women lived proud as long as they could. When they couldn't live proud, they preferred to die. Not one of them was born to take anybody's lip or anybody's lash. When Judy was ready to know about slavery, these were the tales to tell her (West 91).

Cleo's memorialization of her ancestors further represents her ties to the South. It also represents the pride she takes with her. The prestige that Cleo's ancestors hold in her

mind are directly tied to their lives experience in the South and the experience of (and resistance to) slavery in the South. This marks the South as (at least as far as Cleo thinks of it) as not only a feminine space, but a space in which women could protect themselves, even if it was through death.

However, like the South, Cleo's sisters find rejection in the North. Miss Elliot, a dance teacher in Boston, is described as being distressed by Cleo's sister's accents because they are still marked as sounding Southern. Cleo speaks for them or corrects them, such as interjecting “father” for “pa” for her sister Serena; Cleo, in turn, silences them. During Cleo's dinner party, her sisters are not even present because they are far too intimidated by the genteel, Northern crowd to participate. These interactions between Cleo, her sisters, and their Northern peers illustrate the more negative aspects of the North.

The dinner party scene towards the second half of the novel is pivotal in the novel's depiction of the North's tension with the South, as well as a show of solidarity between Northern people. Dean Calloway and Simeon Binney, through the local Black newspaper *The Clarion* go on a mission to rouse a sense of solidarity and allyship with the people of Boston to the wrongfully imprisoned Robert Jones (Serena's husband) in South Carolina. The women are bonding with one another and uniting around Cleo over a party with Lenore. When Dean Galloway interjects with his story, he interrupts a moment between Cleo and the Northern ladies at her party. According to Dean Galloway and Simeon Binney. Jones had been arrested. To the party-goers at Cleo's house, he is not just trying to bring awareness for Robert Jones, he is figuratively bringing the South into the

living room by conjuring images of Jones' imprisoned Black body and racist Whites. Although the guests are moved emotionally by Jones' story, his offer is an affront to their identity. This in turn, reflects upon Cleo as her guests look to her for clarification, the narrator observing “She was a Southerner, she was his kinswoman” (West 258-260). This party is organized to operate as Cleo's step into Boston society; instead, this moment highlights that she is neither Northern nor Southern at this point. Dean Calloway outs her as an outsider. Momentarily, she is othered by her Bostonian neighbors as they look at her. Although they express a temporary moment of sympathy, Cleo is forced to interrupt it in order to prevent the possibility of her being marked as a Southerner, too. She cannot accept Dean Calloway or Robert Jones' Southernness and instead, explains that she cannot support Dean Calloway, *The Clarion*, or their mission to protect Robert Jones from a possible lynch mob. This moment has dual meaning for Cleo. On one hand, she has been accepted into Boston's community and celebrated by her peers. At the same time, the room has been given a realization that their bubble in the North can be broken; the South and racism can't be escaped. Lawrence Rodgers interprets the scene: “To be an accepted part of [Black Bostonian] society, [Cleo] must outwardly cut all social and psychological ties to her Southern roots, 'disclaim' her past, even though she needs to be fortified by her recollections of its effect on her” (Rodgers 169). This event strikes Cleo and takes her out of the North in both the ways in which Dean Calloway outs her to her guests as a Southerner and the realization that's brought to the room.

As Cherene Sherrard-Johnson notes:

However, despite Cleo's valorization of her southern experiences, she is

careful to distinguish her familial past from the violence and poverty of black experience in the South of the novel's present. Her memories of the South are intimate and insulated; however, her South is not the South that accompanies the majority of southern migrants to Boston. (Sherrard-Johnson 612).

Instead, the same South that Cleo clings to for happiness and stability is the same South that attempts to murder her Brother-in-law. Likewise, the same North that attempts to oppress her body and ambitions, is the same North that allows her a temporary modicum of success. This is a multi-dimensional discourse on the South. Cleo Judson acknowledges to her crowd, in an attempt to rebuff Dean Calloway and Simeon Binney:

But when one colored man commits a crime, the whole race is condemned. Tell Robert Jones' story to the world...but the rest of the race will be the real martyrs. Wherever White people see them, they will watch for danger signs. They will be frightened of a dark face, or a slow answer, or a quick step. They will think all Negroes are armed... (West).

This dialogue serves to illustrate that there were still restrictions to Black migrants in the North, as Cleo feels is not allowed to acknowledge her brother-in-law, despite her guest's initial bout of sympathy. This harkens back to her rejection of the migrant children which remind her of herself. West's writing questions the simplified dichotomy between North and South. However, Cleo, as a character, is still placed in the midst of a society that believes in this separation, thereby demanding a complicated examination of the ways in which the North or South are depicted through fiction.

Conclusion and Further Implications

Dorothy West set out to write about the people she knew. After all, who else was doing this? Dorothy West was the daughter of Southern migrants who enjoyed a middle class upbringing in urban Massachusetts. Boston was not an epicenter for Migration narratives, nor were women popular protagonists. In many ways, *The Living is Easy* is a radical addition to the canon of African American literature.

Thadious Davis suggests in *SouthScapes* that Black authors began a reclamation of the South in the 1960s that continued through the 1980s by “explor[ing] the complexity of modern life through the lens of an African-American past that is rooted in the South, necessarily replete with slavery and segregation” (Davis 39). Although Davis credits this watershed moment to the 60s, 70s and 80s, Dorothy West suggests this reclamation years earlier in 1948. Even after her second publication from The Feminist Press in the 1980s, Dorothy West remains an overlooked author in the realm of the Harlem Renaissance, Black women writers, and migration narratives. Despite this, she holds significance in each section of literature. *The Living Is Easy* served, at the time of publication, as a rare entry into the canon of migration narratives. First and foremost, it illuminated the lives of women in a way that few novels had done before. Therefore, it brings new considerations to migration narratives by questioning conventional views of the North, South and women. The novel suggests more diverse considerations of these topics. *The Living is Easy*, raises questions as it answers them, thereby leaving the reader in an uncomfortable gray area. West's migrant is not a victim, but instead a determined and independent woman. West's South and North do not offer an easy dichotomy or a

one-dimensional image of hope and impossibility for either space. West advocates for the South by recalling folk culture, history, and heritage and possibilities for nurturing that the South can provide for displaced Black Americans.

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