"Theah's life anywheres Theah's booz and jazz": Home to Harlem and Gingertown in the context of National Prohibition

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Home to Harlem and Gingertown in the Context of National Prohibition

by Kathleen Drowne

“Harlem was the paradise of bootleggers,” Claude McKay recalls in Harlem Glory (1999), his brief, posthumously published account of this prominent African American community during the 1930s, and he further notes that “Prohibition had made the defiance of the laws general and racketeering respectable” (15). McKay’s retrospective assessment of Prohibition-era Harlem was fairly accurate; like many urban neighborhoods, Harlem was awash in bootleg liquor during the nearly fourteen years of National Prohibition (1920–1933). McKay himself was a habitual violator of the Prohibition laws, and underground drinking establishments such as cabarets and buffet flats frequently surface in his fiction. Yet McKay seldom commented in his writing specifically on the federal liquor legislation that so dramatically changed American life. However, understanding the context of National Prohibition and the significant effects it had on American society in general and the Harlem community in particular allows twenty-first century readers to appreciate better the political undertones of McKay’s novel Home to Harlem (1928) and his collection of short stories Gingertown (1932), both published prior to the 1933 repeal of Prohibition.

When National Prohibition went into effect in January 1920, the saloons and cabarets that dominated the social life of Harlem closed their doors. In their place, scores of illicit speakeasies and nightclubs sprang up to supply bootleg liquor to their thirsty patrons. Protection money paid to police and underworld kingpins allowed these businesses to avoid raids and remain in operation. Harlem establishments ranging from the swanky Cotton Club and Connie’s Inn to the low-down speakeasies such as the Coal Bed, the Air Raid Shelter, and the Glory Hole not only served illegal alcohol but also provided entertainment in the form of jazz singing and dancing (Lewis 242). In his 1927 essay “Negro Life in New York’s Harlem,” Wallace Thurman describes a “typical” speakeasy, located in a “musty, damp basement behind,” called the Glory Hole:

It is a single room about ten feet square and remains an unembellished basement except for a planed down plank floor, a piano, three chairs and a library table. The Glory Hole is typical of its class. It is a social club, commonly called a dive, convenient for the high times of a certain group. The men are unskilled laborers during the day, and in the evenings they round up their girls or else meet them at the rendezvous in order to have what they consider and enjoy as a good time. The women, like the men, swear, drink and dance as much and as vulgarly as they please. . . . Such places as the Glory
Hole can be found all over the so-called “bad lands” of Harlem. They are not always confined to basement rooms. They can be found in apartment flats, in the rear of barber shops, lunch counters, pool halls, and other such conveniently blind places. (48)

Despite McKay’s relative silence regarding the politics of National Prohibition, the clandestine nature of illegal drinking joints must have appealed to the rebellious, iconoclastic side of the author, who spent much of his adult life allied with socialist and other radical organizations—including the International Workers of the World—that championed the less powerful and the dispossessed.

Interpreting McKay’s Harlem-based fiction through the lens of Prohibition-era culture becomes even more complicated when one considers that the expatriate McKay actually spent relatively little time living in the United States during National Prohibition. When the Eighteenth Amendment, which outlawed the manufacture, transportation, and sale of alcoholic beverages, was ratified in January 1919, the twenty-nine-year-old struggling writer was occupying a rented room in Harlem on 131st Street. One year later, when the death knell finally sounded for John Barleycorn, McKay had already left the bustle of Lenox Avenue for an extended sojourn in England. He returned to Harlem in the winter of 1921, and worked briefly as an editor for the *Liberator* magazine, before leaving the country again in September 1922. He traveled from London to Berlin and finally to Moscow, just in time to attend the Fourth Congress of the Third Communist International, which began in November 1922. He remained in Soviet Russia until May 1923, then traveled to Germany and on to Paris. McKay lived in various cities and towns in France, Spain, and Morocco until February 1934, when he finally returned to the Depression-ravaged United States after living abroad for more than eleven years. In short, McKay resided in the United States for less than two of the nearly fourteen years of National Prohibition.

McKay’s dearth of direct commentary on Prohibition, as well as his limited first-hand experience living under the new federal liquor laws, might suggest that the Eighteenth Amendment had little impact on either his life or his writing. Yet Prohibition culture permeates the fiction McKay produced during this era, and he repeatedly relies on cabarets, speakeasies, and buffet flats to provide entertainment for the high-spirited singers, “sweetmen,” and longshoremen looking for love and amusement in the hot night spots of Harlem. Although many temperance advocates believed that those who violated the Eighteenth Amendment were not only immoral but unpatriotic, McKay, especially in *Home to Harlem*, complicates these notions by depicting his protagonist, Jake Brown, as a sympathetic individual searching for happiness in the only ways available to him. Although Jake is a war-time deserter from the United States Army, frequent drinker, occasional drug user, regular gambler, and enthusiastic patron of prostitutes, McKay casts him as an individual with personal integrity that exists apart from his generally lawless conduct. In fact, for Jake and the other single, rootless characters who surround him, the companionship they find in speakeasies, cabarets, and good-time flats offers them a sense of stability and community absent from their work and their home life. As Zeddy, one of the secondary characters in *Home to Harlem*, claims, “Theah’s life anywheres theah’s booze and jazz” (63), and it is this kind of life—not the life of education or marriage or family or personal ambition—that most of McKay’s characters actively seek.
Home to Harlem chronicles the adventures of Jake Brown, a black longshoreman and army veteran who resides in Jazz Age Harlem. He is a young, strong, single man with little money and few personal obligations. During World War I, while stationed in Brest, he deserts the United States Army, but only after he and his black regiment are not allowed into combat but instead are ordered to build huts to house white soldiers. Upon his return to Harlem, Jake works at a series of backbreaking jobs with few complaints, and refuses to take money from his cabaret singer-girlfriend, Rose, who offers to make him her “sweetman” and encourages him not to work. He does, however, squander his hard-earned money on various social vices, including drinking and gambling, and the bulk of the novel approvingly follows Jake on his rounds of the Harlem pool halls, dance halls, speakeasies, cabarets, and good-time flats, where he shoots dice, dances, drinks bootleg liquor, and seduces women. Contemporary black critics such as W. E. B. Du Bois and Walter White vehemently objected to these aspects of the novel, but these same passages offer fascinating glimpses of Jazz Age Harlem nightlife, while demonstrating both McKay’s familiarity with the underworld of the neighborhood and his willingness to include less “sanitized” portrayals of African American characters in his fiction.

Home to Harlem is supposedly set in the months leading up to Prohibition, but McKay, composing his novel in the French Riviera city of Antibes in 1927, includes historical details that indicate his chronology is somewhat flawed. McKay locates Jake in London at the beginning of 1919, where he apparently lives with his white English girlfriend until a race riot erupts in London’s East End—an actual event that took place in June 1919. He ships out for Harlem shortly thereafter, arriving only a few months before Prohibition went into effect in January 1920. Yet in the final chapter, the narrator notes that “Prohibition was on the threshold of the country” (319), indicating that the entire story of Home to Harlem somehow transpires between the months of June 1919 and January 1920. The third part of the novel, however, is called “Spring in Harlem,” and in the penultimate chapter, after Jake and his girlfriend Felice have finally been reunited, the narrator notes that they spend time “lay[ing] in the sweet grass in Van Cortlandt Park” (381). Chronologically, this must be the spring of 1920, and therefore Prohibition has already been in effect for at least two or three months. The additional facts that Jake holds several jobs—including one on the railroad that evidently lasts a number of months—and that before taking the railroad job he stays with another Harlem girlfriend, Rose, for long enough to become “tiahd to death of living with [her]” (115), also suggest that McKay miscalculated his timeline. While correlating the fictional events of the novel to actual months and years on the calendar serves little purpose, these plot details indicate that McKay conflated some of his Prohibition memories with pre-Prohibition Harlem life in Home to Harlem.

The Debate Over Prohibition in Harlem

The politically oriented McKay’s lack of overt commentary about National Prohibition is especially curious, given that the “liquor question” ranked as one of the most divisive social issues confronting America during the turbulent 1920s. Prohibition’s effects extended well beyond the question of whether or not one chose to participate in the illegal liquor
traffic. In fact, one significant but often overlooked consequence of Prohibition legislation was the deep and rancorous ideological schism that it spawned within African American communities. The issue of Prohibition posed serious challenges to the traditional leadership of Harlem and other black areas, and exacerbated volatile conflicts between the old and the new guard. Most prominent African American clergymen, educators, and social reformers were ardent prohibitionists who argued that temperance should be a goal of not just black America but of any self-respecting community. For example, Kelly Miller, a newspaper writer and sociology professor at Howard University, stridently supported the Prohibition laws in his weekly columns in *The Amsterdam News*, an African American newspaper based in New York. Ashamed of the intemperance they witnessed in many black communities, Miller and other black intellectuals, including writer, editor, and activist W. E. B. Du Bois, journalist Edgar Grey, and the Reverend Dr. Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., pastor of the influential Abyssinian Baptist Church of New York City, warned that violating the federal liquor laws seriously jeopardized black citizens’ already tenuous standing in American society. Often, these leaders focused their attacks on the highly publicized nightlife taking place above 125th Street, both because of Harlem’s importance as the newly established cultural capital of black America, and because of its growing reputation, by the mid-1920s, as a bootlegger’s paradise.

In hindsight, it seems somewhat peculiar that old-guard black leaders supported National Prohibition so vehemently, considering that the national campaign for its passage had been fought largely by white temperance soldiers who followed strict segregationist policies and at times even allied themselves with the Ku Klux Klan. Yet many African American leaders chose to overlook the racist ideology that tainted the Prohibition movement, believing that the greater good of racial uplift would ultimately be accomplished if dry politics prevailed. Miller, Grey, and Powell, among many others, promoted the theory that the so-called “noble experiment” would foster a moral renewal of America that would lead directly to increased respect for the civil rights of African Americans. They also believed that strict enforcement of Prohibition would, by implication, strengthen the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, which guaranteed civil and voting rights for African Americans but were often ignored during the 1920s, especially in Southern and border states. The possibility of Prohibition’s repeal particularly disturbed some black intellectuals; according to historian Michael Lerner, one black politician in Jersey City expressed his fear that repealing the Eighteenth Amendment would initiate a domino effect that could potentially lead to the repeal of other amendments—including, most importantly, the Thirteenth, which had abolished slavery (298).

Because these African American leaders perceived that so much was at stake for their race regarding Prohibition, they frequently lashed out at their fellow black citizens who openly violated the liquor laws. Editorials in *The Amsterdam News* referred to anyone involved in the liquor trade as a “race traitor,” and harshly excoriated women, who were commonly believed to support Prohibition more ardently than men, for any alcohol-related transgression (Lerner 298–99). To such conservative black leaders as Miller and Powell, Prohibition offered African Americans a priceless opportunity to prove themselves respectable, law-abiding, and temperate, and they were profoundly disappointed to see this opportunity squandered.
The issue of Prohibition enforcement ultimately pressed the old-guard leaders of Harlem into untenable political positions. Throughout the 1920s, Michael Lerner explains, both *The Amsterdam News* and *The New York Age* called for stricter enforcement of Prohibition laws in Harlem, and moral leaders charged that the lax police presence above 125th Street was a deliberate strategy designed by white municipal officials to “concentrate vice in the black districts” of New York City. Yet, when the police raided Harlem cabarets and arrested bootleggers and customers, these same papers complained that law enforcement officers were unfairly targeting black citizens (336). In the end, the opinions of Powell, Du Bois, Miller, and other African American old-guard leaders proved too exaggerated to carry much moral weight in Prohibition-era Harlem. Harlem residents found their repeated warnings to Prohibition violators unconvincing, and eventually their support for the liquor laws weakened these leaders’ authority in the black community.

This inability of conservative moral and social leaders to dictate the general behavior of African Americans in Harlem added to the scope of Prohibition’s failure. Significant numbers of Harlem’s intellectuals, professionals, and even churchgoers defected to the wet side, and while many conservative ministers and writers never ceased publishing their strongly worded protests against liquor in particular and Jazz Age culture in general, powerful new voices emerged throughout the 1920s that rejected the more strait-laced, traditional morals of the older generation. These young writers vehemently denied the supposed social and moral benefits of Prohibition, and calmly accepted drinking and other so-called vices as commonplace elements of modern urban life. Harlem Renaissance writers including Langston Hughes, Wallace Thurman, Rudolph Fisher, Zora Neale Hurston, and, of course, Claude McKay rose to the artistic and political challenges of portraying the intemperate side of Prohibition-era Harlem. McKay’s *Home to Harlem* became a particular lightning rod of controversy, as it explored, in the words of biographer Wayne F. Cooper, “areas of the black experience that had seldom, if ever, been given such direct expression by a black artist” (247). McKay bore the brunt of numerous critical attacks that condemned his novel’s depiction of a side of Harlem life that included “love-starved ‘grass widows’ and the ‘sweetmen’ who alternately preyed and depended on them, pimps and prostitutes, homosexuals and drug addicts, loan sharks and labor scabs, alcoholics, gamblers, sadomasochists, and corrupt cops” (Cooper 242). Even more alarming to his critics, McKay depicted much of the intemperate, promiscuous, lawless side of Harlem life in affirming, even admiring terms.

“Hunting for Joy” in Harlem: Cabaret Culture in the Jazz Age

In *Home to Harlem* and in several of *Gingertown*’s Harlem-based stories, McKay positions Jazz Age cabarets as important cultural institutions in his characters’ lives that, in some cases, even provide their livelihoods. Jake and his cronies in *Home to Harlem* regularly haunt Harlem cabarets, and Congo Rose, Jake’s erstwhile girlfriend, makes her living as a cabaret singer. Bess, the protagonist of “Brownskin Blues,” and Nation Roe, the central character in “Highball,” are also cabaret entertainers, and references to cabarets surface in “Near-white” and “Truant,” two other *Gingertown* stories. McKay’s frequent inclu-
sion of cabarets in his portrayals of Harlem nightlife is entirely in keeping with his self-proclaimed goal of immortalizing, without sanitizing, “the so-called semi-underworld” of working-class African Americans that he himself inhabited in the years just prior to World War I (Cooper 212). Cabarets served as the sites where broad cross-sections of the population came together to drink, dance, and socialize during Prohibition, particularly in large metropolitan areas such as New York City. According to a New York Department of Licenses Report of 1927, a cabaret was defined as “any room, place or space in the city in which any musical entertainment, singing, dancing or other amusement is permitted in connection with the restaurant business or the business of directly or indirectly selling the public food or drink” (Erenberg xi–xii). Cabarets established few barriers between the entertainers and the crowd; the lack of an elevated stage meant that tables were crowded around the center floor, which put patrons in close proximity to the singers and dancers. The band usually set up off to one side of the floor or up in a balcony, to keep from taking up valuable floor space meant for dancing. The customers sat right in the middle of the action; indeed, in the opening scene of “Brownskin Blues,” Bess dances the Wicked Wiggle as she sings and moves from table to table, “work[ing] her hips in a wanton-sweet way that started everybody giggling and wiggling” (McKay 5). Some patrons try to touch her as they hand her money, and she encourages this interaction. When “a huge barrel-bellied man” gives her fifty cents, for example, she “patted him on his gross neck and did a little shaking at his table” (5–6). When cabaret entertainers took breaks, the dance floor would be given over to the cabaret patrons, who would eagerly dance the latest steps to the band’s accompaniment.

The cabaret business in the United States began around the turn of the twentieth century; most of the early cabarets operated as combination saloons and dance halls in red-light districts and in the basements of city buildings. Around 1912, public dancing became such a popular craze that many cabarets began targeting more “respectable” middle-class patrons (Murdock 73–74). Before Prohibition, drinking was the cornerstone of most cabaret experiences. A 1918 Variety article, for example, asserted, “Everything in and about the cabaret commences and stops with liquor. It starts the eating, it starts the buying, and even with the awful liquor prices, it starts everything else connected with the nightlife of Broadway” (Erenberg 130). With the advent of Prohibition in 1920, cabarets transformed themselves once again into establishments that ostensibly provided only entertainment, but in reality served as fashionable places to buy and drink bootleg alcohol. Some cabarets remained in their underground locations as a security measure, while others operated in plain sight of police and enforcement officials, keeping their doors open through an expensive system of bribery and the strong-arm protection of organized crime.

Cabarets differed from speakeasies in that they tended to focus more on musical entertainment. Speakeasies usually reflected more of a pre-Prohibition, saloon-like atmosphere; while music and dancing were sometimes available, customers generally occupied themselves with talking, drinking, and gambling. However, cabarets drew customers primarily with their lavish entertainment—orchestra musicians, chorus girls, jazz singers, and comedians performed in programs that sometimes lasted several hours. One 1932 description of a Harlem cabaret explains,
Until about eleven o’clock the Negro orchestra plays while the patrons eat, drink and dance. Then the floor is cleared and the show begins. Brown-skinned girls and smiling, chocolate-colored, light-footed boys entertain the patrons. During an intermission at midnight the patrons use the floor for half an hour. By three or four o’clock the whites—the “dickeys,” as the Negroes call them—who have “done Harlem,” disperse as the entertainment ends. (Kiser 43)

While some working-class cabarets did exist, others tried to attract a more “exclusive”—often white—clientele by charging prohibitively high prices, including an admission price that usually went toward protection money paid to police and racketeers. Such an establishment features prominently in “Highball,” a Harlem-based Gingertown story that chronicles the unhappy marriage of a white woman and a black entertainer who meet at an exclusive cabaret. Patrons who frequented these fashionable cabarets could usually buy pints of bootleg liquor or bottles of champagne from their waiter at a premium price, or else just order “set-ups” (cracked ice and water, club soda, or ginger ale) into which they poured the liquor they brought with them. Customers carefully kept flasks and bottles in their pockets—no liquor was displayed on tables in case of an unanticipated raid.

One of the reasons that Harlem cabarets were so popular was that they attracted diverse crowds of both black and white partygoers. As more and more wealthy white New Yorkers and tourists swooped into Harlem for a few hours of entertainment, however, entrepreneurial cabaret owners either segregated their clientele or prohibited black customers altogether. Certain popular Harlem nightspots blatantly drew the color line, much to the dismay of local black residents. Although probably apocryphal, one oft-cited anecdote recalls the great blues composer W. C. Handy being turned away from the doors of the celebrated Cotton Club on Lenox Avenue, though he could hear his own music wafting into the street from inside (Lewis 209). McKay himself ruefully remembers in his autobiography A Long Way From Home (1937) that during Prohibition, Harlem became “an all-white picnic ground and with no apparent gain to the blacks. The competition of white-owned cabarets has driven the colored out of business, and blacks are barred from the best of them in Harlem now” (133). Other upscale cabarets catered to white customers by simply pricing themselves out of most African Americans’ financial reach; in 1929, the New York Daily News reported that the average price, per person, for an evening at the famous Connie’s Inn on 7th Avenue came to more than fifteen dollars—in contrast, the nightly tab at an average cabaret might total two to four dollars per person (Schoener 83).

Still, many cabarets catered to both black and white partiers. In Black Culture and the Harlem Renaissance, historian Cary Wintz claims that Harlem cabarets “provided the most attractive feature of its night life and . . . for a time served as a melting pot for all classes of New Yorkers. Blacks of all types gathered in these nightspots to debate politics, religion, sex, and the “race problem”; black writers entertained their white friends as well as their patrons and sponsors there” (92). This influx of white partiers disturbed many members of the Harlem community. One of their major complaints about Prohibition-era cabaret life was the overblown media coverage of the “the bright lights, the color, the gaiety, the jazz, and the debauchery of Harlem” that glossed over the many social and economic problems that plagued ordinary black residents. In 1932, sociologist Clyde Kiser reported that the white “slumming parties” who traveled to Harlem for a taste of the exotic “usually see
only what they expect to see. The night-club guests participate in the hilarity but seldom realize that while they sit until the wee hours of the morning in a Harlem cabaret or night club, enjoying the entertainment furnished by Negro performers, there are thousands of black folk slumbering within a few blocks, ready the next morning to begin another day of toil” (27).

The few Harlem cabarets that retained all-black clienteles during Prohibition became refuges for local residents seeking to escape white voyeurs. In his 1937 autobiography *A Long Way From Home*, McKay recounts an incident that occurred when he brought his white editor, Max Eastman, to Ned’s, one of his favorite cabarets. “Ned’s was one place of amusement in Harlem,” McKay recalls, “in which white people were not allowed. . . . [But] I was such a good and regular customer of Ned’s that I thought he would waive his rule for me. But I thought wrong that time.” The black bouncer barred the pair at the door, and when McKay caught the proprietor’s eye, Ned’s “jovial black face turned ugly as an aard-vark’s and he acted as if I was his worst enemy. He waved his fist in my face and roared: ‘Ride back! Ride back, or I’ll sick mah bouncers on you-all!’” (131–33). Eastman responded to the rejection with understanding and grace, and in later years McKay thought of the incident not as painful or embarrassing, but instead as a positive, defiant moment in an era in which many economically hard-pressed Harlemites willingly participated in their own exploitation.

In *Home to Harlem*, McKay may have based his portrayal of the Congo, an exclusively black cabaret, in part on his experiences at Ned’s. Despite the tremendous financial success of Harlem cabarets that catered to white patrons, the Congo, as its name suggests, remained true to its origins: “a real throbbing little Africa in New York.” McKay describes the Congo as a destination “entirely for the unwashed of the Black Belt. Or, if they were washed, smells lingered telling the nature of their occupation. Pot-wrestlers, third cooks, W.C. attendants, scrub maids, dish-washers, stevedores.” He continues:

> Girls coming from the South to try their future in New York always reached the Congo first. The Congo was African in spirit and color. No white persons were admitted there. The proprietor knew his market. He did not cater to the fast trade. “High yallers” were scarce there. Except for such sweetmen that lived off the low-down dark trade. When you were fed up with the veneer of Seventh Avenue, and Goldgraben’s Afro-Oriental garishness, you would go to the Congo and turn rioting loose in all the tenacious odors of service and the warm indigenous smells of Harlem, fooping or jig-jagging the night away. You would if you were a black kid hunting for joy in New York. (29–30)

McKay portrays the Congo in fairly glowing terms, and the absence of white customers appeals to his working-class protagonist, Jake, who admits to his friend Zeddy that he is “fed-up on the ofays” (36). At the Congo, Jake meets Rose, the cabaret singer, who takes him home and attempts to make him her “sweetman.” Even after his relationship with Rose ends, Jake and his friends continue to congregate regularly at the Congo, a place that provides them with not only a steady source of entertainment, but also a strong sense of community and camaraderie.
McKay’s focus on cabaret life carries over to Gingertown, his first published collection of short stories. Bess, the lovely and talented cabaret singer in “Brownskin Blues,” is devastated when Rascoe, her dark-complexioned “sweetman” of two years, leaves her for a “scrimpy yaller thing” (12). In desperation, Bess turns to commercial skin-lightening creams to help her win Rascoe back. When single products prove ineffective, she combines several skin-bleaching salves, applies the caustic, burning mixture to her face, and snorts cocaine to deaden the pain. She awakens in a hospital to find her face permanently disfigured. No longer able to make a living as an entertainer and too unattractive to pursue Rascoe any longer, Bess takes a menial job as a scrubwoman in a boarding house. Her story takes a fortuitous—if implausible—turn when, in a single day, she learns that Rascoe has been murdered by his girlfriend’s angry husband, and her friend Jack, who loved her long before her accident, finds her and proposes marriage.

Prohibition-era cabarets were central to many Harlem residents’ experiences, and in “Brownskin Blues,” Fearon’s cabaret serves as the setting for two important scenes. The first occurs when Bess ceases singing and dancing the Wicked Wiggle in mid-performance after she sees Rascoe enters the cabaret with his new girlfriend. When the proprietor cannot convince her to continue her act, he promptly fires her. The second altercation, in which Rascoe is murdered, takes place “off stage.” Readers learn through Bess’s colleague, the boardinghouse cook, that Rascoe has been shot to death in Fearon’s while he was “drinking gin, and with anodder man’s yaller woman sitting up theah beside him” (27–28). Because Prohibition-era cabarets operated outside the law they were, in a sense, “invisible.” Yet in some cases they functioned as a highly public stage upon which private dramas—in this case, the dramas of Rascoe’s various romantic entanglements—played out.

McKay offers little commentary, and certainly no overt criticism, of the mixed clientele who patronize Fearon’s cabaret in “Brownskin Blues.” Fearon’s is what Chandler Owen and others described as a “black-and-tan” cabaret—one that catered to both white and black customers—and McKay notes, “Four tables, well placed, were conspicuous with white customers” (3). Indeed, in one remarkably coincidental scene near the end of the story, Bess’s co-worker reminisces about the singer at Fearon’s cabaret who was so talented that “white folks useta go to Fearson’s special to see her” (27), never suspecting that the disfigured scrubwoman to whom she is speaking is that very singer. Harlem cabarets that attracted white patrons were cashing in on the “Harlem Vogue” that brought droves of outsiders to Harlem to experience what they believed was authentic African American culture. By the late 1920s, though, a number of African American writers had begun to criticize this trend; for example, in a letter dated September 20, 1928, Zora Neale Hurston complains to Langston Hughes: “It makes me sick to see how these cheap white folks are grabbing our stuff and ruining it. . . . My only consolation being that they never do it right and so there is still a chance for us” (qtd. in van Notten 182–83). Hughes himself describes, in his autobiography The Big Sea, how many hard-working African Americans deeply resented the rich white interlopers who drove up to Harlem in taxis and limousines, “flood[ing] the little cabarets and bars where formerly only colored people laughed and sang, and where now the strangers were given the best ringside tables to sit and stare at the Negro customers—like amusing animals in a zoo” (225). McKay’s lack of social commentary about Fearon’s white clientele suggests his disconnection—aft after a decade abroad—from the daily tensions of Prohibition-era life in Harlem.
White revelers who longed for a taste of black entertainment in Harlem, but who did not actually want to socialize with ordinary black people, could attend those exclusive cabarets that catered primarily to white customers. Such a cabaret figures in “Highball,” the fifth Gingertown story, which chronicles the doomed marriage between Nation Roe, a successful black singer, and Myra, his insufferable white wife. Before their marriage, Myra had run with a fast set of white “jockeys, bookmakers, successful salesmen, and cabaret actors” who regularly traveled to Harlem for their evening entertainment (111–12). Myra and her friends “patronized certain cabarets in the Belt, cabarets where the proprietor, the musicians, the singers and waiters were colored, and the patrons almost all white. The common cabaret-going Negroes were not catered to at these cabarets. The few who were welcomed were known in the Belt as ‘Big Money’ Negroes” (112). Nation, who had risen from being a cabaret singer in “a cheap singing-and-drinking joint” (109) in Baltimore to the toast of the Broadway stage, evidently qualified as one of these “Big Money” Negroes. Nation meets the hard-drinking Myra in one of these mostly segregated cabarets, and her flattery and attention leads Nation impetuously to divorce his African American wife in order to marry her.

“Highball” revolves around Nation’s mistaken belief that his white associates disapprove of his mixed marriage, when in fact they sympathize with him and detest his despicable wife. At the end of the story Nation throws Myra out of the house after, having repeatedly defended her to his friends, he hears her callously refer to him as a “prune,” the racist epithet he finds most hateful and hurtful. The story examines the folly of treating people not as individuals but as mere representatives of their race, but at the same time it also reveals a glimpse of that side of human nature that allows people to connect across racial lines. Nation has white friends who genuinely like him, although he cannot fully appreciate this fact because he has convinced himself that “they are nice to me only because I am successful. White folks care for fame and fortune only” (114). Meanwhile, he himself is so attracted to and blinded by his wife’s whiteness that he cannot see her selfish, repellant attributes.

The cabarets that provide nightly amusements to Harlem dwellers and white interlopers provide a vivid backdrop to “Highball.” More importantly, these details of alcohol-drenched socializing lend a sense of verisimilitude and depth to the story of a successful black entertainer struggling to define his relationship with his white wife and colleagues who have, in turn, come to define him both professionally and personally. Without the white interest in black nightlife that came about largely during the Prohibition years, Nation would have had neither a noteworthy career nor a shrewish white wife. Thus McKay uses the complicated racial dynamics of Jazz Age Harlem as the background against which to explore Nation’s own set of peculiar dilemmas.

Good-Time Flats: The Private Rendezvous Apartments of Harlem

While cabarets and speakeasies offered public opportunities for drinking and dancing, National Prohibition also spawned a number of private, for-profit entertainment venues for dancing and partying, complete with food, liquor, gambling, and even prostitutes.
Enterprising and daring Harlem residents transformed their apartments into semi-private speakeasies called “buffet flats,” “parlor socials,” “hooch joints,” or “barrelhouse flats,” and hosted guests sometimes every night of the week. The proprietors of these good-time flats seldom had the money or the inclination to pay either gangsters or police for protection, and so at times they struggled to keep their establishments open. Regular patrons carefully guarded the nature and whereabouts of these party flats from anyone who might pose a potential threat, for as blues historian Paul Oliver explains, “raids were feared by the bell-hops and kitchen mechanics, truck drivers and domestic cleaners who frequented [good-time flats] and could ill-afford to lose their jobs” (152). When raids did occur, police usually closed down the flat by disposing of the confiscated liquor (by pouring it out, keeping it for themselves, or selling it to bootleggers), boarding up the windows, padlocking the entrance, and affixing a decal identifying the premises as a “public nuisance” and therefore closed until further notice. Most proprietors, especially successful ones, responded to police raids by laying low for awhile and then setting up shop in a different apartment; as one of McKay’s characters happily exclaims in Home to Harlem, upon discovering that her favorite good-time flat has reopened elsewhere, “White folks can’t padlock niggers outa joy forever” (336).

One specific kind of good-time flat that frequently appears in McKay’s fiction is the so-called buffet flat. Sometimes the term “buffet” referred merely to the plentiful Southern food and bootleg liquor that was available for a nominal price. But more often, and certainly in McKay’s fiction, a buffet flat suggested a party of an overtly sexual nature. While romantic encounters occurred at all sorts of crowded Harlem parties, buffet flats usually operated more like a combination speakeasy-brothel. The small-time pimps or madams who hosted parties in buffet flats solicited guests by either sending prostitutes to hand out personal invitations to lonely-looking men, or by relying on satisfied customers to bring their friends. To gain entrance to the more exclusive buffet flats, visitors generally had to know someone who would make his introduction to the host. Prostitutes of both genders would entice customers into back rooms, frequently entertaining several different partners in an evening, while a small band or Victrola played jazz and blues in the front rooms so patrons could dance. David Levering Lewis comments that at the buffet flat, “varied and often perverse sexual pleasures were offered cafeteria-style,” suggesting an orgiastic and decadent ambience throughout the apartment (107).

More conservative voices in Harlem, predictably, believed that good-time flats should not be discussed in print, and McKay acknowledges in Home to Harlem the perspective of those convinced that “going to cabarets [was] a sin, and that parlor socials were leading Harlem straight down to hell” (251). But McKay did not shy away from portraying this notorious side of Harlem nightlife in his fiction, and Home to Harlem, “The Prince of Porto Rico,” and “Mattie and Her Sweetman” are all grounded in the underworld environment of buffet flats. McKay unapologetically described what was seen by many critics to be inappropriate graphic depictions of African Americans engaging in immoral behaviors that included drinking, drug use, and sexual promiscuity. In response to suggestions that he should have restrained this impulse to create such unrefined characters, McKay proudly asserted in his autobiography, A Long Way From Home, that unlike other black writers of the era, “I created my Negro characters without sandpaper and varnish” (228). Despite his long absence from the United States during the 1920s and early 1930s, McKay believed that he understood the true nature of life in Harlem, and he firmly maintained:
I did not come to the knowing of Negro workers in an academic way, by talking to black crowds at meetings, nor in a bohemian way, by talking about them in cafes. I knew the unskilled Negro worker of the city by working with him as a porter and longshoreman and as waiter on the railroad. I lived in the same quarters and we drank and caroused together in bars and at rent parties. So when I came to write about the low-down Negro, I did not have to compose him from an outside view. Nor did I have to write a pseudo-romantic account, as do bourgeois persons who become working-class for awhile and work in shops and factories to get material for writing dull books about workers, whose inner lives are closed to them. (A Long Way 228)

McKay’s attempts to make Home to Harlem a realistic novel about a “low-down Negro” leads him to include in his fiction portrayals of the buffet flats and other good-time nightspots that were in fact an important part of some Harlem residents’ lives.

In Home to Harlem, McKay locates several pivotal scenes in buffet flats; indeed, within hours of Jake’s return to Harlem from England, he finds himself drinking and dancing at a typical buffet flat after Clarice, a prostitute, picks him up in a cabaret:

They went to a buffet flat on One Hundred and Thirty-seventh Street. The proprietress opened the door without removing the chain and peeked out. She was a matronly mulatto woman. She recognized the girl, who had put herself in front of Jake, and she slid back the chain and said, “Come right in.”

The windows were heavily and carefully shaded. There was beer and wine, and there was plenty of hard liquor. Black and brown men sat at two tables in one room, playing poker. In another room a phonograph was grinding out a “blues,” and some couples were dancing, thick as maggots in a vat of sweet liquor, and as wriggling. (13–14)

Jake and his female companion are admitted to the buffet flat not only because the madam knows the girl, but also because Jake is black. Since there were virtually no African American revenue agents and very few black police officers in New York City, admitting a visibly black customer to a buffet flat posed relatively little threat to security.

Although Jake works steadily as a longshoreman and then as a cook on the railroad, Home to Harlem focuses not on his work life but rather on the socializing he does after hours. He spends many nights in buffet flats, in the exclusive parlor of Madame Suarez in Harlem, at the liquor-laden apartment of “Gin-head Susy” in Brooklyn, and, during layovers on the railroad, at Madame Laura’s attractive home in Philadelphia. In each of these apartments, a female host oversees the activities of her guests. Music and liquor are plentiful at each of these flats, and Madame Suarez and Madame Laura preside over a roster of attractive prostitutes. The narrator notes with approval, “Jake had never seen colored women so carefully elegant as these rich-browns and yellow-creams at Madame Suarez’s. They were fascinating in soft bright draperies and pretty pumps and they drank liquor with a fetching graceful abandon. Gin and whisky seemed to lose their barbaric punch in that atmosphere and take on a romantic color” (105). Madame Laura’s buffet flat also emanates an aura
of elegant sophistication, and the narrator notes that in the front room there were “a few flirting couples, two groups of men playing cards, and girls hovering about. An attractive black woman was serving sandwiches, gin and bottle beer. At the piano, a slim yellow youth was playing a ‘blues’” (190). Madame Suarez and Madame Laura clearly restrict their clientele in order to maintain a comparatively refined atmosphere, but buffet flats often did not live up to these madams’ high standards. In fact, such operations more often catered to a rougher class of patrons who, as Paul Oliver explains, sought entertainment at good-time flats in order to “forget for awhile the realities of the congested ghettos of the city” and “build a screen between themselves and their environment” (163). McKay shows the joy and release that African Americans find in drinking and dancing together at these private parties, but he elides the social and economic pressures of racism, low-wage menial labor, and lack of opportunity that led black Americans to drown themselves in synthetic gin, drugs, and anonymous sex.

In two of his Gingertown stories, “The Prince of Porto Rico” and “Mattie and Her Sweetman,” McKay portrays buffet flats that are far less elegant than those that Jake frequents in Home to Harlem. In “The Prince of Porto Rico,” for example, a handsome and charismatic Puerto Rican barber named Manuel (known as the Prince) patronizes Bella Rowan’s buffet flat in order to court Bella’s friend, Tillie. Bella was a “very discreet hostess,” and the narrator notes that “[f]or ten years she had been in the speakeasy business, and only once had she had any trouble with the police. . . . At Bella’s you could find a little gambling, a little music, a little drinking, and a little loving. A group of the Belt’s best bad boys found their way there, and also a number of interesting grass-widows” (34). Actually, Tillie is not a grass-widow, but rather is married to a hard-working night watchman named Uriah, and after he leaves for work in the evening she slips out to Bella’s buffet flat, which she finds “a pretty nice place to while away the lonely nights” (36). Mindless of her husband’s loving devotion to her, she begins a torrid love affair at Bella’s flat with Hank Forbes, a regular patron of Bella’s, whom she promptly forgets the moment she meets the magnetic Prince.

While a friend to Tillie, Bella is also a shrewd businesswoman, and she realizes the economic advantages of fanning the flames of Tillie’s new crush. She knows that “[t]o encourage and promote intrigues is the prime business of the keeper of a buffet flat. Successful intrigues bring good business and new customers. So Bella performed her duty; she opened the way for the Prince” (36–37). Bella’s matchmaking leads to tragedy, though, when, on the night when Tillie takes the Prince home for a night of lovemaking, a vindictive and jealous Hank telephones Uriah with an anonymous tip to return home immediately. Uriah arrives to find a guilty Tillie covering for the Prince, who had fled out the window and down the fire escape. The enraged husband strikes Tillie, then chases the Prince into the street, shoots him in the back, and then disappears into the night. Clearly, the consequences of frequenting buffet flats can be far more serious than mere hangovers, which are about the worst thing that happens to the party-loving Jake in Home to Harlem.

“Mattie and Her Sweetman,” the story immediately following “The Prince of Porto Rico” in the Gingertown collection, also takes place in a good-time flat, and while it does not end in murder, it does end in heartbreak. Rosie, the amiable hostess, “had sent out invitations to a number of chambermaids, bellhops, waiters, longshoremen, and railroad men whom she knew personally,” and requests that they “bring their friends and to tell their friends to bring their friends” (55). She charges twenty-five cents for admission, and
“[s]oda pop and hard drinks were sold at prices a little more than what was paid in the saloon” (55). By ten o’clock partygoers fill Rosie’s flat. Amid the “fascinating mélange of color” that made up this “merry crowd” was “one strange person—a black woman in her fifties” (55–56). This woman, Mattie, was thin, homely, and unfashionably dressed, but, the narrator explains, “although she was ugly and unadjustable, she loved amusement and was always ready to pay for it” (64). Her escort at the party was Jay, her handsome, unemployed “sweetman,” for whom she provides food and clothes, and with whom she shares her bed. She asks only for his company in return, but instead the selfish young man treats Mattie cruelly. While at the party, for example, he leaves her to sit alone while he drinks and dances with younger women, and then rebuffs her invitation to dance with a sneer and a gratuitous insult: “Shake a leg, black woman” (63). This draws a strong reaction from the other partygoers, for, as the narrator notes, “there is no greater insult among Aframericans than calling a black person black. That is never done” (63).

Despite Rosie’s attempts to make her feel welcome, Mattie leaves the buffet flat alone and in despair. Jay remains to drink some more, and then, his pockets empty, tries to convince several of the other party guests to pay his way in a nearby speakeasy. When they refuse, he staggers back to Mattie’s apartment, where instead of “warm[ing] up the ole black hen,” as he plans, Mattie throws his few clothes and belongings out the window and tells him to “Take a walk” (71). McKay encourages readers to sympathize with Mattie, who “knew she did not belong to a fast parlor-social set where everybody was young or acting young,” (64), but who worked hard, loved parties, and deserved better than Jay’s malicious treatment. While the good-time flats in Home to Harlem rollicked with the bacchanalian energy of partiers who “abandoned themselves to pure voluptuous jazzing” (108), McKay’s Gingertown stories feature more realistic portrayals of the complex human dramas that unfolded at these rowdy gatherings of chambermaids, railroad men, and other working people, most of whom lived on the economic and social margins of American society.

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Despite the fun-loving, high-spirited qualities of the many characters who populate Home to Harlem and Gingertown, twenty-first-century readers must be able to distinguish between the exciting underground world of cabarets, speakeasies, and buffet flats that McKay portrays, and the much grimmer realities of Harlem life during Prohibition. Rarely does desperation or despair cloud the experiences of Jake and his buddies in Home to Harlem, and the women they encounter in the good-time flats all appear to be having as fine a time as the men they amorously entertain. The Gingertown stories, however, manage to break through this façade of seemingly endless amusement and pleasure to acknowledge the pain caused by racism and by the difficulties in forging satisfying emotional relationships. McKay himself acknowledges in a letter to Max Eastman that the six Harlem stories in Gingertown “go much deeper into the life of the Harlem Negroes than Home to Harlem ever did” (qtd. in Cooper 269). But Rudolph Fisher, in a prescient 1932 review of Gingertown published in the New York Herald Tribune, suggests that McKay was out of
touch with Harlem life and the way that life has changed in the decade since he left the United States (Cooper 276). Indeed, much of McKay’s Harlem-based fiction bears little resemblance to the historical realities of Harlem life. McKay glosses over the grinding poverty experienced by many Harlemites, the lack of economic security even for those who held steady jobs, and the use of alcohol and drugs primarily to provide temporary relief from the pressures of life. National Prohibition spawned a world of illegal activity that was both exciting and exploitative, and McKay’s fiction dwells primarily on the former while largely ignoring the latter.

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NOTE

1. Of course, Jake’s Haitian friend Ray (based in part on McKay himself), is an obvious exception. While Ray takes part in social drinking, dancing, and even drug use, he remains dedicated to his reading and writing—much to the puzzlement of Jake and his other friends.

WORKS CITED


