The Harlem Renaissance’s Bitter Fruit: Inescapable Intraracial Prejudice and Metaphorical Death in Wallace Thurman’s *The Blacker the Berry*
Cynical, destructively alcoholic, and infamously self-critical, Wallace Thurman’s reputation has portrayed his oeuvre as morose and intensely personal. However, as other scholars have noted, an over-emphasis on the subjective stakes propelling Thurman’s literary output too narrowly constricts his broader significance.¹ Insomuch as 1929’s *The Blacker the Berry* can operate as a fictional indictment of black intraracial prejudice, it must be analyzed in direct relation to the sociological framework of 1920’s Harlem to which it responds. In other words, Thurman’s narrative of a dark-skinned black woman painfully striving to secure acceptance and status within elite, lightly-hued black factions reflects his contextual observation of insidious black colorism. Ostensibly, the Harlem Renaissance represented a positive period of novel and plentiful black artistry, engendered through the efforts of black elite like Alain Locke. However, Thurman staunchly challenges this notion. Indeed, his condemnation of colorism within the black community cannot be understood separately from his scrutiny of the Harlem Renaissance itself as an attempted attainment of social respect and power for black Americans via propagandist art and calculated New Negrohood.

Scholars like Henry Gates Jr. have expounded upon post-slavery endeavors to manufacture black representation.² Where Thurman similarly recognizes the deliberate construction of Harlem as an ideological image of black excellence, he too perceives the renaissance as socially restrictive. Collective and generalized manufacturing of black identity served to normalize blackness within the grip of uplift. In other words, black desires for representation free from slavery’s defamation ironically encouraged a masochistic erasure of undesirable black imagery. As the renaissance stemmed from and proliferated this elitist

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projection of identity onto black bodies, then, it further unshackled blackness’ vestigial bondage. Key to understanding *The Blacker the Berry* is the extent to which post-enslavement ideology particularly assaulted black womanhood. In maintaining distance from slavery’s cultural trauma, black ideology ultimately condemned black women. Indeed, Anna Pochmara notes the renaissance’s misogynistic propagation of masculine power as literally inscribed into its rhetoric.³ Where the Harlem Renaissance strove to enforce ideals of “correct” black representation, its localized denigration of black femininity could provoke particularly dangerous implications. For Thurman, intraracial prejudice in Harlem represents an especially insidious implication of such artificial image construction.

I contend *The Blacker the Berry* critically dissects the peril of such prejudice through protagonist Emma Lou’s masochistic self-destruction. In particular, Thurman frames colorism through the motifs of place and male queer sexual expression’s constraint of black womanhood. In other words, Harlem itself normatively enforces misogynistic ideals of color, while Alva represents the archetypal sexually fluid sweetback lover who financially exploits Emma Lou and reinforces her intraracial oppression. Thus, Thurman depicts colorism as pervasive, internalized and ultimately inescapable. Thurman underscores this through Emma Lou’s perpetual conviction in coloristic discrimination and her final, self-imposed isolation within Harlem. Here, Thurman abortively ends his novel as Emma Lou contradicctorily dislodges herself from the city’s collective conscious, yet accepts such standards of uplifted blackness as monolithic and inherently exclusive; incapable of locating pride in her dark black body, Emma Lou accepts defeat. Where Thurman denies any actualization of assuaging Emma Lou’s plight, he thus

demonstrates the gravity of Emma Lou’s clamoring for self-reliance: to self-ostracize from Harlem’s discriminatory propagation of black respectability is to commit a metaphorical suicide.

**New Negrohood and Post-Slavery Politics of Collective Black Imagery**

Henry Louis Gates Jr. illuminates Black America’s idealistic and contradictory self-defeating tendencies: a manufacturing of collective racial identity that served to represent the self, only insofar as it could actively erode undesirable facets of its former iterations. Furthermore, Gates locates the cultural and historical link between latter 19th century black idealism and that of the 1920’s Harlem Renaissance in an emphasis upon black elitism and uplift. Deliberate transmission of black dignity and uplift has roots in an earlier pre-emancipation context. For example, Gates notes the authoritative power of Frederick Douglass’s black image: “Douglass was the representative colored man in the United States because he was the most presentable...and he was the most presentable...because he represented black people most eloquently and elegantly” despite national enslavement (129-130). Douglass’ image thus serves to reveal an active conflation of representation and reconstruction; post-emancipation depictions of generalized black identity eschewed total accuracy for sanitized, or in Douglass’ case, exceptional portraits of blackness.

Post-Civil War “New Negrohood,” Gates writes, was typified by a desire to “turn the new century’s image of the black away from the stereotypes scattered throughout plantation fictions, blackface minstrelsy, vaudeville, racial pseudoscience, and vulgar Social Darwinism” (136-137). Capitalizing upon the term’s semantic agency, where the “new” triumphantly unchained itself from the “old,” late 1890’s and early 1900’s black exemplars like Booker T. Washington and Fannie Barrier Williams worked to redefine the New Negro’s representational

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4 “The Trope of the New Negro,” 129.
capabilities as a signpost for black “education, refinement, and money” (Gates 136). As a result, Gates argues, “Black Americans sought to re-present their public selves in order to reconstruct their public, reproducible images,” a process by which the “curious heritage” of the artificially constructed “New Negro” confronts the stereotypical denigration of black identity transmitted via white social and structural propaganda (130). Ultimately, Gates’ analysis of the late 19th century’s deliberate manufacturing of “representational” blackness proves crucial because it contextualizes the stakes involved in an image control that desperately seeks to sever slavery’s symbolic vestigial limbs. Furthermore, it allows for an appreciation of the Harlem Renaissance’s intensified efforts at black uplift via artistic production.

In his 1925 special edition of *Survey Graphic*, entitled “Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro,” Alain Locke glorified the New Negro: the embodiment of artistic talent and bourgeoisie sensibilities, whereby black creative production could garner respect and enable assimilation (Gates 147). In vehement response, however, Thurman perceived Locke as deliberately nurturing young black artists to be the defense mechanism through which black representation could be strictly diluted. Thurman sardonically seethes in “Aunt Hagar’s Children:” “There has been, we are told, a literary renaissance in Negro America,” where “literate, and semi-literate, Negro America began to strut and shout” (241). “If the Negro writer is to make any appreciable contribution to American literature,” Thurman continues, “it is necessary that he be considered as a sincere artist trying to do dignified work rather than as a highly trained dog doing tricks in a public square” (247). Producing art deliberately palatable for white consumption, the self-eviscerating black artist thus filters himself though a pale glare, thereby projecting an image of

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5 Here, Gates briefly cites *A New Negro for a New Century*, authored by Washington, Barrier Williams, and N.B. Wood: “an elaborately constructed compendium of excerpted black histories, slave narratives, journalism, biographical sketches” (136).

diluted melanin. Thurman ultimately reveals an inconsistency in black representation that reflects the paradoxical nature of Harlem itself: the black elite’s reliance upon white patronage to proliferate black art, and thus enable uplifted assimilation, confronts that same white consumption’s desire for a fetishized performance of blackness soaked in sexualized, immoral, and scandalous tropes (37). In part, then, renaissance leadership can be construed as projecting its frustrations with artistic patronage’s contradictory dynamic upon black bodies through the resulting intensification of image control. In a continuation of post-slavery’s black self-prejudice, the renaissance’s “new” image of the black distinctly suppressed the “old” in self-effacement.

Misogynoir: Rhetorical Denigration of Black Womanhood

In reshaping the black image, the Harlem Renaissance particularly confronted the past by socially censuring black womanhood. As Pochmara notes, the rhetoric Alain Locke employed in positioning New Negrohood as overriding the old is “gender-marked; masculine and feminine qualifiers are repeatedly used to depreciate the Old and empower the New Negro” (63). Locke thus fashioned a dichotomy of agency through the hierarchy of gender. Where the Old Negro, enslaved and disenfranchised, is “passive,” “hyper-sensitive” and dependent upon “charity,” the New Negro is “dynamic,” “capable,” and “active” (Pochmara 63). In other words, Locke’s “performative speech act” successfully evaded “the effeminate figure haunting the past of the black community” by sentencing coded black femininity to the past (Pochmara 63). Ultimately, Pochmara perceives Locke’s black misogyny as responding to the unparalleled heterogeneity of black life in the 20th century and invoking the cultural trauma of slavery. Analyzing the grammatical singularity of The New Negro’s codification, Pochmara notes Locke’s “strategic”

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7 “Harlem Facets,” 36-38.
practicality: “Conscious that the black community was becoming increasingly diversified and that the essential black subject was a social fiction,” Locke strove to “consolidate race consciousness and facilitate group identification” (65). In propagating iconography of generic, respectable, and male blackness, then, Locke could streamline an increasingly heterogeneous community into a generalized racial mass. Furthermore, he could more readily subject this indiscriminate “community” to particular codes of conduct for identity and sexuality, particularly with regards to black women. Here, Pochmara locates anxiety regarding the white male sexual violence inflicted upon black women during slavery.

An integral mechanism of social control and generative slave labor, the exploitation of black female sexuality was of particular concern for earlier black leaders striving for uplift. Indeed, W.E.B. Du Bois implored, if the “red stain of bastardy, which two centuries of systematic defilement of Negro women” triggered the near “obliteration of the Negro home,” then the purity of black female sexuality must be preserved at all costs (Pochmara 41).10 Insultingly, the black man bears the burden of female sexual control. In other words, “the sexual violence against black women is represented as a black men’s problem,” where the visceral vestiges of female rape are re-manifested as sentiments of the black male’s emasculation (Pochmara 41). Post-war claims for black agency, then, were reactively couched in symbolism of exclusively male empowerment and socially-driven demands for female restriction. Ultimately, this dynamic proves crucial to consider in foregrounding the myriad pressures of respectability politics inflicted upon black women during the renaissance. Where collectivized efforts to dictate dignified black representation utilized rhetorical misogyny as a means of dislodging blackness from the traumatic narrative of slavery, black women necessarily suffered. I do not intend to erase or delegitimize a focus upon the ways in which black womanhood in this era endured

societal attempts to physically control their perceived pathology of unchecked sexuality.\textsuperscript{11} Nor do I wish to underestimate the detriment instigated by the literary efforts of Thurman’s contemporaries, which portray black female sexuality as performative in how it threatens male agency and success.\textsuperscript{12} However, I perceive \textit{The Blacker the Berry} to be most explicitly responding to intraracial prejudice as one of the many iterations of oppression black woman sustained during the Harlem Renaissance.

**New Negro Women: The Renaissance’s Stipulations for Color**

Colorism must be considered a particularly dangerous manifestation of the renaissance’s politics for representation. A prejudicial system that encapsulates phenotypical identification and produced socially-stratified implications of power, colorism indeed uniquely catered to the renaissance’s heightened construction of black iconography. Perhaps the most visible figure in the renaissance’s contribution to American art, for example, the mulatta operated across a myriad of creative media. Indeed, Cherene Sherrard-Johnson notes how, “mulatta iconography proliferated during the Harlem Renaissance as a result of visual and literary cross-fertilization,” where fascination with racially indefinable women saturated the published fictions of the \textit{Crisis} and \textit{Opportunity}, Nella Larsen’s \textit{Quicksand}, and comprised the near-entirety of Jessie Fauset’s oeuvre.\textsuperscript{13} In line with Gates’ analysis of the reactionary and artificial reconstruction of black imagery post-war, Sherrard-Johnson thus interprets the ubiquity of mulatta iconography as “a by-product of counter-representational strategies to combat negative images of black womanhood”

\textsuperscript{11} Hazel Carby’s “Policing the Black Woman’s Body in an Urban Context” meticulously illustrates the “grounds of contestation in which black women became the primary targets for the moral panic about urban immorality,” where organizations such as Cleveland, Ohio’s Phillis Wheatley Association arose to protect (i.e. aggressively monitor) “vulnerable” young black women (744-747).

\textsuperscript{12} Here, Carby cites Carl Van Vechten’s \textit{Nigger Heaven} and Claude McKay’s \textit{Home to Harlem} as utilizing fictional black women for the “means by which male protagonists will achieve or will fail to achieve social mobility, and as signs of various possible threats to the emergence of the wholesome black masculinity” (747).

(3). “Beautiful, educated, middle class, and usually engaged in a charitable, conscientious trade” the dignified mulatta served to combat black tropes like “the tempestuous transgressor,” and physically enabled a distancing from vilifying slave tradition through her lighter pigmentation (Sherrard-Johnson 11). The mulatta thus reified the renaissance’s idealized symbol of black womanhood.

As Sherrard-Johnson explains, however, the proliferation of black femininity as refined, financially endowed, and sexually non-transgressive severely restricted “artistic expression and agency for black women,” whilst also eliminating an overwhelming majority of black women from a consideration as “New Negro women” (9-11). In other words, the renaissance’s propaganda collectively reduced black womanhood to a very singular kind of black female, thereby designating uplift and relative progressive racial politics as privilege. To have the mulatta gaze stalk you in paintings, illustrations, theatrical productions, and novels, was to have your dark skin othered and socially broadcasted as impure or lesser. Beyond superficial aesthetic standards that fueled self-hate in darker women and established a fraught hierarchy of flesh tones, such collectively-enforced standards of color politics further controlled and dehumanized black women.

**No Place Like Harlem: The Black Mecca’s Normative Oppression**

Where *The Blacker the Berry* can “productively be read as Emma Lou’s excruciating search for her own place…in the world, Catherine Rottenberg argues that Harlem operates as both the novel’s geographic frame of reference, and as a signpost for Emma Lou’s escapist fantasy (60).” Moreover, Rottenberg interprets Thurman as forcibly displacing Emma Lou and

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purposefully dramatizing Harlem’s liberating potential in order to ultimately reveal that “it is not, by any means, a panacea” for Emma Lou’s strife (60-62). Here, she puts pressure on Elizabeth Wilson’s *The Sphinx in the City*, and its assertion that “the European and American city historically presented vast new horizons for women (62). Where the typical 20th century city provided “cultural, commercial, and sexual freedom,” beyond the confines of a smaller, homogenous community, it could do so because it lessened the normative control exerted by the patriarchal social structure (Rottenberg 62-63). Rottenberg perceives *The Blacker the Berry* as demonstrating the inextricability of race and gender, so that Wilson’s gendered focus fails to account for Emma Lou’s distinctly black, middle-class female context. Thus, “it is precisely this racialized gender stratification within the black middle class” that oppresses Emma Lou (Rottenberg 63). Her freedom from patriarchal devaluation would demand a simultaneous unshackling of racial constraints.

Rottenberg adroitly acknowledges that misogynistic oppression doesn’t affect women in a universal manner. Equally crucial, however, is the tentative answer she offers to account for Emma Lou’s intersectional strife: Harlem’s black heterogeneity. Rottenberg briefly cites Judith Butler’s claim that “subjects are constituted by and through regulatory normative schemes that precede and exceed them,” in order to suggest that metropolitan environments cannot offer true escape (66). On the one hand, “normative schemes are what bring subjects into being and help constitute subjects’ desires, aspirations, and inspirations” (Rottenberg 66). On the other hand, normative perspectives and value systems are highly mobile due to the migratory tendencies of their inhabited individuals. Thus, where cities enable the mass collision of differing ideals and norms, this “proliferation of contradictions and fissures…can open up a wider space of cultural

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collision that facilitates the resignifying of dominant normative identity categories” (Rottenberg 67). If we recall Harlem’s role as “the largest and most diverse black U.S. metropolitan space,” we can apply Rottenberg’s anti-emancipatory analysis: misogynistic rhetoric and the black elite’s coloristic oppression functioned in response to, and precisely because of, Harlem’s impressive heterogeneity (68). Where New Negrohood worked to represent black identity as unshackled from slavery’s cultural trauma, it could force its dominant, normative narrative upon middle-class black bodies. Thus, Emma Lou’s suffering within *The Blacker the Berry* can appear unceasing and pervasive because the efforts to dictate and standardize black female identity stick out so oppressively amidst a sea of divergent black perspectives.

I ultimately want to build off of Rottenberg’s notion of place as enforcing normative restrictions and posit Thurman’s motif of place as one framing device for colorism’s heightened internalization and control of Emma Lou. Insomuch as I value Rottenberg’s understanding of cities as strengthening normative narratives in response to divergent value systems, I contend Thurman uses place as a way of re-situating coloristic control within Emma Lou, where such detrimental ideals are transitive and thus inescapable. Indeed, Emma Lou’s refusal to criticize or forsake colorism as an ideal frame of reference demonstrates her inability to evade intraracial prejudice. Where Rottenberg’s anti-emancipatory city strengthens oppressive structures, it bears testament to the power of Harlem if Emma Lou encourages her own oppression as well.

Brian Russell Roberts similarly examines *The Blacker the Berry* through the lens of place.16 Roberts utilizes Thurman’s self-styling as a “Columbus” in order to understand him as navigating uncharted territory through Emma Lou’s plight: “the unsettled (and unsettling) terrain

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of color prejudice within the African American community” (91-92).\(^{17}\) In this sense, Thurman is “seeking to reconconstellate a distinctly insular topography” by discovering “the hidden islands of color prejudice” (Roberts 93). Roberts thus reads *The Blacker the Berry* as a quasi-geographical exploration of “importune questions of color lines within color lines” where it depicts localized colorism within the racially and spatially segregated community of Harlem itself (Roberts 93). I want to examine this concept of prejudice’s nesting doll effect as it mirrors Alva’s own layered racial and geographical identity.

“Oval-shaped and his features more oriental than Negroid,” Emma Lou’s lover boasts a “warm, arresting, and mellow” yellow pigmentation (Thurman 67). Yet Roberts wants to put pressure on the notion of “Alva as simply an Asian representative within the novel” (105).\(^{18}\) For example, Roberts contends “the specifics regarding Alva’s parentage are highly relevant” in how they signify “Alva’s insular roots in the Pacific” as necessarily “mediated through blackness” (106). Here, Roberts recognizes the narrator as situating Alva’s foreignness within a more familiar, more comfortable notion of black identity. Moreover, he endeavors to signpost Alva as physically embodying the complicated narrative of America’s colonization of the Philippines: the progeny of a Filipino father and an American mulatto mother (Roberts 106-107). From this perspective, Roberts argues that Alva “may be able to offer an alternative to the color prejudice that animates Harlem’s color scheme” because his foreignness makes him “unclassifiable within the color hierarchy” of Harlem’s parameters (108). Concurrently, Roberts criticizes Emma Lou’s mission of self-reliance towards the novel’s close. In particular, he problematizes Emma Lou’s integration into a “classically American self-doctrine of self reliance,” via white artist Campbell Kitchen, because she seems to merely trap herself within a different iteration of discriminatory

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\(^{17}\) Quoted from Eleonore van Notten’s *Wallace Thurman’s Harlem Renaissance*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1994

politics (Roberts 111). I concede that Emma Lou treads tenuous ground in taking advice from
Campbell’s Van Vechten-esque caricature. Furthermore, Roberts admittedly does not position
Emma Lou’s proclamation for autonomy as explicitly less desirable than Alva’s exploitation.
However, I contend Roberts overlooks the sequence-of-events in which Emma Lou almost
immediately undercuts this newfound “selfish” mindset with her return to Alva’s disinterested
abuse. Indeed, Emma Lou briefly resigns herself to the stereotypical de-sexualized black mammy
of Alva’s bastard and deformed child, after receiving a pep-talk on self-reliance outside of Alva.

Roberts earlier concedes that Alva’s ambiguous link to blackness enables him to
introduce Emma Lou to authentic Harlem. In a sense, his foreignness only operates insomuch as
he retains properties of a distinctly black identity (Roberts 108-109). Thus, I want to reconfigure
Alva’s racial flexibility as not necessarily externalizing him in relation to colorism, but enabling
him mobility in and out of the system. Crucial then, is that Alva still benefits from Harlem’s
system of color prejudice, and can boast the privileged bliss of ignorance: Alva’s oblivious
“sugar, I don’t know what you mean’s” in response to Emma Lou’s frustration with Harlem’s
blatant colorism. Alva’s pigmentation advantage cannot prevent Emma Lou from “burning up
with indignation” in response to perceived coloristic prejudice (Thurman 113). Surrounded by a
cultural chorus of “when they comes blacker’n me, they ain’t got no go,” Alva ultimately
appears explicitly ill-equipped to assuage Emma Lou’s intraracial discrimination (Thurman 69).

Sweet Oppression: Alva’s Queered Identity and Emma Lou’s Despair

Where Alva is racially ambiguous, he can too be examined in relation to his indistinct
expression of sexual identity. Indeed, Alva’s Asiatic appearance within Harlem’s microcosm of
coloristic perspective certainly ruptures any perceived rigidity of self. To foreground an analysis
of Alva’s queered sexual expression, I want to briefly turn to Daniel M. Scott III’s interpretation
of *The Blacker the Berry* as “an exploration of non-essentialized, de-natured constructions of the self” (329). If we allow for *The Blacker the Berry* to be perceived as more than a mere projection of Thurman’s subjective racial anxiety, Scott posits a “text that deliberately interrogates several dimensions of identity” (323). Scott particularly asserts that where the novel positions a dark-skinned protagonist physically at odds with, but psychologically “caught up in,” Harlem’s hierarchical and stratified standards of color, it “renders race a constructed performance rather than a natural, given fact” (329). Thus, Scott interprets Thurman as pressuring the notion of racial identity as inflexible in order to reveal its performative aspects. As Emma Lou “travels through a world of masks and performance,” she ultimately verbalizes the “discontinuity between appearance and identity” and illustrates racial identity as unstable or deceptive (331-332). Here, Scott wants to insert sexuality into the dynamic of identity construction: Emma Lou’s journey for self “is as much sexual as it is racial,” confounding the notion that “identity is monolithic” (334-336). Scott ultimately emphasizes Emma Lou’s sexuality as relevant to understanding her racial identity. Thus, he can expound upon Roberts’ consideration of Alva’s racial fluidity, so that Alva’s complicated sexual expression is similarly vital to his characterization. Where I want to construe Alva beyond a light-skinned and financially exploitative philanderer, Scott can highlight insinuations of Alva’s queerness.

In considering Alva’s queered identity expression, I turn briefly to Michael L. Cobb’s seminal work on queer literary representations of the renaissance. Here, Cobb strives to emphasize “queer insolence” as significant for the “articulation of characters whose interactions with race and sexuality are at odds with the dominant culture” (328). Thus, Cobb wants to

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interpret the notion of rude queers as literally and ideologically disrupting Harlem Renaissance narratives in order to contest hegemonic black masculinity and heterosexual normalization. Cobb deftly handles a myriad of queered texts. For example, he thoroughly examines rhetorical insolence and “rude unrestraint” as it pertains to “dangerous” mutual female sexual desire vis à vis Claire and Irene in Nella Larsen’s *Passing* (332-335). However, I stress caution in easily applying the “insolent queer” characterization to Alva. Too impulsive of a labeling may inadequately examine how Alva’s queer identity functions with respect to Emma Lou.

Alva is remarkably rude, as we see him financially exploit multiple women with little qualm. Moreover, chance meeting at a Harlem cabaret displaces the narrative’s focus from Emma Lou’s prejudiced strife to her near-compulsive obsession with Alva (Thurman 67). Thus his disturbance, so to speak, of the narrative operates in direct relation to Emma Lou. Furthermore, any quasi-actualization of homosexual behavior does not occur till the novel’s close, an intimation of “boisterous” and “obscene” tenderness between Alva and another effeminate male youth (Thurman 144). Thus, where I believe it useful and accurate to interrogate Alva’s sexually queered characterization, I wish to specifically accomplish this insofar as Alva’s complicated identity affects and controls Emma Lou. Here, I point to Stephen P. Knadler for his thorough specification of the male sweetback as an articulation of the queer that responds with misogyny to Harlem’s normative pressures on masculinity.21

We recall the considerable efforts of 1920’s black leadership to cultivate a collectivized image of dignified blackness that could successfully wage respectability politics. Stephen Knadler emphasizes how popular sentiments regarding black manhood during the renaissance confronted this uplift propaganda. Post-slavery male frustrations, he writes, were “redirected into

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an aggressive personal politics of assertive masculinity” (Knadler 909). Where black males
found themselves confronted with “inequalities in employment, housing, and education,
performances of power were rampant” (Knadler 910). As a means of reclaiming “a measure of
control over their bodies and their souls,” the flashy costuming of black males utilized
transgressive and feminized modes of dress to reinforce “a real macho ethics” (Knadler 901).
Such figures embodied sartorial queerness, as black males who were “stylin” exemplified a
“boastful parading of fashion and self-adornment” (Knadler 900). Ultimately, coded homoerotic
expression manifested in the figure of the sweetback or sheik dandy (Knadler 900). Built into
such sweet-back iconography was aggressive homophobia and misogyny.

Indeed, Knadler argues, Harlem’s “urban racial masculinity needed the open secret of the
pansy,” where a scapegoat existed for confrontations of male powerlessness (908-909).
Furthermore, the sweet-back appropriation of feminine style echoed the financial exploitation of
black women, where a reclamation of masculinity operated through the romantic and monetary
conquest of women. Knadler remarks on the protagonist in Claude McKay’s Home to Harlem:
“Jake continues to feel an injured sense of manhood that he resists by resorting to powerful
vestiges of masculine privileges over women and stylized performances of violence, sexual
power, and toughness” (909). Bound in a transgressive and queered black male body, then, was
the further oppression of black women. Knadler posits a convincing argument for Thurman’s
utilization of the sweetback motif as a self-conscious and anxious repression of simultaneously
vocalized homosexual desires (922). However, I choose not to focus entirely on explicit, physical
acts of black male homosexuality, or Thurman’s supposed attempts to contradictorily erase such
verbalization. Instead, I believe its transgressive expression and implied existence ultimately
bears crucial consequences for black women in The Blacker the Berry. After all, insinuation of
Alva’s same-sex activity only occurs in the novel’s very close. However, he quite explicitly operates as a sweetback who exploits and oppresses Emma Lou. Thus where Thurman can be construed as ambiguously queering Alva, I interpret him as reacting to Harlem’s normative stress in furthering Emma Lou’s oppression via an exploitative, light-skinned sweetback. In other words, Alva perpetuates the oppression of black women in a system of intraracial prejudice.

“My Color Shrouds Me in:” Colorism as Oppression, Isolation, and Death

I want to perceive Thurman as responding to, and recreating, Harlem’s climate of collective and sanitized black representation in order to illustrate its direct propagation of misogynistic intraracial prejudice. Emma Lou’s plight of colorism thus depicts the detrimental consequences of image construction that seeks to evade slavery’s cultural trauma through the marginalization of dissatisfactory black bodies. Indeed, Thurman immediately characterizes Emma Lou by her social ostracism, where she functions as a “liability” for two differentiated Boise, Idaho communities (1). On the one hand, Emma Lou’s jet-black body renders her hyper visible in contrast to the gleaming white faces that comprise her high school’s graduating class. Emma Lou “would have rather have missed receiving her high school diploma than have to sit as she now sat, the only odd and conspicuous figure on the auditorium platform” (Thurman 2). Here, Emma Lou’s black body serves to visibly alienate her from the white mass in which she is spatially immersed. Moreover, her inability to share in her white peers’ “ephemeral mob emotion” illustrates an exclusion from a distinct collective consciousness (Thurman 2). On the other hand, Thurman emphasizes, Emma Lou’s blackness itself is not ostensibly indictable; its particular shade bears the true transgressive culpability.

Emma Lou’s obsidian skin operates as a virtual scarlet “B” that marks a peculiarity within her own familial context. Dripping with irony, Thurman writes, “Emma Lou’s

grandmother was the founder and the acknowledged leader of Boise’s blue veins, and she guarded its exclusiveness passionately and jealously” (6). Thus, Emma Lou’s ostracism is two-fold in that her blackness can additionally sever her from a community whose perceived physical superiority virtually runs in her veins. “Whiter and whiter ever generation,” the Blue Veins insist, until their descendants can seamlessly achieve assimilation and thereby shed slavery’s racial burden like an oversized coat (Thurman 7). In fashioning his beleaguered protagonist as both hereditarily enshrined in, yet phenotypically excluded from, a cluster of prejudiced light-skinned individuals, Thurman illustrates the painful hypocrisy that comprises particular sects of the black community. Moreover, the Blue Veins are born out of a geographical and psychological desire to escape the southern “slave belt,” and assert social prestige only in denigration of their darker brethren (6-7). Thus, Thurman seems to be vividly depicting Gates’ retroactive analysis of blackness as self-prejudicial in its attempts to collectively reconstruct a projected image. Furthermore, he overtly foreshadows the renaissance’s own localized politics for color.

Prior to Emma Lou’s vision of Harlem as a mecca of black solidarity, Thurman anticipates the danger of buying into an idealized and prejudicial cultural narrative. Consider her brief association with Hazel, a fellow black freshman at the University of Southern California (USC). Vocally, behaviorally, and physically, Hazel signposts as undoubtedly black, a “Negro” and “typical southern darky,” whose attempts at intimacy with Emma Lou provoke horror and unease (Thurman 15-16). Important here is the tone and semantics Thurman projects onto Hazel, via Emma Lou: “Negroes always bedecked themselves and their belongings in ridiculously unbeknown colors and ornaments…it seemed to be a part of their primitive heritage which they did not seem to have sense enough to forget and deny” (18-23). Emma Lou adopts the rhetoric of
the color-privileged black community, and personifies the group’s collective beliefs. She
distances herself grammatically from the othered “Negro,” and “their” tendencies, careful to
distinguish her dis-identification with “vulgar” niggers and their “down south” heritage
(Thurman 23). Yet Thurman juxtaposes Hazel’s characterization with Verne Davis, a well-liked
but decidedly dark fellow student at USC. Here, he reveals the masochism of Emma Lou’s
prejudice.

“A preacher’s daughter with plenty of coin and a big Buick,” Verne’s class belies her
skin tone, and thus enables her entry into the elite social scene of black USC (Thurman 28).
Conversely, Emma Lou flounders on the peripheries of “right” blackness (Thurman 28).
Thoroughly “discouraged and depressed” by colorism’s cruel infidelity, Emma Lou grows
recluse, “convinced “there could be no happiness in life for any woman whose face was as black
as hers” (Thurman 32-38). Thurman’s work here is dually significant. Indoctrinated in adherence
to colorism, Emma Lou’s perspective has been shaped entirely by a prejudicial system, filtering
her worldview through a shaded lens. However, colorism casts its bigoted scrutiny on Emma
Lou’s own black body so aggressively, it threatens introversion: “she had lived to herself for so
long, had been shut out from the stream of things in which she was interested…that she
considered her own imaginative powers omniscient” (Thurman 34). Thus, complicit in her
community exclusion, via colorism, is a reinforcement of her individualism and isolation.
Second, Thurman positions the contradictory dynamics of colorism vis à vis three female figures:
Emma Lou, Hazel, and Verne. In other words, we encounter coloristic vitriol directed at, and
suffered by women. Indeed, Emma Lou “was a girl, and color did matter” (2). Thus, Thurman
cleverly illustrates attempts to both erase deviating iterations of blackness from the cultural
consciousness, and vilify black womanhood. Against this backdrop of strife, Thurman coyly
positions the allure of Harlem as the spatial answer to Emma Lou’s “painfully anxious”
disposition (41). “Desperately driven to escape,” Emma Lou thus flees to New York’s black
mecca in search of the singular “place in the world for a dark girl” (Thurman 31).

Thurman briefly allows Emma Lou to bathe in the ecstasy of agency; she withholds her
body from sulky, dark John in a momentary assertion of sexual denial. However, he shatters her
illusionary optimism within five weeks of arriving to Harlem (Thurman 39-40). Where Emma
Lou is confident in the relative ease with which she can attain employment, Thurman seems to
predispose Emma Lou to failure. This inevitability builds with tension as she waits in the
cloyingly crowded employment office, the space “pregnant with clashing body smells”
(Thurman 46). The office itself operates as a microcosm of colorism. Mrs. Blake, “brown like
butterscotch” and presiding over job assignments, chastises a “sullen” man, “nose flat, lips thick
and pouting” for refusing to work as a subservient waiter (Thurman 48). In response, Mrs. Blake
reads this insolence as signposting for his dark complexion: grinning, she projects onto Emma
Lou, “your folks won’t do, honey” (Thurman 49). Here, Emma Lou’s blackness is hyper visible,
as she has unavoidably exposed herself to overt discrimination. Mrs. Blake eventually sends
Emma Lou to Angus and Brown as a temporary stenographer. “An old Harlem firm” situated
within the “aristocratic tree-lined city lane of 139th street,” Angus and Brown should be read as
emblematic of the black elite (Thurman 51). Two female secretaries confront Emma Lou, the
“powdered smoothness of their fair skins” in stark contrast to Emma’s expectant black face:
“were they sisters?,” Emma Lou wonders, marking them in a relational harmony that excludes
her (Thurman 51). One “quickly suppressed a smile” as she goes to inform the aptly-named and
light-skinned Mr. Brown of Emma Lou’s intrusive presence. From within Mr. Brown’s office
emanates a murmur of laughter; the second typist “seemed to be smiling to herself as she
worked” (Thurman 52). In this scene, Thurman physically ostracizes Emma Lou, denying her access to the conversation held within Mr. Brown’s office. Moreover he emotionally abandons her, as she’s left to speculate and further internalize her flesh’s undesirability in the presence of the smirking typist, with whom no sisterly bond is intimated.

“Mr. Brown has someone else in view for the job,” Emma Lou is finally told (Thurman 53). Thurman’s diction here proves critical: Mr. Brown is said to “view” another candidate, while “an extra pair of eyes” observes Emma Lou’s rejection (53). Emma Lou’s value stems from her image, a sense of her utility as projected via pigmentation. Furthermore, Thurman refuses her penetration of this elite space through a lighter, socially advantaged woman. Again, he genders Emma Lou’s discrimination, where colorism is transmitted reflectively between the mutual female gaze. However, note who directs this secretary to deny Emma Lou: Mr. Brown. Thus, Thurman subtly illustrates colorism’s chain of command as initiating with a male authority figure, thereby echoing the respectability politics waged by the renaissance’s black male leadership. Indeed, Thurman juxtaposes Emma Lou’s humiliating rejection with a scene of male misogyny on 7th Avenue. Reacting to her dark reflection “in the sunlit show window,” a “coffee-colored face” snarls indignantly at a friend’s suggestion he might take romantic interest in Emma Lou: “Man you know I don’ haul no coal” (Thurman 58). As the male trio “merrily” moved away in laughter, Thurman again situates Emma Lou as excluded from group intimacy, where her skin color, likened to physical labor, provokes an alarming allusion to slavery and necessitates defensive, masculine derision.

Thurman repeatedly works to illustrate the insidious strength of colorism as a cultural narrative. In particular, I want to examine Thurman’s intrusion of self into the narrative as a validation of intraracial prejudice’s reality. Emma Lou arrives at a stereotypical “rent-party”
where she is introduced to “the little jazz boy,” Tony Crews, Cora Thurston who insists she is “no lady,” and a “small dark slender youth” named Walter Truman (Thurman 87-89). Thurman humorously and conspicuously codes this trio for Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and himself. I interpret this blatant inclusion of the “Niggerati” as generative of more than a sly laugh, but as introducing perceived authority figures: Harlem’s authentic cultural arbiters and critics. Thus, their vocalization of disgust at Harlem’s colorist elite must not be digested lightly.

In response to a wedding “to which the prospective bride and group have announced they will not invite any dark people,” Cora decries “our ‘pink niggers’” (Thurman 90). Here, Truman advocates for a quasi-sympathetic consideration of colorism’s compulsion. After all, he concedes, “white is the symbol of everything pure and good, whether that everything be concrete or abstract,” justifying his claims with allusions to “Ivory Soap,” “virtue and virginity” as draped in white, and a Eurocentric God’s throne in “spotless white Heaven” (Thurman 90). Truman thus functions to offer a masterful explanation of “their evil” color prejudice and re-iterates the actual black elite’s reactionary and self-effacing image control (Thurman 90). Interestingly, Emma Lou bristles at this critical dissection of colorism: “didn’t they have any race pride or proper bringing up?” (Thurman 90). Unable to grapple with how this group could “so dispassionately discuss something that seemed particularly tragic to her,” Emma Lou seethes with considerable insecurity: “she wasn’t sure they weren’t all poking fun at her” (93). Crucially, Emma Lou does not, or cannot, criticize the system of prejudice about which the others so freely lambast. Her response is to internalize, to interpret the moment as a further mockery of her color itself. Ultimately, then, herein lies the revelatory significance of Thurman’s prose: he fictionalizes high-profile renaissance artists in order to validate colorism’s threat, and directly confronts such efforts with Emma Lou’s jilted indignation and lack of shared sentiment. Where colorism is
verbalized and actualized, she who bears its vitriolic brunt cannot disparage it. Emma Lou’s situation is undoubtedly one of inculcated imprisonment.

I construe Thurman as further illuminating intraracial prejudice’s inescapable influence through the framing device of place and geography. To do so, I want to first consider the connotative power Thurman seems to instill within place. Remarking upon Emma Lou’s arrival to Southern California, Thurman reveals the Pacific Ocean’s inability to “cause her heartbeat to quicken,” its roaring waves powerless to “find an emotional echo within her” until she visits “Bruce’s Beach for colored people” (12). Here, Thurman demonstrates the tremendous pride and solidarity Emma Lou locates in a sliver of land that denotes blackness. Later, Emma Lou learns that her USC classmate, Hazel, hails from Texas; this geographical origin marks her as “flagrantly inferior” and noticeably “a typical southern darky” (Thurman 16). Place thus boasts evaluative agency. Indeed, Emma Lou condescendingly wonders how Hazel “could stray so far from the environment in which she rightfully belonged to enter a first-class university” (Thurman 19). Emma Lou indicts Hazel for transgressing the established delineations of place and exhibiting a mobility that belies her perceived value. Place too bears connotative power within Harlem. For example, Emma Lou can indulge in an intimate, “warm, and fleshy” moment with a “teakwood tan” stranger in broad daylight because she does so under a movie theater’s cover of darkness (Thurman 78). Later, Emma Lou remarks that the Renaissance Casino’s dancehall doesn’t boast “the cultured classes” or “the right sort of people,” while Truman marks the raucous, sexualized rent party as “the proletariat’s parlor” (Thurman 80-98). If place functions as a frame for distinct classification of people, behavior, and associated sentiments, it similarly works to demarcate on the basis of color.
Emma Lou clarifies Harlem’s geographical stratification of color and status: “high-toned” and privileged black specifically lived between “Seventh Avenue and Edgecombe Avenues on 136th, 137th, 138th, and 139th Streets” and in “imposing apartment houses on…Bradhurst and St. Nicholas Avenue” (Thurman 72). Recall that Mr. Brown’s office, the site of Emma Lou’s initial encounter with Harlem’s color discrimination, overlooks 139th street and 7th Avenue. Thus, Thurman presents colorism as seemingly etched in the very foundations of Harlem; where streets can powerfully denote status and exclusivity on the basis of flesh hues, colorism appears transient and pervasive in its presence. Indeed, it seems to haunt Emma Lou, tracing her every step. Determined to move apartments in search of a roommate capable of introducing her to “the right sort of people,” Emma saunters “blindly” down 7th and 8th Avenues till she notices an apartment advertising a vacancy. (Thurman 74). A “bedizened yellow woman with sand-colored hair” and “incongruously” thick lips opens the door, only to quickly shut it upon a “curious” glance at Emma Lou (Thurman 74). “We have nothing here,” the woman explains “testily in broken English” (Thurman 74). Thurman bluntly explains the exchange: “Persons of color didn’t associate with blacks in the Caribbean Islands she had come from” (74). Here, Thurman invokes a foreign iteration of intraracial prejudice. Where the woman projects her localized framework of discrimination onto American Emma Lou, now distinctly othered, Thurman illustrates colorism’s impressive transatlantic mobility.

Colorism thus proves highly adaptable, where it conforms to Emma Lou’s context and provokes an intensification of her “suffering…magnifying each malignant experience” (Thurman 74). In attempting to spatially escape intraracial prejudice, Emma Lou exposes its inexorability. Emma Lou ironically retreats to Harlem’s bustling metropolis because “it was only in small cities one encountered stupid color prejudice” (Thurman 11). In line with Rottenberg’s
interpretation of Harlem as strengthening normative values, however, Emma Lou’s plight only deepens in the black Mecca, a waterfall of derision incessantly drenching her black body: “I don’ haul no coal,” reverberating.23

In response to strict standards for black masculinity, sartorial and sexually queered Harlem sweetbacks often exhibited considerable misogyny by exploiting black womanhood.24 In envisioning Emma Lou’s lover, Alva, as a sweetback, I thus want to illustrate his manipulation and denigration of Emma Lou as extending her intraracial oppression. Thurman depicts Alva and Emma Lou’s initial encounter quite normatively, where a woman and a man share an alcohol-infused jazz dance of apparently heterosexual “abandon and intrigue” (67). Crucial is Emma’s mention of Alva’s voice: “persuasive and apologetic,” his “liquor-laden breath” as explanatory for the appearance of his animated face, “alive with some inner ecstasy” (Thurman 67). His male companions gaze at the pair while they dance, “all in tuxedos” (Thurman 67). Inebriated, accompanied by a troop of flashily-dressed men, and affecting his voice with cunning mock apology, Alva can be tentatively read here as a Harlem hustler. Thurman concurrently expounds upon this through a conflation between Alva and his roommate, Braxton, “a reddish brown aristocrat with clear-cut features and curly hair” (69). Braxton is fastidious in his “usual bedtime” beauty regimen: “his face had been cold-creamed, his hair greased and covered by a silken stocking cap” (69). Equipped with vanity matched by “physical perfection, a magnetic body and much sex appeal,” Braxton is “the golden brown” replication of the “late lamented sheik” and sex-symbol Rudolph Valentino (Thurman 103-104). Thurman characterizes Braxton as well-kempt, feminized, and virile. Aesthetically, then, Braxton harkens to Harlem’s sweetback trope. Here, Thurman depicts Alva as immersed in Braxton’s splendor: sharing a living space,

23 Rottenberg, “Emancipatory City,” my analysis beginning on page eight.
Braxton indeed must climb over Alva each night for bed (69). This intimate routine physically relates the two, and suggestively foregrounds Alva’s queered characterization.

Where Braxton additionally tries his hand at female subjugation, he more behaviorally embodies the sweetback. Indeed, he briefly attracts Anise, a maid for a wealthy white family in Central Virginia who for four years “had been her master’s concubine” (Thurman 106). Boasting a complexion “the color of beaten brass with copper overtones” and quickly smitten with Braxton, Anise “soon undertook to pay his half of the room rent,” additionally “slipping Braxton spare change to live on” (Thurman 108). Braxton’s financial exploitation of Anise readily mirrors that of her former white employer, where male sexual gratification, as unconventional and supplementary labor, begets monetary reimbursement. Interestingly, Thurman can be construed as reproducing and reconstructing slavery’s sexual exploitation of female black bodies within this all-black arrangement. Crucially, however, Braxton’s attempts at female domination routinely fail: “he could have, but not hold” (103). Against Braxton’s incapable misogyny, Thurman pits Alva. Indeed, Alva verbalizes Braxton’s ineptitude to Emma Lou, where Braxton’s “clumsy” vanity was a “distinct handicap to one who wishes to be a hustler, and live by one’s wits off the bounty of others” (Thurman 104). Alva exercises his exploitative prowess through Emma Lou: privy to Braxton’s humorous failures, she “never realized just how she had first begun giving him money,” only aware that monetarily supporting Alva had seemed “natural” (Thurman 101-102). Thus, where Thurman explicitly conveys Alva as engaging in similar exploits of female oppression, he marks him as remarkably adept.

I now turn to Thurman’s closing scene, the novel’s most explicit intimation, so to speak, of Alva’s homosexuality, as it can be utilized to retroactively strengthen earlier allusions to Alva as a queered, misogynistic hustler. Climbing the stairs to Alva’s home, Emma Lou could “hear a
drunken chorus of raucous masculine laughter;” Emma Lou’s feminine corporeality threatens to infiltrate a male collective (Thurman 144). Flinging open the door “she saw the usual and expected sight: Alva, face a death mask, sitting on the bed embracing an effeminate boy…who drew hurriedly away from Alva as he saw her” (Thurman 144). Emma Lou’s lack of surprise serves to paint this scene as mundane, predictable. Where the effeminate youth frantically reacts to her scrutinizing glare, however, he performs his transgression; the result is to denote his and Alva’s physical intimacy as perverse, queered, and to render Emma Lou virtually reactionless with her anticipation of this taboo. Thurman works cleverly here to convey a scene as confronting itself, where “shock” and “surprise” clashes with Emma Lou’s suppressed shudder and calm “hello” (144). Thus, if Thurman reveals Alva’s sexual deviancy, he necessarily relays its perceived banality via Emma Lou. She discerns him for what he was: “a drunken, drooling libertine, struggling to keep the embarrassed Bobbie in a vile embrace” (Thurman 145). Emma Lou ultimately concretizes Thurman’s sweetback characterization of Alva: misogynistic, exploitative, and overtly queered. We can now recall and contextualize Alva’s normative reflexes. He “took pity on” Emma Lou when Braxton patronizes his initial cabaret affair with her; “I bet you couldn’t get five cents out of her,” Alva later challenges Braxton during a domestic dispute (Thurman 69/109). As Alva was always a “libertine,” Emma Lou could never transcend her role as a pitiful, exploitable, “black wench.”

Where Alva furthers Emma Lou’s oppression, then, he perpetuates and strengthens Harlem’s normative colorism. Indeed, Alva escorts Emma Lou to the midnight show at the Lafayette theater, replete with black-faced comedy segments and “the usual rigamarole…concerning the undesirability of black girls” (Thurman 113). Here, a young black performer sings mournfully, “a yellow gal rides in a limousine, a brown-skin rides a Ford, a
black gal rides an old jackass, but she gets there, yes my Lord” (Thurman 113). Emma Lou burns “with indignation” and “immediately imagined that they were referring to her” (Thurman 113). Moreover, she indicts Alva for this affront: “you’re always taking me some place, or placing me in some position where I’ll be insulted” (Thurman 114). Thus, she interprets Alva as the vehicle through which visceral experiences of colorism transpire. Admittedly, it is Alva who earlier introduced Emma Lou to Thurman’s fictionalized “Niggerati, “and thus exposed her to their “dispassionate” remarks on colorism. Emotionally injured and ignorant, however, Alva rages: “Oh, go to hell” (Thurman 117). Two years will pass before the pair becomes reacquainted.

In the interim, Emma Lou befriends Gwendolyn Johnson, a light-skinned brown girl who actively inverts the coloristic paradigm. In particular, she believes that marriage to a dark-skinned man will produce “real Negro” progeny; yet she enables Emma Lou admittance to Harlem’s exclusive “high-toned churches,” where the latter can finally mingle with “the right sort of people” and attract the romantic interest of a desirable “yaller nigger” (Thurman 126-132). Conversely, Alva’s financial exploitation of the distinctly fair-skinned Geraldine has unintentionally produced a “sickly” and physically deformed child, whose disturbing presence compels Geraldine to abandon Alva to single parenthood. A chance run-in with Braxton along 7th Avenue sparks renewed interest in Alva, and mere days later Emma Lou arrives unannounced to live with him and his bastard. Despite Emma Lou’s attainment of privileged, light-skinned companions and romantic prospects, Thurman presents Alva’s influence over her as compulsive. In comparison to Alva’s hedonistic “bulldog” persona, the “next generation of respectable society folk” and black leaders to whom Emma Lou miraculously becomes acquainted are “a litter of sick puppies” (Thurman 130). Emma Lou continuously derides such individuals as “colorless” and “pallid;” finally welcomed by the right sort of people, she “found them to be
quite wrong” (Thurman 130). Where Emma Lou chooses to return to Alva and operate as a veritable mammy to his unwanted offspring, then, she purposefully forsakes the colorist privilege she had triumphantly attained.

I construe Alva’s power over Emma Lou as so immense in its manipulative influence, it wrenches her away from the elitist delusion she had suddenly seen materialize. His sweetback exploitation of Emma Lou, potent in its endurance, returns her to the nethermost rungs of intraracial prejudice’s hierarchy. Infuriated and stinging from rejecting, Gwendolyn spews vitriol at Emma Lou, reducing her to “nothing more than a common ordinary nigger” for returning to Alva (Thurman 136). As transmitted through Alva, then, colorism boasts such inescapable omnipotence that it compels Gwendolyn, previous denouncer of the “pink nigger” complex, to condemn Emma Lou’s blackness, signposting it as ordinary in its expected depravity (Thurman 128). In many ways, Emma Lou has made good on Alva’s earlier crass request and indeed returned to her jet-black hell.

A collectivized and masochistic mode of black representation, colorism bore remarkable prowess for oppression. Where black womanhood suffered denigration and threats of obliteration from idealized black iconography and its cultural narrative, intraracial prejudice subjected black female bodies to particularly intensified scrutiny. Wallace Thurman’s *The Blacker the Berry* deliberately, desperately, reproduces this atmosphere of misogynistic color prejudice. Moreover, Thurman envisions Harlem as strengthening Emma Lou’s pigmented suffering. Where Harlem physically and spatially enforces colorism, Alva’s sweetbacking and queered characterization further reiterates the powerful inescapability of her subjugation. I perceive Thurman as thus imploring us to recognize and condemn Harlem’s atmosphere of intense black image
construction, in which Emma Lou must struggle to survive. Crucially, however, I want to argue that Thurman challenges Emma Lou’s ability to endure such despair.

To conclude, I closely examine Emma Lou’s final moments, during which she attempts to reclaim herself. Ashamed by “the gossip and comments” of her neighbors regarding her role as Alva’s “black mammy,” Emma Lou resolves to leave her lover (Thurman 138). “For the first time now…she also realized that she had been nothing more than a commercial proposition to him at all times,” and thus embarks on a journey back to the high-toned privilege she’d previously, unbelievably, denied (Thurman 139). Yet upon reconnecting with Gwendolyn and Benson, she learns of their impending marriage: Gwendolyn hypocritically settled for Emma Lou’s former “yaller nigger” (Thurman 140). Here, Thurman emphasizes Emma Lou’s dual ostracism. Where Alva relegates her to a dehumanized and impersonal slavery trope, the high-toned community to which she gained tenuous acceptance additionally denies her re-entry. Thurman further echoes this social disconnect: “stunned,” Emma Lou trudges down 7th Avenue, the latter “full of life and color,” the former “impervious” and “oblivious” to “the people she passed or to the noise and bustle of the street” (140-142). Surrounded by the vibrant colors and physical proximity of Harlem’s black mass, Emma Lou feels nothing. She traverses the great promenade of Harlem virtually alone.

Importantly, Emma Lou reinforces her ostracism through a resolute condemnation of her color. Reflecting upon the “thousands on thousands” of black girls who are similarly “plain, untalented, ordinary,” Emma Lou endeavors to “accept her black skin as being real and unchangeable” (Thurman 142-143). As such, she must strive to be “eminently selfish,” seek a semblance of economic independence, and forsake Alva’s abuse (Thurman 143). Thurman ultimately juxtaposes Emma Lou’s deliberate self-isolation with her recognition of colorism’s
cultural inescapability. Moreover, “it served her right that Alva had used her once for the money she could give him and again as a black mammy for his child,” since she “alone was to blame for her unhappiness;” Emma Lou thus “had no doubt herself she was the major criminal” and thereby inds her culpability in colorism. Here, Emma Lou distinctly avoids a criticism of intraracial prejudice itself, instead prosecuting her own black body as foolishly complicit in adherence to this perspective. Ultimately, as we’ve seen, colorism ostracizes and tyrannizes Emma Lou. Where it produces guilt and self-enforced quarantine in Emma Lou, then, it appears triumphantly victorious.

As he vividly illustrates the inescapable pressure the Harlem Renaissance culturally exerts upon black women, Thurman ultimately depicts Emma Lou as contradictorily rejecting this collective narrative. Yet, I contend Thurman’s meticulous image of Harlem’s omnipresent colorism itself throws this attempted contradiction into considerable relief. If we are to construe, as I argue, the renaissance’s politics of color as so dominant in their denigrating influence, then Emma Lou cannot truly escape. Thus, we see how Thurman marks her delusion of liberation: self-isolating and self-blaming. I further posit Emma Lou as symbolically suicidal; her denial to operate in the renaissance’s “unchangeable” prejudice can only be possible in metaphorical death, whereby she bolsters her communal exclusion through a “selfish” and solitary retreat into herself. Thurman’s lasting image of Emma Lou is in transit as she departs Alva’s apartment, emotionally “hardened” to Alva Junior’s “deafening” cries; suitcase in hand and optimistic promises of a satisfyingly self-sufficient future, Emma Lou leaves (Thurman 145-146). Emma Lou ideologically attempts to remove herself from Harlem’s collective consciousness, and physically abandons her last link to viscerally felt prejudice. Yet Thurman reveals the impossibility of her attempted transcendence in his refusal to actualize any promise of a “new
life” for Emma Lou. He instead leaves us with an emotionally numb, communally excluded, and introspective Emma Lou who flees into the abyss of the unrealized, virtual nothingness. Thus, hers is a story that concludes without a future. Indeed, the stakes of colorism prove so high as to necessitate Emma Lou’s literary death.
Bibliography


