Wallace Thurman’s The Blacker the Berry and the Question of the Emancipatory City

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Mosaic: a journal for the interdisciplinary study of literature, Volume 46, Number 4, December 2013, pp. 59-74 (Article)

Published by Mosaic: a journal for the interdisciplinary study of literature

DOI: 10.1353/mos.2013.0046

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There was no place in the world for a girl as black as she,” Emma Lou, the protagonist of Wallace Thurman’s 1929 *The Blacker the Berry*, despairingly laments. Indeed, Emma Lou is very black, “too black,” as she learns growing up in Boise, Idaho in an African-American community that desperately hopes to get “whiter and whiter every generation” (29). Her grandmother is the founding member of the Boise “blue veins,” an elite circle of black Americans who are fair-skinned enough for their blood to be seen “pulsing purple through the veins of their wrists” (28). But to Emma Lou’s great misfortune—and as a result of her mother’s disastrous marriage to a “full-blooded Negro”—she has been born dark (30). She consequently becomes the ostracized member of her family and their exclusive social set. Due to her skin colour, whose hue is constantly invoked with disdain, her grandmother, mother, and the rest of the blue veins isolate Emma Lou and she, in turn, eventually rejects her family and sets out on her own.

Thurman’s novel traces Emma Lou’s various attempts to escape the virulent intra-black racism of her hometown and its psychic effects. Her flight leads her first...
to Los Angeles, where she enrolls as a student at the University of Southern California. But collegiate life in Los Angeles turns out not to be as radically different from Boise as Emma Lou had hoped—at least not in terms of the middle-class African-American community’s colour consciousness and racialized gender hierarchy. This realization propels Emma Lou to move on to Harlem. She is, we are told, absolutely determined to “escape the haunting chimera of intra-racial color prejudice” (70) and believes that in the “world’s greatest colored city” life will be more cosmopolitan and the people more civilized (187). Harlem does indeed prove to be vastly more heterogeneous but, to her dismay, Emma Lou discovers that though the largest black metropolis is indeed unlike any other space, it is not, by any means, a panacea for all her woes.

Given the novel’s overt thematization of colour prejudice within the African-American community and its candid description of sexuality outside the confines of marriage and heteronormativity, scholars have recently returned to *The Blacker the Berry*, underscoring its sophisticated “denaturing” of race as well as gender and sexuality.¹ These scholars also suggest that Harlem plays an emancipatory role in the novel. Building on the insights of this scholarship, in what follows I investigate the connection the text makes between gender, race, and space. My point of departure is Emma Lou’s disturbing lament regarding the difficulty, if not near impossibility, of a “black girl” finding a site where she feels she belongs, a theme that recurs almost obsessively throughout the narrative. *The Blacker the Berry*, I suggest, can productively be read as Emma Lou’s excruciating search for her own place—as a young black middle-class woman—in the world.

Such a reading draws out a series of theoretical insights. A close analysis of Thurman’s use and construction of the city, which is portrayed as the only kind of space in which Emma Lou can realize her desire for happiness, helps reveal how spatiality and place function in relation to gender and race norms. The description of Emma Lou’s geographical odyssey—from a small town to a larger city and eventually to the largest black metropolis—highlights the way spatiality influences the “effectiveness” of dominant norms. *The Blacker the Berry* dramatizes, however, that even though Harlem does open up more possibilities for its female protagonist, the greatest black urban space ultimately fails to live up to its reputation as a Mecca of limitless opportunity. Dominant gender and race norms continue to circulate and regulate life even in this cosmopolitan metropolis, and Emma Lou’s ability to forge her own place becomes possible only within the interstices of the social fabric of urban life.

My objective in this essay is therefore not only to provide a new reading of *The Blacker the Berry* but simultaneously to “deploy” Thurman’s vastly undervalued novel in order to gain further theoretical insights into the specific processes by and through which spatiality—and, more specifically, urban space—helps shape subjectivity and
subject formation. Drawing on David Harvey’s insight that one’s place in the world is inextricably tied to the existing social order and that social orders reproduce and secure themselves through the differential placement of subjects (419), I demonstrate how Emma Lou’s narrative trajectory is precisely about her displacement within the African-American middle-class community due to her “fast black” female body. And yet, as the text simultaneously underscores, displacement can produce unexpected effects, such as the defiant (re)appropriation of the normative desire for place. It is, in fact, Emma Lou’s very displacement that reinforces her desire to find a place and that ultimately pushes her to abscond to the city. Emma Lou’s odyssey, then, resonates with what Harvey describes as the importance of “having” or “knowing” one’s place—in both its constraining as well as its enabling aspects.

Finally, the novel also dramatizes the constitutive dimension of spatiality in subject formation. If, as Judith Butler has famously contended, categories of identity and the norms linked to these categories help produce intelligible and viable subjects, Thurman underscores how place, as a specific spatial formation, becomes the site in and through which the materialization of these norms occurs. Space and “normative schemes” need, then, to be thought together. By raising the question of place with such insistence, The Blacker the Berry concretizes discussions of the constitutive power of norms by dramatizing, with particular force and sophistication, the ways in which specific spaces can and do affect the operation of dominant norms.

Wallace Thurman is not, of course, the only Harlem Renaissance author to depict a middle-class black female protagonist struggling to make her way in the big city. The most famous of these characters, and certainly the most written about, are Nella Larsen’s Helga Crane, Irene Redfield, and Claire Kendry. Today, these protagonists, and Jessie Fauset’s Angela Murray, have become canonical figures within the African-American literary imagination. And, yet, Emma Lou, who has received far less critical attention than her fictional counterparts, is one of only a few fictional (and today relatively “famous”) black female protagonists from the Harlem Renaissance who does not end up dead (Clare Kendry), dying (Helga Crane), or about to be married (Angela Murray). Moreover, she is perhaps the only middle-class black female protagonist who, regardless of her internalized self-loathing, explores extra-marital sexuality with little shame and who, despite her described lack of talent, makes a career for herself as a public school teacher, providing her with economic independence. In other words, notwithstanding the incredible obstacles that Emma Lou encounters, she is portrayed as negotiating the heterogeneity of city life without either completely falling victim to its “dangers” or ultimately falling back into middle-class “gentility.”
This, I suggest, makes the depiction of Emma Lou unique. It also strengthens recent claims that *The Blacker the Berry* has been overlooked for far too long. Daniel Scott, for instance, has urged scholars to re-evaluate Thurman’s text and move away from readings that emphasize the autobiographical parallels between Emma Lou and Thurman himself. *The Blacker the Berry*, according to Scott, “is an exploration of the non-essentialized denatured constructions of the self [. . .] confound[ing] the notion that identity is monolithic, natural, essential” (335). Scott mentions the novel’s spatial dimension by pointing out that Harlem is the stage on which the interrogation of the various and conflicting dimensions of identity are played out. David Jarraway, who focuses on the urban site of Harlem in Thurman’s oeuvre more generally, argues that in his fiction Thurman invokes Harlem as a “dream-space” that ultimately privileges “openness and tolerance of difference” (44). I agree fully with these scholars that the novel investigates the city as a site of “emancipation.” Yet, as a way of broaching the more theoretical question about the relationship between space and norms and, even more specifically, the city as a particular spatial formation that produces a multiplicity of “places” and that holds out a certain emancipatory promise, I focus on Thurman’s critical exploration of the liberating potential of urban life for his middle-class black female protagonist.

In her path-breaking book, *The Sphinx in the City*, feminist cultural theorist Elizabeth Wilson argues that the European and American city historically presented vast new horizons for women since the very nature of the modern city helped weaken traditional gender divisions and the authority of the patriarchal family. In contrast to the small community, which was more strictly controlled by traditional roles, urban living promised women economic independence as well as cultural, commercial, and sexual freedom from the patriarchal household. The city, Wilson claims, “is the zone of individual freedom. There the ties of family and kinship may be loosened and avenues of escape opened up” (16). If in the late nineteenth century, “for middle-class women the most likely alternative to marriage was a career and spinsterhood,” already by the turn of the twentieth century, an increasing number of urban women began to claim “the right to heterosexual experience outside marriage, or sometimes to lesbianism, and they fought for a place alongside men in artistic and political life” (65). The late nineteenth and early twentieth century, it is important to remember, witnessed the emergence of the New Woman ideal, which was an eminently urban phenomenon.3

Wilson’s framework is particularly useful for reading *The Blacker the Berry*, since Thurman’s novel explicitly invokes the emancipatory potential of urban life for his female protagonist.4 From the very beginning of the narrative, the city is presented as a liberating force that can release Emma Lou from the suffocating restrictions of
Boise, Idaho. For the dark-skinned Emma Lou, “the greatest and most modern cities” represent the possibility of escaping prejudice and a “small-town” mentality (70). Los Angeles and Harlem signify places where “Negroes of every class, color and social position” live cheek by jowl, where intelligent, broad-minded people of all complexions intermix, and where there are fewer constraints placed on middle-class black women (34-36). Moreover, the larger and the more heterogeneous the city, the more emancipatory promise the urban site seems to hold; when Los Angeles fails to materialize the urbane and progressive cosmopolitism that Emma Lou had hoped to find, she flees to Harlem, never once ceasing to believe that a truly great urban centre will enable her to escape the stigma of “color” and find “happiness” (69). Thus, Black Manhattan during the Jazz Age—as the largest and most diverse black U.S. metropolitan space—becomes the site in which the emancipatory potential of city life for this middle-class black female protagonist is tested at its absolute limit. After all, as the text rhetorically queries, “Where else could one see so many different types of Negroes? Where else would one view such a heterogeneous ensemble?” (97).

Crucially, however, Thurman’s text exposes various shortcomings in Wilson’s analysis. Rather than ascribing Emma Lou’s urban escape to patriarchal oppression, Thurman describes it as propelled by a complex imbrication of gender and racial norms within the middle-class African-American community. This challenges Wilson’s somewhat reductive claim about women in the city, as she tends to assume that urban women were escaping or breaking free from patriarchal constraints and not from other constraints as well. Emma Lou’s odyssey suggests that this conception of women in the city not only takes whiteness as the standard but does not take into account the constitutive power of normative schemes or the way gender norms interact with other categories of identity, such as race and class. The Blacker the Berry, by contrast, underscores that norms of gender, race, and class are intricately linked, and that it is impossible to extract race from gender. Male dominance and privilege as well as the possibility of moving up the class ladder are intimately connected to and informed by the disdain for dark skin. In Boise and L.A., “the business men, the doctors, the lawyers, the dentists, […] in fact all of the Negro leaders and members of the Negro upper class, were either light skinned themselves or else had light-skinned wives” (60, emph. mine). The “or” in this sentence indicates that very black men could and did become leaders and professionals and that their own skin colour did not necessarily hinder their success. But a dark woman was at an almost insurmountable disadvantage (53). It is precisely this racialized gender stratification within the black middle class and the norms that (re)produce and uphold this stratification that Emma Lou attempts to flee.
In Thurman’s text, then, the city signifies potential liberation, not from oppressive gender roles per se, but from dominant normative schemes that forge particular links among the categories of gender, race, and class. When Emma Lou first arrives in Los Angeles, for instance, she is convinced that her new urban existence will “bring her out” and that in a city of over fifty thousand African Americans, she will be able to prove that a black girl can in fact get along in the world just as well as a black boy. She is determined to show “the people back in Boise” that blackness did not have to be tied to “no-gooderness”; and that in L.A., she could have “as much opportunity and as much happiness” as a fair-skinned girl (53). The city is represented as the only kind of space that can disrupt the dominant middle-class concatenation of dark skin and femaleness with unworthiness—and, as the novel’s title suggests, with (hyper)sexuality.

The social order in Los Angeles is depicted as less rigid and less rigidly regulated than in Boise, and the Californian city does widen the horizons for black middle-class women. Thurman describes the small aspiring black middle-class community in L.A. as a conglomeration of well-to-do families who moved west from Louisiana, Texas, and Georgia. The text also makes a point of stressing that the middle-class community in L.A. is less organized than the one in Boise as a result of this “coming-together” in one space of quite a few different and disparate Southern groups and communities (60). This relative diversity, in turn, can be read as allowing for a slight loosening of the linkage between middle-class black women, light skin, respectability, and desirability. Unlike the Boise blue vein community, the L.A. African-American middle class “were not insistent that their children get whiter and whiter every generation.” During her time in L.A., Emma Lou discovers that dark-skinned black women could be accepted as a part of the bourgeois community—something that simply was not possible in the elite blue vein circle. For instance, Verne Davis, another first-year student, is limned as dark but “one of the most popular colored girls on campus” (55). This revelation provides Emma Lou with the hope that she, too, will be able to fit in, and, at first, she unwaveringly attempts to gain admittance to the elite African-American social set.

Moreover, the African-American women whom Emma Lou encounters on campus are pursuing a higher education in an overwhelmingly white college. This in and of itself is significant, although not necessarily connected to the university’s urban setting. What is more noteworthy and perhaps more intimately connected to the urban site is that these women are depicted as pursuing higher education without this pursuit foreclosing their marriage prospects. One of the women students in the elite African-American collegiate community is described as a senior in the law school and as engaged to another senior in the school of agriculture (48). This suggests that in contrast to Boise, where marriage to a professional man is held out as the only real
“respectable” possibility for middle-class African-American women, in L.A.—during the nineteen-twenties—the possibility of combining some kind of “respectable” career or vocation with marriage has opened up. The middle-class black women that Emma Lou encounters on campus have all entered public space without being automatically stripped of their “femininity” or desirability as marriage partners. Most of the women, we are told, are in college to find their “future husbands”—but their presence on the university campus gestures to the possibility of these women pursuing a different route, the route of the New Negro Woman.\(^6\)

The novel thus clearly resonates with Wilson’s claim about the liberating potential of the city for women, but Emma Lou’s trajectory also complicates Wilson’s influential argument in interesting ways. Current feminist urban theory, even when discussing the impact of race and class on urban women, tends to use gender as a discrete category of investigation, while ultimately concurring with Wilson that the modern city has opened up all kinds of prospects for women, prospects that were simply unimaginable in smaller towns or villages.\(^7\) Indeed, the notion of the “emancipatory city” has become a central trope in feminist urban studies.\(^8\) Yet, in the novel, Emma Lou’s escape is construed as a flight from racialized gender norms and not merely as a flight from patriarchal repression or traditional gender roles. The text’s sophisticated exploration of the constitutive nature of dominant norms suggests that we need to revisit the notion and the discussion of the emancipatory city, since urban space is by no means described as a zone of “individual freedom” for Thurman’s female protagonist.

Emma Lou quickly realizes that while the L.A. black community is not as organized or stratified as the blue veins, it still wants to keep their children and grandchildren from having too dark a complexion (60). It soon becomes clear that Verne Davis has been accepted as part of the “inner circle” because she is the daughter of a bishop, wealthy, charming, and less black than Emma Lou. The black undergraduates at the University of Southern California, most of whose families hail from the Deep South and who have been interpellated into a world that constantly reinforces the desirability of whiteness, thus reproduce ideals of whiteness through the exclusion of Emma Lou and other dark, unexceptional female students. This, in turn, points to the way subjects are brought into being through “subjectifying discourses” (Brown 123). Tragically for Emma Lou, who still assumes that her place is with the bourgeois African-American community, the “right sort of people” reject her for the simple reason that she is a too-black girl.

The narrative trajectory itself undercuts and complicates the novel’s own (rhetorical) tendency to glorify the city as a site of emancipation. Thurman’s detailed
description of the way dominant norms continue to inform and operate in his fictive cities draws our attention to the constitutive power of dominant ideals. The L.A. black middle class is depicted as having “brought” dominant norms from the South, and these norms have clearly helped shape its members’ identity, identifications, desires, and practices. In this way, the text underscores that as people and communities migrated from towns in the south to northern cities, the norms through which they were initially interpellated “migrated” with them. Normative schemes can thus be understood as both materializing in a particular place but also as having the capacity to “travel.”

Building on the work of Elizabeth Wilson, current scholarship in feminist cultural geography has been careful to emphasize the dual-edgedness of urban life for women. Rather than celebrate the city as a liberating force or focusing on the specific gender-related dangers of urban life, much of this scholarship details the opening up of economic, cultural, and social opportunities for women on the one hand, while stressing that gender inequality has simultaneously made the modern city a perilous place for women on the other (Lees 2-3). From this gender perspective, the city holds out the promise of liberation from patriarchal constraints yet is still fraught with myriad dangers. Urban cultural geographer Loretta Lees, however, has recently questioned this framework by asking after the implicit theoretical assumptions that inform notions of an emancipatory and/or dangerous city (15).

Following Lees’s lead and focusing on the feminist aspect of such a query, I propose that current articulations of the emancipatory city—which assume, implicitly or explicitly, that the city liberates women without really theorizing “liberation” or the conditions that allow for an opening up of possibilities in urban space—need to take into account Butler’s claim that subjects are constituted by and through regulatory normative schemes that precede and exceed them (Precarious 45). This conception of the subject challenges the liberal assumption of the city as the zone of individual freedom, since, according to a Butlerian perspective, the very notion of the autonomous liberal subject is an effect or “ruse” of power, and the condition of possibility of agency actually emerges from within normative schemes themselves. It is important to note that my focus is on the way spatiality can be understood to shape subject formation, thus differing from sociological discussions on the specific attributes or effects of urbanism as a way of life. Following Butler, I suggest that the “the city” cannot be understood as a site of emancipation from dominant norms or constraints, since normative schemes are what bring subjects into being and help constitute subjects’ desires, aspirations, and identifications. In other words, there is no “escape” from regulatory ideals. And, yet, I believe critical geography and indeed Thurman’s novel
can add an important dimension to Butler’s theory by inserting spatiality into questions of subject formation and agency.

In *Frames of War*, Butler argues that there is an internal limit to normative construction, since normative schemes are necessarily heterogeneous and dependent on iterability in order to exercise their “crafting” power. Normative schemes not only change over time but are also inevitably multiple and can come into conflict and clash with one another (3-4). The dominant normative schemes of race, gender, and class in the U.S., as Wendy Brown has argued, have been produced through different modalities of power and have a different history of production (123). Normative construction thus always potentially exceeds its limit, given its dependency on iterability (and, consequently, on temporality), on foreclosed identities (the norm simultaneously produces its own constitutive outside), and on the possible conflicting normative demands of different modalities of power.10

I suggest that in metropolitan spaces the internal limit of normative construction is more likely to be extended and, as a result, there is more likely to be an expansion of and an increase in alternative and counter-hegemonic discourses, norms, and identifications. As mentioned, people who migrate to the city “bring” norms with them, rendering the city a site where potentially diverse normative schemes converge. These norms, which can be different from the city’s dominant regulatory scheme as well as different from each other, tend to produce tensions, fissures, and contradictions; this proliferation of contradictions and fissures, in turn, can open up a wider space of cultural collision that facilitates the resignifying of dominant normative identity categories. This cultural collision is, I accordingly argue, intensified in an urban setting, not least because there are always people migrating to and from the city. Moreover, the convergence of varying norms provides the conditions that enable the increased proliferation and circulation of alternative and counter-hegemonic normative schemes. The notion that the metropolis’ dominant normative scheme is likely to be shaped by its interaction with divergent norms brought by people who migrate to the city helps theorize both the opening up of opportunities in the city (i.e., it is not simply about an increase in numbers in urban space but its heterogeneous character, where heterogeneity means the citation of different norms) while simultaneously problematizing the liberal notion of the emancipatory city (i.e., people are always already formed and continue to perform within normative schemes).

This theorization of the city emerges from Thurman’s text, which forcibly dramatizes both that dominant normative schemes are not always “taken up” by specific communities in exactly the same way, and that a higher concentration of alternative and counter-hegemonic schemes exists in the metropolis. Thurman’s novel high-
lights, moreover, that the city is a site where there is an increased likelihood that groups or subjects who have been “displaced” by a certain social order will coalesce and form alliances. These factors, among others, seem to make the embrace of and identification with non-normativity more possible and emerged as a result of the way the “truly great” cities materialized over the course of the twentieth century.11

Robert Park’s famous work on the sociology of urban life in the early twentieth century already articulates the distinctiveness of the great city. He notes that the modern metropolis is absolutely unique in its diversity and the way it brings together—into the same geographical space and proximity—groups of individuals who are “widely removed in sympathy and understanding” (27). Due to the vastness and complexity of metropolises, face-to-face or primary relations are substituted for indirect and secondary ones (23). This, in turn, complicates social relationships, adds an element of chance and adventure, produces new and divergent types, and, importantly, allows for anonymity. Park suggests that due to these factors, the modern city draws the non-normative “man” to its streets: “In a small community it is the normal man, the man without eccentricity or genius, who seems more likely to succeed” (41). In the city, by contrast, the eccentric or divergent type can not only develop his or her particular disposition but is also more likely to find other like-minded individuals. The great metropolis, more than any other place, can, in sum, accommodate and perhaps even encourage “difference.”

While Park was interested in outlining the sociology of urban life at the beginning of the twentieth century, Iris Marion Young also argued at the end of the twentieth century that the city is the only kind of space in which a politics of “difference” can thrive. Young’s theoretical emphasis is on the extraordinary diversity of people and groups in contemporary urban space, as well as on the multitude of subcultures and their differentiated activities and functions that proliferate in the great metropolises: “The possibility always exists of becoming acquainted with new and different people, with different cultural and social experiences; the possibility always exists for new groups to form or emerge around specific interests.” It is this immense diversity and the social differentiation of city life that, according to Young, makes possible a positive inexhaustibility of human relations. Arguing against theorists who yearn for small democratic communities that privilege ostensibly unmediated face-to-face relations by suggesting that such a yearning and normative conception of community tends to deny or suppress differences, Young posits the utopian ideal of an “unoppressive city.” Given the realities of modern urban life—more than half of the planet’s population now live in cities—the city, according to Young, has become the only site in which an “openness to unassimilated difference” might be cultivated (319).
Drawing on Park’s early insights, Young’s insistence on the generative quality of the city’s diversity, and Butler’s notion of normative schemes, I argue that Thurman’s text can help us map out how the city, though still produced by and organized through dominant power relations, becomes a place in which normative schemes are most likely to be put under pressure. *The Blacker the Berry* gestures toward the generative potential of urban life, which results from its vast heterogeneity, plurality, and anonymity, while simultaneously tempering Young’s utopian vision of the ideal city. Harlem—as Thurman’s limit case—best illustrates the great metropolises’ complex social fabric, one in which the (re)production of dominant norms occurs alongside an increase in “divergent” norms and the coalescing of alternative communities. The intensification of these last two elements in the urban landscape can, in turn, be seen as helping to weaken or disrupt hegemonic linkages and to account for the city’s “liberating” potential—but from a Butlerian post-structuralist perspective.

Wallace Thurman’s non-fictional essays written during the nineteen-twenties describe Harlem as the “city in which anything might happen and everything does” (*Collected* 31). Black Manhattan is represented as the cosmopolitan centre and capital of black America. Amritjit Singh points out that Thurman actively celebrates Harlem as a “teeming, pulsating, complex amalgamation of cultures, classes, peoples, and beliefs” (29). Indeed, this celebratory tone informs Thurman’s journalistic publications on Harlem throughout the Jazz Age, and the vibrancy of this city space is reiterated time and again. “In the Mecca of the New Negro,” Thurman insists in a 1927 essay, “you have persons of every conceivable shade and color. Harlem is [...] a modern Babel mocking the gods with its cosmopolitan uniqueness” (44).

Resonating very strongly with the nascent urban sociology of Park and others, Thurman also suggests in these essays that “social barriers are not as strict and well regulated in Harlem as they are in other Negro communities [...] People associate with all types should chance happen to throw them together” (*Collected* 46). Harlem is clearly conceived of as unparalleled and as standing in a category all its own. What is perhaps more interesting for my purposes here, however, is that whereas Thurman’s non-fictional writing tends to lionize Harlem, *The Blacker the Berry* actually registers a very profound ambivalence toward the (then) greatest black U.S. metropolitan space. This ambivalence is filtered through Emma Lou’s enchantment with the city and her concurrent realization that stratification and a racialized gender hierarchy continue to inform and organize African-American life even in “the city of surprises.”

Once settled in Harlem, Emma Lou is eager to find “respectable” work and subsequently sets out in search of a job as a typist for “some colored business or profes-
sional office" (78). She assumes that obtaining “a permanent and tasty position” will be easy. Almost immediately, though, she is made to realize that professional African-American firms do not hire dark women. As one of the employment agency administrators tells her, “lots of our Negro business men have a definite type of girl in mind and will not hire any other” (94). What the administrator insinuates, of course, is that these businessmen insist on hiring light-skinned women, because—even in Harlem—they are considered not only more desirable but also more respectable.

Respectability for middle-class Harlemite women is linked not only to skin colour, but also to the repression of any outward signs of overt (and especially out-of-wedlock) sexuality. The linkage of respectability to sexual modesty is mostly assumed in the middle-class black communities in Boise and L.A., but in Harlem it is explicitly thematized.12 Following various casual sexual escapades and after eventually being rejected by her lover Alva, a charming but two-timing light-skinned “libertine,” Emma Lou decides she wants to restore her reputation by associating with the “right sort of people.” The right sort of people are, of course, “the next generation of Negro leaders, the next generation of respectable society folk”; the ones who had “a future” (200). For women of this class, maintaining respectability in Harlem means boarding at the reputable YWCA—and not at a random boarding house or apartment, as Emma Lou has done until now—attending church regularly, and cultivating a career or uplifting pastime as well as a serious monogamous relationship that will lead to marriage. Overt signs of sexuality in men but especially in women are actively discouraged. Thus, in order to establish herself as part of this social set, Emma Lou has to emulate the norms associated with the New Negro Woman. She returns to school and obtains a teaching certificate, which will enable her to work in the public schools; she attends church and dates “wholesome” young men.

In sharp contrast to Emma Lou’s earlier period in Harlem, during which she seeks out men for sex, when she is establishing herself as part of this middle-class community, her dating venues include church, socials, and bible class. But she is ultimately bored by the “colorlessness” of respectability, and when the opportunity presents itself, Emma Lou impulsively decides to return to her former lover, Alva, and take care of his deformed child. When her fellow YWCA boarder, Gwendolyn Johnson, finds out about Emma Lou’s plans to live with Alva (while continuing to teach in the public school), she is disgusted and breaks all ties with her friend. Gwendolyn declares that Emma Lou is ruining herself and proving herself to be “just a common ordinary nigger” (208). Flaunting sexuality—and in a way that so blatantly flouts the norms of the African-American middle class—is conflated with the lower classes and with blackness. This normative concatenation of hyper-sexuality with blackness and
femaleness, in fact, frames the entire novel. The aphorism is, after all: the blacker the berry, the sweeter the juice.

Yet, even from the descriptions above, it becomes clear that normative schemes of race and gender are being put under greater pressure in Harlem. Although Emma Lou does encounter the same or similar normative linkages, Harlem’s social fabric is depicted as qualitatively different from those of Boise and L.A. Unlike L.A., for example, Harlem is described as providing Emma Lou the cover of anonymity. If in L.A. Emma Lou was constantly afraid of being too forward (39), in Harlem Emma Lou is able to experiment with sex without any thoughts of marriage. The kind of casual sex that Emma Lou has with John when she first arrives in Harlem and then with Jasper Crane, a man she literally picks up in a dark movie theatre, could not have occurred without serious consequences to her reputation or marriage prospects in either Boise or L.A. In Harlem, Emma Lou is the one who rejects John, and Jasper moves into her life and then quickly disappears, all of this without anyone in the city’s various middle-class communities being the wiser. Consequently, when Emma Lou decides to return to the respectable fold, she can re-enter middle-class life without carrying with her any undesirable traces of her “immodest” sexual past. Hence, anonymity is crucial for understanding opportunity in the city.

Emma Lou’s very acceptance into the middle-class Harlem community points to the loosening of the linkage between black women, light skin, desirability, and respectability. On the one hand, the novel describes this particular community as relatively limited in its scope. Thurman details how business firms will not hire Emma Lou, how other black communities only allowed “pinks” into their circles, and how many other “respectable” jobs, such as waitressing in a tea room, are closed to her due to her dark complexion, as well as how she is the constant target of snide remarks and harassment, especially by men. On the other hand, Emma Lou does indeed find a middle-class community whose members are not as caught up with colour, and she is finally accepted into “respectable” society; she attends all of the fashionable socials, and she has a variety of brown and black men to choose from. This delinking of certain traits associated with respectable black middle-class womanhood is, the novel suggests, possible due to Harlem’s complex but “interdependable social structure” (138). While respectability is still firmly linked to sexual modesty, there is a more profound disruption of the link between respectability, femaleness, and light skin than in L.A.

Harlem is also depicted as unique in the way that it has drawn a wide variety of “divergent types” and non-normative subjects to its midst. The strange scene in which a group of artists and young writers come together in order to experience a Harlem house-rent party forcibly dramatizes the complex texture of metropolitan life. The
text makes a point of stating that Alva’s acquaintance with this group of bohemia could only have happened in the city of surprises, and that this group’s acquaintance with Alva, in turn, gains them admittance to the working-class phenomenon of the house-rent party. Alva functions as a “cicerone” to this “underworld,” since, we are told, “proletarian Negroes are as suspicious of their more sophisticated brethren as they are of white men, and resent as keenly their intrusions into their social world” (138). These descriptions convey a sense of division among the lower- and working-class blacks and their middle-class counterparts. The division is presented as less rigid in Harlem, yet it still clearly exists and is described as contouring the everyday life of the African-American population.

But it is this group’s discussion before the house-rent party that shocks and unsettles Thurman’s protagonist. The group consists of artists, writers, a white man, Emma Lou, and Alva. The inter-class and racially mixed environment—as well as the presence of the outspoken woman artist, Cora Thurston—is already noteworthy; however, what unnerves Emma Lou is the fact that the various personalities who are present bring up and vehemently discuss intra-racial segregation, the way whiteness serves as the standard for all that is “good” and desirable, and even hint at the link between race and gender norms. Thurman describes Emma Lou as “aghast” and as exclaiming to herself, “Such extraordinary people—saying ‘nigger’ in front of a white man! Didn’t they have any race pride or proper bringing up? Didn’t they have any common sense?” (143). The answer to this last question is, of course, no—this group does not have “common sense”—if common sense is understood from a Gramscian perspective as “hegemonic” sensibility. The text suggests that these kinds of interaction and discussions—which actively challenges African-American middle-class “common sense”—were not likely to have taken place anywhere else except in Black Manhattan during the Jazz Age.

The Harlem section of the novel, then, stresses that the great city—while still regulated and organized by dominant power relations—is a site that facilitates the formation of various communities with their various appropriations (and possibly resignifications) of normative schemes. Emma Lou never loses faith in Harlem’s uniqueness and generative potential. Indeed, Thurman has his protagonist express her wonder at the very existence of such a city space time and again and, in the text, the opening up of opportunities only becomes possible to a “plain, untalented, ordinary” black girl like Emma Lou as a result of Harlem’s unparalleled cosmopolitanism. But the text also makes it clear that the city’s liberating and democratizing potential is contingent, contextual, and thus ultimately unpredictable.
NOTES

1/ See Scott (332-39) and Jarraway (36-52).

2/ Plum Bum’s protagonist, Angela Murray, for instance, is described as “surrendering” herself to Roger, a white man. Angela is deeply ashamed but is kept from despair by the conviction that Roger will eventually marry her (204-05). In Quicksand, Helga Crane experiences extra-marital sex when she seduces Reverend Pleasant Green, which leads to their doomed marriage (115-16).


4/ Literary scholarship that has combined the insights of feminist urban studies with literary texts has often centred on the modern and urban figure of the flâneur. While I am indebted to this scholarship, I am ultimately less interested in a particular mode of female urban vision and more on meta-theoretical questions concerning how we might reconceptualize the “emancipatory city” from a poststructuralist perspective. See Deborah L. Parsons’s Streetwalking in the Metropolis: Women, the City and Modernity (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000. 5. Print).

5/ This, in turn, challenges Kimberle Crenshaw’s notion of intersectionality (“Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color.” Stanford Law Review 43.6 [1991]: 124-28. Print), since, as Wendy Brown has argued, norms of race, gender, and sexuality “do not take place along discrete lines,” nor are they intersectional in their formation (123).

6/ The New Woman ideal was qualitatively different from the New Negro Woman ideal. The New Woman ideal forged a link between middle-class white women, public presence, and a more open sexuality. By contrast, the New Negro Woman entailed the repression of sexuality and concatenated presence in the public space with a de-sexualization, which was a reaction to the historical hyper-sexualization of the black woman’s body. See Hazel Carby’s “Policing the Black Woman’s Body in an Urban Context” (Critical Inquiry 18.4 [1992]: 738-55. Print) and Rottenberg 92-108.

7/ Liza Bondi and Damaris Rose provide a comprehensive overview of the way Anglo-American feminist urban geography has developed over the past few decades. See “Constructing Gender, Constructing the Urban: A Review of Anglo-American Feminist Urban Geography” (Gender, Place and Culture 10.3 [2003]: 229-245. Print).

8/ Loretta Lees traces the emergence of the notion of the emancipatory city—from social theorists such as Emile Durkheim, Max Weber and George Simmel, and the Chicago School of Sociology through its appropriation by contemporary feminist urban theorists (3-20).

9/ I am indebted to Louis Wirth’s famous essay “Urbanism as a Way of Life” (American Journal of Sociology 44.1 [1938]: 1-24. Print) and Claude Fischer’s later response to that essay, “Toward a Subcultural Theory of Urbanism” (AJS 80.6 [1975]: 1319-41. Print). Both essays, however, are sociological studies of the city, offering important insight into the specific conditions of modern urban life and the way in which these conditions affect city dwellers. Neither scholar addresses the question of how subjects are formed in the crucible of space.

10/ For a detailed account of the specific ways in which gender, race, and class discourses emerged over the twentieth century in the U.S. and produced different modalities of performativity, see Rottenberg.

11/ Anonymity is also a crucial factor here.

12/ The expectation in Boise is that black middle-class women will marry a professional man. When Emma Lou begins to date the newcomer, Weldon Taylor, there is talk about her behaviour. Her mother’s concern is that Weldon will not marry Emma Lou, and this will damage her daughter’s reputation. In L.A., the question of extra-marital sex does not even arise. Because his character is “too black” and desperately desires to fit into the middle-class community, Thurman stresses Emma Lou’s attempt not to seem too forward or vulgar, especially in interactions with men (39, 49).
WORKS CITED


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