"Prologue to a life": Dorothy West's Harlem Renaissance years, 1926--1934

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"PROLOGUE TO A LIFE": DOROTHY WEST'S HARLEM RENAISSANCE YEARS, 1926-1934

A Dissertation

Presented to
The Faculty of the Program in American Studies
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

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APPROVAL SHEET

This dissertation is submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

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Approved, December 2001

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In loving memory of my mother Rose Lien Veselits (1917-1998) for her strength, support, intelligence, and wisdom. Even though she did not live to see the completion of my dissertation, her energy and spirit inspire it and all my work.
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ABSTRACT

This dissertation is a bio-critical study of writer Dorothy West (1907-1998). It focuses on her apprenticeship in Harlem from 1926-1934 during the New Negro literary renaissance and lays the groundwork for an authoritative biography, long overdue. West’s career extends from the Harlem Renaissance to the end of the twentieth century, but she has not received the critical recognition her work merits. The study of West’s early work illuminates her later work, *The Living Is Easy* (1948) and *The Wedding* (1995), and demonstrates the continuity that exists throughout her writing. For it makes clear that West struggled with the same themes and issues repeatedly during her more than seventy years as a writer.

Sensitized by direct experience with slavery and racism in America, Dorothy West’s family internalized an extreme consciousness of color and its gradations. The family’s negative construction of color played out its dynamics in West’s literary imagination. West’s portraits of color consciousness ran counter to the hopes of the Harlem Renaissance to build racial pride through positive self-representation. The dysfunctional model of black family life in West’s literary output challenged W.E.B. Du Bois’ racial aesthetics, and it interrogated the discourse of race being formulated in the black periodicals of the 1920s. Du Bois, especially, underestimated the place of color in shaping positive racial subjectivity. West’s literary questioning cost her the support of the black press, thereby limiting her publishing opportunities. This set of circumstances encouraged West and fellow-writer Wallace Thurman (1902-1934) to develop independent little magazines as alternative publishing venues to maintain authorship and representational authority. But West’s limited success in the little magazines—her own and others—weakened her as an artist and ultimately compromised the full development of her talent.

Dorothy West’s fiction was primarily a quest for self-definition. Ultimately, she followed the path of writer Alex Haley and sought her “roots” across the generations in a slave past. In a life-long struggle with her mother’s conflicted values, she came to embrace what her mother could not; she did so through a broad acceptance of her race with all its vagaries of color and mixed ancestry. At its best, Dorothy West’s life was spent learning to recreate and then to love herself. And at its best, her fiction expressed that struggle to create and to love.
"PROLOGUE TO A LIFE": DOROTHY WEST'S HARLEM RENAISSANCE YEARS,
1926-1934
INTRODUCTION

This dissertation is a bio-critical study of writer Dorothy West (1907-1998) that focuses on the earliest part of her career in Harlem from 1926-1934 during the New Negro literary renaissance. As the title "Prologue to a Life" suggests, the dissertation lays the groundwork for a more extensive and thorough treatment of a major literary figure whose career extended beyond the Harlem Renaissance to the end of the twentieth century. Although West is popularly considered to be a Harlem Renaissance writer, in the critical record she is not treated consistently as though she were. Often assessments of her work begin with the Living Is Easy (1948), making her seem to be a post-World War II writer of the 1940s and after the publication of The Wedding (1995) a popular writer of the 1990s. The lack of a reliable and coherent narrative about West's life and complete oeuvre has kept her a marginal figure among black women writers. A major authoritative biography on West is long overdue and necessary for her to receive the critical standing that her work merits.

Although this dissertation moves outside of the period of the Harlem Renaissance to include the two novels upon which Dorothy West's literary reputation has been made, it does so to provide a context for her earlier shorter fiction and her lived life. The five published short stories of the Harlem Renaissance years challenge the aesthetics of older black publishers like W.E.B. Du Bois and Jessie Fauset because they present a more dysfunctional model of black life than other works of the 1920s that were published in black periodicals. The discrepancies in subject matter and manner of representation help to explain why the black literary establishment largely ignored West. As the shorter fiction and both novels seem modeled on West's own family of origin, they illuminate what is by any measure an unusual family story, forged in the crucible of America's

1Most of West's papers are in the Dorothy West Collection ("DWP") at the Schlesinger Library of Radcliffe Institute ("SLRI"). A smaller Dorothy West Collection ("DWC") is maintained in the Special Collections at Boston University ("SCBU"). Author folders in the James Weldon Johnson Collection
racial slavery and tempered in the assimilationism adopted by some lighter-colored black people as a survival strategy at the turn into the twentieth century.

West was not alone in her challenge to the Renaissance literary establishment. By 1926, the younger New Negro writers, led by Wallace Thurman, had already countered the official model for artistic expression in the predominant New Negro journals. The challenge made a necessity of black little magazines like *Fire!!* (1926) and later *Challenge* (1934-1937). Publishing alternatives like those periodicals developing from the left and the cultural pluralists did present themselves to black writers, but many proved in the long run to be little more than arenas for exposure of what West termed the proverbial “elephant in the living room”—black writing, as amazing as that might be to white intellectuals. It was the presence of the independent black little magazines that served as the appropriate venues to protest against the sexual prudery, classism, and self-conscious racialism of mainstream black journals. Publications of the left like *The New Republic* and *American Mercury* and popular culture presses like Macfadden's and Macaulay's opened their pages to New Negro dissidents. *The Crisis* and *Opportunity* had formulated an agenda that derived in large part from Howard University academics Alain Locke and Montgomery Gregory's literary magazine *Stylus* (1916-1941). As Locke remembered, "The Howard group was among the first to advocate an Afro-American literature rooted in racial consciousness" (quoted in Johnson and Johnson 95). In other words, its mission was the formulation of a "Negro literature" based in "Afro-American culture" "that should secure recognition" and "make a genuine contribution to racial advance" (68-69). Herein lay the formula for acceptable articulations of New Negro identity, against which Wallace Thurman, West, and little magazines would define themselves.

The special circumstances of Dorothy West's personal situation provide a test case for what the Harlem Renaissance hoped to accomplish through assertions of racial pride and self-representation as well as a testament to the immutable nature of color prejudice in the United States. In New York's literary marketplace during the period of West's artistic apprenticeship, W.E.B. Du Bois' powerful conflation of race and nation was ahead of its time as regarded writers like Dorothy West, who was still struggling with the legacy of her father's enslavement,
her mother's apparent ignorance of racial values, and the personal cost of her darker color. Together, these circumstances made self-publication in independent little magazines necessary for her own authorship and representational authority. During the 1930s, Richard Wright's equally powerful conflation of race with class cost West her little magazine Challenge and the literary space she had occupied as an editor. Three decades of literary scholarship on Harlem Renaissance black women writers provide a critical context for West's work and reception and a record of her marginalization. Literary academics and their publishers, for the most part, have managed Dorothy West's most recent reputation, from her near oblivion in the 1970s, through her rediscovery in the 1980s, to her ambivalent fame in the 1990s. Because no biography has yet been written of this remarkable woman, it is necessary to reconstruct in as much detail as possible West's Boston beginnings (1907-1925) in order to understand her fiction and her difference during the Harlem Renaissance. A preliminary biographical timeline that describes her pre-Harlem, Harlem, and post-Harlem experiences might be useful for orientation.

West was born on 2 June 1907 in Boston's South End to a former slave, Isaac Christopher West, and a much younger and lighter-skinned woman, Rachel Pease Benson, whose mother along with all her descendents had also been enslaved and who had taught her that social class could obliterate racial prejudice and custom. Dorothy was raised in an extended family of her mother's three sisters and their two children in Roxbury, Massachusetts, including her cousin, the poet Helene Johnson (1906-1995). She attended public school and perhaps enrolled for a short time in 1917 at Girls Latin School in Boston's Fenway district. It appears that Isaac West lost money during the war and Dorothy had to withdraw. In 1925, at seventeen, West graduated from high school. She and Helene were invited by Eugene Gordon, short story editor for the Post, to join the Quill Club that met in Cambridge and published the little magazine the Saturday Evening Quill with help from the Boston Post. West claims to have written stories for the Boston Post as a child and even to have won prizes. The record shows that as early as sixteen she began sending out manuscripts to readers like New York novelist Cosmo Hamilton. By 1925, she was doing so in earnest, but now to the editors of white magazines like the Bookman and International without any success. Her first break came in 1926 when Opportunity magazine published her short story "The Typewriter" in July 1926. As prize winners, West and Helene—who had published her poetry in
Opportunity as early as 1924—were invited to New York to attend the banquet sponsored by Charles S. Johnson, the National Urban League, and the NAACP and representatives from a maverick group of New York publishers and editors. There she met, most importantly, Zora Neale Hurston, Countee Cullen, Wallace Thurman, and [Richard] Bruce Nugent.

The cousins moved to Harlem in the fall of 1926. For a short while, until the spring of 1927, they were both enrolled in writing classes at Columbia University's Extension Division. West studied under short story writer and educator Dorothy Scarborough and was already working on a first novel in 1927 that Scarborough tried unsuccessfully to place with Harper's and Henry Holt in the fall of 1928. A far greater influence upon West than Columbia, however, was fellow writer Wallace Thurman. After "The Typewriter," West would have no more stories published in the mainstream black press. Through editor Wallace Thurman, she did place a second story, "Hannah Byde," in the July 1926 issue of The Messenger. "An Unimportant Man" (1928), "Funeral" (1928), and "Prologue to a Life" (1929) were all self-published in the Quill. Along with Bruce Nugent and Wallace Thurman, West got a small part in the first production of DuBose and Dorothy Heyward's Porgy directed by Rouben Mamoulian at Manhattan's segregated Guild Theater. Rehearsals began in the fall of 1927. Although she chose not to go on the U.S.-Canada tour with Porgy, she did go to London with the company in March of 1929, returning in June. With Elisabeth Marbury as her first literary agent during 1931 and 1932, acquired through a connection with writer Fannie Hurst provided by Zora Neale Hurston, West tried unsuccessfully to get several other novels published. After Marbury's death in 1933, George Bye, another Hurston contact, represented her more successfully.

Under the sponsorship of the Fellowship of Peace and Reconciliation and by invitation from Henry Lee Moon of the Amsterdam News and Thurman's ex-wife Louise Thompson, West sailed in June of 1932 for Soviet Russia with a group of twenty-two ingenues, including Langston Hughes, to participate in a Soviet film project. "Black and White," a propaganda piece for Meschribpon Film Company about American race relations, was never completed, but it allowed West to strike out on her own and spend eleven months away from the influence of Wallace Thurman, Helene Johnson, and Harlem. In Russia, West developed relationships with Langston

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Hughes and long-time friend Mildred Jones. She returned home in 1933, after her father died, to start her own little magazine *Challenge* (1934-1937) after she failed to interest any Boston newspaper to hire her to write a column on her Soviet experience. This same year Wallace Thurman died. West's magazine, originally intended as a literary quarterly, saw five issues between March 1934 and June 1936. With Harold Jackman as its associate editor, *Challenge* published Renaissance writers like Langston Hughes, Arna Bontemps, Zora Neale Hurston, Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, and Helene Johnson and some new writers like Frank Yerby, Pauli Murray, and Mae Cowdery before it changed its name to *New Challenge* with the spring 1937 issue. Responding to criticism from the "Chicago group," it opened its pages to the Chicago writers, inviting Marian Minus on board as a co-editor and Richard Wright as assistant editor. Contributions came from Frank Marshall Davis, Owen Dodson, and Margaret Walker. Alain Locke, Marian Minus, Henry Lee Moon, and newcomer Ralph Ellison submitted book reviews. In its pages Wright published his now-famous "Blueprint for Negro Writing." The magazine enterprise folded with the fall 1937 issue when Wright tried to take over as editor.

West then worked as a welfare investigator during the early 1940s and for the Federal Writer's Project of the Works Progress Administration until 1944. Lionel C. Bascom has just recently anthologized some of hers and others stories of this period in *A Renaissance in Harlem: Lost Voices of an American Community* (1999). With the help of George Bye, West was able to place numerous stories in the *New York Daily News* between 1940 and 1970. During this time, she lived with friends Mollie Lewis and Marian Minus. It was during this period, and just before she left Harlem for good, that West wrote the first version of "Elephant's Dance" as a "Tribute to Wallace Thurman." She initially returned to Oak Bluffs, beginning around 1943, to help her mother with an ailing aunt; by 1947, she had decided to stay. There she wrote *The Living Is Easy* and placed it in 1948 with the Boston publisher Houghton Mifflin. The novel was based on her story from the 1920s, "Prologue to a Life." West continued to live and work in Oak Bluffs after the death of her mother in the 1950s. She was hired at *The Vineyard Gazette*, eventually getting her own column. In 1970 Hoyt Fuller published "Elephant's Dance" in *Black World*, giving West recognition beyond the Vineyard as a Harlem Renaissance survivor, including invitations to lecture in New England colleges like Boston University. In 1982, The Feminist Press reprinted *The
Living Is Easy, owing in part to the critical work in the 1970s on West by Mary Helen Washington. Doubleday soon took an interest in the aging author and her unfinished manuscript that she finally published as The Wedding (1995) with the help of editor Jackie Kennedy Onassis. Oprah Winfrey's Harpo Productions picked up the rights to The Wedding in 1998 and made it into a television mini-drama. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., then assisted her in collecting and anthologizing the rest of her work into The Richer, The Poorer (1995). The volume included a new version of "Elephant's Dance" in which West still maintained that Wallace Thurman's racial ambiguity and distrust of "racial art" were symbolic of the Renaissance itself, its strengths and its weaknesses. West died in 1998 at age ninety-one.

Dorothy West's published and unpublished work is important because during the 1920s, like Wallace Thurman's, it constituted a challenge to the racial politics of The Crisis and Opportunity. To be sure, their editors meant to enable the poetry, fiction, and essays of young black writers associated with the New Negro movement in the arts, but for some, they did not. As a case in point, West's early stories interrogated the new discourse of race being formulated in the 1920s by New Negro intellectuals like Alain Locke, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Jessie Fauset that proved to be incompatible with West's thinking on race and her immediate experience of it. Theirs was an important discourse, but it had its limitations. Du Bois especially had underestimated the place of color in the shaping of racial subjectivity. Thurman believed that color consciousness abounded in the black community, making himself like the mythical Cinderella, a stepchild to the black community. Like his friend and Messenger theater editor Theophilus Lewis, he believed that until Harlem and the greater United States underwent a reorientation in color aesthetics the positive assertions of racial pride in black magazines like The Crisis were largely irrelevant. The maintenance of a color line even in Harlem that exploited difference actually reinforced color consciousness, he asserted against the grain. Consequently, West and Thurman were led to reveal and investigate that part of the psyche that was conditioned to think "white," that did not know itself apart from "whiteness." For Thurman, this gesture led away from racial self-consciousness to the desire for racial transcendence. For West, it led to an initial denial of race as little more than social class. While Du Bois and Fauset focused on what united the black community, Thurman and West attested to what divided it, and they
paid the cost for doing so. It is not a clear story. Both Thurman and West began their careers with a thorough-going confusion about color and race—initially unable to separate the two—that shadowed their literary development. Examining where and how West’s five short stories got published between 1926 and 1929 provides a commentary on the place of dissention within the New Negro movement of the Harlem Renaissance.

Dorothy West’s story is important for some of the same reasons that Lalita Tademy’s recently published family history is important. *Cane River* (2001), an Oprah Winfrey “Book Club” selection, uncovers an unconventional narrative of survival strategies, along with their later discontents, borne out of several generations of Tademy’s family’s immersion in the peculiarities of America’s racial slavery. At the same time, even the fragmentary evidence of West’s unusual family genealogy is the stuff of *fake* narratives of slavery. Because her inheritance of race was so remarkably different from that of nearly all of her contemporary Renaissance friends and associates, West’s ancestry is valuable in and of itself, as is the complication vis-à-vis color that it helped to create and that had already become the defining element in her (mis)understanding of a racial self. As a child, a teenager, and a young adult, Dorothy West had little sense of herself “separate from whiteness,” did not know “this thing...call[ed] ‘difference,’” to use bell hooks’ words in “Representing Whiteness in the Black Imagination” (338).

Even though the youngest member of the Harlem Renaissance family, Dorothy West was actually the closest to the institution of slavery and therefore to the epitome of the problem of racial slavery and the slave past that the Harlem Renaissance was attempting to reform. Of the other Renaissance writers, except for Angelina Weld Grimke’, West was alone in being the child of a formerly enslaved parent. Unlike Grimke’, however, her father Isaac Christopher West (born c. 1859 in Richmond, Virginia) was dark in color and not the son of his master, but of two unmarried field slaves from different plantations. West’s mother was a different matter. Rachel Pease Benson (born c. 1880 in Camden, South Carolina), pink in complexion, had still inherited three slave names, one from each parent and one from her husband. Dorothy’s maternal grandfather and grandmother, Benjamin Benson, a carpenter, and Helen Pease, his second wife,² were both born into slavery, both had light

²More research is necessary to resolve discrepancies regarding West’s maternal grandparents from the
coloring, and both were the children of house slaves and their Scots masters in two separate dwellings in Camden, South Carolina (Bryan 587).

Like many of the women among Lalita Tademy's family, all of the Benson and Pease children had, in each case, the same white father and the same light coloring but followed the condition of their mothers. These two separate households of mothers and their mulatto children by Benson and Pease, respectively, lived alongside the master's white children and wife in two separate households. Helen Pease, "who had the master's red hair in her braids," was one of eleven mulatto children of West's great grandmother's (name unknown) forced union with her slave master Pease (Black Women Oral History Project 153-54). After freedom, fifteen-year-old Helen Pease was bound in marriage to nineteen-year-old Benjamin Benson with whom she had twenty-one children, nineteen of whom lived, including Rachel, Dorothy West's mother. All of the children had the same light coloring. On the other hand, Lalita Tademy found that her family roots went back to rural Louisiana, where French and French Creole men mated with several generations of enslaved women before the Civil War and with disenfranchised black women thereafter. As was also true in West's family, these men left a legacy of children with almost no trace of color and their mothers who believed that even though deprived of the legal status of marriage their "children [would] have a better life because of how they look[ed]" (Tademy 303). This "bleaching of the line," the "stubborn course our family seems to keep following," according to Tademy's great-great-great-great-Memere Elisabeth (b. 1799), was something to puzzle over. In West's family, it was apparently not to be questioned.

The Scots-Irish Pease-Benson legacy of West's maternal lineage from Camden, South Carolina, which West called her "unimpressive ancestry" ("Fond Memories" 172), was remarkably similar to the Lalita Tademy ancestry (the Derbanne-Daurat-Fredieu-Billes-Andrieu line). This legacy of "white men who left and the colored women who took over the children," according to Elisabeth's granddaughter Emily Fredieu (b. 1861), was differing accounts by (Helene Johnson's biographer) T.J. Bryan, (West's niece) Abigail McGrath, and West herself. By way of example, if Helen Pease was not Benjamin Benson's only wife, the parentage of Rachel West's many siblings, as reported by her daughter Dorothy West, is called into question.

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something to perhaps reconnoiter.\textsuperscript{3} It would not be until the twentieth century that women in either family would bear children of unions blessed by marriage, between two people of the same race, and free of the consequences of color bias.

The answer to why we need a Dorothy West biography is twofold. First, further development of the special circumstances of color and assimilationist patterns in West’s family of origin is necessary in order to understand why West’s early literary expression of race was so different from that of her poet cousin Helene Johnson and her Renaissance friends, like Zora Neale Hurston. The consequence for West was that the black periodical press promoted Johnson and Hurston but not her. A faithful reconstruction of West’s family’s experience of slavery is necessary to show, as with Lilita Tademy’s family, how it shaped their racial views and in turn how those views affected their children. The impact of a particular kind of black ancestry, to be sure, had a decided effect upon West and her writing. Second, as a black woman and a New Negro artist, West had to work through a very specific set of racial problems unlike those of her associates, including her cousin with whom she was raised like a sister. These particular circumstances place West in a difficult juxtaposition with the racial discourse of the Renaissance promoters just as they placed Wallace Thurman in opposition to it.

Three generations of light-skinned house slaves on the maternal side and two generations of black-skinned field slaves on the paternal side came together in the body of Dorothy West. The only child of Rachel and Isaac West, Dorothy was dark-skinned like her father and did not resemble the more than thirty children of the slave masters on her mother’s side born to her maternal grand and great-grandparents. Neither did she

\textsuperscript{3}Even in 1907, well past the turn into the twentieth century, Louisiana freedwomen and their “illegitimate” quadroon and octoroon children were granted “no rights in the eyes of the law” despite the high status of the children’s fathers (Tademy 352, 308). Until Tademy’s grandfather Theodore Billes (b. 1881) married Geneva Brew (b. 1891), a woman of his race who showed color, the pattern had been broken only once, by Emily Fredieu’s daughter (Theodore’s Billes’ sister), Angelite Billes (b. 1879). The break came only after Angelite was also deserted along with her child, Joseph Andrieu (b. 1897), by a Frenchman who fled to France rather than confront the post-Reconstruction madness over open miscegenation in the Creole class. Angelite Billes married a light-skinned man of her race, Dennis Coutee, and had a second child, Ernest Coutee. “The first in our family to have a marriage and a baby both, one before the other,” Emily Fredieu informed Angelite’s father, Joseph Billes, who deserted her when, after she had borne him five children, his peers forced him to maintain the appearance of the status quo by marrying a Creole woman (Cane River).
resemble the other women in the family. For her, it was her color that made her *visibly* different from the large extended maternal lineage of women and children whom she lived among and who would, in Lalita Tademy's terms, have "a better life" because of "how they looked." So it was just the two of them, father and daughter.

Color difference and its negative impact upon black families, especially black children, became the primary substance of West's fiction. Unfortunately, it was the wrong subject for the 1920's Renaissance establishment that was keen to affirm "difference" in more constructive ways, and West's short fiction of the period was largely ignored and unsupported by the black press in Harlem. Her longer fictional work of the late 1940s, which also dealt with intra-racial colorism, found a more accepting audience and a white Boston publisher, Houghton Mifflin, when she no longer lived in Harlem. By the 1990s, West's critique of color consciousness as generational and rooted in racial slavery made her a celebrated writer and acknowledged Islander who now claimed Martha's Vineyard as "the one spot on earth that I want never to change. It is the closest to paradise I will ever come on earth."4

Before this time, however, life within the reassembled, extended Boston family fell far short of paradise. Rachel Pease Benson was Helen Pease Benson's sixth child. She had left the South around 1894 when she was fourteen and had met Isaac West and married him at Boston's City Hall around 1898, when she was eighteen and he was forty. Rachel and three of her sisters closest in age created the same kind of living arrangement for safety as did the Tademy women, four generations of whom resided in Emily Fredieu's house. In Rachel West's case, Carrie Benson, Ella (Benson) Johnson, and Minnie (Benson) Rickson, all of whom were in service except for Rachel, who stayed with the children, shared the same rented house on Brookline Avenue in Roxbury, Massachusetts. With the exception of Carrie, who had no children, "[e]ach of the sisters gave birth to a daughter within a single twelve-month period that spanned part of 1906 and 1907. Minnie gave birth to Jean [Eugenia]; Rachel, to Dorothy; and Ella, to Helen[e] [Johnson]" (Bryan 588). There is no evidence to suggest that Minnie and Ella were married to the fathers of their daughters or that these two men lived in the Roxbury house or visited the women and children. Abigail (Hubbell) McGrath, Dorothy West's niece and Helene Johnson

4DW to Rachel West, [internal evidence suggests c1942], DWP, SLRI.
Hubbell's) only child, called the house at 470 Brookline Avenue and its inhabitants a cross between a "kibbutz," a "commune," and a "collective" (McGrath 124). "[A]ll the sisters...pitched in together in a communal way," she recalled being told, "in order to maintain a lifestyle which had the facade of the real Boston Brahmins" (124). Facade is the operative word here in the world created by Rachel West.

In this house of Bensons and their offspring were the representatives of at least three generations, on the maternal side, of "white mulatto" women, except for Dorothy. The only woman Dorothy resembled, her father's mother Mary West, a former slave, had died before her only grandchild was born. Ironically, Dorothy was to have been named "Mary," but Rachel West did not like the name's association. Dorothy's cousin Helen, who was renamed "Helene" by her Aunt Rachel because she thought it sounded more distinguished, was born first and got the maternal grandmother's name "Helen" even though she bore her no resemblance at all. Dorothy's paternal grandfather, also a slave, had died when Isaac was a boy, leaving his son with no siblings. Except for West's father, there was no other voice from the darker-complexioned side of the family, those who had not lived closely among whites, to give young Dorothy a different perspective on matters of color, the "color foolishness" that Rachel West claimed to disregard. In Lalita Tademy's family, the oldest member, great-great-great-great-Memere Elisabeth, the counterpart to Mary West had she lived, fulfilled this role for her descendants. Although dark in color herself, West had a lifelong fascination for what was in her day called the "white Negro," and during slavery, the "mulatto" or "otoooon." As a result, her adult protagonists, when they are female, are white-looking mulatto women who never serve as fictional personae. Her child protagonists, on the other hand, are dark in color and always represent fictional alter egos. Women with brown skin like her own appear only as minor characters and on the periphery of the central drama. Some of her adult personae are in fact men. In other words, West was never able to fashion for her fictional worlds a woman like herself as a literary heroine.

Dorothy West should be included in the criticism of the period precisely because she, like Wallace Thurman, was not a member of the Renaissance choir. For better or for worse, the literary contests of the 1920s compelled the artist in her, not the Negro, to come to Harlem, while both persuaded her to stay. The full continuum of her *oeuvre*, from 1926 through 1995, reflects the whole process of consciousness-raising that West
underwent to achieve the wholeness she desired, and something of the same "reconnoitering" as the Tademey family, at least in her fiction. Whether or not she ever arrived at journey's end herself is unknowable. For certain, she underwent the journey of memory that bell hooks describes as essential to understanding "the politics of racism" on one's own subjectivity and the "decolonizing of...minds and...imaginations" ("Representing Whiteness" 342, 345, 346). It is debatable, however, that West truly found the "freedom and fulfillment" where "consciousness looks ahead to complete self-realization" that Edward Said, in his "Traveling Theory" (1983), characterizes, through the metaphor of journeying, as the place at which one wishes to arrive.

The absence of a biography on this important Harlem Renaissance figure makes it necessary to begin any study of her with substantial archival work. Given the fanfare of West's rediscovery at the venerable age of seventy-four and the decade in which it occurred, it is not surprising that a mythology developed around her. To establish an accurate picture, one must first piece together a reliable account of West's life by weighing much contemporary criticism and even some of the interviews against the complete Dorothy West Papers, cross-referenced with her literary output and data from objective sources. Then one can begin to assess her merit as a black woman writer of considerable longevity and construct a rather different yet more engaging West legacy, leaving the mythology to map a cultural moment rather than to explain the writer herself. Given the fact that she was a black woman writer during a period when the American literary canon was undergoing substantial revision by black and white feminists and theorists, her revival was timely.

West has for the most part been left out of the critical record of the Harlem Renaissance that was beginning to be written by the late 1960s and early 1970s by important male critics like Robert Bane and black historian Nathan Huggins. Black female critics and theorists, on the other hand, have laid important

3Quoted in hooks "Representing Whiteness" 343.


groundwork. For a start, the deconstruction and decentering of the black male “master narrative” of racial protest and the insistence upon the gender specific nature of racial argument have been crucial first steps. Most important, however, is the impressive work being done on the tradition of black women writers who continue, into the present day, to employ for the purpose of revision the fictional mulatto character and the sentimental narrative form.

Gloria T. Hull’s argument in *Color, Sex, and Poetry* (1987), a study of three other nearly-forgotten Harlem Renaissance women writers, informs my own study: “This process of recovery is slowly but surely constructing a truer American literary history and, it is hoped, hastening the day when writers like [Alice] Dunbar-Nelson, [Angelina] Grimke, and Georgia Douglas Johnson will require no extraordinary efforts to be known and appreciated for who they really are” (xi). I am indebted to Hull’s methodology as well. “Investigating [these women] through their *total* writings, in conjunction with their color and race, and their gender, yields a much more accurate picture of them...as earlier twentieth-century black women writers,” she argues. To considerations of color, race, and gender, I would add sexuality. While Hull does treat sexuality in her study, she avoids using it as a co-equal analytical tool. “Their lives and their works are of dual importance,” Hull continues. “Not nearly enough has been known about them; thus, biographical information—interesting in itself—is also necessary for giving them personal and literary substantiation and for the practice of a holistic scholarship” (15). The same is true for Dorothy West.

Although Dorothy West is not of the same generation as the women writers in Hull’s study, she does occupy a similarly marginal position vis-à-vis the Renaissance, but on the *other side* of its timeline. In 1985, West herself at age seventy-eight summed up the crux of her forgotten legacy to Deborah McDowell: “I’m the oldest living writer from the period now, but then I was the youngest” (270). What she means, perhaps, is the oldest before the public eye, as Bruce Nugent and Helene Johnson were still alive, and although they were not being published, Johnson at least was still writing. West’s status as the youngest member of the Harlem “literati” made her both retrospective and innovative. Her gender and sexuality, her genre, and her extreme youth during the late 1920s to the mid-1930s and her longevity as a writer into the
1990s have made her a transitional figure in almost every regard, and therefore harder to place within standard periodization, especially of male design. But West certainly belongs among the Harlem Renaissance writers.

Dorothy West was rediscovered after twenty years of anonymity when the editors of Black World (formerly Negro Digest) published her essay on the Harlem Renaissance. "Elephant's Dance in Harlem: A Tribute to Wallace Thurman" was included in Black World's landmark November 1970 special issue titled "The Harlem Renaissance Revisited" and brought West's name back before the public. "That piece that started all this," was how West referred to the Thurman essay in an interview with Genii Guinier (Oral 182). "[T]he first time I ever told a story," was another facet of the essay that she shared with Lorraine Elena Roses in a later interview (47). Black World's retrospective issue rekindled interest in the Harlem Renaissance and its critical evaluation as well as presenting, in the words of one critic, "new and challenging perspectives," such as West's (Singh 134). "Elephant's Dance" led to an invitation to lecture from Simmons College in October of 1971, from Boston University in the mid-1970s, and to the first of two important interviews.

Dorothy West's public presence and voice have been strengthened considerably through the efforts of black feminist literary historians, beginning with the Schlesinger Library Oral History Project for which the seventy-one-year-old writer was interviewed by Genii Guinier in 1978. West mentioned in this interview her discomfort with Harvard historian Nathan Huggins' Harlem Renaissance (1971) that came out just after her essay and suddenly became everyone's "Bible" (173). She, for one, "quarreled with everything he said." "He should have asked me. I would have told him better than that," she quipped, quoting her mother half in jest, but to make a point (174). David Levering Lewis was one of the first to interview West, but, remarkably, he did not include her point of view in When Harlem Was in Vogue (1981). Sometime between its publication in 1970 and 1980, West revised her Black World essay "Elephant's Dance" and tried to get it republished, undoubtedly to

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8 It helped that Arno Press had just republished Living in July of 1970.
9 Singh also includes as innovative writers Faith Berry, George E. Kent, and John Henrik Clarke.
10 West's lecture title: "This Is the Way It Was: The Years of the Harlem Renaissance.
reassert her version of the Renaissance. The essay was not published, however, until 1995 in an anthology of her own work. After the Feminist Press reprinted *The Living Is Easy* (1948) in 1982, the subsequent speaking invitations\(^{12}\) and interviews of the 1980s\(^{13}\) increased the public's interest in an already aging author and spokesperson, culminating in an honorary Doctor of Humane Letters in 1985 from the University of Massachusetts, Boston.

Literary critic Mary Helen Washington was the first to give West a place alongside other black women writers in her anthology *Invented Lives: Narratives of Black Women, 1860-1960* (1987). The unexpected attention of the decade energized West to finish the novel she had already been working on for nearly fifty years and Doubleday to assign Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis to serve as its editor. West finally achieved best-seller status with *The Wedding* (1995) that was subsequently made into a television mini-series by Oprah Winfrey's Harpo Productions (1998). At the same time, West credits Henry Louis Gates, Jr., for the great effort he made to collect and anthologize her unpublished or out-of-print short stories and reminiscences in *The Richer, The Poorer* (1995).

This dissertation takes the measure of West's preliminary artistic apprenticeship during the Harlem Renaissance years. It also attempts to put a face with the older voice that speaks through the interviews and to recover the personality and spirit of the younger Dorothy West during the early years of her literary career in Harlem. Only with deep critical musings can this be done as some of the record has been repressed, some distorted, and some is not yet known. By the mid-1980s, after a decade and a half of talking about the Renaissance to eager new listeners and after having completed all but her last novel, *The Wedding*, fact, fiction, and expectation were inextricably intertwined. Lorraine Elena Roses has captured the essence of this

\(^{13}\) Mary Helen Washington, "Interview with Dorothy West" (1980); Deborah E. McDowell, "Conversations with Dorothy West" (1980, 1985); SallyAnn Ferguson, telephone interview with Dorothy West for D LB essay (1981); Lorraine Elena Roses, "Dorothy West at Oak Bluffs, Massachusetts" (1984); Katrine Dalsgard, "Alive and Well and Living on the Island of Martha's Vineyard: An Interview with Dorothy West, 1988"; Salem Mekuria and Boston Public Television, *As I Remember It: A Portrait of Dorothy West* ("Remember"), (1991).
Dorothy West is a consummate raconteur whose tales branch out like the paths that fork out from the cranberry house, and lead you back to the time when women never cut their hair and the fall of Irene Castle's hairpin set women to cropping theirs short. The web of words is complex and the supply doesn't run out. In addition, she takes pleasure in performing for listeners. At one point, remembering a particularly amusing incident from long ago, she claps her hands in delight. A flock of pigeons nestled in the eaves of her cottage takes flight at the peal of laughter, then returns and settles into place, as she continues her narrative.

Dorothy West's style is free-wheeling and associative. So you can't really interview Dorothy West, because any question is an interruption of the flow of stories. Plus she is adept at eluding her questioner—"I'll only tell you so much." I thought I had had some success interviewing her but it turned out that she was also taking data on me. A week later her social column for The Vineyard Gazette included an account of my visit to Oak Bluffs and a profile of my local relatives. (47)

In a letter to her mother, West alludes to the maker of fortunes, the illusive lady luck. The off-hand manner she affects, a style she often used with her mother, may have been an attempt to mask her deepest desire to make her name as a writer, but the chilling metaphor she employs gives her meaning away: "I wish," she wrote, "I knew how soon my ship was coming in. Of course, I realize that since the war many ships have been sunk. I hope mine won't. Well, of course, you never know when you're going to run smack into good luck. And I shall lay on its back and hold it in a death grip."14

The single greatest deterrent to West scholarship has been the insistence among critics of the representativeness of certain authors or points of view over others or of certain historical paradigms. As important as Locke's literary magazine Stylus was in its promotion of young black literary talent, its prescription for excellence represented a quid pro quo of sorts. An unpublished essay by Jean Toomer offers some useful insights on what the Harlem Renaissance was not. To the axiom: "It is commonly held that an artist is the voice of his nation or of his people, and that in his expression the thoughts and emotions of his group become expressed," Toomer offered a revision. "An artist is the voice of his nation or people when he is in sympathy with, and can utilize for his creation, a sizeable body of similar group thoughts and emotions."15 But this is easier

14DW to Rachel West [internal evidence suggests c1942], DWP, SLRI.
15Jean Toomer, unpublished essay, n.t., n.d., t.s., box 48, Series No. II, literature folder 1010, JTP, JWJ, BLYU.
said than done. Representing a group is no easy matter, for "[t]hat art may be a perfected group expression, it is necessary first of all that there be a sizeable body of similar thoughts and emotions within the group......"16 In the case of the Renaissance, there was and there wasn't.

What the Harlem Renaissance was was a collective endeavor of many speakers and many messages. Dorothy West's voice was an important one among many, and it deserves to be given a full hearing. Far from falling on the assimilationist-separatist axis, her concern is with the black community itself and the effects of enslavement upon it as represented in her own family. These effects included, most importantly, the legacy of miscegenation and the shades of complexion it produced, the false conflation of skin color with race, and the emotional impact of color-consciousness. The binary model that opposes black with white and is used as an analytical tool by many critics does not work for a writer like Dorothy West whose miscegenated family is both black and white because of their enslavement, even though West chose only the (racially) black side of her family for fictional use and representation. As Amritjit Singh has said in his perceptive study of the novels of the Harlem Renaissance, it is "the tensions and conflicts existing in Afro-American life in relative independence of white America" that need further explication (137). Dorothy West is a perfect writer with whom to begin this work.

The time has certainly come for a full-length biography of Dorothy West and for her to be included in the critical reassessments of the place of black women writers within the Harlem Renaissance. Biographies and autobiographies, as we know through biographers like Arnold Rampersad and his subject Langston Hughes who produced two autobiographies himself, are crucial to any writer's legacy and contribute greatly to a writer's reputation. Black feminist scholars have already begun the process of revision in major works like Thadious Davis' biography of Nella Larsen and studies like Barbara Christian's Black Women Novelists (1980) and Cheryl A. Wall's Women of the Harlem Renaissance (1995) but without yet including Dorothy West. A few notable exceptions to this neglect have made my work easier:

*Anthologies and Biographical Beginnings: Mary Helen Washington's Invented Lives: Narratives of

16Ibid.

*Critical Studies: Ruth Perry and Martine Watson's edited Mothering the Mind: Twelve Studies of Writers and Their Silent Partners (N.Y.: Holmes & Meier, 1984), which includes Mary Helen Washington's selection on West from an interview, "I Sign My Mother's Name";

*Female Studies: A bio-critical study of black women prose writers that treats color and sexuality using Gloria T. Hull's model in Color, Sex, and Poetry (1987). A theoretical study that places West in relation to other black fiction writers who problematize the "tragic mulatto figure" of white male design in their works and that positions her as writing within the black woman's tradition of domestic idealism. The models for these studies are Jacquelyn Y. McLendon's The Politics of Color in the Novels of Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen (1995); Ann DuCille's The Coupling Convention (1993), and Claudia Tate's "Allegories of Black Female Desire" (1989).
CHAPTER I
"HARLEM CINDERELLA(S)" AND THE METALANGUAGE OF RACE

Dorothy West's lifelong pursuit of personal wholeness illuminates the literary marketplace. Her last novel *The Wedding* (1995) most fully bears the fruit of her journey. It reveals much about the unspoken conditions for publication in New York during the 1920s and '30s. The key issues in *The Wedding* highlight similar issues in Dorothy West's life and come to the same resolution: "to be whole was to have a chance" (150). Thus, *The Wedding* is symbolic of West's journey and becomes a hologram for this study of her earliest life and writing, just prior to and during the literary renaissance in Harlem.

West placed the Renaissance on a par with her large family in her estimation of its importance to her in her growth as a woman and a writer; she assessed its meaning through Wallace Thurman, even to its dates. Her Harlem Renaissance took place during those years between Thurman's arrival in Harlem in 1925 and his funeral in 1934. "The Harlem Renaissance ended when Wallace Thurman died," she has asserted against the norm and on more than one occasion (*Oral, Remember*). What she does not say is that she herself carried on the tradition of Thurman's "critical challenge" to the Harlem Renaissance (*Remember*). She did so in her fiction by employing similar assumptions about race, identity, and art; she did so in her prose by insisting on Thurman's centrality to the movement they had both shared in and cared so much about. Her essay on Thurman was published at the same time as the preliminary critique of the Renaissance by black scholars.

West also recognized in Thurman a problematic relationship to race like her own. His too was rooted in childhood and had produced a similar racial confusion; yet, he also seemed driven to leave behind the memory of it by striking out on his own and moving to Harlem. His presumption of himself as a "critical outsider" to the expressed New Negro goals, that is, to the resolve to create representations of racial integrity and positive racial identity, and the manner in which he played the devil's advocate to those goals, helped West initially in her own pursuit of her self. Reckoning with what had felt to her like marginality within her white mulatto family would come to mean resolving the sense of difference within the positive space of the Harlem Renaissance family of younger artists.

The heart of the conflict in West's family, as noted in the Introduction, had to do with the very problems of
origin, legitimacy, and racial identity that the leadership of the New Negro movement sought to reinterpret through artistic expression. As the only child on her father's side to be born of a legally married man and woman and as a child in the second generation of daughters in three generations of women on her mother's side to have been born of a legally married man and woman of the same race, it is no wonder that West, although herself unmarried, had a lifelong fascination with the institution of marriage for black people. And given the repeated pattern of miscegenation on the maternal side of her family that had produced at least two generations of "white mulatto" women, except for herself, it is also no wonder that the color of black people, particularly mulattos, intrigued her. In other words it was the appearance of race that held her captive.

The proximity to the last era of slavery, the paradox of her light mulatto lineage, and the legacy of her mother's deeply internalized equation of color and class may have made West seem more in tune with the nineteenth than the twentieth century. The dual heritage of enslavement, on both sides of her family, and miscegenation, on the maternal side, that had marked all the descendents but had given young Dorothy a unique position within its bizarre color dynamics had also been the source of West's identity confusion to begin with. It determined her ultimate choice of genre, the highly conventional female literary form, the sentimental narrative, or marriage convention, treating the subjects of love and marriage. Critic Ann duCille signifies upon the literary genre by renaming it. In *The Coupling Convention: Sex, Text, and Tradition in Black Women's Fiction* (1993), duCille explains how the "genre of the novel" and "structure of the marriage plot" have been adapted by black women writers, like West (3). The "coupling convention," she argues, makes "unconventional use of conventional literary forms" because of the white injunction against legal slave marriage (3). With its mulatto protagonist, the genre is the proto-typical black female literary form of the nineteenth century. It was an odd

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17Helene Johnson Hubbell (Ella Benson Johnson's daughter) never saw a photo of her father, William Johnson, or knew what it meant that he was "Greek" (Bryan 587). The race of Helene's husband (William Warner Hubbell) is unknown, as is anything about the father of her first cousin, Eugenia Rickson (Minnie Benson Rickson's daughter).

18duCille also argues that "at the core of African American women's novels are textualizations not unlike those found in the novel as a 'women's medium' more generally: representations of gender relations; celebrations and critiques of the institutions of marriage and family; depictions of female virtue fighting to hold its own against the forces of patriarchal social (dis)order; or, in the words of white feminist Nina
choice, one could say, for a woman like West, who was herself not mulatto in appearance and was afraid of marriage and motherhood in the extreme.19

Dorothy West is, however, also a twentieth-century daughter in her likeness to so many contemporary black women who have witnessed black female domesticity as anything but blissful. Her first novel-length portrayal of her mother's problematic marriage and personality attests to the disjunction's of family life, but with a twist. Dedicating The Living Is Easy (1948) to "Ike," her father, rather than to "Rae" (Rachel), her mother upon whom it is centered, West implies an ulterior motive at work: "Maybe I was trying to punish my mother," she admitted (Remember). West parts company with many of these same contemporaries, however, when in writing The Wedding (1995) she chooses the path of the nineteenth-century black woman writer in concentrating on the potential benefits of marriage for black people. In "Allegories of Black Female Desire; or, Rereading Nineteenth-Century Sentimental Narratives of Black Female Authority," Claudia Tate terms the very different focus of the earlier century as the "idealization of the formation of the family unit" (106). Following another thread of Tate's argument, one could say that at the same time as West committed her writing to the "marriage story," she also committed herself, lifelong, to "mothering...the black text" (108). Rather than produce biological children, West chose to "reproduce[e] her own life symbolically" (108). In this way she, along with other black literary women, fulfilled "the desire to recreate [herself] as a more enduring historical subject" (115).

To the challenges of race, gender, class, and sexuality that every black woman in America faced was added for West the enormous challenge of skin color with its negative racial construction and its correlation to social status and class. "I wanted to be fair," she said in her Oral History as she talked about black identity and identification because "you don't look at yourself; you look at your family" (189). When young Dorothy looked at her white- and light-skinned family, her mother in particular, she saw and felt a difference. When Dorothy's mother looked at the family she had created, her only child, a dark-skinned daughter, what did she see? One

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Baym, "the story of the formation and assertion of a feminine ego" (4).
19In "A Daughter Reminisces," Abigail McGrath recalls that her mother and aunts, Dorothy and Eugenia, "grew up with life-long negative reactions to Rachel [West] and motherhood. Only Helen[e] was brave enough to have a child" (McGrath 125).
could say that Rachel West saw what Olivia Blanchard Cary saw, in Jessie Fauset’s novel *Comedy American Style* (1933), when she first encountered her baby son, Oliver. She beheld “the ‘flawed’ image of herself,” Jacquelyn McLendon argues in *The Politics of Color in the Novels of Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen* (1995). In Fauset’s own words, “[Oliver] meant the expression of [Olivia’s] failure to be truly white” (Comedy 205). Although Rachel West seems never to have considered actually passing for white, at least not after her daughter was born, she complicated matters of racial identity for her child by her class striving. The gospel of upward mobility to which she adhered only disguised her rejection of her own racial construction.

The thinking went something like this: To be middle class was to be white, and to be white-looking was to be middle class (and therefore white). Thus, it was imperative for Rachel West that her large family maintain at least the façade of middle-class existence despite her husband and daughter’s color and despite the fact that the family did not really meet the criteria for being middle class. What McLendon argues is true for the fictional Olivia Blanchard Cary was probably also true for Rachel West: “the ‘black’ body [is sacrificed] to the demands of a white aesthetic” (*Politics of Color* 57). If one accepts the parallel as even partially accurate, then it is also fair to assume that not only the mother/daughter relation would be "distorted," in McLendon’s terms, because of the mother’s “color/class hierarchy” (57), but also the daughter's racial identification and sense of selfhood (64).

As a child, Dorothy looked different from her mother, aunts, and cousins Helene and Eugenia, and she felt different because she was treated differently, most obviously in the thoroughly racialized outside world of Boston. "Helene was light-skinned and Eugenia was olive-skinned. The [other] children thought they were white," West said in one of her interviews. She alone suffered the sting of overt racism when she was singled out and called

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20 McLendon's chapter, "My Poor Unwhite Thing," *Color Mania in Comedy American Style,* is a provocative study of Fauset’s critique of the "class/color bias" among some middle- and/or upper-middle-class black people whom she represents fictionally (56, 58) and the ways in which "issues of class and issues of color are [not] mutually exclusive" for them (55). Both relate to West's life and her text, *Living.*

21 Thadious Davis argues the same for Jessie Fauset’s character Olivia Blanchard Cary in *Comedy.* Olivia distances herself from other African Americans purportedly not to be included in their unjust treatment. "But her hatred," says Davis, "is a displacement of her inability to accept herself as she is racially constructed in the U.S. Visibly white in appearance, Olivia refuses a societal designation as black, and disguises her rejection of an African-American identity as class striving and social mobility" (xx). Phebe Grant, on the other hand, even lighter than Olivia, assumes a place "within an oppressed racial group
"nigger" in front of her cousins and her peers (Remember). Her solution, she said, was to stay at home by herself and write so that her cousins could play together unmolested (Remember). It is no wonder that race seemed like a color to Dorothy West.

All the above factors may have motivated West to join nineteenth-century black women writers in their need to "claim" the marriage convention for their own purposes. It had already become "a trope through which to explore not only the so-called more compelling questions of race, racism, and racial identity but complex questions of sexuality and female subjectivity as well," according to Ann duCille (3-4). These same factors seem to have produced "unconventional coupling" in West's personal life as well, in the twentieth-century sense of the term. She never married but had lasting and emotionally strong intimate friendships with cousin Helene Johnson and friends Mildred Jones and Marian Minus. One is reminded of the haunting lines from Audre Lorde's poem "Who Said It Was Simple?" in connection with the "sexual mountain"22 she was trying to surmount: "But I who am bound by my mirror/as well as my bed/see causes in Colour/as well as sex/and sit here wondering/which me will survive/all these liberations.23

Given West's difficult position, most importantly within her family, it is not surprising that before she could "claim the right to speak for herself," or, in bell hooks' words, in Talking Back (1989), to "make the gesture of defiance that heals" (9), she would first speak, at least publicly, through another. That person was to be Wallace Thurman. Much earlier, and in her personal life, West seems to have needed her cousin Helene Johnson for the same purpose. Even into old age, whenever interviewed about her past, West went back and forth between stories about Helene and stories about Wallie. It is unfortunate, therefore, that she immortalized only Thurman in a prose essay.

"It was [Thurman's] nature to rebel," West felt moved to explain a decade after the Harlem Renaissance, "to pull the pedestal out from under the plastic gods of other people" ("Elephant's Dance: A Memoir of Wallace

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Neither outspoken nor iconoclastic herself, she too had come to see the danger in what Thurman referred to in *Infants of the Spring* (1932) as the false foundation of self-conscious racial thinking, especially as a means to generate an artistic statement of self. The "determining factor" of color during the whole of Thurman's life, both outside and inside of his cultural group, had devastating consequences for him.²⁴ It troubled West almost as much as it did Thurman, whom it eventually defeated. As different as they were in temperament and personality, Dorothy West saw in Wallace Thurman a partial image of herself.

"Color defined the Harlem Renaissance," Gloria Hull rightly asserts *(Color, Sex, and Poetry* 17). "Philosophically and practically," she argues, "it was a racial movement whose overriding preoccupation [with color] can be seen in all of its aspects and manifestations" (17). The very name "Harlem" was interchangeable with the signifier "black," as in James Weldon Johnson's *Black Manhattan* (1930). "Its debates and manifestos," "book titles," "artistic illustrations," indeed, nearly everything about it was deliberately color-coded (17).

Throughout the duration, artists who identified with this movement came in every color—from light-skinned mulattos like Alice Dunbar-Nelson, Angelina Grimke, and Georgia Douglas Johnson, whom Hull chronicles, to those with dark and very dark skin, like Dorothy West and Wallace Thurman. All were affected by considerations of color-as-race. How they were affected was also a matter of color, Hull suggests. "Racial attitudes of the larger society, Harlem Renaissance dictates, and personal experience all combined to determine the handling of color in their writings," Hull concludes (17).

I argue in this study that on the basis of "personal experience" and their own complex color obsessions the late-comers Thurman and West found the dictates of the Renaissance leadership inhibiting while they found the camaraderie of the younger Renaissance writers mutually enabling. They had come to Harlem during the 1920s to leave behind their white neighborhoods, in Los Angeles and Boston, and to blend in with other black people like themselves. In other words, they wanted to escape the obsession with skin color, in the larger racist white society where it had originated and still persisted and also closer to home, in their families, where it was being

²⁴John A. Williams makes a similar case for the relevance of Thurman's challenge in his "Afterword" to the 1979 reprint of *Infants of the Spring*. 

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imitated. Color preference as a construct of race had been for them so perverse and had so negative an association that Thurman and West found it impossible to embrace wholeheartedly the very racial visibility they most wanted to avoid. Neither would have been considered race liberals; Thurman had difficulty with race loyalty. Where "consciousness" and "identity" were concerned, Thurman first and then West believed that art, rather than race—whose meaning was still indeterminate—was a safer basis upon which to fashion a new sense of self, so that race could not be a thing played with mirrors. This preference, however, did not make either one of them an assimilationist. Their thinking was part and parcel of the integrationist thinking of the 1920s and the post-War American nationalist rhetoric that had spilled over into belles lettres and the arts. A large number of writers, including Jean Toomer and Countee Cullen, self-affiliated first and foremost with their status as "Americans" and secondarily with a particular ethnicity or racial group.

Debate over the important relationship between "race" and "consciousness" and "race" and "subjectivity" predated the Harlem Renaissance by some three decades. Among black writers, it had been analyzed most comprehensively, and persuasively, in the work of historian W.E.B. Du Bois and stated most expressively in his psychological theory of "divided consciousness" in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903):

> ... the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, -- a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. (214-215)

A holistic identity for African Americans was possible, in Du Bois' view, by bringing the "African" half of a dual heritage into communion with the predominating "Anglo" half of the "American" equation. This recuperation of culture would foster pride and replace psychic division with psychological balance. To maintain equilibrium, Du Bois warned African Americans to see the expectations and representations of the dominant culture as adversarial and treat them as such.

For African Americans who followed Du Bois' prescription, the language of race was advanced alongside the language of culture. According to historian Barbara Fields, the impediment to being black in white America was
particularly onerous because of the racial basis of slavery in the New World. African Americans had to respond in kind. In "Ideology and Race in American History," Fields argues that "African Americans "invented themselves, not as a race, but as a nation" (143). In other words, the process of transforming the signification upon the word "Negro" from negative to positive and making it commensurate with that of "American" required a massive collective effort. So, for pioneering writers like Du Bois in Souls, and later in Dusk of Dawn: An Essay toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept (1940), and Pauline Hopkins in Of One Blood (1902-1903), African-American culture-as-nation became the Rosetta stone of race.

For historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, the language about race in the larger American society developed at the same time as "race" and "culture" were being made equivalents in the minds of African Americans. In "African-American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race," Higginbotham argues that the discourse about race is "double-voiced," and therefore it serves two masters: "the voice of black oppression and the voice of black liberation" (12). Borrowing from Mikhail M. Bakhtin, she argues that of necessity "Blacks took 'race' and empowered its language with their own meaning... (13). Then, "[t]hrough a range of shifting, even contradictory meanings and accentuations expressed at the level of individual and group consciousness, blacks fashioned race into a cultural identity that resisted white hegemonic discourses" (14). Thus, African Americans' first attempt "to be whole," and therefore "to have a chance," in Dorothy West's terms, was to take the overarching language of race as they found it and make it their own, whatever the omissions, contradictions, or complications to follow.

In the academy, African Americans have had to create literary language to describe textual expressions of race. Theorist Henry Louis Gates characterizes the presentation of the double consciousness of race by blacks themselves as embedded in texts that are "double-voiced."25 In The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American...
American Literary Criticism (1988), Gates explains the variety of ways in which such texts are "doubled." From double audiences, styles, and literary ancestors to double meanings, they often employ a tradition for the express purpose of revision. Most important to the signification in these racial narratives are the racial subtext and/or "inter-text."

In the literary expression of the New Negro of the mid-1920s, individual and group efforts to effect racial self-representation for the most part followed in the direction of Du Bois' thinking and Alain Locke's organization. Many of the writers commonly associated with the Harlem Renaissance also found the language of cultural autonomy enabling of psychological wholeness. Their achievements, like those of their nineteenth-century counterparts, represent, in Higginbotham's terms: "the continued desire to capture transcendent threads of racial 'oneness'" (15). This desire is especially apparent, she argues, in "blacks' appropriation of the productive power of language for the purpose of resistance" (15). The strategy is recuperative and restorative, according to Higginbotham, because of its important transformative power. "Such a discursive rendering of race," she argues, "counts images of physical and psychical rupture with images of wholeness" (15).

Wallace Thurman and Dorothy West inherited what was meant by the Renaissance leadership, using the appellation "New Negro," to be a renewed effort at regenerative strategies; yet for Thurman and West, "race" did not ipso facto signify a positive source for "identity." Indeed, what Higginbotham terms "race as the sign of cultural identity" (15) was for them problematic. "Race," for them, was too inflected with "color." Their own search for a holistic subjectivity that included, but was not limited to, identification with their race, took a different, and perhaps more troubled, path. Unlike Jessie Fauset, for example, whose fiction was informed by what Thadious Davis terms an "attack on debilitating cultural beliefs and social practices" (xv), Thurman and West's representations of the conditions of their own oppression were not "grounded" in Fauset's "race consciousness" (xv); instead, they were fixed in personal experience and personal pain, and perhaps too references to women as a "muted group," in their own culture and in male culture simultaneously ("Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness," in The New Feminist Criticism, Ed. Showalter, 1985). Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar term the nature of women's writing "duplicitous" or "palimpsestic" (The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination, 1979).
For Thurman, especially, after arriving in Harlem mid-decade, "looking at one's self through the eyes of others" and seeing one's soul revealed through them took on a meaning quite distinct from what Du Bois had in mind when he critiqued white American society at the beginning of the century. Once critical mass had been reached in Harlem, creating a majority black population, black collective identity could be expressed as a "nation within a nation." In this "other world" and in the eyes of the mulatto portion of the amorphous black middle class therein, Thurman felt he recognized the same "contempt and pity" as motivated his own fair-complexioned mother to abandon her only child after his dark-skinned and—to his mother's family—unacceptable father had deserted them both. His own irreconcilable difference, the very mark of the Negroes' subordination in the first place, he felt was still his blackness. Something of the same could be said for West who also felt denied by her near-white mother who had taken the measure of her daughter's soul and had found it incompatible with her own design for living middle class and well in a treacherous white world. "Felt" is surely the operative word here. It is equally crucial to establish that neither Thurman nor West ever included the younger Harlem artists within the category of the contemptible black bourgeoisie. Although perceiving themselves as caught in something like the Du Boisian double bind vis-à-vis a small, though personally significant, portion of the black middle class, neither had any difficulty forming intimate and lasting relationships within their own close-knit circle of artist friends. Thurman in particular felt the need to voice his objection to a seemingly conflicting discourse of identity. On the one hand, it encouraged cultural oneness through race, which he clearly identified with color. On the other hand, he felt subjected to an internal racial caste system that ever reminded him of his "two-ness."

Many of Thurman's critics point to factors that distorted his perceptions about race and caused him to

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26 Conceptions of "black nation" recur historically in the black American struggle: in the late 1700s with James Forten and Paul Cuffe; in the 1830s with Martin Delany, David Walker, and Henry Highland Garnet; in the 1920s with Marcus Garvey; and in the 1960s with Malcolm X. See Jeremiah Moses Wilson, ed., Classical Black Nationalism: From the American Revolution to Marcus Garvey (N.Y.: NYU Press, 1996).
overstate his social criticism. A good example of this tendency toward magnification was his insistence upon the
pervasiveness of intra-racial colorism. Some critics point to his extreme color consciousness as having been the
cause. These critics include, most importantly, American literary critic Mae Gwen Henderson and Thurman's
Dutch biographer Eleonore van Notten, as is developed in a later chapter.27 By the time of this first biography,
Henderson had already taken the further step of arguing that Thurman's over-emphasis of color may have been
masking his sense of failure and self-loathing because of his homosexuality, the motivating factor, in her
analysis, behind all of his work. While this claim is difficult to prove in a relatively short article such as she
wrote, one wishes Henderson would have pursued her argument more fully as it has merit.

Be that as may be, it is fair to say, and entirely understandable, that within the forums provided by the older
Renaissance leadership, comparatively speaking of course, none encouraged complete openness about the totality
of black experience, such as Thurman and West felt moved to express. The combination of "propagandistic
positivism,"28 on the part of Renaissance facilitators, and secular humanist, Americanist thinking, of the decade
in general, resulted in a subtle form of censorship of black subject matter that probably could not have been
avoided. Oversimplifying for brevity, one could say that at the same time as the black leadership was pursuing
what some have called an incipient black aesthetic it was also caught up in what might be called the "mystique of
Americanness." The latter was a forceful promotional effort by the new Jewish publishing establishment that was
being called "American cultural nationalism" or "cultural pluralism," specifically to incorporate their own

27See van Notten's Wallace Thurman's Harlem Renaissance (1995) and Henderson's essay for The Harlem
Renaissance Remembered (1972), "Portrait of Wallace Thurman."
28Trey Ellis' essay for Callaloo, "The New Black Aesthetic" (1989), contrasts the Harlem Renaissance and
Reconstruction with the Black Arts Movement's "PR for the race" at the expense of "culturally
authentic[ity]" while also acknowledging a debt to Civil Rights activism and Black Nationalist "pride"
(236-239). Ellis offers his "cultural mulatto" (a "thriving hybrid") as a newer manifestation, those who are
"educated by a multi-racial mix of cultures" but still identified as "wholly black," and "middle class" (242,
237). Born out of the ultraconservative 1980s (243), the NBA's "spiritual and...biological" relatives are the
"avant-garde artists" of the "70s like Ishmael Reed, Toni Morrison, John Edgar Wideman, and Funkadelic.
"Stripping themselves of both white envy and self-hate they produced super-sophisticated black art
that...expanded or exploded the old definitions of blackness" (237). Proactive as well, Ellis sees cultural
mulattos as "no longer need[ing] to deny or suppress" the "complicated and sometimes contradictory
cultural baggage to please either white people or black" (235) but as "defining blacks in black contexts"
and "armed with savvy and hungry new institutions, like the Black Filmmaker Foundation...and Defjam
ethnicity as well as the cultural backgrounds of other Americans recently or not-so-recently immigrated, to include race as well. The impetus was to obviate the American melting pot metaphor and replace it with one suggesting an American tapestry instead. This competing relational sense among black intellectuals that stressed certain similarities with other cultural groups could be stated as something similar to: "we are just like you."

When considerations of audience changed, as they did among the members of the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s, the dynamics of black representation changed as well. The new leadership had abandoned any interest in presenting black experience for white consumption and approval. Again, oversimplified for brevity, the new attitude could be stated as something similar to: "we are not like you." It expressed the desire for what Hoyt Fuller called a "mystique of blackness." In "Towards a Black Aesthetic" (1968), Fuller explained the obvious necessity for black intellectuals and artists to unhinge completely from mainstream American cultural values and representations (582). Two years later, Fuller would publish West's article on Wallace Thurman and the Harlem Renaissance, which he obviously thought fit into his agenda. Vincent B. Leitch, in *American Literary Criticism from the 30s to the 80s* (1988), points to how this attitude affected what writers could express when writing for a black audience. Making reference to Stephen Henderson's introductory essay "The Forms of Things Unknown," from *Understanding the New Black Poetry* (1973), Leitch illuminates the meaning of, what Trey Ellis would later call, a "black context":

To account for the specificity of black experience, Henderson posited the "Soul-Field," which was an historically formed, cohesive repository containing the social experiences, moral and political values, linguistic forms, religious practices, and emerging aspirations of black people in America. A few years earlier, he had labeled "Soul-Field" simply "Soul" and characterized it as the black "unconscious." Out of this domain emerged all forms of black expression, including revelations of self-hatred (the "nigger component"). (Leitch 339)

This larger arena of expression, had it occurred during the 1920s, might have helped to neutralize some of Thurman's invective; and had he lived longer, he might have been able to strike a balance in his thinking about color and race as, finally, West would do, even in her thinking on Thurman.

From the few references to the 1960s that Dorothy West has made in her extensive interviews, I would records" (238).
judge that she was more influenced by the philosophical underpinnings of the Civil Rights Movement and the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., than the Black Arts Movement and its aesthetic theory. For one, West was already fifty-three years old in 1960. For another, the inter-racial nature of King's organization would have seemed more familiar to her, living as she did on Martha's Vineyard Island in the black community of Oak Bluffs. By then, West had matured enough in her knowledge of the racial past to understand the reasons why her mother (and her mother's mother before her) had absorbed so many of the false values of the white middle class, including status based in color that had created social stratification among blacks themselves. The full import of what the competing leadership advocated of black power, black nationalism, black Muslimism, and black art would have seemed too radical a departure from the direction of her own socialization during the Harlem Renaissance. She was interested in this point of view and respected its intentions, she has said, and she absorbed as much of the critique of the Black Aestheticians as her age and temperament would permit. But it was King who inspired her. His use of Holy Scripture to preach and to demonstrate the power of love to change individual hearts and to change the world through non-violent civil disobedience was the path to wholeness she chose. Her epigram for The Wedding, which comes from 1 Corinthians 13:4-7, attests to this psychological and spiritual alignment.

West also lived to see the formation of a "New[er] Black Aesthetic." As articulated by its spokesmen, like Trey Ellis, it meant to re-balance the interests of the black middle class with those of the black working and lower classes that had become the metier of the 1960's movement while at the same time insisting on cultural authenticity in representations of black life. Rachel West, her daughter came to understand, followed what her foremothers had taught her about a particular kind of black survival during slavery. Strategies like upward mobility and self-segregation from the poorer members of the race were seen in times past as the only salvation for a large extended family with little or no education past the primary grades. All that the eighteen-year-old Rachel Benson believed she had to barter with for Isaac West's money and a better neighborhood in the subtly racist Boston of the early twentieth century were her fair complexion, her taste for the better life, and
her indomitable will. While Isaac West, like Fauset's Christopher Cary in *Comedy American Style*, did not agree with his wife's thinking about color, he too had "selected his wife under the influence of color and gender ideology" (Davis xxiv).

It is in West's final work of fiction, *The Wedding*, published some seventy years after her first Harlem short story, that she was able to create a representation of wholeness in racial terms. Like the Reverend Dr. King, she allowed herself to be guided by the promise of the New Testament; and like many black women writers before her, she was drawn to the feminine literary form of the sentimental novel with its spiritual intent and its "emancipatory purpose." In the distinct "marriage plot" of *The Wedding*, unlike that of *The Living Is Easy*, West found more than a vehicle for expressing her own troubled racial and sexual reality. She found a way of transcending them. It was her parents' marriage that had created their daughter's color problem, and it was her enslaved great- and great-great-grandmothers' forced concubinage that had created a color problem to begin with. Thus, it would be in a sanctified marriage of uncompromised *choice* and mutual *consent* between the partners that the solution must lie.

While retaining the "mixed" protagonist, who through no choice of her own represents two races in one body, West de-emphasized the "mediation" (between races) capability written into the convention for the mulatto figure, whatever the ratio of black to white blood. She wanted to avoid both the physical implications of mulatto characters and the significance of appearance. By reclaiming the social institution of marriage for a lawful union between a wealthy, near-white mulatto woman (Shelby Coles) and an unmarried white man of a lower social class (Meade Wyler), West had thoroughly inverted the extra-marital *placage* arrangement. The conventional literary fate of the nineteen-century octoroon woman, who is another kind of character of mediation, *placage* is

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29 These are duCille's terms and a gloss of her argument from *The Coupling Convention*. A fuller use of the text comes in a later chapter.

30 "Placage," a socially sanctioned, extra-legal form of concubinage between a free octoroon woman (*gens de couleur libre*) and a wealthy white "gentleman," generally by consent of the woman's mother, was practiced in antebellum New Orleans. The white aristocrat was allowed to cohabit with his mistress and produce children in a "cottage in the clearing" provided by him but separate from the domain of his legal white wife. Liaisons were formed at "Octoroon Balls" admitting "white gentlemen" only.
abandoned by West, in favor of social equality instead.

At the same time, in *The Wedding* West was revising significantly the "coupling convention" of her nineteenth-century literary foremothers, Frances Harper and Pauline Hopkins. Their mulatto protagonists deliberately choose a marriage partner on the basis of racial similarity in order to accomplish the task of racial uplift and reunification of black people and black families after the Civil War. These choices were part of a larger political statement by the authors whose intentions were to reestablish the integrity of the black community after slavery. They were appropriate goals for the time. West, on the other hand, nearly a century later, preferred to endorse the social freedom of Christian humanism and the legal freedom of integration, as it was being represented at the start of the Civil Rights era. Dr. King so eloquently had prayed for and preached that "all God's children" should be full citizens and equal participants at the feast of life. Ideally, integration based on principle would liberate humanity from the very social signifiers of race, class, and color that had allowed racial slavery to exist and to divide black from white and black from black. For West, to be against miscegenation, especially as a creative act, was to deny the whole of her family, and that was never her intention. Only by allowing for unrestricted choice in matters of love and legal union could West undo the wrong that slavery and racism had done to her family and to her.

In *The Wedding*, West returns to her protagonist what many generations of black women like her maternal ancestors did not have: choice. By making her heroine black-identified but white looking, she did not have to deal with negative ascriptions of blackness. More importantly, as Ann duCille argues, in a different context, "[W]hite is one of the colors in which 'blacks' exist" (54). The evidence was only too clear in West's mother and all of the women in her family. Thus, if the absence of legal marriage and African Americans' vulnerability to forced coupling were negative signifiers of slavery, as was the case for West's maternal great and great-great grandmothers, then the presence of legal marriage contracted through racially neutral choice would be a positive signifier of freedom. The individual may have no control over what race or color she will be in a racialized world, but she can choose whom to love or to marry.
The Wedding, however, is about much more than the marriage between Shelby Coles and Meade Wyler. A union of black and white is not the axis upon which the novel turns toward future happiness, as the reader would expect in the sentimental form. If it were, one might say that West's final artistic vision is simply utopian, or worse, regressive. West is not providing the reader with a twentieth-century version of the classic octoroon figure, as described by Sterling Brown. This fictional octoroon is the white writers' "favorite character," who desires a white lover or union with a white man, as Brown argues, "above all else" (*The Negro in American Fiction* 145). For one, the "near white" Coles family does not approve of Shelby's choice. Meade's family is a lower social class. Class status is the medium through which Corinne Coles, especially, differentiates herself from black people so that she can live as "near white" as possible without actually passing or admitting to herself her disparagement of her socially constructed racial self. Only ninety-eight-year-old Gram approves of Shelby's choice of Meade because he is "real white" like herself. In Gram's case, color, rather than class, is the more important signifier. At this point in her life she wants to return to "living [real] white." For another, the text only builds to the wedding of Shelby and Meade without actually including it. This strategy places the emphasis where it belongs, on the reasons for the choice of husband Shelby makes and not on the choice of Meade because he is white.

The narrator's task is to remind the reader, through revealing the generational histories of both sides of Shelby's complicated genealogy, that it is the integrity of the choice that counts. Shelby's decision, if it is to carry her to the moral high ground, must draw from the values of the right ancestral figure. It is obvious that Gram is not the intended model for just behavior. Making literary the scriptural intent of I Corinthians 12:1-11, the novel's epigram, West constructs Preacher Coles, the founder of the black side of the family, like Dr. King, as a mortal being endowed with the gift of spiritual healing. From each generation of Cole's family members, beginning after Emancipation, the narrator relates the story of a personal conversion that brings about restoration and reconciliation. It is as though slavery's curse is so immutable that each generation must be ritually cleansed again and again with each new cycle of death and birth. First it is Preacher Coles; then schoolteacher, Isaac...
Coles' wife and Clark Coles' mother; then Shelby Coles, Clark Coles' daughter; and finally, Gram Shelby, the slave master's daughter. It is she who must be the one finally to close the circle of injustice and prejudice and thereby be healed herself.

If intentionality means anything, then West's response to a question about the deliberateness of her "style" reflects upon the point of textual meaning. Lorraine Elena Roses during a 1984 interview posed the question about style when *The Wedding* was still very much a work in progress.31 "A style comes to you through necessity," West explained. "I always tell the story of a life," she says; "in the end there is a last paragraph in which, whatever I title the story, the end is the opposite. For example, in my novel, *The Wedding*, there is no wedding (47-48). In fact, the novel ends fifty minutes before the ceremony is to begin and with a very different and significant event of plot. It concerns Gram and her great-granddaughter Laurie. The *denouement* of reconciliation therefore derives from a reunion of black and white between two members of the same family. The proposed union between Shelby and Meade is not a *Deus ex machina* after all.

Finally, *The Wedding* is epochal in its reach. The intertwined and miscegenated family story of the Shelys and the Coles is set between two historical signposts of black history. It begins, intentionally "way back in slavery," at the end of the Civil War, West says, and ends equally deliberately in 1960, just as the Black Arts and Civil Rights movements were beginning to change everything *The Wedding* is about because of its own time period (Roses 48, *Oral* 156). In other words, it is a *fin de cycle* story, as it were, which West meant to bring closure to a particular cycle of dangerous black middle-class racial thinking like her mother's. As West summarizes the practice, "A fair person was supposed to marry a fair person and thereby produce fair children" (Roses 48). The operative verb is *supposed to*. Thus, acceptance (read love), Shelby's and Meade's of each other, despite both their family's objections, is what makes the union possible. This side of the plot overrides—but does not ignore—race in its prescription for wholeness.

On the other side of the plot of *The Wedding* are two parallel and interconnected stories involving the wrongs.

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31In 1978, West said she had fifty pages of a five-chapter outline that she submitted to a publisher (*Oral*)
done to children by adult guardians. Both call attention to race and skin color to show the tragic result of choices made on the basis of these flawed criteria. The event and impact of the death of six-year-old Tina, the "honey-colored" middle child of Lute McNeil, demands resolution and is indispensable to the marriage plot itself. The (brown) father's sin of covetousness (of Shelby Coles' fair skin) is indirectly the cause of his child's death. The same is true for (white) Gram's denial of the infant Laurie, (Liz Coles' "dark child). The latter is the novel's more important union because it takes place as the novel ends. Gram's reconciliation with Laurie through the healing "touch" of kith to kin is, in Laurie's mother's words, the novel's true "miracle" (53).

In this parallel story, West reaches back to her unresolved short work "Prologue to a Life," published nearly seven decades earlier. In the 1929 "Prologue," another white-skinned mother, by dying, rejects her infant, also born female and dark, because her beloved light-skinned twin boys have died. At the moment of his wife's death in childbirth, the grieving father names the child "Lily," after his deceased wife. He, on the other hand, is "saved" by his recognition that loving this child is the only way out of the pain of his recent loss. The similar story in The Wedding brings the implications of "Prologue" full circle. Again, it is the "heart's child" who dies, Tina, the favorite of her father's three, and it is the dark child who survives, Laurie, who is loved and who is the vehicle through whom Gram (the white race) is redeemed.

In her interview with Lorraine Elena Roses and in her Oral History (1978) of six years earlier, West focused her discussion of the novel in progress, not on the prospective bride and groom, but on the ancient white grandmother and her "brown" great-grandchild. The effect is to privilege their story above that of Shelby and Meade. West admits to "borrow[ing] a friend's [Marian Minus] white grandmother" (155-56) for her character Caroline Shelby, called "Gram" by everyone in The Wedding. In the real story, as told to her by Marian Minus (the "brown baby), when it came "Granny's time to die...Granny clung to the bedpost and said, 'I want Baby to forgive me, I want Baby to forgive me'" (Oral 155). In West's adaptation, Gram is also the penitent. "She makes the greatest change," West says of her fictional character (156). And Gram's active acknowledgement of repentance as the only saving grace for her is the reconciliation the novel is meant to hinge upon as well. The

156). It is unclear how much more had been done on the novel in 1984 at the time of the Roses interview.
final scene is of Gram, Liz, and Laurie, and Gram's embrace of Laurie. "Then, without saying a word, she turned to her great-granddaughter and extended her hands" (Wedding 240). With these words of the narrator, Gram and her family are now united, finally, "in God's way," one could say. The concluding paragraph reads:

Liz placed Laurie gently into Gram's wrinkled arms with a small, sad smile. Gram cooed softly as she rocked the infant back and forth, her finger tickling its dark chin. She felt the baby grow quiet in her arms, and she thought of Josephine [her own daughter], whom she had held the same way so many years before. She could not turn the clock back. She could not change the past or do much about the present. But she could spend the little time she had left on earth making things a bit better for the future. Liz put her arm on Gram's shoulder, and they turned away and walked back into the house. (240)

It is as if Gram has reached out for and touched, in spirit, the healing hands of Preacher Coles, her contemporary in age but one whose body has long since left the physical plane. Preacher is made manifest in the infant child.

With this action, the two sides of the family, black and white, Coles and Shelby, unite at last rather than simply coexist. Now the wedding can go on, and everyone can be seated at the Lord's table, in Martin Luther King, Jr's terms.

Unlike Wallace Thurman, West was able, finally, to create the resolution to intra-racial colorism in acceptance and to make acceptance possible through love. In the spirit of I Corinthians and the words of The Wedding: "Color was a false distinction; love was not" (240). Finding this solution took West all the way back to her first years in Harlem, when—still a teenager, still impressionable, still optimistic, and still essentially a romantic at heart—she had heard the beautiful ballad from Shuffle Along and its refrain "Love will find a way."32

Grasping the ideal, West never let go, even if it had taken her more than six decades to recreate its meaning in another artistic form.

Artistic visions do have seasons, as most social and literary critics know. Thadious Davis explains the phenomenon of literary success as "the conjunction of time, circumstance, and taste," in her assessment of the ambivalent reception of Jessie Fauset's novel Comedy American Style (1933)(xv). Eubie Blake resisted

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32 West knew the cast, the musicians and dancers, and the composers of Eubie Blake's all black musical comedy that opened on Broadway in 1921 and ran for years. (Bontemps, "The Awakening" 5). Because a love song between two black actors had not precedent, Blake took a chance using "Love Will Find a Way" (Kimble and Bolcom 93).
the racial etiquette of the white milieu in which he worked, Broadway's Tin Pan Alley tradition, to honor an artistic racial vision of his own. The time was right for a black musician to unburlesque black people's stage presence with more authentic characterizations. Blake was rewarded for his representation of intra-racial harmony and his realistic depiction of black life and love, evident in the popularity of his review with both blacks and whites. However, when Thurman and West scripted their initial revelations about the effects of intra-racial disharmony, even if based in erroneous black middle-class values adapted from distorted white values, their work was not what the times called for, judging from their lack of success. Their representations of race, which may have seemed inappropriate to some, were as yet "in opposition."

This was the opinion of contemporary writer Sterling Brown who argued on behalf of Thurman at the end of the 1930s. Apparently Brown hadn't read West. According to Brown, Thurman "[had put] his finger upon one of the sorest points of the Negro bourgeoisie, its color snobbishness, 'its blue vein circle,' 'aspiring to be whiter and whiter every generation'" (The Negro in American Fiction 146). Establishment blacks in positions of influence, on the other hand, did not welcome Thurman's work.

West, whose subject matter was similar to Thurman's, although never as overstated, must also have been perceived by the black publishing industry as "in opposition" to the Renaissance's goals as well. I would argue that because she was unable during the Renaissance years to move beyond the parameters of her own family experience of color prejudice, she too was largely discouraged in her writing by the Renaissance power structure. It had to have inhibited her growth as an artist. When she fashioned her stories out of this negative self-referential point of view, black periodical publishers were reluctant to publish them. And as she could not, or would not, sensationalize her material, as one could argue Thurman had done, mainstream white publishers were not interested either. Thus, both West's content and her style cost her publications during the 1920s and '30s.

By the 1990s, however, West's final artistic vision had managed to capture at least one spirit of the times. In The Wedding, her bold representation of love as sufficiently powerful to transcend color, race,
and class and thereby to heal ancient antagonists, fit the mood of many in a new decade wary of the challenges of social change, religious dissent, racial division, and sexual politics, whatever their positive effects may have been. Nelson Mandela's appeal for "truth and reconciliation" in the aftermath of apartheid in South Africa, even after his long imprisonment and the devastation of this system of racial hierarchy, was the saving grace for his country. With a similar grace, Dorothy West put her trust in the age-old wisdom of the Sermon on the Mount for the inspiration that had motivated other peacemakers like Mahatma Gandhi and the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who could only try to change the world in God's way. The message of conciliation at the very heart of *The Wedding* had, in the words of Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "much resonance in a multicultural America at the end of the century." And as Ann duCille reminds us, in *The Coupling Convention*, "Historical specificity...is a central concern of [any] analysis of the relationship between the marriage tradition and racial and sexual ideology" (4).

In the marriage plot of *The Wedding*, West created a modern day Romeo and Juliet. Her revision of the story, so captivating to artists as diverse as William Shakespeare and Leonard Bernstein, made use of two ancient foes as a starting point, but love was not to be doomed. Given the importance to herself of the novel's theme, the long-standing and deadly effect of color prejudice within a single family, and given her advanced age, West needed to envision a happy ending. Thus, the sentimental form, or comedy—in the Elizabethan sense of the genre as ending with a wedding—needed to supersede the tragedy inherent in the original narrative by Shakespeare. The "two houses both alike in dignity," those of the Shelbys and the Coles in *The Wedding*, were, in reality, one house precisely because they had been forged in the crucible of slavery. Living within this family of mixed bloodlines, whose black side had learned to privilege one race over another, was like living with leprosy, West believed, and it mutilated just as surely. Truth and reconciliation before the union of man and wife was the only means whereby the family could unite itself. This focus, then, on the desirability of intra-racial stability places *The Wedding* within a tradition more

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33 Gates' obituary of West, "Beyond the Color Line," for *The New Yorker* 82.
34 Jessie Fauset uses this strategy but for the purpose of irony in *Comedy*.

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nineteenth than twentieth century and one that writers like Alice Walker and Toni Morrison have resisted in their own "healing narratives." Claudia Tate argues, in "Allegories of Black Female Desire" (1989), that texts of "domestic idealism" make "intra-racial affirmation rather than interracial protestation their principal subject" (119). They do so, not as a capitulation to the status quo, but as a "revised liberational discourse" (119).

As Ann duCille so aptly argues, black literary texts are social constructions rather than objective reality. They are, she asserts, "fictive invention" and not "transparent historical documents" faithful to "the black experience" and constituting a "master narrative of the race" (6-7). West's fictive constructions, over the period of her writing career, were for black as well as white audiences, but always, as duCille would say, "on behalf of black people" (151); they were for and about the West's large extended family that represented the whole of the color range, her mother being the lightest and her father the darkest. They were, most importantly, for herself. And as her art was her life, it is not surprising that there, in that airy region somewhere amidst the real and the imagined, West created a space sublime to re-envision herself.

Dorothy West, a short story writer, magazine editor, and novelist during the five decades before the publication of The Wedding, experienced with colleague and mentor Wallace Thurman the deep and painful hurt of color prejudice and with it a repressed and ambiguous sexuality. Almost to their disadvantage, both began their careers during the second half of the 1920s in Harlem, New York. In this literary marketplace, the most successful venues for publication in the black press, which was their preference, were regulated as to content. The editors placed substantial emphasis on positive racial subjectivity, which neither could represent, and discretion in the treatment of sex and sexuality, which Thurman clearly violated. The white press, on the other hand, sent various and mixed messages in its almost prescriptive taste for modernist primitivism and exoticism in racial representation and anti-Victorian candor in the treatment of sex and black sexuality. Here Thurman alone benefited, in the sense that he got published by Macalany's and Macfadden's. He paid the price, however,
and left a flawed legacy. His work was unbalanced in conception and unpolished in presentation. As Sterling Brown has argued, Thurman's work clearly "had something to say," but without sufficient accomplishment. Of Emma Lou Morgan in *The Blacker the Berry* (1929), Brown wrote: "His heroine is as morbidly sensitive about color as any tragic octoroon, and shows as little fight" (146). Of *Infants of the Spring*, Brown wrote, "at times [it was] peevish, at times angry, crudely written, and not always well thought out" (147).

Despite West's considerable effort to relocate from Boston to Harlem at just eighteen years of age, and despite the importance of the Renaissance to her personally, the New York publishing community of the 1920s had a negative influence upon her early development as a writer. Before she moved to Harlem, West had not considered, or simply did not understand, racial subjectivity as necessary to her fiction. She actually avoided race as a fictional subject. Her first published short story, written in Boston, is more a realist text than a racial one, if one can separate the two, treating black life without calling attention to it as race. Rather, it is the psychology of poverty and meaningless toil that engages her writerly interest. "The Typewriter" (1926) depicts the tragic result of a poor man's attempt to compensate for his loss of self-worth by using the prestige of his daughter's typing lessons to imagine for himself a position of importance.

Once in Harlem, however, West came under the influence of other young black writers who were caught up in the matter of racial subjectivity and identity and the black periodical press, which was encouraging representations of race as aspects of African-American culture. Thurman's creative work not only wrestled with the value of, to him, a limiting paradigm, but also came to the resolution that race and identity were essentially antagonistic. West's exploration of identity was much more discreetly expressed. At age nineteen, and as young people often do, she felt ashamed of her heritage. She wanted to escape her family and the racial stigma of slavery—on both sides, including its color. What she understood about her own identity at that time was her "difference" from the members of her family. Had she ever put words to her perception it might have gone something like the following. The beautiful light-skinned Rachel Benson had married the dark-skinned Isaac West for his money, and she, Dorothy West, was the product of an unhappy and unrepresentative—for the family—
-union of opposites. She would admit later in life that this "one-sided love affair" had hurt all the members of her family (Remember). Years later, by living through eight decades of social change, as West implies in her Oral History, she was finally able to admit to her slave heritage. The admission allowed her to put herself in her mother's shoes, as it were, to achieve some balance in her perspective on her mother and on herself. Because of this altered perspective, West chose to write The Wedding as a final testament of love, to her family and for herself.

Even then, West believed in black people not in black culture. When she was ready to embrace her heritage, she wanted to chronicle how the black side of her family—the side she cared about—had been able to transcend slavery. Even if lighter skin had given her foremothers certain opportunities denied to others, the fact was they had still begun as slaves, and that—finally—was the crux of the matter for her (Oral 207). On the other hand, those writers like Langston Hughes and Sterling Brown, and to a lesser extent Zora Neale Hurston, who, having had a different racial experience from West's, found in the cultural features of race a positive basis for their art, in its blues lyrics, its folk speech, and its folklore in particular. Although Hurston's success was longer in the making than Hughes' and Brown's, she alone among the women writers was encouraged and published by Alain Locke, starting with promoting her in the Stylus, and she was later assisted financially in her pursuit of education at Barnard. Twentieth-century black writers and critics, like Alice Walker, promoted her work before any of the other Harlem Renaissance women writers. Thus, comparatively speaking, Hughes, Brown, and Hurston have been celebrated for their achievements, for understandable reasons of positive representations of race as culture. However, because West's earliest heroines are often adolescents who struggle with the psychological ramifications of color-conscious family relations and the deleterious effect on young women who are considered by their parents as too dark, her recognition, I argue, has been later in coming. Even in The Wedding, however, West could only imagine happiness as belonging to "white" people.

Decades before writing The Wedding, West's fiction was more in harmony with other black female contemporaries in one way at least, in what was by then a common gendered subtext, a distrust of marriage.
Early representations of the struggle for subjectivity and authenticity in West heroines are frustrated or ill-fated within the marriage relation, up through and including The Living Is Easy (1948). Claudia Tate, in her analysis of Hurston's Janie Crawford in Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937), argues that for black women of the early twentieth century, marriage no longer had the same value socially or usefully and had become instead a matter of compromise (98-99).

During the nineteenth century, however, writers like Frances Harper and Pauline Hopkins, in what are now their canonical literary texts, endowed the institution of marriage with an almost spiritual force for black "race" people who were concerned with the future of African Americans. Dr. Lattimer and Iola Leroy, in Harper's Iola Leroy (1892), and Sappho Clark (nee Mabelle Beaubeam) and Will Smith, in Hopkin's Contending Forces (1900), are two examples of couples in companionate, racial marriages, whereby the institution itself is "privileged" and "valorized," in Claudia Tate's terms. Within this social vision, black women are actually empowered in the marriage state in a way not possible for them as single women. According to Tate, both Harper and Hopkins "designate black female subjectivity as a most potent force in the advancement of the race" (107). Both understood that in racialized antebellum America not only did the legal right to marry confer "civil status" upon the recently emancipated slaves, but also it virtually wrote them into "civilization" in the minds of whites (101-103).

Among the white middle class during the nineteenth century, legal marriage, according to Tate, functioned—in the discourse of the time—as the visible sign of freedom and social respectability (99)—even if not in the reality of actual individual women's lives. In "'Civilization,' the Decline of Middle-Class Manliness, and Ida B. Wells's Antilynching Campaign (1892-94)," Gail Bederman shows, albeit for a different purpose, the extent to which Ida Wells understood and manipulated the prevailing "discourse of civilization" to serve her own cause. Embedded in this discourse was the definition of what it meant to be middle class. Making reference to historian Mary Ryan, Bederman agrees that "the American [white] middle class molded its distinctive identity around domestic values and family practices, especially as elaborated and instituted by evangelical Protestant women"
Thus, writers like Harper and Hopkins would have been as aware as Wells was that legal marriage was the imputed value at the very heart of civilization. As Claudia Tate expresses this truism, in "the foundation of the family and society" was the middle-class white "basis for concepts of morality...and human progress" (102). Furthermore, as Tate argues, "domestic idealization" served a double purpose for black women writers. In literary texts "of black female authority," it functioned as a "trope of racial and sexual liberation" (126). Alongside the texts by Harper and Hopkins, Tate also analyzes Amelia Johnson's *Clarence and Corinne* (1890), Emma Dunham Kelley's *Megola* (1891), and cites Mrs. Nathan F. Mossell's expressed viewpoint in this regard in *The Work of the Afro-American Woman* (1894): "'home is undoubtedly the cornerstone of our beloved Republic....Marriage constitutes the basis for the home'" (117).

For West's heroines of the 1920s, however, whatever their stated or unstated fantasies of romantic fulfillment and sexual desire, the consummation of desire was not with their husbands. West's representation of marriage in her early fiction is similar to Tate's depiction of marriage in the works of West's black contemporaries. It is, Tate argues, "socially sanctioned brokerage" and "socially regulated female sexual desire" (99), as it is in white women's texts of the period as well, one might add. Not surprisingly, then, marriage is actually destructive of black female agency, a "deterrent to achieving female subjectivity" (99). For West, the other deterrent is expressed in her—almost unique for the time—racial subtext, that of being the wrong color in a white-identified value system in her family. With the exception of Hurston's 1925 one-act play *Color-Struck*, it was not until 1933 that Jessie Fauset would write a full-length study of the under-examined issue of color-consciousness in *Comedy American Style* and how it could destroy the functionality of a black family. Her text and its predecessor, Charles Chesnutt's *Wife of His Youth* (1899), were brought out by white publishers.

An ingenue writer, West went naturally to the subjectivity of her biography to create her troubled protagonists in her four short stories of the 1920s and '30s. Her fictional representation of her own experience, particularly in "Prologue to a Life" (1929), is that of the daughter who is rejected by her fair-skinned maternal parent because she is too dark, and worse, female. Her fictional representation of her mother Rachel West in "Hannah Byde".
(1926) is also that of the light-skinned woman, in this case a wife, who rejects her too-dark and less literate working-class husband, especially when she finds she is pregnant with his child.

June Jordan's recently published collection of autobiographical poems, *Soldier: A Poet's Childhood* (2000), speaks directly to the conjunction of time, circumstance, and taste. It explicitly addresses similar themes found in West's short stories that had come too early in the century for appreciation. For Jordan, it took until the end of a successful academic and literary career for her finally to reveal the nature of her compromised childhood, something Dorothy West had attempted to do some seventy years earlier, and with no name recognition. In Jordan's case, however, it was the father who had placed the daughter's identity in jeopardy. Jordan's "Poem about My Rights" serves as a perfect illustration of the very theme that West tried so hard to express, the dilemma of gendered color identity in adolescence, but unfortunately without Jordan's perspective:

My father saying I was wrong saying that
I should have been a boy because he wanted one/a
Boy and that I should have been lighter skinned and
That I should have had straighter hair and that
I should not be so boy crazy but instead I should
Just be one/a boy....

Ultimately, the child persona in the poems "simply takes in experiences imagistically," Deborah McDowell argues in her review of the book, while the adult poet expresses consciousness of "the assault on her very forming being" ("Favorite Son" 3). It is, in part, this same violated self that characterized West's earliest sense of personhood and had formed the basis for her earliest unhappy protagonists. It is understandable, yet still regrettable, that for West *Crisis* and *Opportunity* were not ready publicly to support her work or even help to guide it.

Dorothy West and June Jordan, for different reasons, avoid a holistic treatment of black female sexuality. In Jordan's case, her poetic persona is constructed as a child, so sex is handled playfully, as the twelve-year-old speaker would understand it, and sexuality has not yet found a place in this prepubescent psyche. In West's case, as was true for the majority of black women writers of the nineteenth century who
preceded her, female sexuality is for the most part expressed simply as sex. In conventional gender terms, it is something that happens when women marry; it is necessary to the production of offspring. In other words, it is an aspect of marriage and maternity or a problem encountered in marriage or motherhood.

In "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women" (1989), Darlene Clark Hine argues that sexual reserve has been a deliberate and in the long run empowering strategy. It is a highly conscious part of a "search for respect and control over their own sexuality," a "cult of secrecy" meant "to protect the sanctity of inner aspects of their lives" (915). Hine has termed this reticence to express issues of black female sexuality "the culture of dissemblance." She sees it as a privacy issue most applicable to women of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Deborah McDowell illuminates dissemblance accordingly. "Since the very beginning of their history, black women novelists have treated sexuality with caution and reticence, a pattern clearly linked to the network of social and literary myths perpetuated throughout history about black women's libidinousness" (Introduction xi). The near-absence of female sexuality in novels of the nineteenth century by black women, however, changed with Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928) in the second decade of the twentieth century.

Deborah McDowell's 1986 Introduction to novels by Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen is a good place to telescope what is an ongoing debate. McDowell claims that despite Larsen's departure from the previous tradition, black women writers' reticence about representing sex and sexuality remained nevertheless (Introduction xiv). Larsen's work, and that of Jessie Fauset, McDowell argues, may have "flirt[ed] with female sexual desire," but both "lacked the daring of their contemporaries, the black female blues singers...[who] sang openly and seductively about sex and celebrated the female body and female desire..." (xiii-xiv). Jacquelyn McLendon, on the other hand, argues persuasively, in *The Politics of Color* (1995), that "[a]lthough it is both relevant and significant to explore the influence of the blues on some black literature, it is not an influence that is necessary to validate black female sexuality, nor does it legitimize the 'blackness' of literature or its authors" (2).
More to the point in McDowell's argument, then, is her sense of the politics of textual representations of black female sexuality. McDowell's assertion in this regard is clearer when separated from popular culture representations. Popular culture images of Jazz Age women abounded during the 1920s, even if the two predominant ones depicted different social classes. Black blues women and their counterparts the white "flappers" had both acquired a more public presence and a much freer sexuality. However, for one, the specialized medium of the blues, along with its rigid class affiliation during the 1920s, is too significant a factor in explaining the differences in representations of black women to be ignored. The blues form itself invited sexually explicit lyrics; indeed, the audience expected them. Even if for this reason alone, blues singers did not have the same restrictions placed upon them as female novelists did, nor did they have the same goals. Fauset and Larsen's representations of black women were part of a historical moment, McDowell rightly claims. Their "ideological ambivalences" in this regard, she argues, "are rooted in the artistic politics of the Harlem Renaissance, regarding the representation of black sexuality, especially black female sexuality" (xiv). On the question of how much black, or white, women writers compromised their artistic representations for social and political reasons, however, there is some dispute.

McDowell argues that Nella Larsen found a middle path. Her strategy for striking a balance between the competing demands for "respectability" from the marketplace and for honesty in the artistic expression of black female sexuality from her own writerly integrity was to create characters who were themselves the embodiment of these same "contradictory impulses" (xvi). Relying upon "psychic division" as a representational strategy, however, meant that Larsen could only treat black female sexuality "obliquely," in McDowell's view (xvi). The acknowledgement of a split "between a desire for sexual fulfillment and a longing for social respectability," according to McDowell, was Larsen's compromise to the "conflicted" arena of black representational politics.

Elizabeth Ammons, in *Conflicting Stories: Women Writers at the Turn into the Twentieth Century*
(1991), argues for what amounts to a similar compromise on the part of white women writers, but for different reasons. She points to Edith Wharton, for one, who was among a group of writers like Kate Chopin who also faced social barriers that served to restrict their ability to freely represent upper-class white women as full sexual beings, particularly outside of marriage. One could point to Chopin's short story "The Storm" (c. 1899; pub. 1969) and her novel *The Awakening* (1899) to trace the manner of Chopin's negotiation. Written as a sequel to "At the 'Cadian Ball" (1892) and at the same time as *The Awakening*, "The Storm" included what was left out of the novel, explicit treatment of female sexual desire and its consummation outside of the marriages of both of its participants. Chopin decided not to publish "The Storm," indeed, never wrote another word, after male critics blasted her novel as an unwholesome transgression of (white) middle-class proprieties regarding marriage and motherhood. In *The Awakening* Chopin had allowed her heroine Edna Pontellier to express dissatisfaction with her condition as a wife and mother, while she only implied that Edna also had taken two lovers in the interim before her death by drowning, which the critics no doubt championed as her due. What Chopin may have wanted to include of explicit sexuality in her upper-class white protagonist was placed instead into "The Storm," using the body of Calixta, an Acadian woman of mixed blood.33 Chopin's strategy suggests most importantly the degree to which white female bodies of the middle to upper classes could not be sexualized for a literary marketplace still strictly governed by male sexual politics at the end of the nineteenth century.

Comparatively speaking, one could argue that Nella Larsen's treatment of black female sexuality in *Passing* is no more or less oblique than Edith Wharton's treatment of white female sexuality in *The Age of Innocence* (1920). A novel closer in time period and one that employs a similar strategy of "doubling,"

33Calixta's lover Alcee Laballiere is a French Creole, as is Adele Ratignolle in *The Awakening*. At the time Chopin wrote "The Storm," a "Creole" was a person born in Louisiana but of French or Spanish nationals. Most importantly the word automatically designated the person as "white" and for the most part aristocratic. "Acadians," on the other hand, were also descended from Spanish or French nationals but by way of a region in Canada formerly called "Acadia." Acadians often had mixed genealogies and were therefore not *ipso facto* "white." They were generally middle or working class.
Wharton, as Elizabeth Ammons points out, was also assumed to be silent on issues of female sexuality because of her class (142). The "doubling" of Larsen's Clare Kendry and Irene Redfield in *Passing* (191), if Ammons is indeed correct, is not unlike that of Wharton's doubling of the *Contessa* Ellen Olenska and May Welland in *The Age of Innocence*. In Larsen's case, "Clare represents for Irene the dangerous side of herself—foreign, outlawed—that she as a respectable, middle-class black woman has successfully denied," Ammons argues (191). "Clare is sexual, daring, creative. She has moved out of African American bourgeois culture; she roams free of its demands for conformity and social service and endless attention to familial and community uplift" (Ammons 191). The "union" with Clare that Irene "secretly desires," the "passionate longing for fusion," is in fact that of uniting two "alienated parts of one potentially whole identity" (Ammons 191). In this sense McDowell is right that Larsen holds two "contradictory impulses" together in one text, as Irene Kendry does in one body (xvi). However, even if one accepts McDowell's argument for "reticence" in the treatment of black female sexuality, or "doubling" as Ammons suggests, as a way around a more frank and direct treatment, one can still easily distinguish these strategies as "modern."

Most important in this regard are the critics who argue, as does Jacquelyn McLendon, that readers should consider the many and varied ways in which black female sexuality is expressed by Fauset and Larsen. This distinction is important, according to McLendon, in order not to miss the whole of both authors' roles as "makers of meaning" in their individual artistic projects. To quote McLendon on this point: "[W]hat Irene and Clare in *Passing* and Helga in *Quicksand* all want is to be disembodied, in one sense to free themselves of "intense class identification with the discipline of the bourgeois body" and in another to free themselves of the frustrations of repressed female desire" (11). One need only look to the complexity of Helga Crane's eroticized "conversion" to the Reverend Mr. Pleasant Green in Larsen's *Quicksand*. The "vitality" with which after her marriage to Green Helga anticipates nights of lovemaking "so strong that it devoured all shoots of reason" (112), and everything that follows therein, is a case in
point. The reader witnesses the amazing feat of Larsen's exploration, in McLendon's words, of "the debilitating effects of imposed restrictions on female eroticism or desire, especially outside of marriage" (88). Thadious Davis would add that Fauset was highly sensitive to the many false values of the black bourgeoisie that were "little more than thinly veiled attempts to resist being racialized as African American" (xxii). As such, "Fauset takes on the ways in which race as it was constructed within the United States impinges upon the expression of emotions and libido," according to Davis, as well as the "connection between racial identity and female sexuality" (xxv).

The difference between Dorothy West's female protagonists of this period and those of the writers mentioned above is quite distinct. In the mostly autobiographical stories written and published between 1926 and 1929, West used children as her fictional personae. As a matter of fact, because they get younger with each story, the distinct, if not deliberate, age regression must have some meaning. Millie, in "The Typewriter," (1926) is a teenager, but she is not completely a West persona. Millie was modeled on Helene Johnson, according to West (Remember), leaving Millie's much younger sister Daisy, a barely defined character, as the West persona, an interesting characterization as Helene and Dorothy were virtually the same age. Judy, in "Funeral" (1928), is ten. Essie, in "An Unimportant Man" (1928), is seven or eight. Lily, in "Prologue to a Life" (1929), is a newborn. West was, of course, quite young herself when the stories were written, between eighteen and twenty-two. By all accounts, she was also sexually inexperienced at this time. Most of the explicitly sexual protagonists of other black women writers, it is important to note, came later in their careers. Only Fauset's 1924 There Is Confusion had been published by 1929 when West had completed her stories of this period. Hurston, born in 1891, was forty-six when she published Their Eyes Were Watching God in 1937. Nella Larsen, also born in 1891, was thirty-seven when she published Quicksand and Passing in 1928. Ann Petry, born in 1911, was thirty-five when she published The Street in 1946. Therefore, the precedent for representing sexualized black women as protagonists and even fictional personas had not really been established by her contemporaries when West
was crafting her early stories.

Even as West turned to longer fiction and began work on The Living Is Easy in the mid-1940s, her predisposition toward child heroines continued. Already approaching forty, West created her fictional persona Judy Judson as a child going on six when the story opens and eleven when it concludes. Midpoint in the writing of her first novel, West returned to Oak Bluffs to help out her mother with a sick and aging aunt; the daughter never left. One could hazard a connection here in that only the fictional personae West created for her mother, that is Hannah Byde, Cleo Judson, and Corinne Coles, have reached puberty and beyond and are married women while West's own fictional personae are dependent children. The author has said that while she does not write for children, she writes well about them. Her success derives from her ability to "go into their thinking" (Dalsgard 34). "My child characters are my best characters," she claims (34). One might say, then, that try as she might to emancipate herself, Dorothy West remained forever her mother's child. Yet, in the same interview, West implies that she was always mature beyond her years and that childhood had eluded her. "That's no child" she remembers grown-ups saying about her, "that's a little sawed-off woman" (Dalsgard 30). And, as if agreeing, she concludes: "So, evidently, I never really was a child" (30). The contradictory impulse within Dorothy West, one could say, was either staying mama's baby or growing up. Fictionally, the dilemma is represented in the child protagonist with the adult consciousness of the narrator.

By the time West finished The Living Is Easy and had already lived closely and, one could say, intimately with Mildred Jones and Marian Minus, or even later in her career after Rachel West had died in the mid-1950s, another precedent had been set in black women's poetry that West clearly did not follow. The erotic and homoerotic verse of Mae Cowdery, Angelina Weld Grimke, and Gladys May Casely Hayford had been read, the most discreet of which were even found in the pages of The Crisis. As Maureen Honey points out in her anthology Shadowed Dreams: Women's Poetry of the Harlem Renaissance, "The eroticism found in verse of the 1920s not only made visible the hunger of Black
women for unrestricted, self-defining experience, but also brought to the surface feelings for women that had been couched previously in platonic language" (21). The lines "To plunge—/My brown body/In a golden pool,/And lazily float on the swell,/Watching the rising sun," and the rest of the poem that Mae Cowdery titles "Longings," had already been accepted by The Crisis in 1927 (Quoted in Honey 129). Cowdery's poem "Insatiate," published in We Lift Our Voices (1936), moves from the lines, "If my love were meat and bread/And sweet cool wine to drink/They would not be enough,/For I must have a finer table spread/To sate my entity" to a bold finish, using the feminine pronoun: "If her lips were rubies red./Her eyes two sapphires blue... (Honey 131). Gloria Hull, who states unequivocally that Locke and Cullen were practicing homosexuals, goes so far as to argue that for reasons of his sexuality Cullen encouraged explicitly sensual, even sexual, poetry and that Cullen's anthology Caroling Dusk (1927) was an important repository for woman-centered poetry of a variety of themes (Hull, Color, Sex, and Poetry 8). "Out of the tense awed darkness, my Frangepani comes," Gladys Mae Casely Hayford writes in "Rainy Season Love Song," published in Caroling Dusk (1927). She too expresses same-sex longing and desire: "Whilst the blades of Heaven flash round her, and the roll of thunder drums./My young heart leaps and dances, with exquisite joy and pain./As, storms within and storms without, I meet my love in the rain" (Quoted in Honey 151).

It is interesting to note that Wallace Thurman felt no inhibition about sexualizing his characters. Here, one could say, gender clearly applies. One could also argue that Thurman's initial exploitation of sexuality in "Cordelia the Crude" (1926) and Berry (1929), because it was female, was a mask for what he was reluctant to express about male bisexuality and/or homosexuality. In his first short story, his contribution to Fire!! magazine, he represents Cordelia's libidinousness as healthy and natural. The same is true for Cordelia's working-class counterpart, Emma Lou Morgan, in his first novel. Less explicitly described, but still present, are middle-class black women with supposed healthy libidos in Infants (1932). Male sexuality, on the other hand, when included in "Cordelia" and in the two novels published by Macaulay's, is represented as bohemian, heterosexual free love,
but with little development, and only covertly as homosexuality.

Perhaps because of what may have appeared to West as Thurman's fictional candor about sex, she could at least broach the subject of her own sexuality, which must have been equally important to her, through him. Thus, when speaking about Thurman in this regard in "Elephant's Dance," West may also have found a way to express, albeit vicariously, the deeply personal—and for her inseparable—matters of colorism and sexuality; however, she expressed them as Thurman's alone. One could posit the dynamic for West in the following manner. Because the darker daughter did not share in the light and color-conscious mother's "white" womanhood, she did not share in her womanhood either. Thus the desire for love, human touch, and emotional closeness could only be satisfied perhaps through same-sex relationships of varying degrees of physical intimacy.

In the first of two eulogies, "Elephant's Dance: A Memoir of Wallace Thurman" (1970), West only hints at the effect of colorism and sexuality on Thurman and with the same discretion Thurman himself used in his autobiographical fiction. In this initial tribute, West speaks of the challenges to Thurman's literary fulfillment as twofold. He was, she says, "a slight, nearly Black boy," who wanted "to be thoroughly male and was afraid ... he was not" (77, 80). Notably, West does not pinpoint the elemental nature of the problems of color and sexual identity for Thurman. Five decades later, however, in the 1995 revision and expansion of essentially the same tribute of 1970, now with the shortened title "Elephant's Dance," she minces no words about the impact of color on her friend: "Thurman had come into the world the unwanted shade of black. He was not his mother's pride and joy, and his undesirability was made apparent to him. [T]o the handicap of color was added the tremendous task of overriding his heritage" (214). About his sexuality, however, she is guarded, yet still more forthcoming about Thurman than she ever would be about herself. She writes that when the end was near for Thurman, he traded his "writing colleagues" for "the precious young men who were his new satellites, and had no privacy..." (221). The juxtapositions of "precious," "young men," and "privacy" move the writer into a closet of coded

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36 This eulogy has a curious history. Written ten years after Thurman's death and while West was in the WPA Writers' Program (Dalsgard 30), it was published twenty-six years later. In 1980, West reworked it in conjunction with a personal interview. Unfortunately, the piece in this form is not extant. Then sometime between 1980 and 1995 she revised the original, dropped the subtitle, and included it in The Richer, The Poorer.
meaning. West's image of Thurman and his hangers-on is managed with her characteristic understatement. The satellite metaphor for Thurman's coteries establishes the elemental magnetism of his personality. However, when West substitutes "precious young men" for "writing colleagues," she suggests a distinction between his intellectual and his sexual magnetism. One may infer, if only through innuendo, that Thurman's unresolved color complex and impending sense of failure manifested themselves in same-sex attraction, with which, according to Mae Gwen Henderson, he was not comfortable.

West never fully sexualizes her fictional characters, even after she had reached sufficient maturity herself to do so. It is difficult to account for the factors, other than a combination of age (either too young or too old) and gender that prohibited her from any similar, non-fictional disclosures about herself either. As a male writer, Wallace Thurman felt free, at least in his autobiographical fiction, to represent sexualized beings and to at least imply a connection between sexuality, sexual preference, and color in his adult male personae. West's autobiographical personae, on the other hand, never even reach puberty, so that what little there is of sex or sexuality in her earliest stories is not self-reflexive. These early characterizations of pre-sexual girls are to an extent understandable given that West was barely out of her teens herself when she began to publish; however, her curious reversal of the maturation process in her fictional personae of this period, ending with a cradled newborn who has literally just opened her eyes, in "Prologue to a Life," is not easily dismissed. It seems to imply a symbolic return to the womb to begin again in a creative rebirthing, as it were, reminiscent of Chopin's protagonist in The Awakening (1899). Edna Pontellier ends her life at the same moment as she begins it, "naked under the sky...like some new-born creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known" (Chopin 152). The important difference, however, is that Edna is a married woman of twenty-eight with two children when the novel opens and on the way toward a sexual, psychological, and artistic awakening; her regression, therefore, is emotional and symbolic. Thurman, on the other hand, was twenty-four when he wrote "Cordelia" and nearing thirty when he wrote Infants. Still, the content of West's creative work during this formative period does provide the best evidence of some of the specters that haunted her, but without

personalizing. It also demonstrates, to an extent, what Claudia Tate means by gender shaping "very different racial arguments" (Tate 104). While Thurman expressed identity primarily through color and sexuality, West expressed identity through color and gender—but not through sexuality. The sole exception may be in a private diary, which she calls attention to in her Oral History. It was there that she recorded the personal matters of her life during this same period of time. It is possible that this diary provided the only space for first-person disclosure or holistic self-reflection. In the stories "Hannah Byde" (1926), "An Unimportant Man" (1928), "Funeral" (1928), and "Prologue to a Life" (1929), and in the earliest drafts of The Living Is Easy (1948) and The Wedding (1995), West created a literary voice, even though restrained, to say what her personal voice could not.

West's use of Thurman as her own voice corresponds to what Cheryl Wall calls the "concealed speaker" in her perceptive analysis, Women of the Harlem Renaissance (1995). This particular form of dissemblance, Wall argues, "may be read as a metaphor for the woman writer of the Harlem Renaissance..." (xii). Like other black women writers of the 1920s and '30s, West desired to make her living as an author. And like them, she was forced to abandon a full-time literary career by the end of the 1940s. Writers like Gwendolyn Bennett, Marita Bonner, Anne Spencer, Georgia Douglas Johnson, Helene Johnson, Jessie Fauset, Nella Larsen, and Zora Neale Hurston could not sustain full-time authorship either. However, West, like Hurston, clung tenaciously to her writing for the rest of her life. Like these same contemporaries, West shared what Wall calls "a capacity for self-invention that allowed [them] to become...artist[s] in the first place" (202, 203).

It is precisely this capacity both for disguise and self-invention that makes West a difficult subject of study. Her personal self and her fictional world often configure together in something like a Mobius strip. Like this form symbolic of infinity her life and her art overlap in places, curve back and around, and end in their own

37 Claudia Tate argues in "Allegories of Black Female Desire" that sentimental fiction by postbellum black women writers employs a racial narrative different from that in texts by black male writers.
38 West speaks of a diary she kept in the mid-'30s that appears to contain very personal material (Oral 164). Letters indicate a conflict about Mildred Jones' expression of sexual feelings while West was pursuing a relationship with Langston Hughes. The Schlesinger Library has expressed interest in obtaining this diary and the personal papers West kept with her in Oak Bluffs.
39 Although Wall treats only Jessie Fauset, Nella Larsen, and Zora Neale Hurston, much of her analysis pertains as well to Dorothy West.
beginning. Nowhere is this overlay more obvious than between the contents of the "sketches and reminiscences" in *The Richer, the Poorer*, written from 1970 to 1987, and the contents of the *Oral History* given in 1978. West herself admits to this layering of consciousness in her interview for Boston Public Radio, *As I Remember It* (1991), when at eighty three, she was trying to relate how her parents met: "Sometimes I don't know if I am mixing fact with fiction," she says, adding an often-repeated phrase of hers, "I really don't know."

Mae Gwendolyn Henderson's insightful discussion of the "complex subjectivity" of black women is a helpful guide to follow in the pursuit of the complex subjectivity of the woman and the writer Dorothy West. In "Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics, and the Black Woman Writer's Literary Tradition," Henderson argues that "black women speak from a multiple and complex social, historical, and cultural positionality" (19). Thus, to enter into and interpret West's own complex subjectivity, theory can be a useful analytical tool.

In her indispensable article "African-American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race" (1995), Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham argues for a greater attention to theory in the study of African-American Women's history. Cultural critic Hazel V. Carby, almost a decade earlier in *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (1987), makes a similar case for theorizing race in literary and cultural histories, especially in the interpretation of texts by black women. According to Higginbotham, race, as a separate social category of analysis is like class and gender, but it ultimately exceeds them. Race, too, is socially constructed and derives from the identification of difference and the configuring of peoples one against the other (4). At the same time race is a more complex and comprehensive signifier, a "metalanguage," because "it speaks about and lends meaning to a host of terms and expressions, [and]...aspects of life, that would otherwise fall outside its own "referential domain" (5). In other words, because both gender and class are "racially inflected," they are primarily constructed through race. "By continually expressing overt and covert analogic relationships," Higginbotham argues, "race impregnates the simplest meanings we take for granted" (5).

Most important to Higginbotham's theory is her explanation of how race acts as a "metalanguage." In cultures like the United States where race is "overdetermined" and where racial separation is "endemic" to
social custom, race defies ordinary linguistic boundaries and ceases to function as mere language. When it takes on these extra- or meta-linguistic capabilities, it creates reality rather than merely describing it; it shapes subjectivity rather than merely reflecting it. In Higginbotham's terms, it is in its "discursive representation and construction of social relations" that race is most obviously a metalanguage (5). Its effect is to incorporate and therefore obfuscate other socio-cultural categories, like class, gender, and sexuality (5). Ever elusive and quixotic in its interactions,

it blurs and disguises, suppresses and negates its own complex interplay with the very social relations it envelops. It precludes unity within the same gender group but often appears to solidify people of opposing economic classes. Whether race is textually omitted or textually privileged, its totalizing effect in obscuring class and gender remains.(5)

Higginbotham’s major point, that gender identity, sexual identity, and class identity are “inextricably linked to and even determined by racial identity” (4), may be applied to the study of Dorothy West. It could help the biographer to avoid a too simplistic analysis of her relationship with Wallace Thurman and, indeed, of her place within the Harlem Renaissance. Her perhaps over-identification with Thurman at times obscures rather than illuminates important aspects of her life, an idea that will be considered in a later chapter. For now, it is sufficient to say that Thurman’s influence upon West was a primary factor in determining how she initially interacted with the literary marketplace in Harlem. It is equally important to consider how Helene Johnson’s presence made it possible for West to come to Harlem in the first place, a subject also treated in a later chapter.

From 1926 when West and Thurman met until 1934 when Thurman died, he served as an alter ego for the young Dorothy West.

Thurman, like West, but unlike Helene Johnson, arrived in Harlem self-conscious about his color. Unlike West, however, he was able to objectify and intellectualize what was essentially a personal matter into a system of belief. He was drawn to The Messenger because it gave him the institutional support he needed in his crusade against the overdetermination of race in discussions about the new American art being written by black writers like himself. The Messenger’s explanation of difference in terms of the economics of class was more compatible
with Thurman's understanding than The Crisis' explanation of difference in terms of race (cultural nationalism). Literary Realism, with its inclusion of class, gender, race, and ethnicity (cultural pluralism) provided for Thurman and West an easier path to modernity in literary expression.

Thurman and West's dissatisfaction with the representational strategies of the leadership of the two most important black periodicals can be understood within a context of the changing socio-political realities of post-World-War-I Harlem. As culture critic Hazel V. Carby points out in her chapter "The Quicksands of Representation," "the relation of the black cultural elite [like Du Bois and Locke] to the majority of black people changed drastically as a result of the migration north of southern blacks" after the War. It affected dramatically their role in representing "the race" (164-65). In short, with the formation of a large population of working-class urban blacks, "intellectual leadership and its constituencies fragmented" (164). Carby further argues that "[t]he concept of the 'New Negro' of the Harlem Renaissance had become "a conventional way of referring to these literary and artistic intellectuals, but this limited contemporary application of the term has emptied it of the radical working-class meaning that was established by the group of intellectuals, leaders, organizations, and journals which were devoted to 'economic radicalism'" (165). The leadership of The Messenger, for example, was far more radical in this regard. For A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen, the "New Negro" had a slightly different meaning than to many of their contemporaries. S/he was "the product of the same world-wide forces that have brought into being the great liberal and radical movements that are now seizing the reins of political, economic and social power in all the civilized countries of the world," Carby quotes Randolph as saying (165). Thurman and West, both members of the working class and both with distinctly working class sympathies, found The Messenger's form of progressivism, the promotion of working class interests and cultural pluralism, more comfortable because the focus of the reformist spirit was only indirectly on race and color politics.

As such, George Hutchinson's The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White (1995) is in basic accord with Hazel Carby's argument and provides another theoretical structure for this study. According to Hutchinson, an examination of the discourse of race alone is insufficient to understand black publishing in the 1920s and '30s.
The forces that brought about the Renaissance were philosophical as well as institutional, he argues. The new, more progressive magazine and book publishers in New York, who were mostly of Jewish extraction, were invested in the discourse of cultural pluralism and its dissemination. As outsiders themselves, both to the publishing establishment and to its homogeneous Anglo-Saxonism, they wanted a foothold in the public intellectual arena. Where they were most compatible with the publishing establishment was in their promotion of American literary nationalism (the autonomy of American literature) and American writers. Being "American" was the only common bond these book and magazine publishers of the Left had. They were, therefore, even more invested in diversifying what was being offered to the public as intellectual and cultural capital. It was clearly in their interest to supplement, if not challenge, dominant paradigms of American cultural homogeneity. They wanted to influence the public domain, while generating knowledge and shaping the rules of a competing, and more relevant—to them—discourse.

New Negro philosophies were not incompatible with the new publishers' objectives; in fact, they were mutually constitutive. The discourse of race as heralded in *The Crisis* and *Opportunity* influenced whom these Jewish publishers like Knopf, Viking, and Boni & Liveright got to know and promoted. Their shared networks, like the NAACP and the Urban League, and to some extent their shared goals, brought the new Jewish publishers together with their black counterparts at the two most significant of the black periodicals. These friendships and associations were productive for many young black writers like Cullen and Hughes, for example. The black press, built around the Talented Tenth, was more conservative than its Jewish counterparts on the issues of the vernacular and "the folk"—or class, as some would prefer to call it, and on the relevance of Victorian social values. The new publishers, in turn, favored the vernacular over "high Modernism," the overthrow of Victorian prudery, and, most importantly, the intersection of race and nation as far as their ethnic interests were concerned. *The Crisis* and *Opportunity*, on the whole, preferred a self-referential, positive racial discourse as their counterpart in American literary nationalist goals.

In this regard, it is clear why Thurman and West did not advance along with others of their colleagues whose...
work was compatible with the values and objectives of Du Bois and Charles S. Johnson, and why Cullen, Hughes, and Helene Johnson did. Thurman and West's consistent support of the little magazine venue was, in many ways, how they negotiated the juggernaut of ideology. Thurman's independent magazine *Fire!!* (1926), Eugene Gordon's partially subsidized magazine *Quill* (1928-30), and West's future little magazines *Challenge* (1934-1937) and *New Challenge* (1937), created a market for writers who did not meet, or who wanted to express concerns beyond the scope of, the specialized racial criteria of both the new black and new white publishing worlds.

It is in this context that Dorothy West's "search for self and form" in the "release of creative powers" was a complicated and life-long journey. In her person as in her fiction, the challenges to wholeness were many. The search for a viable self required of West a response to the conflicting messages about her color and gender, and sometimes her sexuality, that she received first from her mother and then from the literary marketplace of the 1920s and 30s. To borrow from Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, West tried to separate her "blackness" from her "womanness" in order not to be disabled by her femininity as Wallace Thurman had been in regard to his "masculinity." West's novel *The Wedding*, published some sixty years after the Harlem Renaissance, most fully depicts those challenges to a viable self that West herself encountered on her literary journey; it offers her path to wholeness and her resolution—even if only through art. In so doing, West had to re-envision the thesis of marriage-as-entrapment in her stories of the 1920s and 30s, and, to borrow language from Claudia Tate, West had to return to the "valorization of the institution" by mid-nineteenth-century black woman novelists, making it compatible with her own discourse of freedom. As such, she was compatible with the mid-nineteenth-century transcendentalist belief in the power of the spirit over the material and the power of Nature to instruct and empower (wo)man.

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40Meetings were held in Eugene Gordon's Cambridge home. Members of the Boston Quill Club included Dorothy West, her cousin Helene Johnson, and Waring Cuney.
American viewers who watched Oprah Winfrey's 1998 television adaptation of *The Wedding* (1995) with its setting in Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts, but who were unfamiliar with Dorothy West probably assumed that the author was a contemporary writer on New England subjects. Their impression may have been confirmed if they also knew about Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis' collaboration with West as her Doubleday editor.

In fact, a complex of circumstances allowed a 1990's American public to become acquainted with an obscure eighty-eight year old black writer living for almost fifty years in near seclusion and retreat after twenty years in New York at the center of Harlem literary life. Remarkably for West, meeting and working with Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis was the key.42 Onassis became aware of West as a fellow islander with a manuscript-in-progress about the Vineyard probably through Bertha Klausner, West's then literary agent. As a powerful editor at Doubleday, Onassis could persuade her publisher to offer West a book contract once she had been introduced and had engaged herself in West's project. Doubleday perhaps saw the market potential in West because of her much lauded connection—since the 1980s—with the Harlem Renaissance, by then its purported "sole survivor."

Most of the public first learned about West through her association with the woman they knew as "Jackie," the world's most famous woman—and mother—to whom West dedicated the book following her editor's untimely death. Readers then came to appreciate the novel itself because it made issues of race seem less divisive by focusing on family ties and "blended" genealogies while interrogating social class.

During the nearly twenty years West struggled in Harlem to get published, except for a short period, she was never similarly assisted by persons in positions of power and influence within either the black or white press,

41 Quoted from West's memoir, "My Mother, Rachel West" *Richer, Poorer* 351.
42 One wonders what Kennedy Onassis would have done had West developed and published the "Chappaquiddick outline" in 1970 that her literary agent Bertha Klausner was promoting. A letter to Klausner from Elliott Schryver (which Klausner included for West to read) states: "She has a marvelous story here, a terrifying one in its implications." Klausner writes that Schryver would advance $25,000 (Bertha Klausner, to DW, 1 June 1970, DWP, B1F21, SLRI). Later, Klausner writes: "I hope that we can settle your book [with Schryver].... I don't know why the delay unless it's a political matter" (Bertha Klausner to DW, 14 Aug. 1970, DWP, B1F21, SLRI). In 1982, when Kennedy Onassis bought her summer home on the Island, Klausner writes: "How about doing an article about Jackie Kennedy in her new home? I think I can get *House Beautiful* to take it" (Bertha Klausner to DW, 3 Aug. 1982, DWP, B1F22, SLRI).
unlike many of her male colleagues. She was unmarketable in mainstream white publishing houses like Harper’s and Henry Holt & Co. during the 1920s and ’30s because she wrote short stories rather than novels or poetry collections and because she employed nothing of the exotic, the sensational, or the primitive in her plots and characterizations. "There were whites who found us exotic," West told her interviewer, Katrine Dalsgard (42). "It was true that black people were a fad. That is why I wrote the essay "Elephant’s Dance," which was about Wallace Thurman. Wallie could see through all that" (42). On the other hand, West was largely unsupported by the mainstream black publishing establishment because of the troubling content of her family stories. It was owing to the support of her cousin Helene Johnson and her close associations with the Harlem literati, primarily Wallace Thurman, her mentor, and Zora Neale Hurston, her model, that living in Harlem was such a positive and memorable experience for her. However, trying to get published in Harlem was another matter. For West, it was not just the challenge of being "Young—A Woman—and Colored" and the perception of the Harlem hierarchy this might engender. Having internalized the bias from her mother against dark skin, West’s literary production was affected; her negative presentation of black family life and marriage did not endear her to the mainstream black press. Thus, for West at the time, hers was the challenge of being young, too dark, and a woman, and her positional affected her perception of the Harlem power structure.

To use Thurman’s metaphors, West was not only one of the traditionally dispossessed, the “motherless child” of the spirituals; she was also one of Aunt Hagar’s “step-children,” a “Harlem Cinderella” if you will—bad enough for black men, worse for black women, according to Thurman. Within the race, the wrong color was another "ghetto within a ghetto"—in Cheryl Wall’s terms. In “New Negro” terms, Thurman and West may have viewed Alain Locke’s celebration of "racial consciousness" through a glass darkly.

When Kennedy Onassis became West’s editor in the 1990s, something of serendipity was at work between the

43I am indebted to Cheryl Wall for pairing Marita Bonner’s 1925 Opportunity essay with Locke’s and her argument that "the paradigm set forth in 'The New Negro' overstates the case for male writers, but it contradicts the experience of many women" (Women 5).
44Wall considers southern blacks living in the North as not “home” (Women 31).
45Wall argues that Bonner negotiated "the ghetto of race and the ghetto within the ghetto that is the gilded cage of the middle class" (Women 7).
two women. West may have finally found the perfect advocate whom she had sought in so many women—even though Kennedy Onassis was more than twenty-five years her junior. Before Kennedy Onassis, these mother-surrogate women included actresses Irene Bordini, Edna Lewis Thomas, and Rose McClendon (Serena in Porgy); millionaire publicist Elisabeth Marbury; and perhaps even writer Zora Neale Hurston. The collaboration resulted in what West came to see as a "perfect partner[ship]." and it produced the best seller West so dearly wanted—more than half a century in the making.

As strange as it may have seemed to the 1990's readership, given the publication history of The Wedding, West was much more than a writer of the modern era and New England. Propaganda notwithstanding, she was much more than a Harlem Renaissance survivor. According to Mary Helen Washington, one of West's best critics to date, West occupies multiple positions within literary history precisely because of the longevity of her professional life. "Spanning almost seventy years, West's writing career links the Harlem Renaissance with the social realism of the thirties and forties and popular fiction of the eighties and nineties" (Preface xv). To take Washington's astute analysis further, I would emphasize that the harvest of the '90s was already apparent in the stories and manuscripts of the '20s; therefore a deeper understanding of the formative period of West's career places the later, better known publications into a context, creating continuity between her early and mature work.

The difficulty the young author experienced finding institutional support for her first stories may be explained through Higginbotham's theoretical work on racial discourse. Because race operates as a metalanguage, Higginbotham argues, it often subsumes conflict about matters of race. Her theory provides a possible

46As early as seventeen, West expresses a disaffection and estrangement from her mother and the first of many attempts to seek mothers in other women. "When I was just turned fifteen [the year her maternal grandfather died] I lost something very precious, a something, the loss of which will always be tragic: faith in my mother. I shall not write about it, yet I shall never forget the bewildering pain that assailed me and the wound so rashly opened that will never heal. ... [A]t seventeen I met the woman, who, I believe, will always be the prevailing influence in my life: Edna Lewis Thomas. I was at a loose end when I met her. Nothing mattered. I didn't even care about my writing. I was, very briefly, a young failure. Then she inspired me. What a glorious mother she would make! Dear angel! Someday I hope to return some of her kindness" (DW, "The Kitchen," 17 Oct. 1924, handwritten ms., 7 pp., DWP, SLRI). Considering Rachel West's imputed desire to perform on the stage, it is interesting that the daughter's choices are chiefly actresses.

47"To the memory of my editor, Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis. Though there was never such a mismatched pair in appearance, we were perfect partners."
explanation for why less scholarship has been done on black writers who are or have been considered "oppositional." Thurman's and West's literary production and their alliance with The Messenger had just such potential for conflict, but it offers a different point of view and, therefore, a supplement to Harlem Renaissance studies, along the lines Hazel Carby began pursuing in the 1980s. According to Higginbotham, historians of African-American life have done well in their efforts to accentuate race. Their exhaustive studies of the ramifications of racism on the cultural and socioeconomic positioning of blacks within American society have been significant. The fact of the history of hostile race relations in the United States has made many black writers reluctant to engage areas of conflict within the black community: those of gender, class, and sexuality among black people themselves (17). The overall result, in Higginbotham's view, is the tendency to render uncritically "a monolithic black community, black experience, and voice of the Negro" (6). It is important, in her view, to interrogate "the overdeterminacy of race vis-à-vis social relations among blacks themselves and conceptions of the black community as harmonious and monolithic" (6). Thus, examining the Harlem publishing experiences of less successful black writers like West and Thurman who were not enabled by the Harlem Renaissance midwives could point to ways in which, despite their best efforts, the mainstream black press had its own issues with hegemony.

I argue that reasons other than writing ability exist for why in the early 1980s Robert Stepto, for example, would still need to point students to West's direction: "Dorothy West is another woman from the Harlem Renaissance who should be recovered in the same way Zora Neale Hurston was recovered" (Dalsgard 29). West's representation of intra-racial color-consciousness during the 1920s, because it was without Hurston's affirmation or Fauset's race loyalty, was problematic for black publishers. Her attempt during the 1930s to displace race with class, but without politicizing it like Richard Wright, also made it difficult for her to get published in periodicals that could have called attention to her work. West's participation in the first decade of the New Negro Renaissance both inspired and disappointed her burgeoning talent. She began, then abandoned,

Carby's last chapter in Reconstructing Womanhood critiques the dates and locus of the Renaissance and...
her two novels of the 1920s, and completed them in the late 1940s and 1990s—away from Harlem. Both of these circumstances led to a hiatus in writing and to an editorial career during the mid- to late-1930s. Although Challenge magazine became the longest running black little magazine, owing to her competence and tenacity, she virtually gave up authorship to run it. For some of these same reasons, West has eluded the kind of detailed attention necessary to an understanding of her place within literary Harlem, and literary Harlem has been partially homogenized in certain aspects of its presentation by scholars. Fortunately, current scholarship has expanded our understanding of how black women writers have appropriated domestic fiction and its importance in telling women’s stories. These studies have provided the necessary groundwork for an assessment of West’s short fiction of the 1920s and ’30s where the dominant story is one of gender not race, especially when, in Higginbotham’s terms, gender is constructed through race.

West’s own view on the subject of herself seems also to have been influenced by the literary marketplace. The construction of a persona began in the late-1970s with the Schlesinger Library Oral History interview and continued into the mid-1980s with the Feminist Press’ reprint of The Living Is Easy. By this time, West seems to have engaged in the process of "biomythography." This "construction of a mythic self" from a "self-authorizing posture," according to critic Cheryl Wall, speaks directly to the issue of secrets and silences surrounding, especially, black women’s lives (Women 30). In West’s case, it has fostered myths about her life difficult to dispel, myths about education, social class, and sexuality. Wall locates the source of this phenomenon in Zora Neale Hurston—in what I would call the "cosmic Zora" consciousness. West, too, has constructed in language that which she desired—or perhaps believed was desired of her. Through the many published interviews, which satisfy the "autobiographical gesture," a collage self has emerged, reconstituted from her fiction, which is itself autobiographical (32), and the dictates of age and the marketplace that perhaps she believed could still not accept the full truth of her life were she able and willing finally to give it.

the authority of the leadership in class terms. These issues pertain to my interest in The Messenger.

The irony of the many first-person testimonials is that like Pauline Hopkins' character Sappho Clark in *Contending Forces*, whose assumed identity and pseudonym conceal the tragedy of her real life story as Mabelle Beaubean (Ammons 80), West has been unable to be fully forthcoming. And consistent with Elizabeth Ammons' description of the "fable of 'Sappho'" at the heart of the Hopkins' novel (80), West, I would argue, is like Sappho, remains a "figure in hiding, a figure able to express herself only in fragments and by indirection" (80). However, through the domestic genre, which invites contemplation of genealogy, West was finally, in *The Wedding*, able to acknowledge and reveal certain aspects of a complicated family tree and from it she has created something of a "home." And like her friend Zora, she has utilized language that acknowledges race while not allowing color to define it.50

When interviewed at age eighty-three for Boston Public Television, West said that her "family and the Harlem Renaissance" were the "two most dynamic influences in [her] life" (Remember). "Living within [an extended family] was like living inside a story," she explained on another occasion ("Rachel" 167). That "family story" led her to another literary family of choice in Harlem where for the first time in her life she did not stand out as different. On a personal level, she found her new social context very satisfying. "In time I was to play my part in the Harlem Renaissance," West explained. "I was nineteen and its youngest member" (Remember). In her televised interview West also expressed her belief that "the Harlem Renaissance ended"—not with the stock market crash that affected the New York publishing world and nearly every writer—but five years later "when Wallace Thurman died" (Remember).

Considering that 1934 was the same year West, following her return from an eleven-month tour of Soviet Russia, founded and began editing her literary magazine *Challenge* (1934-1937), her remark seems connected to that venture. And considering that she first wrote the essay on Thurman in 1944 at a point in her career when only the white-owned *New York Daily News* was publishing her stories51 after her own magazine had folded

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50Wall's discussion of Hurston's approach to race and identity, even though out of a very different biography, has much in common with West's *(Women)*.

51Run by the Patterson McCormack family. West's agent George Bye sent "Jack in the Pot," which they accepted
(Oral 169-170), her remark seems also connected to the vagaries of literary publication as well. It suggests that, for her, Thurman's work was central to what she considered the important goals and accomplishments of the New Negro writers of the 1920s, making Thurman's "failure"—as much as Langston Hughes' "success"—synonymous with the Renaissance effort. However, because West considered Thurman "the most symbolic figure of the Literary Renaissance in Harlem" ("Elephant's Dance: A Memoir" 85) and Zora Neale Hurston its "genius" (Remember), she makes Thurman's experience normative and Hurston's work exemplary. West also indicates that a significant break occurred between the literary ventures of the "innocent" and "hopeful" 1920s and those of the (by implication) less naive and less promising 1930s. Her statement is worth quoting in full: "The Harlem Renaissance can never be repeated. It was an age of innocence, when we who were its hopeful members believed that our poems, our plays, our paintings, our sculptures, indeed any facet of our talents, would be recognized and rewarded" ("Introduction" 3). The importance she places on "innocence" and endeavor rather than on actual accomplishment, discussed in a later chapter, is a perspective rarely advocated in Renaissance studies.

The orientation and focus of most Harlem Renaissance writers and the black press itself were primarily racial—until Wallace Thurman argued against the concept of a "distinctly Negro art." The presence of what Thurman called a "Negro note" in writing by Negro authors seemed to him, and to West, a sounder estimation of what he and his colleagues were accomplishing. He did not agree with Hughes, Du Bois, and others that writing by Negro authors would constitute a "Negro art" or a "Negro aesthetic." Zora Neale Hurston, a woman of the rural South, was, of course, clearly in line with the new cultural anthropology of Franz Boas and his conception of a Negro "presence" that constituted a "distinct Negro culture" in the United States, even though "American" by virtue of residence. Hurston was ready to document and express this culture fully. Theories of racial difference based in cultural difference existed in tension with George Schuyler's—and others'—view to the contrary, which emphasized instead a homogeneous Americanness. Thurman, from the state of Utah, took

for their "Blue Ribbon Fiction—Sunday stories." Later they took her work regularly for the "daily short story" section.

52 Quoted in West, "Elephant's Dance" 223.
the middle position. Negro experience would produce different subject matter from other American realist writers, but nothing more.

On the other hand, the orientation and focus of most black writers of the 1930s were primarily economic, as would West's inclination be after her Moscow experience. In line with the new sociology, the Chicago School, most closely associated with it, theorized about labor solidarity across racial lines. For the Chicago social realist writers like Richard Wright, it also meant the possibility of a "proletarian art." Negro life, the former first believed, could and should be treated, but without calling attention to race. Negro writers would be better served by concentrating on their status as Negro workers rather than as Negroes. By 1937 as Wright sought to get a foothold in New York, he would combine "Negro" and "proletarian" to offer a new "Blueprint for Negro Writing" so doctrinaire that it left no room for West's views in what was to have been a collaboration with Wright. Wright had approached West for a position on the editorial board in 1937 after West and Marian Minus had changed the magazine's name to New Challenge to give the Chicago social realists (whom Minus knew) an audience in New York. West hoped that Wright could provide ballast to the low budget magazine with some much-needed financial support from his Communist party connections. However, she saw almost immediately what Wright's real motives were: to use the magazine to critique the Harlem Renaissance. Her response was to fold the magazine after publication rather than allow Wright to take it away (Remember).

The artistic conceptions of race and class clearly influenced Dorothy West during the 1920s and '30s. She benefited personally and socially—but never ideologically—from her association with the younger Harlem writers of the 1920s: Wallace Thurman, Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Bruce Nugent, Rudolph Fisher, Gwendolyn Bennett, Eric Walrond, Aaron Douglas, and John Davis ("Elephant's Dance" 216). They became her surrogate family, replacing her extended family in Boston and Oak Bluffs. But the racial philosophy promoted by Langston Hughes and the black press proved too limiting for her art. Her personal philosophy was still based most fundamentally in her understanding of the color consciousness in her family and in the larger black community outside of the intimate and supportive black arts community that was her
West's artistic development and its longevity actually owed a considerable debt to the 1930s while she was managing a literary journal but not writing. As James Young argues in *Black Writers of the Thirties* (1973), race was then considered "indefinable" by the new social science. It was de-emphasized in favor of an economic and class-based frame of reference (36), like that *The Messenger* had championed during the previous decade. That West lived long enough to be revitalized by the new interest in class, multi-culturalism, and sexual freedom of the 1980s and '90s, provided her the opportunity for near-fictional closure on the 1920s and '30s, as far as race and class were concerned, in her best seller *The Wedding*. Silence remains on the subject of sexuality, suggested only through Thurman and private journaling.

During the period to 1934, West is best understood as a writer of and between movements—the New Negro movement in Harlem and the social realism of Chicago-cum-New York. She was born about five years too late to have been among the first wave of young writers in Harlem. She began writing in Boston, she says, at an early age.54 Her career as a short story writer continued in Harlem.55 There she encountered in the spring of 1926 the original circle of young black writers who would form her social group and a group ethos through *Fire!!* magazine, already having taken shape. Then, with the support of these same writers, she herself would try to influence literary production through editing a little magazine of unrestricted content, until Richard Wright became the new spokesman for Negro letters in the late 1930s.

Prior to that time, and then thereafter, West struggled to finish and publish a novel. When she first settled in Harlem, she began work—perhaps prematurely—on what would become her two novels— *The Living Is Easy* and *The Wedding*, both, then, in the form of unpublished sketches and narratives, the evolution of which is dealt with in another chapter. Neither, however, was completed in 1920s or 1930s. *The Living Is Easy* was not published until 1948.56 More than sixty years would pass before *The Wedding* was completed and published. West had put

54 West claims she sold stories to the *Boston Post* in her teens (see Ferguson, *DLB* 76 and Dalsgard 30).
55 "The Typewriter" and "Hannah Byde" (1926); "An Unimportant Man" and "Funeral" (1928); "Prologue to a Life" (1929).
56 Literary agent George T. Bye writes to West in Oak Bluffs that A.A. Wyn would "take an option on the book
aside the manuscript during the 1930s while in Soviet Russia and while editing Challenge. She had approached publishers in the late 1920s, and again in vain during the 1950s, the 1970s, and the 1980s because no market existed for a book based on a black woman's experience of domesticity in Oak Bluffs, Martha's Vineyard. She deliberately abandoned the manuscript altogether during the 1960s because, as she explains it, although her novel-in-progress was "about black people" who had risen from slavery to a middle-class status it would not appeal to the members of the "black revolution" (the Black Arts Movement) who were writing the critical reviews and who "hated the middle-class blacks" (Oral 153-54). She adds: "I think if it had come out then, it would have been lost entirely." And, that, she says, "would have destroyed me...I would never have written another line" (156-57).

Set in 1953, The Wedding became a best-seller in the 1990s in part because of West's apparent de-emphasis when completed," requesting revisions and a new outline (George T. Bye to DW, 9 July 1945, DWP, B1F20, SLRI). In August West received a $500.00 advance and in September a contract (George T. Bye to DW, 17 Aug., 1945, DWP, B1F20, SLRI). In September of 1946, Houghton Mifflin, working through Bye, recontracted the book-in-progress. In a letter to Bye, included in West's letter, Paul Brooks of Houghton Mifflin expresses what he likes about the work. It is "an extraordinarily convincing and subtle study in character" with "a setting that is quite fresh," and the author "has, thank God, avoided making it a race novel, which is a real asset to start with. Though it deals with a Negro society—a more complex one than most people realize—it is never dependent on the race issue for its strength" (George T. Bye to DW, 12 Sept 1946, DWP, B1F20, SLRI).

57In the fall of 1928, Dorothy Scarborough, West's Columbia writing instructor, tried unsuccessfully to place a manuscript with both Harper's and Henry Holt & Co. Internal evidence suggests "Where the Wild Grape Grows," the earliest basis for The Wedding (Dorothy Scarborough to DW, 17 Sept 1928, DWP, B1F19, SLRI).

58Double Day wanted a substantial revision of the then-titled "Where the Wild Grape Grows," leaving out the sub-plot with Pierce and Carol Hunter, but did not offer a contract at that time (Double Day to DW, 13 April 1951, DWP, B1F21, SLRI).

81 "I wish you would get back to your novel which you started years ago" (Bertha Klausner to DW, 14 April, 1973, DWP, B1F21, SLRI).

60"I wish you would complete the novel you started years ago with the grant from Harper and Row. It seems to me it might be good for a television mini-series. Did you see Scopbles on t.v. Your book is better than that. Today sex is explicit. The more confrontations you have between characters with psychological problems, the best chance you have for a best seller. Can I help you in any way to promote your autobiographical book, which I love, for which I have no takers. If you reread it perhaps you can make it stronger." The references are probably to "Where the Wild Grape Grows" and "Martha's Vineyard Chronicles" (which was rejected by Harcourt, Norton, and David Godine, all in 1978. Klausner may refer to "The Emergence of Eleonore" from the 1920s. It is the only explicitly sexual story West wrote (Bertha Klausner to DW, 2 March 1980, DWP, B1F22, SLRI).

61In 1960 West was awarded a grant from The Mary Roberts Rinehart Foundation for "material submitted." It is not clear which manuscript West sent; it probably was "Where the Wild Grape Grows" as, beginning in the 1940s, she had had no trouble placing short stories with New York Daily News (William Sladen to DW, 4 Oct. 1960, DWP, B1F21, SLRI).

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of race and interracial struggle. In this text, West fits into the tradition of postbellum novels by black women that, in Claudia Tate's argument, "culminate in marriage" and "idealize the formation of the family unit," while at the same time they represent a bourgeois lifestyle (106). In West's representation of race in terms of class through a close-knit community of wealthy light-skinned blacks vacationing on Martha's Vineyard, she seems to tell a story like the narratives of her foremothers. Their novels, which present "a closely circumscribed, idealized, intra-racial social context" and seem "preoccupied with middle-class propriety, civility, domesticity, and commodity consumption," are in Tate's words products of "gender constructs" rather than "racial" ones (106).

While Tate's argument is compatible with West's endeavor, it is likely that West was also working a deliberate sleight of hand for her white readers. What Tate argues for as true of West's literary predecessors is true for her as well. Their "focus on bourgeois propriety and material consumption may have indeed been a device to disrupt the popular conflation of race with class rather than a conspicuous display of wealth," Tate claims (106-107). This was West's as well. The device, however, appealed to black readers as well. Oprah Winfrey, for one, found West's disclosure of a community of blacks in Martha's Vineyard exhilarating because it confirmed a reality she herself understood, that black people have always participated in more than just the lowest socio-economic group. At the same time, West's presentation of class is much more of a literary device than it is mimetic reality. For one, the wealth that exists in *The Wedding* does not exist among the cottagers in *Oak Bluffs*. One can easily discover this by simply visiting *Oak Bluffs* or by watching West's videotaped interview *As I Remember It*.

Indeed, the focus on class in West's final novel may also have been a form of escape and a capitulation, finally, to her mother. In Bolshevik Russia, during her eleven-month tour in 1932 and 1933, the twenty-five-year-old West believed she had found the most complete freedom from racial subjectivity. The experience catalyzed in her a maverick view of identity as social and personal rather than economic or racial. Yet it was precisely because of their race that the twenty-two would-be actors were invited to make a propaganda film in Moscow during the 1930s; and it was because of her darker color—"I am a certain type," she writes her mother—
that West allowed herself to believe that she was a more valued cast member to Meschabpom. At the same time, she has said on various occasions that people loved her because of her color, Henry Lee Moon, for example. "[T]he reason Henry wanted to marry me," she tells Genii Guinier, "he thought I was a lovely person...he still thought I was a virgin, I think. .... But he had been brought up in towns where there were only whites. And I think he more or less told me this at this time, and so that therefore, my looks were exactly what he wanted, you see" (Oral 220). Evolving over a period of eighty-odd years, The Wedding is West's literary resolution to the issue of color in relation to personal identity. "Identity," The Wedding's narrator asserts, "is not inherent. It is shaped by circumstances and sensitivity, and resistance to self-pity" (82). Yet, in her personal life, the escape from race, as we have seen, was never entirely successful.

In the 1920s, and before that solution, the people West spent most of her time with were the darkest of the Harlem "litterateurs"--Wallace Thurman, Zora Neale Hurston, Countee Cullen, and Claude McKay, and their mutual friends Harold Jackman and Richard Bruce Nugent. During the mid-1940s, West returned to Martha's Vineyard to live year round with her mother and her friend from Challenge magazine, Marion Minus, in the tiny community of African Americans nestled in the Highlands of Oak Bluffs. Within the dozen or so summer cottages, both class and race could remain diffused in the indeterminacy of island summer residence.

Before then, and during the 1930s, West concentrated on little magazine editing, following in the footsteps of her mentor Thurman. At the time, she saw her magazine as an effort to "rebirth" the supportive group spirit of the "Fire Seven." These included Thurman, Hughes, Hurston, Bennett, [Nugent], Aaron Douglas, John Davis--who had created a hospitable and encouraging atmosphere for writerly ambitions--and to "light [the] literary way" for the "newer voices." West had long been accustomed to living and working in groups because of her extended family of aunts and cousins. She especially felt the need for congenial colleagues after returning to New

62 Although familiar with the class critique of Marxism, West was never a doctrinaire Marxist like Wright.
63 DW to JWJ, 23 Oct. 1933, JWJP, West Folder, JWJ, BLYU. Pauli Murray was one of the first to catch wind of West's project through Mildred Jones and to ask about contributions (Pauli Murray to DW, 23 Oct. 1933, DWP, B1F11, SLRI).
York from Russia and the film tour. It was the middle of the Depression, and she had just lost her father.\textsuperscript{64} A 1934 letter from Hurston in response to West's query for a \textit{Challenge} submission states with Hurston's pithy directness what was different about West's venture: "I'd love to be in the issue with Rudolph Fisher. He is greater than the Negroes rate him generally. That is because he is too honest to pander to our inferiority complex and write 'race' propaganda."\textsuperscript{65}

Also instructive in regard to the development of West's personal subjectivity is the revision of her original tribute to her mentor, "Elephant's Dance: A Memoir of Wallace Thurman." In playing Thoreau to Thurman's Emerson, West took fifty-one years to fully express her debt to Wallace Thurman. It was not until 1970 that the eulogy was published in \textit{Black World} after being rejected by \textit{Life} and \textit{Story} magazines as "pretty far off trail."\textsuperscript{66} After the article appeared in \textit{Black World}'s special issue, it prompted a series of speaking invitations that gave West a chance to share her experience of the Harlem Renaissance and to produce some income at the same time. As the essay was later revised, one must speculate about the reason. West began her public lectures the same year as Nathan Huggins' \textit{Harlem Renaissance} (1971) appeared. Her stern rebuke of his book seven years later in her 1978 \textit{Oral History} suggests that her version of Wallace Thurman, in particular because it said so much about herself, was the truer one. West uses as an example of the "misinformation" in Huggins' book the unreliability of one of his sources, Louise Thompson Patterson, Thurman's ex-wife, who was to West "quite out of tune" (175-76). West objects to what Patterson provided about Thurman, and she objects to Huggins going to someone for information who in her view was "totally outside the Renaissance" (176). Thus, a double motive may have provoked the revision of "Elephant's Dance": her desire to set the record straight as regards Thurman and her desire to have the last word on Nathan Huggins. Whatever the reason, West placed the revision in her 1995 collection \textit{The Richer, The Poorer}. Now titled simply "Elephant's Dance," she dropped the subtitle "A Memoir of Wallace Thurman" but without dropping Thurman from the essay. In doing so, she came as close as she ever

\textsuperscript{64}I have not been able to obtain a birth or death certificate for Isaac Christopher West who died in January or February of 1933 or in November or December of 1932.

\textsuperscript{65}Zora Neale Hurston, letter to DW, 24 March 1934, DWC, F2B1, SCBU.

\textsuperscript{66}March 7, 1944, DWP, B1F2; and B1F25, DWP, SLRI.
would to speaking for herself.

The revised essay is a gesture of acknowledgement that in Thurman West had finally found her psychological double, the "twin" she seemed to be searching for in her earliest fiction. West had spent her childhood in a loving threesome, of herself and her cousins Helene and Eugenia, but she felt that to the outside world her little group was really a pair because only she showed color and therefore appeared to be of a different race. To avoid the negative attention to herself that always resulted when the three were seen together, young Dorothy says she withdrew to become a writer (Remember).

In her teens, West constructed a short story, with more than a few gothic flourishes in its earliest version, that addresses the alienating experience of color. The framing device is that of a light and beautiful mother and her "genius" twin sons who stand in the way of their darker sister's own genius and full confidence in "being glad I'm me" ("PART ONE" 2). It is through the fictional death of the mother and her twins that Lily becomes "a naked, simple, and fearless child given the strange name, Genius" (6). Revised sometime between 1928 and 1929, re-titled "Prologue to a Life," and published in the little magazine *The Saturday Evening Quill*, the sketch is a precursor of and fictional counterpart to the new "Elephant's Dance." When adapted into its final version, some of the gothic detail is dropped and the plot undergoes significant revision. Now it is the mother who communes with the dead twins rather than their sister. In the second version, Lily's mother, also named Lily, willingly dies in childbirth rather than care for an unwanted newborn who, from the moment of conception, is an undesirable replacement for her sons. This rejection of the substitute child, along with the mother's heightened desire for death when the child is born a girl and dark like her father, provides a parallel story to the fuller story West gives about Thurman in the new essay about him.

Like the Renaissance itself, which West called "a style of living we learned in stages" (Remember), West's style of writing also came to her in stages. It began once she met Thurman whom she championed as a kindred spirit, following the unmasking of her deepest psychological challenges in literary expression in the unpublished sketches. West was attracted to Thurman from their first meeting because of what she called his "rebelliousness"
She herself was more soft-spoken and compliant then and tended to diminish her own importance
during those years by referring to herself, she recalls, as "small" and "very young" and just "a woman," and
therefore to be "ignored" (Oral 183). Except by Wallie Thurman. In Wallie Thurman's loft, at "Niggerati Manor" when she was nineteen, West not only liked what she heard, but also she says she first heard her own
voice (Remember).

On the other hand, when West quotes her mother's favorite saying, in a short memorial succinctly titled
"Rachel," her acknowledgement is contradictory. For one, West never explains why Rachel's oft-repeated
"Speech was given man to hide his thoughts" was so memorable ("Rachel" 169). As a writer, this daughter could
just as easily have found the injunction to conceal puzzling. Coming from a woman who seems to have
supported her daughter's career, the intimation of such a life's motto is even more profound. Without
acknowledging the implication for herself, West concludes the essay about her mother by writing: "At such times
I would say to myself, 'She will die with her secrets.' I had guessed a few, but they had been only surface deep,
easy to flush out. I know that the rest went with her on her flight to heaven" (169). One could say that West
herself shared a similar fate.

The secrets and silences in West's own life are the legacy of her mother, making her, in this sense, her
mother's daughter. What she gives as her debt to Rachel West—that her mother "didn't have hang-ups about race
or color" ("Rachel" 167)—is of a piece with the legacy of secrets and silences. Indeed, if the secret be told, West's
sensitivity about her color—and her gender—were the "part of her [mother] forever embedded in [her] psyche"
(169). It is primarily because of this personal history that West's imaginative project The Wedding represents the
full circle of her life.

Indeed, for West the circle becomes the symbol of psychological wholeness and social wellbeing through the
uniting of male and female, itself symbolized in the marriage union. In "Hannah Byde," the disastrous marriage
of Hannah to George Byde for the wrong reasons of color and class has already occurred as the story opens.
Hannah's boredom and disdain for her husband becomes the vicious circle symbolic of their married life. It

67"Prologue to a Life" is based on her undated, unpublished ts, "PART ONE," DWP, SLRI.
slowly tightens around her day by day until the knot is so securely fastened it cannot be undone when she
discovers she is pregnant. In *The Wedding*, the unlikely marriage between a modern day Juliet and her Romeo
for similar reasons of love finally comes together after more than a few obstacles. Shelby Coles and Meade Wyler
are about to exchange rings and vows publicly in their wedding ceremony that will unite symbolically, rather
than further divide, the families of two ancient foes by closing, even if only symbolically, the circle of color and
class prejudice that has been a plague on both her houses. Thus, the circle provides the symbolic structure for
West's definition of self-concentric rings in which the personal is enveloped in the communal. In *The Wedding*,
the ties that bind people together are formed within the circle of social relations and family—and not necessarily,
or always, within race.

From the "empty, uneventual circle" of Hannah Byde's marriage (197) to the secure union of Shelby Coles
with Meade Wyler, West uses the circle as a representation of wholeness and makes wholeness life's goal. Love,
the true basis for union, is the only emotion "blind to color lines and racial bars and class divisions and religious
prejudices and all the other imposed criteria," the narrator intones in the spirit of Christian humanism (*Wedding*
105). Love forms the circle that creates wholeness of self. In the words of *The Wedding*'s narrative voice,
speaking of young Isaac Coles who has received the gift of healing from his father Preacher Coles: "to be whole
was to have a chance" (150). Here, too, West is one with her favorite writer Doestoyevsky, who, unlike Tolstoy
"a seer of the flesh," is "a seer of the soul."

Thus, while issues in *The Wedding* surely do involve race, gender, and class, the novel is not essentially about
them; it is about the human heart when placed in conflict with the social constructions of race, gender, and class
and the harm they cause to individual human beings. Here West does not give in to what Cheryl Wall calls the
"false universalism" that had previously silenced black women ("Taking Positions" 2). *The Wedding* is about
black people, the lightest among them, and their absorption, rather than rejection, of the slave master in
themselves. For this group, class is at the center of West's social analysis because of how it becomes a
construction of race in its exclusionary practices. The text speaks to the vulnerability of white-skinned blacks
who live as the Coles live and whose imitation of white color hierarchies defines their conception of middle- and upper-class life, which they racialize as white. This form of psychological passing is dangerous because their acceptance of white identification is more than a defiance of being racialized as black; it is a denial of heritage. West makes it comparable to the fatal condition, for those inside and out, of living in the proverbial glass house. "The Coles' house," the narrator explains, "dominated the Oval. With its great glassed-in porches, against which many birds had dashed themselves to death..." (2). What she implies is that even white skin on black people does not protect them or render them invisible; therefore, as a signifier of difference within the black world, it is a false and dangerous distinction.

Race, then, is presented as unstable when emphasis is placed on its visual aspects. If race can only be seen, then "white Negroes" like the Coles cannot be black. Seeing race is the problem between white and black, according to the community of Ovalites. "Show me one white man who can look at a colored man without saying to himself, I see a colored man," is their shared conviction (Wedding 74). In the case of young Shelby Coles, what whites "knew to be a colored child—dark skin, dark hair, and Negroid features" (62) did not apply at all to the child who had wandered away from home, and lost herself in the process. As one community spokesperson expresses it:

They couldn't find a lost colored child, so they had to settle for any child that was lost. They had the whole town keeping an eye out—everybody put on dark glasses. Those of us with light-skinned children should put a tag on them, "Please return to the colored race." (74-75)

Race, in fact, is invisible, like glass walls. Those who do not know this are "the ones who make it so easy for us to pass. We jump their fences and they never find us, and all the time they're looking right at us" (75).

Gender among the Ovalites is just as unstable as race because class affiliation aligns women like Corinne Coles with the discourse of white womanhood and its social commodification and not with the emancipated "new women" of independent means, self-worth, and personhood. Women who are whole define themselves within the context of their own values and not the external demands of societal constructions of gender, race, class, or sexuality. Neither Hannah Byde nor Cleo Judson, in The Living Is Easy, is a whole person in this sense,
nor is Corinne Coles. All three barter with their bodies for marriage and security, with the added benefit, in the racist society whose values they imitate, of near-white coloring that increases their chances of upward mobility. None, however, has a sufficiently instructed mind or consciousness to be rid of these unwanted marriages. They become twentieth-century *femmes covert.* For this reason, all three make disastrous marriages and lead double lives. Miss Amy Norton, in *The Wedding,* provides an example of a different kind of repressive circumstance. She, unlike Hannah, Cleo, or Corinne, has a finely educated mind but remains unmarried because she is too well instructed for a white, upper-class Bostonian.

In her choice of a husband, Shelby Coles may seem like an updated version of Jessie Fauset’s Olivia and Theresa Blanchard in *Comedy American Style,* but she is not because of her motivation in choosing Meade Wyler over the “pick of the best of breed in her own race” (4). Indeed, Shelby’s choice runs so radically “contrary to expectations” that it “affronted all the subtle tenets of [her] training” (4), suggesting that she has made a bold choice and that she employs values other than those of her parents’ milieu. That she would “marry outside her race, outside her father’s profession, and throw her life away on a nameless, faceless white man who wrote jazz, a frivolous occupation without office, title, or foreseeable future, was beyond the Oval’s understanding” (4). In other words, Shelby is like Olivia Blanchard in that “race/color is not overtly or apparently inscribed on her own body”; but unlike Olivia, Shelby is not interested in “construct[ing] an identity that meets society’s standards of acceptance.” Shelby is unwilling to divide the human race into preferential hierarchies of “ordinary” and “fine” families. One could say of Shelby that this choice separates her from what McLendon argues is “Janet [Blanchard’s] particular (re)vision of reality” and signals Shelby’s rejection of just such a “distinction.” McLendon further argues that this distinction is true for Olivia’s mother Janet and provides an “ideological embodiment of [Janet Blanchard’s] notion that issues of class and issues of color are mutually exclusive,” an “ideology” that Fauset works to deconstruct (*Wedding* 55).

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64 “Woman covered.” Cathy Davidson, in her 1986 Introduction to Hannah Foster’s *The Coquette* (1797), uses the term to describe 18th-century women after marriage as “hidden,” legally bound to a husband’s judgment, right or wrong.

65 See Jacquelyn McLendon’s discussion of Fauset’s *Comedy* (54).
In *The Wedding*, the "eye" of the beholder is constructed to represent simultaneously the "I" of self, thus, what one sees is a projected self-image. In this sense, until one can "see what love saw" (83), one cannot experience the world as whole. Gram has a "distorted" eye (114), Liz Coles a "biased" eye (114). Both live the limitations of their vision. The narrator, possessing an "impartial" and "cosmic" eye, mirrors desire and infinite possibility (114, 135). In this limitless artistic vision West, as author, cultivates a perception of wholeness.

West ends *The Wedding* with both a marriage and a death to represent her holistic vision of life. Using these Elizabethan literary conventions, of comedy and tragedy, to resolve the novel's central conflict, West acknowledges both the "comic" and the "tragic" aspects of her story of people who "form color lines within the color line" (White 682). And she offers her readers choices. Those who find comfort in the tale's "moral," "color was a false distinction; love was not" (*Wedding* 240), will feel the essential optimism of the text. Those who note the complications inherent in the moral will measure its complexity instead, finding at the narrative heart an essentially tragic vision. Or, the reader may chose to see the world through the narrator's eyes, as being far more complicated than false binaries like black and white, male and female, and right and wrong pretend to simplify.

Corresponding imagery further supports the narrative dynamic of multiplicity. In order to seat every wedding guest, the Coles will have to use all the chairs in the house—the "gilded chairs," with their thin veneer of gold that disguises the plain wood beneath, along with the "undertaker's chairs" with no disguise at all. The Coles' "ballroom, with the little gilt chairs that had hugged the walls for years now [were] set in place for the wedding, and the undertaker's chairs in sober alignment (2). Symbolically, in order for this wedding to take place, the Coles family must reach back into the whole of its resources and the whole of its past, "for better" and "for worse," as is signaled in the language of the wedding vow itself. As weddings and funerals represent—in a larger sense—the recurring cycle of life and death, the final events of

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70One is reminded of Hurston's "cosmic Zora" from "How It Feels To Be Colored Me" (1927): "At certain times I have no race, I am me. ... The cosmic Zora emerges." The essay was published in the May 1927 number of *The World Tomorrow*.

71I borrow Walter White's characterization of the effect of prejudice in the white community on parts of the
West's last fiction affirm the circle of life. To dramatize the difference between the healers and the healed and unhealed in the protagonist's journey to wholeness, West uses contrasting geometric figures as symbolism. She characterizes the Island's black, upper-class community in *The Wedding* as living within "a ring of cottages" (7) that comprised an "oval"—not a circle. The older generation's obsession with racial selves and skin color in the formation of their exclusionary class results in loveless unions and infidelity. To make clear her critique, West represents the Ovalites' distorted values by distorting the symmetry of that which is most symbolic of marital union, the wedding ring. Most of the parents' false values, fortunately, are not passed on to Shelby and Liz Coles although some of their influence is felt. For Liz, race is not a visible commodity; it is better seen as "a private and internal struggle" (93), yet she marries a dark man with conflicted views about color who will not attend his sister-in-law's wedding.

The circular structure of the novel, most importantly, unites the bride-to-be Shelby Coles, with the values held by her great grandfather, Preacher Coles, the healer, before the union with her husband-to-be. A male ancestral figure of great benevolence, Preacher, half Irish and half black, had survived slavery to engender a long line of Coleses and to minister to the spiritual needs of his neighbor. His world view, so different from that of Shelby Coles' parents, is based in divine revelation. It is made clear in the narrator's representation of the nature of the wisdom of his words: "The reality of the invisible spirit transcended the assumptions of the flesh, a great-grandfather [Shelby] never knew might have said. Confrontation based on color had addled man since Moses married the Ethiopian woman and God made leprous the skin of the sneering man who challenged His right to move Moses to love" (*Wedding* 82).

Preacher's parable of God's curse upon and punishment of those who practice color prejudice reverses the popular, with whites, interpretation of God's supposed curse upon Ham and his descendants and the subsequent designation of who are "the chosen" and who "the untouchable." Literary revision of biblical black community in his essay "Color Lines" for *Survey Graphic: Harlem, Mecca of the New Negro* (1925).

72Elements in the novel's presentation work in opposition to narrative unity. The disparity may be West's or an inadvertent product of Gates' final editing of the text.

73West's literary healing is like Toni Morrison's use of narrative as a "healing art." West may have found the
justifications for racial slavery goes back to the mid-nineteenth-century slave narrative. As is the case with
*Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (1845), Douglass, like West, also used
the mulatto class of slaves as the basis for his counter argument.74 In Preacher's cosmology, the
punishment for the sin of racial preference at the expense of God's will is leprosy and exile, not moral
superiority and dominion as pro-slavery advocates would believe. Leprosy, itself, serves also as a powerful
metaphor for the mutilations and deformities resulting from racism and racial slavery based in skin color
and origin precisely because it is a highly infectious disease affecting the very site of color designation, the
skin. The accompanying irony is that as the flesh peels away and drops from the body, so too does color,
leaving only bone and connective tissue and a cadaver-like state of colorlessness. The physical
deterioration of the flesh that leprosy causes serves as an objective correlative for the emotional and
psychological pain and debility resulting from the disease of racism and for the moral destruction of the
whole of the body politic. The potency of God's curse, like His destruction of Sodom and Gomorra, is
clear. In biblical and secular literature, the leper is the quintessential outcast figure, quarantined with
other lepers to live in shame outside of the healthy (unleperous) human community, and doomed to
certain and painful death, he becomes the untouchable and not the Ethiopian woman whom God Himself
has ordained to be the beloved of His chosen, Moses.

With this parable, Preacher Coles provides the very instruction that Shelby's parents are incapable of
giving her. The healers, like Preacher, understand "reality" in the manner of persons of faith who live by a
code of values where the "invisible" and "spirit[ual]"] are key. Consciousness, for "transcend[ental]"
thinkers, is fixed not on the corporeal itself but on its resemblance to the divine, (the invisible, the

74"[I]t is...plain that a very different-looking class of people are springing up at the South, and are now
held in slavery, from those originally brought to this country from Africa; and if their increase will do no
other good, it will do away with the force of the argument, that God cursed Ham, and therefore American
slavery is right. If the lineal descendants of Ham are alone to be scripturally enslaved, it is certain that
slavery at the South must soon become unscriptural; for thousands, are ushered into the world, annually,
who, like myself, owe their existence to white fathers, and those fathers are most frequently their own
masters" (Douglass 50).

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colorless) that becomes the guiding principle in human life. Preacher Coles would have been the same generation as West's father, Isaac Christopher West, who was also born into slavery. Thus, it is the darkest of the older generation (Preacher Coles) and the lightest of the younger generation (Shelby Coles) who regard spirit over matter(s) of color. West herself, in between the generations, is like Isaac Coles, Preacher's son—affected by color—in his youth when among whites and in his adulthood among blacks—and then enlightened. Thus "reality"—the real world as distinct from imagination or fantasy—can only be the fictional, a product of the imagination.

In this sense West is an essentially romantic writer and not a realist. Her similarity to the great romantic Nathaniel Hawthorne is remarkable. Dealing both autobiographically and fictionally with a different circumstance of shaming and being shamed in "The Custom House" introduction and The Scarlet Letter, the narrative persona of Hawthorne, the Custom House surveyor, says of the writer of autobiographical fiction something that could apply to West as well. When an author indulges in "such confidential depths of revelation as could fittingly be addressed, only and exclusively, to the one heart and mind of perfect sympathy," it is "as if the printed book thrown at large on the world wide, were certain to find out the divided segment of the writer's own nature, and complete his circle of existence by bringing him into communion with it" (35).

West also employs metaphors of profane and sacred community in her symbolic use of the musical idiom of jazz and the sacrament of holy communion as she argues for reformed social structures in human relations, primarily in the institution of marriage. Because of racial slavery, the conception of humanity as a circle had been much maligned and subverted. Marriage itself was corrupted and with it the concordant union of hearts and souls. In her novel that centers on the important life choices of whom to regard, and whom to make, one's kin, West calls for the restoration of harmony in the family of man and provides the symbolic path.

75West uses the defining devices of domestic fiction in Wedding. The "evocation of emotion" in the tragic death of young Tina, the critique of the marital status quo, the rejection of the sexual double standard, the use of the seduction plot, the new model for a happy family, are all examples. While she makes "sentimentalism" an option for middle-class black women, the text does not serve "as a powerful agent for social change" as do other sentimental texts like Harriet Wilson's Our Nig (1859) and Harriet A. Jacobs' Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl (1861). See Jane Tompkins, Sensational Designs (1985); Cathy N. Davidson, Revolution and the Word (1986);
Jazz, as a literary trope, is a highly suggestive model for the restoration of consonance in human relations. On a literal level, Meade Wyler is constructed as a jazz musician, not a medical doctor like all the husbands of the Coles women. On a symbolic level, jazz is a musical form, representative in literature generally as productive of harmony and in African-American literature specifically as productive of cultural bonds. Even with its improvisational nature, jazz's idiom, though complex and often quixotic, is still harmonic. Combining strength with flexibility in its play upon basic melodies and common chord patterns, it improvises in order to create, yet it maintains a specific rhythmic understructure to unify solo with ensemble performance. As is the case for Alice Manfred in Toni Morrison's novel Jazz, whose narrative structure is modeled upon just such a musical performance, the beating drums, "like a rope cast for rescue, spanned the distance, gathering them all up and connected them" (Jazz 58). And for the Traces, "Violet decided, and Joe agreed, nothing was left to love or need but music" (224). Likewise, Shelby Coles tells her sister Liz that when she met Meade, "it was his music I fell in love with first" (Wedding 209).

Most importantly, the jazz-musician-as-artist, which West develops beyond James Weldon Johnson's ragtime player in his 1912 text, serves as an important character type of her own design, and jazz itself, are emblematic of ways to overcome limitations and circumstances. West believed in artists, persons of imagination who, being able to transcend race and gender, are capable of birthing new visions. More open-minded than the public at large, "[t]he artists were the liaison group," she says in "Elephants Dance" (80). And like Shelby's fiancé, Meade Wyler, in The Wedding, artists are "trailblazers" (221), not "dedicated to old patterns, old forms" (219) like Lute McNeil and Shelby's parents. West thus offers Meade as the artist figure, constructing him as white—contrary to the tradition in black literature of jazz as a black cultural signifier, to force the reader to think in new ways and outside of a racial mindset, at least in this one instance. It is important to note that Meade is never developed as a character nor does he make a single appearance in the text; thus, one reads him symbolically, not as the quintessential white man but as representative, in his disposition, of an artistic form based in improvisation.

rather than strict formal properties, like those that govern fugues and sonnets, for example. What Meade brings
to Shelby, therefore, is not his whiteness but his flexibility, thus offering Shelby the possibility of transcendence
over rigid racialized thinking, both black and white, through improvisation—that is, taking the more important
social interactions as they come and on their own terms. In other words, West argues less for or against inter-
racial marriage than against simple formulas for, or false binary solutions to, what is anything but black and
white for miscegenated families who must cope with the all the baggage of slavery and very real divided
loyalties.

Shelby marries outside her race and class to a white jazz musician, thus crossing the "great divide" of her
mother’s perception. Corinne Coles, who had married according to the false standards of the Oval and according
to Gram’s wishes, could neither reconcile the apparent contradiction in herself nor understand her daughter’s
attraction to a jazz musician. Thus, Corinne’s personality is constructed as one in bondage to a divided psyche
and to a "second self, the dark devourer, the primitive behind the pale skin," a "monster that stalked [her]" from
which she cannot free herself (Wedding 109). After her marriage, she becomes cold and unloving to her
husband. Instead,

her lust for dark black men under cover of the night mirrored her repulsion during the day,
and perhaps it was jazz’s open, even cerebral flirtation with the dark side, its willingness to let
go and improvise with mind as well as body, that explained it, when for Corinne, the two had
always been sundered by a divide too vast to bridge. Or maybe Corinne was just a product o f
her conditioning—no more, no less. (216)

William Faulkner’s Light in August comes to mind because of its similar dramatic situation and its similar
characterizations. It may help to interpret West’s meaning as other than a new version of the “blood tells”
mulatto stereotype. Corinne knows she has black blood, unlike Joe Christmas; therefore, no shocking revelations
about heredity are forthcoming. Clearly she aspires to white ideals, but she does not pass, unlike Christmas who
goes back and forth between the black and white worlds. Corinne has no interest in white men, nor is she
sexually vulnerable to them. She neither comes to a tragic end, nor is she in any way distinguished because she is
mulatto. What is at stake of the tragic mulatto formula is that no one "escape[s]" the “racialized body,” "nothing
[is] worse than possessing black blood," the "amount of 'black' or 'white' blood determines moral standards"; in sum, "the mulatto is more wretched than other blacks because of the mulatto's desire to be white, urged, naturally, by her or his white blood" (McLendon, Politics of Color 14-16, 21).

Corinne Coles is not an embodiment of (the supposed by whites) mulatto predisposition. But West's representation of her seems at first to fit somewhere between the mulatto Joe Christmas and the white Joanna Burden in Faulkner's novel by reversing the gender. In Joe Christmas, Faulkner represents some of Corinne's acquiescence to white constructions of color where "blackness" (and the "black body") signify a "negative essence," but as regards constructions of black women and black women's sexuality. Christmas' most savage carnality is practiced upon black women. However, because he is perceived by Joanna Burden as a "white Negro," her divided consciousness is based less in color, per se, than in white constructions of sexuality as regards black men. Color does come into play, as their passion finds expression only in the dark of night whereby Christmas appears more like the stereotype of the black male's (overly) sexualized body to Joanna. At the same time, Joanna does not fit the frigid white woman stereotype either. Something of the same dynamic pertains to Corinne Coles in the above passage because of the specific color signification of "dark black men [my emphasis]" and the "dark side [my emphasis]" of her psyche that work in tandem with the black man's purported hyper-sexuality.

I would argue that West was familiar with the tragic mulatto stereotype and that she deliberately exempts Corinne from its most obvious defining attributes. What West emphasizes instead are the very stereotypes that Corinne's white grandmother (Gram), like the other "Negrophobe" Joanna Burden, would find similar. Here the mirror metaphor is important, as is the reference to Corinne's "conditioning." Given the syntax of the passage of West's description of Corinne, the looking glass does not mirror nature itself. It is Corinne's "lust" that is a mirror image of her "disgust"; in other words, they are one and the same thing because they come from the same source, Gram's prejudicial stereotyping of black people, especially

those who show color. What is really being reflected back is a mirror image of Gram's distorted psyche and world view as it is inscribed in her granddaughter whom Gram has groomed to bring herself closer to what she herself recognizes as the attitudes and the look of the white world that she lost when her daughter Josephine married a black man and bore his child.

Secularizing the religious metaphor of Holy Communion, West offers another view of blood relations. Rather than the "blood tells" basis for nineteenth-century pseudo-scientific racism, or twentieth-century essentialism, West utilizes symbolically the basic myth of Christianity—the sacrament of holy communion—to endow blood with spiritual properties instead. The narrator, with an "impartial" and "cosmic" eye, tells of Preacher Coles' call to heal in conceits of Transcendentalism. Living within the fields and forests after he walks away from slavery, Preacher Coles becomes whole again through communion with Nature: "He would cup the healing waters in his cleansed hands, drinking it slowly like wine. The wine gave him strength to seek bread, and the bread and the wine restored his wholeness" (Wedding 116). In the ritual of transubstantiation of bread and wine, communicants may partake symbolically of the body and blood of Christ to incarnate His spiritual properties and maintain a connection with the Divine. Marriage, which is also a ritual sacrament, unites human with human to partake of the spiritual as well as physical properties of each other, if you will, and incarnate them through conception; the offspring is the physical representation of husband and wife in his/her own body.

In the construction of her novel generally, West utilizes some familiar African-American character types (Grimes-Williams 127-30), significantly revises others, as she weaves the oral tradition into the literary. The figure of most importance in the text is the "seeker/questor." Desiring to shed old selves to develop new identities, "seekers" set out to find and free themselves—in the tradition of the slave narrative and nineteenth-century Romanticism and Transcendentalism. Preacher Coles, the quintessential questor figure, is a "mulatto," as are almost all the major black characters; some are seekers, some are not. For the older generation West adds to the composite questor figure that of the "moral guide." For the younger generation she contributes her own
"Matriarchal" figures are the most problematized of the character types and do not serve as "ancestral figures." At a certain point in the racial/social evolution, for some, their ability to love their children and instruct them in sound community values was impaired by life experiences that have left them unhappy and unfulfilled. Although West is most interested in interrogating the maternity of black women for whom the legacy of racial slavery and racialism has resulted in emotional and sexual emptiness and a problematic relationship with their daughters, she does provide other models of motherhood but without developing them. What Jacquelyn McLendon points to as true for Fauset's *Comedy American Style* is also evident in West's text. "The maternal discourse," McLendon argues for *Comedy*, "is bifurcated through representations of the destructive mother and the ideal nurturer" (McLendon, *Politics of Color* 60). In *The Wedding*, existing alongside the many "destructive" mother figures—black and white—are the nurturers. First, there is the "maternal eye of the Oval, where all the children were partly owned by all the watchful mothers" (25). There is also the "ideal nurturer" figure in Mrs. Goodwin, "next door's mother," whom Tina McNeil wishes were her own, "a smiling brown mother" who provided "safety" with "words that were loving" and with "a hug and a kiss, sometimes more than one, sometimes more than two" (15, 236).

By far the most destructive figure in *The Wedding*, however, is not a mother but a father, Lute McNeil, the novel's villain, whom West configures as a bitter misogynist. In many ways he resembles certain aspects of Faulkner's Joe Christmas but without the textual probability of redemption. A man also of mixed blood, but darker than Christmas, who also has "no memories of mother love" (22), Lute engages with women in toxic relationships in which he is psychologically and physically abusive. His solution to his not-so-repressed-rage for his rejection by "mother bitch" (23) is twofold. Having "a deep-rooted compulsion...to father children who knew [only] their father" (23), Lute selects unstable women to couple with; then, he tries to force the women he impregnates—all white—to love their children even though he
knows they are incapable, having themselves never experienced love either. Even worse, he seems trapped in a compulsive and sadistic form of psychological incest (or Oedipal urge if you will) and mother hatred. Lute, the reader is told, "practiced a savage carnality" upon "women of the street, as if each wore the face of his mother, that face of which he did not know one line" (22). He "hoped God had punished his mother" "to starve" and "to die...lingeringly, unknown and unwept" (23). Lute chooses as a substitute housekeeper and guardian for his three daughters "[a]n ugly, colored woman he could trust with his child, while he went home to kill his white wife" (22-23). Corinne Coles is like Lute in that she too has mother-love issues, and her mother is white as well. "Her fear that she might reject her child as Josephine had rejected her was too deeply rooted in her psyche for her to drag it up to the surface and damn its consequences" (66). However, Lute's daughter's unnecessary death is blamed not on the father but on the absent mother. In the world of the novel, Tina dies because she has no mother, like "next-door's mother," to protect and love her.

Thus, to replace what is normally the mother's instructional role, West conflates the Preacher with the moral guide and makes the figure male. West's composite character functions as the ancestral figure and healer who provides a spiritual path for the young. Untutored and unlettered, Preacher represents orality as well because his voice is his text. Here, too, West adapts a black literary tradition for her own purpose.

The literary applications of the oral tradition manifest themselves in a number of ways, including a revision of a story presumably familiar to the audience; a participatory narrator who is moved to maintain an intimate connection with the story, thereby lending the story a sense of immediacy; and the use of multiple narrators in a mock call-and-response performance. (Newson 63)

Rather than utilize this form of the story within the story, West creates a circular story to unite a figure from the past with one from the present to help in the continuing process of healing.

The ancestral figure is the first of his line to be healed from the effects of slavery because of the manner in which he lives his life and sees the world. When Preacher reenters society, he follows the call to spiritual healing. Feeling a bond with the "Butternut woman," whom he only meets by chance, he forms
a union with her, with his Bible and his own oath, to beget a child. Preacher passes his gift of healing on to this son Isaac whose medical practice will be dedicated to ministering to the sick among the poor. These healers are the novel's whole people; they are nourished physically and spiritually and work to restore harmony—within and between persons. On the other hand, those who are healed, like Shelby Coles, must be willing to let "[t]he scales [fall] from [their] eyes" (Wedding 239) and pursue all that the symbolic transformation implies. The healed are ritually reborn to envision the world anew, as does the artist.

One of the most powerful scenes in the text is the conversion (healing) of Isaac Coles' wife, "schoolteacher," and her subsequent reconciliation with her husband at the moment of his death. Schoolteacher and Corinne Coles are modeled mostly on Rachel West, so that schoolteacher's lessons (and Corinne's) are also Rachel West's lessons. Schoolteacher, "fair-skinned, graceful, and from an unimpeachable family" (Wedding 153), is caste- and color-conscious, which is why she forms an "emotionally empty" marriage with the "handsome and fair-skinned Isaac Coles" (154), possessor of a Harvard medical degree. Schoolteacher, bored in her marriage and with "the outlets for her femininity," "slowly, with much stopping and starting and grinding of gears, her masculine genes began to function and gave her life a new direction, and made money her standard of success" (155). She becomes so corrupted by the need for material status to distance herself from the poor (read "black") and therefore maintain her middle-class identity (read "white"), that she becomes a slum landlord on a large scale. In a twist of fate, in order to please the white society women with whom she socializes and sits on committees for charitable work, she is assigned to learn about "the day to day life of the poor" (by which they mean "black") in order, ostensibly, to better serve them. In her eagerness to please, schoolteacher does not question why she is the chosen one.

Be that as may be, the experience works a miracle in her life because it changes her perception of herself. She begins her job by first "think[ing] of her tenants in an entirely different light as research material" (Wedding 165). Then, remarkably, she perceives them as suffering human beings. This shift in consciousness occurs as she takes down in writing the stories they relate. At first it is merely to have a record of their complaints. However,
once her resistance is worn down and she actually begins to hear the people she interviews, schoolteacher becomes one with their stories and with them:

The words poured out of them, faster than her pencil could keep track, faster than her questions could fit in, sounding at first like another language, the accent so mush-mouth Southern, the English so inverted, the idiom so full of gospel images, and the whole interwoven with Gullah from a grandmother's grandmother's remembering, singing, soaring African words as beautiful as African birds. And their unknown phrases, both Gullah and jargon, began to relate to those whose meaning was clearer. Her ear accustomed itself to the slurred speech and separated it into sentences. She understood, and her understanding sifted through the layers of her self-defenses, and the loneliness that links the deprived whatever their pearls of accomplishment became the bond between her area of need and theirs. She listened long and she listened deep, and her involvement, the full measure of her penetration, became complete. (165)

In the beauty of her prose, West dramatizes in this passage the process of cultural recognition and return, as she also demonstrates the deep psychic level of consciousness where cultural identity resides. By sexualizing the passage, West not only suggests the nature of true interpersonal communication as empathic, but also what has been missing in schoolteacher's sexually cold relationship with Isaac, thereby foreshadowing the scene of sexual union of husband and wife about to take place.

Schoolteacher is further touched by conscience when, looking at the image of the crucifix in her bedroom, she recalls the scriptural text on charity (love).77 The psychological healing she first experiences is described in circular images of wisdom's inner light and wholeness. "Through another shower of tears, the cross seemed to radiate spears of shimmering light, like spokes from God's center to the center of her consciousness. For the first time in her religious life, she experienced a moment of oneness—which Preacher would have called a revelation—with God, a moment in which the spirit rewards the flesh" (Wedding 168). Schoolteacher's altered perception brings her, for the first time in her marriage, together in physical love with her husband. For Isaac: "He saw her ecstasy. He saw her wholeness..." (172). And for schoolteacher: "In the crescendo of her conversion, she witnessed the revelation, the word made flesh, Christ coming toward her in the visible body of man. If he but touched her, she would be redeemed" (173). Their lovemaking that night brings with it a peace that neither had

77 Again, 1 Corinthians 13, but verses 1-3 and the King James Version instead.

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ever experienced with the other. Schoolteacher's transfiguration is accomplished because of whom she has married.

Isaac's father is the conveyer of the gift to his son. Preacher, who "drew satisfaction from healing," was a speaker of the Word. Although he carried a Bible with him, he could not read it, but even so he was able to "ma[k]e the book talk" (Wedding 135). So it was that Preacher "carried in his mouth the pearl of Christ...and with it a compassion that never corrupted itself" (150). The father rendered onto his son a pure heart like his own and taught him compassion for all things, so he too could walk in beauty and kindness. Isaac, whose nature was filled from a young age with empathy and understanding, was the perfect receptacle for his father's gift. He learned instinctually the important lesson of being made whole.

There was a time during his adolescence when [Isaac] had held a small trembling bird in the power of his hand and watched it as it flew high and far away, its broken wing mended and its trembling halted—able to fend for itself once more as a result of his care. From this, Isaac learned the power of his hands, and he also learned that to be whole was to have a chance. (150)

West creates the character of Isaac Coles as representative of the older generation and as a physical rather than spiritual healer. Freed from "the stumbling block of illiteracy that made most colored tongues mute," Isaac was educated to become a medical doctor (Wedding 134). Although named for her own father, Isaac Christopher West, Isaac Coles is actually of West's generation, suggesting that he serves more appropriately as her fictional persona, albeit male. His lessons, then, are her lessons.7 Isaac, like West, but unlike Shelby Coles and her generation, must still be concerned with the status for blacks that came with educational excellence and professional identification, with "pursuing a career that came with a convenient, self-explanatory title, like M.D., or Esq." (218). However, for the older generation's children, born in the 1930s, the world was different and better. "They were a blessed bunch, Shelby and her friends, the first generation of all the generations since slavery to have no self-consciousness about being colored" (217).

West is such a biographical writer (as she herself happily attests), that the character Isaac undergoes many of

7 Isaac Coles is a fictional persona; Mary "Christopher" is a pseudonym; Dorothy "West" is her given name,
the experiences of racial taunting, of rejection and alienation, that had happened in her own life. However, one of the most important events in shaping his personality is his relocation at age fourteen from the South to the North. He leaves his mother and father behind to travel to Boston and Martha's Vineyard with a New England spinster schoolteacher for the purpose of education. This transformative experience for young Isaac, which was chronicled in a different manner in *Living* through Cleo Judson, a female character, is based in West's mother's experience, with a few key revisions.

Thus, in *The Wedding* West abandons the practice in her previous work of making her characters straightforward biographical equivalents of herself and family members. In this her final novel, she still utilizes the same family history, but improvisationally, and it is integral to her novel's meaning. In creating the older generation of the Coles and Shelby families, West takes a composite of all the important known life experiences-of herself, of her father, and of her mother—and distributes them democratically among the characters most like each one's fictional counterpart. Thus, at least fictionally (as both of West's parents were dead by this time), West creates a world in which—were she, her father, and her mother actually there—each would be required to walk in the others' shoes, as it were. For example, in the text, West gives her mother's name, Rachel, to a female character who is a brown-skinned, single woman whom Clark Coles loves and is having an affair with outside of his marriage to the emotionally and sexually frigid but fair-complexioned Corinne Coles, who in turn has clandestine trysts with very dark men whom she otherwise despises. The narrative effect of these divided parents of Shelby Coles is discussed in other sections.

The point at hand is that the real Rachel West, through this characterization, must trade places with her daughter and experience the fate of the brown-skinned black woman who cannot pass and does not win the man in marriage. Rachel West also trades places with the real-life Isaac West by being a passionate loving woman as the fictional Rachel. Then as the fictional Corinne, whom she most resembles in the text, she must face the same emotional and sexual rejection from Clark Coles as in real life was her own husband's fate. On the other hand, the real life Dorothy West, as the fictional Isaac Coles, must undergo her mother's dislocation from her family thus "Isaac Christopher West."
and the loneliness and crisis of identity it occasioned. Like her real life father, Isaac West, she as Isaac Coles must experience the emotional weight of his marriage relation with Corinne, the distant, social climbing, unloving and unsexual wife, as was Isaac West's experience with Rachel West. Likewise, the real Isaac West trades places with both Rachel and Dorothy in his fictional experiences of events in their lives as well. Each of them as fictional personae in the novel are, therefore, a composite of each others' experiences of color, of gender, of sexuality, of desire, of disappointment, of love, of rejection. In other words, each through experiencing the full range of the experiences of the others' undergoes a conversion and comes finally to a place of empathy, understanding, and personal wholeness, making forgiveness of each other finally possible.

Shelby Coles, whose very name is a joining together of both sides of this multi-generational family of Shelbys and Coleses, acts as an agent of reconciliation, as does the wedding itself. The narrative begins with the younger generation, and for the most part, follows the cycle of one complete day—the day before Shelby Coles' wedding. The unexpected events leading up to the ceremony change each member of the family significantly, altering the dynamics so that the wedding, which is almost postponed, may take place and a new line may begin as unencumbered by the legacy of slavery as is possible. In the words of the narrator, Shelby bridges "the infinite distance between two worlds and two concepts of color" because she is herself representative, in her very body, of "the overlapping worlds and juxtaposed mores..." (Wedding 61, 63). "The whole is the sum of all its parts," (45) the narrator suggests. To be whole in this family is to stop leading the double lives that the older generation of Clark Coles, Corinne Coles, and Gram Shelby have allowed as a means of balancing double aims: to be acceptable (on someone else's terms, meaning to be white or as near-white as possible) and to be happy (on one's own terms, meaning to be one's self). The first is to acquiesce to racial constructions of humanity, to try to fit an identity from without; the second is to forge an identity from within. It is to marry whom you love. It is to be active in life's choices rather than reactive.

To encapsulate the solution to the color prejudice that nearly overwhelms the text—the plague on both their houses, as it were, and the source of psychological wounding—West makes acceptance through love the heart of
the novel. Gram (Caroline Shelby), the white maternal figure, learns to accept the dark-skinned female child, her
great-great-granddaughter—and Shelby Cole’s niece—Laurie. Gram, desiring nothing more than to be buried in a
white-only cemetery with her kith and kin, must realize Laurie is her kith and kin just as she, Gram, is Laurie’s.
Gram’s great-granddaughter Shelby Coles chooses love over class and race when she accepts, on an equal
playing field, her troth to Meade, her white, working-class fiancé, “a seed salesman's son” who in turn “had
never revered her as a sacred cow of the Coleses” (*Wedding* 83, 84).

To accomplish the parallel narrative resolve, West revises the “marriage plot” to problematize, not marriage
itself as she had in *Living*, but the meaning of marrying “one's own kind.” In so doing she writes middle-class
black mothers into sentimentalism while she traces their deserved loss of “domestic power and influence” over
the daughters of those whose marriages of mixed bloodlines had become products of colorism. Gone is female
“divine agency” in the main characters. Corinne Coles, no “angel in the house,” has extra-marital affairs and a
divided sexual psyche. Gram Shelby is a thoroughly unhappy bigot. While maintaining the blend of idealism (in
outlook and worldview) and realism (in characterization and conflict) common to the genre, West makes
community, rather than the home itself, the site of “redemption.” In this way, West includes both external and
internal manifestations of color prejudice: the racism of whites like Gram and the color preferences of blacks like
the Coles and Shelbys. Because bloodlines are so intermingled in the family genealogy, race is not the issue;
rather it is the selves that have been formed out of resistance to racial constructions, understandable yet equally
oppressive.

To avoid the sentimental novel’s ideological intent, West constructs various narrative perspectives from which
to examine certain marriage relations within the African-American community. Ideologies of race and racial
selves are nemeses in West’s fictional world. The first is from the point of view of the light-skinned Coles family,
representative of the Ovalites—“the vanguard of the black middle class” from Washington, D.C., and New York.
Choosing to “live colored” rather than to pass for white, they still maintain their predisposition to stay white

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80In *Living*, the novel’s focus is on Cleo Judson’s marriage to Bart Judson; therefore, it is not the daughter’s
looking through the "right kind" of marriages. One could say they live in a state of psychological passing. The
narrative view is that "[t]he Clark Coleses came closest to being as real as their counterparts" (Wedding 3). The
second narrative perspective is split between Lute McNeil and his daughter Tina's very different points of view.
The third is from the perspective of Shelby Coles, Preacher's great-great granddaughter. And the final
perspective is that of Shelby's white great-grandmother, "Gram," of the same generation as Preacher Coles, and
co-founder of the same family, yet "the daughter of blue-blooded slave owners" (114). One of the "real" whites,
Caroline (Gram) Shelby also "lives colored" in the Oval with the only family she knows, her granddaughter's,
but Gram desires to "live white" again and return to the South of her youth and to Xanadu, her plantation.

In her critique of the Ovalites, West also complicates the literary trope of the mulatto figure. Her protagonist
is neither ignorant of her heritage nor cursed with genteel poverty; neither is she desirous of passing into white
society nor of standing by her race. Shelby Coles, with full consciousness and unrestricted choice, chooses a
marriage partner with none of these usual mitigating forces. Thus, West represents the possibilities of racial
intermixture rather than the tragedies. In this regard, she continues in the humanist vein of Pauline Hopkins,
while envisioning happier resolutions. In fact, West rewrites the conclusion of Hopkins' family sagas of mixed
blood relations that end only in death by envisioning what, in the modern world, could make them turn out

perspective. Judy Judson, as a pre-teen girl, is too young to serve as a sentimental heroine.
81 The light-skinned protagonist, though not typical of West heroines, is a return to the earlier "Hannah Byde"
(1926). In her fiction of the '20s, dark-skinned daughters are more commonly the heroines. Their conflicts with
ambiguous light-skinned mother figures are manifested in characterizations of diminished self worth. In Living,
the light-skinned mother overwhelms the dark-skinned daughter's perspective. In Wedding, however, two dark-
skinned women, who do not produce offspring, stand at the periphery of the plot but serve as positive
counterparts to Corrine Coles. Sabina and Rachel both love Clark Coles. He loves them for their dark-skinned
beauty and warmth. In the end, their "loss" of Clark Coles is no loss because of his bifurcated view of color.
82 The white aristocrat George Tryon rejects Charles Chesnutt's Rena Walden (House Behind the Cedars, 1900)
when he learns of her mixed racial heritage. James Weldon Johnson's unnamed narrator (Autobiography of an
Ex-Colored Man, 1912) marries a white woman to complete his passage into white society. Nella Larsen's Helga
Crane (Quicksand, 1928) won't accept a Danish artist's proposal because he is white. Wallace Thurman's very
dark Emma Lou Morgan (The Blacker the Berry, 1929) knows that her mother and grandmother, both light-
skinned, believe in expunging traces of blackness through selective intermarriage. Dorothy West's dark-skinned
Bart Judson (Living, 1948) chooses to marry Cleo because of her light skin only to be rejected by her sexually.
These are but a few examples of how the literary imagination has represented the "negative impact on marriage"
of both the "external" and "internal" "color caste system" (Phiefer L. Browne, "Marriage," Oxford Companion to
West utilizes the literary trope of mistaken identity as a way of examining the visual constructions of race. The ante- and postbellum slave narratives dealing with mulatto characters relied upon mistaken identity as a way of escaping enslavement. In later fictional narratives of white-looking mulattos by black writers, this problematic characterization, often undergoing unmasking but not leading to tragic consequences, was first used as a figure of mediation to examine relations between the races and the choice of reaffiliation with the black race. In the twentieth century, mulatto characters became useful in exploring intra-racial relationships of various kinds, especially having to do with color and color hierarchies adapted from the dominant culture's values. West follows in the latter tradition but insists that race (black/white) cannot be physically identified, turning on its head the truism by white writers like T.S. Stribling and William Dean Howells that no matter how white the body of the mixed-race person, identifying tell-tale signs of blackness remain.

In The Wedding, West constructs two parallel cases of mistaken identity that involve color and class. A white man takes Gram, who is white, for "Negro" because she is not among whites but with her family inside the Oval, known by all the Island's residents to be an exclusive "Negro" enclave. This white, working-class Police Chief, using the standard measures of color, speech, or social class, cannot tell that Gram is white. As such, "poor white trash" that he is in Gram's estimation, he cannot confirm for her "the superiority of the [white] race" (78).

The chief of police presented Gram with her granddaughter, restraining his surprise that this old lady was as blue-eyed as the child who called her Gram. According to his previous conceptions, her age consigned her to those generations that were sometimes less black but were never more white than they should be. (75-76)

The Southern accent surprised him. .... This old lady did and yet somehow didn't talk with a

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83Two writers who have examined intra-racial colorism come to mind in this regard. Jessie Fauset's Comedy (1933) depicts the ostracizing of the dark-skinned son by his sister and mother, resulting in his taking of his own life. Charles R. Johnson's Osherding Tale (1982) dramatizes the marriage of a mulatto man to a white woman, both of whom desire mixed race children as emblematic of a new world order. See also Jacquelyn Y. McLendon, "Comedy: American Style," Oxford Companion AAL 165; and Jonathan D. Little, "Mulatto" Oxford Companion to AAL 512-513.
tongue that was coated with grits and gravy. In fact, if she hadn't sounded so colored she
would have sounded white, which was the nearest the chief could come to appraising the
quality and inflection of a Southern gentlewoman's stubbornly unaltered pattern of speech.

This problematic of racial visibility, in white terms, is juxtaposed with Gram's granddaughter's experience.

Shelby Coles is taken for white by the white residents of Martha's Vineyard, when as a child she is lost outside
the Oval, for the same reasons that Gram is mistakenly identified as "Negro," because of her color (blue eyes,
white complexion) and middle-class appearance (clean, well dressed, well spoken). Too young still to know the
difference between "colored" and "white," she discovers that when she was lost among whites "no one gave her a
clear indisputable claim on herself" within the racial terms that they could not avoid invoking. Only Shelby's
name provided her with an identity outside the Oval and her family.

Also consistent with the sentimental novel, West's symbolic use of the girl lost in the woods is important in
three ways. Initially, the symbolism suggests the tortuous path for the sentimental heroine who must learn how to
make her way in the world through the right marriage. As the young woman is also a "Negro" whose white skin
is not the protective covering her mother believes it is, the symbolism suggests the perilous condition of identity
for Shelby Coles. And as the young woman who is white enough to pass, the symbolism suggests that were she
to follow this dangerous path she would be irrevocably "lost" to her family and therefore to herself.

The narrator constructs this story within a story through the use of flashback and dramatic juxtaposition.
Memories of her childhood trauma are triggered when Shelby sees Barby, Tina, and Muffin (Maria) McNeil and
their dog, Jezebel, next door. Shelby thinks back to another dog and is momentarily transfixed by a reverie that
replays the frightening event of being lost with a little dog that is not hers in a community that is equally not
hers. This narrative strategy is meant to enable the reader to connect Lute's "honey colored" little girls with
Shelby's experience, the implication being that they are just as "lost" in their current surroundings—the Island
and the Oval. Also juxtaposed with these two scenes is Shelby's recollection of Meade's disagreement with her
that "color [is] the core of character" (Wedding 82). All three events, as they signify each upon the other, suggest
that color is not the core of character, if not a false distinction.
West further provides a formal genealogy at the beginning of the novel, complete with solid and broken lines to represent marriages and "coupling" relationships, to reveal the complicated family heritage that inscribed color in the first place. Shelby's position reflects her parents'. (White-looking) Shelby's "unacceptable" marriage to (white) Meade also includes a broken line to (brown-skinned) Lute McNeil, a dangerous liaison. The configuration inverts her (white-looking) father's "acceptable," yet troubled, marriage to (white-looking) Corinne, also with a broken line from Clark Coles to (brown-skinned) Rachel, his mistress, who would have made the better wife. Like her father, Shelby almost does not marry the person she loves. And as both Lute and Rachel show color, the real problem is character, not complexion. Here, the use of West's mother's name is telling because the novel's genealogy actually reverses the West family genealogy. In a sense, West rewrites her parents' marriage and her own fate.

In constructing the story of Shelby's loss (getting lost in the woods), West means to undercut the false sense of security felt by white-skinned blacks like the Coles and actual whites like Gram and to point wherein real security lies. "When [Shelby] got lost, she was lost altogether, her identity destroyed in her...her precious sense of wholeness hanging by a hair" (Wedding 80). When she is found and returned home, she believes her identity has been restored; "She was Shelby, one and indivisible..." (73). Nonetheless, Shelby, the rose-skinned, blue-eyed blonde, is moved to ask her rose-skinned Gram something she had never before questioned: "Am I colored?" to which Gram responds: "Yes." Then Shelby asks: "Are you colored too?" Gram's answer is: "I'm your Gram" (80). The child feels relieved, not because she is "colored," but because now she is "something definite" (80). Gram has taken the first step toward claiming her family on a surer basis than color. Indeed, the whole force of the narrative works against this false sense of security in "whiteness" in a family of mixed heritage. "Everyone knew how [Corinne] felt about color. If her feelings rubbed off on her children, they stood a good chance of catching white fear, and God help her if they decided to pass and were lost to her, not just for a day, but forever" (75).

This meditation upon identity is meant to call into question color as a basis even for racial identity. Although
Shelby cannot at first understand, she comes to know as an adult that safety and identity within the Oval are unstable and self-limiting because they are based in faulty social institutions that encourage false definitions of self. Paradoxically, color, in this instance, blends with anonymity.

Her walk through the woods had started out as a triumph of self, a beginner's step forward in independent action. But her first adventure outside the concentric circles of her special world she had blended so completely with the passing crowds that she took on the color of their anonymity and could not find her way back to the road that separated the races. She walked in unreality, and no one gave her a clear, indisputable claim on herself until the Oval made her name a golden ball.... (Wedding 81)

As Shelby learns in her acceptance of Meade, "[l]ove" and "likeness" are not always a pair. Together, they do not guarantee psychological and social well being. Further, the whole of one's self is based on considerably more than racial tags like "Caucasian" and "Colored."

Making Shelby Coles' choice of a husband one center of the plot of the 1995 version of The Wedding was an important step in West's development. Shelby is of the same generation as West's niece after whom the marriage plot is patterned (Gates, "Beyond the Color Line" 82). Her story, which West partly dramatizes, includes the possibility of a black woman making an important life choice that, while it is still influenced by considerations of racial constructions of color, class, or gender, is not determined by them. The nucleus of the original novel prospectus of 1928 that Harper's and Holt saw and were most interested in was that of the older generation of three sisters aging together in their retreat at Oak Bluffs, at the time, West's mother and aunts' story.*4 What Doubleday also rejected as poorly conceived, two decades after Harper's and Holt's rejection, was the sub-plot concerning the younger generation, the couple Pierce and Carol Hunter, representative at the time of the author's own generation.85 West's ability to write beyond her mother's experience and to re-imagine the Hunter story, making it Shelby, Liz, Linc, and Meade's instead, marks the shift from her reliance upon her mother's world view for fictional representations and her own negative self-image for other earlier representations. Shelby Coles thus serves as an alter ego of choice for West herself in her desire to make free choices as a person rather than only as a member of a racial group.

84 Dorothy Scarborough to DW, 17 Sept. 1928, DWP, B1F19, SLRI.
On the other hand, Shelby's parents are stuck within the psychological and spiritual asymmetry of the Oval. Ironically, on the surface the community seems to be just the opposite, "orderly and homogeneous," until the narrator adds the qualifier "too," by way of suggesting the incestuous nature of the Oval where reside only "kith and kin" (Wedding 2). The misperception therein is that "love' and 'likeness' are too often equated" (2-3). The Coles' estate, which "dominated the Oval," was in fact set on a "dead end" (2-3), the same dead end to which their values of the "right [skin] colors" and the "right professions" have led them. After the death of Corinne's mother—Gram's only child, Josephine—Corinne was carefully indoctrinated into Gram's distorted worldview. Having accepted the prevailing social conditioning, Corinne is led to do the kinds of self-destructive things that people do when they believe that "color" is the "core of character" and that "identity" is "inherent" (82). In no uncertain terms, the narrative voice rejects the false values of the Oval and the brutality of their imposition. She offers instead a new generation with different choices, the generation to which Shelby and her sister belong:

A balance had to be achieved, but that was a lesson learned at the expense of all too many of Clark's [Coles'] generation, a generation half afraid that all the insidious white stereotypes contained a germ of truth, a generation mired in the self-hatred that was bigotry's most monstrous crime, more damaging than a laundry list of physical indignities because it amounted to a mental rape, a theft of personal dignity. (Wedding 196-197)

Indeed, West's focus on issues of class that give rise to bad marriages is meant to show how constructions of class obscure racial identity. Class, according to the narrator, provides a social "line of demarcation... sharper than the color line" (Wedding 76). The color line, Gram knows, "was openly crossed under cover of night" (76). The marriage of Josephine Shelby, Gram's only daughter, to the dark-skinned Hannibal served to prove the point. Their offspring begin the line of light-, then, white-skinned Shelbys. On the other hand, according to Gram: "Communication between white aristocrat and white trash was unknown, there being no magnet of color to attract one to the other" (76). The Oval was reserved for upper-class blacks only, and money, although important, "was not the determining factor in distinguishing between majors and minors. The distinction was so subtle, the gradations so fine drawn, that only an Ovalite knew on which level s/he belonged, and an outsider

85Doubleday to DW, 13 April 1951, DWP, B1F21, SLRI.
sometimes wasted an entire summer licking the wrong boot" (7). Adelaide Bannister, another of the near-white Ovalites, who because of her bad heart "was mired in debt to her doctor and druggist," rents her cottage to Lute McNeil, a working class black man and a "minor." In doing so, "she had let down the class bars" and had let in Lute and death (7-8).

In her attempt to problematicize race as the only signifier in social relations, West demonstrates the inextricable link of class to color and the color basis of class. Even though the Ovalites disapproved of marriages to "Negroes" who showed color, they tolerated them if the couples were of the same class. Corinne Shelby, Gram's granddaughter whom she had raised from birth, accepts the "dark-faced" Line's union with her daughter Liz because he is her "own kind," that is, soon to be an M.D. like her father. As far as color is concerned, "the right color [is] preferable" (Wedding 47); but Corinne, who "had acquired her prejudices through Gram," concedes that is "not as mandatory as the right class" (90), as though the two were mutually exclusive. Thus, those relatives of her son-in-law-to-be who share his color but work in blue-collar jobs, like cook and butler, are not included on the guest list. When Liz elopes rather than submitting to such obvious prejudice, Corinne justifies to herself her own behavior as simply that which her social position requires of her. But her defense of class is more mask than social face. Her class-consciousness serves to disguise her deep-seated rejection of racial identification because of its negative construction in white America, which she understands intuitively through her own grandmother. The presence of Line's people would be too stark a reminder to Corinne of her own vulnerability to racial construction herself, a construction she obviously rejects and with good reason. In other words, Corinne's perception of Line's family and her subsequent treatment of them is meant by West to mirror Corinne's generation's perception of white society's attitude about all blacks. Therefore, her strategy for survival is one of psychological positioning: "class and the posture it demanded had given her the self-assurance to feel no barrier was insurmountable... (90).
The degree to which Corinne has internalized Gram’s racist stereotypes is made even clearer in her disapproval of her youngest daughter’s choice of husband. Shelby is engaged to a man who is white, but who is also objectionably working class, and even worse, has chosen a “profession” that would have had to signify to Corinne everything she most fears about her race, under Gram’s instruction. It would follow that Corinne cannot even begin to comprehend how a “real white” man could be interested in (to her) a low-down musical form like jazz when he could be anything that the white world admired.

Whatever the explanation, she refused to concede a shred of inherent dignity to banging on a piano like a monkey while a bunch of liquored-up or smoked-up or hopped-up junkies thrashed around at a Harlem rent party, sweating on everyone and everything and howling at the moon as if all good sense had escaped them. Corinne took another long sip of her vodka tonic and leaned back in her chair. No, she just couldn’t see it (216).

Caroline Shelby (Gram), the southern, blue-blooded aristocrat, looks upon her great-granddaughter Shelby Coles, who, although she is descended from slaves on the paternal side, is the image of her own face. After three generations of carefully monitored marriages, Shelby’s hair, eyes, and skin are literally Gram’s (physical) mirror image. Therefore, Gram’s rejection of great-great granddaughter Laurie because she shows color, is a rejection of her own self. The healing process Gram and Shelby undergo, but for opposite reasons, requires a new consciousness in line with the novel’s central meaning, that love is colorblind.

Prior to this positive, if not idealistic resolution, both Shelby and Gram are portrayed early in The Wedding with a false consciousness about the forthcoming marriage. Gram’s goal is to bleach the line back to white. By carefully controlled mating between light-skinned partners, she had hoped to return to “living white” by eventually leaving her family who can never be “white” enough for her despite their wealth and position. Thus, she supports Shelby’s inter-racial marriage to Meade for exactly this misguided reason—because he is “real” white and may finally grant Gram her wish. Shelby, on the other hand, begins to doubt her choice of Meade when first her sister Liz censures her for “turning [her] back on [her] race” and then her father cautions her not to distrust “Negro men” because of his mistakes (Wedding 101, 201). Shelby also wonders if her choice is based
in sexual fear, that she would not be able to satisfy the legendarily potent black male, challenging her to consider Lute McNeil instead. Consequently, Shelby subjects herself to Lute's manipulation of race loyalty while, unknown to her, he is married, and to a white woman (240).

Lute McNeil's deceptions, however, lead only to the death of his heart's child. Tragically, Tina's own father accidentally runs her over. Her care has been neglected because of his fixation on Shelby Coles' white skin and upper-class lifestyle and his determination to crash through the barrier of class in the Oval. Secretly married to a wealthy white woman whom he loathes and from whom he has demanded a divorce, Lute cannot get from Della what he desires from marriage to Shelby. Both have the right class status, but only Shelby has it among blacks where his three honey-colored daughters could be accepted completely, unlike in the white world, despite their physical resemblance. Through the child's sacrificial death, Gram and Shelby realize the limitations of their perceptions; both are led to choices based not in fear but in love.

In West's final cosmology, it is only love that has the power to transform. Love's power, as the only meaningful basis for identity, community, marriage, and life, is evident in the biblical passage West chose to inform her text. 1 Corinthians 13:4-7, her epigram in The Wedding, places love (charity) at the center of her fictional creation, just as her novel places her as a writer within the revitalized Christian humanist tradition of certain black writers of the post-1960s.

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Re-envisioning the nineteenth-century domestic novel bound this twentieth-century writer's narrative to the moral nexus of the sentimental form, the Bible, and, by allusion, to the spiritual values of a former slave, great-grandfather Preacher Coles. His parable of Moses' call to love leaves the reader with a graphic illustration of God's view of racist practitioners. Far from elevating the detractors of the Ethiopian woman, God made them
untouchable. "Love" also signifies the concluding story in West's final collection of work published just after *The Wedding*. In it she shares the wisdom of her eighty-eight years: "[The] act of love is not a natural instinct. .... The wanting to give is only learned by learning to love" (243).

III

Racial constructions of color, class, gender, and sexuality, as represented and clarified in West's novel of the 1990s, were more problematic during the period in which the work was actually begun, when the apprentice author was in her twenties. Any one of these limiting ideologies is sufficient to illustrate the exclusionary practices of New York's literary marketplace of the 1920s and '30s and, consequently, the need for alternative publishing outlets like *The Messenger, The Quill, Fire!!, Harlem, and Challenge/New Challenge.* The black periodical market of the 1920s, because of its own developing construction of race, was not ready to publicly encourage a dialogue about intra-racial colorism, in part because of its dependence upon a white audience. That would change during the 1960's Black Arts Movement when the audience for black writers had been re-envisioned. On the other hand, the modern New York publishing industry of mostly Jewish intellectuals and entrepreneurs, try as they might to foster creative expression more democratically, found primitivist, exoticist, and exceptionalist representations of blacks more marketable than West's form of domestic realism. The Marxist 1930s required of writers an ideological and economic interpretation of social class that West preferred to resist. The domestic genre, which she found compatible with her literary aims, was by now iconic of everything modern literature wanted not to be. By the mid-1980s when the Feminist Press had reprinted *The Living Is Easy* and

86 With the exception of the *Quill*, these are just the Harlem little magazines. Robert Bone considers *Messenger* (1917-1928) a little magazine (116).

87 Houghton Mifflin's interest in *Living* in 1948 may have been its Boston setting and the publisher's desire to break into the New York black publishing market after the success Harper and Bros.'s had with Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940), and earlier with the poetry of Countee Cullen and the fiction of Claude McKay, especially *Home to Harlem* (1928). Houghton Mifflin, publisher of Charles W. Chesnutt's first four major works (1899-1901), had only published the juvenile fiction of Arna Bontemps during the 1920s and '30s. It was far behind the
the mid-1990s when Doubleday had published *The Wedding*, market demands had changed and broadened.

Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen did write in the form of the domestic novel, or as Ann duCille would say "us[ing] the metaphor of coupling," but they did so to critique rather than to affirm the "social practices" and "gender conventions" of marriage, motherhood, and female economic dependence (87). Critics duCille and McLendon both concur that these writers were far more "modern" in their attitudes toward women's roles and sexuality, as well as consciously artistic in the crafting of their novels, than they are often given credit for. For duCille, Fauset especially was able to depict the "new woman" as unmarried working class or professional wage earner with an independent career and lifestyle, and not necessarily interested in "bourgeois marriages" (87). For McLendon, Larsen in particular portrays black women whose bourgeois socialization keeps them confined to "frustrations of repressed female desire" from which they wish to be free (*Politics of Color* 11). Even so, Fauset had to take her chances with small publishers. *There is Confusion* (1924) alone attracted a major Renaissance publisher, Boni & Liveright, but that can easily be explained by her connection to *The Crisis* during the peak of the new publishers' interest in black authors. Thereafter, Matthews and Marrot (London) and Stokes (New York) brought out *Plum Bun* (1928, 1929), *The Chinaberry Tree* (1931), and *Comedy* (1933). On the other hand, Nella Larsen, whose novels *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929) were even more critical of the domestic entrapment, and therefore more "modern," was able to interest Alfred A. Knopf with the help of Carl Van Vechten. The quality of Larsen's writing and the maturity of her craft certainly helped to make her work appealing to the accomplished white author and the major white publishing house.

Dorothy West's representation of hierarchies of color and class in her family of origin—and from a child's perspective—in the initial drafts of *The Wedding* and other of her short stories of the 1920s, posed a challenge to the currency of race consciousness as it was being promoted in the black periodical press, particularly *Crisis* and *Opportunity*. It is true that as a teenager herself she was preoccupied with her family's color prejudice and was

unable either to reveal her family's full history or to understand the connection between their enslavement and their color consciousness. However, hers is but one of several examples of writers like Wallace Thurman whose subject matter ran counter to the aims of the Renaissance leadership and therefore was undervalued or valued for the wrong reasons.

Richard Bruce Nugent's representation of homosexuality during the 1920s serves as a parallel example. He says of his poem "Shadow," published in *Crisis,* that it was mistakenly praised as a "race poem." He found it amusing as he had meant "Shadow" to be about sexual—rather than racial—stigmas.88 It is important to use Nugent as a reference point in this regard because along with Helene Johnson, Zora Neale Hurston, and Wallace Thurman, he was one of West's closest intimates. Perhaps, with the exception of Hurston, this group was unrepresentative of the younger writers because each had deeply felt issues about color. Yet all the members of West's group were an integral part of the Renaissance's inner circle of young black writers, and when they provided the leadership for circumventing the older black leadership's role in choosing what would be published of theirs, they did so with the full support of their colleagues, to a person.

Thus, when the young Langston Hughes boldly asserted in his *Nation* essay, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," "We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame [emphasis mine]" (693), his rhetorical gesture of inclusion, generous as it was, did not go unnoticed nor was the response to it homogeneous. It was clear to some that Hughes spoke from the body of a man light enough to pass for Mexican. Indeed, it was Nugent's view that Hughes could serve as spokesman for the "Negro in America" precisely because he had the right "color, hair, and name." Nugent called Hughes' subjectivity a "divine right" because it was similar to his own, and, at least in his perception, it ensured a more secure social position within certain sectors of the black community.89 Nugent may have been guilty of oversimplifying a more complex issue for Hughes, but by the same token he was playing the same role for

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Thurman and West as he suggested Hughes was trying to do for the whole "Negro" race, speaking for them. By the time of *The Wedding*, West was able to articulate a view similar to Nugent's through her character Liz Coles: "Race relations and class distinctions and color differences are too subtle for any dim view of them" (94).

Writers like Dorothy West and Wallace Thurman had experienced enough of the bitter demarcations of color prejudice within their families, as is detailed in later chapters, and in some quarters of the black middle class, to question the benefit of emphasizing racial awareness and racial selves in their writing. Nugent, a self-proclaimed product of "divine right," relates how he at first refused to meet Thurman, based entirely on Thurman's color in order to illustrate what a person of Thurman's color and background was up against. Langston Hughes, playing the part of the host, wanted to introduce Nugent to Thurman at the Harlem YMCA. Because of his upbringing, Nugent considered Thurman "too black" even to make acquaintance with. Almost immediately, Nugent says he regretted his racially motivated response. He apologized and soon after became Thurman's close friend. Indeed, Nugent speaks at considerable length about the divine right of "color, hair, and name" in regard to the black middle class of Washington, D.C., of which he claims he and Hughes were members.

Thurman, because of his color, had dubbed the few dark-skinned literati like himself—Countee Cullen, Claude McKay, Gwendolyn Bennett, Zora Neale Hurston, and Dorothy West—"Harlem Cinderellas," and he pioneered writing in fiction about both intra-racial color prejudice and homosexuality. He died tragically at age thirty-two before he could find his suitable prince. Many years later in *The Wedding*, West finally came to terms—at least fictionally—with the dilemma of the "tragic shadow" of colorism without ever mentioning it by name. In her personal life, she never married. She never bore the child she said she desired. She never openly discussed

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91 Thurman used "Black Cinderella" and "Harlem Cinderella," interchangeably for his play, part of the proposed trilogy about black life he was writing with Virginia Venable, William Jourdan Rapp's wife. The trilogy itself, titled, variously, "Black Belt," "Black Mecca," and "Color Parade," was to include: "Harlem" (great migration) "Jeremiah the Magnificent" (Marcus Garvey and the UNIA), and "Harlem Cinderella" (intra-racial colorism and passing) (Klotman, "Wallace Henry Thurman" 267-268).
92 Nugent made homosexuality the subject of his stream of consciousness story "Smoke, Lilies, and Jade" (Fire!! 33-39); Hurston's "Color Struck" (Fire!! 7-14) was about intra-racial colorism; Bennett's "Wedding Day" (Fire!! 25-28) was about white racism.
her sexuality, her lifestyle, or any love relationships, other than those with men. She was in her seventies when the Feminist Press reissued The Living Is Easy. She was in her late eighties when she became a best-selling author. Not surprisingly, the 1920's public discourse on race and the private reality of race in individual lives existed in tension with one another for writers like Wallace Thurman and Dorothy West. The potential for racial disclosure and affirmation were both enabling and disabling for West in the youthful beginning of her career. Ultimately, the experience stifled rather than empowered creativity.

West's upbringing in Boston, between 1907 and 1926, mirrors the larger ambivalence over race, where the action does not always suit the word. To begin with, she was raised to understand "culture" as a product of one's family life and one's immediate environment, socialization, and social class—be it Boston or Eatonville, Florida. According to West, her mother always said she did not believe in being "colored." She wanted to teach her daughter that people are most of all human beings. As young Dorothy had no private discourse of race to rely upon, she believed her mother without understanding the implication of Rachel West's logic, that if "human beings" were not "colored," they must be "white." Although, according to the daughter, her mother recognized racial prejudice for what it was, she seemed not to understand how influenced by social hierarchies she was. West's white-skinned mother herself never experienced prejudice because of her color; and as Dorothy was the only family member who showed color, Rachel West's solution to racial encounters was to tell her daughter to simply rise above them. The conflict in this point of view for the daughter, was that in inter-racial settings, at least, the practice was not effective, not even in middle-class Boston. As West would express the dilemma in her first novel: "identical dress, houses, and accents did not make Simeon a Bostonian" because of his color (Living 122).

Privately, the daughter also witnessed a contradictory racial drama played out at home between her parents. It brought much personal pain and a divided loyalty—to her mother and most especially to herself. West's beautiful mother, young enough to be her husband's daughter, is portrayed fictionally as using her youth, sexuality, and fair coloring first to attract and then to control her very dark-skinned and intellectually inferior husband. These

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93Mae Gwendolyn Henderson's words ("Portrait of Wallace Thurman" 148).
were the trump cards (that unknown to her daughter) Rachel West had learned from white society. The discourse of the equally dark-skinned daughter, in her short stories, also exposes the mother’s ambivalence toward her daughter and her bias towards her lighter and white-skinned nieces and nephew. The daughter had intuited at an early age that “[t]he thing [missing between the mother and daughter] was a sense of oneness,” as West expresses it in Living (222). Thus, by the time the author was forty, she must have begun to understand some of her mother’s shortcomings, yet her fictional insight about her mother’s estrangement from her is written from the mother’s perspective.

In West’s early literary representations, only intelligence is race free, according to the fictional mother. Thus, in “An Unimportant Man” and in Living, the antidote to a woman’s less than perfect physical beauty is the cultivation of the mind through rigorous education and the pursuit of an ambitious profession. Interestingly, these are the same remedies given writer June Jordan by her father. Apparently perceiving the inevitability of her physical shortcomings, West followed part of her mother’s advice and chose writing as a vocation. She also tried college but was unable to complete a degree. Her creative spirit, it seems, led her to desire a greater participation in life rather than a formal study of it, a tension she explores in the early fiction. The lack of any substantial college training or a college degree became, later in life, yet another obstacle for the young writer, as it had been for Wallace Thurman who invented most of his college background (van Notten, Chapter 2). Photographs of West as a young woman show her to be quite beautiful, as do comments by her friends in letters. Thus, one can only assume that being the wrong color was her specific shortcoming.

West’s understanding of how she came to be a writer is equally ambivalent, as she gave various accounts. In a 1995 interview, for example, she tells about how and when she began to write by describing a racial incident, and not motherly advice. At ten, she says, white classmates shamed her before her white-skinned cousins, Helene and Eugenia, by directing a racial slur at her. Thereafter, she avoided the schoolyard at recess. “When it was playtime, I said I didn’t want to go. I used writing as an excuse for not going out to play. That was the beginning of my writing” (Messud 7). Whether or not this is a true recollection, given that the writer was in her nineties.
when she shared this memory, is not important. Her need to share it so near the end of her life is the part that is significant.

Despite her shortcomings, Rachel West, according to her daughter, did her best to generate a positive frame of reference for young Dorothy and the two nieces and one nephew partially in her care. West says so in several of her short sketches and reminiscences, particularly "Memories of a Black Childhood," in \textit{The Richer. The Poorer}. However, when the same material is fictionalized, West depicts her mother as feeling that "some part of her felt severed, her self-identity with her daughter" (\textit{Living} 222). Yet the large, blended, extended family that Rachel West cultivated and craved modeled at least a representation of wholeness. In terms of a group identity, the family matrix was mutually supportive and encouraging to all of its members. As Rachel West (Cleo Judson) surrounds herself with her sisters, one could say to remind herself of the "whiteness" her daughter seems to belie, the daughter (Judy Judson) envisions herself as being the center of the younger generation's love. She constructs, as well, a mother surrogate in a cousin, (Helene Johnson), who, finally, loves her because of her color. The younger generation's presence within the extended family of mostly Benson aunts (the Jericho sisters) allowed the children to move outside the circle of the mother's influence—when it seemed hurtful.

West duplicated this close supportive unit in her choice of Harlem friends. They were as open and accepting of her as any people she would ever meet. Her cousin Helene Johnson, the fictional cousin who loved her because of what made her unique, was also a member of the inner circle of young Harlem writers. That is why, perhaps, the expectations of New York's black and white publishing industries during the 1920s and '30s were not what the young West had imagined them to be and had created a conflicted literary marketplace for her work.

Both \textit{Crisis} and \textit{Opportunity} advocated art as an instrument in the advancement of the race and black culture as the basis for black art. Robert Bone calls this drive toward cultural autonomy—in the mining of "racial elements" for literary expression—"cultural dualism" (61-62). Neither periodical could accommodate writers like West.\textsuperscript{94} \textit{Crisis}, in particular, encouraged literary production \textit{en masse} among black writers; yet, not surprisingly, it chiefly endorsed representations of positive racial identification. It was almost silent on the
subject of color prejudice within the race. Had there been more openness about the roots of this understandably reactionary yet highly destructive social practice, perhaps West could have been healed much earlier in her life and not trapped for so long in self-effacing thinking. Conversely, white publishers like Knopf, Harcourt, and Harper's who seemed receptive to works by black authors about black life, largely encouraged representations of blacks that perpetuated them as "other." Unlike the gentlemen publishers of the nineteenth century that Susan Coultrap-McQuin has detailed in her book *Doing Literary Business: American Women Writers in the Nineteenth Century* (1990), the modern white press did not cultivate women writers like Susan Warner, Fannie Fern, and Harriet Beecher Stowe and the enormous female readership who favored the personal and social concerns of the domestic sphere in the shaping of women's lives. The market, in the 1920s just was not there, they believed.

With remarkable zeal and integrity, and with deep personal motives, West insisted upon freedom of expression in art. She dealt in issues of the heart and soul, including the restricted, the repressed, and the taboo. In spite of the prevailing publishing climate, West maintained her vision that the everyday personal and social experiences are the most important in life. They most reflect and provide the potential for the healing power of love. West found the heritage of domestic realism compatible with her aims, even as she had no desire to proselytize.

The one Harlem little magazine of the early Renaissance that offered uncensored content came too early for West's participation. Barely nineteen when she moved to Harlem in the fall of 1926, she had nothing in hand to contribute to Wallace Thurman's *Fire!!*, published in November 1926, only a month after her arrival. "The Typewriter" had already won a prize in the 1926 *Opportunity* contest; and Thurman, a Messenger editor, had already taken "Hannah Byde" (July 1926). The one-issue magazine *Fire!!* was brimming with the taboo subjects of colorism, miscegenation, prostitution, adultery, homosexuality, *et al.* "Little sister," as West was affectionately known, would have found congenial company in the publication with Zora Neale Hurston, Gwendolyn Bennett,

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94 *Opportunity* took only "The Typewriter" in 1926.
95 The two blockbusters of the 1920s were Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven* (Knopf, 1925) and McKay's *Home to Harlem* (Harcourt, 1928). Hughes' *The Weary Blues*, Van Vechten "Introduction" (Knopf, 1926), although not as popular, still met the criteria.
Richard Bruce Nugent, and Thurman in their uninhibited exploration of black life.

Any one of West's forthcoming short stories would have been suitable for Fire!!. "An Unimportant Man," "Prologue to a Life," "Funeral," even though not sensational in content, were nevertheless problematic portrayals of black family life as West knew it, but they were not yet ready for publication. These stories examine loveless marriages between dark-skinned husbands (who dream about their dark lost first loves) "trapped" in marriages to passionless "golden brides" they come to hate, or they are about marriages between high yellow women disgusted with their brutish "nigger" husbands whom they cannot leave because of their financial dependence. They are about middle-class pretensions and ambitions; about light-skinned mothers who are disappointed with their darker daughters whose spirits are thereby broken. What they all have in common is an unrelenting exposure of black middle-class color prejudice. West would self-publish all three in the Boston little magazine The Quill in 1928 and 1929. By then Fire!! had become Harlem and had lost most of its heat.

Subsequently, West developed her publishing outlet Challenge/New Challenge—like Thurman—as much to compensate for her own lost literary time during the 1920s as to provide an accessible venue for herself and other aspiring writers unable to get published. Before 1934, she had been able to publish only one short story in a mainstream periodical. "The Typewriter" was different enough from the above three stories to interest Opportunity. Its sympathetic male protagonist and his personal defeat because of white racism was an acceptable story line. Otherwise, West depended upon The Saturday Evening Quill for publication. She and her cousin Helene Johnson had both been members of Boston's Quill Club in 1925, having been invited to join by Quill editor Eugene Gordon, a Boston Post short story editor and stringer for the Messenger.

Helene Johnson, unlike her cousin, had no trouble getting her poetry published regularly in Opportunity, so she did not depend upon self-publication.

West's worldview would change over time, as would her fictional representation of the potential for black

96 Thones in the latter two stories find fuller expression in Living.
97 Harlem Vol. 1, No. 1 (Nov. 1928) was Thurman's second attempt at independent publication, too mainstream in format to be genuinely a little magazine.
98 West says that from ages fourteen to sixteen she published stories in the Boston Post and won cash prizes.
people to make happy marriages and happy lives. Gwendolyn Bennett's "Wedding Day: A Story" (Fire!! 1926) may have influenced the author's final fictional work. One could speculate that when West revised The Wedding in the mid-1980s, she rewrote and inverted "Wedding Day" as a testament to her own emancipation from a previously deterministic predisposition. The very dark bridegroom Paul Watson, in Bennett's story, would not have to be jilted on his wedding day by the white "street woman" who despite her own low social status believed that it was she who could dispose of him at will. Paul Watson would not have to be taken in by this woman in the first place to begin a relationship against his own better judgment.

The non-traditional subject matter of West's work corresponded with her non-traditional lifestyle during the 1920s. She was not, however, avant-garde in the libertine manner of Bruce Nugent, who claims to have understood "the underworld of homosexuality," among other things (tape 2, side 2). Nor was she as bohemian as Hurston was. Yet undeniably, West was attracted to the bohemian lifestyle and its participants for a time and they to her. Nugent, who knew West well, includes her in the "inner circle" of younger Harlem writers whom he defined as being "different" from the rest of the younger generation black writers, like Arna Bontemps. The latter's serious deportment seemed to exclude him, in Nugent's view (tape 2, side 2). "I was a part of a little group called Niggerati, named by Wallie or Zora," Nugent claims proudly. "So too was Dorothy" (tape 2, side 2).

In temperament and in lifestyle, West was actually more like Countee Cullen who did become a good friend and even proposed marriage. To borrow Toni Morrison's term, the "unspeakable," in this case homosexuality, was to remain "unspoken" in her life as it was to remain unspoken in his life. Like Cullen, West dealt with her sexual orientation obliquely, in her private life and in letters to and a relationship with Langston Hughes. In fact, only Nugent would state unequivocally: "You see, I am a homosexual" and could claim he was never "in the closet" so to speak (tape 2, side 2). Nugent and Cullen both married. West did not despite proposals of marriage from at least four men, including Cullen, Nugent, Henry Moon, and Claude McKay. Although she expressed a strong desire to have children, she chose to live with her mother and female roommates and remained childless.

Those stories do not appear in her papers at Radcliffe (Richer, Poorer 1-2).

99Henry Louis Gates, Jr., says The Wedding was based on a miscegenous relationship involving West's niece.

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Likewise, West's goal in discussing colorism was never for sensational effect but to arrive at domestic harmony. Thus, the sentimental genre was well suited to her. Although considered conservative in content, it was still a rebel genre for women—because women were not supposed to write, and particularly not black women.

Not surprisingly, with pigmentation as a starting point for identity, West's early fictional representations of autonomous selves, of gender, and even of creativity are unstable. Her earliest fiction explores the effects of poverty on the realization of potential and only indirectly the effect of color on a character's psyche. Once in Harlem, however, West created fictional daughters with perceptions of loss—of mother love, of self-esteem, of gender security. These dark-skinned daughters replicated the psychological wounding of colorism. An early characterization of Lily the artist and Lily the bereaved mother in an unpublished manuscript tellingly shows West's conflation of creativity with mother-loss.100

Racial issues also played themselves out in the larger community of the literary circles that made up the literary marketplace. Ideologies of race and then class came into play even within West's own social group. These limiting ideologies influenced her inner circle of friends, the younger literati with whom she most associated, for such ideologies seemed to govern publication in the literary marketplace. For a few years, West's little magazine helped keep alive her hunger for authorship and a public self. However, the tide would turn when Richard Wright worked his way from Chicago to New York and onto the last issue of New Challenge in 1937. As assistant editor, he used the magazine as a springboard for his own views and those of his Chicago colleagues. His powerful conflation of race with class ended West's independent publishing endeavor and her stay in Harlem. She disbanded New Challenge and within eight years had moved back permanently to Martha's Vineyard.

The discourse of class, as she understood it during the 1930s, seemed to provide West with a temporary safe haven where she could escape the public emphasis on racial self-consciousness. Living in Soviet Russia not long after the Bolshevik upheaval allowed West to observe a social situation in which class took precedence over race.

("Beyond the Color Line" 82).

100 West's "Part One" was adapted into "Prologue to a Life."
Removed from the subjectivity of race, West found a justification and a precedent for investigating intra-racial classism as the more significant factor in establishing a personal and social identity. Concentrating on the dynamics of group socialization, she formulated a more personal understanding of social class, less rigidly dependent upon the economics of Marxism than the construction of race. She did not, however, ever support the propagandistic impulse of Marxism nor did she believe in its relevance to art. Richard Wright, a member of a new generation, did. His ideas seemed to provide a direction for black writing quite unlike her own.

West's approach also provided the catalyst for the founding of her little magazine. She hoped to create a market for herself and other writers who were not preoccupied with racial ideologies and doctrinaire Marxism. During the Depression and in keeping with the 1930s, her model for Challenge was not Thurman's "blue book-style" Fire!! whose intention was to shock and speak the unspeakable. When planning for Fire!!, Bruce Nugent claims: "Wallie and I said something homosexual should be written" (Tape 2, Side 1). Moreover, that unorthodox desire brought them all the scandal they expected and desired. Instead, West followed the basic format of the tamer Columbia University literary magazine New Copy. Its new editorial policy was to accept unpublished work that had "interest for readers" but didn't fit "any contemporary periodical market." Before 1929, Copy took previously published work that had an audience.

While still a Boston teenager, West decided to write for the stage after attending her first play at the Tremont Theatre. She would soon learn that the New York theater during the decade of the twenties was ready for new work by "native dramatists."101 In her youthful exuberance, she even promised a script to actress Irene Bordoni, who had provided her with tickets to her first matinee and with whom she corresponded and to whom she often sent flowers following a performance. She admired enormously actress Rose McClendon, who played Serena in Porgy, and courted her friendship by sending frequent complimentary notes and roses on opening night. She planned to organize a Little Theater movement with Maud Cuney-Hare at the Allied Art Center that Cuney-Hare directed in Boston. She even enrolled in a play writing class at Columbia. However, when West applied for the

101 "The Emergence of Eleanor" was West's first play written at age seventeen.
position of writer at the New York Theater Guild, she got a small part in Porgy instead. The Theater Guild's production of DuBose and Dorothy Heyward's Porgy, was part of a shift away from "foreign drama" to "American drama" and well-suited to West's interest both in American plays, her mother's childhood in South Carolina, and her family roots.

Whatever the reason for West's interest in the play, it consumed her professional life for some time and shifted her focus from writing plays to performing in them. Interestingly, it was the role of Bess, played by Evelyn Ellis, which called for the antithesis of the usual white- or high-yellow-skinned actress usually cast in prominent dramatic roles. The character of Crown's Bess, the heroine, is described as "very black, [with] wide nostrils, and large but well-formed mouth" (Mantle 212). On the other hand, Serena, played by the light-skinned Rose McClendon, is described as "a self-respecting 'white folks' Negress" (212).

West's role in Porgy had a lasting effect upon her. The cast provided work for fifty-three Harlemites and was made up of mostly dark-skinned blacks like West and Thurman, who also had a part in the first production. The story line in Porgy of southern rural blacks before the great migration to the North directly influenced her first novel. It took its title from the lyrics of the song "Summertime" that was created for the later Gershwin opera Porgy and Bess (1935). "Summertime," the words go, "and the living is easy/fish are jumping/and the cotton is high." The Living Is Easy inverts the meaning of Porgy as it chronicles West's mother's move from South Carolina to Boston and the effect on young Judy Judson of her mother's dislocation and class prejudice on the extended family of aunts and their offspring who are brought to the North by their sister and aunt, respectively, Cleo Judson.

West's initial experience of play-acting went beyond the obvious excitement of appearing before an audience in a hit play. It also provided a means by which to try on new identities. Her walk-on role in the original Porgy stage production in Harlem (1927) and later in the touring company in London (1929), and her screen role in the

102 The original stage show of DuBose and Dorothy Heyward's Porgy was Oct. 10, 1927 at the New York Theatre Guild. It dealt with the lives of Charleston blacks who lived in a Gullah-speaking tenement neighborhood known as Catfish Row, as most of the men were fishermen (MacGowan 208, 210, 211, 216).
never completed Mescalaboom Film Company's *Black and White*, in Soviet Russia (1932), provided the initiation.

Unlike the mulatto who can experiment with different racial identities, West could not pass for white; she could not inhabit another ethnic or cultural community in disguise. To try on new identities she had to engage in the role of actress or writer/artist, with which she was already experimenting. Playing roles may have at first provided an unexpected substitute. During her stay in Soviet Russia, West mentions in a letter that she is reading James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*. Originally published in 1912, it had been reissued in 1927 and is only one of two books West mentions in her correspondence. The novella is about a mulatto character who, when he becomes upper-middle class, moves permanently into white society for the prosperity of his family—but not without a few regrets, like the loss of his own musical satisfaction and cultural mooring. For a writer who seldom talked about the books she read, the admission seems more than a coincidence.

What may have started as a means toward reconciliation, or as a coping strategy, became, for a time, role-playing, until the role merged with her real life. Her self-presentation in letters as Langston Hughes' lover in Russia, given his alleged homosexuality and her virginity afterward, might be seen as a kind of dress rehearsal. At the very least, it may have allowed West the possibility of safely enacting her sexual desires and the possibility of motherhood. Likewise, West's unpublicized account (except to Hughes) of her relationship with Mildred Jones in the 1930s and her unexpressed relationship with Marion Minus thereafter may have allowed her the necessary escape from motherhood and marriage. During the 1980s, West may even have role played her own fictional creations. Her interviews seem to mix fact and fiction through over-identification with her characters'

104"...after my first feeling for Mildred Jones had passed, my love for you grew very sturdily...." and "...this is the first time I have had the stamina to admit to myself that I do not, and I do not remember when I did, want her as she wants me." After the initial separation from Mildred Jones because of Hughes, West continued to share a room with her during the duration in Russia (DW to Langston Hughes, 27 Oct. [1932], LHP, West Folder, B164, JWJ, BLYU).

105Marion Minus, from Chicago, began corresponding with West on the advice of James Weldon Johnson during the initial stages of *Challenge*, while Minus was teaching at Fisk. Minus later lived with West in New

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physical appearance, decorum, neighborhood, educational attainment, and economic independence—the indicators of social status in the black community. One could argue that this role playing became a means to an identity for a woman seeking wholeness and perhaps perceiving her own life accomplishments as inadequate. Whatever the case, clearly her most enduring role was that of writer-author, which she took with her to her death.

In the early years of her career, West's search for a viable artistic self finds expression in the vast arena of New York's literary marketplace. Her search intersects with that of many others of the younger new Negro writers of the 1920s and '30s, especially her closest friends, Helene Johnson, Wallace Thurman, Zora Neale Hurston, Bruce Nugent, Countee Cullen, and Harold Jackman. West's struggles and successes—like those of her colleagues and intimates—illustrate how social, economic, and literary factors influence individual identity and artistic achievement. West, like others, used the literary marketplace as a way of exploring, defining, and developing a self.

Examining Dorothy West's literary search and her friendship with Wallace Thurman during the initial period of the Harlem Renaissance paves the way for a more heterogeneous understanding of the important literary nexus of modern black writing. The counter discourse of class and cultural pluralism and the contributions of little magazines to the cultural and artistic significance of the Harlem Renaissance may well be undervalued. Although concerned with both aesthetics and race, black little magazines avoid the dogma of manifestoes. They are not invested in the production of hegemony, as is often the case with single texts or advocates. In these alternative literary venues, artistic freedom and publication are the goals rather than the promotion of racial theories or discourses of race that often silenced other speakers.

Exploring the literary marketplace for black writers in Harlem during the 1920s and '30s means also examining biographies. The history of the production and publication of The Wedding itself illustrates the importance of a writer's connections, of subject matter, and of timing to artistic achievement and to publication.

itself. Harlem's literary production may be seen as a microcosm of the greater social and cultural environment of the times. Every writer of the Harlem Renaissance wrestled artistically with the dynamics of whether or not to express racial identity. Each would come to terms with race and its relation to a personal sense of self and to the selves projected to the world. The writers' private and public experiences of color-as-race were significant factors in their literary representations, as were their individual conceptions of art and the artistic self.

Mary Helen Washington's "Preface" to West's collected works provides an example of how West's reputation as a New England writer is maintained. She writes:

West reminds me that there is a strong sense of place in African-American literature: the Middle Passage, Southern plantations, the urban North, Jim Crow railroads, the church—each place has required specific performances, created specific histories, and shaped specific cultural identities. In her focus on the places she knows well—especially Boston and Martha's Vineyard—which have rarely been written about in African-American literature, Dorothy West has complicated and expanded our knowledge of America. (xv)

Washington is right to underplay Harlem's "spirit of place" in West's formative literary career as Harlem better served male writers and "race men and women."

West is herself ambivalent on the subject of "place." She concludes The Richer, The Poorer, the last work she would ever publish, with a personal reminiscence called "Flight." In it she says: "I knew the Island was the home of my heart" (252). Yet, the manner in which she illustrates this claim for the Vineyard reads ambiguously. The Island may easily have been a necessary escape, as islands so often are. These small landmasses in the midst of great oceans are steeped in romantic lore and probably always will be. In the western literary imagination since Shakespeare, islands are practically synonymous with sites of refuge, seclusion, and chance encounters. Like the mythic island in The Tempest, Martha's Vineyard Island did hold out the same possibility for transformation. West, however, describes her return to Martha's Vineyard by air as an interrupted journey. In the manner of her presentation, she mirrors similar events and familiar imagery of an unusual mix of men who had influenced her life: Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and John F. Kennedy, Jr., through his mother.

[Note: West's death certificate reads "Writer-Author" for "occupation."]
In "The Flight," West is the "sole passenger" on a plane bound from Logan Airport to Martha's Vineyard Airport. The plane takes off but never arrives. The day, she writes, had been unexpectedly filled with snow, fog, ice, and considerable air turbulence—conditions so bad that the pilot was forced to fly by instrument and in "total invisibility" (249). Without even informing his passenger, the pilot circled and returned to Logan. "The front wheels had locked" West found out later (251). Under better weather conditions, the pilot would have taken the chance to complete the scheduled run but not, he said, in "zero visibility" (251). Pilot and passenger deplane and are met by a "stark white emergency vehicle" (251). West's response to the failed mission is telling: "I saw it as an undeserved punishment, a sort of slap in the face..." (251). The interrupted journey would only be complete once she rerouted herself on another airline, this time by way of New Bedford, Massachusetts.

Various elements in this story make it remarkable representative. This flight of no return is a chilling foreshadowing of the tragic event that took John F. Kennedy, Jr.'s life after the death of his mother, West's editor. The stark images of blinding whiteness in "Flight" call to mind the opening passages of Wright's Native Son, in the juxtaposition of the blizzard and the dark boy who loses his way. The very condition of invisibility, particularly as it relates to West's position of isolation within the plane, is her counterpart to Ellison's Invisible Man.

Harlem, West hoped, would be her home of the heart. Unfortunately, fate—or was it circumstance—decreed differently. Yet Harlem did serve West for a time as home, inspiration, and rite-of-passage from neophyte to professional woman of letters. Deeply disappointed with her inability to publish her manuscript "Where the Wild Grape Grows," West returned in the mid-1940s to her childhood retreat of Oak Bluffs and to her mother. Like the island in The Tempest, the Vineyard, she wanted to believe, possessed "magic" and "healing powers" "to prolong life and restore health" (n pag.). Here, art imitates life as West, who had steadfastly refused to write "colored books," experiences the dilemma of her fictional heroine Bea in the rejection of stories treating black life rather than race. In this coming of age and generational story, the basis for The Wedding, Bea is one of three
aging sisters. Her son is passing for white away from the Island, lost to his mother for a time, only to return. The mother says to him: "You know perfectly well what a colored book is.... People of my generation...don't approve of such books. We were brought up in the belief that a man is what he makes himself. I cannot admire books that say a man is what his color makes him and colored books do."\(^{108}\)

Current literary critics who believe in the importance of expressing a public racial self have been at the center of critical interpretations of the Harlem Renaissance and what can be called genuine "Negro literature." This analysis, especially since the Black Arts Movement's critique, has too often been made at the expense of much personal conflict for writers like Dorothy West and Wallace Thurman. Thurman would say that not enough attention was paid to "color," the key component of race, as he saw it John A. Williams finds a companion to Thurman's challenge to the racial politics of the Renaissance in LeRoi Jones' 1962 *Home: Social Essays.* "A Negro literature, to be a legitimate product of the Negro experience in America,' Jones writes, 'must get at that experience in exactly the terms America has proposed for it, in its most ruthless identity.'"

From this sentiment, Williams concludes for Thurman: "The Negro experience has as its taproot the condition of color" (287). In the "Elephant's Dance in Harlem," between 1925 and 1934, West says, when "everything mulatto was in," she believed—whether rightly or wrongly—that neither one fit the bill. Thurman did not have the personal resources to successfully resist taking it personally, and he died; West fought back and survived. It took until the 1960s for "black is beautiful" to include them, but this rhetoric, too, had for West its own threatening ideology. The new emphasis on blackness again served to exclude. She lived within a near-white family whom she loved. So, West managed her recovery on her own, on an Island, and in print.

Jazz aficionado Wynton Marsalis, in his commentary for Ken Burn's PBS documentary *Jazz,* for WGBH Boston (2000), puts a contemporary spin on the Jazz Age in Chicago, and, by extension, Harlem. He describes how white youth went up to the black clubs in Chicago to hear black musicians play the new music. They went

\(^{108}\)Ibid. C. Emory Jennings is male and has his mother's light coloring. Pierce Hunter, the son surrogate, is also male. This gendering is consistent with West's use of light-skinned mothers who desire male offspring who resemble them and not dark-skinned girls and with the construction of her alter egos, like Isaac Coles. The resolution to this characterization comes in *Wedding.*
because that was where jazz lived. "If you're a trumpet player, and you hear Louis Armstrong, you want to play like him—not because he's black, but because it's the greatest trumpet you've ever heard," says Marsallis (Jazz, Part III). Their parents did not condone this influence since they believed only white musicians could mentor white children. "That's how it is in the myth [of Cinderella], Marsallis goes on to say. The one who you keep out, and you push down..., that's the one you learn from, the one with the moral authority, with the gift. That's as old as night and day; that's as old as dust. And it's not about black and white. But here it is now—that same myth in black and white" (Jazz, Part III).

Dorothy West's personal quest for wholeness and the challenges she faced are emblematic of issues of humanity and self-acceptance. For West, the satisfaction of resolution did not come early; a whole lifetime would pass before the sweet victory of resolution was achieved. The triumph of West's personal and public accomplishments becomes all the more compelling when one considers her near the end of her life—a woman in her late eighties, all but forgotten by her antagonist the literary marketplace. Then, up from the Vineyard she rises, like the mythic phoenix, and tucked beneath her wing is her best-selling novel. Finally creating a "healing" narrative to cure the cultural "dis-ease" of color prejudice, West joined other spiritual sisters like Alice Walker and Toni Morrison who utilize words and their power as soothing curative balms to massage gently away, and ever away, emotional and physical pain and thereby heal the community and themselves. In so doing, West completed the circle of wholeness that had possessed and engaged her for ninety-one years.
CHAPTER II
FROM BOSTON TO HARLEM (PART ONE):
THE NEW ENGLAND BACKGROUND, 1907-1926

The challenge of childhood for Dorothy West was to overcome the condition of her parents and the wound she felt at not being mirrored by anyone in her family. Her first response was to blame her mother: "You wouldn't give me your beauty," she accused, "and you wouldn't give me my father's blue eyes" (Oral 186). Indeed, West's most distinct fictional alter ego, Judy Judson, believes as a child that her dark appearance amidst white "provoked a feeling of betrayal that even little people could assume the color associated with nighttime terrors" (Living 208). Whenever young Dorothy was seen with her mother, aunts, and cousins, it was assumed that she was not related to them. West's more mature response was to put the blame where it belonged, on racial slavery and its legacy. On her journey to wholeness, she came to understand that her "fair-skinned" relatives were different from her only because "they were the children of their masters." Even though their physical likeness had brought them certain "opportunities," "[i]t wasn't their color that made the [real] difference" (Oral 153-54), given the full range of discriminatory practices in a thoroughly racialized American society. Her solution, finally, to the destructive effect of color-consciousness within the black community was, as the darkest member of her family, to "always take up the cudgels for [the fair-skinned members]" and to assert with conviction that between the dark and the white was the whole of the black race.

The challenge to the biographer of reconstructing a reliable portrait of the artist and her early life in Boston is to get beyond Dorothy West's secrets and silences and to unravel fact from fiction in the written record. A private joke between mother and daughter was West's actual age. Even cousin Helene, "the same as my sister," West always claimed, did not know the exact year cousin Dorothy was born, only that she celebrated her birthday on June 2 (Oral 166). What mattered to the author was writing; the rest, she said, was unimportant.

West reentered literary scholarship of the 1980s with very public features. Her distinction then as the


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"only living member of the Harlem Renaissance" goes a long way towards explaining the phenomenon, but is woefully incomplete to profile the full significance of her life. And, for all the publicity, West has, like her fictional creation Cleo Judson in The Living Is Easy, maintained a largely "secret life" (3).\textsuperscript{110} An appealing persona of West has been fashioned from the Feminist Press notices and the various interviews with the elderly author; however, the complex production of an image rather than the presentation of a life has been the price of West's privacy.\textsuperscript{111}

The West who has been fabricated from the sketches, the interviews, and the oral history, when conflicting information is obscured, is a "well-educated," "privileged," reconstructed "proper Bostonian" with a penchant for ironic analysis of her class. Indeed, critic Mary Helen Washington's 1995 "Preface" to West's collected short stories, The Richer, The Poorer—distilled from an earlier interview of hers with West—provides a good summary of the legend. It is also a good place to start its deconstruction. Washington, an accomplished and perceptive scholar whose pioneering work helped to rescue West from near oblivion, inherited the predicament of West scholarship with its inexact biography; it is understandable that her work, as good as it is, requires some supplement.

Washington's biographical indulgence in the "Preface"—about her own entry into "Boston of the eighties" serves multiple purposes. It sheds light on the critic, Washington, and her subject, Dorothy West; on the status of "black women's literary history"; and, to some extent, on "the black bourgeoisie," all stated concerns of the scholarly introduction (xi). Washington expresses West's authorial dilemma at the same time as her own scholarly one when she writes: "I was new to the East Coast, living in Cambridge, teaching at the University of Massachusetts in Boston—and not sure I wanted to stay in a place where one was constantly being judged by social class, by family background, by academic credentials" (xi). Yet it is precisely in these three areas—of class, family, and education—that the Boston-born Dorothy West has become most fictional. Thus, Washington's comparative analysis of authorial and narrative voice in West's longer fiction reaches

\textsuperscript{110} A 1995 interview reveals West kept personal files in Oak Bluffs.

\textsuperscript{111} Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes maintained a similar secrecy about their private lives, according
conclusions that could be seen differently. Her interrogation of narrative perspective is a good place to begin.

West, Washington argues, departs from earlier black fiction by employing the "marginalized insider" rather than the "privileged narrator" (Preface xiii). She "both reflects and critiques the attitudes and ideals of the black bourgeoisie" because, as Washington implies, West herself simultaneously embodies and recreates conflicting cultural values (xii). A more accurate understanding of West's early years in Boston leads one to a different premise. In order for West to function both inside and outside her fiction as the "ambivalent insider" (xiii), she would have to have been a member of the black middle class, as would her mother, Rachel West. No biographical information exists to suggest that either is the case.

The myth of West's insider status—as a member of the rarified black community of people with "education, surrounded by other blacks of achievement and financial security"—can be summarized through Washington's "Preface" (xii). As regards social class: "By birth and breeding [West] is 'a proper Bostonian,' which, in the days of her youth, meant that she belonged to a genteel, aspiring middle class" (xii). As regards family background: "[Her father] Isaac West's prosperous business allowed the family to become among the first blacks to own vacation homes and to spend their summers on the island of Martha's Vineyard, specifically in Oak Bluffs, that part of the island that blacks claimed for their own" (xii). And as regards academic credentials: "Dorothy West attended the prestigious Girl's Latin School and Boston University and later the Columbia School of Journalism" (xii). While elements of truth exist in some, although not all, of these claims, none can be taken wholly at face value.

The source for much of the confusion about West's biography seems to be Adelaide M. Cromwell. Perhaps West's earliest contact during the period of her reclamation, Cromwell attests to a thirty-five year friendship with West that she says began "in connection with my work on the black upper class in Boston," in 1948 when the author was forty-one and already living at the Vineyard (Afterword 349-350).112 At that time, Cromwell was researching "the Negro upper class" of post-World War I Boston "as a topic for [her] biographers Robert Hemenway and Arnold Rampersad.

112 West expresses considerable acrimony toward Adelaide Cromwell (Gulliver) in handwritten, undated notes from among her papers at the Schlesinger, pointing to an estrangement at some point in the
dissertation in the late 1940s" (*The Other Brahmins* xi).\(^\text{113}\) When she began an Afro-American Studies Program at Boston University in the 1970s, she brought West to campus to lecture on the Harlem Renaissance, creating what Cromwell calls "an awakening for her, a prologue to her rediscovery" (Afterword 350). It is impossible to determine how early Cromwell began the biographical profile of West that she provides in the "Afterword" to *The Living Is Easy*, what other forms the profile has taken, or why it contains unsubstantiated information.\(^\text{114}\)

Clearly, Cromwell was an asset to West as well. She introduced the writer in person to a new generation of students of African-American literature after *Black World's* 1970 publication of West's essay on the Harlem Renaissance, "Elephant's Dance," had brought her name back into the public domain. The opportunity Cromwell provided for West to offer guest lectures periodically at Boston University over a period of six years was the appropriate follow-through for this Renaissance insider eager to share her experiences and her evaluation of this important period in black *belles lettres* that was just beginning to be of interest to scholars like Nathan Huggins. It also seems that Cromwell started the file that became the West Collection at the Mugar Library, Boston University. She then prodded the reluctant author to contribute to the special collection whenever she could. Along with Carl Van Vechten, Cromwell, up until the 1980s, was most responsible for West's decision to make a record of her participation and to centralize her papers (*Oral* 148-149). It would make sense that Cromwell also encouraged West to take up and finish the writing of the novel she had put down in the sixties that later became *The Wedding*.

Cromwell's 1982 "Afterword" to *The Living Is Easy*, published with the Feminist Press reprint, became a chief source of information about West for scholars and students. Cromwell seems to have had the relationship.


\(^\text{114}\) In "Appendix D: Research Data," Cromwell provides a copy of her questionnaire and the initials of the thirty-six interviewees, among whom was "D.W., daughter of one of Boston's successful businesswomen
only personal relationship with her subject and to have conducted the earliest interview with West, on 22 August 1950, when the author was in her early forties. By comparison, Genii Guinier's 1978 *Oral History* was taken when West was already seventy-one; by then, what the interviewer recorded was to a large extent fairly well rehearsed. By then, West had been lecturing on African-American literature and answering many of the same questions about the Harlem Renaissance and her group of writer friends that were asked again in the *Oral History* and other interviews. Mary Helen Washington's own 1980 interview was granted when the writer was seventy-three. A fading memory and a desire to fictionalize her past may have led West to embellish her account. Cromwell's remarks about the overlap of fact and fiction in *The Living Is Easy* are almost prophetic: "West took pains both to inform and to disguise," she says (359). One could also say the same for Cromwell's interweaving of fact with fiction in her portrait of West's life.

The fictional "irony" Washington points to in her critique of *The Living Is Easy* (Preface xiii) undercuts West's biography as well. The novel's "tone of ironic humor" comes first hand to its author, according to Washington. It is "learned from [West's] mother," and is used "to satirize the pretensions of the Boston black elite, especially their desire to distinguish themselves from 'ordinary' blacks" (xiii). The novel's narrator, like its author, breaks from the nineteenth-century tradition in black writing of the "privileged narrator," says Washington. The story is newly presented from the vantage point of the "marginalized insider" who is "both a fierce critic of the bourgeois life and a loyal daughter upholding the values of family and class" (xiii). Here, according to Washington, West follows in the tradition of writers contemporary with her, in works like James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* (1912) and Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928) (xiii). This imprecise mixture of biography and literary criticism—of author and narrator—in Washington's analysis is instructive. Because West's fiction is so autobiographical, even a critic as astute as Washington finally casts West as a fictional character herself. The novel's narrator may indeed function as a "marginalized insider"; West the author does not.

The real irony of the West family's status, as the fictional Judsons in *The Living Is Easy*, as well as in

[[sic?]], a novelist and a member of Boston's shrinking but still existent "old" Negro elite (244-53).
actual Boston society, may indeed be that the Wests were "ordinary" blacks—if the only other choice is "elite." Having made the black "middle class" synonymous with "elite" and "bourgeois," Washington leaves no room for the Wests to be of the upwardly mobile black working class with, for a time, a higher than average income, but with unrealized middle-class aspirations to status and educational accomplishment. Even in the text, Cleo Judson is referred to by the narrator as one of the "outlanders bringing their money where it was badly needed" (246). Neither of Dorothy West's parents was Boston born or bred, a seeming prerequisite to "gentility." West's story, according to a 1948 press release from Houghton Mifflin, "concerns the people who belonged or who longed to belong to the select few whose impregnable position had been established by Boston birth and genteel breeding." (1). In the same press release, West herself admits to a "Spartan upbringing in Boston [that] was a real stand-by" for her later life (2).

The real "story of privilege" that Washington refers to as the West's (Preface xiii), even in the text of The Living Is Easy, relates only to the Binneys and the Hartnetts and not to the Judsons or the Jericho sisters. Both Cromwell and West identify some of the real life equivalents of the characters, four of which are drawn from the real life Trotter family of Boston. Carter Binney is J.H. Lewis whose large Boston tailoring business (where Filenes now stands) employed fifty people. Carter's daughter Althea Binney is Bessie Trotter. Cole Hartnett, the Harvard medical student, is the brother of Bessie Trotter who became an M.D. (even though in the text he is Mr. Hartnett's son and marries Thea). Mr. Hartnett is Henry C. Turner who made a fortune boarding horses and carriages in his large livery stable belonging to wealthy whites. The most important character, Simeon Binney, is Harvard graduate Monroe Trotter who, along with George Forbes, started the anti-segregationist Boston Guardian (Afterword 359). Trotter was also a highly public critic of Booker T. Washington, who appears in the novel as Dean Galloway, the "Dean of a Negro

\[115\] Dr. Trotter did not like the portrayal of his family in Living, West says. "I went to his house to be praised for the book and he asked me, 'Do you know where I have your book?' I thought it was on the coffee table. 'In the attic and that's where it will stay.' I think the thing that offended him was that...I wrote...that they were poor" (Roses 48).

\[116\] West intended to make B.T.W. a "comical" figure in Living, "an old Darbie with the South in the mouth," placed among "handsome people," as she "was brought up to have contempt for [him]"; however, "it wouldn't write that way," she says. "He turned out "dignified" (Roses 49).
College" in the South (Living 257). Except for Galloway (BTW), these are "the other Brahmins" who owned homes in Cambridge, educated their children at Harvard, and were considered "an integral part of Boston society" (Cromwell 359; Roses 48; Oral 174).

The "outlanders," on the other hand, the Judsons and the Jericho sisters, like the Wests, have a distinctly different background. They move from a three-room rental in the South End, where they have lived for ten years, to a ten-room rental on the Roxbury line; Cleo dreads the thought of her husband's tasteless choice of cheap "Mission furniture" to fill the new house (Living 152). She presides over a single "society" event before she is forced to take in boarders in her rented house when her husband's business fails at the start of World War I. While the Judsons may be considered of "the nicer class of colored people," to whom Cleo constantly refers in order to distance herself from the black cotton belters recently arrived in Boston, they are not in the same social class as the Binneys and the Hartnetts. It is their middling status that replicates the Wests' actual situation in Roxbury and Oak Bluffs and that makes them such a fascinating study.

The most accurate of Cromwell's material on the West family's relationship to the fictional Judsons positions them as observers rather than as "Brahmin" members of the "fragile black community in [Boston]" (Afterword 358-59). "Northern blacks took pride in not living in a segregated society," Cromwell writes. "They were, however, an insular group, a black village, a world apart in a white city." To this Cromwell adds, "Dorothy West, an exception to this insularity, chronicled the secret city" because "she understood the values of this world" (358). It is just this liminality that makes West's point of view so important, and it is in this sense that her subjectivity and objectivity compete. About the Cleo Judson character, Cromwell argues: "As a strong, determined, controlling, beautiful woman of some means with an adoring husband, Cleo is new to black literature" (361). Cromwell completes her history of black Bostonians and The Living Is Easy with a discussion of the immigration patterns to the city, including the Wests' own:

The small group of blacks about whom Dorothy West wrote has all but disappeared in mythology and in fact. Ironically, few of these people had children, and those who did sought other environments in which to rear them. The black community today, however, is far from invisible—its growing size and complexity result not only from a continuing stream of southern migrants like Bart and Cleo but also from immigrants from Jamaica, Barbados, Cape Verde Islands, and,...Haiti. (361)
Much of the former "invisibility" of the small community Cromwell only alludes to had to do with color.

West does write about what Cromwell has described as an enclave of light-skinned black Brahmins, the community within a community, but she does so in juxtaposition with an even smaller and more significant community, that of a family, her family, and in particular a certain kind of black mother, her mother. As Cromwell rightly claims, *The Living Is Easy* is a story about a "strained marriage" from the perspective of the couple's only child (Afterword 357). In the text, Cleo Judson wants to be "accepted as an integral part of Boston society" based on her coloring and her income and lifestyle (*Living* 299). In real life, Rachel West was conflicted about not belonging to Boston society when she should have based on her color. Thus, it is the whiteness of the community of blacks making up the inner circle of family that is the focus of West's work. Then, her lens opens to take in the outer circle of light-skinned blacks that have formed a separate community. Even here, it is not the economics of the group that chiefly interests the darker daughter, Dorothy West. Her concern is with the phenomenon of being "near-white" within a select black world. The desire for access to economic upward mobility seems to come with white skin, as is Cleo Judson's experience; however, this somewhat artificial pass key has a negative effect upon those who reside within the circle because of birth and not color. It is in this particular sense that West is interested in the black middle class.

Mary Helen Washington's concluding analysis of *The Living Is Easy*, within the "Preface" to *The Richer, The Poorer*, is clearly limited by the fabrication of West's biography. Washington argues that "the figure of the [fictional] child Judy, ..., much like West herself, rejects her mother's [Rachel West/Cleo Judson] desire for status, money, and white acceptance..." (xiii). I agree with Washington's analysis to a point, but, the fictional mother in *The Living Is Easy* cannot be the same biological mother who, Washington has said earlier, "satirize[d] the pretensions of the Boston black elite, especially their desire to distinguish themselves from 'ordinary' blacks" (xiii). If she were, she would be Cleo Judson's alter ego.

This intertwining of erroneous fact with fiction serves to distort West's life and her family's actual
social status. In reality, Rachel West, unlike Cleo Judson, does desire the trappings of the middle class, without actually possessing them. Outside of the mention of some names of prominent black families by West in the interviews, however, no evidence exists that her mother aspires to—or could enter—a higher social class, or that she has a conscious conception of the black Boston elite, as Cleo Judson has. West more often has said: I come from the class of the genteel poor" (Oral 195). If, like the fictional narrator, West were the ironic fulfillment of Cleo Judson's desire, then she would function as, in Washington's words, "both a fierce critic of the bourgeois life and a loyal daughter upholding the values of family and class" (Preface xiii). Dorothy West, however, is not this loyal-daughter-critic. Rather, she depicts the hopes, frustrations, and failures of the black working class and the contradictions of class and color; and her short stories from the 1920s through the 1960s illustrate this contradiction.

Just how much Washington relied upon the 1978 Oral History is hard to say; but, clearly, the determination of social class comes partly from Genii Guinier's work as well. West told Guinier that her mother and a friend read the "society pages" in Boston and talked endlessly about the Boston social register and the yearly debutantes, which West laughingly claims they pronounced "deb-yoo-tantee," implying they were outsiders or even envious "wannabes" (193-94). The West family's connection to the Trotters is impossible to determine from West's correspondence. Claims about them show up only in the interviews: that Bessie Trotter was her mother's best friend and taught the two-year-old Dorothy her lessons (203), that Maud Trotter was her own godmother (203), and that one of the Miss Trotters unwittingly set fire to the West family's four-story residence at Martha's Vineyard (185). Perhaps West felt that given her family's alleged social position she should have known this important Boston family. Or, perhaps she was responding to her interviewer's agenda, desiring to please and to satisfy the expectation of her own importance. When, in the Guinier interview, West obviously wishes to discuss her debt to Grace Turner and her love and respect for Wallace Thurman, both of whom are completely unknown to the interviewer, West recognizes that Guinier "didn't sound very interested" (180). She responds instead to Guinier's several prompts to talk about Monroe Trotter (203), in spite of the fact that the interviewee finally admits to not "remember[ing] him so much"
(204). Even when West begins to talk about her dear friend Zora Neale Hurston—"my eyes can sometimes
fill with tears about Zora, because she was a very gifted person"—she says movingly, Guinier's response is to
change the subject. "We have to get together again and just talk a little bit about Zora Neale Hurston,
because...but not today" (171). Sadly, whatever West might have shared about Hurston and others who
meant so much to her is forever lost. The point is that much correspondence from Grace Turner, Wallace
Thurman, and Zora Neale Hurston attests to their friendship with the author, as do innumerable mentions of
all three of their names between other correspondents. The Trotter family, on the other hand, is not
mentioned a single time within the extensive correspondence that dates as far back as the earliest letters of
1912, so why do they assume such importance in the many West interviews, one might ask.

In many ways, the decade that rediscovered the aging author also created the desire for her. West
notes in her Oral History her utter surprise that after so many years of neglect, "there was an interest in black
women," making "the material that may have been unread for many years" suddenly important to scholars
(149). Perhaps the portrait of West that emerges during this period was influenced as much by the
expectations of the interviewers as by the anxieties of the interviewee that she measure up to her
contemporaries, especially Zora Neale Hurston, whose biography she knew well and whose work was in
demand, particularly after Alice Walker's efforts and Robert Hemenway's 1977 biography (171, 184-85).

During the 1980s and 1990s, feminist theorists, literary critics, and historians, in an attempt to open
up the literary canon, challenged previous scholarship by male critics of the Harlem Renaissance, going back
as far as 1937. Sterling Brown, Robert Bone, and Houston Baker are chiefly responsible for excluding,
obscuring, or distorting the contributions of many black women writers during the 1920s and '30s. First, the
decentering of the blues and folk aesthetic important to many post-sixties black writers and critics as the
representative signifiers of "blackness,"\textsuperscript{117} was necessary to make room for writers who used other
representational strategies. The decentering of Sterling Brown's all male "Harlem School," which he

\textsuperscript{117}See also Houston A. Baker, Jr., \textit{Afro-American Poetics: Revisions of Harlem and the Black Aesthetic}
(1988); Amiri Baraka, \textit{Blues People: Negro Music in White America} (1963); Bernard Bell, \textit{The Folk Roots of
Contemporary Afro-American Poetry} (1974); Craig Hansen Werner, \"Laying the Changes: From Afro-
identified in *The Negro in American Fiction* (1937), was also necessary to the re-evaluation of women writers like Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen who had been consigned to the lower rungs of infamy for writing "Bourgeois Realism" or the passe "Tragic Mulatto Passes for White" (139-145). Robert Bone, in *The Negro Novel in America* (1958; rev. ed. 1965), followed suit by placing Fauset and Larsen into "The Rear Guard" (95, 101-106).

Dorothy West, in her new position as a "marginalized insider" and a woman writer, could now supplement Brown's gendered list of black writers of the important "Urban Scene" (131-145). More importantly, she could join the revisionists' Fauset and Larsen who interrogated color and class rather than merely re-representing it. As West was neither a southern blues woman nor a bourgeois snob, she could, like Fauset and Larsen, be said to embody the middle-class, urban black woman writer sensitive to class and racial strata in her creation of character, the direction that Mary Helen Washington has taken West criticism. However, if one goes back to the beginning of West's career, to the stories she wrote during the Harlem Renaissance, her work fits better alongside "urban realist" writers like Wallace Thurman, who in Brown's "In Opposition" category (145-148), satirize or critique "one of the sorest points of the Negro Bourgeoisie, its color snobbishness" (146).

Robert Bone was more insightful in his criticism of West, than of Fauset and Larsen, perhaps because he was more nearly her contemporary and she was writing in a new decade. The "minor Renaissance figure who was later to write an important novel called *The Living Is Easy* (1948)," according to Bone (116), West had primarily "a Renaissance consciousness" (188), even into the 1940s. She joined the ranks of the "most promising" writers of "postwar Negro fiction," (171) Bone argues. More significant than her "minor" status was the important category in which he placed her. For West and those other writers in "revolt against protest," the common goal was "to provide a wider base for Negro art" and "to break out of the narrow limits

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118 Brown's "The Urban Scene," is divided into "The Harlem School," "Purpose Novels," "Bourgeois Realism," "The Tragic Mulatto Passes for White," and "In Opposition."
119 Robert Bone began this book as a thesis under Sterling Brown's supervision.
120 See especially McLendon's Introduction, "Is There a [Black] Text in This Woman?."
of racial protest into some kind of universality," but without "the siren spell of assimilationism" or "the conscious avoidance of Negro life" (171-72).

Fortunately for Fauset and Larsen, black feminist theorists like Jacquelyn McLendon have offered an important corrective to the diminished status of their work. Her study of *The Politics of Color in the Fiction of Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen* emphasizes the creative strategies of the writers' fiction rather than their biographies and their supposed "bourgeois ethos" (1-2) as though either provided a one way mirror into their texts. A similar corrective is necessary for West, but it must begin with her biography. Because the basis of much of her life has been so obscured, the present study is an attempt to set some of the record straight. McLendon's work, however, is a better final model for understanding West's "positionality" in her major fiction because of the theoretical tools that McLendon applies to the rereading of black women's Harlem Renaissance texts. Her ample demonstration of the "literary self-consciousness" of these writers and their shrewd use of the mulatto character as an appropriate "signifying metaphor of difference" could as well be applied to West's creation of other "untragic" mulattas, at least as regards the woman writer's "need to counter representations of blackness and black female sexuality created by racism" (2, 4). However, because of the preliminary nature of the present study of West, it may err on the side of what McLendon rightly cautions against, criticism that is "overdetermined by autobiographical and thematic issues of color and class" (1-2).

Belief in the myth of West's bourgeois status perpetuates misinterpretations of West's fiction in relation to her life. A "penitent" West, Washington argues, founded *Challenge* magazine in the 1930s and developed her "serious side" into the 1940s "as she worked as a welfare investigator and on the WPA, and as she produced short stories about issues of race and class" (Preface xiv). The short story "Mammy" (1940), according to Washington, marks a change of consciousness in West. "[T]he black welfare investigator assigned to eliminate people from public assistance is forced to see how much she has in common with people of all classes..." (xiv), as does the author. This statement is true to a point, but more so of the fictional story. West and her family did feel the effects of the Depression, and West does admit to rejecting her
formerly "carefree bohemian" life when she returned from Russia in 1933; however, it is still more accurate to say that it was West's working class origins and the unusual economics of her extended family that provide the memories that were plumbed for her fiction. The collective effects of the stories about her ex-slave, maternal grandparent's near-poverty in South Carolina; her aunt's live-in service in Boston to white employers; her ex-slave father's near illiteracy because of the necessity of full-time work from the age of ten, provided the understanding and experience to create empathetic characterizations like "Mammy." This working-class background also allowed West both to be an effective social worker and to create fictional narrators who could function as "marginalized insiders"—both to class and race, even when, early on in her life, their author could not.\footnote{121}

Washington clearly limits her argument in the "Preface" when she does not historicize West's short stories. The result is an unconscious misinterpretation of West's relationship to the decades of the 1920s, '30s, and '40s, and she leaves no room for a comparison of narrative technique in the longer and shorter fiction. It is true that the majority of the selections for the anthology *The Richer, The Poorer* were written after the 1930s, including the title story. However, those like "The Typewriter" (1926) and "An Unimportant Man" (1928) (both included in the volume), "Hannah Byde" (1926), "Prologue to a Life" (1929), and "The Black Dress" (1934) (not included) were all written before *The Living Is Easy*. Each of them deals in some way with pretense and delusion as regards status and middle-class aspirations within the black working class.

The volume of stories in *The Richer, the Poorer*, as a whole, does gesture toward a post-Depression sensibility.\footnote{122} But those stories written after the 1940s do not reflect an essentially different consciousness, as

\footnote{121}"Mama" and "Pa" and Cleo Judson are based on West's mother's reminiscences about her parents and herself, available in the West Papers at Radcliffe. Rachel West explains that neither of her parents could read or write. She recounts her own service to a white family in Boston when in her teens. Like her siblings, she had no formal education past the early grades. Isaac West's near illiteracy, owing to his enslavement and work history, is evident in his letters. According to Abigail McGrath, all of the Benson aunts were in service, including her grandmother Ella Benson Johnson. McGrath's mother, Helene Johnson, was virtually raised by Rachel West.

\footnote{122}West chose eleven of the thirty selections (DWP, B1F27, SLR3). Her acknowledgment to Henry Louis Gates, Jr., suggests he was the final editor. Four of the *New York Daily News* stories were included: "Fluff and Mr. Ripley" 1944; "The Penny" 1941; "The Roomer" 1941; "The Maple Tree" 1957. West and the volume's editors rejected the same stories as were rejected by *Woman's Home Companion*, *Collier's*, and *Good*
Washington suggests. What the decades of the 1930s and ’40s did add of significance to West’s work was a more conscious recognition of the color dynamics of class and the social hierarchies it formed within the race.123

When juxtaposed with her correspondence and other materials from archival sources, West’s first published novel *The Living Is Easy* (1948) helps fill out key aspects of the history of the writer and her extended maternal family.124 The novel does rely heavily—although not mimetically so—upon biographical material concerning the writer’s early years in Boston, along with the histories of her parents, maternal aunts, maternal grandparents, and paternal grandmother. Boston, as well, figures largely into what might be called a West consciousness. The novel, as published, is a blend of earlier unpublished manuscripts and some published short stories, bringing together three decades of a writing career. An "autobiographical novel," the story "examines the economic and psychological prisons upwardly mobile blacks create for themselves by pursuing false values," according to SallyAnn Ferguson’s profile of the author and her work for the *Dictionary of Literary Biography* (193).

An important subtext, however, provides immediate sympathy for Cleo Judson, one of those "upwardly mobile blacks." It recognizes the damage done to young women like her who learn to imitate "false values" when removed from the nurture of their own community, to be "cloistered" (West’s word) with the white upper class, for their "protection," as is Cleo’s early fate. Cleo was not sent to the North because she was the oldest daughter or the lightest of her many sisters but because she was the most spirited. Still, the message must have been dear to her that wealthy white people could provide for her what her family could

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123 Critics of *The Wedding* follow the precedent of assuming West’s elite status and supposing that it gives her insight into the fictional Boston-bred Coles family.

124 According to Helene Johnson’s daughter Abigail McGrath, "Dorothy’s version in *The Living Is Easy*" of the "family economics" "caused such a catastrophic uproar in the family that most members stopped speaking to Dorothy. To this day many family members still don’t speak to one another as a direct result of that book" (McGrath 124).
not. And even though she quickly realizes that she does not feel like "an integral part of the family" or "devoted" to them as Miss Boorum expects she will (Living 27), still, she has been exposed to the psychology of dependence upon "superior" white ways of living, and sufficiently so, that she applies them in her strategy to obtain wealth and position through marriage outside of this privileged white group. Not surprisingly, Cleo is caught in the contradictions of culture that she herself has been living during the six years of her late adolescence and young adulthood in Boston with the Boorums.

Cleo Jericho, however, is clearly not a tragic mulatto. She is not unaware of her roots, nor is she like more modern mulatto figures who consciously pass for white and complicate their lives. Rather, Cleo believes that she rejects "white" values, at the same time as she tries, mistakenly, to maintain the economics of the system she has been pulled into. "The woman who passes," according to Mary Helen Washington, "is required to deny everything about her past: her girlhood, her family, places with memories, folk customs, folk rhymes, her language, the entire life of people who have gone before her" (Invented Lives 164). Cleo most certainly is not divided against her family of origin or even isolated from all members of the black community of her choice. In fact, Cleo spends the whole of the novel, and her life from age fourteen to twenty-nine, trying to reclaim her southern family, in the same way that young Judy, her daughter, must finally reclaim her mother. The complicating factor is Cleo's inability to distinguish between white flight and segregation. One could say that hers is a form of psychological passing that begins for the purpose of economic survival. The unfortunate result is that Cleo cannot mature beyond love for her nuclear family, even into love for an extended family of in-laws. This defect is especially true as regards her sister Serena's husband. Robert Johnson functions symbolically in the text as a representation of Cleo's greatest unconscious fear, that her outward appearance, with all of its socially sanctioned signifiers of "whiteness," will not prevent her inevitable exposure. However, because she cannot find sympathy with Dean Galloway's message, that Robert is "a symbol of the South's injustice to black men" (Living 257), she also cannot find a place in the larger black community.

The sub-plot of The Living Is Easy, on the other hand, is about complicated mixed racial genealogies
of mothers and daughters and their frustrated attempts to restore wholeness to themselves. Most importantly, Corinne Evans (whose mother died young) and her daughter Lenore, The West End Duchess, are placed in dramatic contrast to Mrs. Carter Binney (Corinne’s half-sister, now deceased) and her daughter Althea Binney. These pairs are juxtaposed with Cleo Judson and Judy. Both Corinne and Lenore have Cleo’s coloring, but Lenore, like Judy, does not have Corinne’s and Cleo’s mentality. Corinne, the daughter of a ”regal brown butler man” and an ”austere faced Irish maid,” is taken as a sex slave by Beacon Hill bachelor Thad Tewksbury when he meets the teen-aged Corinne (whom he finds ”exotic”) at the funeral of his deceased butler, Corinne’s father (Living 106-107). This unholy bondage at least hints of incest, which is meant to function symbolically for the white man’s lack of respect for black family integrity and his disruption of it. The sexual bondage also hints of pedophilia, as does the Judson marriage because of the extreme differences in age. Here the symbolic reference is to black women’s loss of girlhood.

To remove the shame of her concubinage, Corinne decides that the daughter she bears should marry into a prominent black family—meaning light-complexioned like her daughter—and thus return to her own race. ”She did not want [Lenore] to grow up with the belief that a wealthy white protector was worth a colored woman’s loss of caste” (Living 109). The use of the word ”caste” is important for two reasons. Within the closed social system of the group West describes, ”living white” is considered a disgrace, a social death, as it were. At the same time, it is the desire of the group to ”look white” by selective inbreeding with other light-skinned blacks in order to maintain their social position that is at the heart of why the Altheas and Lenores cannot make good marriages that make them happy. Nevertheless, Corinne plans to use her gambling fortune to buy Cole Hartnett (engaged to Althea Binney) for Lenore and to ask Carter Binney (her foster sister’s husband) to become guardian to her daughter (now in a convent school in Canada) (113). ”[Corinne] wanted to die in the world in which her father’s name had been a proud one. [Lenore’s] marriage to someone securely inside it would sanction her reacceptance” (111). The daughter, on the other hand, “began [at six] to pray to God to turn her a color that would make her unmistakably a member of her
mother's race" (108). At twenty-four, Lenore wants to marry old Mr. Carter Binney to settle the score of his rejection of her mother's request and his obvious "contempt" for her and for whom he feels no pity. However, persuaded by Cleo Judson, who feels some guilt over the part she plays in the proposed alliance because of her friendship with Althea, Lenore settles for Simeon Binney instead.

Before Corinne Evans dies, she exacts an oath from Lenore that she "promise to marry into her circle" (Living 113). The daughter agrees and closes the gambling salon to white men and "entertains" only men of color like Cole and Carter Binney. The young are allowed to win (to pay for their Harvard educations), the old to lose so that their (colored) wives will have to socialize with Lenore, especially Carter Binney's wife (Althea's mother) (113), because Lenore stands as proxy to her own mother. Cleo's response to Lenore's earnest resolve to respect her mother's wishes is meant to be taken as an illustration of false consciousness; Corinne and Lenore's plan seems more revenge than racial solidarity. The narrator, in close touch with Cleo's thoughts, presents the dilemma in terms of passing. Cleo, also light enough to pass, clearly never considers "betraying" her family—being "lost" to them. Even when she lives among the white upper class, she believes her only desire is to escape them. Once she marries a dark man (for his money) and gives birth to a dark daughter whom she does not wish to abandon, she cannot pass. However, she sees passing into white society as the best option for Lenore Evans:

Cleo felt a surge of helpless anger. What was the business of belonging? What was it worth? A tailor and a stable owner were the leaders of society. And the Duchess was saying this seriously. This woman, who could have crossed the color line and bought her way into any worldly circle, preferred to yearn for a counterfeit of the Brahmin cult. (113)

Yet, the narrator's use of the word "counterfeit" implies that Cleo believes subconsciously that "white is right" and that what passes for black society is merely an illegitimate imitation of the real thing. The Duchess, who has no family except for Althea and Simeon, would not face the same problem as Cleo if she passed, as there would be no one to "lose." Althea and her husband have no interest in a relationship with her. Lenore comes remarkably close to incest in choosing Simeon as a partner, as their mother's are half-

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sisters. The result of the marriage is spiritual death for both and physical death for Lenore. The civil ceremony, Lenore knows, is unconsecrated in the eyes of the Catholic Church. Unconsecrated, the marriage produces no offspring, and the Binney lineage dies with Simeon.

Sufficient irony in The Living Is Easy undercuts Cleo Judson's preoccupation with social status and color consciousness for the reader to reject her values; yet even West herself—in the ambiguous way she reshapes personal biography for fictional purposes—becomes an embodiment of one of the novel's central conflicts. Indeed, in The Living Is Easy, West begins a process of gentrification that she completes in The Wedding. She makes use of the general locale of her Boston and Oak Bluffs residences but gentrifies them considerably in order to grant a higher social class to her fictional characters. By extension, one could say that West's personal history, by the time of the interviews of the 1970s and '80s, has been gentrified to grant a higher social standing for herself.

West's real-life predicament in Boston, of having had an address on Brookline Avenue but not in Brookline, is also replicated in the novel. It provides a good model for the push and pull of class and status in West's Boston upbringing (and later in the fictional renderings of it). The plot of The Living Is Easy centers on a large three-story house right on the Brookline/Roxbury line where the Judsons are able, finally, to rent. The fictional house is a surreal composite of the two residences and neighborhoods where West and her parents actually lived: at 470 Brookline Avenue, Roxbury, until 1933 and at 23 Worthington Street, Roxbury, during the rest of the 1930s. West obscured her address when in correspondence she used "Back

126 The physical features of the actual "Oval" change in The Wedding. Vineland, Myrtle, Mountain, and Rose (dirt roads) enclose the circle of cottages. (Sullivan bisects the Oval). West lived at #10 Myrtle. Only the Adam Clayton Powell home at #15 Vineland (Grape Lane) is a substantial dwelling but certainly not a mansion. 127 An 1897 Boston map shows Brookline Avenue as it was in 1914. It became Brookline Avenue in 1868, "from the Mill-dam (Beacon Street) to Washington Street, Brookline" just inside the Brookline, Mass., line, (Record of Streets, City of Boston Printing Dept., 1910). A 470 Brookline Avenue address in 1914 would have been on the block between Longwood Avenue and what is now Francis, not on the southern end of Brookline Avenue which is actually in Brookline once Riverway is crossed. The house no longer stands on what is now a commercial street. Only one original building is left, an 1873 brick structure, now a pharmacy. The sign "Entering Brookline" is one block from where Longwood intersects with Riverway in the Roxbury Fens. 128 Correspondence suggests that Rachel West moved to a flat at 23 Worthington Street, Roxbury, just before Isaac West died in February, 1933, while Dorothy West was still in Russia (RW to DW, 10 Jan. 1933, DWP, B1F2, SLRI). Worthington, on an 1897 map, is a block and a half long, starting at Tremont, crossing over
Bay" or "Boston" for the Brookline Avenue address rather than "Roxbury" and when she made "Brookline Avenue" interchangeable with "Brookline," just as Cleo misrepresents her new address as in the better neighborhood of Brookline when she knows it is on the (wrong) side of the street that is actually Roxbury.  

A main thoroughfare, Brookline Avenue ran from Beacon Street (now Kenmore Square) south to Washington Street in Brookline. The Wests' address at 470 Brookline Avenue was one block from the entrance to Brookline (at Longwood Road) and three streets from Brookline proper. In later years, West maintained the fiction of her family having owned a large house, sometimes three stories, sometimes four stories, like the one described in the novel as the Judsons' rental (Oral).

As described in the novel, the Judson house can almost be found on a map; the near-realism of the elaborate detail of its location—which is, finally, not locatable—is suggestive of a similar unreality surrounding West's personal sense of place. Especially after she left Boston, she interacted with Renaissance writers and artists from predominantly middle-class backgrounds who were not hiding the fact that their fathers were ex-slaves as she was. In the novel, Althea Binney tells Cleo Judson of a rental "to colored," which the narrator describes as "on a street abutting the Riverway, a boulevard which touched the storied Fens and the arteries of sacred Brookline" (Living 5). A virtual borderland, on the very edge of prosperity, it is said by its owner-landlord, in the text, to be on the Roxbury side of an unnamed street whose other side is Brookline. On a real map, the southern end of Brookline Avenue as it crosses Riverway Drive does actually extend into Brookline, but one would not arrive there following the precisely narrated description given of Cleo and Judy's route from Northhampton Street. The affected realism here serves no directional purpose.

Huntington, and running to Longwood. A 1927 map shows an extension of Worthington, continuing on for another block to the Fenway. Worthington was laid in 1887, the extension in 1899 (Boston Record of Streets). Worthington is now one block long, between Tremont and Huntington. The Harvard Medical School has replaced the stretch from Huntington to Longwood. The stretch between Longwood and the Fenway, renamed Palace Road at some point, is now the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum; it was constructed from 1899-1903. Mary Frances O'Brien, Social Sciences Reference Department, Boston Public Library, located the 1897 and 1927 Boston maps and sources to establish the history of Back Bay's development (1814) as an up-scale community to ease the overcrowded West End. "A former tidal estuary," it "extends from the Boston Commons to Massachusetts Avenue and from the Charles River to Washington Street," a "residential and commercial area of...600 acres." 470 Brookline is not in Back Bay (Hare P. Aldrich, Jr., "Back Bay Boston" The Journal of the Boston Society of Civil Engineers, Vol. 57 (Jan. 1970)).
Following the narrative voice-as-tour-guide, from the detail provided one is led, instead, across Brookline Avenue and down Chapel Street into Brookline even though Cleo and Judy are said to remain in Roxbury. The first description of the journey by trolley from Boston’s South End is completely accurate, with the streets and sights just as one would actually encounter them:

The trolley rattled across Huntington Avenue, past the fine granite face of Symphony Hall, and continued up Massachusetts Avenue, where a cross-street gave a fair and fleeting glimpse of the Back Bay Fens, and another cross-street showed the huge dome of the magnificent mother church of Christian Science. At the corner of Boylston Street, within sight of Harvard Bridge and the highway to Cambridge, Cleo and Judy alighted to wait for the Brookline Village trolley. (*Living* 39)

The importance of Brookline and a Brookline address becomes quickly apparent in Cleo Judson’s response to simply believing she is in this exclusive and private section of the city. "The motorman steered his rocking craft down a wide avenue and settled back for the first straight stretch of his roundabout run. Cleo looked at the street signs, and her heart began to pound with excitement. This was Brookline" (*Living* 40). If one follows an actual map, it is not Brookline. What the narrator refers to as the “first straight stretch” is the first of four streets on the north end of Chapel. The fifth is Audubon Road (now Park Drive), and the next, St. Mary’s, marks the line between Brookline and Roxbury. Regardless of the inaccuracy, Cleo sees what she is looking for. "[Cleo] began to peer hard at house numbers. A row of red-brick houses began, and Cleo...pulled the bell cord" (40).

Both times Cleo seeks an address outside of the familiarity of the middling South End, she navigates by instinct and desire; thus the narrator, in this terrain, does not provide precise directions, and the reader knowledgeable about Boston streets must fill in the omissions. It is clear that Cleo is neither acquainted with the West End (too lower class), where the Duchess still lives in what is essentially a gambling parlor, nor with Brookline (too upper class). In this case, Cleo is looking for brick houses, a sure sign of affluence. As the ride is very short, she and Judy probably exit on the corner of Chapel and Audubon; then they most likely walk the block down Chapel to St Mary’s Street. But the house Cleo seeks must be on Chapel because she would not be able to read house numbers on a side street from a seat on the trolley. As Cleo sees the right
kind of houses and ambiance suggestive of old money, she believes she is on the right street.

Cleo walked slowly toward the number she sought, taking in her surroundings. Shade trees stood in squares of earth along the brick-paved sidewalk. Each house had a trim plot of grass enclosed by a wrought-iron fence. The half-dozen houses in this short block were the only brick houses within immediate sight except for a trio of new apartment houses across the way, looking flat-faced and ugly as they squatted in their new cement sidewalk. (Living 41)

The narrator's careful detail of the journey and the locale has three purposes. First, it is to make Cleo seem comfortable and capable in her quest but also an outsider. It is to establish the difference between an upper class (white) neighborhood and the South End (black), which Cleo wishes to escape (but where Simeon Binney enjoys living in his father's abandoned house) and to show how close to where the Judsons will rent are the famed mansions of actual Brookline. Finally, it is to show the complete triangulation of Boston's social stratification and the proximity of the largest ethnic group, the Irish, who also depended upon "white flight" for upward mobility.

In the adjoining block was a row of four or five weathered frame houses with wide front porches, big bay windows, and great stone chimneys for the spiraling smoke of logs on blackened hearths. The area beyond was a fenced-in field, where the sleek and beautiful fire horses nibbled the purple clover and frisked among the wild flowers. Nearby was the firehouse with a few Irish heads in the open windows, and a spotted dog asleep in a splash of sun. (Living 41)

The reader is meant to be both critical of Cleo's endless capitalist desire and sympathetic to her inability ever to achieve it.

Directly opposite from where Cleo walked was a great gabled mansion on a velvet rise, with a carriage house at the end of a graveled drive. The house was occupied, but there was an air of suspended life about it, as if all movement inside it was slow. Its columned porch and long French windows and lovely eminence gave the house grandeur. A stone's-throw away was the winding ribbon of the Riverway Drive, over which the hooves of carriage horses clip-clopped and shiny automobiles choked and chugged. Beyond were the wooded Fens, at the outset of their wild wanderings over the city to Charlesgate. (41)

Once again, the faux realism would actually take the reader to another place. In order to see Riverway Drive, Cleo would have to have been at the corner of Chapel and Audubon or Chapel and St. Mary's. At either point, "beyond" would be looking back toward Boston and "the wooded Fens" leading to "Charlesgate." The only other place where Riverway would be visible and beyond the Fens and Charlesgate,
would be farther south on Chapel Street where Chapel intersects Longwood Avenue that then intersects Riverway. But this would have been a slightly longer trolley ride. So once again, what appears to be realist prose is actually imaginary.

Likewise, the narrator’s description of the parlor of the house that Cleo so desires to live in creates the same ambiguity as the details of the journey by which she arrives at it. The reader gets a clear sense of wealth and refinement, especially in the room’s attitude of “graciousness.” At the same time, like the trolley ride that takes one nowhere, the fittings seem almost too grand for a rental. The disjunction, if unintentional, makes the narrator seem like Cleo, an outsider. “The lacquered floors were of fine hardwood, the marble above the great hearth was massive and beautiful. The magnificent sliding doors leading into the dining room were rich mahogany, the wallpaper was exquisitely patterned. From the center of the high ceiling the gas chandelier spun its crystal tears” (Living 45). Yet, the narrator’s metaphoric use of the chandelier and its deviation from its natural purpose—it does not illuminate but weeps—suggests that she is consciously manipulating the scene to demonstrate the difference between Cleo’s vision and her own.

The actual residences that the Wests lived in have in common with Cleo Judson’s ten-room house that they also seem to have been rentals—the only means by which to escape from Boston’s South End. In the Wests’ case, both the Brookline Avenue and Worthington Street rentals were flats rather than entire houses.130 This fact makes Isaac, Rachel, and Dorothy more like the potential boarders than the Judsons themselves, whom they are supposed to resemble. Bart Judson’s intention to let rooms is not shared by Cleo. “I’m not turning my house into a sleeping stall the very second I cross the threshold,” she threatens (Living 154). This bit of thrift is left unrealized in the text; only an interview of prospective roomers takes place once Bart’s business can no longer support the family (292-95). The connection is most likely that Rachel West did provide some kind of rooming service to help pay the bills: “[T]hese people that my mother knew—and I told you that she brought many people in,” West shares with Genii Guinier, “she saved many rents...” (Oral 195). Because neither the Brookline Avenue nor the Worthington Street buildings still stands, it is

130 About 23 Worthington Street, West says “I hope the flat is bigger than 470” and “has anyone rented that

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impossible to know what they looked like. What is sure is that both addresses were in desirable areas, in proximity to the Fens and to Riverway, even if only the borderlines.\footnote{The Worthington neighborhood, from Tremont to Huntington, is between Harvard Medical School and Mission Hill Playground. On Worthington’s upper end, near Simmons and Girls Latin abutting the Fenway, is}

Each location in the text is racially marked and corresponds with Cleo’s construction of blackness in relation to her complicated and contradictory construction of self. Even as one of Boston’s “better class of colored families,” no matter where she moves, she never gets into a “good” neighborhood until it has already begun to decline. Her upward mobility amounts only to an exercise of running in place, as it were. Likewise, no matter how white her body is it does not permit her to merge with whiteness or to completely eschew blackness. Bart Judson serves a similar purpose, as do the different locales; he is a reminder of Cleo’s flawed perception of blackness and his own cross-purposes in loving Cleo. Bart sees the South End of Boston, where they have lived in “three furnished rooms and the use of the kitchen” for ten years, through different eyes from his wife (Living 4). Even though the neighborhood was originally only available to blacks like them and to the Irish because of white flight, Cleo, the narrator informs us, sees herself as disconnected from the “influx of black cotton-belters” to this community, formerly her own, “this plague of their own locusts” (5).

The metaphors of disease and devastation used to describe these southern rural blacks are not so easy to read because of the syntax of the sentence. The use of “plague” to describe the effect of their invasion, with its implications of “trouble,” “affliction,” “harassment,” “scourge,” “pestilence,” “calamity,” “curse,” even “evil,” depending upon how seriously one wants to read the censure, actually sounds like white fear or a projection of it. However, given the third-person plural possessive pronoun “their,” which would be the first person plural possessive “our” if Cleo were speaking rather than the narrator, in combination with the reflexive “own,” suggests some identification on Cleo’s part. The sentence when spoken by Cleo would read: “We view our southern brothers with alarm, and we have scattered all over the city and its suburbs to escape this plague of our own locusts.” “Locusts,” as they “migrate in swarms and eat all the vegetation of a dilapidated flat [at 470]?” (DW to RW, DWP, 3-5-33, B1F1, SLRI).
district," conjure up an image of Armageddon and a life and death struggle. This attack of parasites in numbers so boundless they obscure the landscape and with appetites so rapacious they leave behind vast wastelands is so powerful an illustration of destruction that locusts are used in biblical parable as agents of infestation and death. Depending upon how one reads the phrase "our own locusts," as "locusts amidst ourselves" or as "locusts like, or of, ourselves," depends upon where one places the emphasis. Either way, given that the subject of the analogy is black people, the metaphor is one of such "otherness" that it goes even beyond white fear into the realm of white nightmare. People do not naturally create negative images of themselves like this one. Thus, Cleo's ability to embody this horrific perspective suggests the extent to which she has absorbed white racist constructions of blackness and also the extent to which she fears subconsciously the social death that would result for her were she to be perceived as one of them as they are constructed by whites. The West End where "The Duchess" has inherited a house from her mother is even lower on the social scale, which is why it can be maintained as a gambling house. To Cleo Judson, the narrator explains, "Here were the sullen and shifty-eyed," the denizens of the dark. ...the haters who thought they were beaten because they were black" (99).

Other characters see these same southern migrants differently. Bart Judson, born in Virginia, expresses their presence in images of growth and production. To him they are "transplanted Southerners," "hard-working, simple" people like himself (Living 64); their uprooting and re-rooting in Northern soil has the expectation of a better harvest. Yet Bart chooses to love Cleo, who constantly seeks to separate him from "his own kind." Northern-born Simeon Binney, who lives in the South End and publishes the anti-segregationist newspaper The Clarion, believes in the importance of the community of South Enders. They are "the colored population of Boston now" (143), he tells Cleo. He does not make the same distinctions between integrated neighborhoods with the "nice' colored" and "white" and what will soon be a "solid black" one.

When Cleo finally gets her chance to leave the South End, she encounters Mr. Van Ryper, who makes the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. 22 Palace Street, next to it, is now the Mass. College of Art.
plain the racial politics of his corner of Boston, temporarily shattering Cleo's illusion of upward social mobility. "Brought up in an abolitionist household," Van Ryper claims his prejudice is "against the Irish" and not the Boston Negroes whom he nevertheless segregates into the "chaff" and the "wheat" (Living 46-47). Whereas he will accept "his solemn task" toward the Negro, the proverbial white man's burden, he regards the Irish as a "threat." "They did not come here in chains or by special invitation," he declares (47). He thus asserts his absolute right to not live beside them but, rather, to "rent [his] house to colored" while he moves into an all-white safe haven (47). He sets Cleo straight about the present status of the neighborhood she so covets:

"This isn't Brookline," Mr. Van Ryper said crossly. "The other side of the street is Brookline. This side is Roxbury, which that thundering herd of Irish immigrants have overrun. They have finally pushed their boundary to here. Time was when Roxbury was the meeting place of great men. Now its fine houses are being cut up into flats for insurrectionists. I'm moving to Brookline within a few days. Brookline is the last stronghold of my generation." (48)

Although disappointed initially with the fine, though indelible line between the two addresses and worlds, Cleo readjusts reality almost immediately. Now that she is closer to her ideal than she has ever been she has no intention of splitting hairs the way Mr. Van Ryper does. It is the impression that counts, after all. Without a second thought she simply disregards the geography lesson and moves forward with her plan. "Cleo was completely satisfied with everything she saw. There were no stoop-sitters anywhere, nor women idling at windows, nor loose-lipped loiterers passing remarks. Her friends who lived in Dorchester, or Cambridge, or Everett had nice addresses, of course. But Brookline was a private world" (Living 41-42).

The "privacy" is of a piece with Cleo's life; indeed, she is a woman whose inner life is "inviolate" (Living 3). In many ways, the "secret life with her sisters," which she conceals within her large pocketbook, is her only life (3). The rest, "her credit books, showing various aliases and unfinished payments, and her pawnshop tickets, the expiration dates of which had mostly come and gone" (3-4) are the means by which she is able to put aside money, gather her sisters around her, and pick up from where she had left off at fourteen. "So long as her sisters were within sight and sound, they were the mirrors in which she would see..."
Mama" (22). This is a very different mirror than the one in her dark child's eyes, and Cleo needs it desperately.

The full implication of Cleo's "aliases," used in the beginning as foreshadowing, is not made obvious until the novel's close when the reader understands Cleo's failure in her masquerade as a wife and mother. Before that time, "To Cleo culture was a garment that she had learned to get into quickly and out of just as fast" (Living 44). She comes complete with "stage smile" and a full range of "artifices" (44). Indeed, "There were so many secrets in her day that any discussion became an exposure" (138). In truth, Cleo still needed mothering herself. Unable to complete the normal maturing process from girlhood to womanhood, disguise becomes the perfect metaphor for the manner in which she now inhabits the world of the North. She was taken from her home in the South and away from her family during a crucial developmental stage when post-adolescent girls begin to reckon with notions of self that result in positive identity formation. Thus, Cleo is stuck emotionally in age fourteen. The reader is meant to see Cleo's immaturity and "secrecy" as a direct result of her lost connection with Mama, first through distance then through Mama's death.

Cleo's inability to fashion anything like a stable adult identity and her need to role-play cannot be expressed, then, simply as the cultural dualism of most African-Americans, even as it is certainly connected. Cleo's interrupted maturity leaves her in the tenuous position of not belonging anywhere. In a discussion about author Nella Larsen, Mary Helen Washington names this condition as one of "marginal[ity] to both black and white worlds" (Invented Lives 163). As Cleo straddles these two worlds in a precarious balancing act, everything is affected, particularly her own attempt at mothering. In a moment of weakness and fear, Cleo, clutching onto what she wrongly believes to be her only stability, her daughter, expresses the very crux of her dilemma and Judy's as well: "I want [Judy] to be a Bostonian, but I want her to be me deep down. Judy, her frightened heart cried, be me as my sisters are Mama" (Living 141). Still dependent upon the mother's gaze for identification, Cleo needs the surrogacy of her sisters, in her mother's absence, to mirror back an identity. Thus, when Cleo's first sister arrives "she knew that some part of her interrupted childhood was restored" (165).
Unfortunately, none of the adults mirror young Judy Judson. With her mother’s gaze always directed, of necessity, elsewhere and away from her, Judy is represented initially as a young victim of her mother’s confusion. However, through the careful use of an omniscient voice whom the reader is meant to trust and who narrates from hindsight the incidents of the novel, Judy is not frozen in her childhood, but has a fully developed adult perspective as well. Because her vision as the narrator exceeds that of the mother’s, Judy is able to overcome and reconcile at least some of the effects of her childhood at the same time as her childhood is being revealed. Most importantly she achieves a sense of self-possession and self-control through the device of narrative omniscience. Thus, the story begins and ends with Judy, making her its center.

For now, the irony of Mama’s decision to send young Cleo North with Miss Peterson, purportedly to save Cleo’s virtue, is that the thwarted seduction of her by “some white man” in the South happens anyway. When the white spinster Miss Peterson can no longer keep her young charge with her in Springfield, Cleo is sent to another wealthy woman in Boston to be something between a ward and a servant. Her “cloister” only places her in the path of an unscrupulous white man. As Cleo sits “in Miss Boorum’s parlor, reading Little Women.,” remembering, no doubt, Mama’s protection and love, Miss Boorum’s nephew is reading Cleo. “[L]ooking at Cleo across the table, [he] was profoundly disturbed by his emotions” (Living 29). It is no great reach to understand what those emotions were. “He, too, had heard about Negroes. He had heard mostly about Negro women, and the information was correct. Desire was growing in his loins and there was nothing he could do to stop it. All he could do was try to keep it from spreading to his heart” (29). Marriage, of course, is out of the question. Nearly every choice Cleo makes thereafter seems to be a result of the wrongful separation from her mother and sisters and the negotiations she had to perform in order not to be snared into the ardent Casanova’s “campaign” to rob her of her virginity (30).

To signal this sympathetic reading of Cleo, the narrator, after a single chapter in present time, takes the reader back to Cleo’s childhood. This strategy serves to illuminate the complicated and entangled forces that have made Cleo who she is. In part the digression serves to contrast Judy’s northern childhood
unfavorably with Cleo's southern one, but mostly it is to show Cleo at her best: her spiritedness and fearlessness, her agility, her love of nature, her mischief, her imagination, and her inexhaustible lust for life. The narrator affirms with much largesse: "The wildness was in her, the unrestrained joy, the desire to run to the edge of the world and fling her arms around the sun, and rise, with it, through time and space, to the center of everywhere" (Living 13). In South Carolina with her family, Cleo is symbolic of daylight itself. One is reminded of Janie Crawford, who, with all the world before her, what to choose. Cleo's enormous potential, however, is misdirected when she is sent to the North.

What Cleo learns in these northern houses is not truths to live by but lies and invention. Like Linda Brent before her, similarly trapped in a mulatto body but as a slave, Cleo assumes the necessary "guile" to maintain some control over herself and survive. And, like Joe Trace in Toni Morrison's Jazz, similarly trapped in an emotional time warp because his mother Wild would not show him her hand, everything else is reinvention for survival. What happens to Cleo while she is with the white folks are incidents that seem as if they should be from someone else's life. "Cleo was neither good nor bad. She was in a state of suspension" (Living 28). She spends most of her time in the novel trying to recreate the moment of departure from home and her promise that she will "send for [her sisters] as soon as she got rich" (25). In depicting the pull of the South as an invincible force that Cleo cannot resist, however, as a "siren song" that requires a mythic strength not to succumb to it, the narrative characterizes Cleo's journey to adulthood as unheroic and unfulfilled (155). The disruption of southern cultural practices results for Cleo in over-identification with her captors, whereby she observes and internalizes the value of white skin and how it allows for social entree into the world of power and entitlement.132

At the same time, Cleo's plan to thwart Miss Boorum's nephew's lust is quite unlike the response of the traditional mulatto character when face to face with the white man's prerogative. "If he ever came hankering after her," the narrator informs, "she'd stab him dead with an ice-pick" (35). Cleo, it seems, gathers strength from a long heritage of Jericho women, and it makes her resolute. Mama has taught her that

132On the other hand, Wright's Bigger Thomas, in Native Son, is trapped by white racism because he has no
opposition to abuse and rape should be absolute. While enslaved, Great-aunt Fanny and Great-grandmother Patsy both committed suicide in the face of violence from the white southern aristocracy—male and female—because it was their only choice. Cleo, however, is not a slave, so she adapts the legacy of resistance to suit her condition. She decides that quick-witted offense against the abuser is the best defense in the long run (90-91).

It is, therefore, what Cleo makes of her loss and loneliness that is critiqued in the text because of its negative effects upon all the people whom she most loves. The sad result of the totalizing whiteness that surrounds Cleo in her new northern "home" is her over-identification with it. As she learns what desire means in white terms, Cleo is unaware, as are other black fictional characters in the same predicament, that "privileged status is based on the oppression of her own people" (Washington, *Invented Lives* 164). In this sense, what Washington argues about ambivalence regarding "racial status" and "racial identity" for another female character that she discusses (164) does seem also to apply to Cleo Judson in West's text.

Adelaide Cromwell's commentary on representations of social stratification in *The Living Is Easy* is a useful window into the sociology of Cleo Judson's precarious positionality and West's literary depiction of it. Cromwell unravels some of the intertwining threads of ethnicity, race, and class in turn-of-the-century black Boston when she writes:

> There were places blacks wanted to live, for example—Brookline or hardly discovered Roxbury rather than the South End. (Cambridge was acceptable, no doubt because of the smaller number of blacks living there). Blacks in Boston understood the complexity of status within white society. They viewed Jews, Irish, and Italians according to ethnicity and class, not color—in contrast to the way they viewed Brahmins. And Dorothy West knew the scandals or events that could upset the black village insularity—a gambling house run by a black woman, illegal abortions, the marriages of white (especially Irish) women to black men, business failures, unsuccessful professional practices, drinking, broken marriages—and marred the expectation of easy living in Boston. (358-59)

These very scenarios are dramatized in the novel within the context of Cleo Judson's social climbing and the price it exacts upon her husband and daughter, who together share a different color identification.

Thus, the actual plot tracks Cleo Judson's false racial values in her response to the sudden migration of familial cultural values to sustain him in the North.
of black cotton-belters to Boston. She mistakenly believes that it is only this influx, (like that of New York blacks to Oak Bluffs in *The Wedding*), that disrupts tolerant inter-racial social patterns. As Miss Elliot puts it, "We may soon be outnumbered by South-Enders, or worse, diminished in the estimation of our better whites who hardly thought of us as colored before their coming" (*Living* 172). The narrator knows differently. One could say that Cleo Judson learns false values from northern whites at too tender an age to allow her to be the heroic center of the story. That power shifts to nine-year-old Judy, the questing figure whose own journey is completed in the narrative process itself.

By placing the action of the novel between July of 1914, and April of 1917, West creates a narrative distance that serves two purposes. Making the War rather than the Depression the cause for the failure of Bart Judson's business, she departs from strict biographical reality in order to critique Boston society from a safer place. She wants also to show that both events, the War and the Depression, brought the same response from whites in power; they simply closed ranks and retreated from the fray. Using this time frame rather than the beginning of the 1930s that marks the actual event of her father's business failure, West can create her most obvious alter ego, Judy Judson, as a child of six rather than a woman of twenty-three. This strategy allows the narrative point of view to exhibit wisdom beyond that of the child's, while still using the child's perspective. Thus, West can both represent and transcend herself in her fiction. The narrative voice itself becomes the resolution to the problems of childhood that West encountered and represents in young Judy: the near voicelessness of her character and the perception of her mother's disassociation from her.

*The Living Is Easy* is, therefore, both West's mother's story and West's own, both Cleo Judson's and Judy Judson's. The author's use of biography does not, however, inhibit her artistic design and purpose. In many ways, the text makes real life turn out differently. It is easy to see the similarities between Rachel West's story, upon which the Cleo Judson story is modeled, and the DuBose Heyward play *Porgy*. Where the stories differ is in the color politics of their protagonists. The character of Bess, in both versions of the

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133 With a June birthday, West would have just turned seven in July of 1914, making her a year older than Judy Judson is.
Given that a chief conflict in the novel for Judy Judson is "having her mother denied her" because they are so unalike in beauty or color (Living 170), the difference is important, and intertextuality exists between the play and the novel, making Porgy a quiet subtext. One could say that West recreates the play she herself performed in into a version of her own life. In the case of the novel, it is the daughter who desires to leave, not the adult woman (or mother figure) Bess. In the play, Bess, who tries to mother an abandoned baby to keep herself distracted from following her lover, finally chooses conjugal love over motherhood. At the same time, the author fictionalizes her mother's story by satisfying, in the text, a desire her mother may have had. West allows the character of Cleo Judson to attain middle-class status and acceptance within the circle of Boston's black elite, if only for a single night, but she also shows the emotional price Cleo must pay for it. The Christmas party where Cleo triumphs is placed in ironic juxtaposition with Pa's death. The guests having all left, "[Cleo] deserved to sleep like a weary angel at the end of this exciting evening that saw her accepted as an integral part of Boston society." Instead, "[s]he saw the drowned face of her father" (266).

The novel opens in summertime when the "living is easy" owing to Bart Judson's prosperity and Cleo Judson's youth. Cleo reasons that as they are "all young and alive," she will invite her sisters for a week's visit to her house in Brookline (Living 154). The plan is the culmination of eleven years of hope that this reunion will ever be possible. Cleo allows her husband to believe she is pregnant and in need of sister Lily's help, who in turn needs help herself. The initial deceit sets off a chain reaction of deception and intrigue around which the novel develops. The easy living ends with the economic aftermath of World War I in the demise of the once lucrative banana trade, the separation of Cleo's sisters from their husbands, the estrangement of husband and wife, and, most importantly, Judy's loss of innocence.

Perceptions about maternal acceptance or rejection and the effects on each character's psychology are mirrored in a second sub-plot. This one concerns the younger generation, Cleo's daughter Judy, her two nieces, and one nephew. Nostalgia for her former status in the warm South of her childhood, concern for her

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West appeared in the 1928-stage version of Porgy and not Gershwin's Porgy and Bess from which West's
current status in the North, and anxiety about her own mother's love are key to Cleo's often conflicting motivations; they produce, or model, most of the major conflicts within the novel. "For Cleo her share of maternal affection constitutes a rejection of sorts..." (Ferguson 193). The legacy is bequeathed to Judy. The younger members of the family make heroic efforts to mother each other and therefore supplement what Cleo is incapable of providing.

The distance between fact and fiction is particularly short with regard to plot, especially in the case of the Jericho sisters. *The Living Is Easy* is structured almost entirely around real events. Corroborating material is readily accessible in the West correspondence and among other West archival material, particularly a set of drawings by her mother, Rachel West, depicting family, family relationships, and various family events. It is easy, for example, to establish Rachel West's sibling relationships. She shared living accommodations off and on with three of her nine sisters: Daughter, Doll, and Minnie; her sister Bess (Isabella) lived close-by in Boston. Ferguson's *DLB* profile of West comes to a similar conclusion, indicating that Isaac West had more than just a wife and daughter to support on his salary. "Rachel West may have married her husband, a man a generation or more her senior, for his money. His profits provided a living for the extended family—comprised of Rachel West's sisters, brothers, nieces, and nephews—in which West grew up" (Ferguson 188). The communal living probably started at 470 Brookline Avenue and at Benson Cottage, Oak Bluffs, and continued at the 23 Worthington address in Roxbury. Evidence in the West Papers does not, however, suggest that Rachel West's brothers or nephews lived with her, although they may have received financial support. Only Virginia Ayers (Ginny), probably a niece, is mentioned in the letters. In West's interviews...
(with corroboration from Helene Johnson's), West reveals that the household was made up of not only the Jericho women but also their four children: Dorothy, Helene, Eugenia, and Melvin. According to Abigail McGrath, "All of the mothers were in service except Rachel. Which meant that Rachel took care of the girls while the others went to work as maids. In those days, maids would work for weeks at a time before they would have a day off to visit their families" (McGrath 124). As early as January 1929, Isaac West moved to West's off-and-on apartment at 43 West 66th Street, to do business in Brooklyn.\textsuperscript{137}

Materials from the Dorothy West Papers at Radcliffe also establish some of the novel's genealogies and characters. West's grandmother Benson bore nineteen living children in South Carolina, ten of whom were girls. A composite of the "Jericho sisters"—Cleo (Judson), age twenty-nine; Serena (Jones), twenty-one; Lily (Bates), twenty-four; and Charity (Reid), twenty-five, bear a resemblance to West's mother Rachel Pease Benson West and three of West's aunts: Ella Benson Johnson ("Daughter"), Carrie Benson ("Doll"), and Minnie Benson. Rachel Benson was actually child number three rather than the oldest as portrayed in the novel.\textsuperscript{138}

One can verify that at least two of Rachel West's sisters relocated to the Boston area between 1912 and 1914—when \textit{The Living Is Easy} opens—and that the cottage in Oak Bluffs was already in use, although it is not mentioned in the text. Correspondence places Bess Benson in Boston during the summer of 1912 and Dorothy and Rachel West in Oak Bluffs.\textsuperscript{139} Young Dorothy's letter from Oak Bluffs to Carrie Benson places her aunt in Manimet, Massachusetts, during 1914.\textsuperscript{140} Aunt Bessie writes to nine-year-old Dorothy in Boston during the spring of 1916, placing the West family at 470 Brookline Avenue.\textsuperscript{141}

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\textsuperscript{137} Edna Lewis Thomas ("Tommie") first rented this apartment, then Zora Neale Hurston, Dorothy West and Helene Johnson, Isaac West, and Mollie Lewis. West wrote to her father, mother, Helene Johnson, and Ginny Ayers at this address.

\textsuperscript{138} Rachel West draws her siblings in order of birth: "Robert, Willie, David, Ella, Doll, Rachel, Matte, Isabella, Minnie, Bennie, Jessie, Scottie, Eugene, Scipio, Emma, Belton, Sarah, Malcolm, Ruth" (DWP, B3F38, SLRI).

\textsuperscript{139} Bess Benson to RW, 1 Aug. 1912, DWP, B1F1, SLRI. The Oak Bluffs cottage is referred to as on Myrtle Avenue, as a P.O. box number, and as Benson Cottage. The Houghton Mifflin Press release (1948) says it was West's grandfather's, Benjamin Benson, who came North after Helen Pease Benson died.

\textsuperscript{140} DW to Carrie Benson, 1914, DWP, B1F12, SLRI.

\textsuperscript{141} Aunt Bessie to DW, 20 April 1916, DWP, B1F12, SLRI.
West's sustained portrait of her maternal grandmother, Helen Pease Benson, in "Poor Mama"\(^{142}\) bears a striking resemblance to Cleo (Jericho) Judson's "Mama" in *The Living Is Easy*. The *Oral History* repeats important information about West's great-grandmother and grandmother that is not, similarly, projected into the novel.

My mother's father and, indeed, my mother's mother, were the children of their masters. ... When slavery was over, the white master gave my great-grandmother, (— Pease) who had eleven children [one of them Mama] by him, she gave her a great tract of land, and told her to take her children up there..., and he gave them pigs and cows.... (153-54)

West says she was obliged to write the characterization from her mother's memoir of her own parents that was rendered in *illustration* rather than text.\(^{143}\) Some of the drawings also correspond to information in West's *Oral History*, the house in Camden, North Carolina, for example. Included in Rachel West's hand, however, were several written recollections about her parents and grandparents that she did not draw. Still, they were important enough to have stayed in her memory and to have required expression:

"Mama could strap me until I ran blood."
"Pa, don't talk Gullah before the children."
"Grandpa warmed our hands in his mouth."
"My mama and pa had an argument. Ray [Rachel] said: 'Don't touch my mother.' Like a signal, every child jumped up and grabbed a weapon."\(^{144}\)

"Grandpa" would have to be on the paternal side as it is clear, from the above statement, that Rachel's grandmother was not married to "master." In her videotaped interview, West tells a story that suggests the living arrangements before the Civil War. Rachel's grandmother and her children, including Rachel's mother, either lived in the master's house or they spent Christmas in the "big house" with master's wife and their children who got dolls as gifts while Helen and her sisters looked on. Little of the implied violence or abuse appears in the novel, only Mama's corporal punishment of her children, particularly Cleo. Memories like these when translated into fiction often explain psychological divisions between the generations or the sexes. One could find a rationale for Cleo's desire for female company and solidarity to the exclusion of men, other than what happens with Miss Boorum's nephew, had West chosen to include anything other than happy

\(^{142}\) Dorothy West removed this unpublished ms from the archives according to a note.
\(^{143}\) DWP, B2F38, SLRI.

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memories of Cleo's childhood. The omissions must have to do with the author's artistic motive. She is not trying for strict realism in depicting Cleo's youth; rather, the narrator makes it clear that Cleo's memories constitute primarily "a veil of lovely illusion" (Living 53).

Benjamin Benson, "Pa Jericho" in the novel, on the other hand, seems far less important to Rachel and Dorothy West, and very little of his real biography appears in the text. Cleo's lack of regard for Pa until he dies is undeveloped. She claims it is because he remarried a Miss Hattie after Mama's death, but Cleo is never a witness to this union. Pa is left completely alone after Robert leaves and while the sisters are in Boston, which is a direct cause of his death by drowning. Rachel West fails to mention that her mother is her father's second wife or that Benjamin Benson, after his wife's death, followed his three daughters North, including to Oak Bluffs where he bought land, and because he was a carpenter, built their cottage (Bryan 587). None of these biographical facts figure into the novel's story line except that he was in the South when he died. Apparently, "while residing in Oak Bluff, Benson incurred the scorn of his neighbors—primarily because of his southern, non-Yankee origins and only secondarily because of his race. Unhappy in the North, Benson returned later in his life to his beloved South, where he lived out his final days" (587). Most of this information appears only in profiles of Helene Johnson. West, who would have known him, says almost nothing about him.

More germane to Cleo Judson's parents in West's novel is their racial background. Rachel West notes the following reference to color: "Mama and Papa were half black and half white, but that did not make them half slave and half free. Being half white let Mama and Papa be house slaves." The children they produce, and their children's children, share their mulatto coloring; several, like the fictional counterparts of Cleo, Charity, Victoria, and Tim, are light enough to pass, although none desires to. However, Cleo and Bart Judson, unlike "Mama" and "Pa" in the text, favor light skin, but their color prejudice is not passed on to the

younger generation. In the text, West makes it clear that Cleo learns her color prejudice from white society and not even indirectly from Cleo's parents. West does suggest in the Oral History that the family's light color did affect their status as house slaves and "opportunities" thereafter. Near the end of her interview with Guinier, West returns to the subject of her maternal grandmother and begins to admit something about her that she can't quite get out. What she does disclose suggests that Rachel's color consciousness did indeed begin with her mother: "[S]he died before I was born. And I didn't like my grandmother, because I thought she might not like me because...[unfinished thought]. And my mother was always telling me about the things that my grandmother said...[unfinished thought]" (Oral 218). According to Adelaide Cromwell in her commentary on The Living Is Easy, fragility marks the northern black community. "In these circles pigmentation was very important. A dark complexion [Judy's albatross] often made people, especially women, feel insecure and different" (358). By extension, a light complexion should have made Cleo feel secure and similar.

The color white, in the text, however, is actually symbolic of death and fear, as it also was in West's family life (Oral). In The Living Is Easy, as Mama holds a gun to shoot a mad dog, she was "white as death when she fired. Her color didn't drain back for two days, and Lily was born before it did. Lily came into the world so white she wouldn't have browned in an oven, and she was always the scariest thing on two feet. The old folks said she was marked" (51). Whiteness is sister Lily's "birthmark," and "Lily was scared of everything, including her shadow" (51). Lenore Evans, ash blonde and the lightest character in the novel, is the most tragic (101). The description of her on her return to Cambridge after her disastrous marriage to Simeon Binney relies metaphorically upon the image of a blizzard to demonstrate the impossibility of clear vision and its consequence, her approaching death: "Outside, the snow was beginning to fall in a blinding swirl, obscuring the sky and star which had guided the wise men. Between heaven and earth there was now a white shroud. The Duchess could not discern which way wisdom would travel that night" (186). Cole Hartnett, when he agrees to practice with a white doctor, becomes an abortionist, symbolically, a taker, rather
than a giver, of life (318). In real life, something of the same signification upon the color white also
pertained. West says that her mother once told her about her grandmother (Helen Pease Benson): "Mama's
white babies always died," a singularly unusual remark as all of her children were fair enough to be taken for
white, including Rachel. West finishes her mother's thought, but without noting the irony. "And so, I
think...the reason they didn't care for white people, were frightened of white skin was because they thought
that the baby was pale and sick. I guess my Aunt Minnie [Lilly] was the only one who lived" (Oral 200).

With the exception of West's fictional persona Judy Judson, Rachel West and Cleo Judson have much
more in common in their physical characteristics and biographies than others of the characters and their real-
life counterparts. A photograph of Rachel West at "age 18-21" shows the close resemblance.147 Both women
were said to be "a beauty," in the sense of being "slender," "golden," and "immaculate[ly]" dressed (Living
74, 3). Both were born in South Carolina to poor sharecropper parents who were unable to provide much
education for their numerous children. Both left as teenagers for the North in the company of a New England
spinster who had been residing temporarily in the South. Both had positions with genteel, Boston mistresses.
Cleo openly resents the legacy of servitude and the humbling of self to whites that was her father's
experience, and she is proud of the legacy of the strong women in her mother's family. Both Cleo Judson and
Rachel West were married to men twenty-three years their senior and "shouting Baptists" while the two
women were both Episcopalians.

While the fictional Cleo Judson resembles her fictional "Mama" physically, the two are constructed as
having very different spirits. Unlike Mama who loved her children equally and Papa "better than anyone"
(Living 17) and whose "house was run to the beat of [her] heart" (21), Cleo is depicted as favoring her niece
Victoria over her daughter, as unloving to her husband, and as "deceitful," "predatory," and "perverse." Cleo
Judson's least desirable characteristic, her color consciousness, produces the third central conflict of the
novel. The Jericho sisters' children are witnesses to conflicting messages about race and gender. While skin
color and "race" are not equivalents in Cleo's conscious mind, she does prefer her white-skinned niece and

147DWP, Photograph Drawer, SLRI.

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nephew Victoria and Tim to her dark-skinned daughter Judy. Althea Binney, with a "peaches and cream" complexion and "chestnut hair as soft as silk, and with genteel breeding, "was Cleo's model of perfection" (Living 94). Perhaps she simply finds more comfortable those who reflect her own physical mirror image self, like her light mother. Perhaps her observation that light skin makes one more compatible with white society leads her to want the same for her children. Or, as mentioned earlier, she is resisting racist constructions of blackness.

Whatever the reason, Judy's situation is quite like Simeon Binney's. "[D]arker than either of his parents," "his browness made him seem different to them just as Thea's fair skin made her seem the same" (12). The context is the key. Because Cleo stays among white-looking people like Althea Binney, her daughter always looks different. Cleo says she does not believe in being "colored." She tells her daughter, her nieces, and her nephew: "You're four little children. That's all you have to call yourselves. If you think you're different, you'll act different, and people will treat you different" (296). Yet Cleo's obvious preferences do affect the children and must seem contradictory to them. Cleo marries a dark-skinned man for his money and because he reminds her of Pa. Judy witnesses the way her mother taunts her father with the epithet "Mr. Nigger" when she means to express anger and superiority, even though it is the denial of sex that provides the "weapon that would cut [him] down quickly and cleanly" (35).

Cleo Judson, at times, does seem to have a conception of "race," but having "race consciousness" does not equate with goodness or success in the novel. It does seem that she is one of the black Bostonians whose "lives were narrowly confined to a daily desperate effort to ignore their racial heritage" (Living 105) in spite of the fact that she does not ignore her race altogether. She believes she merely makes distinctions based on social demeanor and class. Typical of this kind of person is Miss Eleanor Elliot, Vassar graduate, and the single daughter of a black professional. "She could never marry a colored man because of her upbringing nor a European because she hadn't enough money" (169). Rather than compromise her position, she uses her good Back Bay address to ensure that she will fill her dancing classes (169). Cleo hates "the sullen and shifty-eyed, the denizens of the dark" living in Boston who are the men and women "born without
race pride" (99). She can easily distinguish between these mostly southern blacks, Mr. Van Ryper's "chaff," and her own multi-hued extended family, of which she is proud, Mr. Van Ryper's "wheat." Cleo does not share the same view as "white folks who expected all niggers to be one big family" (260). When she at first confronts the West End Duchess, believing her to be white, she screams "Get out of my race and stay out," as though "race" has meaning for her. When she learns the Duchess is not white, she exhibits solidarity. "If I had known you were colored, I wouldn't have hit you from so many sides," she apologizes (104). Yet the camaraderie is more the result of the Duchess' wealth and "patrician" "breeding" (101) than her race, in other words, as with all her friendships, a function of class.

Simeon Binney, the novel's representative of "black pride," appears genuine in his pursuit of social justice in the beginning of the novel and almost heroic; however, his Achilles heal also prevents him from being the novel's moral center. His initial desire is, rightly, to use The Guardian to "wake these sleeping colored Bostonians" to the fact of their "second class citizenship" (Living 131, 134). Here the narrator agrees that his is a worthy effort Simeon, although he is "privileged" with a Harvard education, is, like Judy Judson, the wrong color. This condition may either be the source of his insight or the motivation for his scorn. Whatever the case, he markets his ideal of racial solidarity to acquire the West End Duchess' fortune, allegedly to save his sister and to finance his newspaper. Their marriage, which Geo—even though the matchmaker—considers as akin to "cut[ting] his own throat" (140), is never consummated. Lenore, a Catholic, has been married in an inconspicuous civil ceremony in New York and not by a priest. She knows she is unmarried in the eyes of the Church. The narrator calls the "burial" of Simeon's "single blessedness" that which has "formed the [new] man of compromise" (187). Oddly, rather than resume his own stoic and detached arrangement with life as he had in his bachelor days, Simeon becomes addicted to promiscuous sex instead. This development seems completely out of character and unmotivated, unless Simeon and Lenore are ironic doubles for Bart and Cleo Judson.

Cleo is also conflicted as regards gender. She says that "[w]omen are better off without men," yet much of the novel works against this premise. Cleo wonders why her sisters Lily, Serena, and Charity, now
estranged from their husbands, grow to be less and less like Mama. "Had they lost their look of Mama because they lived without men?" she asks (Living 284). Cleo herself is represented as a bride in name only. Her daughter wishes in the future to marry and have children, but she fears she too will lose them to her mother. Cleo is herself presented, finally, as economically and emotionally tied to her husband. She is characterized as devious and dishonest, extorting money from her husband with every opportunity. He, in a condescending way, leaves an allowance for her under the kitchen clock. When the living is no longer easy, in the aftermath of the war, a sprung clock becomes emblematic of Cleo's psychological state when her husband leaves for New York, his business having failed (284-285). Simeon Binney, on the other hand, sees women as "feed[ing] on men" (140), when in fact he is maintained by his wife Lenore's fortune, in an unloving marriage arranged through Cleo herself.

Most importantly for the daughter, West constructs Cleo as being sexually repressed, but not unsexual. By contrast, her sister Charity and her husband Ben value physical intimacy and are presented as sexually compatible and mutually desirous: "[Charity] crossed the room to Ben, and put her arms tight around him, feeling the quivering begin in her body, and the breathlessness riding her words. ... In the warm dark their bodies merged in perfect oneness, and their island of the passionate night was rich in everything for their needs" (Living 159). Cleo, on the other hand, has no understanding of sex as pleasure. "When she found herself in her marriage bed, she let [Bart] know straightaway that she had no intention of renouncing her maidenhood for one man if she had married to preserve it from another" (35). According to the narrator:

When Cleo was twenty, their sex battle began. It was not a savage fight. She did not struggle against his superior strength. She found a weapon that would cut him down quickly and cleanly. She was ice. Neither her mouth nor her body moved to meet his. The open eyes were wide with mocking at the busyness below. There was no moment when everything in her was wrenched and she was one with the man who could submerge her in himself.

Five years later, she conceived a child on a night when her body's hunger broke down her controlled resistance. For there was no real abhorrence of sex in her. Her need of love was as urgent as her aliveness indicated. But her perversity would not permit her to weaken. She would not face the knowledge that she was incomplete in herself. (35-36)

Mary Helen Washington argues that Cleo's character in this regard is evidence of the feminist themes in the text. "Cleo connects sexuality to women's repression and refuses any kind of sexual life, preferring
instead emotional intimacy with her sisters and their children" (Invented Lives xxiii). Moreover, the reader is aware of the inappropriateness of Cleo's sexual partner who is completely unlike her sisters' husbands. That Bart Judson is old enough to be Cleo's father, that she knew him a mere two days before she married him, that she chooses him as the lesser of two evils, but an evil nonetheless, that he resembles her Pa cannot be overlooked given Cleo's emotional immaturity and arrested development. These incestuous undertones make her choice of near-celibacy understandable, even prudent. When she chooses Bart Judson, it is because of his money and his age. Cleo expects to be left a widow with a large nest egg. "Oh, hush up, Mr. Judson," Cleo said sharply. 'Don't talk about dying. You'll bury me. You'll be too mean to die and leave me your money" (Living 230). Unconsciously, Cleo tries to replace her absent father. As Bart has had no sexual life before marrying at forty-two, one could say Cleo picks a sexless and dark man to overcome her experience with predatory white men, but also to ensure that Bart will not force himself upon her—given the politics of their different colors of which Cleo continually reminds him. And as Cleo's Mama had died giving birth to a dead child, "Pa had just as good as killed her" (30).

One wonders, however, if the responsibility for conjugal sex is not transferred symbolically from the "white" mother to the dark daughter, providing a powerful metaphor for the black female body that must endure the unthinkable to save the "white" one, not unlike in slavery. In this case, Judy's loss of girlhood to "incest" (be it emotional or physical) is even worse than her mother Cleo's loss of girlhood through dislocation. A highly suggestive scene in The Living Is Easy, along with its correlative in the Oral History, especially when juxtaposed with the representation of the "frigid wife," suggests such a strategy. In particular, the construction of the "sober," thrifty, stoic lifestyle of Bart Judson, before he marries Cleo Jericho (Living) is slightly different from the image of the "dandy" Isaac West "who had a racehorse" before he married Rachel Benson (Oral 197). In the novel, the secrecy of the "blessing" of the father's "dirty" money by Judy's "clean" hand, when he comes to her in his night clothes, into her bedroom, in the dark, and away from the watchful eye of Cleo, is repeated in the oral testimony. There is at least a possible comparison in Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye with Pecola Breadlove's loss of innocence when her father impregnates
her. One need not take the fictional incident West creates in *Living* as real even if it appears again in the *Oral History*. What is important is the use to which West, like Morrison, puts the sexual violation of a young girl.

West's father "Ike," to whom the novel is dedicated, resembles much of his fictional portrait as Bart Judson, especially as regards purely factual material. Born into slavery on the ruined Judson plantation, he was probably the child of a black father because of his color and his mother's position as a field hand. Mary Judson tells her son that "her man had been sold away from her" and that "she had no recollection of her own parents" (*Living* 57). Bart gets his freedom with Emancipation at a year old (Isaac West at seven) and moves from Richmond to Springfield to Boston with his mother, carrying with him his slave name (as does Isaac West). "Hardworking and sober minded" he had been in business for himself from the age of ten. A "shouting Baptist," he was saved at seventeen (31, 33, 57, 74). Like Bart Judson, who is forced to relocate his business to New York following World War I, Isaac West moves his business to Brooklyn sometime between 1929 and 1932, as a result of the Depression. He stays at 43 West 66th Street, West's apartment, while he conducts business. From his few letters to his daughter and niece, it is clear that Isaac West often summoned a higher power in his prose and is barely literate. Some word usage suggests linguistic influences other than Anglo-Saxon if not faulty spellings. By way of example, he writes: "My Dear Darling Sweet Girles I Receivd the Box Candy Both Boxes it was gust what I like I am So Happy I am Glad I Have got a Girl thank God I am Prought of you" (transcribed exactly). 165 In the text, both Bart and his mother Mary speak non-standard English. Taking a random selection from the text, Bart says to his mother: "'Mam, Mam, I can't find Jesus. I searc' in the Bible. He warn't there! I search' one night in the lonesome graveyard, and I heard the ha'nts wail. But I couldn't find Jesus. He warn't there!'" (65). Mary replies: "Can't you hear de rush of wings? Can't you hear de los' lambs bleating on de hills? Can't you hear de Marster's voice...? Ain't you feel de monstrous light what strike and blind?" (65).

As regards the construction of aspects of Bart Judson's character and personality, there is some ambiguity. Most is handled in the text of *The Living Is Easy* with odd juxtapositions of memory with event.

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165 Isaac C. West to DW, [10 Nov. 1930 and 30 Dec. 1930], DWP, B1F3, SLRI.
In Chapter Two, which is entirely about Geo's girlhood, the narrator intrudes with a fleeting image of Bart Judson, then in his mid-thirties, seemingly in response to the narrator's expletive: "God help the man who married [Geo]." "Somewhere in Springfield, Massachusetts, at that moment, Bart Judson, a grown man, a businessman, too interested in the Almighty Dollar to give any thought to a wife, was certainly giving no thought to an eleven-year-old hell-raiser [Geo] way down South" (Living 23). As the chapter is short, seemingly, the incidents that develop Geo's character are carefully chosen. The above digression to Bart Judson follows an especially odd sequence of images, purportedly to demonstrate Geo's wild spirit. In particular the use of hands and money in conjunction with male genitalia has a parallel in a later scene between Judy and her father in Judy's bedroom in Chapter Twenty-Seven. Its foreshadowing is the following.

Geo first steals her sisters' money and tries to distract them from their "woe-begone faces" by hanging by her hands from a tree. A boy comes by and laughs which makes Cleo want to "loll" him because he is looking at the "split in her drawers." Cleo butts him in the groin, "where the weakness of boys was—the contradictory delicacy," in order to win. "He lay very still, his hands shielding his innocent maleness from further assault [my emphasis]." After the boy runs away, "her sisters knelt beside her, letting their soothing fingers [read hands] caress her face" (20-21, 23). The reference at just this point to thirty-five-year-old Bart in connection with twelve-year-old Geo, who will be his undesiring wife in six years, tilts the meaning of the scene. It goes from the foreshadowing a husband-to-be soon to make a bad marriage to a much younger woman with whom he will be incompatible to a middle-aged man in the company of a child.

The narrator, using psychologically loaded words and reversal, goes on to describe Bart Judson as a man who is not always what he seems. He practices deceit for his own well-being, and he projects on to women what he himself is guilty of. Bart avoids designing women by wearing "a disguise of ancient suits to confuse the predatory" (Living 33). "He had distrusted women until now. He thought all they saw in a man was his pocketbook. .... Artfully he had sidestepped them all, spending his days in such hard work that sleep came easily, and there were no wakeful hours of "aching loins" (32). On the other hand, Bart is happy to find that Cleo is in service (vulnerable) and in need of rescue (vulnerable) from a different kind of sexual
predator, Miss Boonum's nephew. He proposes to Cleo on the day after he meets her, largely because of her appearance (color and age), and he reaps the end he most fears, a predatory female after his money, as though an enactment of self-fulfilling prophecy or psychological necessity.

Turning now to the scene between Bart Judson and his daughter Judy, from Chapter Twenty-Seven, one notices the familiar pattern of images of money and hands, of the dirty (sinful) with the clean (innocent) juxtaposed with male sexuality, progressing from the wife to the daughter. The chapter begins in the aftermath of the Christmas party at which only Cleo is present. Bart lies awake on Cleo's bed where Judy has been sleeping with her mother since the arrival of Geo's sisters. This night only Bart has been allowed to fall asleep beside Judy, but with several provisions, including taking a bath and putting on a clean nightshirt. "Upstairs, Bart stirred on [not in] Cleo's bed. This begrudged concession had not included his passage between the sheets.

... He wanted to put a coin in her hand. He had put money in her hand from the time that she was born just as he "slid coins under Cleo's closed door" now that Judy sleeps with her mother (Living 267-68).

Gently Bart pressed the palm of her hand, extracting the blessing. She was his luck, or so he saw her. His lucky piece, he called her. Unknown to Cleo, it was his custom to visit at Judy's bedside when the day's receipts had been exceptional. Waking her, he would pile the packets of money on her pillow and press her small hand on the stack. He called that the blessing of his money, and believed that would help him to double it. He had the common sense to make the ceremony short, knowing that Geo would raise Hail Columbia over his piling germs on her child's pillow. (268)

The sleeping Judy then triggers other memories (desire) for Bart of coming to Judy's room when she was in a room by herself. Immediately following, Bart goes downstairs "conscious of his nightshirt and bare knees" (269) to look for his wife as the house is quiet. With tears she had only shed once before when she was eighteen, Cleo tells Bart of her father's drowning and temporarily allows him to comfort her. Recovering herself, she wants money from him for Robert Jones' defense and a trip South to bury Pa. This request signals the usual round of insult and humiliation common in their relationship where money is concerned. "'Talk big, Mister Nigger,' Cleo taunts. "You're the one holding the moneybags. Go on and talk. I've got to listen. I can't tell you to take your money and be damned. All I can do is humble myself. All I can do is beg. How do you want me, down on my knees? I never knelt to a man in my life, but I'll kneel to a nigger now'" (276). Seeing
Cleo in a vulnerable position triggers desire in Bart, in the only time his sexuality is mentioned in the text. "As she bent her knees, his hands dug into her shoulders. Tears of love and hate and terrible frustration stood in his eyes. He felt his maleness hard against her and pushed her away" (276). Once the anger leaves her, the narrator says, "He and her father merged into one image..." (276). Thus ends Part I of the novel.

In the Oral History, the story is similar:

I never even told my mother to the day that she died, because my mother told me that money. ...she didn't want me to like money. ... My room was on the top floor, the bedroom. And I don't know, I was a little girl, so I guess I was maybe only about nine. It was dark, though. And my father would come up to my room, and I believed my mother, that money was dirty. ... [H]e would come up, and he would... I don't know how much money, he would have lots of money in packets. He called me his lucky penny. ... At any rate, when my father would come up and say, "Dimmy, I want you to...." I can see my white sheet and the money. Because for a little bit...the dirty money was on my bed. And I loved my father, adored him; my mother was a little jealous. He would say, "I want you to bless the money." So I put my hand on the money, and he would say, "I made a lot of money today, and if you bless the money, it will double tomorrow." I would put my hand on the money, and then he would take it up and go away. But I will remember that forever. Not just that one occasion, but very often he used to do that. I knew it was a secret that I must not tell my mother, and I never told my mother. But yes, yes, I blessed my father's money all the time. (196-97)

When West shares with the interviewer that she does not like money and the reasons why, ("It may be because of my father." "I don't know why I felt it was wrong to like money. Well I guess she had taught me that" (197)), the explanation does not fit her proud story above. On the other hand, both Cleo Judson and Rachel West loved money for what it could buy. It is, therefore, odd that the mother would teach her daughter to dislike it and be jealous of her daughter's affection for her father given her own estrangement from him. In other words, there is a subtext somewhere in this tangled and contradictory story. At the very least, the child is taking on some form of adult responsibility for the father, be it emotional, psychological, or sexual, because the mother does not.

Biographical equivalents can be established for each of the second generation—the Jericho sisters' children—Judy Judson, Victoria Bates, Penny Reid, and Tim Jones. West's cousin, Helene Johnson Hubbell, the daughter of Ella (Benson) Johnson, is most like "Victoria" in the novel. Eugenia Rickles, the daughter of Minnie (Benson) Rickles, is "Penny." The blue-eyed and blond-haired "Tim" in the text is Melvyn, "the little blonde boy" West speaks of in the Oral History. He may be the real life brother of Virginia Ayers (called
"Ginny," "Jean," and "sis" by West) who lived most of the time with Rachel West but is the daughter of Isabella ("Bess") (Benson) [Ayers?] (160, 193). He may also be the brother of the eighteen-month-old child who died. "At ten years old, two children came into my house that were younger," West tells Guinier (Oral 210). Writing from New York in 1929, Isaac West mentions Rachel West's sister "Matte" (born after Rachel) and—possibly a daughter—"Merry [Mary]" who will keep house when the husband and wife separate. [Mary] may have been another West cousin. 150

Rather than using only one character (Judy Judson) as an equivalent personality for herself as she had for her grandmother (Mama) and mother (Cleo), West constructs, from the four children, a composite personality to serve as her fictional persona, and vica versa, to demonstrate a whole personality. Although Judy, Vicky, and Penny may be "sufficient to each other," (347) none is sufficient unto herself. For purposes of plot, there must be four children so that Cleo can finally be Mama in the "lovely illusion" of a southern childhood (Living 53). And, together, they comprise the whole of the color spectrum. A boy cousin, Tim, is necessary to problematize gender, and perhaps sexuality. Two-year-old Tim loves Judy best and is influenced only by her; she serves as his surrogate mother. However, by the end of the text when Bart leaves for New York, Cleo decides to take five-year-old Tim away from Judy and into her own bedroom to replace Bart as "the man of the house" (347). The male gender of the child is necessary to confirm that Cleo desires a male child. "Girls belong to their fathers," she rationalizes. The innocence and pure love of the youngest child serve as a foil to the parent's immature and injurious love. The perception of a fractured self that Cleo Judson discovers in her own psychology is thus passed on to Judy.

The disjunction Cleo feels is never resolved in the novel. She wants to be a Bostonian, and she wants to provide the childhood she remembers for her daughter by recreating it and living it again vicariously. The problem is that Judy does not mirror Cleo, and Cleo is at a loss to replicate the mother/child relationship she

149 An 8-1-1912 letter to Rachel says that Bess will marry ("Your sister Bess" to RW, DWP, B1F1, SLRI). A 4-20-1916 postcard from to "My dear friend Dolly" (DW) suggests a young Virginia writing to nine-year-old Dorothy ("Virginia and Bessie" to DW, DWP, B1F12, SLRI).

150 Isaac C. West to DW, [Jan. 1929], DWP, B1F3, SLRI.

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had known. As Cleo reflects upon the first Christmas morning that she is together with all her sisters and
their children in Boston, she broods rather than rejoices. What she feels is not unity and reunion but loss:
"The thing [missing] was a sense of oneness. Now some part of her felt severed, her self-identity with her
child. There was a little girl, and then there were three little girls and a boy. And now in Cleo was the core of
fear that there were no children at all" (Living 222).

While the blended family Geo creates calls attention to her ambivalent relationship with her daughter,
it also serves a positive purpose. Most importantly, it provides the children with a representation of
wholeness. Even if the sense of oneness is only possible through group identity, still it allows the children to
draw from each other what each most needs. It also allows each child, in effect, to experience the other
children's color. Thus, none of the children is only dark or only white. Understanding and acceptance, as
regards color in particular, but also other matters like gender, is accomplished through vicarious experience
so that in the children's generation, color prejudice is absorbed, not through assimilation (racial genocide)
but through the power of sympathy.

Both Mary Helen Washington and writer Paule Marshall point to the "self-division...at the heart of
Geo's conflict" (Invented Lives 352). The narrative perspective, says Washington, "profoundly ambivalent"
towards Cleo Judson, "creates a novel that is in contradiction with itself: Cleo the girl artist becomes Cleo the
woman monster" (346, 350). Washington cites Paule Marshall's explanation for this characterization:
"Ruthless and despotic in her quest for acceptance, in constant terror that her lowly origins in the South will
be found out, [Cleo] is, at the same time, nostalgic for that past. She lives in perpetual conflict with the self
she has assumed and the person she is" (352). Neither critic, however, applies this particular psychological
phenomenon to Cleo's daughter, Judy Judson.

Rather, Washington uses this example of "daughterly distance from the mother's perspective"
(Invented Lives 351) to produce an incisive piece of feminist criticism. Placing The Living Is Easy into a
continuum with a later "mother-daughter stor[y]," the author's 1982 memoir "My Mother, Rachel West,"

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151Mary Helen Washington makes a similar observation in Invented Lives (345).
Washington elaborates on Marianne Hirsch's theory of the silencing and oppression of the mother in literature "by the discourse of the daughter" (Invented Lives 350). This apparent "complicity[ly] with the patriarchy" occurs because the daughter "may perceive the mother as both powerless in the world of men and overpowering in her domestic role" (350-351).

Indeed, West's narrative does acknowledge just such a status in several places. Cleo herself, in a rare moment of reflection, wonders why it is that she has most command over the weakest sister. "There were times when she was unhappily aware that the sister she could influence easiest was the sister with the least spirit" (Living 216). Cleo further worries that "Some day she would run out of ways to skin the cat" (55). The narrative voice also suggests that Judy comes to a realization about her mother's powerlessness at the point that all her schemes begin to unravel and she is at her most vulnerable state. "Judy was beginning to see that Cleo was the boss of nothing but the young, the weak, the frightened. She ruled a pygmy kingdom" (308). Of course, given the narrative design, it is the older Judy looking back upon her life from the vantage point of some thirty years who comes to this insight and not her nine-year-old alter ego. This dual narrative strategy allows for both critique of and sympathy for the mother, who regardless of her limitations and intentions has hurt her daughter, and that hurt must be expressed and then resolved, as I believe West tries to accomplish through her text.

Washington, on the other hand, argues that West tries to resolve the novel's "ambivalent portrayal of the mother" (Invented Lives 345) in a separate work. I would propose that she accomplishes it in The Living Is Easy. West's "moving and loving portrait" of her mother, according to Washington, apparently was not possible until twenty-five years after Rachel West's death (351). In "My Mother, Rachel West," Washington asserts, "we see the daughter struggling with the ambivalence, guilt, and awe she felt toward her mother but was unable to express in the novel" (351). In the critic's estimation, the real significance of the memoir is the daughter's ability, finally, to see that her mother is also a woman with a life "separate from her roles as

mother and wife." More remarkable is "that life still remains a mystery to the daughter" (351).

Even though *The Living Is Easy* does not produce "a moving and loving portrait," like "My Mother, Rachel West," I would contend that the desire to balance ambivalence and guilt with awe is already present in the novel in a way that it is completely absent in the early short stories. Contrasting the unpublished and published short stories with *The Living Is Easy* helps chart the beginning of the reconciliation with the mother. West was, after all, forty-one when the book was published, and she was living at Benson Cottage with her mother when she wrote most of the text. No evidence from letters or any other extant source suggests that Rachel West was displeased with the book. West herself says she cannot remember whether or not her mother actually read the book (*As I Remember It*), while in another interview she claims that her usually critical mother paid her the "highest compliment she ever paid her daughter" by saying "'Very good, Dorothy,' after the publication of *The Living Is Easy*" (Roses 47). The narrative voice places ambivalence at the center of Judy's world and not just at the center of the mother's.

When she made her regular reports to her cousins on the Big People's business, they felt baffled and impatient trying to draw conclusions. If the Big People wanted their husbands, why didn't they go back to them? If they hated to see their children forget their fathers, why had they brought them away? If they thought Papa was so wonderful, why didn't they stand up for him? If they didn't want Cleo to boss them, why did they let her? (*Living 202*)

Ultimately, Washington's desire to rescue Cleo Judson from what she considers Cleo's fictional silencing and censure is to point out the mother's power to enable the daughter's art. West "discovered the beginnings of her own creative voice by remembering her mother's voice," (344) Washington argues. Washington comes to this conclusion by way of an incident that West has related in their interview. The art of storytelling began for West when she mimicked her mother—in Wallace Thurman's loft. West recalls: "'[I was] making fun of those proper people just as my mother would'" (345). Washington's analysis continues by separating the daughter from the artist. West may have benefited psychologically from a more sympathetic, accepting father figure, but it was not from the "male power" that she gained her "power as a writer" (351). In West's "search for self and form," Washington quotes the author as saying: "'All my mother's blood came out in me. I was my mother talking. ... I became me'" (351).
As valuable as Washington's reading is, were she to extend it, some inconsistencies remain unresolved. Why, for example, is West's mother's "blood" the unifying element in the division of the personal from the artistic, given its negative implication in questions of racial identity? How, along these same lines, can the speech act be considered empowering when West portrays her mother as a woman who lies uncontrollably? The implication, in that case, would be that it is her mother's lies that are the basis of "me" the artist. The ambivalence about the mother seems not to be so easily asserted away. An excellent passage that reflects the daughter's ambivalence is presented as genuine questioning on the part of Judy through the wisdom of the narrator. Her recognition of Cleo's inability to tell the truth is actually a saving grace. Judy can just as easily select what she wishes, or can bear, to believe and can even rationalize, if need be, that she may have mistaken her mother's real attitude:

Cleo would start another outrageous story. Judy would lie there listening, half amused, half moved, and wholly confused in her feelings for Cleo by her admixture of fiction and fact. She made it so hard to know what to believe. Why did she never tell the truth? Why didn't anyone ever stop her? Was it her voice? Did they like to listen to her talk just to hear the music sounds she made? Was it because she was so full of life that she made things move inside you, tears or laughter or anger, and when she went out of a room something like something alive left with her? (Living 201-202)

"My mother, Rachel West," the daughter's forgiving tribute to her mother, is just that, and like other eulogies, with their intention to praise, it is a one-dimensional profile erring intentionally on the side of positive memory. Clearly it is a product of the 1980s.

To understand West's psyche during the decades of the 1920s and 1930s, one would emphasize instead the plight of the daughter. It is her discourse that dominates the mother's story even into the 1940s and especially in the short stories of the earlier period. West does not employ her creative imagination to present, as Washington argues, "her [mother's] ironic view of pretentious blacks" and "satirize their foibles" (345) until the late 1940s with The Living Is Easy. Even then, as Washington rightly points out, "There are only two chapters in which Cleo is allowed [the] position of heroic center of her own story. Predictably it is when she is still a very young girl. In these chapters, which flashback to her childhood, Cleo openly questions the paternalistic rules that deny her power and autonomy" (Invented Lives 348).
The daughter's "search for self and form" and the "release of...creative powers" (*Invented Lives* 351-352), with which the novel clearly wrestles, seem less resolved, particularly in the early years of West's short story writing (1926-1932). The short fiction is preoccupied with twins and twinning. Stories written before *The Living Is Easy* pair fathers and daughters, most often because of critical and unloving color-conscious, light-skinned mothers. In these stories, a feminist reading of West's creative output of the 1920s and '30s is more difficult to construct. One could argue that it was West's reconciliation with her mother at age forty, some ten years after the death of the father, which prepared her to write the novel when she did. The story leading up to it, "Prologue to a Life" (1929), proves the point as it is so substantially different in its nihilistic presentation of the mother/daughter relationship.

Even in the novel of the late 1940s, creativity is stifled rather than animated. The heightened degree to which West fictionalizes the self—in comparison with how she fictionalizes the mother—suggests the origin of the problem of the search for self as deeper than the mother/daughter relation caught in the contradictions of the patriarchy. Representations of gender, autonomous selves, and creativity are completely unstable in the novel too, particularly because of the age of the children characters, but even when West uses known aspects of herself and Helene Johnson as models for the Jericho sisters' children. Cleo's rejection of Judy because of her color creates a deep psychological wound far deeper than that caused by the division of gender spheres, at this time in West's life, that the author resolves through her narrator's omniscience and understanding. Washington does mention that "[a]ccording to West, her light-skinned, beautiful mother was never quite able to accept having a plain, dark-skinned child" (*Invented Lives* 345). However, Washington's project is to uncover "maternal power" and to establish, through West, how the daughter comes to artistic "voice." Thus, Rachel West's color consciousness is seen as only one motivation in West's coming to terms with her mother through Cleo Judson.

It is only when West combines all the characteristics of all the Jericho children that she can delineate a whole personality for her nine-year-old self. In this way she can show where she is coming from, but without

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153"The Typewriter" (1926), "An Unimportant Man" (1928), "Funeral" (1928), "PART ONE" (n.d.), "Prologue
being stuck there, and model her imagined better self, as the narrative voice certainly has matured beyond the
child. Judy Judson—as close a similarity as exists—is only one of the female alter egos of the more complex
Dorothy West. Victoria is the other. Four-year-old Tim serves as the male counterpart.154 In order for Cleo to
have loved her most, Judy should have been a light-skinned male with the qualities of Vicky and Tim. In
order for Rachel West to have loved her best, Dorothy West would have to have been someone other than
herself. Then, having satisfactorily fictionalized a personality for herself, West draws upon this same
characterization during the interviews of the nineteen eighties to enrich her biography.

For just these reasons, The Living Is Easy is rightly the daughter's story. While Cleo Judson may be
the physical center of the novel, Judy Judson is meant to be its spiritual center. However, because Judy is
constructed as other than her mother's natural replacement, she cannot fulfill the role without assuming
attributes of Vicky and Tim. Judy is as others perceive her: clearly a disappointment to her mother, loved
fiercely by all the children, and their center. Early in the text, Judy is the object of her mother's gaze, the
mother who "eyed her daughter with disapproval" (Living 86). We are privy to Cleo's thoughts as she
considers how a child should be "a projection of its mother"; thus, she cannot be satisfied because her child
is not. To have the narrator later provide the defining gaze returns Judy to the subject position. When
described by the narrator, Judy is associated with "goodness" and "truth"; she becomes the "fountainhead" of
the children's "search for truth" (210).

Judy and Cleo are physically and spiritually unalike, creating tensions and rejections on both sides.
Judy is "not a beauty like her mother"; instead, she not only looks like her father, but also she is just like him
(Living 74). Cleo wants her daughter to "sit" and be "like a little Boston lady," but Judy is her father's
daughter. She shares with Bart Judson "a similarity in their souls" that peeves Cleo (74). Both father and
daughter are reticent and gentle, which "bores" Cleo (219). Interestingly, West makes no distinction in eye
color as was true in real life of her father's blue eyes, but makes Judy an exact match with Bart Judson. "She
was dark. She had Papa's cocoa-brown skin, his soft dark eyes, and his generous nose in miniature" (39). The

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to a Life" (1929).
\end{quote}
narrator acknowledges that Judy knows that "most of their schoolmates' meannesses were directed at her because she was darkest (209). "Schooled too well by Thea [Binney] in ladylike behavior" (209), Judy is unable to strike back, which "worries" Cleo who had not intended to instill in her daughter signs of "softness" (219). It brings "shame" to Judy that her cousin Victoria [Helene Johnson] "was doing her fighting for her" (209).

Light-skinned Victoria is both Judy's spiritual alter ego and surrogate mother, even though she is only a year older than her cousin. As a fictional creation, she has many of the qualities Cleo admires and some that West may also have desired in her mother. Victoria, too, has limitations that only find complement in Judy's personality. Because of her courage, loyalty, and intelligence, Victoria is a projection of the perfect mother/daughter. Like Cleo, Victoria is a take-charge person and a natural leader: "She was wild and free, and afraid of nothing" (Living 299). Unlike Cleo, Victoria has a fierce loyalty to Judy because of her color and hates white children because of that loyalty. To Judy, "[b]eing one of a household that was vari-hued, ...[Victoria] had no color prejudice or preference" (207). The narrator knows otherwise, that in order to renounce color one must be conscious of it. "[Vicky], the child of Cleo's heart, was the one whose intelligence equaled Cleo's hope. Yet Vicky, for whose stormy nature Cleo had set no example of restraint, was unable to discipline her fine mind" (300). While Victoria's ambitions are great, they are yet unrealized. "She was going to run away and roam the whole world, ...and she would write poems about everything she saw, and send them to Judy to keep for her" (299). Both Vicky and Judy have a highly developed aesthetic sensibility and an "instinct for knowledge"; both are interested in "distillations of beauty" and "the pursuit of truth" (300-301). The two cousins are part of the "school world" and a larger world, unlike Penny who "never envisioned anything but a colored world" (207). They each desire to leave Cleo's circle of influence.

Because the two cousins function together as parts of a whole personality, it does not diminish Judy that it is Victoria who possesses the soul and capabilities of a writer; each has a role in the pursuit of the imagination. It is Victoria who loves the wisdom of words: "Restless, fun-loving Vicky could be sobered and

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134 Of the major writing, this alone does not use twins as psychological doubles.
inspired by the simple act of opening a book. She turned pages tenderly, not wanting to break the ebony thread that wove itself into a wonderful pattern of words. And the words were the explanation of life, the key to understanding" (*Living* 299-300). But Victoria can only proceed with Judy's steadying influence. Judy, on the other hand, has "the larger vision." "Judy had instilled the need in her.... But she needed Judy to steady the lighted lamp, to be somewhere near when she wrote. Away from Judy she could not harness her spirit (300). Judy takes pleasure in the artistic form only for itself, for the way it works upon her sensibility. In music Judy finds a "distillation of beauty. She could recognize beauty now in whatever form or shape it assumed. And for her it was most manifest in the faces of little children" (301). Here, the daughter resists the mother's injunction to make a career out of her childish passion. For Judy, music simply "is."

Judy's feelings of fear and resentment toward her mother are magnified in the character of Robert Jones, Serena's husband and Tim's father. Perhaps Judy's unexpressed anger is actually displaced onto the uncle figure. Because Judy fears that if she married, Cleo would "try to turn her against her husband" and "try to take her children away, she "was going to leave home and get married and never come back" (*Living* 301). Two-year-old Tim is constructed wholly innocent and unconscious of color. He is bonded to Judy, not to his mother, or father, or Cleo. A broken and nihilistic figure, Robert Jones rejects Cleo and her version of the warm South of memory. For financial reasons once his wife joins Cleo in Boston, he moves to the city where he passes for white to find work. In so doing, he kills a clansman to protect a black community for whom he is doing police work (261). Using the "scared nigger" defense, he is acquitted, but only if he will leave the South where he has "crossed the color line" (304). Robert Jones blames Cleo for his misfortune because she had lured his wife Serena away from home, creating the separation that resulted in his passing for white that was his undoing. The final portrait of his rage and hostility as portrayed by the narrative voice is sobering:

only the now of his nothingness occupied him. He stayed within his wall of silence, forswearing all but the meager speech of assent or denial. Over the growing film on his mind only one image was stretched, the hated Cleo of his conjuring, she whom he had never seen, she the enemy who had ravaged him. Serena could not lead him out of the dark. (305)
This metaphoric play on absolutes of black and white, which West creates as the objective correlative of Robert Jones' anger, again evokes the theater. In this case, the black and white film strip, frozen into a single frame, projects an image of Cleo, one more real than her actual self does whom Jones has not even met. The man, described as enveloped in complete darkness, is as one in a movie theater watching a film of his own invention. The fact that West had a role in the Russian film *Black and White* in 1932, before she wrote *The Living Is Easy*, is not lost in the scene. West again seems to draw, in her imagery, from the role-playing and actress in herself to represent her mother. In other words, she can only do so within the distance provided by a dramatic role. Equally remarkable is the way the two whitest members of the family are dissolved into blackness, and now, because of their cruelty and revenge, share in the same darkness of the dark daughter.

While daughters in the novel resemble their fathers, it is mother love they most crave; however, gendering too is unstable. The novel is constructed around events dealing with the father. Part I (Chapters 1-27) begins with Cleo's search for a house in Brookline, made possible because of her marriage to Bart Judson. It ends with the death of Pa, who drowns helping the dishonored Robert Jones. Part II (Chapters 28-35) begins with Cleo's return from the South with Serena and Robert after burying Pa and ends with Mr. Judson leaving for New York and Cleo's resolve to replace Judy with Tim Jones, Robert's son. The narrator speaks from Cleo's perspective when she says, "Girls were always their father's children, but boys always seemed to cling to women" (*Living* 347). In other words, Cleo blames Judy and the way of the world for their estrangement. The irony in the rejection is that Cleo, herself, needs to believe that her Mama loved her most and to feel that love expressed. This is her justification for recreating the past through the physical presence of her three sisters (30). At the same time, it is her father's death that "has broken the chain of enchantment," not her mother's (284).

Cross-gender likeness is replicated in the younger group of four, but with considerably more artistic license. West does not construct a biographical equivalent of herself in Judy alone. She embodies in Judy everything mothers reject. Projected onto the fictional creations of Vicky and Tim are all that the mothers
value, even as the children differ from their mothers. In Penny, West creates a vivid representation of filial rejection; the daughter is repulsed by the gluttony of her mother, Charity. It develops in her an "extreme fastidiousness" about food and clothing and disorder (Living 296-298). Likewise, Victoria is courage personified, while Lily, her mother, fears everything. Ultimately, only intelligence is race-free in Cleo Judson's world. "[B]rains are the only thing that counts. And brains are not black or white" (221), she chooses to believe. Thus,

[h]er ambition for the little girls was tremendous, and for Judy it was greatest. Out of her egoism she could not imagine that she had not borne a remarkable child. She was determined that Judy should have an abundance of education. She held the firm conviction that a plain child was denied the distraction of prettiness for a noble purpose. (219-220)

That "noble purpose"—outside the realm of the novel—was for young Dorothy West to become a writer. In the background of this desire is the specter of The Clarion, Harvard-educated Simeon Binney's newspaper for "Boston Negroes" (Living 93). At stake in the novel, for Simeon Binney is not the choice between creative fiction or journalism but the choice of audience. Writing for a black audience, as Simeon does, how "race" will be represented when "class" and "culture" make for "difference" rather than similarity becomes the problematic (126).

West engages the question of whether or not race even applies when one has not been socialized within the race. What, asks the narrator, is the appropriateness of "race conscious[ness]" anyway "for a young man who had been brought up exactly as if he were white" (Living 35). From the point of view of Boston's middle-class (white) Negroes, she explains, one's "Bostonness" should override designations of "race" and "blood." The problem for Simeon Binney is that his Bostonness does not—because of his brown skin (135-136). His obviously racialized body that has made him aware that "[i]dentical dress, houses, and accents did not make Simeon a Bostonian" (122). The same does not apply to Cleo who was not raised white until she was fourteen, which only shows the strength of the pull of white values on Cleo when her family is not with her. It was just this intersection of race with color that West probes throughout the whole of her long writing career.
Since "an abundance of education" and the fulfillment of intellectual "ambition" were synonymous in the mother’s eyes, it becomes clearer why West may have felt the need to augment her educational accomplishments. She could do so by assuming the fictional biographies of Tim, Judy, and Thea. Tim "had entered the first grade at four. Cleo thought kindergarten...a foolish waste of time. She passed Tim off for five and a half..." (Living 302). Miss Althea (Thea) Binney, a genteel, white-skinned black, tutors Judy. "Thea was Cleo's model of perfection. She had been a day pupil at private school, and later a boarding student at a select academy" (92).

Thusly, West enters the public realm of the Dictionary of Literary Biography in the late 1980s as something of a fictional character herself. A child prodigy, already in the second grade at age four, whose education progresses naturally from private school to Columbia University. According to the DLB, she was tutored at two by Bessie Trotter and later by Grace Turner, "a proper Bostonian." At four, West was tested and admitted into second grade at Farragut School. She finished elementary school at Martin School in the Boston Mission Hill District. Then West attended Girls Latin School from which she graduated in 1923 at sixteen (Ferguson 188).

Even a cursory look at the DLB's chronology for West shows the discrepancies. For example, with a June birthday, had West started second grade at four, she would have entered Girls Latin at nine and graduated at fourteen, in 1921, and not at sixteen, in 1923. It is far more logical that she began the first grade at six in 1913 and graduated from high school, if a May graduation, at seventeen in 1924, a month short of eighteen, making her a month short of nineteen when she went to New York to attend the Opportunity banquet in the Spring of 1926, just before her birthday. In "Our Prize Winners and What They Say of Themselves" (Opportunity 1926) West sent in the following profile: "As yet I have a simple biography. I was born in Boston—I can never remember the name of the street—eighteen years ago and educated in the public schools, for which, I must confess, I had no great fondness."155

155"Our Prize Winners and What They Say of Themselves," Opportunity (June 1926): 189.
A sketch by Rachel West showing Dorothy at age nine dressed for "G.L.S." only adds to the mystery. The registrar's list of "notable alumnae" from Girls Latin does not include West. Girls Latin School was a part of the Boston Latin School founded in 1635 as a college preparatory high school to which girls were admitted in 1878. From 1881 until 1922, the school was located on Warren Avenue in Back Bay. In 1922, it moved to Avenue Louis Pasteur in the Fenway, next to Simmons College, the neighborhood where the Wests lived in after 1933. Dorothy West may have been enrolled in Girls Latin in September of 1916 (if nine) or September of 1917 (if ten, which she says was her age in some of the interviews). But, if the plot of *The Living Is Easy* is accurate, then Isaac West's business failed, as Bart Judson's did in the text, when the United States enters the War. Dorothy may then have had to withdraw from Girls Latin. It is unlikely that she accepted a scholarship because she would have considered it charity, which she says her family never succumbed to (*Oral*). Attending a select academy, or Boston University, or Columbia, is more likely of a piece with having a Brookline or Back Bay address—a seeming requisite for a successful writing career and a mother's acceptance. Perhaps a more accurate picture would be that of West as a first generation Bostonian of working-class parents, not even a generation out of slavery, with better educational opportunities than her parents and a predisposition toward distinction. Her family and friends, in order to accomplish what they have not been able to do, cultivate her success instead. The atmosphere of the early 1920s was conducive for just such hopeful thinking on the part of the older generation for their children. Oak Bluffs neighbor and musician Harry T. Burleigh in his praise of West best expresses it after she had won second prize in the *Opportunity* contest for her short story "The Typewriter." It was her first major publication:

[M]ay I hope to be included and kept within that ever widening circle of your real friends, as one who early saw your gifts, as one who always manifested sincere pleasure in meeting and talking with you..., as one who now congratulates you most heartily for the... excellence of your work—as one who is filled with suppressed exhilaration at the significance, the importance, the inspiration of what you yet are to do.  

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156 DWP, nd, B2F27, SLRI.  
158 Harry T. Burleigh to DW, 20 May 1926, DWP, B1F4, SLRI.
In this sense West is like her fictional character Isaac Coles, in *The Wedding*, just on his way to Harvard:

"From birth Isaac had known himself to be the receptacle for other people's hopes that went far beyond thoughts of his individual happiness. He was a flag bearer of sorts, and he knew it..." (152). But unlike the fictional Isaac, West never received a college education. 182

"We [Dorothy and Helene] were supposed to go to Columbia," West tells her interviewer, Genii Guinier. "We were very poor, so we didn't have much money" (Oral 168). When she comes back to the subject again, she adds only that "by that time," 1927, there were some "traumatic things that I don't like to talk about." What ever else she said is off the record, except for the fact that it "got all messed up" (201). It is only possible to establish through her correspondence that West enrolled in the "Special Courses in Writing," a part of Columbia University's Extension program for unmatriculated students. 160 Her participation in Columbia's Writers' Club and their literary magazine, *Copy*, may have been the model for her own literary magazine, *Challenge*.

Dorothy West's real-life ambitions begin for young Judy Judson where *The Living Is Easy* leaves off. It would appear that she meant to launch herself from high school directly into the world of the arts without college. New York fiction writer Cosmo Hamilton's novel *Who Cares?* provided her with a philosophy of life: "The world is theirs to do with what they will." 161 This mid-'20's optimism empowered West to imagine herself a writer. A piece of juvenilia entitled "The Play and the Novel," from her "Senior Essay" (undated), favors the play for its realism. The novel, she remarks, is only for "the romance of life." Her rationale, besides the fact that her mother loved the theater and wanted to be an actress, explains her early interest and why she solicited friendship with French actress Irene Bordoni who performed at the Tremont Theater and gave West and Helene Johnson complimentary tickets.

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182 Boston University's registrar cannot confirm West's attendance nor does her correspondence. The 1978 Oral History mentions several lectures at B.U. over a period of six years, probably those for Adelaide Cromwell in the 1970s. West received an honorary degree from the University of Massachusetts, Boston in the 1980s. 160 Columbia University's registrar confirms that West was not a matriculated student. The only record of her is a card she filled out with a name and address only. 161 Dorothy West, "Senior Essay," [June 1924?], ms, DWP, B1F26, SLRI.
A second piece of juvenilia entitled "The Kitchen," written in 1924 at seventeen, describes an optimistic West preoccupied with becoming a "personage." The "open letter"—to be read only if the author becomes successful—lists various personal "milestones." It serves as a kind of early autobiography—dealing in large part with West's intellectual and creative interests, her mother Rachel West and her mother surrogate, Edna Thomas.

Here the personal and the artistic are closely intertwined—, as they would be during West's entire artistic journey. At ten (1917), came the "first realization of beauty"—of writing style—and the desire to become a stylist, motivated by "the fictionalization, by Gladys Hall, of the movie "Who Cares?" At thirteen (1920), came the first realization "that mother love lasted throughout the years. I thought at eight" (1915), says West, "one stopped being mother's baby, and consequently grew up." At fifteen (1922), West says she "lost something very precious, a something, the loss of which will always be tragic: faith in my mother." Then, at nearly sixteen (before June, 1923), she says she "lost all, or nearly all, my egoism, Cosmo Hamilton, it was. He could, he should have been more kind." At seventeen (1924-1925), West met a mother-substitute in Edna Lewis Thomas ("Tommie"), "the woman, who, I believe, will always be the prevailing influence in my life.... I was," she explains, "at a loose end when I met her. Nothing mattered. I didn't even care about my writing. I was, very briefly, a young failure. Then she inspired me." The "piece de resistance!" is when she met actress Irene Bordoni at Boston's Tremont Theater.

Between 1923 and 1926, at ages sixteen through nineteen, West initiated correspondence with various members of the arts community. Three or four of these letters—more like flattering fan mail—first reflect the bold and earnest naivete of youth. They were written to famous people who seemed accessible to her. West wrote in 1923 to her "ideal" author, Cosmo Hamilton in New York, asking him to critique a "story" of hers. Hamilton's response was not encouraging, as we have seen from her autobiographical sketch. In 1925, West wrote a series of letters to her "ideal" actress, Irene Bordoni, whom she says she met after seeing her in a play at the Tremont Theater in Boston for a second time on 15 October 1924. After her meeting with

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162 Dorothy West, "The Kitchen," 17 Oct. 1924, ms, DWP, B1F27, SLRI.
Bordoni, it seems that West wanted to write a serious play worthy of the actress' talent. Bordoni was always kind and appreciative of West's adoration.\textsuperscript{163} Most of the letters from Bordoni are thank you notes for flowers from West. The play West intended was never presented. After the Opportunity contest in 1926, she began corresponding with musician and musicologist Harry T. Burleigh. Burleigh had a residence in the City and knew Rachel West from Oak Bluffs, where he summered at Shearer Cottage. Burleigh's response, a bit hyperbolic, differed considerably from Hamilton's. He claims to have known both Dorothy and her cousin Helene Johnson at the beginning of their careers,

\begin{quote}
\begin{center} in the chrysalis stage, when the wings of your imagination were just starting to germinate. Even then I recognized your gifts; the special bent or tendency—perhaps inclination is the better word—of your endowment... How quickly those full seeds of talent have sprouted? It is always so where the ground of one's planting is so rich and fertile.\textsuperscript{165} \end{center}
\end{quote}

Although it was the March 1926 Opportunity contest that actually launched West's career, with the publication of "The Typewriter" and a trip to New York at almost nineteen, West had tried to get published much earlier.\textsuperscript{166} Her letters of inquiry, beginning in 1925, were more serious and more directed toward a goal of publication than were her earlier ones. West's ambitions were probably spurred by the success of cousin Helene Johnson's poem "Trees at Night" that was published in Opportunity in 1924 and won a prize in 1925 (Mitchell 6). West, it seems, first sent manuscripts to The Bookman and The International Magazine Co. The fact that unsolicited work from a juvenile writer might actually be read and critiqued in 1925 was in keeping with the spirit of interracial cooperation in the arts that began to manifest itself around 1924 with the celebrated literary contests and interracial awards dinners. They gave black writers like West an entree into the literary marketplace through contest judges who were publishers, editors, and writers. Thus, it is not so strange that West began writing in March of 1925 to enlist the aid of publishers and literary agents.

Because of her age West was not as influenced by the first stage of the Harlem Renaissance as Helene

\textsuperscript{163}Cosmo Hamilton to DW, 26 April 1923, DWP, B1F12; and "Senior Essay," SLRI.
\textsuperscript{164}West makes no comment when she writes of Helene letting Bordoni know the girls were "colored" and must see the play "from the wings" and not the orchestra.
\textsuperscript{165}Harry T. Burleigh to DW, 20 May 1926, DWP, B1F4, SLRI.
\textsuperscript{166}The DLB claims West at seven published "Promise and Fulfillment" in the Boston Post where she won prizes for this and other stories to follow (Ferguson 188).
Johnson was. Even before 1925, Jessie Fauset at *The Crisis* was nurturing young talent like Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen, and *The Crisis* literary contests first got underway. Helene was inspired by this group, in absentia, and was well established as a published poet by 1926. *Opportunity* took "Night" and "Metamorphism" for its January and March 1926 issues. Her three submissions to the 1926 literary contest won prizes: "Fulfillment" (first honorable mention), "Magula" (fourth honorable mention), and "The Road" (seventh honorable mention) (Mitchell 7). Contest judge Robert Frost said of Helene that she had "produced two of the finest lines in the entries" (*Opportunity* 1926). *Opportunity* continued its interest in the Boston poet by publishing "Futility" and "Mother" in their August and September issues. In the 1927 contest her "Summer Matures" won a second prize in the poetry division and "Sonnet to a Negro in Harlem" won a fourth. Among the judges this time, according to *Opportunity*, were Joseph Auslander, W.S. Braithwaite, Carl Sandburg, Maxwell Bodenheim, Ridgeley Torrence, and Countee Cullen.

Important to establish is the degree to which West's developing work differed from the artistic zeitgeist of 1925 and how her participation in the 1926 *Opportunity* contest paved the road to *Challenge* magazine through contacts with other black writers. Even though West was first published in *Opportunity*, it was during 1926 when the shift away from black periodicals' sponsorship of the arts was occurring. West came to Harlem at the moment of the split between the younger avant-garde writers and the old guard. Thus, politically charged issues like how race should be represented artistically were being debated among writers like Langston Hughes, Wallace Thurman, Countee Cullen, and Zora Neale Hurston well before West appeared in Harlem to join forces with the avant-garde. However, her realistic representation of black characters and her use of irony place her, like them, well outside the genteel tradition from the outset. Yet her unsensational subject matter and her representation of colorism within the race kept her out of *The Crisis*, especially. Her representation of the working class, but not the folk, found her a place in *The Messenger*. Her participation with little magazines like *The Saturday Evening Quill* became a necessity thereafter.

West, like Thurman, was more concerned about the effects of color prejudice and its ambiguities than about the positive results of race consciousness that she clearly did not understand. By 1948, when she wrote
The Living Is Easy, she had sufficiently digested the rhetoric about racial representation to take of it what she needed. Clearly she rejected Hughes' extreme—for the time—view that black culture motivated black art. She had taken from Thurman the concept of the "Negro note." Her own understanding of "culture" was more a product of her family and their social class than of race. Her earliest published short fiction (1926-1929) deals directly with the effect of poverty on the realization of potential and then the effect of color on people's psychology, particularly when white middle-class values are absorbed uncritically.

The fathers in "The Typewriter" (1926) and the later "Prologue to a Life" (1929) seem less modeled on Isaac West than does Bart Judson in The Living Is Easy (1948). They express an evolving view about the black male's lack of opportunity in a racist society, but they also depict unstable marital relations as well. Both trace the demise of a spirited black father. In "The Typewriter," the father, a "tired, bent, little old man," becomes for a time "J. Lucius Jones" because of his daughter's typing lessons. As he dictates fictitious letters to her, he imagines himself "that enviable emblem of American life: a business man."167 In "An Unimportant Man," Zebediah Jenkins, having failed the bar exam three times, decides to give up his pursuit of the law. "You can't fool with these white folks," he realizes, and decides to force an education upon his unwilling young daughter instead.168 By the time West completed her first novel, she had lived through the 1930s, had been to Soviet Russia, and had lost her father. In The Living Is Easy, she attributes Bart Judson's financial ruin primarily to economic factors associated with World War I rather than to racism. She attributes Isaac West's death in 1933, in part, to the effects of the Depression on his business.

Before 1926, however, West was criticized for the lack of racial representation in the manuscripts she sent to publishers. A good example is the response by John Farrar of the Bookman to her submission. "You write vividly and with a certain originality. This particular story...is too long for the Bookman. ... If you have any short sketches we should be glad to see them. Why don't you write about your own race, or do you? It

seems to me there is a certain audience for the good Negro story." It is impossible to know to which story he refers.\textsuperscript{169}

Another example illustrates her attempt to imitate ethnic writer Fannie Hurst. The response from a query letter to Ray Long, at the \textit{International Magazine Co.},\textsuperscript{170} is from readers Joseph and Mary Rosie Levinsky: "We both feel it is a mistake to try to imitate Fannie Hurst...to write about things which you don't know at first hand. ... We don't think you can write about Jews as well as Fannie Hurst...because Fannie Hurst is a Jewess and she knows the race." They suggest to West she write about "either the life of colored people or the life of whites with whom you come in direct contact."\textsuperscript{172} It is also unclear to which story they refer.\textsuperscript{173} It is interesting to note that West, in early 1930, and through Zora Neale Hurston, asks the same Fannie Hurst to critique her novel-in-progress. West admired Hurst's style (\textit{Oral} 172) and probably also her ability to get published. She got both of her literary agents through Hurst, Elisabeth Marbury and George Bye (170, 172).

Contrasting the memory of the above incident, recorded fifty-nine years after the event, with actual letters about it helps to illuminate the limitation of relying too heavily upon first-person testimony for biographical detail. In a 1984/1985 interview with Deborah McDowell, West describes the same exchange of letters differently. She says she was fourteen (1921) and submitted the story to Ray Long at \textit{Cosmopolitan} (a magazine to which she says she subscribed from age thirteen). Consciously imitating favorite author Fannie Hurst's style and subject matter, she received a "scathing" response from Long (which she did not save), to the effect: "you are a forty-year-old spinster who knows nothing about love" and one Fannie Hurst is enough.

Also in the fall of 1925, West submitted a play for review by Sydney Rosenfeld in New York, who

\textsuperscript{169}John Farrar to DW, 12 March 1925 and 3 April 1925, DWP, B1F19, SLRI.
\textsuperscript{170}Deborah McDowell, who organized some of the West papers at Radcliffe, cannot date some of West's unpublished manuscripts. Even West, in her handwritten notes, expresses uncertainty and gives conflicting information, particularly about work which predates "Where the Wild Grape Grows." I have not been able to examine West's personal file.
\textsuperscript{171}Ray Long to DW, 11 Sept. 1925, DWP, B1F19, SLRI.
\textsuperscript{172}Joseph and Mary Rosie Levinsky to DW, 24 Sept. 1925, DWP, B1F19, SLRI.
informed her of his twenty-five dollar retainer. "The Emergence of Eleanor" is a play about sexual rivalry between a mother and daughter. 174 Apparently, West found Rosenfeld's name in *Theatre Arts Magazine* where he had published "Confessions of a Playwright." She had been using the magazine perhaps as a writer's guide, to composition and query letters. It is interesting to note how this same name (reconfigured) and theme reappear in *The Living Is Easy* in the relationship between Lenore Evans, The West End Duchess, and her mother Corinne (whose name reappears in *The Wedding*). Something about this unpublished play remained important to the author.

West receives yet another unfavorable critique of her work, suggesting the journeyman status of her early writing. Rosenfeld praises her ability to sketch "character" and "atmosphere," but points to her failure to produce an actual play because of her inability to plot the story with an "action line." Her characters, he says, "do nothing...." He also points to the "unsavoryness" of the story's "environment." He concludes: "It is because you can write that I feel you need guidance and should learn the craft of play writing from the ground up."175 His next letter to West suggests she read "situation" plays like Pinero's *Children of Destiny*. Pinero's philosophy of "the visualization of the effect of certain causes" would help her create "situations" and move away from "novelistic narrative."176 Given that West was just out of high school, Rosenfeld's advice shows tremendous confidence in her ability and respect for her intelligence in suggesting a thorough reading of a technically difficult dramatist like Pinero.

Rosenfeld's reply to a letter from his client refers to the subject matter of the play and perhaps some defensiveness about the indirection of the play. Unfortunately, West's letter is not included in the file. "It is needless to tell you how greatly I was surprised by the revelation contained in your last letter," he writes. "I agree with you re: marketing your wares by proxy—for purely business reasons."177 The implication of the need for a pseudonym to publish the play, Rosenfeld's "surprise" at West's disclosure, and his previous use of...

173McDowell 268.
174Sydney Rosenfeld to DW, 4 Sept. 1925 and 22 Sept. 1925, DWP, B1F19, SLRI.
175Sidney Rosenfeld to DW, 23 Sept 1925, DWP, B1F19, SLRI.
176Sidney Rosenfeld to DW, 28 Sept. 1925, DWP, B1F19, SLRI.
177Sidney Rosenfeld to DW, 5 Oct. 1925, DWP, B1F19, SLRI.
the word "unsavory" for the plot, together with the revelations in "The Kitchen," lead to the conclusion that a
certain intrigue pertains to someone close to West. As "The Emergence of Eleanor" is about a mother and
daughter and as "The Kitchen" details a long-term conflict between Dorothy and Rachel, but without
disclosing what, it is reasonable to infer that the intrigue is the subject dramatized in the play. Margaret
Perry's observation that West's "close identity of father and daughter [in most of her fiction] evokes the
Dostoyevskian absorption with childhood and the belief in the incorruptible nature of children"\(^{178}\) may
explain why Dostoevski was West's favorite writer, but autobiography looms large over the preference.

The breakthrough West so desired came in 1926 when she shared second prize with Zora Neale
Hurston in the *Opportunity* literary contest. Magazine editor Charles S. Johnson's letter of congratulations
which followed also expressed a larger context for the contest than the aiding of individual careers that
probably went well beyond West's immediate goals: "This," said Johnson, "is more than a mere rewarding of
prizes; it is to our minds, the evolution of a literature."\(^{179}\) From correspondence it is clear West was still
living at 470 Brookline Avenue when she submitted "The Typewriter" and used the contest as an entree into
New York literary society. It seems she attended the *Opportunity* dinner as she had invited a family friend
living in the City to join her.\(^{180}\)

Both the prizewinners and judges listed in Johnson's follow-up letter became important to the young
West's literary career. "I hope the various meetings of the contest proved valuable," Johnson states in this
same letter. And they were. West used the commentary on her story from the five contest judges to gain
admission to a writing course at Columbia's University Extension Program. Those judges were writers Zona
Gale and Jean Toomer, editors Stuart Sherman (*Books*) and Carl Van Doren (*Century*), and educator
Blanche Colton Williams. West also came to know all the contest winners. She made friends with Zora
Hurston ("Muttsy"), worked through a romance and a rivalry with Claude McKay ("High Ball"),
collaborated with Eugene Gordon ("Rootbound") on *The Saturday Evening Quill* and John Davis ("Waters


\(^{179}\) Charles S. Johnson to DW, 4 May 1926, DWP, B1F11, SLRI.

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of Megara") on Challenge. Most prominently, West saw a benefit in further contact with Blanche Colton Williams of Columbia, Eric Walrond of Opportunity, and Irene Bordoni and her husband Ray Goertz, the manager of the Empire Theatre. She corresponded with all three of them.

In July, West, still in Boston placed another short story "Hannah Byde"—this time in The Messenger (2 July 1926). She did so through friend Wallace Thurman who was soliciting manuscripts from his friends and was substituting for George Schuyler as editor. SallyAnn Ferguson's measure of the story for the DLB points to the diminished capacity of the heroine to effect a life with meaning for herself. West's reference to the "traumatic things" going on in her life at the time (Oral 201) seems to be reflected in the protagonist's lack of empowerment. The traditional solutions for women of marriage and children do not, as is true for Cleo Judson, satisfy her need for fulfillment on her own terms. According to Ferguson's analysis,

"Hannah Byde" ... shows West's tendency, also from Dostoyevski, to emphasize moral, psychological, and social confinement. ... [The story] illustrates the tragedy suffered by many of West's female characters.... Often they end up like Hannah, bitterly resigned and "crushed by environment, looking dully down the stretch of drab tomorrows littered with the ruins of shattered dreams." Because she is not white, Hannah's avenues of achievement are greatly narrowed, and her life becomes an empty "uneventual circle" that she, at twenty, tries to enliven by marrying George Byde. In due course he stifles her, but she has no recourse other than passive resignation to her fate and acceptance of an unwanted pregnancy. Throughout this tale West uses verbal irony to underscore the defeat in Hannah's life. For instance, when her husband prefers jazz music on the phonograph to "do her good," Hannah, alienated and depressed, hears only "dreadful noises" in this traditional cultural healer. (188-89)

The Opportunity prize and dinner, the attention from Charles S. Johnson, the admiration of friends and family, the publication of another story—all influenced West's desire to return to the literary and social milieu she had been recently invited into. She spent the next six months laying plans to relocate to New York, which she did in October, 1926, at nineteen. West was now, she said, working on a novel. It is difficult to determine which manuscript she means. However, because material from "Funeral," published in The Saturday Evening Quill in April 1928, already deals with characters and situations from The Living Is Easy, it may have been this manuscript.

West must have been pleased to receive the critiques of her work that she had requested from the

180John E. Moseley to DW, March 1926, DWP, B1F12, SLRI.
A "carbon note" from Blanche Colton Williams, written about "The Typewriter" reads: "The matter and manner are simple, unique, somewhat moving, and almost wholly convincing. The details present scenes of reality. Pathos and humor in the little man touch life." Charles S. Johnson, already planning to send judges' comments to contest winners, enclosed the rest of West's in a personal letter written to her. Two other judges expressed similar praise for "The Typewriter." Zona Gale noted that the story contained "pathos and intense characterization." Jean Toomer wrote: "To me, the best realized story is 'The Typewriter.' The old man is completely pictured—nothing left out; his story has been set down with swift economy." This response from a major writer like Toomer was high praise for a fledgling writer and must have sent a strong message of encouragement.

Eric Walrond also wrote a personal letter to West accompanying the ten copies of the June issue of *Opportunity* where West's story had been printed. Apparently he saw the ingenue writer as a potential promoter for the journal. He writes: "I am really very deeply concerned about the dearth of *Opportunity* in Boston. We have made innumerable efforts to get it around and I think there is a man there by the name of Gordon who is supposed to be working the district. But I hadn't been aware of the extent of his limitations." The man Walrond refers to is most likely Eugene Gordon, West's associate at the *Saturday Evening Quill*. Walrond concludes: "Incidentally, of the "How I Came To Do It" asides in our June issue, yours is the least lushy." In fact, her profile in *Opportunity* read: "I am rather a reticent sort, but I am intensely interested in everything that goes on about me. I love to sit apart and read—as best I can—the souls of my neighbors."

In the meantime, Ray Goetz of the Empire Theatre—and Bordoni's husband—responded to a letter from West where she suggested that Miss Bordoni needed a "good dramatic play" to act in. Goetz agreed. He wrote again to West in December of 1926, two months after she had moved to New York. He wanted to make an appointment with her to discuss "the play you have in mind." He also wanted to help Helene

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181 Dw to Blanche Colton Williams ("BCW"), 22 May 1926, DWP, B1F19; BCW to DW, 21 June 1926, DWP, B1F19, SLRI.
182 Charles S. Johnson to DW, 28 June 1926, DWP, B1F11, SLRI.
183 Eric Walrond to DW, 26 June 1926, DWP, B1F12, SLRI.
184 Ray Goetz to DW, 13 Dec. 1926, DWP, B1F19, SLRI.
Johnson publish the poetry she had sent to Irene Bordoni. Nothing came of either suggestion, but it seems that West may have intended to submit a rewrite of her play "The Emergence of Eleanor," possibly after polishing it up in a play writing class at Columbia, as she had been planning.

In September, still in Boston, West received an encouraging letter from Blanche Colton Williams in response to the query about Williams' writing class at Columbia. This may have been the final prompt that West and her cousin Helene were waiting for to make their move to New York. Williams, having resigned her position at Columbia to chair the English Department at Hunter College, refers West to Dr. Dorothy Scarborough who has taken over the Columbia writing class. Williams, who says she has "read especially your letter with interest," also informs West about a writing class Williams herself may instruct the following summer at Columbia. In the meantime, "and if you care to try [Scarborough's class], I will recommend you most heartily," she adds. Williams instructs West to use her as a reference if she visits Dr. Scarborough directly. "You will have no trouble in being admitted if you decide to come." And in a post script she remarks: "I expect to place your "Typewriter" on one of the O. Henry Memorial Rolls, and if there is time and space I shall call attention to repeated themes, using it and Mr. Butler's as examples." Williams asks West to correspond. West does better than that; she goes to see Williams in person.

By mid-October, 1926, Dorothy West and her cousin Helene Johnson are living at the 175 West 137th Street YWCA in New York City. Apparently, that is where they stayed when they attended the Opportunity dinner in March of the spring of that year, and that is where they continued to room for seven months, until May of 1927. They appear to have maintained the friendships they had made at the Opportunity banquet, with Zora Neale Hurston, Countee Cullen, Wallace Thurman, and Bruce Nugent, before the move to New York. Their affiliations proved invaluable at first and supplied them with good company, lodging, publishing opportunities, and a part in Porgy.

In her Oral History more than fifty years later, West relates a painful memory—or perhaps a dream—surrounding the death of an infant child, a "family child," to whom young Dorothy had played the part of

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185 Ray Goetz to DW, 2 July 1926, DWP, B1F12, SLRI.
surrogate mother; it makes a perfect ending to this chapter about mothers and daughters and their power to mirror identity.

I don't know whether it was the doorbell ringing that waked me, but I went right back to sleep, but evidently not into a deep sleep, naturally. I'll remember this as long as I live. I wake up because I hear voices. And my mother, and my white... Because I remember my aunt's white face, and my mother's golden face, and they're looking in the mirror. The reason they are looking in the mirror is because they are trying to be as far away from me as they can. I'm in the bed here, and the mirror... So I see their faces, and I hear my mother..., I'll remember it till I die—she said, "I don't know what to do about Dorothy. If I wake her up and tell her now, she'll never forget it. If I don't wake her up, she'll never forgive me..." Because she was looking in the mirror, she saw that my eyes were open, so she came to the bed and she said to me... "And Sister died. And she won't have to suffer any more. Now go back to sleep." And I went back to sleep; I turned over and went back to sleep, 'cause I was an obedient child. (201)

The distance she perceives between her mother and herself that results in the figurative death of childhood, was Dorothy West's greatest challenge to overcome. Her initial solution was to join the ranks of the young black writers whom she had just met in New York City and who seemed to her to have worked out their own questions of identity more than satisfactorily.

186BCW to DW, 9 September 1926, DWP, B1F11, SLRI.
CHAPTER III
"ELEPHANT'S DANCE IN HARLEM" AND LITERARY MARKETPLACES

Just three years before her death at age ninety-one, Dorothy West published an amended written version of her still guarded personal assessment of the Harlem Renaissance. Her revision for publication of the earlier Thurman eulogy so near the end of her own life represented more than just a testament to their friendship. It was a chance to return to one of the most important decades of her life, one she never quite left behind, to set the record straight about a number of things still important to her. The appraisal of Wallace Thurman a second time may also have given her the courage to express a part of her most private self, even if indirectly, while time still allowed. The new essay no longer referenced Thurman’s name in the title, even as West addressed in stark detail the challenge of Harlem to a fellow writer’s literary production. In Thurman’s case, the Harlem experience, she believed, had negative as well as positive consequences. On the negative side, it had contributed to the writer’s subsequent escape into extreme male-centered bohemianism and the intrigue of his own dangerous constructions of reality. This was not the path West herself would take, but one wonders, given her incredible insight, how close she came to the same crossroads.

Assuming the role of “literary historian of the Niggerati”117 by proxy for Thurman, West offers, in her words, “the subjective evaluation of a disillusioned man whose early aspirations to lead Harlem’s artistic avant-garde had come to an end” (“Elephant’s Dance”). Exchange “woman” for “man” and the same statement could be made about Dorothy West a decade later. For Thurman and West, the less popular story of the place of “color” in the shaping of racial subjectivity during the Harlem Renaissance had not really been told. West’s new memorial to friend Wallace Thurman is as close as she ever came to claiming her part in this, the Renaissance’s very significant challenge.118 Her reconstruction of the social and intellectual milieu surrounding Thurman, which helped to form and sustain his philosophies during the period between 1925

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117“Remember I am to be the literary historian of the Niggerati” (Wallace Thurman (“WT”) to Langston Hughes, [1929], quoted in van Notten 267.
118In the interviews after The Wedding, West also talked about her dark color in relation to her family; however, some information conflicts with the Oral History of seventeen years earlier, understandably, given her advanced age. The same is true for the obituaries and articles of 1998. In The Richer, The Poorer (1995), “Fond Memories of a Black Childhood” (n.d.) and “The Gift” (n.d.) center on colorism. The first describes the family’s color range. The second speaks of her very dark father. West’s tendency to
and 1934, projects a view of the Harlem Renaissance that does not begin and end with the new discourse of race and American nationalism being formulated by the New Negro leadership. For some, like Thurman and herself, who considered themselves New Negroes too, the competing discourse of cultural pluralism and American nationalism being formulated by liberal whites felt perhaps less threatening than the glare of yet another floodlight on race, interchangeable in their minds with color. Thurman's more high profile position within the black literary avant-garde, his alliance with The Messenger, and his subsequent recourse to left-leaning journals and the popular culture white press all demonstrate in much larger relief than West's life does this alternative path through modernity that West would choose as well. West never spells out the appeal of cultural pluralism to Thurman, or herself for that matter, but given the position Thurman eventually took with regard to a "too destructive race consciousness" that could only be "transcended," it is clear that the ideology of race as presented in The Crisis and Opportunity and the push for racial hegemony in matters of representation were not enabling to writers like Thurman and West in the way they were meant to be.

The idea of revising a fifty-year-old eulogy, the substance of the additions, and the retention of significant unedited passages all point to West's own cultural politics and the progression of her thinking on color, race, gender, class, and sexuality. With the exception of gender, Thurman's challenges were West's challenges—in a manner of degrees, and what West says about Thurman's challenges illuminates, most importantly, her life and career. The most meaningful supplement, on behalf of Wallace Thurman, to the newly titled "Elephant's Dance" is her public recognition of his internal battle with color and with intra-racial color prejudice. Heretofore, both she and Thurman had masked what might be called their color complexes within fiction and fictional autobiography. The nature of West's efforts in her short stories to express the effect of her family's distinct color hierarchy and distorted valuation of color is explored fully in the following chapter. For now, it is important to probe Thurman's texts because as West's closest intimate and the conduit for her own literary voice, as she admits, his more extreme representational strategies provide a counterpoint to hers. Zora Neale Hurston's work does as well because she was one of the few writers close to

fictitiousize her life only accelerated with age and notoriety.
West who also examined like subject matter but without ever losing her perspective or her sense of herself as a fully racial human being. West may be seen as the median between the two.

Thurman's initial strategy to expose and express his demons in *The Blacker the Berry* was to create a central female character and then make her a single part of a complex fictional alter ego that also included male counterparts. The point was to depict through a composite psychological approach the many dimensions of color consciousness but also to break down this multiple subjectivity into recognizable parts so that each manifestation could be represented individually in a single character. The seeming protagonist Emma Lou Morgan, for example, is constructed as sharing the author's skin color and his hyper-color consciousness and defensiveness. She is for the most part a loner. The male writer figure Truman Walker is constructed also as a Thurman look-alike but as holding completely opposite views about color from his female complement. Truman Walter functions within a group of black artists who are as free from color prejudice as is possible. The bohemian *bon vivant* Alva (with no surname) who is light enough to pass as white contributes to Emma Lou's sensitivity about her color because of his narcissism. Almost completely without discipline or perspective, Alva indulges himself in the pleasure of as many excesses as time allows, namely drink, sex, and indolence. He does not discriminate between female and male sexual playmates. Together, Emma Lou, Truman, and Alva constitute a personality trilogy representative of Thurman's warring psyche.

In a single literary attempt to link himself personally with color prejudice within the circle of self and race, Thurman penned an autobiographical sketch called "Notes on a Stepchild" (1929) some two years after finishing *The Blacker the Berry*. It was an "auto-biography not to be published," he wrote to Langston Hughes, and it never did see the light of public scrutiny. Bruce Nugent believed that "Wallie," as he

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190 *Comedy American Style* is a sustained and balanced look at the issue of color prejudice within the black community. The text was treated in an earlier chapter because of the relevance of its subject matter to both *Wedding* and *Living*. It is not treated in this chapter because West never mentions *Comedy*, and even if she had read the novel, it was not during the period covered in this chapter as she was in Soviet Russia at the time. West never sought out Fauset, or visa versa.

190 WT to Langston Hughes, Feb. or March 1928, LHP, JWJ, BLYU. "Notes on a Stepchild" is part of the longer unpublished "Aunt Hagar's Children" [1929].
always referred to his friend and collaborator, was unable to create anything but autobiography (van Notten 252) despite his many fictional masquerades. The same can be said for West. For both, autobiographical fiction would function as the preferred artistic space in which to take heed of and reimagine the self.

Thurman had characterized the demon of intra-racial colorism, poetically, in *The Blacker the Berry* as a "haunting chimera" (59). His word choice is worth examining. A "chimera" is expressive of a range of mental states, from preoccupations to visions, that is, things of fanciful origin. The word also implies things grotesque or monstrous in proportion. The choice to modify "chimera" with the adjective "haunting" is suggestive both of a ghostlike quality and a habitual fearful presence. Thurman, like Edgar Allan Poe, strayed into the eerie regions of the gothic to evoke the emotional and the psychological and to depict the troubled and troubling state of his psyche as that of obsessive and anxious interiority. Some of the same gothic imagery can also be found in West's early, unpublished work of her late teens and to the same effect.

When Thurman moved on from fictional and real autobiography to actual ghostwriting for *True Story* magazine, he may finally have strayed too far from reality. The "personal histories" that editor William Jordan Rapp had established as the signature feature of *True Story* were always first-person accounts; indeed, each issue of the magazine contained "some six unsigned first-person stories" (van Notten 253). It is not hard to see why Thurman would be so intrigued by this new pursuit. "Writing under all sorts of fantastic names, like Ethel Belle Mandrake or Patrick Casey, [Thurman] did Irish and Jewish and Catholic 'true confessions,'" Langston Hughes vividly recalls (*The Big Sea* 234). This freedom to inhabit without risk an unrestricted range of subjectivities, including gendered and ethnic ones, and even to revise the content of other people's lives by imitation of their perspectives, was probably not the healthiest occupation for a man with precious few personal boundaries and with such a fragile hold on his own identity.

West appears to have understood Thurman's predilection for literary voyeurism and to have witnessed how easily ghost writing could get out of hand for him, even take on a life of its own. His excesses in this regard probably served as a graphic warning. Indeed, Thurman had such an appetite for this new, more lucrative form of escapism that he indulged himself whenever possible. Obviously a highly satisfying
diversion, his imaginative impersonations spilled over into his personal life, as is clear in the following account by West of Thurman's almost antic behavior.

While working at Macfadden's at Broadway and Sixty-third Street, Thurman would visit nearby friends on Sixty-sixth Street.... Over a table of odds and ends, occasionally augmented by his own contributions of a bottle half full of bathtub gin, for he was fond of these friends, he would laughingly give detailed synopses of the more lurid stories that were polished by his pen. Then he would settle down to a fantastic tale of his own, and, growing fascinated by his own fabrications, would ask for pad and pencil. ("Elephant's Dance" 223)

One might even say that Thurman's last novel The Interne, co-written two years before his death with A. L. Furman, was another attempt at impersonation, this time of himself.191 Judging from Thurman's summary of the novel in a letter to editor Granville Hicks, it had the usual autobiographical elements. The story, Thurman wrote, "concerns itself with the experiences of a sensitive young medical graduate who enters a city hospital for a year. But conditions are appalling. And the interne who leaves college filled with ideals and ethics has a rude awakening" (quoted in van Notten 254). Even without knowing that Thurman's early biomythography included a supposed stint in medical school, one can easily see the Thurman persona taking shape, only this time in whiteface. A critique of the book immediately signals how this work is different from the usual Thurman fare: "There is nothing racial about 'The Interne,'" the reviewer observes. "[W]e grasp the fact that all characters...must be white, but Thurman seems quite as familiar with the motives and characteristics of the whites as his previous works indicate his familiarity with racial characters."192 The critic's use of the conjunction "but," rather than "and," is curious. In the still thoroughly racialized world of the 1930s, it should not have been so surprising that a person of color, occupying a minority position in society, would be able to read and recreate a white character. What is surprising is that Thurman would want to design this all white-world and then take an identity within it. Given his unresolved color complex, it is at this point in his career that his work seems too self-effacing, too much like racial negation. Indeed, given those "previous works" that the reviewer alludes to and given Thurman's philosophy of the "Negro note"--the black writer's chief contribution to a new American perspective--The Interne is hard to situate in his

191Furman, an attorney, was related to the Macaulay publishing family (van Notten 254).
192Clifford C. Mitchell wrote the review for The Washington Tribune 19 Aug. 1932 (quoted in van Notten
otherwise strictly autobiographical œuvre. Either Thurman had finally transcended his own philosophy, or he had finally transcended himself. In other words, this latest imaginative construct of "whiteness" may have marked a point of complete self-denial. It may even have been the creation of a new kind of psychic division that included aspects of his white co-writer as well. If, however, the work had different aims, it may have been to investigate that part of his psyche that desired, or was conditioned, to "think white," the manifestation of color prejudice that Thurman had left out of his composite personality in *The Blacker the Berry*.

Robert Hemenway's criticism of Zora Neale Hurston's unfinished biography of "Herod the Great" sheds light on Thurman's situation as well because it may provide a parallel example of disassociation of sensibility at the final stage of a writer's career. Near the end of his life, Thurman, like Hurston, seemed distanced from what had been the wellspring of his inspiration, New Negro artists and popular culture Harlem. In Hemenway's judgment, Hurston's last literary manuscript did not measure up to the best of her work, despite the tireless effort she put into it, because it represented a departure from her elemental muse. According to her biographer,

[I]t fails because it illustrates how far [she] had retreated from the unique sources of her esthetic: the music and speech, energy and wisdom, dignity and humor, of the black rural South. Her achievements during the Renaissance increase or diminish in direct proportion to her use of the folk environment that she had grown up in and would later return to analyze. ("Zora and Eatonville" 192)

Thurman might even have concurred with Hemenway's opinion had he been around to do so. And he surely would have known, as he personally oversaw the serialization of the "Eatonville Anthology" in *The Messenger* (1926). He also memorialized his friend Zora as Sweetie May Carr in *Infants of the Spring*—the "gynecologist" (read anthropologist), knowing that her anthropological vision, even if exploited at times, was her strong suit. Thurman felt it was what made her work more honest than that of some of his colleagues who were not writing from personal or racial experience, a departure from the realist tradition he believed himself part of. A fan of Hurston from the beginning of their acquaintance, Thurman used more of her work
in *Fire!!* (1926) than any of the other authors. He considered both story "Sweat" and one-act play *Color Struck* so important to the literary journal that he would not choose between them. He also saw to the placement of "How It Feels to be Colored Me" in *The World Tomorrow* (1928). Conversely, Hurston would have been the right critic of Thurman's work, had she had the time; she could easily have written his obituary. That, however, was left to Hurston's "little sister," Dorothy West.

West's first testimonial, "Elephant's Dance: A Memoir of Wallace Thurman," came at a transitional point in her own career, while she was working in the "writers' program" for President Franklin Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration (WPA), just before she left Harlem for good (Dalsgard 30). Written in 1944, ten years after Thurman's death and four years after Hughes' first autobiography *The Big Sea*, "Elephant's Dance" may have been motivated, given the timing, by Hughes' much-quoted section on Thurman. Hughes' well-known work was published only seven years after the Soviet Russia film tour (1932-33) with Dorothy West and Thurman's ex-wife, Louise Thompson. During this time, Hughes and West, as seems evident in West's correspondence, had been in a close relationship with some degree of intimacy. Hughes, however, leaves her out of the record of his recent past while devoting much space to his ex-roommate, Thurman. Perhaps West felt the need to at least have her say with regard to their mutual friend whose death had affected her profoundly.

It was not until the "Elephant's Dance" revision of the 1990s, however, that West put a face on the problem of what Hughes had called Thurman's "ambivalence," which Hughes rather artlessly revealed in *The Big Sea* as simply an aspect of Thurman's innate nature. West, on the other hand, names the source of the ambivalence in "Oscar and Beulah Thurman," Wallie's "mismated" and "indifferent" parents who found him "undesirable" because of his "unwanted shade of black" (215-216). She implies that the deep emotional scars left from his parents' cruelty never healed. What he had internalized as a personal stigmata never left him, as is evident in one of his ironic book "dedications": "To Beulah, the goose who laid the not-so-golden egg"

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193 Hughes influenced West differently from Thurman; after 1934, she was ambivalent about him, although protective of their relationship.
West's evaluation is equally ironic: "In Thurman's mind," she says, "to the handicap of color was added the tremendous task of overriding his heritage" (216). The sentence would normally read in the reverse: "To the tremendous task of overriding his heritage, was added the handicap of color." The inversion, moreover, is deliberate, placing the emphasis where it belongs—at least while Thurman was still functional—on his color not his race. The same would be true for West in her later life, as evidenced by the maturity of her perspective on Thurman in the final revision of her tribute to him.

West may even have been taking her lead from Thurman himself. Perhaps she had read "Notes on a Stepchild" by then. Thurman's unpublished manuscript was placed in the Special Collections at Yale's Beineke Library, where West herself had contributed select documents at the request of Carl Van Vechten to honor James Weldon Johnson. In "Stepchild," one of two autobiographical sketches, Thurman at least acknowledges the possibility of his having a color complex. Writing in third person, which was not uncommon for him, Thurman says of himself: "He tried hard not to let the fact that he had pigmented skin influence his literary and mental development" ("Notes" n. pag.). Given the probable date of the manuscript as 1929, Thurman's fictional resolve in the later Infants of the Spring was to choose a better persona for himself and then implement it through an act of will. Needless to say, the metamorphosis did not come about.

West understood Thurman's state of mind near the end of his life, and it terrified her. At age thirty-two, he had returned to Harlem, from Hollywood, to die. In the past, alcohol and frenetic activity had been able to numb his pain. Now, he had to give up his gin, cold turkey, and the result was tragic. "[He] would not face himself alone, nor sleep alone, nor say one serious thing," West recalled ("Elephant's Dance" 226). He was dying of tuberculosis and spent six long months on Welfare Island in the incurable ward. In West's judgment, "They were the bitterest months of his life." She remembers that "He was too weak for anything but contemplation, and his thoughts, turning inward, probed little but waste" (227). As much as she loved Wallace Thurman, West could not bring herself to visit him where he lay dying, not even once. It was simply too distressing. One can only speculate as to why; however, she says that she regretted this neglect of her

194 The dedication is actually to Infants. Berry is dedicated to "Ma Jack."
dear friend to the end of her life (Oral 183). Anyone familiar with West through her interviews or her final work of fiction can tell that she did not spend her final days in the contemplation of "waste." It may be fair to say that she had taken heed of Thurman's tragic end and had steeled herself never to repeat it.

Anyone also familiar with West's "Prologue to a Life" (1928) and The Living Is Easy, knows that color also shadowed her literary development. She, however, was finally able to create a healthier resolution to it in The Wedding than Thurman had in all but his first novel. In The Infants of the Spring, and perhaps even in The Interne, "personal transcendence" and the resulting loss of self seemed his only antidote to unhealthy self-esteem and unhappiness, in other words, escapism. West, on the other hand, remained productive until her death at age ninety-one. The solution to colorism that Thurman offered early on in The Blacker the Berry would have been a better choice had it been possible for him to make it. In the novel, he makes racial self-acceptance the path out of self-hatred for Emma Lou Morgan. Had he lived longer, he may have followed his own good instincts and gained the maturity, perspective, and wisdom that West achieved through him and with longevity.

Having lived to tell the story, West begins and ends her essay on Thurman by pointing to his representativeness among black writers of the Harlem literary renaissance. She reiterates in her revised eulogy the centrality of Thurman's part in the "elephant's dance" called "Negro writing" (215). She outlines his connections to the literary institutions important to them both, in particular The Messenger, but also, for Thurman, Macfadden and Macaulay publishing houses. All three publishers helped shape his career—for better or for worse. Her almost singular acknowledgment of the public debt the "Negro literary renaissance" owed to Thurman had not changed over the more than fifty years since she had written the first tribute, nor had her conviction that Thurman was its "most symbolic figure" (227). Still believing it was his due to be the Renaissance's acknowledged spokesman, she continued to maintain that "the name of Wallace Thurman is more typical of that epoch than the one or two more enduring names that survived the period" (215).

West compares Thurman with a more successful fellow writer and mutual friend, Zora Neale Hurston. Her age and her different choices and attitudes, had made her, unlike Thurman, into an "established
nove1ist." "The truth was," West argues, "that for the most part the young writers of the period were not ready for publication. Thurman's two novels give evidence of this immaturity and incomplete experience" ("Elephant's Dance" 225). Thurman, himself, questioned his writing ability and that of his contemporaries. He was disappointed with his own creative work and suspicious of the "one-book appearance of [other] Negro writers" (224). With his usual cynicism, he jumped quickly to the (partially erroneous) conclusion that "it was the result of some deep-rooted complex or merely indicative of a lack of talent" (225). West found a third, and far less cynical, explanation on the subject of literary readiness, using the example of fellow writer Zora Neale Hurston, who was older and wiser. West writes:

At that time publishers were vying with each other to bring out Negro books. Zora Neale Hurston...had written a half dozen creditable short stories. Publishers pressed her for a full-length manuscript. She stoutly maintained that she was not ready to affix her name to a novel. Her contemporaries, including Thurman, insisted that she was simply lazy, and predicted that she would peter out as a writer. (225)

Thurman, on the other hand, rather than pace himself and allow time for necessary revision, something he continually criticized Hughes for not attending to, was addicted to instant gratification, as are many unstable people. He seemed completely caught up in the rush to publish while white publishers were still interested in material from black writers. He worked on multiple projects simultaneously until he literally wore himself out. In other words, according to West, Thurman "allowed himself to be exploited, and has left as heritage two imperfect books" (225).195

Thurman's decline and untimely death were the result of forces both internal and external, West believed, and she never altered this initial view. His rise and fall were as symptomatic of his own strengths and weakness as they were of those of the Renaissance itself. West's summary of Thurman's Harlem years and his subsequent fate is stark in its brevity. She writes: "In 1925 he came hopefully from the West Coast.

195 The fact that Hurston's biographer reads her motives differently does not invalidate West's point. Robert Hemenway interprets Hurston's reluctance to publish as a matter of conflicting professional loyalties. "Sweat" and "Eatonville Anthology" were published while Hurston was at Barnard when she wanted to commit herself to the science of anthropology. "Significantly, Hurston does not return again to Eatonville as a source for fiction until "The Gilded Six-bits," Hemenway explains. It was published in Story in 1922 and is an account of marital infidelity that led in 1934 to a contract for her first novel Jonah's Gourd Vine. What happened to her in the intervening period is largely an untold story. ("Zora and Eatonville" 204-205).
He was twenty-five and the Negro literary 'renaissance' was in its full swing. ... He died on Welfare Island ten years later, with none of his dreams of greatness fulfilled" ("Elephant's Dance" 215).

West shows convincingly that early on Thurman was not given the recognition he deserved, and, left unsupported, he not only sought help in some of the wrong places, but also he lost his footing. Without the regard of the Renaissance's internal power structure, he came to feel that his belief about the nature of the Renaissance was false. And as Thurman's philosophy was so dependent upon his own fragile personal psychology, he concluded that he too must be false. His strategy, therefore, "to be a movement all by himself," was of course a defensive posture and a bad choice (216). The result, West rightly concludes, was a flawed endeavor and a failed friend. The basis of West's criticism is that Thurman had a mind too good to waste. "[I]f Harlem had produced a dozen contemporary minds as keen as [Thurman's]," she claims, "he would not have drowned his disillusion in drink, and under his leadership something better might have come out of that period than the hysterical hosannas that faded on the subsequently stillly night ("Elephant's Dance" 215). One of only a few genuine intellectuals among the younger Harlem writers, he deserved more attention and respect. In time, had he been able to come to terms with his demons, he might have taken the lead in democratizing the Renaissance along the lines of his friend and supporter Theophilus Lewis, theater critic for The Messenger. Lewis' vision of freedom from white influence in his formulations for independent publishing enterprises and a grass roots black theater was shared by Thurman who had the energy and the pluck to push the agenda further than he did had he not felt like such a pariah among the influential older New Negroes, especially Alain Locke. It is not difficult, either, to read between the lines and connect West herself both with Thurman's struggle for recognition and his racial thinking, given her own life and career. Most prominently, Thurman clarified for her that color is not race and that race, of and by itself, is not art.

Thurman provided a metaphor for his untimely death in the epigram for Infants of the Spring. Taken from Hamlet, it has been judged by critics as an expression of Thurman's negative evaluation of the

\footnote{West probably got this quotation from Thurman's 1927 interview with Granville Hicks for The Churchman}
Renaissance itself; however, one could as easily interpret this meditation upon failed potential as evidence of Thurman’s state of mind and as inner-directed negative self-evaluation. As Thurman’s chief preoccupation was always himself, why not in his final work of fiction as well.

The canker galls the infants of the spring
Too oft before their buttons be disclosed
And in the morn an liquid dew of youth
Contagious blastments are most imminent.

—Hamlet

What better strategy for an autobiographical novel that withholds significant personal reference than to have it signify upon the very locus classicus of the antic disposition, Prince Hamlet. The title and the verse containing it come from Shakespeare’s well-known drama of masking and fatal indecision. In Thurman’s text, it is clear that he makes use of Shakespeare’s image of an untimely frost upon the immature blossom as a metaphor for stunted growth, whether in himself or in the novel’s initiate artists who also fail to achieve greatness, despite the implicit potential to bloom and grow. The reader is directed to the nature of the disease that withers the tender blossom as that which also impaired the Renaissance goals. The writers have been infected with a “too destructive race-consciousness.” The insubstantiality of race as a basis for art has acted as a bane upon excellence in artistic production. In other words, racial self-consciousness is not fertile soil from which to produce a harvest of healthy modern writers. However, whether intentional or not, overlapping meaning can still be inferred. The “canker” that “galls” can as easily be frustrated sexuality, which is as likely to cut life short as any disease. In fact, in Thurman’s case, the two seem inseparable. Here, Thurman had put a finger on a characteristic artistic flaw—his overstatement and overemphasis. He had implicated as well a psychological haunting—his color complex and uncertain sexuality.

In this novel, as in all of Thurman’s literary works, the nature of important relationships is masked, making it difficult to read his commentary on race because of the subtext on sexuality. The narrative in Infants has a single point of view, that of Raymond Taylor. He is a black writer at the beginning of his career, yet he is already jaded and disillusioned. The main conflict concerns the restrictions imposed upon

(10).
the artist in the creation of art in an environment of racialism and decadence, which includes homosexuality. The resolution is the proposed transcendence of both. Taylor has decided to "renounce Harlem" (222), and in many ways the text does serve as a renunciation of sorts of the Harlem Renaissance itself. The bitterness, sense of frustration and personal failure that inform the novel are foreshadowed in the epigram. Great art does not happen among the "infant" artists; they are relegated to seed-sowing only.

The racial narrative, provided by Raymond Taylor, only appears to be straightforward. Taylor is "disgusted with the way everyone sought to romanticize Harlem and Harlem Negroes," (36) and he rejects two kinds of black writers. On the one hand there are those writers "who had nothing to say, and who only wrote because they were literate and felt they should appraise white humanity of the better classes among Negroes" (91). These were the writers whom Thurman called the "propagandists" and whose contribution to the Renaissance he had earlier described as "sociological rather than literary." On the other hand, there were those writers who wanted to escape their racial identity through denial of everything black. Again speaking as Raymond, Thurman writes: "He had no sympathy whatsoever with Negroes...who contended that should their art be Negroid, they, the artists, must be considered inferior." Such artists "did not realize by adhering to such a belief" they were, in fact, "subscribing to the theory of Nordic superiority" (91). Yet, in the text, Thurman praises only Jean Toomer for "elements of greatness" (221). Before then, in his 1927 essay "Nephews of Uncle Remus," he had included Langston Hughes as an exemplary writer because of his artistic integrity. Toomer and Hughes, because they were "the most aware of the aesthetic value of literary material in their race," he had said, were good examples of how to integrate racial material into literary works.

Their work is distinctive because it contains vestiges of that Negro note which will characterize the literature produced by truly talented, sincere Negro writers. Neither of them is worried by an inferiority complex that makes him wish to escape his race by not writing of it and at the same time binds him more tightly to the whipping post he would escape. (297)

By 1932, however, Thurman and Hughes were estranged. In Infants, Thurman refers to Hughes, in the persona of Tony Crews, as doing "interesting" and "unusual" work, but it was "spotty" (231). At that same time, it began to appear that Thurman had tied himself to that same whipping post.

The narrative in Infants builds to a denunciation of racial dogmatism and a retreat to individualism. In
the (in)famous and often reprinted salon scene that takes place at Niggerati Manor, Thurman uses the voice of a writer other than Truman Walter, that Cedric (Eric Walrond), as most expressive of this point of view:

"What does it matter," [Cedric] inquired diffidently, "what any of you do so long as you remain true to yourselves? There is no necessity for this movement becoming standardized. There is ample room for everyone to follow his own individual track. Dr. Parkes [Locke] wants us all to go back to Africa and resurrect our pagan heritage..... Ferderson [Du Bois] here wants us all to be propagandists and yell at the top of our lungs at every conceivable injustice. Madison [McKay?] wants us all to take a cue from Leninism and fight the capitalistic bogey. Well...why not let each young hopeful choose his own path? Only in that way will anything at all be achieved." (239, 240)

An iconoclast by nature, and by any standard well read, Thurman was attentive to the implications of living in a period of cultural transition. To him, the aesthetics of the genteel tradition were in conflict with modern reality. Victorian sentimentality had produced a form of inverted race identity and middle-class values that were expressive of the former century. Historian George Frederickson calls this type of racial thinking "romantic racialism" (Higginbotham 15). "Blacks construed and valorized," and whites believed, according to Frederickson's analysis, "a self-representation essentially antithetical to that of whites" (15).

Thurman saw this kind of portrayal as reactionary and false, fulfilling sociological rather than artistic aims. Literary Realism, as it was being developed by writers like Theodore Dreiser, was in his view the best form through which to express the reality of Negro experience as it was actually being lived in urban centers like Harlem. The modern urban Negro, like himself, was the "New Negro" and called for artistic representation. This endeavor included exposure of the positive and the negative aspects of Negro life, as well as a more democratic view of the Negro masses.

Thurman did not see himself as one of Du Bois' "Talented Tenth" much as he wanted to be a leader; therefore, he threw out the baby with the bath water. Du Bois' construction of a social system built around a Negro intelligentsia that was meant to ensure Negro survival and success became to Thurman nothing more than an outmoded bourgeois ideal of racial uplift, emanating from New England values and Harvard intellectualism. Of working-class origin, and from the Northwest and the Southwest, Thurman was from the opposite end of the social spectrum in his class status and his experience of life. As a boy, he was deserted by
both of his parents and left to be raised by a hardworking grandmother on a negligible income. He had little formal education beyond high school and seems always to have had to sacrifice his artistic and intellectual endeavors to eke out a living. Indeed, Thurman came to New York with so little money that he almost resorted to prostituting himself during his first few months in Harlem. Never estranged from the Negro masses, so-called, because they were working class like him, once he got to Harlem, he held that the resilience of the race lay in the working-class Negro man and woman and not in the intelligentsia, as Du Bois would argue. This position is not altogether different from Hughes' in his essays "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" (1926) and "These Bad New Negroes" (1927) in that both Thurman and Hughes looked outside the black middle class for cultural values that had the mark of racial experience. It is not surprising that Du Bois and Thurman each reached his conclusions based in his own personal experience.

Contradictory impulses, which were sometimes out of control, also influenced Thurman, making his philosophy anything but a unified whole. Unlike Hurston, who could celebrate contradiction as the essential nature of reality, Thurman could not benefit from the range of possibility that contradiction presented because of his instability. In the importance he placed on individualism and in his understanding of art as race free and unresponsive to morality or politics, he was a post-Romantic and an integrationist. In his doctrine of the "Negro Note," he was a Realist. In his fascination with Nietzschean philosophy and the philosophical ideal of personal transcendence, he was a Romantic. And in his affinity with Marcus Garvey, who preached the beauty of blackness long before it became popular to do so, Thurman was, at times, a separatist.

As much as Thurman valued Hurston's work and helped to get it published, he must have known that his socialization was markedly unlike hers. He had not experienced southern black rural culture, so he did not attempt to draw from it as perhaps Hughes had tried to do in his failed collaboration with Hurston over *Mule Bone*. Thurman's experience with race had been provocative, but negatively so, not positive and energizing like Hurston's, so he preferred to de-emphasize race as a part of his everyday reality, until it

197 Higginbotham also cites Du Bois' "The Conservation of the Races" (1897).
seemed as though he was actually denouncing it. Living in a black community had only begun for him when he moved to Harlem. Thus, he tried with great difficulty to find the means to express his basic humanness by using his own experience of the world. In fairness to Thurman, his intention was neither to deny a connection to the black community nor to exalt it, that is, until he lost his sense of balance.

Periods of cultural transformation, like the Harlem Renaissance years, do not produce certainty. Instead, black writers registered the tremors of change, as did F. Scott Fitzgerald's literary creation Nick Caraway in *The Great Gatsby*. West, herself, saw Fitzgerald, and not the older voices like H.L. Mencken, as having influenced her thinking and that of her fellow writers because of the element of hope and reverence for the new (*As I Remember It*). Thurman found value in both. Indeed, Thurman's lack of certitude is what, in West's view, makes him symbolic of the times. According to critic Amritjit Singh: "most of the Renaissance writers...were characterized by ambivalence and tension, and many individual artists failed to resolve their conflicting impulses about race and art, while others found only tentative solutions" (*Harlem Renaissance* 341-42). Thus, Thurman's commentary on black writing, even when judged as extreme, was not uncharacteristically divisive and oppositional; it reflected the volatility of the times. Indeed, it was Thurman, and not Hughes or Cullen, who was singled out by socialist writer and editor Granville Hicks as representative of the "New Negro." Their published interview occurred only two years after Thurman had arrived in Harlem. When Hicks encouraged Thurman to express his own philosophy about Negro writing, Thurman complied with his usual gusto. His statement exemplifies his core belief that the "new" was only in the process of becoming:

> We're in a transition period. We don't know what it is all about. The early work was largely imitative. Claude McKay was one of the first to strike an individual note, and now there are a score or more of writers who are simply trying to write good stuff. We intend to keep on trying. Socially we want to win recognition for the Negro at the same time that we break down the desire, which seems to be growing within the race, not to be a Negro. But mostly we want to create good literature and good art. (11)

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*It is also possible that Thurman took his lead from critics like Edmund Wilson, in his "The All-Star Literary Vaudeville" (1926). Wilson harangued New York liberals like Floyd Dell, Louis Untermeyer, and H.L. Mencken for what he saw as their rush to create an American national literature at any cost by encouraging and endorsing a dubious output of work by writers like Edna St. Vincent Millay and Eugene O'Neill. Their work, he wrote, was being sold to the American public with no regard for critical standards.*

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The change from racial to multi-cultural rhetoric between the 1960s and the 1980s helped West to fully appreciate Thurman's sometimes-confused philosophical orientation. Between decades, the separatist intent of black cultural nationalism during the 1960s had nullified the rhetoric of inclusion of American literary nationalism during the 1920s, such as Thurman and West believed in. The call to complete artistic secession by the 1960's black leadership did more than separate American literature from Old World cultural traditions as Ezra Pound had preached much earlier in the century during and after the first World War. The advocates of a Black Aesthetic divided black America from Europe and black people from white America. Amiri Baraka reechoed Pound's sentiment about the "botched civilization" of the Western world (Old World Europe) as an "old bitch gone in the teeth" at the same time as he made white America synonymous with Europe's doom. In his poem "Babylon Revisited," Baraka presents a competing image of the empty muse of European poetry—now enjoined to white America: "the great witch of euro-american legend," "The gaunt thing/with no organs/with sores on her insides/even her head/a vast pus chamber." Because the black separatist critique was so extreme in its rejection of American literature as white and exclusionary, West all but gave up writing. By comparison, the multi-cultural '80s re-energized her to try to complete the novel she had been working on for so many years. By the 1990s, she had sufficient circumspection to assert more emphatically than in her memorial of the 1940s the fatal consequence of being unable to redeem oneself from racial labels and racial barriers. Thurman's case was particularly tragic because with great effort he had tried to believe that individuals can and should function outside a racially demarcated framework, as he understood it, even while he chose to live among black people. The difficulty with this view, in Toni Morrison's terms, in her theoretical study Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination (1992), is that American society is so thoroughly "racialized" and the English language so "racially inflected," that one cannot escape race, especially not writers; and, from her vantage point at the end of the twentieth century, she would also argue that one need not want to escape race either. On the other

199Ezra Pound, "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley (Life and Contacts)," V, lines 90-91 (1920).
200 Amiri Baraka, "Babylon Revisited," lines 1, 2, 7, 8, 9, 13 (Randall 214-215).
hand, Thurman’s contemporary George Schuyler was convinced during the 1920s and ’30s that the valorization of racial difference played right into the hands of white supremacists.

Thurman seemed to have a hold on the relationship between class and race in American society, but he could not use his knowledge to sufficiently guard against his tendency to personalize from the basis of race alone. It was clear to him that the higher one’s social class the easier the inevitable social interaction with whites and other blacks. It was not difficult among a group of bohemian artists to blend in as middle class, since this group was young enough and open-minded enough not to care about class. However, when Thurman came to feel that one’s color also determined one’s class, he began to see his biology as his destiny. Like West, he had not grown up within a nurturing black culture as Hurston had, so he and West could as easily believe that race was an experience of skin color and little more. Unlike West, however, Thurman had not experienced the support of a large, loving family. As far as the record shows, he had no siblings or cousins either, as West had; therefore, he never found the emotional resources to buoy him when he found himself Thoreau’s proverbial “majority of one.”

People are human beings first, Thurman often said and wanted very much to believe. One’s friends are chosen on the basis of shared values and interests and not on the basis of race. Social class, broadly defined by Thurman to include bohemian, intellectual, and artistic circles, created loyalties and social acceptance sooner than race. Thurman’s significant relationships with two white men, one a literary partnership with William Jordan Rapp, the other a love affair with Harald Jan Stefansson, are cases in point. However, even these nurturing alliances could not shield him from the fatalism that drove him to an early death. West—who lived so much longer and with much more family life, flawed as some of it was—could use her understanding of class to deflect from a too destructive preoccupation with race, and she knew she was indebted to Thurman.

At some point in her life, West must have found Thurman’s intellectualism and secular humanist orientation wanting. She seems to have been moved to embrace the Christian humanist ideal of the Rev. Dr.

201 See van Notten 222-223.
Martin Luther King, Jr., and to have taken to heart the integrationist vision of the Civil Rights Movement. She even uses these values as a starting point for her novel *The Wedding*. The text comes full circle, from the limitations of a single family mired in racial confusion and economic determinism to the possibilities inherent in a conception of a human family bound together by a common goal of equality and justice for all. This idealistic worldview is fictionally possible because West constructs her protagonist, Shelby Coles, as living in the right generation and drawing strength from the right spiritual values. Preacher Coles, like the Reverend Dr. King, transfers to his kith and kin the knowledge of the soul. A latter-day Thoreau in a transcendentalist paradise of his own creation, Preacher finds in nature the same source of man's divinity in the pure waters of a different Walden Pond, where the soul has no color and is sufficient unto itself. Needing neither scapegoats nor social caste for its own elevation, the spirit, as King would preach, guides life's journey.

Thurman, on the other hand, had appropriated the "Cinderella" story as a cultural metaphor for his version of the Negro social outcast, as he had come to see himself. His choice of "Harlem Cinderella" as the title for the third part of his proposed "Trilogy on Black Life" (Klotman 268), like his choice of the title *The Blacker the Berry* for his first novel, was deliberate. He meant to highlight the condition of dark-skinned members of the Negro community and to express how they functioned symbolically as stepchildren within their race. Reorienting the well-known fairy tale of "Cinderella," the quintessential stepchild, Thurman problematized the concept of racial self-consciousness. For writers whose primal experience of "race" was their color and whose experience suggested that dark skin determined low status in all aspects of the white world, and in many aspects of the black world, such a preoccupation was more perilous even than Cinderella's dilemma of facing her ragged and cinder-covered self in the mirror yet desiring still to go to the ball. Thus, when Thurman penned his own autobiography, he represented himself as marginal even to the lineage of Ham. He was one of Aunt Hagar's *stepchildren*, a black Cinderella.

Thurman's popular 1929 play *Harlem*, which saw ninety-three performances at the Apollo, making it a virtual triumph, spawned the idea for the trilogy *Black Belt*. Co-written with Virginia Venable, William

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Jordan Rapp's wife, the work would include three plays, each of which would examine one of the three historically important social experiments by African Americans. The first, based on the original stage play, *Harlem,* would be about the black family and the Great Migration. Another, "Jeremiah the Magnificent," would consider Marcus Garvey and the UNIA (Universal Negro Improvement Association). The last, "Harlem Cinderella" or "Color Parade," would examine the phenomenon of passing and intra-racial prejudice (Klotman 267-68).

"Harlem Cinderella" seems never to have been finished; however, an extant synopsis indicates its intended plot. Like the play *Harlem,* it is melodramatic in conception as it relies on social types, rather than full characterizations, and depends upon a fairy tale resolution. Typical for Thurman, melodrama would allow for sensational representation and hyperbole rather than the more difficult task of careful dramatization. The plot is as follows:

J. Sealbright Moore, a middle-class lawyer and his wife, suffer from color prejudice. Their light-skinned daughter, Adelaide, gets all their attention and love while Lavinia, their darker daughter, is made, like Cinderella, the drudge of the household. Adelaide is betrothed to an upwardly mobile, even lighter-skinned doctor. He refuses to marry her when he finds out that Lavinia is in love with and may marry a man who is not only dark but who does not have a college degree. He will only capitulate if Adelaide agrees to renounce her family and the race. The proud father becomes apoplectic when he hears of Adelaide's desertion and when he finds that the elite (class and caste) real estate colony he has invested in has gone down in financial ruin. The "happy" ending is reserved for the young "black" couple. (Klotman 268)

Less easy to understand in Thurman's conception of "Harlem Cinderella[s]" is the commentary on gender. Thurman may have found it irrelevant to his own identification that the mythical Cinderella was female and was saved from her fate by marrying her Prince.202 Even though he provides important male counterparts to Cordelia Jones and Emma Lou Morgan in their respective fictional worlds, the choice of female protagonists in three out of four of his major works, given their autobiographical nature, makes his construction of gender problematic. It is especially puzzling as the narrator explicitly recognizes the fate of the too-dark female as being far worse than that of the too-dark male. One could argue that using a female

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202 Thurman used the Grimms' version rather than an earlier form where Cinderella's dead mother sends the fairy godmother as a mother surrogate to help her daughter for her.
persona was another masking device to provide distance from himself while representing colorism seemingly objectively. Still, the possibility exists that Thurman was trying for a different effect altogether.

Whatever the manner of representation, intra-racial color prejudice haunts Thurman’s personal philosophy and his literary work of the late ’20s and early ’30s. The Blacker the Berry (written 1927; publ. 1929), "Negro Life in New York’s Harlem" (1927), "Harlem Cinderella," (c. 1928), Harlem (1929), "Notes on a Stepchild" (1929), and Infants of the Spring (1932), to name a few, all deal with color prejudice within the black community. It is an issue as ingrained and prevalent in the "badlands of Harlem," Thurman says in "Negro Life in Harlem" (137), as it is in the juke joints of Jacksonville, Florida.

Thurman’s reaction to his part in the color parade was to distance himself in any way he could. Nowhere is this habit made clearer than in Thurman’s letter to a trusted friend about the production of Infants of the Spring. Thurman confides to William Jordan Rapp that he has not exactly authored his autobiographical work; rather, it has been recorded, as the word "amanuensis" implies. The use of this term is further arresting when one considers that it is most commonly associated with the actions of a sympathetic white person (usually an abolitionist) who transcribes, for a slave who is unable to write, certain events in her/his life that delineate the escape from bondage to freedom. Representing his own autobiographical work in this way, as though it were an "as told to" narrative that required a more literate copyist than himself, moves Thurman’s meaning in opposite directions. On the one hand, the reader can expect to bear witness to a liberating event that the protagonist undergoes; on the other hand, the amanuensis being himself, the author and protagonist, projects a continuing sense of self-division that the event of liberation has not reconciled.

I finished the first draft of my novel about five A.M., yesterday morning. Writing it has been an experience. I stood as one apart and watched it issuing forth from Wallace Thurman. It is the first thing I have ever let write itself, playing amanuensis to some inner urge.... (Quoted in Henderson, "Portrait" 164)

"Cordelia the Crude," Thurman’s short sketch of six years earlier and his only fictional contribution to Fire!! magazine, may have been his first attempt at fictional self-distancing through the use of a female persona. At The Looking Glass and The Messenger, the two black magazines he worked for in 1925 and 1926, Thurman had been confined to editing only. Although he was tireless in his efforts to place what he
could of the fiction of his friends in *The Messenger*, a story of West's, for example, and several of Hurston's, he was not writing any himself. While these magazines were sympathetic to Thurman's racial and proletarian views, they were not in a position to transgress the prevailing proprieties by debuting Thurman's "sex radicalism," as Alain Locke would later refer to it in his review of *Fire!!* for *Opportunity*; thus, Thurman and the avant-garde's desire to explore subject matter outside the restrictions of the Victorian envelope required a magazine of their own creation if they wanted to see print. In this regard, biography and the literary marketplace intersect in the single issue of the largely collaborative little magazine *Fire!!* (1926).\(^3\) None of Thurman's artist friends had any trouble disassociating themselves from the didactic, the sentimental, or the prudish, except for Countee Cullen. Indeed, according to West, *Fire!!* magazine had been the first "declaration of independence" of the younger black writers ("Elephant's Dance" 223). Artistic license was the rallying cry of Thurman in his leadership of the "new luminaries," as West referred to Thurman, Hurston, Hughes, Rudolph Fisher, Eric Walrond, Bruce Nugent, and sometimes Countee Cullen ("Elephant's Dance" 220). No subject matter was censored. Gwendolyn Bennett wrote of inter-racial sex, conflict, and betrayal in "Wedding Day"; Hurston's *Colorstruck* dramatized intra-racial color prejudice;\(^4\) and Nugent's "Smoke, Lilies, and Jade" introduced the subject of homosexuality and homoeroticism. From the perspective of hindsight, West believed that the magazine had perhaps gone too far. "[M]uch of the material [in *Fire!!* was oversensational," she said. Those outside the inner circle of contributors "rejected [the selections] because they were too far removed from ordinary, conventional experience" (223-24).

In the short sketch "Cordelia the Crude," which Thurman wrote before his novel, and which was adapted into the play *Harlem*, he develops a story line where morality (sex) and class supersede race, but its meaning is complicated by the participant narrator's confused sexuality. Cordelia, who is remarkably free from racial self-division—perhaps because she is not dark-skinned—is unashamed of her healthy libido. Not

\(^3\) As good a study as is Abby Arthur Johnson and Ronald Mayberry Johnson's *Propaganda and Aesthetics: The Literary Politics of Afro-American Magazines in the Twentieth Century* (1979) in its overview of the black little magazines, it misses the essential dynamics between little magazines, their editors, and the literary marketplace.

\(^4\) It is fair to note that *Colorstruck* was first published in *Opportunity* and received a prize in the 1925...
surprisingly, she is constructed as lower class, and "physically, if not mentally a potential prostitute" (5), that is sexually unrepressed, in the narrator's opinion. Her character fits with the "erotic bohemian lifestyle" Thurman early espoused and that was for him tied to the lower classes. The story's ostensible plot is about black southern migration to Harlem and the difference in attitude between the younger and the older generations, represented by Cordelia and her parents. Once in Harlem, Cordelia refuses the time-honored uplift strategies of education and profitable labor to "play the game [of sex]" with the "sheiks" of the motion picture crowd (6). She is placed together with the participant narrator, also without a color complex, but much lighter than Cordelia and middle class. The narrator, then, is an outsider to the scene he inhabits; he is intentionally slumming in a Harlem movie house when he meets Cordelia. The sub-text, where the real energy of the drama resides, is that of an unusual tryst between the narrator and Cordelia, taking the plot and meaning in an uncertain direction because sexuality is (unintentionally) ambiguous. While Cordelia desires sexual freedom and sex, the narrator prefers sexual ambiguity and no sex. Through the "dicty" narrator, Cordelia unwittingly learns to profit from what is merely a natural endowment—her unbounded enjoyment of sex; she can sell what before she gladly gave away. The manner in which Cordelia learns this lesson is by not having sex with the narrator, who flees the bedside instead, giving her two dollars for her trouble.

If Negro writing in Harlem of the 1920s could be perceived by Dorothy West as an "elephant's dance," one wonders if the two interrelated issues of intra-racial color-consciousness and black sexuality might not be the proverbial "elephant[s] in the living room." The dearth of written expression by black writers on these taboo subjects and the reluctance of black publishers to give them anything like a forum in mainstream black periodicals of this period support this premise. Had Thurman not been so preoccupied with his own dark color, the frank exploration of sexuality, in particular, the prohibition against same-sex desire, might have been the direction of his fiction, as was the case with Bruce Nugent, whose coloring and class fit Thurman's "Cordelia" narrator. Fire!! was an important publication in this regard and should have seen more

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205West's reference to Harlem is not Sterling Brown's "Harlem School" but Thurman's "Harlem" as "the heart of the Negro interest in literature and art" (Hicks 10).
As many bisexuals and homosexuals moved about the Harlem arts community as in Greenwich Village or any other locale attractive to writers and artists. Apparently, the Harlem entertainment community, unlike Harlem religious establishments, was tolerant, at least to men (Watson 134). Unlike the working-class blues women, men like Thurman, Nugent, McKay, Cullen, Locke, Harold Jackman, and probably Langston Hughes, (134) were all of the middling class or better and well-educated or at least seemed to be because of their cosmopolitanism; but with the sole exception of Nugent, they did not go public with their sexual preferences. They were silent about them even in personal correspondence. Some, like Cullen, Nugent, and McKay even married.

Among Harlem women, one could note only the well-known blues women, in other words, women of the lower and working classes who were allowed to have a public sexuality because of their profession. Bessie Smith, Alberta Hunter, Jackie "Moms" Mabley, Ma Rainey, and Ethel Waters were able to combine their sexuality with their art in an acceptable (to the public) way (Watson 134). In fact, bisexual and lesbian women writers also existed in Harlem, but one could only speculate about who they were until fairly recently.206 The personal history and lifestyles of women like Dorothy West and her two closest female friends and roommates, Mildred Jones and Marian Minus, suggest at least the possibility of black women having been "passionate friends" or even lovers. For most women of the black middle class, however, the clear sanction against other than heterosexual love must not only have repressed the full expression of desire but also censored the literary imagination.

The degree to which bisexuality and homosexuality were practiced openly in Harlem is contestable. According to Richard Bruce Nugent, both Harlem and Greenwich Village permitted homosexuals to gather in clubs and private spaces. "Nobody was in the closet," he says. "There wasn't any closet" (Watson 134). Alain Locke, for example, wrote Hughes that he planned on forming "a coterie of young writers," including

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the "handsome" Jean Toomer, Hughes, and Cullen—based in the "love of paganism." Hughes responded that he liked the idea of "some little Greenwich Village of our own" (Rampersad, Vol. I 69). One may only speculate if Locke's motivations were entirely literary (or literal); however, when considering that all the men named for this group (with the possible exception of Toomer) were most likely bisexual or homosexual, it is fair to say that Locke probably was testing the waters for the right bait. It is important to note that no similar group for Harlem women was proffered openly. In other words, male writers of the Renaissance had an edge with Locke precisely because of Locke's penchant for sexual intrigue. West states unequivocally that Locke never helped her, only the men (As I Remember It). The benefit to Locke of a collaboration with Hughes seems fairly apparent to Hughes' biographer Arnold Rampersad, when he concludes: "Hughes wanted to get into Howard; Locke wanted Hughes in bed" (Vol. I 92).

While Nugent may have flaunted his sexuality, neither West nor Thurman discussed theirs, at least in letters, as far as the record shows. While West wrote about gender she did not write about sexuality. On the other hand, she was quite fascinated with the lesbian lifestyle while she was living in Soviet Russia. In fact, the topic of same-sex attraction is a subject of general discussion in West's letters from Russia, during the early thirties while she was living with Mildred Jones in Moscow. She writes more than a few letters to her cousin Helene Johnson sharing gossip about what their mutual friend Mollie Lewis had witnessed of overt lesbianism in German bars and clubs while she was living there in the mid-1930s. West's letters are quite detailed and explicit. She even alludes to the potential for a sexual relationship with Mildred Jones in a conflicted letter to Hughes, whom she claims to love;²⁰⁷ however, this triangular relationship was never explored further or dramatized fictionally as were the other important events in her life.

Thurman was far less direct about sexuality in letters. He had at least two male lovers; yet, his "references to relationships with men are never explicit" (van Notten 236). One can, however, read between the lines, especially in his correspondence with Hughes. Nevertheless, Thurman includes heterosexual sex in all of his fiction, as well as bisexual or homosexual subtexts. What is important is that as a male writer,
Thurman felt freer than West did to fictionalize what must have been an important subject for them both. The final scene in *The Blacker the Berry* clearly pushes the boundaries of what was considered acceptable. In terms of the narrative, it is the homoerotic tableau that provides Emma Lou with the will to break away from her lover Alva who has taken advantage of her in every way imaginable:

[Emma Lou] saw the usual and expected sight: Alva, face a death mask, sitting on the bed embracing an effeminate boy whom she knew as Bobbie, and who drew hurriedly away from Alva as he saw her. There were four other boys in the room, all in varied states of drunkenness—all laughing boisterously at some obscene witticism. Emma Lou suppressed a shudder....

....

Then once more she saw Alva, not as he had been, but as he was now, a drunken, drooling libertine, struggling to keep the embarrassed Bobbie in a vile embrace. Something snapped within her. (229, 231)

Thus, even though freer than West to deal with sex and sexuality, the subject of Thurman's representation of male sexuality is as problematic as his representation of color and gender. Bruce Nugent, because of his ability to portray male sexuality artistically and openly, provides a point of reference and a considerable contrast to Thurman in this regard, according to Thurman's biographer. Thurman either obscures or avoids a similar treatment even when it seems to the reader that a potential same-sex relationship is present or developing in the text, as in "Cordelia the Crude," *The Blacker the Berry*, and *Infants of the Spring*. Thurman's biographer writes:

Unlike Nugent, who in "Smoke, Lilies and Jade" allows his mind to wander through an explicitly bi-sexual landscape by free association, Thurman deals almost furtively with the same subject. One can only speculate why a writer such as Thurman, who insisted on realism and whose fiction unashamedly reflects his fascination with the self, seems unwilling to deal explicitly with his own sexuality. Thurman freely utilized nearly every aspect of his own life in his writing. Indeed, he viewed personal experience as the indispensable guarantee of authenticity in art. Yet, while he exploits his most painful experiences with racism for his novels, the treatment of his own sexuality in his fiction is virtually non-existent. Even Thurman's most enduring love affair with Harald Jan Stefansson is obscured in *Infants of the Spring* as a high-minded idealistic quest for a friendship unhindered by racial preconditions. (van Notten 237)

Given his unrelenting and even blunt treatment of colorism, the consistency of Thurman's predisposition to mask his sexuality and his treatment of male sexuality in general supports Mae Henderson's argument, discussed more fully later in this chapter, that Thurman's "homosexual tendencies" were a far greater
millstone than his color (160). They seem to have created enough social and psychological difficulties for him that he betrayed his own artistic credo to suppress them.

On the issue of race, the darkest of the "Negro litterateurs," a Thurman coinage from "Negro Artist and the Negro," were just as willing to deviate from the norm and explore the taboo subject of color. Here again, of the contributors to Fire!!, Cullen was the exception. Hughes, also a member of Thurman's group but whose valorization of race and racial subjectivity made his views more compatible with those of Du Bois and The Crisis than those of Thurman and Nugent, still sympathized with the work of his friends and supported it. The only maverick in matters of racial expression before Thurman's group was Jean Toomer in his literary efforts after Cane (1923).

W.E.B. Du Bois, like others of his generation, wanted to promote African-American culture and pan-Africanism rather than critique them. As far as sexuality was concerned, he was understandably Victorian in his distaste for its exploitation. As long as sex fell within the realm of the folk and their "folkways," in other words, distanced as wholesome primitivism, it was permissible, if not valuable (Davis 22). Although Du Bois did not deny that color prejudice existed within the race and certainly had sympathy for those who suffered from it, he did not encourage its expression in literary selections for The Crisis. He was more likely to give a positive example of blackness than to accuse lighter-skinned African Americans of color prejudice. Du Bois creates one of the first dark heroines in black literature in his novel The Quest of the Silver Fleece (1911). The protagonist, Zora, is socially conscious and racially proud; she marries a man of her race both for love of him and for the good of the race. In a later novel, The Dark Princess: A Romance (1928), Du Bois develops an alliance between India and America in the marriage of an Indian Princess, Kautilya, to a Virginia Negro, Matthew Towns. Du Bois constructs their child as representative of the potential for unity among the darker peoples of the human race.

It would be left to Langston Hughes, in another decade, to note the importance of The Blacker the Berry with its entirely different premise from Du Bois'. Thurman's novel, Hughes explains in The Big Sea, is "on a subject little dwelt upon in Negro fiction—the plight of the very dark Negro woman, who encounters in
some communities a double wall of color prejudice within and without the race" (234). Apparently, subject matter that worked against New Negro unity was left to counter-culture forums like Fire!! magazine and to the white popular presses like Macaulay's. Du Bois, on the other hand, had the kind of story line Harcourt, Brace was interested in.

Whether or not it is more true than false that the black press was primarily the agent of suppression of controversial material, Thurman believed it to be so. Some support for Thurman's opinion can be found in various sources. Countee Cullen publicly advocated Du Bois' "genteel code" on racial subject matter. Cullen's expressed position in Opportunity (March 1928) was that "[d]ecency demands that some things be kept secret; diplomacy demands it; the world loses respect for violators of this code." Alain Locke, whose sexual orientation toward young men must have been well known, expressed in his review of Fire!! magazine for Opportunity (December 1926) that in all matters racial the New Negro should be publicly radical, but in all other matters, publicly conservative.

Du Bois was not insensitive to Thurman's experience of color prejudice; however, he seems to blame Thurman for not taking advantage of the possibilities of Harlem to surmount it. In his 7 July 1929 review of The Blacker the Berry for Crisis' "The Browsing Reader" column, Du Bois agrees that colorism within the race is a "problem which most colored people especially have shrunk from, and almost hated to face" (250). The novel's theme, Du Bois goes on to say, is "one of the most moving and tragic of our day" and could surely result in "the plight of a soul who suffers not alone from the color line, as we usually conceive it, but from the additional evil prejudice, which the dominant ideals of a white world would create within the Negro world itself" (250).

Having said this, Du Bois quickly adopts the language of the idealist and applies the inevitable "shoulds" and "woulds" to his critique of Thurman's text. In a real sense, he corrects Thurman's literary representation of Emma Lou Morgan's plight. The full effect is that of denying Thurman's point of view. Du Bois' only praise comes for the section of the text where Thurman characterizes examples of inter-racial color prejudice in the West, before Emma Lou Morgan moves to New York. Midway in his review of The
Blacker the Berry, Du Bois states:

[B]ut excellent as is the thought and statement, the author does not rise to its full development. The experience of this black girl at the University [UCLA] is well done, but when she gets to Harlem she fades into the background and becomes a string upon which to hang an almost trite description of black Harlem.

....

The story of Emma Lou calls for genius to develop it. It needs deep psychological knowledge and pulsing sympathy. And above all, the author must believe in black folk, and in the beauty of black as a color of human skin. I may be wrong, but it does not seem to me that this is true of Wallace Thurman. He seems to me himself to deride blackness; he speaks of Emma's color as a "splotch" on the "pale purity" of her white fellow students and as mocking that purity "with her dark outlandish difference." He says, "It would be painted red-Negroes always bedeck themselves and their belongings in ridiculously unbecoming clothes and ornaments."

....

It seems to me that this inner self-despising of the very thing that he is defending, makes the author's defense less complete and less sincere, and keeps the story from developing as it should. Indeed, there seems to be no real development in Emma's character; her sex life never becomes nasty and commercial, and yet nothing in her seems to develop beyond sex [my emphasis]. (250)

Thurman certainly had sufficient psychological acquaintance with his subject as well as the kind of sympathy for his heroine he was capable of, but his experience told him that her dramatic situation would be fraught with much complexity and even "self-despising." That Emma Lou should at first totally undervalue herself because of how society had rejected her because of her dark color is exactly the point. That she tries to find a way out for herself by virtue of moving to Harlem and seeking an alternative experience is also the point.

That the author should feel ambivalent about his autobiographical character, given that her problem is his problem, is unavoidable. Du Bois seems to miss the existential conflict Thurman tries to express in his zealousness to mediate and promote positive racial values, racial uplift, and racial pride, about which Thurman, at that point in his life, is still unable to fathom as he might.

The vernacular and how it not only expressed color consciousness but also reinforced it fascinated Thurman. He employed its terminology in his non-fictional and fictional work, not categorically to "deride blackness" as Du Bois implies but to demonstrate the impact of racist language on a person's self-construction, which he certainly understood from experience. Thurman was well aware that in the actual communities of Harlem slang for pigmentation abounded. It more or less proved his point that colorism was

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rampant and indispensable to the hierarchy of social relations, but it was being glossed over in the public expressions of unity in the black community. Indeed, a well defined "color scale" existed and was commonly used. Whereas such a list after the 1960s might have represented a linguistic effort to individualize color for positive distinction and validation or for distinguishing the "real" blacks from the "near whites," in the 1920s it was more the reverse. Zora Neale Hurston's "Glossary" from "Story in Harlem Slang" suggests the range of terms for shades of skin tone, from light to dark: "Pe-ola," "high yaller," "yaller," "pink toes," "high brown," "vaseline brown," "seal brown," "low brown," "eight rock," "inky dink," "dark black," "low black," "lam black," "damn black," and "I don't deal in coal (I don't keep company with black women)" (1008-1010). Other familiar terms included: "pink," "mustard seed," "puntin seed," "honey," "lemon-colored," "copper-hued," "olive," "cocoa brown," "chestnut," "coffee-colored," "nut brown," "maroon," "sealskin," "blue charcoal," "ebony black," and "eight-ball" (Watson 88).

Taking his lead from Hurston, Thurman peppered The Blacker the Berry with the most extreme examples of color-coded epithets he could find and applied them specifically to Emma Lou Morgan. At the same time, he distinguished between those in the black community who thoughtlessly used language that harmed themselves and others and those who did not, in order to effect some balance in his criticism. Employing such expressions as "I don't haul no coal," meaning "I don't go out with dark women"; "coal skuttle blond"; "inksputter"; "dark meat"; "black cats must go," Thurman is not just demonstrating his familiarity with the vernacular; indeed, he is going for far more than sensational effect. He wants to reinforce his point that the internalization and use of white racist terminology has a direct correlation to how Emma Lou Morgan feels about herself. For contrast, Thurman also represents a group of Harlem artists, of which Truman Walter is a member. These painters and writers may not be insiders to Harlem street culture, even as they try to learn about it, but they are conscious of the effects of internalized racist behavior around them.

Through his fictional protagonist Emma Lou Morgan, Thurman explores the negative result of basing a definition of self entirely in skin pigmentation, and he offers a way out, in the same terms. He creates a heroine dark enough to be unacceptable even to her parents. "My color shrouds me in," writes Countee
Cullen in a poem expressive of the same issue. Thurman uses Cullen's line as one epigram for his novel to provide a supportive metaphor of colorism as a negative function of personality. At the same time, he uses, as a companion epigram, the folk saying, "the blacker the berry, the sweeter the juice," from which he derives a positive expression of color and the title for his novel. This more constructive outlook is the answer to the question that Cullen's poem poses and holds out the possibility that the heroine will find the same "sweetness" in herself and "play her part" accordingly. Indeed, Emma Lou does in the novel's denouement.

Thurman's Emma Lou Morgan, although unconventional for black heroines of this period, is not entirely unique. Hurston's play *Color Struck* also dramatizes the effect of color prejudice within the black community through her character Emma Beasely. Thurman may have been working for the same effect as Hurston although he lacks Hurston's perspective and racial sympathy. Her use of irony and point of view clearly are at odds with Emma Beasely's perspective. West believed that the intent of *The Blacker the Berry* was satire but that Thurman was incapable of maintaining a satiric tone throughout. The result, she argues, is "angry overemphasis" that turned into "diatribe." Thurman succeeded only in "mak[ing] his black heroine more than a little unsympathetic, and color screams from every page" ("Elephant's Dance" 219). In other words, Thurman broke his own rules of composition, substituting sociological harangue for literary treatment and succumbing to the very "destructive race consciousness" that he believed disabled art.

Because Hurston's Emma Beasely is not typical of her other heroines, she makes for an interesting comparison with Thurman's Emma Lou Morgan. Emma Beasely's bitterness over her color leads her to blame the mulatto rather than white society for her problems and thereby to denigrate herself: "Oh, them half whites," Emma complains, "they gets everything, they gets everything everybody else wants! The men, the jobs—everything! The whole world is got a sign on it. Wanted: Light colored. Us blacks was made for cobble stones" (11). Emma's attitude makes it impossible for her to accept the love of a good man. She goes so far as to falsely accuse John of raping her light-skinned daughter, who would be, in Emma's distorted thinking,

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206. "The Shroud of Color," *American Mercury* (Nov. 1924): "Lord, being dark," I said, "I cannot bear/The further touch of earth, the scented air;/Lord, being dark, forewilled to that despair/My color shrouds me in, I am as dirt/Beneath my brothers' heel...." "Dark child of sorrow, mine no less, what art/of mine can make
naturally more desirable than herself. John pointedly rebukes her: "So this is the woman I've been wearing over my heart like a rose for twenty years! She so despises her own skin that she can't believe any one else could love it!" (14). The reader is meant to agree with John.

For Thurman's Emma Lou Morgan in the beginning of her journey, color clearly is a shroud. The "tragedy of her life was that she was too black. Her face...was to be her future identification tag in society," the narrator tells the reader (5). It is clear in the world of the novel that it is impossible to forge "black is beautiful" from the smithy of parental abandonment and perceptions of societal disgust. Yet, rather than representing Emma Lou Morgan's blackness as her essence, Thurman uses metaphors of impermanence that suggest that her blackness is nothing more than a false face. Like an "identification tag," her color is a label rather than an identity. Emma Lou Morgan's skin color is an "unwelcome...mask" that separates her from others (5). This image of masking is elaborated upon later in the novel, in a section dealing with theatrical representation, to show how white actors portray African Americans in caricature on stage and how art tries to imitate life. Arline Strange plays the part of a mulatto Carmen "in an alleged melodrama of Negro life in Harlem" (98). At the same time, Emma Lou sees a real "Negro" named Hazel Mason, who is very dark and very provincial, from Prairie Valley, Texas, as playing the part of a "southern darky," in a "barbarian" "ugly" "minstrel-like performance." Emma Lou uses such pejoratives to describe Hazel as "primitive," "circus-like," a "pariah," a" Topsy," a "fuddler"—but it is because her behavior (read class) calls unnecessary attention to her color.

By creating Emma Lou as female, Thurman makes the argument that Dorothy West could not. In part, his intention was to represent colorism in the extreme, the worst case scenario as it were, as was his usual preference. The narrator sets up the problematic of color as that of the too dark female. He says of Emma Lou:

She should have been a boy, then color of skin wouldn't have mattered so much, for wasn't her mother always saying that a black boy could get along, but that a black girl would never know anything but sorrow and disappointment? But she wasn't a boy; she was a girl, and color did matter, mattered so much that she would rather have missed receiving her high

thee see and play thy part?/The key to all strange things is in thy heart."
school diploma than have to sit as she now sat, the only odd and conspicuous figure on the platform of the Boise high school. (4)

Of course, if one knows Thurman's biography, one knows he is not fictionalizing here. He is describing a scene out of his own life. The only change is the gender of the victim of racism. The narrative voice further imparts that "Dark girls could get along if they were exceptionally talented or handsome or wealthy..." (195), but as Emma Lou is none of the three, she initially does not get along. Without some other personal gifts, superficial as they might be, what the very black woman can expect as passing for love is merely service to a light-skinned male. "The only thing a black woman is good for is to make money for a brown-skin papa," Braxton tells Alva (132).

Initially, Thurman seems to displace onto the body of the black female what he cannot admit as his own burden of color. West addresses Thurman's authorial displacement but without noting the autobiographical content: "In The Blacker the Berry the dark-skinned heroine suffered many of the humiliations he would not have admitted having suffered himself," she argues. And, as she points out in both versions of her essay on Thurman, "He appears in the book as Truman Walter, describing himself as 'a small, slender, dark youth with an infectious smile and small features.' It is an accurate description, and the only complimentary one of a black person in the book" ("Elephant's Dance" 362). If Emma Lou Morgan and Truman Walter are indeed composite personas of Wallace Thurman, as I have suggested earlier, then the uncomplimentary portrayal of blackness is consigned to a black woman.

Thurman's experience of life told him that class was a function of race in the United States; thus, class features prominently in his analysis of color consciousness and inter-racial mixing in The Blacker the Berry and in a far more candid way than West could ever voice. Thurman includes both the realities and the misconceptions. The narrator speaks of what for African Americans was a fairly obvious conflation of class with race: "[I]n Kansas all Negroes were considered as belonging to one class. It didn't matter if you and your parents had been freedmen before the Emancipation Proclamation, nor did it matter that you were almost three-quarters white" (9). Class also functions in the "social intermixture" between the races, according to the narrator. Cross race relations, he claims, are most common in the lower classes; whereas, in
the upper classes, almost no "social intercourse" occurs. There, the lines are indelible; "it was purely a matter of color" (10).

The text goes on to trace the inevitable imitation of social caste in the black community; it too was a matter of color. The "blue vein" societies in constructing their own positions of privilege followed the Anglo-Saxon custom, including those found in the former British colonies where, in the West Indies, for example, "persons of color groups" existed. Like their white counterparts, they designated themselves as a "superior class" and "a very high type of Negro." The effect of this practice was entitlement to "respect and opportunity and social acceptance" not afforded to "the more pure blooded Negroes" (11) like Emma Lou Morgan.

The narrator explains how this hybrid of racial etiquette was inscribed and the mythology that legitimated it. It rested on the same distortions of southern history and southern social myth practiced by the former plantation owners. Ironically, the sins of the past were mirrored and reproduced among the victims of slavery themselves, and the possibility for a bond of unity in oppression was seriously compromised. In the blue bloods' veins, the narrator explains, was supposedly "some of the best blood of the South." Generations of slavery allowed them to believe that they were more closely "akin" to their captors, "the only true aristocrats in the United States," than their race (11). It became, to them, "a natural division of Negro society" (12). The logical conclusion to this bias is impressed in their motto: "whiter and whiter every generation." At some point, the blue vein offspring could simply pass as white and be absorbed into the white race, and "the problems of race would plague them no more" (12).

Thurman, of course, was not the only black writer to be acquainted with this lamentable social system. A similar group of blue veins, the Coles family in Dorothy West's The Wedding, form an identical kind of "sacred inner circle" (41) as had occurred in Emma Lou Morgan's family in The Blacker the Berry. And the problems of race continued to plague them. West suggests the vulnerability of these people as like those people who live in glass houses—and throw stones. Like the proverbial house built on sand, the house built of glass offers only the illusion of protection or security; it reveals more than it conceals. And, the stones
once thrown cause the very walls to tumble down.

Emma Lou finds that the same color prejudice existed in the supposedly cultured and intellectual arena of Los Angeles as it did in provincial Boise, Idaho, where she had grown up, and as quickly as she could, had fled. The same was true for Harlem—except among the artists and writers to which Truman Walter belongs. West constructs her own version of this trope of creativity in *The Wedding* and calls these artists—all "the liaison group." They alone transcend race prejudice and function in society as painters, musicians, and healers, forming a counter culture of their own creation. In the chapter called "Rent Party," Thurman develops his own counterpart to the blue bloods of the race in Truman Walter's group of artist friends. Alva considers them free enough from "color prejudice" to bring Emma Lou along without her being insulted or his having to blow his cover. Truman Walter, however, considers his friends too naïve about class. His desire is to introduce them to an alternative social structure where they can find the real thing for their artistic representations. He takes them on what he calls a "pilgrimage to the proletariat's parlor social," to a rent party (155-57). Thus, a parallel subplot develops around issues of class as the writers and artists desire to get in touch with the "proletarian Negroes." These two classes, interestingly, are strangers to each other. The workers "are as suspicious of their sophisticated brethren as they are of white men and resent as keenly their intrusions into their social world" (138-139).

The main purpose for the scene, however, is the frank discussion of intra-racial color prejudice. It provides the chance to bring the Alva, Truman Walter, and Emma Lou Morgan perspectives together into one arena. At first, Thurman provides commentary on the racial views of his thinly disguised *Fire*! friends. Paul (Bruce Nugent) disdains the "pink niggers" and says it is they who should be "ridiculed." Cora Thurston (Zora Neale Hurston) is "mad" just thinking about the whole disgusting thing. Tony Crews (Langston Hughes) believes in "laughing at their stupidity." Truman Walter (Wallace Thurman) says they are merely "a product of their environment" (142-43). The Walter character does most of the justifying, the Hurston character most of the retorting.

The real psychology of depicting the rent party scene in the manner of its presentation is to show the
ego in conflict over race and to demonstrate a resolution through Truman Walter. The point of view quickly shifts from Alva to Truman Walter and then to Emma Lou. The three perspectives are seen through the kaleidoscopic lens of the narrative to dramatize the three faces of one ego in conflict with itself over the issues of color and class. Truman Walter represents the "idealized self" a personification of "the Black American's successful redemption through an act of intellectual will" (van Notten 240).

Walter spends considerable time trying to deal rationally with the sensitive subject by proposing a philosophical paradigm of society and then showing its causality. "White is the symbol of everything pure and good"; "all standards are the standards of the white man"; "Mulattos have always been accorded for consideration by white people;" "people have to feel superior to something"; "the mulatto is much nearer white than he is black, and is therefore more liable to act like a white man than like a black one, although I cannot say that I see a great deal of difference in any of their actions. They are human beings first and only white or black incidentally"; "Negroes are...subject to be influenced and controlled by the same forces and factors that influence and control other human beings"; "prejudices are always caused by differences, and the majority group sets the standard" (143-147). "Then, too, since black is the favorite color of vaudeville comedians and jokesters, and conversely, as intimately associated with tragedy, it is no wonder that even the blackest individual will seek out some one more black than himself to laugh at" (147). Emma Lou, on the other hand, has a purely subjective and emotional response. She "couldn't see how these people could sit down and so dispassionately discuss something that seemed particularly tragic to her" (148).

While class and color are interrogated in The Blacker the Berry, sexuality is not. It is present but ambiguously so and is depicted entirely through Alva, not Truman Walter. Alva's sexual activity with men is referred to but not described; it is balanced with his sexual relationships with women like Emma Lou Morgan. Yet, the homosexual group activity is constructed in a negative light in terms of the plot. It is Emma Lou's encounter with Alva, Bobbie, and the other young men who flee from embarrassment at their discovery that serves as the catalyst for her finally leaving Alva. "Something snapped in her," says the narrator, and Emma Lou moves on to an unstated future. No where does the narrative design require that the reader...
Critic Mae Henderson, in her penetrating study of Wallace Thurman, comes to a conclusion about Thurman's conflicted perception of race and race consciousness as based largely in his own conflicted sexuality. Thurman's "homosexual tendencies," according to Henderson, "played a part in his negativity," and they "contributed to feelings of personal failure and inadequacy" (Henderson 160). In particular, "Thurman saw his homosexuality as creating social as well as psychological difficulties" (161). While Henderson accepts Theophilus Lewis' judgment that Thurman had a nature "rich in...the Shelleyean essence," (148) words she takes from the eulogy for Thurman, Henderson disagrees with Lewis' interpretation. Lewis has qualified his statement by saying that Thurman's "real life was lived in a world of thought and beauty."209 In other words, Thurman had a spiritual rather than a material sensibility. Henderson, on the other hand, characterizes this Shelleyean "substance" as a "tragic shadow that seemed to hang...vaguely around Thurman." The tragic shadow, she argues, was the "consciousness of a failure" (148). This apprehension had as much to do with what Thurman called a want of "the magic fire of genius" as the "phenomenon of race consciousness and self-hatred," Henderson concludes (156).

Placing sexuality as the nexus of Thurman's problem, Henderson is in basic disagreement with Eleonore van Notten's biography of Thurman and Bruce Nugent's commentary on Thurman. Both cite his too-dark color as the primal cause of his disassociation of sensibility. Nugent would still maintain into old age that Thurman "drank himself to death because he couldn't live with what he found life to be... because he had the dual problem of never being accepted in black society or white society" (quoted in van Notten 227).

On the issue of racial representation and art, Henderson implies that Thurman's own confusion and displacement make him an unreliable critic of his peers. She presents Thurman's negative critique of his fellow writers as a projection of his own greatest defect. Thurman saw the black artist as hindering himself "by a preoccupation with his racial identity" only to reveal the degree to which he is "a victim of his own

209 The eulogy to which Henderson refers is that of Theophilus Lewis', "Wallace Thurman," *N.Y. Amsterdam News* 5 January 1933, n. pag.
self-hatred arising from his racial identity" (Henderson 166). In other words, Thurman's unconscious
preoccupation with a racist self-image may have motivated his philosophy and fed his denial. "That Thurman
was only vaguely aware of his own preoccupation with race is indicated by his constant disavowals of such
influences and his deliberate efforts to transcend the self-imposed limitations of race consciousness,"
Henderson argues (167).

Finally, according to Mae Henderson, Thurman was not able to manage the delicate balance between
putting too much or too little race in his creative work. The first made for propaganda and sociology, the
second for an inferiority complex. Whatever his subconscious desire, his conscious intent was to maintain
the "Negro note" in American literature without acquiescing to "the canker of a destructive race complex"
(Henderson 167). Henderson writes:

In *The Blacker the Berry* he resolved this dilemma of race consciousness and individuality
through an acceptance of oneself and racial identity. In [*Infants of the Spring*], the answer
seems to be a rejection of one's racial identity through a doctrine of what he once described
as Nietzschean individuality. (167)

Thurman's aversion to colorism developed from an early age. In his unpublished "Notes on a
Stepchild," he again cultivates the metaphor of the "stepchild," but this time Aunt Hagar's child is male.
Referring to an offspring unrelated to at least one parent, "stepchild" as a social signifier it epitomizes
familial estrangement. As Thurman was the biological son of both his parents, his use of "stepchild" to
delineate his filial relation is purposeful. Either it refers to the color difference between himself and his
mother, making him seem unrelated to her; or it refers to surrogate parenting from grandmothers, in his case
Emma Jackson ("Ma" Jack), making him seem an abandoned child. The uncommon use of prepositions in
the title, which, because it is an autobiographical work, should read "Notes of a Stepchild" rather than "on,"
has a further alienating effect, suggesting a clinician observing and recording the behavior of a patient rather
than an author remembering and inscribing his own life story. This distancing of the writer from his subject
and his subjectivity makes the piece more clinical study than autobiography.

Bruce Nugent also contributed to Thurman's decentering strategy when he wrote a fictional biography
of his friend. Oddly, it was intended to be a part of Nugent's own autobiographical *roman a clef*, "Gentleman..."
Jigger" [circa 1930], as though the two men actually occupied a single subjectivity. Nugent provides important material on Thurman's parents not included in "Notes on a Stepchild." He clearly points to a family mired in color prejudice. In Nugent's portrayal, Thurman's mother, Beulla Jackson, apparently disgraced her light-skinned family by marrying Oscar Thurman, a man who was "too dark" for the family's taste. The attraction-repulsion dynamic that goes on among the family members determines people's fates to a large degree. Of Beulla Jackson, whom he calls "Hagar," Nugent writes:

At sixteen she was a raving beauty of light brown complexion, silky hair and Nordic features and ran off to Los Angeles with a black buck nigger with no name. Henry he called himself.... She and Henry [Berman] Pelman were married in Los Angeles. She promptly had a child and lost her husband.... [Beulla] Hagar recovered from both childbirth and marriage. Philosophically she decided that it served her right marrying so black and wrong, secured a divorce and started home to mother.... Little Henry grew and learned to call Emma[line] Ma Leany and to say his prayers before he saw his mother again. (Quoted in van Notten 73-74)

Nugent seems in tune with Thurman's sensitivity to color and color prejudice. Characteristically, Nugent minces no words as he names the origin of Thurman's troubled psyche: "Wally was very conscious of his being Black in a Black society that put Black down and put mulatto coloring up." This consciousness of not measuring up phenotypically was, in Nugent's view, "a very important psychological fact in Wally's life" (quoted in van Notten 175). Whether or not the perceived correlation between social status and skin color was actually true is not as important as Thurman's believing it was and Nugent's lack of disagreement. Indeed, church records show that in Salt Lake City, Calvary Baptist—the church Thurman's grandmother helped found and which she attended—drew a color line between its light and dark-skinned members (60, 69). One wonders if Thurman and Ma Jack were allowed to sit together there.

"Notes on a Stepchild" provides Thurman's personal solution to the problem as a hundred and eighty degrees of separation from his family. The urbane persona he fashions, because it is third person, seems a fairly obvious inversion of his biographical self. Donning the mask of "artist" is a calculated move to legitimate his desire to disengage and distance himself from that with which he cannot cope. His conception

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210 The manuscript is part of Dr. Thomas Wirth's private collection in Elizabeth, New Jersey. It remains unpublished.
of the artist is largely a post-Romantic one, the solitary spirit removed from the crass interests of the material world, aloft in the heights, and in quest of the sublime. Of this representation of himself, Thurman explains:

He had consciously detached himself from any local considerations, striven artfully for a cosmopolitan perspective. He knew that there was a certain amount of discomfort, a certain amount of interference, inevitably to be expected from one's fellow men, no matter what happened to be one's color or race or environment. He was not interested in races or countries or people's skin color. He was interested only in individuals, interested only in achieving his own salvation and becoming if possible a beacon light on Mount Olympus. (Quoted in van Notten 175)

If one substituted the pronoun "she" for "he," one could as easily be reading The Blacker the Berry with the Truman Walter character giving advice for, or to, the Emma Lou Morgan character about "getting over it" as they both share the same skin color. Yet when comparing Berry's narrative strategy of three separate subjectivities in conversation with each other as manifestations of one persona with that of "Notes," a single objectivity, the narrator's, the latter work reads like an experiment in disassociation of self.

According to West's memoir of Thurman, it was her belief that Thurman used both denial and escape to deal with the continual provocation of color prejudice. He was most conscious of it outside his class and dealt with it sarcastically, either through renunciation or fictional displacement, but seldom directly. This "nearly black" man, she says, "hated Negro society [attitudes of intra-racial prejudice], and since dark skins were never the fashion among Negro upper classes, the feeling was occasionally mutual" ("Elephant's Dance" 219). West goes on to say that "[i]n his book, The Blacker the Berry...[Thurman's] dark-skinned heroine suffered many of the small humiliations he would not have admitted suffering himself" (219). One could say that Thurman's construction of female protagonists in "Cordelia" and The Blacker the Berry was just such a distancing measure to alleviate the shock of recognition and, therefore, responsibility.

In West's view, Thurman came to be so self-conscious and tightly wound that he personalized any social rejection as linked to his pigmentation rather than to his behavior. Accordingly, when he was "disinherited" by conservative blacks after his excesses with the cabaret crowd, he saw a projection of his own worst fears. At such a time, according to West, he "allowed himself to grow extremely sensitive following their changed attitude and to believe that it was his black skin that had made him declasse." Then,
as though a self-fulfilling prophesy, Thurman went on the aggressive and became his own worst image of himself. "He mocked their manners and their bastard beginnings, and divorced himself completely from a conventional way of life," West concludes ("Elephant's Dance" 220). Her presentation of the distorted causality working in Thurman's troubled thinking at this time is alarming.

According to Thurman biographer Eleonore van Notten, one must be careful when judging the nature of the dispute between Thurman and the black middle class. As he affirmed innumerable times, most candidly in his interview with Granville Hicks, he wasn't trying "not to be a Negro"; rather, he was actually trying to "break down the desire" (11). van Notten writes:

> It is important to stress that Wallace Thurman's predicament, and that of his protagonist Emma Lou Morgan, was primarily one of color, not of race. Neither object to an identity as African-American. Morgan repeatedly points out that she does not mind being black; she does, however, mind being too black. Similarly, as various testimonies from Thurman's friends indicate, Thurman did not object to his racial background but resented his skin color that was rather darker than was acceptable to so-called educated blacks. (van Notten 226)

As important as color and race were to Dorothy West and Wallace Thurman, however, neither is sufficient to explain the whole of their lives and literary careers in and outside Harlem from 1925-1934. Thurman did not travel abroad, as West did during these years, but he did not limit himself only to the Harlem literary milieu, as did many of his colleagues. He could as easily be found downtown as uptown. For better or for worse, he made the most of opportunities in the larger metropolis and—now—epicenter of a newly configured publishing world. According to Thurman, if Harlem is "the center of the American Negroes' cultural renaissance and the Mecca of the New Negro," it is so "only because Harlem is a part of New York, the cultural and literary capital of America" ("Negro Life in New York's Harlem" 144). What Thurman implies by this statement is a connection between the black and white worlds of literary business and a change in publishing itself. One might also want to argue that within the cultural and literary capital of the left Thurman would find another escape from himself.

On the first point, George Hutchinson, in *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White* concurs; his
study provides the publishing context that Thurman only alludes to, as each considers how New Negro publications came about. Hutchinson's mapping of the literary field in which black texts emerged has a much broader basis than Thurman's experiential one, and it has the advantage of hindsight. Nevertheless, both men insist on a larger focus than black periodicals alone to understand the expansion of publishing opportunities for black writers that occasioned the Harlem Renaissance. In Dorothy West's summary of Thurman's black and white publishing networks in New York, from her essay "Elephant's Dance," she concentrates on the disadvantages for writers like Wallace Thurman.

First, however, Hutchinson quotes from Henry May, to document the upheaval in the New York book trade that upset the old hegemonic order around the time of World War I. "New York publishing," May explains, "with its traditions and taboos, still presented a formidable conservative front in 1912. By 1917 the rebellion had cracked the front at many points; this may well be the most important evidence of its strength" (Hutchinson 343). Within the context of the new post-War sensibility in the early part of a new century, a group of ambitious intellectuals who were not Anglo-Saxon or Protestant, but who were men, created the institutional basis for the proliferation of a new politics of "Americanism." Mostly Jews, they were cultural outsiders themselves, as well as interlopers in the entrenched bastions of the New York publishing world. They and their firms became the "new insurgents" and advanced considerably New York's remarkable ascent as the new publishing center of the United States, replacing Boston (Hutchinson 343-44). To continue with Henry May's war metaphor, the battle plan of the rebel forces, the new publishers, was multilateral, and the incursions were executed simultaneously. Accordingly, "[s]ome publishers of the 'rebellion' actually launched their own magazines to help alter tastes and complement their publishing programs. Thus Mitchell Kennerley, a forerunner of such publishers as Knopf, the Bonis, and Liveright, started The Forum; and Knopf founded American Mercury with his friend H.L. Mencken at the helm" (343-44).

With the possible exception of the Harper's staff, members of the aggressive new publishing network collaborated with writers of the Harlem Renaissance. Most modern black and white literature was first placed in one or more of the proliferation of new periodicals dedicated to a new publishing agenda. For
fledgling writers, the magazine trade became the footbridge to book-length publication. As Hutchinson argues,

The new magazines had much to do with the historic changes in the publishing world without which the Harlem Renaissance might not have happened as and when it did. [T]he great majority of the authors who edited or regularly contributed to The Seven Arts, The Masses, The Liberator, The Nation, The New Republic, The Crisis, Opportunity, American Mercury, and other magazines closely related to the Harlem Renaissance had their books published by Alfred A. Knopf, Harcourt and Brace, Boni & Liveright (or Albert and Charles Boni), and Ben Huebsch (who merged with Viking in the mid-1920s). (343-44)

In "The Transformation of Literary Institutions," Hutchinson rightly argues that investigating issues of race alone cannot explain literary publication during the 1920s. "Literary discussion groups and social gatherings...did play a role in the emergence of black modernist networks," he agrees, but to fully comprehend the institutional basis of the New Negro movement requires understanding the attendant conditions in the New York publishing world itself. The changing "cultural politics" of the first decade of the twentieth century, Hutchinson believes, fostered a publishing nexus designed specifically for its expression. "American literary traditions interacted and changed through the mediation of institutional settings," Hutchinson argues. Publishing new racial texts was fundamental to the phenomenon and cannot, and should not, be separated from "the complex negotiations of cultural power within the American field as a whole" (125-126).

Hutchinson's study, because of its breadth, provides a more satisfying interpretation of the phenomenon of black publishing in the 1920s than the prevailing explanation for it—including Thurman's—that Hutchinson seeks to dispel. He summarizes the standard thesis as follows: "The sudden fascination of whites for the 'primitive and exotic' caused profit-seeking white editors at established firms to become interested in black contributors" (343). Hutchinson agrees that money was made on black texts, that some black writers did advance by acceding to the tastes of "jaded" whites, and that the number of black publications did exceed previous decades. But he argues that the old publishing establishment was barely

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211 George E. Kent's Blackness and the Adventure of Western Culture (Chicago: Third World Press, 1972) and Cary Wintz's Black Culture and the Harlem Renaissance (Houston: Rice UP, 1988) are two of many studies Hutchinson cites that promote this thesis.
involved in the brokering of black texts, and that atavism and greed were not the primary motivating factors for the new publishing houses interested in work by black writers.

West's own justifiable criticism of the New York publishing industry, although a little too broad in scope to be entirely reliable, does paint a slightly different picture from the one reconstructed by George Hutchinson. Both versions of her essay "Elephant's Dance" offer a modest cultural history of their own. Some connections, however, do need to be made in order for her summary to present the whole of the literary network she and Thurman operated in. Her essay gestures toward a "cluster" of writers, magazines, and publishers that helped shape and foster Thurman's philosophy and career, and through him, the beginnings of her own. Where Thurman worked as an editor and published corresponds only to a small degree with the supportive new journals outlined by Hutchinson; among those who provided him assistance, there is no correspondence at all. Hutchinson's analysis is a much more sympathetic account of the publishers and of how and why black writers got published, and his focus is not on Thurman's small network of Macfadden's, Macaulay's, and The Messenger. Instead, Hutchinson is interested in a particular group of young Jewish entrepreneurs who came out of Columbia University, had ties to Greenwich Village, and whose interest in black writing was largely genuine because of a shared interest with black writers and intellectuals in expanding the boundaries of American literature to include ethnicity and race.

West, on the other hand, implies that publishers like Macaulay's and Macfadden's were less than genuine in their assistance to Thurman and others like him. From there she concludes that Thurman was not fooled by the "the Negro art fad," as he called it ("Negro Artists" 37). "[He] knew," she argues, "that the traditional attitude of white America, despite its shift in emphasis during the period, was still such as to discourage by over-praise and specious evaluation any honest Negro writer's productive impulses" ("Elephant's Dance" 225). Her implication is not hard to draw. All publishers, progressive or otherwise, in reality saw "Negro writing" as just such an "elephant's dance" after all.

While Thurman was convinced that the "Negro artist" would be "exploited by white faddists, and sneered at by non-faddists," that is "overrated on the one hand, and under-praised on the other," ("Negro
Artists’ 38), a few black writers contemporary with the Renaissance were not as persuaded that the exploitation/exotica explanation was inclusive enough. Chief among them was academic and poet Sterling Brown. While citing Brown, however, Hutchinson takes his lead from a different maverick poet and critic. Although Robert Hayden came of age after the New Negro movement, he uses the advantage of hindsight to bring perspective to the issue of why black writers became good copy and what that copy amounted to. In his "Preface" to The New Negro (1928), Hayden compares the values of the Renaissance writers against those of his generation. He finds the key difference in the comfortable affiliation of the former with the appellation "American," an idea anathema to the Black Arts Movement Hayden emphasizes, against the prevailing view, that among black and white writers and intellectuals, what might be called the "sensational" was offset by a competing concern for the discourse of "American cultural nationalism" and the place of black writing in it (1). What both Hayden and Hutchinson argue for, essentially, is a far more complicated representation of what was indeed a complex cultural negotiation at the institutional level. In Hutchinson’s words,

The booklists of the white publishers of the Harlem Renaissance show that they concentrated initially in critical realism and regionalism, left-wing political theory, modernist anthropology (Boasian and Malinowskian), American cultural nationalist and ethnic writing, modern continental European fiction, and new studies of sexuality and gender. They became publishers of the American high modernists, but their intellectual and institutional centers of gravity—and their closest personal relationships—were with the editors of and contributors to the [new] magazines..., not with the expatriates and the avant-garde. (343)

Additionally, Sterling Brown’s viewpoint serves to modify Langston Hughes’ well-known depiction, in his first autobiography, of a Negro “vogue” during the 1920s. Hughes, it seems, generalizes from and makes normative his own experience as does Brown. In "The Negro Author and His Publisher" for Negro Quarterly (1945), Brown argues from his own publishing experience, and perhaps that of his colleague James Weldon Johnson, who brought The Southern Road (1932) to the attention of Harcourt, Brace. Brown agrees that a temporary fashion for a certain type of black text existed; however, the mere fact that neither he nor J.W. Johnson was author to such a text or beholden to white patrons, led him naturally to other conclusions. For example, between 1927 and 1939, Brown’s poetry was first published in Opportunity and
The Crisis. Then Theatre Arts, Scholastic, The New Republic, Poetry, and The Nation accepted it. None of these periodicals qualifies as being of the old publishing establishment; at least four of them were closely associated with the new publishing networks that Hutchinson outlines. Brown, who argued the case much earlier, is of the same mind as Hutchinson regarding motive: "A few new and liberal publishers were genuinely interested in Negro expression; a few attempted to create and/or cash in on a fad" (quoted in Hutchinson 343). However, Brown also expresses his disappointment with the dearth of black texts that actually came before the public. "[W]hen all was said and done, comparatively few books of the Negro were published," is his final lament (quoted in Hutchinson 343).

Hutchinson is in accord with Sterling Brown about the few new and liberal publishers; he establishes a context and history for them as well. It is this scholarship that is the most important aspect of Hutchinson's study. To echo Brown, when all was said and done, comparatively few houses published black texts. They constituted a group of interrelated firms that had taken the New York publishing world by storm and had found common interest and common cause with black writers:

[A] closer attention to the institutions that fostered and supported the Harlem Renaissance shows that long-established publishers opened their doors to the new black writing to a very minimal extent if at all. In fact, the movement came on the heels of a massive transformation of the publishing industry that was spearheaded by new publishers, centered in New York, that began publishing black writing fairly early in their existence. (Hutchinson 342-43)

Moving in a very different circle from Sterling Brown, Wallace Thurman was in Hughes' camp concerning the faddishness of, or "vogue" of interest in, black writing. Unlike Hughes, though, Thurman arrived in Harlem with this opinion already formulated as is evident from his 1925 review of Alain Locke's The New Negro. It is clear from Thurman's extreme points of view and too forceful assertions that he lacked the academic training and circumspection of the Harvard M.A., educator, and poet, Sterling Brown. Fresh from Los Angeles, Thurman was asked by Theophilus Lewis to review Locke's anthology for The Looking

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Glass. West excerpts the review in the 1944 eulogy to Thurman, but as a demonstration of Thurman's
cynicism early on, which extended to his contacts in the white community.

"In it [The New Negro] are exemplified all of the virtues and all of the faults of this new
movement, even to a hint of its speciousness. Many have wondered what this Negro literary
renaissance has accomplished other than providing white publishers with a new source of
revenue, affording the white intellectuals with a 'different' fad and bringing a half a dozen
Negro artists out of obscurity." ("Elephant's Dance: A Memoir" 78)

West also alludes to Thurman's general disgust with "exploit[ive]" and "patroniz[ing]" whites without adding
that Thurman was not always referring to publishers. He did, as West argues, play the "bad boy" and insult
the exploiters and pawns to their faces rather than playing the "Sambo," but the examples she gives of this
Thurmanesque posture are not of publishers, per se; many are about intellectuals, critics, editors, and the like
(79). West's own use of the euphemism "elephant's dance" for Negro writing within a similar context, along
with her symbolic use of Thurman as exemplifying the Renaissance, implies that she came to share some of
Thurman's cynicism in this regard.

Thurman's skepticism was not unique, however. George Schuyler's satiric view of the Renaissance
came together most effectively in his "Shafts and Darts" column for The Messenger. Thurman knew and
admired his senior editor's intellectual and verbal edge. Schuyler's advice to New Negro writers for hooking
white publishers was to live up to all of their predigested stereotypes. "Success," writes Schuyler,
"depends...on the ability of the striving writer to do the Charleston, sing the spirituals, and chatter amiably
with the abandon supposed to be characteristic of members of a race with a primitive background." A
manuscript will surely get a reading if it exposes "true Negro psychology" (quoted in Hutchinson 300).
Schuyler's point of view was formulated well before 1926, which suggests imitation on Thurman's part.
Whatever the case, Schuyler's sarcasm and its expression fit closely with Thurman's early view of
exploitation and in Thurman's favorite medium, satire. It seems clear why Thurman was drawn to Theophilus
Lewis, George Schuyler, and The Messenger, and why all three were drawn to H.L. Mencken and American
Mercury, their model.

The authority of both Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston's published views on the relationship between white publishers and black writers may also have influenced Thurman and West. Hughes' articulation in *The Big Sea*, however, is too closely bound to his unresolved relationship with his former white patron Mrs. Osgood Mason for it to be entirely objective or universally applicable. It is fairly clear that most of his invective is aimed at Mason, rather than his publisher Alfred A. Knopf, who seems to have made no similar demands for primitivist-only work. Hurston's "What White Publishers Won't Publish" (1940) has certain points in common with Hughes' but also expresses important differences.

As compelling as is Hutchinson's provocative revision of the "exploitation theory" in his study of the new literary institutions of the 1920s, it is not the most important contribution the book makes to Harlem Renaissance studies. The impressive detail and coherent narrative about the new publishing entrepreneurs and their intellectual and social networks, which included black writers and the black periodical press, are more important to any study of Thurman and West. In what did get published, Hutchinson establishes the foundation for reciprocity between the new publishers and the New Negro writers. Their association included a shared view about the potential for American literature that had begun with Progressive Era cultural politics and literary Realism. In part because of the new publishers, the discourse of race in America competed with the discourses of ethnicity and cultural pluralism. The extent to which either discourse enabled Thurman in his expression of himself is debatable, however.

While it is true that what was to become the new establishment was not immune to expressions of the primitive and exotic, the new publishers' stake in black writing was far broader than this narrow claim would have it, according to Hutchinson (343). These new houses had a far more ambitious agenda, he argues. "They published virtually all the books concerned with the new ideology of cultural pluralism, which—far more than interest in the primitive—helps explain their interest in black authors" (343). To be fair, at least in the case of primitivism, the zeitgeist following World War I did include an atavistic urge on the part of disenchanted and war-weary intellectuals who no longer found nourishment in the Western industrial societies of their own birth. They sought to resuscitate themselves, even if vicariously, by immersion in non-
Western traditions unlike their own. The interest in folklore and folkways that exploded in the U.S. after the war was part of a desire to return to a simpler and purer past helped to construct an ideal that seemed to emanate from the rural sectors of the country and the non-industrialized nations, like Africa. Black texts, like *Home to Harlem* and *The New Negro*, that reflected a non-middle-class or non-Western ethos were nearly guaranteed to find a good publishing house, if not success.

Even Alain Locke, to a degree, got caught up in the sentiment of an unspoiled Africa that he used as the model for his philosophy of the New Negro, African-cum-American in a new Harlem environment. Locke's *The New Negro* (1925), which actually set the ball in motion, came close to being a "primitivist" text because of its Africana; and, if that is so, Locke is implicated along with Albert and Charles Boni for his appropriation of another's culture that he discovered in Paris. Locke was not of European descent, though he had a classical European education, but he was like other intellectuals and artists from industrialized countries who were fascinated with the cultures and art of pre-industrial societies. One would not like to call Locke's own search for new forms of artistic expression and approaches to creativity, inaccessible to him in the metropolis, merely exploitation of African sculptors or acquiescence to French taste in African sculpture. Locke's relationship, as a Western intellectual, to the "tribal art" that produced the sculptures that so intrigued and inspired him resembles in certain ways that of other Western artists in their pursuit of the "primitive."

It is just as possible that black writers and white publishers operated under a similar anti-colonial spirit, broadly defined, being showcased in various issues of *Survey Graphic* itself. This orientation had resulted from the recent war and had become a common bond among the new publishers most interested in black writing. Literary Harlem, as Locke's "Mecca of the New Negro," became, in these terms, the indigenous substitute for literary Dublin and Irish nationalism. Harlem was the newest expression of liberalism and cultural nationalism that had a decidedly anti-colonial animus. The editorial by Paul Kellogg for the March 1925 Harlem edition of *Survey Graphic*, a white publication, compares the "race-spirit" of the

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\(^{213}\)See Constance Rourke, "Traditions for a Negro Literature," *The Roots of American Culture* (1942) with
New Negroes to that of the many coterminous colonial struggles. Referring to the rejection of English rule by Irish nationalists, the rejection of the monarchy and class privilege during the Bolshevik revolution in Russia, and the Mexican nationalist struggle against Spanish rule in Mexico, Kellogg seemed genuinely interested in vulnerable indigenous societies and the cultural triumph over European, and now American, imperial domination rather than in voyeurism of the "other" (Kellogg 627). The fact that these special issues were by and not just about these cultural groups speaks also to their genuine interest in the emancipation of the formerly colonized. Likewise, James Weldon Johnson's *The Book of American Negro Poetry, With an Essay on The Negro's Creative Genius* found a sympathetic publisher in Harcourt, Brace in 1922 and again in 1931. It is more in line with James Joyce's efforts than Van Vechten's. Johnson, like Joyce, saw the black poet as a developing cultural force rather than as an atavistic urge.

Hutchinson's argument about white publishers' interest in black authors solidifies in his analysis of V.F. Calverton. For Hutchinson, Calverton's treatment of black literature in his most significant book of criticism, *The Liberation of American Literature*, reveals even more persuasively than his *Anthology* his view of the importance of African American culture to the national identity as a whole. The most important development in modern American literature, for Calverton, was the long-needed liberation from a "colonial" mentality; the next needed development, in his view, was a break from "petty bourgeois individualism" into a revolutionary "proletarian ideology." This final liberation had been approached by *The Masses*, but Eastman, Dell, and company had not matched their revolutionary ideology with a suitable validation of proletarian art; moreover, they had failed to reach beyond a bourgeois audience of intellectuals. Calverton's culture-heroes from what we now call the American canon were Whitman, Mark Twain, and Theodore Dreiser. He applauded the "rediscovery of America" in the first two decades of the twentieth century, pioneered by writers from outside the orbit of New England—particularly Midwestern muckrakers, critical realists, and free-versefiers. By the mid-teens, the nation finally had a poetry in the language of the American people, "rooted in the American soil," and the "native" thrust of the literature survived the twenties undiminished. (287)

Thurman's journalistic presentation of Harlem, with its "cosmopolitan cross currents" and "personality individual and inimitable," makes the perfect case study for a liberated American prose and cultural pluralism. In this sense, he was on the same page as the progressive new publishers. Harlem may have functioned as a center of intrigue to many because it was itself a microcosm of the larger New York City, or

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an Introduction by Van Wyck Brooks.
the United States for that matter. In Thurman's words, the "Mecca of the New Negro" houses a "motley hodge-podge of incompatible elements" within a space of twenty-five blocks by seven blocks, and despite "its self-nurtured or outwardly imposed limitations" it "strives to become a homogeneous community" ("Negro Life" 134). What Harlem teaches about complicated multi-ethnic social relations could be applied elsewhere. Thurman saw therein no "one-dimensional Negro caricature" for the consumption of white voyeurs. Additionally, he writes, "There is no typical Harlem Negro as there is no typical American Negro" because "[t]here are too many different types and classes. White, yellow, brown and black and all the intervening shades. North American, South American, African and Asian; Northerner and Southerner: high and low; seer and fool—Harlem holds them all..." (145).

Furthermore, Thurman's credo of introducing a "Negro note" into American literature would also have been of interest to the new advocates of literary emancipation and cultural pluralism. After all, they were just some of the ethnics themselves when compared with the WASP American mainstream. Thurman believed that the black writer could bring another perspective to the pioneering work, as good as it was, of progressive dramatists like DuBose Heyward and Eugene O'Neill in their plays Porgy and The Emperor Jones, respectively. Both authors avoided the genteel tradition by breaking through the barriers of race and class in their representations of rural blacks making the transition to urban New York City, according to Thurman's thinking ("Negro Artists" 38). The black writer could improve on these representations "by writing of certain race characteristics and institutions," unknown to these liberal white writers who were still outsiders to black culture, as sympathetic as they surely were ("Negro Life" 137). By going to the same sources as Heyward and O'Neill had mined, the working class, progressive black writers would be tapping into the right "artistic material," therein "to select and preserve such autonomous racial values as were being rapidly eradicated in order to speed the Negro's assimilation" ("Negro Artists" 37). Unlike the bourgeoisie, the black working class, in Thurman's view, "still retained some individual race qualities" ("Negro Life" 137).

The key contacts in the black community for young black writers that led to the important white
publishing houses are almost identical on West and Hutchinson’s lists, suggesting that they were well known.

They were the writers who “had preceded the Renaissance” and were affiliated with either The Crisis or Opportunity: W.E.B. Du Bois, Jessie Fauset, James Weldon Johnson, Alain Locke, and Walter White (“Elephant’s Dance” 217). None, however, was a conduit for Thurman or West. Only James Weldon Johnson, when asked by West in the mid-1930s, agreed, though with reluctance at first, to write a preface for the first issue of Challenge. Claude McKay,214 whom West also lists in this group, maintained an important correspondence with Thurman and was close to him ideologically; however, McKay was a latecomer to Harlem. He made use of James Weldon Johnson, especially, (and Joel Spingarn whom West does not mention), to get to Harper’s, without sharing his source with Thurman. Johnson even oversaw the complicated negotiations with the State Department that made it possible for McKay to return to New York where he was essentially a persona non grata because of his former, alleged communist affiliations.215

Thurman, on the other hand, shared with McKay his contact with Lee Furman who published McKay’s 1937 autobiography A Long Way from Home. McKay’s extensive correspondence with J.W. Johnson, beginning before the publication of Home to Harlem (1928), provides ample evidence of the extent to which Johnson could be useful to black writers, especially with Harper’s.

West leaves off from her list the name of Charles S. Johnson, perhaps because he was not a writer. Nonetheless, besides Fauset, C.S. Johnson, in his position as editor of Opportunity magazine, especially from 1924-1927, was truly an “Entrepreneur of the Harlem Renaissance” and is still largely an unsung hero (Gilpin 215). Along with William H. Baldwin, also of the Urban League, Johnson used his influence with Harper’s editor Frederick Lewis Allen to bring together interested white publishers with black writers of the New York Writer’s Guild. Allen provided the former and Johnson the latter (224). It is well known by now that the first Civic Club Dinner (March 21, 1924) was fruitful in terms of publishing opportunities. Harper’s

214 McKay used various London houses from 1912-1920 for his early poetry. In 1922, Harcourt, Brace took Harlem Shadows. From 1928-1933, starting with Home to Harlem, McKay used Harper’s for his four novels. Interestingly, Harcourt, Brace and Jovanovich/World reprinted four of McKay’s titles in 1969 and 1970.

215 The JWJ/McKay correspondence is dealt with briefly in the following chapter.
began courting Countee Cullen, and, starting in 1925 with *Color* and ending in 1947, the firm published all eight collections of Cullen's poetry and his only novel *One Way to Heaven* (1932). Paul Kellogg gave over an entire issue of *Survey Graphic* to Alain Locke that became *Harlem: The Mecca of the New Negro* (March 1925), and Boni & Liveright subsequently published the expanded version of the anthology, also edited by Locke, now in book form and titled *The New Negro* (1925) (228).

It is clear from "Elephant's Dance" that the writers in West's group—namely Thurman, Hurston, and herself—among a few others, did not break into the four book publishing houses (Knopf; the Bonis & Liveright; Harcourt, Brace; and Harper's) that Hutchinson points to as helping make the reputations of the younger black writers and the more established older ones. By way of example, despite Hurston's consistent publishing relationship with *Opportunity*, it was the Philadelphia firm of Lippincott that brought out her first six books and Scribner's, her first novel. George Schuyler, among the older writers, published his essays almost exclusively in the Knopf-owned *American Mercury*, yet his autobiography of the period, *Black No More*, was brought out by Macaulay's, Thurman's publisher. The Macaulay Company was well out of the main loop and far less influential than the big four publishers Hutchinson inventories, despite the presence of V.F. Calverton at Macaulay's the same year that Thurman published his first novel *The Blacker the Berry* (Macaulay Co. 1929). According to West, Macaulay's (like Macfadden's) was a "popular fiction" press, publishing "what a large part of the public wanted" (225). Funding for Thurman's second novel came quite by chance. Elisabeth Marbury, literary agent, philanthropist, and vice-president of the American Play Company, financed the writing of *Infants of the Spring* (Macaulay Co. 1932) to the tune of $500.00 simply because Thurman asked her for help. (This second publication had secured a job for him at Macaulay's.)

Thurman had met Marbury fourth hand at a party to which West had invited him. West admits to being thoroughly shocked when later she found out that her guest had cornered Marbury and had asked her for

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216 Hutchinson's chapter "Black Writing and Modernist American Publishing," gives a short history of these publishers.

217 From her letterhead, it is clear that Marbury acted as both agent and liaison between her clients, foreign and American, and the literary world en masse. She brokered clients for the theater and the motion picture industry and represented authors of novels, short fiction, and even articles (van Notten 249-50).
money, while Marbury was totally charmed by Thurman's frankness (Oral 169). It was actually A.A. Furman, related to the Macaulay Company owners, who most assisted Thurman and co-wrote with him the novel *The Interne* (Macaulay 1932). At the same time, Thurman was moonlighting with Macfadden Publications in the evenings where he was "ghost editing" *True Story* magazine for friend William Jordan Rapp (van Notten 252). After *The Interne*, Thurman left Harlem and resorted to Hollywood screen writing. He wrote scripts for "Class 'B' Pictures" with Bryan Foy, of Foy Productions, Ltd. of Hollywood, who had been introduced to him by Furman (225).\(^{218}\)

Besides A.A. Furman, most helpful to Thurman's career in direct ways, according to West, were two men, both involved in the popular culture book trade and theater. Theophilus Lewis (*The Looking Glass, The Messenger*) and William Jordan Rapp (Macfadden Publications, which produced *American Quarterly* and *True Story*, both of which Rapp edited from 1926-42) remained friends of Thurman's for life. That Thurman's biggest success was on Broadway with his play *Harlem* (1929), co-written by Rapp, should be no surprise. Here was the one time where Thurman received the help and support he needed to realize his project. Rapp, a "feature writer" for the *New York Times* and an established playwright, had the kind of network necessary to produce a Broadway show. Sadly, it was just such a network that constantly eluded Lewis at *The Messenger* (van Notten 194). Thus it was Rapp with whom Thurman created and at the Lewis home in the Bronx where he did most of his creating (195).

For Thurman, the bedrock of his network, according to West, was *The Messenger*. He worked on the magazine as an editor in 1925, as a temporary replacement for George Schuyler. *The Messenger* was the least racial, most socialist, and least powerful of the black magazines, apparently because its forte was iconoclastic satire and class critique and its mission statement, before Schuyler and Thurman's tenure, did not include interest in literature or the arts. A. Philip Randolph, the driving force behind *The Messenger*, and its co-founder Chandler Owen, both believed in economic determinism and both were fervent integrationists. They saw the value of black solidarity and independent action in the fight for just treatment and equity, only

\(^{218}\)The 1934 films were *High School Girl* and *Tomorrow's Children* for Foy Productions.
not as a separatist cause. Theirs was part of a larger grass roots crusade to transform American society for economic and social justice. In this way, *The Messenger* was not unlike many of the various magazines of the left during the same period (Hutchinson 290-291). Racism, Jim Crow, and exploitation of workers were in the editors' view the result of the economic system of capitalism; thus, as Americans first, African Americans were part of a vast inter-racial labor force that needed to be organized and united (291). For this reason, Randolph, for one, had no affiliation with Moscow and the Third International. For him, the importation of doctrinaire Marxist ideology and its transplantation would not serve America's unique racial system. Any socialist practice used to influence equity issues in the United States would have to be seeded and nurtured in native soil and adapted within an American context in order to effect the evolution of a "mulatto' national culture" (291). Racial pride, therefore, was not incompatible with aggressive integrationism; indeed, it was necessary to ensure genuine integration (291).

George Schuyler's leadership of *The Messenger* changed the journal in several significant ways. For one, it was he who encouraged the magazine to begin publishing literature in its pages after his appointment in 1922. He was able to increase the amount of submissions while he was filling in as managing editor for Chandler Owen. Schuyler's "one hundred percent Americanism," which adamantly opposed black cultural nationalism, most influenced the magazine from 1923-1926, when "The Negro-Art Hokum" appeared in *Nation* (292). His principles were clearly in tension with *The Crisis* and *Opportunity* on the subject of racial aesthetics. For him, all art responds to the imprint of "nation" not "race." Anything resembling the "art of Homo Africanus," like slave songs and the blues, "are contributions of a caste in a certain section of the country," he believed. Furthermore, "They are no more expressive or characteristic of the Negro race than the music and dancing of the Appalachian highlanders or the Dalmatian peasantry are expressive or characteristic of the Caucasian race" ("The Negro-Art Hokum" 662). The lead sentence from his infamous *Nation* essay read: "Negro Art 'made in America' is...non-existent"; it can only be found "among the numerous black nations of Africa" (662). After Schuyler justifies his position by describing the extent to which all immigrant groups undergo Americanization through "exposure" to the same "schools, politics,
advertising, moral crusades, and restaurants," he drives home his point that of all "immigrants" the "sons of Ham" have been in America the longest and have long since become Americanized. They "have been subjected to what the uplifters call Americanism for the last three hundred years," he argues (662). One should, says Schuyler, rather ask one's self why the "Negro-art hokum" is so popular and well received. His answer is provocative. "This nonsense," he argues, "is probably the last stand of the old myth palmed off by Negrophobists [slave masters, pseudo-scientists, and the KKK] for all these many years, and recently rehashed by the sainted Harding, that there are 'fundamental, eternal, and inescapable differences' between white and black Americans" (663). Schuyler, for one, preferred to believe that people living in America are Americans and that art made in America is American art. Given Schuyler's age, it is understandable that he was wary of theoretical positions that might further disenfranchise black citizenship and enterprise. His early socialization in post-Reconstruction America, which included exposure to pseudoscientific theories of race that fueled reactionary texts like The Clansman (1905) and films like Birth of a Nation (1915), more than likely contributed to the confrontation between what he knew and what he needed to believe about race and inclusion. When Schuyler rejected the "premise," of racial difference, as he understood it, his reasoning had merit. "Difference," in his view, is (too) "flattering to the white mob" ("Negro-Art Hokum" 663). The disparity among Americans—of any complexion—could better be accounted for as a result of class. Dorothy West took this same position to heart but for very different reasons.

Thurman, also true to form, made an impact at The Messenger. By February of 1926, the magazine would proclaim a commitment to Thurman's pet project, that of promoting the best in the literary arts by black writers. The new banner read: "The Editors of The Messenger take pleasure in announcing that beginning in our next issue an especial effort will be made to print first rate short stories, verse and other literary features."219 By April and May the editors were requesting material specifically from black writers on black life (van Notten 123). West responded with "Hannah Byde" (July 1926), her second story to get published, and Thurman printed his own essay "Grist in the Mill" (June 1926). Hurston's "Eatonville

"Anthology" was serialized in weekly editions for three months (September through December 1926). Thurman's last piece for The Messenger was a supportive review of Van Vechten's Nigger Heaven (September 1926), argued for on the basis of artistic freedom. Thurman left The Messenger for The World Tomorrow in November of 1926, the same month Fire!! was published.

The Messenger's opposition to black cultural nationalism, led by George Schuyler, is one of its defining features. During the years of Schuyler's greatest influence, The Messenger appealed most to middle-class black readers and garnered its largest black readership (Hutchinson 292). At the same time, J.A. Rogers and (West associate) Eugene Gordon, frequent contributors to The Messenger and advocates of amalgamation, began having their work published in V.F. Calverton's Modern Quarterly and H.L. Mencken's American Mercury, along with Schuyler's work (292). Clearly, Wallace Thurman followed Schuyler's precedent in this regard, as Dorothy West followed Eugene Gordon's. In other matters economic and social, however, The Messenger was unmistakably pro-Afro-American, to use Schuyler's term. As the dynamics of The Messenger changed so did its readership. In 1921, the magazine's editors believed that their readers were two thirds black and one third white (Kornweibel 54). In fact, from 1917-1921, the magazine's audience was chiefly made up of white and black radical intellectuals. Subsequently, under Schuyler's tenure, the stance and tone shifted as the magazine became more sympathetic to black business and the American Federation of Labor. At that point it featured society pages, sports, business and industry, and the achievements of black entrepreneurs. Then, in 1925, it became chiefly an organ of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (50-51). During 1926, when Thurman served as editor, Schuyler was on loan to The Pittsburgh Courier.220 Absent Schuyler's influence, the magazine abandoned some of its more radical labor rhetoric and tried again to attract a new generation of well-informed socialists and liberals (van Notten 105). Regardless of editor, it always maintained a firm opposition to the philosophy and authority of the "old guard" black intellectuals like Du Bois until it folded in 1928.

220Theophilus Lewis, "Harlem Sketchbook: Wallace Thurman," New York Amsterdam News ([15 Jan.] 1933), n. pag. I do not have access to the Amsterdam News but am using a photocopy of the obituary found in the Harold Jackman file in the JWJ, BLYU.
The exception who proved the rule was Theophilus Lewis. Lewis was closer to Langston Hughes' views on "Negro art," that a racial world existed out of which arose racial art, but Lewis still found common cause with Thurman who, like Hughes believed in authentic racial values and their source in the black working class and popular culture forms. As theater critic for The Messenger and former editor of the short-lived little magazine The Looking Glass (1925), Lewis was committed to the arts like Thurman and both of them to independent (of white) publishing ventures and popular theater. Especially important was their insistence that a new standard of aesthetics was necessary, of which color was most in need of redemption. A reorientation of color aesthetics was crucial to the progress of black drama so that actresses with a medium-brown to dark skin tone could appear on stage, which, in the 1920s was rare (Kornweibel, "Theophilus Lewis" 177).

As a committed friend to Thurman until the time of his death, Lewis is a reliable source of information about Thurman, practically from the moment he arrived in Harlem. In a belated eulogy that Lewis wrote because he felt the news coverage of Thurman's death was inadequate, Lewis makes a case for Thurman's significance:

My favorite newspaper [New York Amsterdam News] did not report Wallace Thurman's last public appearance with its usual skill and good taste. Thurman was not a neighborhood versifier or a small-time night club celebrity. He was a serious artist and one of the most important figures in Aframerican literature. He was too big a man for his death to be played down in a human-interest story. ("Harlem Sketchbook")

Friend Harold Jackman considered Lewis' acknowledgement appropriate. In a letter to Carl Van Vechten, he writes that he considers Lewis' obituary "the best account of [Thurman] to date." 221

Lewis dubs Thurman "the kingfish of Aframerican literature," and provides in his "Sketch" a short and accurate history of Thurman's editing experience and its overlap with their friendship. During the summer of 1925, he says he initiated Thurman into the business by giving him "his first editorial job in New York." Appropriately, it was on Lewis' new little magazine The Looking Glass. True to form, Thurman had already tried little magazine editing in Los Angeles with The Outlet (West, "Elephant's Dance" 216). Lewis

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221 Harold Jackman to Carl Van Vechten, 10 May 1942, JWJ, BLYU.
then confesses to the low budget arrangement he had with Thurman who performed the proverbial labor of love. In exchange for his work, he received only meals and sometimes lodging (along with Bruce Nugent and George Schuyler, from time to time). Lewis also explains Thurman's versatility and dedication: "He was reporter, editorial writer, assistant make-up man and errand boy. His salary was nothing a week. That was hardly enough to pay for his board and lodging so he had his meals with my family" ("Harlem Sketchbook").

Perhaps Lewis' biggest influence on Thurman, which he passed on to Dorothy West, was his view of how to best utilize, and even direct, the literary marketplace. Lewis advocated freedom from white publishers through independent publishing enterprises. His advice may well have convinced Thurman to shift to the popular book and film trades around which Lewis had developed an entire business philosophy. Little magazines, like little-theater groups, were ultimately the road to independence and artistic development, for Lewis; but unlike their better financed white counterparts, they needed to begin as low-row ventures and work their way up the social ladder. Fire!!, in its artistic success but circulation failure, was a perfect illustration of the Lewis rationale. The new publishing enterprise that Lewis imagined would begin philanthropically with capital from wealthy blacks who had disposable incomes and were willing to provide the seed money for start-up publishing outlets.

The first phase was the publication of inexpensive, mass market, lowbrow-reading materials. By this, Lewis actually meant the lowest rung but highest revenue products of the trade, "trash" books of the dime novel kind, that would include formula mystery and crime novels, "sex books" (romances), and the like. These invaluable assets had, after all, built the white publishing industry. The mass-media-first approach was meant by Lewis to hook black readers into fiction reading and build up the necessary pool of consumers. Once accomplished, "better literature" would be added to round out the black publisher's lists. Chiefly this strategy would cut out the white readership and their tastes as the primary audience toward which publication was usually aimed, and, in Lewis' view, at the expense of black authorship (Hutchinson 301).

Lewis' strategy for the development of a black theater\footnote{Hutchinson relies for his information primarily on Lewis' "Theatre" column and his three part "Survey of} was, similarly, a part grass roots, part black
cultural nationalist endeavor. He no doubt had witnessed the growth of the Yiddish Theater in New York, for example, and could see the potential for success when an ethnically or racially bound critical mass audience existed. In contrast to his Messenger colleagues, Lewis agreed with Du Bois that "a theater of, by, for, and near black folks" was necessary (quoted in Hutchinson 305). However, in his adamant rejection of the "romanticization of black difference" and "racialist notions of organic black difference," he was united with Schuyler and The Messenger philosophy (308). For him, Hutchinson argues, "rather than emphasizing the unique dramatic qualities of black popular performance in relation to modern Western theater as a whole, Lewis stressed the strategic importance of developing a theater based on what black communities would actually enjoy and support" in their own communities (308).\(^\text{223}\) Lewis saw white critics as insincere who wrote about the few black actors performing or reviewed the even fewer black plays being produced. Their fulsome praise made them dangerous, despite their apparent liberalism and optimism for the future of black theater. They seemed to Lewis to be attending, in Hutchinson's words, "the theater of the 'other'" insofar as they were "perhaps blinded by what they wanted to find in black theater" (306).

For eventually producing black drama that is indigenous, Lewis' plan was to begin where drama already was—in the dance halls. In other words, go to what the black audience already knows and attends and work up from there. The burlesque theater, born out of minstrelsy, had already been infiltrated by black performers and formed the basis of black popular drama (Hutchinson 306). Indeed, "[t]he 'vulgar' comic revues...had emerged from the black appropriation of the 'white' black face minstrel show—the most 'indigenous' white American drama, and itself a caricature of black cultural performance," Hutchinson argues (307). Regrettable as this development was, Lewis believed, in opposition to Du Bois, that this tradition could be made to serve the black community rather than parody it. Perhaps using a model like that of the well-known Elizabethan Theater, Lewis proposed that the black middle class, rather than shunning the

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reviews, begin to attend them. Eventually, their presence would effect a positive change and act as a “leavening factor” so that an "Aristotelian' mean" could be reached to accommodate both low and high tastes (307). Lewis was actually more pragmatic than essentialist when it came to utilizing drama to reinvent Afro-American culture (311). He believed that an independent little-theater movement was an essential first step to cultural liberation. In his words, it was "perhaps the only foundation on which a truly national black theater could be built" (quoted in Kornweibel, "Theophilus Lewis" 184).

Others of Lewis' specific and progressive views on the subject of black theater were at odds with those of Du Bois, Locke, and even A. Philip Randolph (Kornweibel, "Theophilus Lewis" 184-85). As drama editor, Lewis commented regularly in The Messenger on six black theater groups: the national Ethiopian Art Theater (NEAT), the Tri-Arts Club, the Inter-Collegiate Association, the Sekondi Players, the Krigwa Players (Du Bois' group), and the Aldridge Players. Principally, he disapproved of idealized drama of the genteel tradition. Romanticizing southern and rural folk life as black life was, in his view, counterproductive to the cultural effort of self-representation at hand (Hutchinson 309). And it conflicted with the move toward realism apparent already in the Yiddish Theater and underway in the work of the Province Town Players, soon to be recognized as the theater of Eugene O'Neill. Lewis did not believe in Locke's aesthetics of origin. The "new black culture" would not be "an organic growth out of the folk or African past" as Locke believed, Hutchinson argues. Instead, as transplanted southerners facing northern realities, "American Negroes," according to Lewis "are a 'new' people--in fact, the newest people." They face the same necessity as others in the post-War era of social reinvention "out of the fragments of collapsing civilizations, migratory populations (not rooted ones), [and] dying religions," Hutchinson argues (310-11).

Lewis' idea of cultural self-invention, then, has something of what Hutchinson calls the "postcolonial project" (310). "Surprisingly," as Hutchinson postulates, "[Lewis'] argument ends up buttressing and extending in certain respects the more typical amalgamationist tendencies of The Messenger's cultural politics, though redefining the amalgamated identity as Negro [rather than American] while characterizing white culture as prone to extinction" (311). Although surely not his intention, Lewis builds his theater on the
proverbial foundation of sand in not realizing how thoroughly entwined with white colonialism was his pathway out, to a restoration of pre-colonial African-American culture as it were. Accordingly, "[I]f the drama Lewis imagines here is that growing out of the popular black musical revue, then a main source of its very vitality is the extent of its conscious hybridity, of its double reversal upon American racial differentiation and its subversion of the color line" (311). Far removed from the African primitivist model offered by Locke, Lewis' theater would be, unwittingly, thoroughly "American" in its hybrid nature. As Hutchinson argues,

This meant not some pure racial origin, nor some Herderian folk past such as Alain Locke and Montgomery Gregory stressed, but rather the modern, urban erotic, both morally and culturally "impure" comic revue, "illegitimate" offspring of an illegitimate, patently racist (though subconsciously miscegenationist), and pronouncedly indigenous "white" American drama that owed its own existence to African American culture as much as to the peculiar fantasy life of the white American mind. (311)

Thus, Lewis' version of black cultural nationalism resembles amalgamationism in its unconscious cultural hybridity. The line between the two is very thin indeed, in Hutchinson's view, if it is to be Lewis' idea of "racial nationalism." "For if the black comic revue, appealing to male sexual interest (usually in 'mulatto' women, as Lewis noted) and subversive 'masked' humor exploiting racialist stereotypes, is the vulgar origin of indigenous black drama," Hutchinson argues, "it is nonetheless a form in complex relationship to a popular 'white' drama that while consciously racist, flirted with racial 'cross-dressing' and unconscious transracial identification, as Eric Lott has recently argued" (308). What post-colonial theory has to offer, unavailable to Lewis, is the necessity to balance the obvious benefit of any liberational strategy with just this sense of inevitable contradiction that Hutchinson points to.

On the other hand, Lewis' belief in black cultural nationalism has something of the American immigrant experience. As is the case for most immigrants, cultural loss seems more the norm than Locke's model of cultural transference of racial archetypes. Both men, however, put a positive spin on the importance of group cultural development, an idea that kept eluding Thurman. Lewis' view is partially in league with social critic Randolph Bourne's whose 1916 "Trans-Cultural America" analyzed and rejected the "melting
pot" metaphor for American culture and its handmaiden assimilationism. Writing for The New Republic, The Seven Arts, the Atlantic Monthly, and The Dial, Bourne was a pioneer voice in the debate around the social and political forms of multi-culturalism and cultural pluralism and their importance to a country like the United States that continually denigrated immigrant culture in the name of homogeneity and control.

Hutchinson's critique of Schuyler's thinking about American cultural nationalism points to some troubling inconsistencies as well. To begin with, Schuyler took his cue from American Mercury and its white middle-class editor H.L. Mencken. Hutchinson calls this particular influence "provoking" and "paradoxical" (293). Schuyler was insistent that blacks and whites were first and foremost Americans, having no differences of note between them. At the same time, he railed against the absolute madness and destructive capacity of American culture's most emblematic discourse, that of race, perhaps because he was so aware of the tenacity with which the culture held onto constructions of race and was defined by them. The polarity in these positions seemed to elude Schuyler as they did Thurman. In Hutchinson's terms: "[If] the 'fiction' of racial difference is so embedded in the way 'white' and 'black' Americans perceived each other and themselves, is it not productive of cultural difference—cultural difference that is at one and the same time distinctively 'American' and, because it is 'American,' racially marked?" (293). It would be difficult to respond with a negative, considering what we now know about the social construction of race; yet, Schuyler seemed to have been capable of maintaining contradictory positions simultaneously and seemingly without the necessity of resolution.

For better or for worse, Wallace Thurman was indebted to Lewis' popular culture views about theater. It was probably Lewis who encouraged Thurman's adaptation of "Cordelia the Crude" for the stage. With the exception of the centrality of intra-racial color prejudice, the play corresponds to many of Lewis' prescriptions for good black drama. Harlem is unidealized, unromanticized, and indigenous. It is about black people recreating themselves in the urban North. It has enough popular culture interest, because of its use of

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225 Johnson & Johnson's Propaganda and Aesthetics, on the other hand, sidesteps the issue of ideology completely and presents instead factual accounts of the formation and development of periodicals like The

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familiar black institutions other than just the black church, to bring in a diverse audience. Thurman got a good review from Lewis, who was known to be a harsh judge of previous plays by "Talented Tenth" writers. "What we call the Negro Theater," he had written, "is an anemic sort of thing that does not reflect Negro life, Negro fancies or Negro ideas" (quoted in Kornweibel, "Theophilus Lewis" 182). Thurman's play seemed to satisfy all of these prerequisites. In this wildly popular melodrama, which saw ninety-three performances at the Apollo on West 42nd Street beginning in February of 1929, Thurman sketched the outlines of a story about southern black migration. He was careful not to use the more conventional Broadway form of the "domestic drama." Indeed, some of his worst reviews came from those who felt he had sensationalized lower-class black Harlem life and bohemian libertinism. Friend Theophilus Lewis would defend the practice as intentionally "melodramatic" to make a point. After a time at Macaulay's, beginning in the summer of 1932, it seems Thurman had learned even more about "what a large part of the public wanted" ("Elephant's Dance" 225) and quickly moved on to film and Hollywood.

Although George Hutchinson devotes a chapter to The Messenger in his study, he rightly acknowledges that the magazine was never on a par with The Crisis and Opportunity in terms of influence. Because The Messenger's cultural politics were so different from these more influential periodicals it did not have the same access to the white publishing powerhouses supportive of New Negro writing (Knopf; the Bonis & Liveright; Harcourt, Brace; Harper's). It was The Crisis and Opportunity that sponsored the literary contests where prominent intellectuals and publishers like Van Wyck Brooks and Joel Spingarn served as judges, middlemen, or actual brokers. Of them only Carl Van Vechten (Vanity Fair), H.L. Mencken (American Mercury), and the Van Dorens (Century) were even indirectly involved with either Thurman or West.

From what West's essay on Thurman says about the journals supporting Thurman's career, it is clear

\[\text{Messenger and black little magazines.}\]
\[\text{An announcement in The Crisis XXXIX (Sept. 1932): 292.}\]
that among the younger Harlem writes both she and Thurman (and Jean Toomer\textsuperscript{227} to a degree) fit into the larger discourse of the period, that of "race" and "nation," engaged in by The Messenger, rather than the predominant discourse of race by The Crisis and Opportunity. Wallace Thurman's attitude toward "race" men and their approach to matters of race resembled closely The Messenger's editorial statement: "The Messenger is the only magazine of scientific radicalism in the world published by Negroes.... Our aim is to appeal to reason, to lift our pens above the cringing demagogy of the times and above the cheap, peanut politics of the old, reactionary Negro leaders" (Daniels 244). Socialist in its orientation and originally a union newspaper called The Hotel Messenger, The Messenger evolved into a different kind of journal than The Crisis and Opportunity. As The Headwaiters and Sidewaiters Society of Greater New York, it represented the interests of labor—chiefly the urban male worker—and not race (244). It quickly changed to the United Brotherhood of Elevator and Switchboard Operators and became The Messenger. It is difficult to say if choosing labor over race made the magazine regressive or progressive, looking back to the 1910s or ahead to the 1930s. Labor agitation began in earnest when the more radical Wobblies threw out a wide net to catch and unionize those workers who were underrepresented by the American Federation of Labor. Much of the organizing took place in Greenwich Village and was supported by Marxist intellectuals and their journals. The most visible were Max Eastman's New Masses and the Southern Workman, which also helped pave the way for Richard Wright. A. Phillip Randolph and Chandler Owen gave the black worker a greater collective voice in the pages of their magazine. In February 1923, three years before Thurman was hired, The Messenger added a subtitle to its banner: "New Opinion of the New Negro" through the influence, no doubt, of its editors George Schuyler and Theophilus Lewis (224).

Two separate surveys published in The Crisis and The Messenger are a good place to highlight the attitudes and disagreements about the race, race consciousness, black writing, and the on-going struggle for legitimacy during the late-1920s. The differing priorities of each magazine were captured in their respective

\textsuperscript{227}Boni & Liveright published Cane (1923); Harper & Row reprinted it (1968). Van Nostrand took "Race Problems and Modern Society" in Problems of Civilization (1929); Lakeside Press, a private Chicago press, took Essentials (1931); the Philadelphia Young Friends Movement published The Flavor of Man (1949).
survey titles: for *The Crisis*, "The Negro in Art: How Shall He Be Portrayed?"\textsuperscript{228} and for *The Messenger*, "Group Tactics and Ideals."\textsuperscript{229} While *The Crisis* editors were invested in aesthetics, that is, how black life is best represented artistically and how artistic portrayals of black people affect white perceptions, *The Messenger* editors had more pragmatic concerns, that is, the degree to which race consciousness assisted or restricted black people's acceptance as culturally "American" and their civil rights, in that order. The latter's is a more complicated blend of related issues, from segregation to amalgamation with "Americanism" and labor equity balanced in between.

The questions in each of the differing sets of samplings and the responses of the readership show the differing orientations and cultural/racial politics of the two journals, their editors, and their audiences. Scholarly studies of the Harlem Renaissance more often reference only *The Crisis* survey. The gallery of important writers and publishers who sent in answers to *The Crisis* indicates that its survey was either publicized more widely or more important to the respondents. The polling took place between February and November of 1926, beginning not long after the publication of Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven*, during the summer of 1925, widely condemned in the black press. The date of the survey is important as it was during the summer of 1926 that the *Fire!!* editors began planning their own response to Van Vechten's prerogative and, more than likely, to the *Crisis* survey itself. Thurman would have recognized *The Crisis* agenda behind the questionnaire, Du Bois' push toward homogeneity in race matters, which is fairly obvious in Du Bois' rhetorical questions ("Is not" and "Is there not") that beg agreement rather than dispute or clarification. Thurman would also have seen Van Vechten's book as the provocation. It is no surprise that the young writers came out on the side of artistic freedom. On the other hand, *The Messenger's* forum was probably written and organized by George Schuyler. The polling took place during 1926 and 1927 and was most likely a response to *The Crisis* survey, given its dates, in an attempt to reorient their priorities. Schuyler engages the issue of black identity as a query rather than as a given; the wording of his questions is much more open-ended. The issue of collective identity is situated in a much larger context that invites discussion.

\textsuperscript{228} van Notten reprints *The Crisis* survey (48), from *The Crisis* (Feb. 1926).
of autonomy, amalgamation, and Americanism.

Another way to evaluate the two surveys is to interrogate what each set of questions might say about the nature of the man who conceived them and how each set of questions reveals something about the writer's guiding assumptions regarding the nature of (wo)man. Those from *The Crisis* demonstrate the orientation to the "what" of the humanist, while those from *The Messenger* demonstrate the orientation to the "how" of the pragmatist. Du Bois, who assumes a collective identity for black people, utilizes a "high" culture, "low" culture bias and is essentially concerned with man as a social and psychological being, as "consciousness." Schuyler, who assumes an American identity for all ethnic and racial groups, including blacks, is interested less in substance than in impact. How a potential collective racial identity will affect black Americans' access to democratic liberalism and citizenship rights takes precedence for him over racial essence or solidarity. Like Frederick Douglass before him, Schuyler regards man as a political being, leaving questions of consciousness muted, if sounded at all. Thurman and West would take something from both perspectives but not from either one's elemental position. Their desire was to be creative beings first and African-American citizens thereafter.

*The Crisis*, it is fair to say, not only advocated the primacy of racial consciousness but also the maintenance of standards in regard to the "artistic portrayal of Negro character." Its editors, Du Bois and Jessie Fauset, took the position, fairly representative of the older generation, that to achieve the desirable end in race relations, restraints on subject matter and characterization were appropriate and necessary. The best

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230 *The Crisis* survey: "The Negro in Art: How Shall He Be Portrayed?": 1. When the artist, black or white, portrays Negro character is he under any obligations or limitations as to the sort of character he will portray? 2. Can any author be criticized for painting the worst or the best characters of a group? 3. Can publishers be criticized for refusing to handle novels on the ground that these characters are no different from white folk and therefore not interesting? 4. What are Negroes to do when they are continually painted at their worst and judged by the public as they are painted? 5. Does the situation of the educated Negro in America with its pathos, humiliation and tragedy call for artistic treatment at least as sincere and sympathetic as "Porgy" received? 6. Is not the continual portrayal of the sordid, foolish and criminal among Negroes convincing the world that this and this alone is really and essentially Negroid, and preventing white artists from knowing any other types and preventing black artists from daring to paint them? 7. Is there not a real danger that young colored writers will be tempted to follow the popular trend in portraying Negro character in the underworld rather than seeking to paint the truth about themselves and their own social

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articulation of this view is by Du Bois himself. In a *Crisis* issue following the questionnaire, Du Bois expresses the position of the idealist, the sentiment of the romantic, and the methodology of the absolutist. "[I]t is the bounden duty of Black America to begin this great work of the creation of Beauty, of the preservation of Beauty, of the realization of Beauty....," he writes. His summons to black writers, musicians, and artists, as important as it was at precisely this moment in time, had a ring of control to it that one could say was inimical to the creative spirit. "[A]ll Art is Propaganda and ever must be...for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy. I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda," he concludes.231 While it is not possible to say exactly what Du Bois meant by the word "propaganda," it is nearly impossible to disassociate it from even its most benign meaning of "publicity" and "promotion." And while a fledgling writer might have genuinely respected Du Bois' sincerity and conviction, s/he may not have responded well to the didacticism.

Harper Brothers' loss of its three most important authors because of its conservatism in matters of subject and taste speaks to the larger question of artistic representation and the literary marketplace. Most realist and naturalist writers after Henry James had already broken with the genteel tradition. As early as 1913, Doubleday got Joseph Conrad away from Harper's owing to the shrewd enterprise of Alfred A. Knopf while employed at Doubleday. By 1919, Sinclair Lewis had signed with Harcourt, Brace to ensure the continuation of his literary success. Theodore Dreiser switched to Boni & Liveright when he became frustrated over the lack of daring of Harper's (Hutchinson 367).

Many young black writers were no different from their white counterparts in their rejection of what they considered a bourgeois and post-Romantic mentality. In their representations of the working class and the poor, of urban squalor, the vernacular, the world outside of New England, and underneath and around middle-class piety and propriety, these writers joined in the project of literary Realism, believing, in their best moments, that Realist writing by its nature allowed them to utilize racial material while it excused them from bearing their race as an albatross. A good example is Zora Neale Hurston's defense of the "folk farthest class?"
down," as she called them. As a writer, Hurston clearly repudiated the mentality of racial uplift and the agenda of black noblesse oblige based on the proposition that "ordinary bloods had something to say too" (Wallace 18). Langston Hughes provides a different example of Hurston's outlook in his response to The Crisis survey when he wrote: "It's the way people look at things, not what they look at that needs to be changed."

Wallace Thurman makes an important distinction when he talks about the stake for a black writer when s/he conforms to prescriptions by "bourgeois black America": one then "assumes the conventional race attitude toward his people rather than an artistic one," he wrote. To Thurman this reaction would spell the death of art ("Negro Artists" 38).

The Messenger, unlike The Crisis, made economic realism and basic socialist, rather than racist, thought a priority and the necessary preconditions to progress for black Americans. Its editor, George Schuyler, took the position that a consciousness of racial "difference" was neither a necessary given nor necessarily desirable. The assumption of "difference" had no meaning for him because so much assimilation had occurred already (in the black middle class) that it was a stretch at best to find distinguishing characteristics. At the same time advocating racial difference could easily be undermined given the status quo of assumed racial inferiority of black Americans. His view, like that of West and Thurman's friend Eugene Gordon and other Messenger affiliates, but unlike Thurman's friend Theophilus Lewis, was that the desire to exploit racial "difference" was reactionary. The racism of white Americans was the prime mover

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232 Langston Hughes, Editorial, The Crisis (April 1926): 278. See also van Notten 47-49.
233 The Messenger survey: "Group Tactics and Ideals": "1) Is the development of Negro social consciousness (a definite group psychology, stressing and laudation of things Negro) compatible with the ideal of Americanism (Nationalism) as expressed in the struggle of the Aframericans for social and industrial equality with other citizens? 2) Will this ideal of equal rights and privileges be realized within the next century? 3) If and when this ideal is realized, will it or will it not result in the disappearance of the Negro population through amalgamation? 4) If the struggle for the attainment of full citizenship rights and privileges, including industrial equality, is to result in the disappearance of the Negro through amalgamation, do you consider the present efforts to inculcate and develop a race consciousness to be futile and confusing? 5) Do you consider complete amalgamation of the whites and blacks necessary to a solution of our problem? 6) Do you desire to see the Aframerican group maintain its identity and the trend toward amalgamation cease? 7) Can a minority group like the Aframericans maintain separate identity and group consciousness, obtain industrial and social equality with the citizens of the majority group, and mingle freely with them? 8) Do you or do you not believe in segregation, and if so, in what form?"
behind "race pride" in black people, in Schuyler's estimation, which still made the expression of positive racialism a defense strategy rather than an unmitigated belief system. And, as white capitalism invented "race" to ensure a cheap and disposable labor force, those who defended "race," even as a positive value, still were helping to maintain the racial status quo because race was, after all, a social fiction of white America (Hutchinson 299). Schuyler was well aware of the continuing oppression of black people based on their race, and he did advocate solidarity and civil rights, but he did so on the basis of the "group" rather than the "race." Race bonding, in his view, was at this point in time too divisive a strategy for black progress in the economic and political realm (295). Conscious (American) nationalism, rather than race consciousness, was the way to ensure the ideals of the American way of life and the "Americanism" of middle class blacks.

As George Hutchinson points out, Schuyler's understanding of assimilation was not quite the standard view. He never actually accepted the prevailing view that the United States was primarily "Nordic" in character or that Nordic values were normative or should be normative. A "new racial identity" was already in the early stages of development in the U.S., according to Schuyler, "such as had never been seen before" (299). In other words, Schuyler's willingness to accept amalgamation, so called, was not necessarily what it seemed to be. By way of example, N.B. Young of Lincoln University (where Hughes received his undergraduate degree), who responded to The Messenger survey, was slightly to the left of Schuyler on the issue of amalgamation. Although they began their thinking in a slightly different place, they still came eventually to the same conclusion. For Young, race consciousness was a single lap on the entire race to amalgamation that had already begun. It could best function to place controls on the mixing of the races. Obviously, Young saw positive racial differences even though he did not want them preserved for separatist purposes. He wrote that "amalgamation should be a blending of both races, culturally and biologically, so race consciousness would help ensure that some Negro traits entered into the formation of the new group" (quoted in Hutchinson 296). Another example of unorthodox amalgamationist thinking was the view of J.A. Rogers, who was further to the left of Young. Rogers argued that once "American" no longer meant "white," then "racial consciousness" would be incompatible with American nationality. In the meantime,
that "dignified homogenous thing," the American ideal, had no yet come about (quoted in Hutchinson 296).

Theophilus Lewis, The Messenger’s theater critic, was almost alone in his negative view of amalgamation. His position no doubt affected his advocacy of a black aesthetic. His rhetoric, which simply reversed the specious eugenics of the day, completely disavowed interracial unions. Lewis’ desire was to maintain specific black characteristics of which he believed there were many (Hutchinson 290). His rhetoric was as remarkably similar to that used by Black Power advocates of the 1960s as it was dissimilar to the anti-racialist thinking typical of The Messenger. As such, Lewis’ racialism differed from the prevailing editorial position of the magazine whose perspective was that of a now common culture and national identity between black and white Americans that served as the important unifier. If the United States was not already a "mulatto nation," it soon would be (290).

Schuyler, like Wallace Thurman, was probably guilty of overemphasis; at the same time, it is fair to say that iconoclasts use exaggeration deliberately as a strategy to shock their readers into awareness. Their object is to dislodge the center by asserting the extreme. As a committed socialist, Schuyler was more persuaded by the Marxist economics and political science of his day than the new anthropology. Thus, to him, ascribing divisions along racial lines only perpetuated the inequalities of the social status quo that was already deeply divided along racial lines. And, as a journalist, Schuyler dealt in matters of fact and objectivity rather than in fiction and the subjectivity of the creative process.

George Hutchinson is not so charitable to Schuyler, whom he believes was extreme in his effacement of racial and cultural distinctiveness in the American melting pot. Schuyler’s inclination to assail any statement of difference as ludicrous placed him in an adversarial position to multiculturalist and racialist aesthetics. His adamancy in refuting any attempt to forge a cultural link between the African American and Africa as “race exoticism” bordered on zealotry. According to Hutchinson, “this point of view distinguished Schuyler from most of the canonical Harlem Renaissance writers, whose efforts to develop a black aesthetic he regarded as submission to the racialist absurdities of white supremacy” (299).

What is most important about the Crisis and Messenger surveys and the debate they engendered to
West and Thurman's development is the ways in which the latter differed in tone and intent from the two leading black journals regarding racial nationalism and American cultural nationalism. For Du Bois and *The Crisis*, racial thinking was a positive end in itself, the means to attain psychological wholeness and equality through a critique of American culture. In Hutchinson's analysis, Du Bois' steadfast platform was "a political and social indictment of white America on the grounds of 'American ideals,' served by the propaganda of art" (289). For Schuyler and *The Messenger*, racial thinking, if at all, was a means to an end in the march toward economic equality through integration and socialist practice. For Charles S. Johnson and *Opportunity*, "cultural self-revelation" in the form of an "aesthetics of experience," that one could call "cultural racialism" in Hutchinson's terminology, was "a 'harder' form of cultural pluralism than that of *The Crisis*" (289).

Despite its shortcomings, *The Messenger* did put Thurman in contact with other leftist and socialist journals. He turned to them for their more progressive editorial policies and economic stability. Among the white journals where Thurman published, the most prestigious was *The New Republic*, representing left-wing moderates. *The Haldeman-Julius Quarterly* identified itself as "a debunking magazine and...an enemy of sham and hypocrisy" (quoted in van Notten 186). *The World Tomorrow*, Christian, socialist, pacifist, allied with the Fellowship of Reconciliation, had an issue devoted to black writers in 1923, and Thurman was hired as publication manager in October 1926. Other journals included *The Churchman*, *The Independent*, *The Bookman*, *The Greenwich Village Quill*, *The Dance Magazine*, and *American Monthly* (part of Macfadden Publications, editor, William Jordan Rapp).

Even Hutchinson's fuller list of periodicals and journals open to New Negro writers, including those of the second tier and those of a more literary bent, were more useful to other writers of the Renaissance. To the magazines like *The Forum*, *The Seven Arts*, and *The Masses*, Hutchinson adds the following group. Together, they provided a substantial diversity of audiences, unreachable through the black periodicals alone.

[T]he strictly "literary" magazines such as *Palms*, *Poetry*, and *The Little Review* published some black writing, even an occasional special issue focusing on the New Negro; and the *Saturday Review*, *Vanity Fair*, and *The Bookman* published some criticism; but the main support and publicity for the movement came from *The Nation*, *The New Republic*,

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American Mercury, The Liberator, Modern Quarterly, and the like. Among black publications, the strictly "literary" organs [little magazines] like Harlem and Fire!!, although of great interest, for the most part died too quickly to have a sustained impact, and so The Crisis and Opportunity became the chief journals of African American literature and criticism. (Hutchinson 127)

These magazines could be distinguished by the essentials of their cultural politics, the immediacy of their commitment to uplift and reform (Crisis and Opportunity), or the extent of their interest in bohemian values and radical left politics (Masses, Liberator, New Masses, and Modern Quarterly) (Hutchinson 135). Thus, the more experimental black writers, Jean Toomer (Seven Arts, Poetry, The Little Review), Sterling Brown (Poetry), and Langston Hughes (Vanity Fair) could place their work before a select and more difficult to reach audience. Politicized writers like Claude McKay (Liberator, New Masses) and Rudolph Fisher (American Mercury) could reach the white New Left. Academic writers, like Alain Locke (Survey Graphic) and Countee Cullen (The Palms) got the chance to arrange large and popular editions of New Negro writing. Literary critical writers and essayists like James Weldon Johnson (American Mercury), Wallace Thurman (New Republic), Langston Hughes and George Schuyler (Nation, American Mercury, Modern Quarterly), and Zora Neale Hurston (American Mercury) expanded their readership as well.

Although Thurman was estranged from The Crisis and Opportunity, he was nevertheless fascinated with the black press as an institution. He always sought employment at the black presses first, even though he generally became quickly dissatisfied either because of their conservatism or their lack of resources. His first professional job was with a black newspaper in Los Angeles for which he wrote a column called "Inklings." His first job in Harlem was with a black little magazine that failed, Lewis' Looking Glass, and a black periodical that wasn't committed enough to art and modernity, The Messenger. In 1927, Thurman believed that ample positions existed on black papers only in theory. In his view, most black publishing outlets were not hospitable to the younger writers of his crowd. "The Harlem Negro owns, publishes, and supports five local weekly newspapers," he wrote; they are "conservative in politics and policy and believe that most of the younger Negro artists are 'bad New Negroes.'" In his view, "These papers are just beginning to influence Harlem thought and opinion" ("Negro Life" 144). Of them, the oldest was The New York Age; the most
extreme was Garvey's *Negro World*; the "political sheet" was *The New York News*; the "scandal sheet" was *The Tattler*; and the largest was *The Amsterdam News*. Only the latter was "progressive" enough to satisfy Thurman's criteria. It featured the metier of many of "the leading Negro journalist and [had] the most forceful editorial page of the group" (144).

Thurman viewed what became his exclusive connection with white magazines and publishers after he left *The Messenger* as a kind of unsatisfactory "journalistic asylum" ("Editorial" 21). The choice was one of reaction rather than action. His own "revolt" against black magazines for what he saw as their many deficiencies left him in the position of estrangement from his primary audience. Thurman knew that while certain white magazines were receptive to work by black writers, a black audience in significant enough numbers did not necessarily read them. "Few Negroes would continually buy white magazines in order to read articles and stories by Negro authors, and...from a sense of race pride, if nothing more, there were many Negroes who would buy a Negro magazine" (21). As Hutchinson argues, and Thurman certainly would concur, the white magazines were far more receptive to—if not advocates of—a broad range of artistic and intellectual points of view than any of the mainstream African American venues. The same was true for the publishing houses that were allies of the New Negro. For the most part it was Alfred A. Knopf, Harcourt and Brace, Boni & Liveright (or Albert and Charles Boni), and Ben Huebsch of Viking who published the new Negro writers. Later, after some reorganization and the loss of key writers like Theodore Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis, and Robert Frost, Harper's joined on (Hutchinson 344). However, not unlike the black press, the cultural politics of even the most liberal publishers were not unambiguous.

By way of example, Thurman makes clear the mixed messages that black authors received especially from a conservative publishing house like Doubleday, a house not allied with the Harlem Renaissance during the 1920s. In a letter to Hughes, Thurman relates an experience of trying to get *The Blacker the Berry* published. Thurman writes:

For an experiment I submitted my novel to Doubleday.... The reader's report was priceless. "This is a very articulate novel for a Negro." And on "It has none of the décor of sensationalism of *Nigger Heaven* and *Home to Harlem*." And — "It is a good novel but would advise against publishing. Would not be a commercial success. However we may
The response cuts both ways as regards exploitation. Doubleday apparently appreciated that Thurman's text had not joined the primitivist/exoticist bandwagon; yet, the firm saw it as unmarketable to a large audience for that very reason. The inference one might draw from Thurman's experience is that the desire for inauthentic and sensational black texts had as much to do with readers as with publishers. Of course one also hears the subtext of West's "elephant's dance" in the publishers incredulity that the writer of the text was black. It is interesting to note that this was the same Doubleday that in the mid-1990s made West a best-selling author.

For Thurman, the main problem with black magazines was mostly generational but also aesthetic. Although he was critical of black journals in his 1926 Fire!! editorial, he best summarized his complaint on the editorial pages of the first edition of Harlem (1928) and in his choicest invective. The "new voices" allotted space within the pages of black journals seemed to him almost out of place as they were, in Thurman's words, "squeezed between Jeremiads" (21) making the format look clearly dated. "Those magazines that have lived throughout a period of years have been organs of some philanthropic organization whose purpose was to fight the more virulent manifestations of race prejudice," he argued (21). The time had come, however, to replace the journalist-as-preacher models. "The magazines themselves have been pulpits for alarmed and angry Jeremiads spouting fire and venom or else weeping and moaning as if they were either predestined or else unable to do anything else," he wrote in his customary hyperbole (21). Thurman saw the new role for black journalists as one of secularization in order to stay abreast of the modern. "For a while this seemed to be the only feasible course for the Negro journalists to take. ... and the journalists of that period are not to be censored for the truly daring and important work they did do" (21). However, the time was overdue for change; the former prophets were not only out of season, they were also standing in the way of progress. "Rather, they are to be blamed," he said, "for not changing their journalistic methods when time and conditions warranted such a change, and for doing nothing else but preaching and moaning until they...

224 WT to Langston Hughes, February or March 1928, LHP, JWJ, BLYU.
completely lost their emotional balance and their sense of true values," was his fiery conclusion. Almost as important to Thurman was the fact that black editors seemed indifferent to the magazine's aesthetics during a time when a magazine's look mattered. The result—"The New Negro artist revolted against shoddy and sloppy publication methods, revolted against the patronizing attitudes of his elders assumed toward him, revolted against their editorial astigmatism and their intolerance of new points of view," he declared (21). In short, black editors were jeopardizing their magazines' futures; they were entrenched in the past and censorious of the present.

For some of the same reasons he rejected the idea of a Negro art, Thurman was uncompromising in his rejection of the "amour propre" writing tradition and the fusion of art and politics that he felt were Du Bois' legacy, especially ("The Negro Artists and the Negro" 38). Du Bois' genteel style, resulting in almost atypical representations, was too extreme a response to the previous caricature of blacks by white writers, in Thurman's view, and actually interfered with a realistic and holistic depiction of black life. Thurman called this manner of writing the "butter side up" approach and included Alain Locke as well. He withheld little censure despite the fact that Locke and Du Bois, as part of the older generation, had "midwifed" the Harlem Renaissance through black periodicals (38). In Thurman's words, these writers were too "considerate of the Aframerican's amour propre, soothing to his self-esteem and stimulating to his vanity." Along with the promotion of literature of inter-racial and racial uplift propaganda, the unintended result was the treatment of the Negro "as a sociological problem rather than as a human being" (39). "The black writer was doing a disservice to himself as an artist," Thurman argued, "by constantly dwelling on the theme of racial struggle between whites and blacks" (39). The younger writers were responding instead to the literary bias of the new century and the desire to replace the genteel tradition of nineteenth-century writing with the realist vision of the present day, he believed. Thurman's criticism was leveled even more sharply at the black and white readership. They seemed to Thurman "unable to distinguish between sincere art and insincere art...unable to differentiate between the Uncle Remus tales and a darky joke told by Irvin Cobb" (38). The dismissal of the old and the education of the new were a simultaneous process in Thurman's view.
Indeed, what Thurman most desired in 1928 was a magazine fully expressive of the new age. He saw many models among white magazines but none edited by black writers. "An independent magazine of literature and thought" was his objective (Editorial, Harlem 21). Using the rhetoric of cultural nationalism rather than that of racial nationalism, Thurman hoped to break through what he saw as a barrier of insularity on black periodicals. "It was time," Thurman wrote, "for someone with vision to found a new type of magazine, one which would give expression to all groups, one which would take into consideration the fact that this was a new day in the history of the American Negro, that this was a new day in the history of the world..." (21-22). To express this more urbane outlook, Harlem welcomed both black and white contributors and readers, which would with some luck be large enough to sustain the effort. Thurman deemed an open forum the best format to accomplish his more catholic vision, one "from which the Negro can gain some universal idea of what is going on in the world of thought and art" (22). Nevertheless, it was important to him that Harlem also maintain its primary mission. He wanted it to be "a clearing house for the newer Negro literature, striving to aid the younger writers, giving them a medium of expression and intelligent criticism" (22).  

Clearly, Thurman was proud of his position at The Messenger and the connection he made there with lifetime friend Theophilus Lewis; still, Thurman may have been better served had he been connected early on with, or moved on to, a more stable and better funded magazine and one more in tune with the arts. V.F. Calverton, at the Modern Quarterly, might have been excellent mentor for Thurman. His resources were vast compared to those of The Messenger, and he was better established. Calverton’s radical anti-Victorian stance and anti-Puritan crusade especially suited Thurman. Like Thurman, Calverton favored the candid and unrepentant exposure to dialogue of the formerly taboo and restricted. As such, he designed The Modern Quarterly (1923-1940) to surpass the mere liberalism of The Nation and The New Republic even as his

235 Thurman’s review of Rudolph Fisher’s The Walls of Jericho was more favorable than his review of Nella Larsen’s better-written Quicksand and bordered on advocacy (Wallace Thurman, "High, Low, Past and Present," Reviews of The Walls of Jericho by Rudolph Fisher and Quicksand by Nella Larsen, Harlem Vol. 1, No. 1 (Nov. 1928): 31-32).

236 Much of the information about Calverton in this sections comes from Hutchinson’s chapter "V.F.
periodical, like them, advocated cultural nationalism and opposed "high" modernism for other more indigenous forms of modernity in literature (279-80). Although Thurman placed a high value on European literary models in the beginning of his career, he came to see the importance of the black writer as the logical conduit for interpreting the cultural and vernacular forms of black life. Thus, Thurman was in the same camp with Calverton in his desire to redefine American literature by orienting it toward cultural nationalism through cultural pluralism. The two men were different in important ways as well, which would have produced a fascinating dialogue between them. Calverton was a committed socialist, believed fervently in the social value and the social dimension of literature, and considered African-American literature unique in its authentic "expressive" tradition and essentially a folk form (281). Thurman would have challenged all three principles, but they represented the very thinking Thurman most needed exposure to. Likewise, given his kinship to the avant-garde, Thurman could have flourished with Boni & Liveright,237 who, in Hutchinson's words, were the "Impresarios of Greenwich Village" (300).

Simultaneous with managing The Modern Quarterly and compiling his Anthology, Calverton wanted to influence the book trade as well in the direction of proletarian writing and socialist critiques of American culture, including what he took to be the capitalist invention and overemphasis of race. As an editor at Macaulay's in 1929, he was interested in the work by Thurman, Hughes, and Schuyler, for different reasons. In Hughes' case, Calverton saw the direction he believed Hughes' writing was taking and could not understand his publishing relationship with the Knopfs as they did not promote radical and reformist literature. Calverton was unsuccessful, however, in interesting Hughes in Macaulay's (Hutchinson 285).

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237 In a 1927 letter to Hughes, Thurman says he was hired as a reader for Boni-Liveright (van Notten 198). "Thurman's comparison of Harlem with Greenwich Village as equally lacking in artistic excellence is not surprising. Of the Niggerati only Nugent made contact with the white avant-garde downtown. Thurman, according to Nugent, hardly ever went there. He was convinced of the superiority of Europe where the arts were concerned, so much so that he virtually overlooked such literary figures as Eugene O'Neill, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Sherwood Anderson, and Sinclair Lewis, all of whom had close links with the Village. In Thurman's estimation it was the idea of a lost generation which linked Harlem to Greenwich Village; the idea of a promising younger generation which squandered its talents in bohemianism and dissipation" (van Notten 182). At the same time van Notten shows that Fire!!'s first editorial office was a 17 Gay Street, in the Village. It was also the address of Dorothy Hunt Harris, Charles S. Johnson's secretary, and her husband.
George Schuyler's socialist leanings, his satire, and renegade criticism appealed to Calverton, especially Schuyler's invective against beliefs about inherent and substantive differences between Americans, black and white. Calverton made room for Schuyler in The Modern Quarterly and helped interest Macaulay Company in Black No More (1931). In 1929, he was instrumental in Thurman's being hired by Macaulay Company and subsequently publishing his two novels (Hutchinson 285-86). In Thurman's case, Calverton was marketing texts that actually mocked the conflation of African Americans with the primitive and the exotic and the inherent designation of difference it implied (286). In Hutchinson's view, Calverton's and others' "revolt against 'Puritanism,' insofar as the latter is perceived as one aspect of the 'colonial complex'...that also fosters racism, does not shade seamlessly or inevitably into a racialist vision of Negroes as exotic primitives; and even when it does, it does not necessarily entail a strong resistance to other types of black fiction" (286).

Calverton's interest in black literature and his use of The Modern Quarterly as a partial forum for it placed him on the periphery of the Renaissance as an impartial literary friend to black writers before meeting Thurman.238 Judging from his negative review of Thurman's first novel The Blacker the Berry (1929) for The New York Herald Tribune Books, Calverton might have been able to draw Thurman away from fiction and help him to develop his flair for feature journalism instead. Had Thurman's editorial work been at a solid enough firm with the right political and artistic edge, he might have done just that. Macaulay's, even though a popular press, shared the same anti-Victorian values as Calverton's journal and the journals of the radical left, but it didn't have the same intellectual edge that Thurman required. Calverton understood Thurman's limitations as a creative writer and did provide just the kind of criticism that Thurman said white reviewers were unwilling to give. Calverton writes:

As a literary effort [Berry] is without distinction. It lacks the very dynamics that should be most conspicuous in the life that Mr. Thurman sets out to depict.... An obsession is hard to chisel into exquisite and effective form. It is more easily made into a pamphlet than into a novel. (Quoted in van Notten 241)

artist James Harris (van Notten 131).

Whereas serendipity may have assisted Thurman once in his career, George Hutchinson points to the more reliable and accessible network that could be, for a time, relied upon, to assist black writers. Hutchinson defines the overlapping, interracial circles of influence, whose hub was Columbia University. It fanned out from and intersected with the same new publishers interested in the contributions of black writers to what was then being called "native [American] literature." The key players were Joel Spingarn and Alfred A. Knopf. Both men moved in circles of intellectuals allied with The Crisis, through the NAACP, and Opportunity, through the National Urban League. Both organizations were interracial civil rights forums.

The Columbia University fulcrum that put the wheel in motion was Joel Spingarn, professor of comparative literature, mentor to Alfred A. Knopf (class of 1912) and Randolph Bourne. Spingarn, who had been dismissed from Columbia, became chairman of the NAACP in 1913 and thus intersected with The Crisis nexus of W.E.B. Du Bois,239 Jessie Fauset,240 and the literary contests that began in the early 1920s.

The Knopf nexus, which included most importantly Carl Van Vechten, developed when the "American Cosmopolitan," Alfred A. Knopf, after a short apprenticeship, opened his own publishing house. Here, the Opportunity nexus with Charles S. Johnson and the Urban League intersect. Knopf started out with Doubleday, Page's publishing house, but he soon found the firm far too "Puritan." He moved on to apprentice with Mitchell Kennerley, then the editor of both The Smart Set and The Forum. The latter "became a magazine outlet for [Kennerley's] authors, a practice Knopf imitated in founding American Mercury" (Hutchinson 361). The Forum, perhaps because it supported Irish nationalism, found common cause with black writers. Hutchinson writes,

[It] became an American conduit of the Celtic Revival and one sympathetic to African American concerns; its editor's wife, Mrs. Henry Goddard Leach, served on the board of the National Urban League and donated the prizes for the first Opportunity literary contests, for which her husband served as an essay judge (joined by Van Wyck Brooks). (362)

Once established with his own house, Knopf, by 1916, began publishing more American writers;

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239Du Bois first used A.C. McClurg's of Chicago; Harcourt, Brace in the 1920s; Holt in the 1930s; and Harcourt, Brace in the 1940s.
240Fauset used Boni and Liveright in 1924 and Matthews and Marrot of London in 1928. Stokes of New...
these included Max Eastman, Alfred Kreymborg, and Carl Van Vechten. Knopf was known for becoming close friends with many of his authors and allowing them to "recruit" other authors. Interracial politics and literature often intersected at this point. H.L. Mencken, for whom Knopf started *American Mercury* in 1923, suggested Walter White, NAACP's Executive Secretary after James Weldon Johnson, as an author worthy of the firm. Van Vechten sponsored Langston Hughes, beginning with *The Weary Blues* in 1926, in what would be a long-term publishing relationship. He also put Nella Larsen in touch with Knopf, who took both *Quicksand* and *Passing*. Van Vechten also lured James Weldon Johnson away from Harcourt, Brace when Knopf agreed to reprint *Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* in 1927. However, even though Johnson allowed Knopf to publish *Black Manhattan* in 1930, he also published *St. Peter* that same year with Viking and stayed with Viking thereafter. The value of being published by Knopf, outside of the extensive network it provided, was Knopf's known reputation for selectivity, quality productions, and loyalty to his authors. Rather than relying upon best-sellers, Knopf's solid backlist was the "bulwark" of the firm and kept it going through the Depression years (Hutchinson 363).

III

Thurman, who preached racial transcendence, had mistakenly hoped it could be accomplished through personal success. His egoism and his doctrine of individualism and superiority, as articulated in *Infants of the Spring*, produced, as the novel itself shows, social alienation and denial rather than transformation. The closest Thurman comes fictionally to a realistic approach to race and identity is in *The Blacker the Berry*. The path to healthy self-esteem for Emma Lou Morgan is through self-acceptance.

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241 White used Knopf for *The Fire in the Flint* (1924) and Grosset and Dunlap of New York for *Flight* (1926).
243 J.W. Johnson used the Boston firms of Sherman, French in 1912 and Cornhill in 1917; changed to Harcourt, Brace in 1922 and then used Viking in 1925, 1926, 1927, 1930, 1933, 1934 and 1940. He used
However, because of the novel's complex narrative structure, the resolution seems forced at best and only a partial solution. The novel's split protagonist creates a doubled point of view. The female Emma Lou Morgan desires acceptance and transcendence; the male Truman Walter has already found them in art. Alva continues on the path of excess and sexual indulgence. Thus, neither solution unites Thurman's alter egos.

Interestingly Dorothy West may not have met Wallace Thurman at the *Opportunity* banquet in New York City or even at his infamous loft in Harlem, but at the Gurdjieff meetings (Henderson 150) where, under Jean Toomer's guidance, matters of the spirit were being privileged over matters of race, the limitless possibilities of consciousness over the more limited domain of racial identity. Jean Toomer held these meetings in Harlem from the spring of 1925 through the spring of 1926 with other Harlem regulars like Dorothy Peterson, Aaron Douglas, and Nella Larsen. Langston Hughes apparently was not impressed enough to return after a few sessions (van Notten 99). Toomer's much criticized counter-culture probing of the "authentic self" took him away from color and into the mysticism of George Ivanovitch Gurdjieff. The Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man, begun in 1921, intrigued Toomer. He came to Gurdjieff's teachings after writing *Cane* and by way of two Gurdjieff disciples, P.D. Ouspensky, known in Greenwich Village through his book *Tertium Organum*, and Alfred Orage. Ouspensky utilized Gurdjieff's metaphysics of "The Fourth Way." It involved, among other things "the vigorous discipline of the mind, emotions, and the body in an effort to free and empower the basic essence at the center of the self." A higher state of functioning called "Being" could be summoned through a perfect balance of "the mental, emotional, and physical" best accomplished through gymnastics, dance, and lectures (van Notten 99). For Toomer who "rejected racial, regional, and sexual restrictions" (Hutchinson 358), the appeal of consciousness seemed the path to the expanded and unrestricted self he desired.

Knopf only once in 1930.

If Henderson is correct about this meeting, it would have taken place around the time of the banquet in March 1926. Toomer's first Harlem gathering was in Nov. of 1925. He left for Fontainebleau in May of 1926, by which time the Harlem arts group knew of Gurdjieff's philosophy and of each other. West returned to Boston shortly after the *Opportunity* banquet and didn't move to Harlem until October 1926. By then Toomer was in Chicago (See van Notten 101).
In the metaphysics of Gurdjieff, Toomer believed he had found a path to what might be called a "unity of being." Gurdjieff's philosophy provided a means to bring into harmony Toomer's diverse racial birthright (van Notten 99). Joining together, rather than isolating, the various racial and cultural parts of himself that he had inherited through his ancestry, seemed a more holistic endeavor. In Toomer's own words: "In my body were many bloods, some dark blood, all blended in the fire of six or more generations. I was, then, either a new type of man or the very oldest. In any case I was inescapably myself" (Turner xiii). The ideal, for Toomer, was at the level of consciousness itself, a perception of wholeness and harmony that extended out from the self to others (not unlike the enlightenment schoolteacher finds in Christian humanism in *The Wedding*). After the publication of *Cane* (1923), however, Toomer's readers regarded him as a black writer, an attitude Toomer rejected as too one-sided. He used the example of Sherwood Anderson to explain to Waldo Frank the restrictions inherent in this insistence on racial priority. "Sherwood limits me to Negro. As an approach, as a constant element (part of a larger whole) of interest, Negro is good. But try to tie me to one of my parts is surely to loose [sic] me" (quoted in van Notten 98-99). Toomer never gave up on his pursuit of "being" as the highest form of identity. His journey took him for a time to psychoanalysis and inevitably to Eastern religious practice (Watson 85), as it had for the many other soul searchers and transcendentalists who preceded him.

Even before his split with black writers on the question of racial identity, Toomer was also at odds with most of the new Negroes on the question of cultural values. He saw even the most progressive black intellectuals as held hostage to bourgeois Anglo-Saxonism, unlike white intellectuals of the left who, he believed, were far more detached and wary. Indeed, Toomer championed the intellectual left affiliated with *The Liberator*, for example, as having exceeded the Anglo-Saxon model and having liberated itself in a way the black bourgeoisie had not. Writing his friend Mae Wright in August 1922, as he worked on *Cane*, Toomer implies that his connection to cultural critics of the Left had actually liberated his valuation of the Negro race. Doing so was "to create a living ideal of one's own" (quoted in Hutchinson 131). It is certain that Toomer's close friendships with intellectuals associated specifically with *The Seven Arts, The Nation,*
The New Republic, and The Liberator were essential to his efforts to revitalize Negro identity aesthetically. His brief months in Georgia were artistically productive precisely because New York had prepared him for this cultural journey (131).

Thurman, who also found a place in the pages of The New Republic and value in the white intellectual left, was genuinely interested in Gurdjieff but chose to go in another direction to achieve a kind of trans-racial awareness. His different path, he believed, was more in harmony with the New Negroes (van Notten 100) and his own temperament.

Thurman's attraction to the Gurdjieff system may...have been provoked by the significance it placed on the development of a consciousness and self-perception which transcended the racial level. This notion of racial transcendence...was one of Thurman's own leading objectives particularly in relation to how he perceived his career as a writer and critic. According to Gurdjieff (and Thurman concurred), man's problems, including race-related concerns, were mostly internal rather than external. (281)

The inordinate concentration upon the self at the heart of Gurdjieff's aesthetics probably also motivated Thurman. More than likely, however, his inviolate cynicism operated against Gurdjieff's philosophy taking hold even if he had consciously desired it. Iconoclasm and belief ordinarily do not operate in harmony (van Notten 101). The "cosmopolitan perspective" Thurman flaunted brought him in line with his more natural soul mate—the Nietzschean H.L. Mencken ("Notes on a Step-child" n. pag.).

The basis of his artistic credo calling for racial liberation was, Thurman believed, in accord with Toomer's philosophy. Thurman's statement in "Nephews of Uncle Remus" (1927) about "[F]reeing himself from restrictive racial bonds and letting the artist in him take flight where it will," was a publicly articulated manifesto, published in The Independent (297). Thus, Thurman's position on art and race was not essentialist. He did not believe in a "distinctly Negro art." It was experience, not essence, that determined one's subject matter and treatment. "[B]ecause of differences in the Negro's background," Thurman argued, "there will be differences in what he writes and paints. There is bound to be a Negro note but not a Negro art" (Hicks 11). The same was true for white artists, in Thurman's view. Both kinds of textual production are simply aspects of American literature. This philosophy was also Countee Cullen's stated view in his edited poetry anthology Caroling Dusk (1927), despite its subtitle referencing "Negro Poets." It would be Sterling.
Brown's view as well, evident from the subtitle for his important collaborative anthology *The Negro Caravan: Writings by American Negroes* (1941).

Thurman was neither an assimilationist nor a black cultural nationalist; he was instead a cultural pluralist, especially because of his urban orientation. He did believe in what he called "autonomous racial values," as in the blues; but felt that cultural forms were worth preserving as "artistic material" only. Like Toomer, he was against "the Negro's assimilation" into "the quagmire of American Kultur"; he said so in his article "Negro Artists and the Negro" (1927) for *The New Republic* (37). Indeed, he believed that in *Fire!!* magazine, not only did the "contributors [go] to the proletariat rather than to the bourgeoisie for characters and material" but also that the writers were "interested in people who still retained some individual race qualities and who were not totally white American in every respect save color of skin" (37). For this reason, Thurman appreciated the work of Hurston and Arthur Huff Fauset. The collecting and use of black folklore and folk speech exemplified the black writers' identification with black Southern rural traditional culture. Black urban writers like Theophilus Lewis, Langston Hughes, and Rudolph Fisher, and Thurman himself, on the other hand, by emphasizing the musical and linguistic presence and the social traditions of black Americans who had made the long migration North but had not yet been socialized by the middle class, explored more contemporary black cultural contributions.

Thurman continually advised his contemporaries to emulate Jean Toomer—because of his writing, not his race. According to West, Thurman felt that "Jean Toomer was the only Negro writer who had the elements of greatness." However, West notes too that "Toomer has written little since his memorable Cane, and is far removed from Negro living" ("Elephant's Dance" 217). Here she expresses an unstated value for both herself and Thurman, that of living in the black community and taking inspiration from it.

On a less philosophical plane, Thurman saw the championing of a unified racial consciousness in art as both absurd and hypocritical. In his article "Negro Life in New York's Harlem" (1927) for the leftist *Haldeman-Julius Quarterly*, Thurman points to the tremendous diversity among the multi-ethnic and national mix of the group "collectively known as Negroes." In the first place, people of color did not have a
unified racial presence. At best, Harlem was a "magic' melting pot" maintaining its borders because of its
diversity, as is clear from Thurman's article.

The social life of Harlem is both complex and diversified. Here you have two hundred
thousand people.... You have pure-blooded Africans, British Negroes, Spanish Negroes, 
Portuguese Negroes, Dutch Negroes, Danish Negroes, Cubans, Port Ricans, Arabians, 
East Indians and black Abyssinian Jews in addition to the racially well-mixed American 
Negro. You have persons of every conceivable shade and color, persons speaking all 
languages, persons representative of many cultures and civilizations. Harlem is a magic 
melting pot, a modern Babel mocking the gods with its cosmopolitan uniqueness. (135)

Harlem is, nevertheless, a linguistic "Babel," the implication being that it is, like the Old Testament Tower, 

multi-vocal.

Secondly, Thurman had observed the deep strains of intra-racial prejudice toward recent immigrants 
of color that went on right in the race capital of Harlem. Rather than racial bonding, he witnessed the 
expansion of race prejudice among blacks themselves. From the kind of caste he himself was subjected to 
based on degrees of melanin in skin tone among American blacks, he noted the formation of another caste 
system based also upon "territorial divisions" within the community. Thurman notes the hierarchical system 
within the multi-ethnic black groups that co-existed in the social life of Harlem in the 1920s.

The American Negro predominates, and, having adopted all of white America's prejudices 
and manners, is inclined to look askance at his little dark-skinned brothers from across the 
sea. .... This intra racial prejudice is an amazing though natural thing. Imagine a 
community made up of people universally known as oppressed, wasting time and energy 
trying to oppress others of their kind, more recently transplanted from a foreign clime. It is 
easy to explain. All people seem subject to prejudice, even those who suffer from it most, 
and all people seem inherently to dislike other folk who are characterized by cultural and 
lingual differences. It is a failing of man, a curse of humanity.... ("Negro Life in New 
York's Harlem" 135)

Thurman's colleague and friend, Zora Neale Hurston, on the other hand, advances the terms of the 
racial debate in a way Thurman never could. She does so most directly in an autobiographical essay 
Thurman helped her to place in The World Tomorrow 245 where he had been hired as publication manager in 
October of 1926. In "How It Feels to be Colored Me" (1928), 246 Hurston's self-described "race" experience 

245Socialist, pacifist, and Christian, it was the publication of the Fellowship of Reconciliation and was 
absorbed by The Christian Century in 1934 (van Notten 40). 
246Hurston gave Thurman the proceeds from the article to pay off her share of the Fire!! debt.
is far more complex and holistic than most of her contemporaries. Race presents possibilities for her rather than limitations; it gives her a range of identities, from the "colored" Zora to the "cosmic Zora"—ultimately. In her words, it is "a brown bag of miscellany propped against a wall. Against a wall in company with other bags, white, red and yellow" (1652). When so inclined to present the "racial" aspect of herself—the "colored," "everybody's Zora"—Hurston uses considerable irony and metaphors of performance. She invokes the language of the theater, sometimes with whites as the actors, sometimes herself. Each portrays different styles of living for the others' rapt interest. She, then, is not the only spectacle of race; whites have race too. Here she would agree with Thurman and West that one can feel yoked by race when it operates as an ideology because then it is a burden not borne by their white counterparts. As will be apparent in the succeeding section, Hurston "assaults the concept of racial essence, revealing its basis as absurd and fundamentally rhetorical," according to Michelle Wallace. "She does this by exploring a series of rhetorical relations—between blacks and whites, the black middle class and the black poor, males and females, blacks and tans—what each says about the other in the process of defining the superior self" (19).

Ultimately, Hurston, like Toomer, does distinguish between a "self" that is not referentially associated with race, as well as one that is. She signals the conditions under which race is summoned. To express this complicated subjectivity, she uses water imagery as a gloss on the Psalm of David:

I do not always feel colored. Even now I often achieve the unconscious Zora of Eatonville before the Hegira [escape]. I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background. For instance at Barnard. "Beside the waters of the Hudson," I feel my race. Among the thousand white persons, I am a dark rock surged upon, and overswept, but through it all, I remain myself. When covered by the waters, I am; and the ebb but reveals me again. (1651)

The powerful subjectivity of the speaker's "I am" is the iteration of the racially saved. The "rock," like the river bank and the river's bottom, is natural to the river and a solid base upon which the traveler finds sure footing to cross over. Biblically, it is the metaphoric foundation of faith. The rock is not an insignificant presence; indeed, the swift waters are forced over and around it, and they are transformed into turbulence and rapids, to the peril of the unaware canoer or swimmer. The rock may be "overswept" but never swept away. That the speaker is "Beside the waters" is suggestive both of baptism and eternal peace. The
transparency of water cannot obscure the rock as it swells, and it leaves the rock unveiled at it recedes.

In terms of race, therefore, Hurston is not an essentialist; she is a positionalist (to coin a word). She resembles no one more than Virginia Woolf (A Room of One's Own) in the "impression" she gives of "a constantly shifting perspective," so says Michele Wallace with tongue in cheek, "until it becomes clear that race is a game played with mirrors called words" (19). Hurston is much more likely to "juggle competing notions of 'race'" than to stake an actual claim (19). Because she does so artfully and rhetorically, she often is in the same debunking territory as Wallace Thurman, but she is never didactic or cynical, as is the case in Thurman's Salon scene from Infants of the Spring. In almost any given work, Hurston undermines the public rhetoric of the Harlem Renaissance male speaker regarding race and racial allegiance. "Her archly heretical tone about such sacred cows as racial pride, skin color, slavery, the eating of watermelon, the singing of the blues and conjure—her skillful narrative flow into and out of dialect, and the multiple rhetorical strategies of her 'native' informants" was a "revelation" to Michele Wallace, not because what Hurston said and recorded were unfamiliar, but because they were written down (19). In other words, Hurston bridges the gap between what was actually known and what was allowable in print during the Renaissance.

According to critic Barbara Johnson, in A World of Difference, as a black writer, Hurston's "strategies and structures of problematic address" are brilliantly accomplished as is her solution to Du Bois' problematic of "contending allegiances to race and country" (quoted in Wallace 21). As a black woman writer, Hurston manages "to narrate both the appeal and the injustice of universalization, in a voice that assumes and articulates its own, ever-differing self-difference" (21). Thus, race is always within the speaker's control. Hurston chooses to be its subject rather than its object, confirming that "'race' as a way of categorizing and limiting a writer's domain simply shouldn't and doesn't exist" (21). Wallace makes a pertinent distinction regarding the presentation of racial cognition. Hurston, she argues, "provides a funky footbridge between the lofty pronouncements of a public racial self-consciousness [of Hughes, Du Bois, Wright, et al.] and a private (ordinarily anonymous) collective black sensibility, a sense that somebody/women had another view of things" (19). The path laid by Hurston, which West follows and wherein she departs from Thurman, is in the
Ideas about a "Negro aesthetic" are the obvious background to Michele Wallace's discussion of Hurston. They are as well regarding Wallace Thurman's adversarial position. William J. Harris points out in his work of the "Black Aesthetic" that one is more likely to embrace the idea of a "racial essence" (rather than a "Negro note") if one is anthropologically oriented. "Racial aesthetics are usually based on the idea of an authentic folk culture," Harris explains. "That is, southern folk culture serves as a link to Africa, the homeland. Therefore, the folk culture is the source of an authentic and distinctive black self" (Harris 67-68). Those writers like Zora Neale Hurston, Arthur Huff Fauset, Sterling Brown, and sometimes Langston Hughes, who came naturally to the idea of an authentic black folk culture and experimented with what they took to be folk forms, did so without exclusionary intentions. However, for better or for worse, their work pointed inevitably toward the 1960s and the promotion of another exclusionary discourse to replace that of the 1920s and racial self-consciousness—that of a self-authorizing black aesthetic.

IV

Editor, playwright, novelist, publisher, Wallace Thurman threw his hat into Harlem's literary ring in September 1925 at the age of twenty-three; no one more than he felt the pleasure as well as the pain of the "Negro vogue." The good news was twofold. The black periodical press was waging a campaign, in the name of "developing a body of literature about Negroes" by Negroes, to advance in the creative arts by enticing neophyte black writers with literary contests, prizes, publicity, and publishing space. At the same time, the new and progressive element of the white New York publishing world had also opened its doors, in

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247 See also John Edgar Tidwell, "Sterling Brown," The Oxford Companion AAL 105. "The poetry in Southern Road challenges Johnson's dictum that the poetic and philosophical range of Black speech and dialect is limited to pathos and humor. Although the minstrel and plantation traditions had heavily burdened African American speech with the yoke of racial stereotypes, Brown, along with Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston, admirably demonstrated the aesthetic potential of that speech when it is centered in careful study of the folk themselves. Brown came to this conclusion, as he said in a 1942 speech, when he discovered the way folklore
the name of American literary nationalism and cultural pluralism, to New Negro writers. The bad news was double-pronged. The black sponsoring magazines—The Crisis, Opportunity, and to a lesser degree The Messenger—were themselves sponsored by civil rights or labor organizations with specific agendas of their own, like improving race relations. The white sponsoring magazines—The Seven Arts, The Masses, The Liberator, The Nation, The New Republic, American Mercury—were themselves either launched or sponsored by the interrelated and highly conscientious group of mostly Jewish publishers and their supporters also with specific agendas of their own, like breaking through the barriers of the conservative (WASP) New York publishing front, altering literary tastes, and enhancing the publishing programs of their own publishing houses. Unfortunately, Thurman saw only divided loyalties in the black press. Whether it was intentional or not, their prior commitments, he believed, placed limitations on artistic freedom and creativity and the nurturing and developing of black authorship. The scope of their subject matter for the most part was limited to race, especially what represented the best in the race. Almost twenty years after the fact, Dorothy West would describe the "social mingling" of "Negroes and whites" "to discuss...Negro writing," as nothing more than an anomaly, an "elephant's dance." She concluded somewhat cynically that this writing was "remarkable" but for the wrong reasons, "not so much because it was writing but because it was Negro writing" (216). According to Thurman, it had suddenly become "good copy...and Negro America began to strut and to shout" ("Negro Artists and the Negro" 37).

Within only months of his arrival in Harlem, Thurman's editorial abilities were recognized via his appointment to positions on two black periodicals. He reached New York just in time to review Alain Locke's The New Negro for the independent Looking Glass; and when it folded he moved on to The Messenger. The next step was to work for the progressive white periodicals and to use their pages as a forum for his critical analysis of New Negro writing, the black press, and white interest in New Negro publications. He was circulation manager at The World Tomorrow, editor at Macaulay's, and ghostwriter at Macfadden's; he published in The New Republic. Both to his advantage and to his detriment his editorial philosophies became a lens through which to view African American vernacular language."
bordered on zealotry in his efforts to shape and mentor the artistic direction and standards of Harlem writers.

Well read in the mostly European classics—Proust, Tolstoy, Thomas Mann, Dostoevski, Joyce, and Dreiser—Thurman was both astute and harsh in his unrelenting criticism of himself and his Harlem contemporaries. One could easily trace his intellectual affinity with two well-known, but very different, critics of (white) American literature and American society, Edmund Wilson, as we have seen previously in the chapter, and *American Mercury* editor, H.L. Mencken, as has been mentioned throughout this present study. Suffice it to say that Thurman, because of his racial and intellectual immaturity, did not have the same secure standing of either critic, even if they sometimes came to erroneous conclusions themselves. Thurman tended either to imitate and reapply critical positions like Wilson's or to jump too easily to conclusions in the Menckenian role of artist-iconoclast. Thus, too often, Thurman found the work of his own colleagues lacking in the substance and quality of what Wilson called the tradition of great European writers with whom only American writer F. Scott Fitzgerald could compete. "Speaking purely of the arts," Thurman had said, "the results of the renaissance have been sad rather than satisfactory, in that critical standards have been ignored and the measure of achievement has been racial rather than literary" (Henderson, "Thurman" 153). In other words, reapplying Wilson's standards, Thurman was concerned with the ways in which overemphasizing racial subjectivity interfered with the black writers' craft. As regarded Mencken, according to biographer W. H. A. Williams, he was well established in middle-class, urban, white Baltimore society, and "no rebel was ever more conventionally and securely rooted" (17). Thus, Mencken only "adopted the persona of the outsider," in order to perform the role of journalist, literary critic, and iconoclast (58).

Thurman was an outsider in almost every sense of the word—to the East, to the comfortable middle class, to his race, and a non-conformist almost from birth—the decision to rebel against the voices of consensus within Afro-American intellectual society may not have been as carefully calculated. Performing the role of critic in the extreme position of iconoclast requires more than a quick, discerning mind. It also requires the kind of confidence that comes from stability, prosperity, and a secure sense of place, as was true for Mencken (Williams 21). Wallace Thurman had only his small group of artist friends to fall back on as he...
attempted to take anti-Victorianism to the extreme, exhorted against bourgeois conservatism and Alain
Locke's management of the New Negro; however, without the psychological security of home and family, he
lacked a secure racial identity that made his critique of racial discourse and the black press problematic and
perhaps propelled him into the cultural pluralist camp of the new Jewish intellectuals without full
understanding the substance of their discourse either. Thus, Thurman's choice of the role of Nietzschean
artist-iconoclast, given his age, temperament, and background, was a daring one to be sure.

A man of strong convictions, Thurman was almost alone in his critical vision of what the Harlem
Renaissance could become. How often must he have felt like an uncertain Moses standing atop Hughes'
metaphoric "racial mountain," surveying that landscape of black talent below. Preferring a "magic mountain"
instead, Thurman sought deliverance from both the racial nationalism of Hughes and the slavish imitative
behavior of the black upper class. According to Dorothy West, "It was during this period that [Thurman] first
read Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*. Comparing as best he could decaying European culture which
Mann depicted and the confusion of life among the Negro upper classes, he urged his followers to read the
book carefully" ("Elephant's Dance" 220). However, with leadership invested in the upper class, West argues
that Thurman saw little prospect for the future. "His social renunciation of them was quickly followed by
intellectual renunciation, crystallized for the first time. He was equally hard on the nationalists and
miscegenists, but he had no personal theory which he could substitute for those which he rejected" (220). Far
from an assimilationist and never captivated by the bourgeois ethic of upward mobility, Thurman tried, like
Toomer, to maintain the position of the cultural pluralist, but he had neither Toomer's connections to the
intellectual fervor of the white avant-garde in Greenwich Village nor had he penetrated fully the identity
politics of cultural pluralism as promoted by the Jewish publishing establishment. Ultimately, Thurman
chose to pursue the path of individualism to find acceptance, preferring not to be united by race or previous
condition. Believing so thoroughly in his own utter difference because of his color, his desire, paradoxically,
was to transcend what he saw as the limitations of difference in racial group identity.248 Therefore, in his

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248 See Ellen Schrecker, "Strange Bedfellows," review of *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner Now?*
textual depiction of the New Negroes in *Infants of the Spring*, instead of concentrating upon the unity of the movement by utilizing the awards banquets as the locus for New Negro socializing, he highlights the disparities by creating a salon at Niggerati Manor that hosted members of the older and the younger generation of New Negroes.

For West, New York of the 1920s was the "Magic City," a place of "aesthetic nurture" and awe. She believed it to be so, and she had "coveted" it "ever since hearing composer and family friend Harry T. Burleigh describe its plays and other cultural events" (Ferguson, "West and Johnson" 22). Her idealism and hopeful spirit even neutralized Wallace Thurman's negativity for a time. "Significantly, too," Ferguson argues, "the youthful talent and wide-eyed innocence of Dorothy West and Helene Johnson momentarily dispelled Wallace Thurman's characteristic cynicism in *Infants of the Spring* it caused him to allude, if only briefly, to the creative possibilities of the Harlem Renaissance" (24).

West's initiation into Harlem literary life coincided with at least three countervailing forces. The two poles of the consciousness movement competed for attention: Toomer's philosophy of racial transcendence, adapted from Gurdjieff, and the new Negro philosophy of racial self-consciousness that had begun in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). The latter seemed to dominate in Harlem when Dorothy West first arrived. The value of cultural pluralism was also gaining credence in the larger New York arena, especially as it was complimentary with the new support for American literary nationalism (van Notten 99). At eighteen, West was closest in sentiment to the cultural pluralist camp. In her earliest writing she was even cautioned against imitating Fannie Hurst and Jewish ethnicity. It would be left to cousin Helene Johnson to follow the lead of McKay and Hughes in her poetry of positive valuation of blackness and defiant nationalism.

The affection West felt for Thurman was reciprocal. From a distance of only a few years, Thurman looks back upon this time in 1926 in his autobiographical *Infants of the Spring* and fictionalizes—without satirizing—West (Doris Westmore) and Johnson (Hazel Jamison) in brief portraits. These "two young girls,

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249 Ferguson interviewed West by phone 26 September 1981.
recently emigrated from Boston" and in the company of Zora Neale Hurston (Sweetie May Carr), are introduced through the novel's narrative voice Raymond Taylor (Wallace Thurman):

> Raymond liked them more than he did most of the younger recruits to the movement. For one thing, they were characterized by a freshness and naiveté which he and his cronies had lost. And, surprisingly enough for Negro prodigies, they actually gave promise of possessing literary talent. He was most pleased to see them. He was also amused by their interest and excitement. A salon! A literary gathering! It was one of the civilized institutions they had dreamed of finding in New York, one of the things they had longed and hoped for. (230-231)

As life is ever more complex than fiction, neither West nor Thurman found in Harlem what they most desired. Thurman did not live long enough to look elsewhere. He most definitely left his mark, nevertheless.

"Thurman's nature moved in tides," Theophilus Lewis writes in his beautiful memorial to a friend (n. pag.). "[His] passing left a real void," was Dorothy West's sentiment. "[W]hen he died, it all died with him" (Oral, 183).

Thurman's literary epitaph could easily have been Zora Neale Hurston's 1950 essay for Negro Digest "What white Publishers Won't Print." Hurston addresses the issue of black writers' capitulating to white taste and the misconceptions it breeds about blacks and black life. Consequently, says Hurston the "average, struggling, non-morbid Negro is the best-kept secret in America" (121). Thurman did seem to have capitulated to this temptation in his treatment of the sensational in his writing. "[T]he Anglo-Saxon's lack of curiosity about the internal lives and emotions of the Negroes...," Hurston goes on to say, about "incisive and full-dress stories around Negroes above the servant class" derives from what she calls "THE AMERICAN MUSEUM OF UNNATURAL HISTORY" ..." (117-118). Anglo Saxons are thus prone, in Hurston's view, to stereotypes and atavistic beliefs—that black people—are either one dimensional or essentially savage (120).

This general skepticism "about the complicated emotions in the minorities," Hurston argues, bred the wrong kind of writing. It was definitely "NOT filled by the fiction built around upper-class Negroes exploiting the race problem" nor by the exploitation of the "exceptional" blacks and the "quaint" "'O! Man Rivers." "Rather," says Hurston, "it tends to point it up. A college-bred Negro still is not a person like other folks, but an interesting problem, more or less" ("What White Publishers" 117, 121). "Minorities do think,"
Hurston assures her reader, "and think about something other than the race problem [my emphasis] (119). "The realistic story around a Negro insurance official, dentist, general practitioner, undertaker and the like would be most revealing" because "[t]o grasp the penetration of western civilization in a minority, it is necessary to know how the average behaves and lives. Books that deal with people like in Sinclair Lewis' *Main Street* is the necessary metier" (121). The "revelation to the public" of this kind of Negro "is the thing needed to do away with that feeling of difference which inspires fear, and which ever expresses itself in dislike" (121). Hurston's commentary, though different from Thurman's, still has to do with homogeneity in representation.

Hurston's wisdom was, as always, prescient. The depiction of unexceptional female lives that also probed the politics of gender, class, and color were not highly marketable until the 1970s. Works by Jessie Fauset and Nella Larson, and among the younger writers like Gwendolyn Bennett, Marita Bonner, Dorothy West, and Hurston herself competed in the marketplace, and still do, with the masculine-based "color nationalism" of the Black Arts movement of the 1960s (Singh, "Harlem Renaissance" 341). Early literary expressions of how gender inflected race can be found in Marita Bonner's "On Being Young--A Woman-and Colored" (*Crisis*, 1925), in Elise Johnson McDougal's "The Task of Negro Womanhood" and in Jessie Fauset's "The Gift of Laughter" (*The New Negro*, 1925). West follows in this tradition, with female protagonists like Hannah Byde and familial situations like marriage, childbirth, love and loss, and particularly young black women's coming of age stories as in "Prologue to a Life." As Craig Hansen Werner writes,

> Recognizing the decentralized network of black women writers helps clarify their significance both in relationship to the Harlem Renaissance and to African-American women's culture. Building on their unique perspective on the relationship between race, gender, and class oppression, these foremothers resisted the dominant terms of discussion of the Harlem Renaissance and provided a foundation, as Alice Walker and Toni Cade Bambara have acknowledged, for the redefinition of African-American cultural traditions by black women writers of the 1970s and 1980s. ("Harlem Renaissance" 377)

During the 1920s, black writers, in order to wield more authority and influence and to get a foothold in publishing, became editors themselves. They followed one or more of three formats—anthologies, "Negro
numbers," the special issues of mainstream magazines, and little magazines. Some—like Countee Cullen (Caroling Dusk, 1927)—followed the lead of James Weldon Johnson (Book of American Negro Poetry, 1922) and Charles S. Johnson (Ebony and Topaz, 1927) and became editors of anthologies. Some—like Cullen (Palms, October 1926) and Wallace Thurman (Harlem, 1928)—followed the lead of Alain Locke (Survey Graphic/The New Negro, 1925) and edited special issues devoted to African American literature of established journals like Survey Graphic. Others—like Wallace Thurman in Harlem (Fire!!, 1926), Arthur Huff Fauset in Philadelphia (Black Opals, 1927-28), and Eugene Gordon in Boston (Saturday Evening Quill, 1928-30) joined another kind of entrepreneur who wanted to offer a venue for belles lettres through self-publication in little magazines. Dorothy West, in the 1930s, finally bridged the gender gap when she edited Challenge (1934-1937) and New Challenge (1937).

What continued to inspire black periodicals to sponsor the work of black authors had primarily to do with that which created journals like the Crisis (1910-) and Opportunity (1923-1949) in the first place. Their emphasis was on how individual black writers added race to the American cultural mix. Additionally, a specific group of white publishers offered to these same black writers the institutional support they wielded, whether within the discourse of race or the discourses of cultural pluralism and American literary nationalism. Both kinds of institutional support were central to the achievement of literary talent. During the 1920s, the younger members of the Harlem Renaissance negotiated between white and black publishers, and each in her/his way joined in the critical discourse on the role of black literature and art, in the modern black community and in the world.
CHAPTER IV
FROM BOSTON TO HARLEM (PART TWO):
BLACK BOHEMIA, 1926-1934

The first challenge Dorothy West faced once she moved to Harlem was to find her own voice amidst those of the more seasoned and dynamic "Fire Seven" to whom she was attracted. They would publish *Fire!!* magazine within a month of her arrival. The second challenge was to develop the kind of personal and institutional support necessary to artistic production. West's objective, like that of others in her group, and writers of modernity *en masse*, was clearly to "contribute to the new and tremendously important wave of art development in America," as her friend Maud Cuney-Hare would express it in relation to her Allied Art Center in Boston. At the time, West believed that Harlem, not Boston, was the most productive place to continue her victorious entry into the arts that began at the 1926 *Opportunity* awards banquet. However, like other black women writers of the period, her initial success was short-lived; sustained literary achievement, it turns out, was to be a matter of endurance. West's situation was not unlike that of Alice Dunbar-Nelson, Angelina Grimke', and Georgia Douglas Johnson that Gloria Hull has brought to light in her study *Color, Sex, and Poetry* (1987). West, in fact, joins the many black women authors who were, in Hull's words, "struggling against unfavorable odds to create their personal and artistic selves" (xi).

The obstacles for black women writers, as Hull's study points out, were largely endemic and rooted in gender. They amounted to, as Hull explains, "broad social factors and patterns of exclusion" (7). Most importantly, women were not provided with the same kind of support that their male colleagues received and that allowed them uninterrupted freedom to write (10). According to Hull, the manner in which key male sponsors of the period "dispensed not only money but also advice, support, and vital aid" to under-financed artists was at best "controversial" (10). The fact that nearly all the recipients were men, Hull argues, only proves that financial and other assistance during the Harlem Renaissance was not necessarily meritorious (7). The "personality-patronage" phenomenon of this era exemplifies the longstanding power-brokering among men historically, those "customary male circles of power and friendship" now expanded across race (9). It is important to consider this circumstance when examining the basis of distinguished literary production during the 1920s. In sum, where *belles lettres* were concerned, those with power treated women as journeyman
practitioners and men as earnest professionals, all the while perpetuating the myth of individual merit (10).

Alain Locke, in Hull's view, awarded his benefactions "misogynistically" and patriarchically (7). His conduct in these matters is especially "problematic," Hull argues, when one considers the sexual criteria at work for the young men he singled out to help, especially Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes, although Locke also assisted other less productive artists like Bruce Nugent (7). "Locke, in fact, functioned within a homosexual coterie of friendship and patronage that suggests that literary events were, in more than a few instances, tied to 'bedroom politics' and 'sexual cronyism' as they no doubt may have been in the heterosexual world also," Hull goes on to say (8). Hull's real point is not to disparage Cullen or Hughes' sexuality but to demonstrate the arbitrary bases of Locke's patronage. With the sole exception of Zora Neale Hurston, and then only at times, women were excluded and ignored by Locke. West concurs with Hull's assessment when, in another context, she confirms, "Locke only helped the men" (Remember).

Several male circles of power that affected who was funded and who was not are by now well known and go beyond Hull's representation, and Langston Hughes always figures significantly in the spoils.250 A primary group included Alain Locke, Carl Van Vechten, Frank Crowninshield, Alfred A. Knopf, Countee Cullen, Bruce Nugent, and Hughes that resulted most favorably for the latter in the publication of The Weary Blues (1926). Another group involved Van Vechten, Knopf, James Weldon Johnson, Edwin R. Embree of the Rosenwald Fund, Claude McKay, and Hughes and resulted in a scholarship to Lincoln University for Hughes. A third group was that of Van Vechten, Noel Sullivan, and Hughes that made possible the publication of Hughes' The Ways of White Folk (1933).

Dorothy West relates in two separate interviews very different scenarios involving her cousin Helene Johnson, herself, and two members of the above fraternity. "Frank Crowninshield was a white-haired man who was editor of Vanity Fair, and he printed a couple of [Helene's] poems" ("Bottled"), West remembers. "He called her to see him, and he thought that she was a pretty little girl." (She was nineteen or twenty at the time). "[H]e propositioned her," West continues, "and she came home frightened. So we both got down on

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250 See David L. Lewis' When Harlem Was in Vogue (1981).
our knees and prayed. We prayed a lot in those days," she says (Oral 185). And of her own experience of sexual harassment, West recalls: "In those days, the women were just like excess baggage or fair game. Remember, I was living in an apartment in New York and Carl Van Vechten used to come and visit [along with A'Lelia Walker]," she says. "[A]nd, once in a while, he would try to goose me. (I hate to admit this.) .... I never will forget that A'Lelia Walker used to say, "Carlo, let that child alone" (McDowell 273).

One of the most elaborate and lengthy collaborative efforts to enable authorship and publication was the three-year and multi-faceted support of Claude McKay's Home to Harlem (1928). This generous circle included Walter White; James Weldon Johnson and the Garland Fund; Max Eastman; Arthur Schomburg; Alfred Harcourt of Harcourt, Brace; Harper's; Louise Bryant and her husband William Bullit. From short story to novel, promotion to reviews, this group managed McKay's life in myriad ways that were indispensable to the completion of this novel and its success.

Given the status quo of literary sponsorship that favored male artists, even amongst the most liberal and well-meaning of patrons, some women naturally tried to fill the void through their own efforts to aid each other. "True," Hull argues, "quieter, less-visible female support networks existed, and women were sometimes able to serve their sisters. Nevertheless, because of women's less-advantaged status, these networks could only amount to consolation circles for the disfranchised" (11). West's and Helene Johnson's relationship with Zora Neale Hurston would fit this category in spite of the fact that in the early part of the Renaissance Hurston was one of the few women Locke promoted early on in Howard University's literary magazine Stylus. However, even when women like Fannie Hurst extended assistance to writers like Hurston, some form of exploitation resulted. In Hurston's case she was required to put in an appearance as entertainer and waitress at Hurst and Van Vechten's lavish parties. When West refused to stand in as a replacement for Hurston, she was quickly cut off. Further, Hurst never excluded men in her assistance to writers, nor did Elisabeth Marbury, West's first literary agent. "Even when female spheres of patronage and aid were possible, they did not always realize their potential because of women's interests, positions, or socialization," Hull concludes (11).
Beyond the substantial impediments to authorship for women discussed above, certain factors, personal and familial in nature, were perhaps unique to Dorothy West. They clearly limited her immediate progress toward her goal of distinguished literary production during her orientation into the arts. Her very young age and inexperience—her extreme ingenue status as a writer—kept her from being taken seriously. Insufficient financial backing of the most basic sort from her father further restricted her efforts to develop her talent in any sustained way. Her possible troubled sexuality during adolescence and the very real family instability during her first months in Harlem inhibited the full expression of her creative imagination and pulled her back emotionally to Boston. The irony was not lost on West that she was rediscovered in the 1970s because, as she tells Deborah McDowell (albeit incorrectly), she was "the oldest living writer from the period now"; however, "then," meaning in the 1920s, she admits (correctly), "I was the youngest" (270).

All of West's personal circumstances contributed to her difficult path to authorship. Had she been able to follow the more traditional educational route of Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston, her primary support would have been institutional, as Lincoln was for Hughes and Columbia for Hurston. Not only were white philanthropists more ready to fund educational pursuits, but also a college degree, at the time, made one an integral part of Du Bois' 'talented tenth,' the vanguard in the development in the arts. Clearly at least a measure of the status Countee Cullen and Sterling Brown enjoyed was due to their Harvard M.A. degrees. Had West been further along in the development of her craft she might have received, like Claude McKay, the help James Weldon Johnson and many others provided him. Had she been male, like Wallace Thurman, she could have found worthwhile employment in the magazine and book trade and made her own connections through periodicals like The Messenger and publishers like Macaulay's as Thurman had done while developing his craft. Had she been the same color as the other women in her family, including her cousin Helene Johnson, she might have been free of the albatross of color consciousness that influenced her early prose and limited her appeal. Had she been secure in herself generally, she might have been able to express her difficult path to sexual identity, as had Angelina Grimke' and Mae Cowdery in their poetry and
The nature of West's subject matter during the mid- to late-1920s was probably the single most important limiting factor in her efforts to develop her writing and get it published in black periodicals. With the exception of "The Typewriter," her work, like much of Wallace Thurman's, was out of sync with what *Crisis* and *Opportunity* wanted to publish in the arts. Their preference was for positive and celebratory aspects of African-American culture rather than the more troubling aspects of African-American life, especially among blacks themselves. West's work was consistent with some of the experimental writing that many of the younger writers were producing, especially that which was intentionally uncensored for publication in *Fire!!* magazine. More is the pity that the magazine saw a single issue and was so widely scorned by the establishment black press. As Nellie McKay points out in her "Foreword" to the important anthology *The Sleeper Wakes: Harlem Renaissance Stories by Women* (1993), looking at the "unknown" works of unknown writers, or even the unknown works of known writers, "is an excellent menu for giving us a new look at the Harlem Renaissance" (xiii). "The stories," she argues, "cover the variety of experiences that over time have defined the identities of black women in America. The majority explore events and ideas in the domestic sphere where the survival of individuals and the group occurs amidst an entanglement of intraracial relationships that are not always nurturing or supportive" (xiii). It is just such kinship ties enmeshed in and around color privilege, gender vulnerability, and to a limited extent, inhibited sexuality, that West represents in four of her five published stories of the 1920s. Her experience with these short narrative exercises is like that of other black women writers of her time, who turned similar themes into full-fledged novels later on in their careers (xiv). However, more than that of other women writers, West's work challenges assumptions about freedom of expression and representation during the Harlem Renaissance.

The relative ease with which Helene Johnson published her work and enjoyed a high degree of name recognition during the 1920s was so different from her cousin's experience that it serves as a valuable

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reference point. Johnson's poetry did satisfy the expectations of the black press and its predominantly male editors; as a result it consistently found a place in Opportunity especially ("Trees at Night," May 1925; "My Race," July 1925; "The Road," July 1926; "Summer Matures," July 1927). Gloria Hull goes so far as to say that "Of all the women poets, Helene Johnson's work most reflects the qualities commonly designated as characteristic of the Renaissance" (Color, Sex, and Poetry 13). Chief among these was undisguised racial subject matter or what Ann Allen Shockley terms "race assertion" (405).

Johnson's poem "Sonnet to a Negro in Harlem" is a good example of the appeal of her treatment of race. All three editors of the most important Renaissance anthologies, Countee Cullen, James Weldon Johnson, and Charles S. Johnson selected this poem of Helene's for reprinting. James Weldon Johnson targets the chief virtue of "Sonnet" in his 1931 "Preface" to the revised Book of American Negro Poetry. The young poet, he claims, has grasped "the 'racial bull' by the horns" (279). In other words, "Sonnet to a Negro in Harlem" prominently foregrounds race and expresses something elemental to racial consciousness, in J.W. Johnson's estimation. The poem is worth quoting here in its entirety.

You are disdainful and magnificent—
Your perfect body and your pompous gait,
Your dark eyes flashing solemnly with hate;
Small wonder that you are incompetent
To imitate those whom you so despise—
Your shoulders towering high above the throng,
Your head thrown back in rich, barbaric song,
Palm trees and mangoes stretched before your eyes.
Let others toil and sweat for labor's sake
And wring from grasping hands their meed of gold.
Why urge ahead your supercilious feet?
Scorn will efface each footprint that you make.
I love your laughter, arrogant and bold.
You are too splendid for this city street!

Despite its traditional form, "Sonnet" is "new" in its content. It is decidedly "pro-black and militant," according to Hull, as well as employing "the new colloquial folk-slang style popular during that time" (Color, Sex, and Poetry 13-14). In the poem, according to Ann Allen Shockley, Johnson "rhapsodized over a black man" and "extolled blackness, black pride, and black life" (409). She did so, one could add, in a way...
that her cousin Dorothy never even considered.


Black female critics of the 1980s and '90s who began analyzing Helene Johnson's work within the continuum of black women's poetry have rescued her from obscurity and have provided her contemporary reputation.252 As racially specific as were many of her poems, Johnson's poetry also corresponded with what other black women poets were writing, and it expressed similar themes. Maureen Honey identifies the most predominant among these themes in her anthology Shadowed Dreams: Women's Poetry of the Harlem Renaissance (1996). She groups the poetry thematically under "Protest," "Heritage," "Love and Passion," and "Nature." Even as Johnson's work favors the first two themes, it still fits into all four categories. According to Honey, "The literary fate of this promising poet is instructive, for it underscores the invisible forces operating against distinctive female voices from the twenties. Even with an excellent ear [and]

252 Vernon Mitchell's recently edited volume This Waiting for Love: Helene Johnson; Poet of the Harlem Renaissance (Amherst: U. Mass Press, 2000) has brought to the public previously unpublished poems.
disciplined writing...Helene Johnson could not survive the era that inspired her" (29).

One could add that as Dorothy and Helene were virtually the same age and had grown up together in the same household, more like sisters than cousins, the difference in their subject matter and voice is equally instructive. The more visible force operating against Dorothy West's developing a distinct racial voice like Helene Johnson's had to do with the negative circumstances in which West came to consciousness about color and its relationship to race. Obviously, not all dark-skinned writers were racially insecure. Gwendolyn Bennett for one had no difficulty expressing pleasure in brown skin and beauty because of color, as in her poem "To a Dark Girl," which begins: "I love you for your brownness./And the rounded darkness of your breast." Her sense of continuity in heritage is apparent in "Song" where the speaker is "weaving a song of waters/shaken from firm, brown limbs" and "mothers hold brown babes/To dark, warm breasts." But the easy conflation of race with color has its own problematic as West clearly understood. Skin color was the chief signifier of racial slavery, and black people come in all colors, including white. Suffice it to say that Helene Johnson, who had the same light coloring as her own mother and West's mother and all of the aunts and uncles, found it unnecessary to problematize "Negroness" ("Negritude") while Dorothy West, who was dark like her ex-slave father, chose to express the conflict she had experienced over contradictions between assertions of race pride amidst color consciousness in the older members of her family and the black community.

Also less successful with the mainstream white press than her cousin, West had only two reprints of previously published works accepted during her first decade as a writer. Again, this bad luck was owing to her longer genre and the content of her work. A remark to the author from a literary agent in 1980 is relevant to the period of the 1920s, to which the letter refers. Her "preference for 'normal' people less influenced by artifice," David Evanier writes, meets his own literary standards, but was an obstacle to her marketability. By inference, one could say that the characters West created did not meet the contemporary appetite of the white readership. Their taste was seemingly for the "exotic" and the "rare" in the lives of "distinctive" blacks,

253 David Evanier to DW, 30 December 1980, DWP, B1F16, SLRI.
and white publishers tended to feed that appetite.

West's immediate solution for getting published was a retreat to Boston and to an obscure, start-up little magazine called The Saturday Evening Quill; later, it was the creation of her own Harlem little magazine Challenge. As Nellie McKay notes, "that the young Dorothy West published in the local black Boston literary magazine, The Saturday Evening Quill, and that Gwendolyn Bennett's "Wedding Day" first appeared in the short-lived Fire!!!...indicates the difficulties these women faced in finding suitable publication outlets" along with "their determination to be published writers, and their self-confidence on that issue" (xi). Interestingly, once West's work was out in the public realm by 1928, primarily through The Saturday Evening Quill, two of her four stories were immediately reprinted in the non-mainstream white press, Edmund O'Brien's The Best Short Stories of 1926 and Columbia University's literary magazine Copy, an impressive average for a young woman not yet twenty-one.

The events discussed in this chapter separate into two convenient time frames. The first is the period between the fall of 1926 and the winter of 1928. During this time, the nineteen-year-old West and her twenty-year-old cousin Helene Johnson took up residence at the Harlem YWCA, enrolled in writing classes at Columbia, and unexpectedly appeared in Porgy. After a little more than two years, West was forced to return to Boston, having completed none of the writing courses. The second period falls between the beginning of 1929 when West is primarily outward bound—in Boston, in London with Porgy—until June of 1932 when she is on her way to the Soviet Union with Meschrapborn to make a film about race relations in the United States.

The two highpoints during the first fourteen-month period involve West's abiding interests, her writing and the theater. At the same time, it was a period of flux and regrouping for the literati with whom she had formed a close association. The creative writing courses at Columbia were part of a special program for non-resident students through the University's extension program that both West and her cousin responded to immediately in the fall of 1926. By April and June of 1928, West had two short stories published in The Saturday Evening Quill. In the interim, the "cattle call" for actors, as Nugent liked to call it,
went out in the fall of 1927 to snag black extras to fill the all-black production; it attracted West, Nugent, Thurman and others to the segregated Guild Theater for walk-on parts in *Porgy* (van Notten 190-191). It provided employment for West and Nugent, at least through February of 1928 after *Porgy* had moved to the Republic Theater, and for Nugent when he toured with the company in the winter of 1928. Thurman had long since been fired after striking for better pay.

As 1927 came to a close, the "collective spirit of rebellion" that seemed to bind the "younger generation" together had lost some of its intensity. The cooling-off happened in part as a result of the long absences from Harlem of three of the *Fire!!* editors, namely Hurston, Nugent, and Hughes (van Notten 169). The same group that produced *Fire!!* magazine did regroup around Wallace Thurman's next brainchild, *Harlem* (Nov. 1928), but not with the same energy or sense of purpose. A combination of factors weakened the important Thurman-Nugent inner circle to which West most particularly belonged. Thurman was expending considerable time juggling his many artistic projects in 1928. He took a writing sabbatical from Harlem in February of that year and married Louise Thompson in the fall. Nugent was out of Harlem during *Porgy's* winter London tour.

During the second period, West also lost some of the Harlem focus so prevalent between 1924 and early 1927. The literary contests and publications that had kept the arts community in close contact with each other, thanks to the efforts of *Opportunity* and *Crisis* magazines and the tireless work of Charles S. Johnson and Jessie Fauset, had been suspended. And despite the fact that West and her group "were taken up by the Park Avenue people," ostensibly for assistance, "We were writing, but not always getting published," was West's summary of the period. "I was writing many stories during that time that weren't being accepted. And I wasn't alone," she recalls (McDowell 274). For three years, West had only a single story published, again in *The Saturday Evening Quill*.

During the earlier period, which had set the stage for the cousins' artistic initiation, the group spirit of the younger writers had already coalesced in 1926. It began after Thurman's arrival in Harlem in 1925 and his editorial positions and peaked with his move to Niggerati Manor in November of 1926. The 267 West
136th Street space that he shared with Bruce Nugent constituted "a free loft at the top of one of [Iolanthe Sydney's] buildings," West remembers (Oral 177). The camaraderie continued until Thurman was thrown out of his rooms late in 1928. Remarkably, "Gwenie" Bennett, Zora, Richard Bruce [Nugent]—using a nom de plume because of his mother—Aaron Douglass, "Lang," John Davis, and Wallie were all in Harlem in 1925 and 1926. Age united them as much as philosophy. Among them (with the exception of Hurston who unknown to all was actually thirty-five and closer to Theophilus Lewis and Claude McKay's age), Nugent was the youngest at twenty; Thurman, Bennett, and Hughes were the oldest at twenty-four, and artist Aaron Douglass was twenty-seven.

After the November issue of Fire!!, Thurman was already planning the second and third installments; he had two enthusiastic new recruits, Dorothy West and Helene Johnson. "That's where we went," to Wallie's, West recollects. "I mean we gathered there. Except for Countee Cullen. Countee was above the mob, you see" (Oral 177). By then, "[t]he only people on the outside," West recalls, "were Langston...Countee Cullen was into Harvard" (180). Hughes, she says later, was on the outside by virtue of attending classes at Lincoln. Unlike the summer of 1926, when he had moved into the Manor, Hughes spent the summer months of 1928 and 1929 away from Harlem to write his first autobiographical novel Not Without Laughter that would be published in 1930 (van Notten 169). It would take until the early 1930s before West would form close relationships with three of the more important, of many, males with whom she was involved in significant ways during the Harlem years—first Cullen and then Hughes. "And Claude [McKay]," the third male writer in West's life during the mid-1930s, "He was older than everybody...so that he was a separate" (Oral 180). In a later interview, West also mentions that McKay was considerably more serious about his intellectual life and his work than her friends. He continually "scolded" her, she says, for the waste of precious time that went on among the younger writers (Dalsgard 33, 41). Interestingly, except for the three men other than Thurman and Nugent important to West's biography, "the rest of us were all together," West asserts with pride (180). Hurston was among the "us" in spirit and by virtue of letters even though she was primarily out of town for extended periods. She was conducting research and collecting
folklore by December 1927 (van Notten 169). By 1928 Thurman was writing a play (Harlem), editing a magazine (Harlem), and getting married. The closing of Niggerati Manor weakened the circle of young writers in contact with him. Harlem, according to its editor, was determined to make publishing decisions based on "literary merit," a principle Dorothy West surely would come to appreciate in the 1930s when she continued the struggle to capture the very best writing for her magazine Challenge.

The vacuum created in 1928 by Thurman's frequent absences and growing loss of faith in Harlem and its potential created a space for another center of attraction among the younger writers, the thirty-eight-year-old Claude McKay, in absentia. He was in North Africa and Europe during the peak years of the Renaissance, between 1924 and 1934. Early on, Wallace Thurman, Langston Hughes, and, more importantly, James Weldon Johnson had begun corresponding with McKay. The latter was trying to woo McKay back to Harlem after his long absence since 1922. As Johnson would write, he wanted McKay "to take full advantage of the great wave of opportunity that Negro literary and other artists are now enjoying" as well as to give "strength and solidity to the whole movement." McKay had always enjoyed a solid literary reputation in New York because of his published poetry; it only increased with the success of the phenomenally popular Home to Harlem, another of Harper's publishing accomplishments. So much of a phenomenon, in fact, that the best-seller actually created what Sterling Brown later termed the "Harlem School" (Brown, The Negro 131). In Hughes' estimation, the novel, which "ought to be named Nigger Hell," "must be the flower of the Negro Renaissance—even if it is no lovely lily...." Quite the contrary, it is, he tells Alain Locke, "the best low-life novel I've ever read." The obvious connection Hughes makes with Van Vechten's infamous work of three years earlier suggests that the "solidity" McKay provided with his text was the exploration of uncharted "lowlife" territory in the working class dimension and uncensored content of his story.

West did not acknowledge or meet McKay until 1934 when he sought her out because of her little

254 WT to Claude McKay, 4 October 1928, WTP, JWJ, BLYU.
255 JWJ to Claude McKay, 26 January 1928, CMP, JWJ, BLYU.
256 Langston Hughes to Alain Locke, 1 March [1928], Alain Locke Papers, Howard.
magazine. After Thurman died and Hughes was living in California with Noel Sullivan, West was left to Cullen and McKay; she would soon meet Richard Wright. "Countee used to pull me one way, Claude used to pull me another way," she recalls (Oral History 180). As luck would have it, Cullen and McKay ended up together, by 1937 they were co-editing a magazine called *The African*. At the same time, Richard Wright was on his way to New York from Chicago to "steal" *New Challenge*, in West's embittered opinion. Her unfavorable portrait of him as the radical-gone-philanderer Simeon Binney in *The Living Is Easy* suggests her lack of respect for the uses to which he had put his polemics and for his treatment of colleagues like herself. Although she makes the claim late in life that Simeon Binney is modeled on Monroe Trotter (Roses 49), I would argue that when she speaks about Wright in her interview with Deborah McDowell, Simeon Binney's fate seems to resemble West's attitude about Wright, suggesting that Binney might actually be a composite representation of two sides of a similar personality in Trotter and Wright.

As far as the younger writers were concerned, it was Wallace Thurman himself who was the initial link to McKay in the late 1920s, then Dorothy West in the mid-1930s. Thurman's interest in McKay, besides his poetic talent and craft, seems to have been a combination of his intellectual rigor, his candor, and his non-conformity, qualities Thurman also possessed. It is worthy of note that when Thurman first wrote to McKay, he made race and nation an issue. Thurman specifies in his first letter: "I am ...[an] American born Negro."257 He does not, however, employ this distinction when in his article on "Negro Poetry" for the *Bookman* he includes McKay and calls him "the only truly revolutionary poet of the lot." This very public critical position made Countee Cullen angry, while Langston Hughes, true to character, concurred,258 that is until the mid-1930s when he actively promoted himself as a "radical Negro" poet rather than just the "Negro poet" of the 1920s. The lengthy exchange of very substantive letters between Thurman and McKay ended in 1934 with Thurman's death.

At the same time as McKay made his return to Harlem, West was beginning to assemble her first issue of *Challenge*. McKay kept a close eye on her because he too had aspirations to play a leadership role in

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257 WT to Claude McKay, 3 February 1928, WTP, JWJ, BLYU.
the Harlem Renaissance. In his initial attempt to organize a new Writer's Guild with himself as president, McKay was competing with West for the same writers. He also wanted to enlist the help of James Weldon Johnson, then at Fisk, who lent an air of legitimacy to everything he endorsed. West would not get the same enthusiastic response to her request for an introduction to the first issue of Challenge, which Johnson reluctantly agreed to write, as representatives of Harper's had gotten when they asked Johnson to write the biographical introduction of McKay for Home to Harlem.

The twenty-seven-year-old fledgling editor's interest in the forty-four-year-old McKay seems, initially, to have been Thurman. However, West does admit in two separate interviews that McKay had helped to shape her professionally. To Deborah McDowell she says: "Some say Claude McKay was my mentor, but I didn't think of him as my mentor, though he did have a great influence on me" (270). To Lorraine Elena Roses she says: "Curiously enough my mentor was Claude McKay. He scolded me about my 'friends with fat souls' who gave parties" (48). Apparently West meant that she learned discipline from McKay and a more serious attitude toward her work. Whatever influence there might have been, however, must be speculated upon as nothing in the correspondence explains exactly to what West refers. Instead, the letters suggest a budding romantic interest on McKay's part that included a jealous streak and a tendency to dominate and instruct. West tells Katrine Dalsgard in an interview that she disposed of certain of McKay's many postcards, which he was wont to fire off to her at regular intervals. "Apparently," she said, "it is the continental habit to write everything on a postcard" (33). She was mortified at what the postman might have thought if he had read one in particular that said, "I know you were with your lover last night" (33), when she was simply mooching a free dinner off one of her "friends with fat souls," as McKay would call them (Roses 48). It is probable that what the two agreed upon was a unique perspective on class in relation to color, a product of McKay's having grown up within the British colonial system and West having grown up in a family of light mulattoes. McKay shares his point of view, not in his letters to West, but in letters to J.W. Johnson.

What is interesting about Claude McKay, besides his relationships with Thurman and West, is the

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234 WT to Claude McKay, 4 October 1928, WTP, JWJ, BLYU.
authority he enjoyed early on, with both the younger and older Harlem writers. Some critics like Gloria Hull do not believe this high regard was merited. As Hull argues, in 1926 McKay's literary reputation was based solely on his 1922 *Harlem Shadows*, until the much subsidized *Home to Harlem* became a bestseller (10). However, given the importance placed on *Home to Harlem* in studies of the Harlem Renaissance, it is easy to forget that McKay was not an American writer. Few refer to him as "West Indian" in the way that other "crossover" writers like Paule Marshall or Jamaica Kincaid have their countries of origin attached to their names. Actually, McKay had spent very little time in Harlem or in the United States. From 1912 through part of 1914, he lived in the South and the mid-West, in Alabama and Kansas. He arrived in New York in 1914 (when West was seven years old) and from then until 1919 had various jobs, including work on the Pennsylvania Railroad. McKay utilized this experience as the basis for his novel *Home to Harlem*, which began as a short story (Hathaway 489). The Harlem race riots also occurred in 1919, inspiring McKay's much-heralded poem "If We Must Die," which Max Eastman published in *The Liberator* and to which nearly every critic of the Harlem Renaissance refers. Interestingly, the poem does not name racial struggle specifically as the basis for the militant attitude of the poem's speaker and his call to arms.

In Harlem, the habitual meeting point that replaced Niggerati Manor, beginning in the fall of 1928, was the literary salon of "the rich black woman" A'Lelia Walker, about whom Carl Van Vechten had written *Nigger Heaven*, according to West (*Oral History* 168). However, as Gloria Hull points out, Walker lavished money on a close, handpicked clique of followers, but she never subsidized the Harlem arts community; she only kept her doors open to them (11). Those doors led into Walker's Harlem mansion at 108-110 West 136th Street and frequently allowed entrance to West's writer and actress friends. "[A] great friend" of A'Lelia Walker as well as West's mother, Edna Lewis Thomas, "a Bostonian who had moved to New York" and "a great beauty," probably provided the initial entrée (*Oral* 168).

While Thurman, West, and Nugent certainly were frequently in attendance, Nugent recalls that some artists avoided A'Lelia's and thought it perhaps misnamed. More than one person's perception was that her salon "was a place for A'Lelia to show off her blackness to whites" (Watson 144). Wallace Thurman
nicknamed Walker's ever-present friends her "ladies-in-waiting" [as they] included striking light-skinned women (actress Edna Thomas [West's friend], Mayme White, Mae Fain) and witty homosexual men (Casca Bonds, Edward Perry) who organized the socials" (142-143). "Some of A'Lelia's guests relished her extravaganzas while simultaneously looking upon their hostess—dubbed the 'dekink heiress' and the 'Mahogany Millionaire's'—as a dubious flowering of Negritude" (144). If Watson accurately relates Nugent's remarks, then Thurman and West also received the same mixed message perpetrated in the spectacle before them. It more than likely had fueled Thurman's skepticism about the honesty of the movement as it had helped West to formulate her negative response to white America's attitude toward black people as little more than a "fad," which she went on to record, through Thurman, in "Elephant's Dance" (Dalsgard 42). When Houghton Mifflin, without consulting West, used a portrait of A'Lelia Walker for "the original cover of The Living Is Easy," the writer was very upset. Although Walker's "head costume" was all wrong for the "period" of the text and her "brown" color was not right for the "light-skinned" protagonist, apparently Walker fit the image that the publisher had of middle-class black women, despite the novel's specificity (33).  

West was a friend to most of the younger Harlem writers at this time. She recalls that by 1928 she was spending most of her time in an exclusive circle, "a little group of four...writers who stuck together"—herself, Wallace Thurman, Bruce Nugent, and Harold Jackman (Oral 179) —except for the time in 1928 when Nugent toured with Porgy. All of them were supporters of Van Vechten whom they probably had met through Edna Lewis Thomas. Of Van Vechten, West would say, "[m]uch of what I have learned, I learned from Carl" (177). Be that as may be, when given the choice of Van Vechten's apartment or Wallie's loft, there was no contest (177). West chose Wallie.

Thus the period covered by this chapter is that between the two Harlem magazines, Thurman's Fire!! (1926) and West's Challenge (1934), from the time of Thurman's greatest influence on West to the waning

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259 West's recollection does not square with a photograph of the Boston book signing in which a copy of the book reveals a different cover from the one West describes. West probably refers to the cover from the Feminist Press reprint.
of that influence when West left for Soviet Russia. From the fall of 1926 through the summer months of 1928, the "Fire!! seven" came and went. The group that first produced Fire!! also regrouped around Wallace Thurman to produce Harlem (1928). As old guard politics began to fade, the young writers became less reactionary. Neither Crisis nor Opportunity sponsored any literary contests after 1927; Jessie Fauset had resigned to write full time; Charles S. Johnson went to Fisk. Only Alain Locke, of the midwives, remained active as a book reviewer and critic for Opportunity.

A literary academic as well as a writer, Countee Cullen, like Sterling Brown, was an outsider to West's group, even though Cullen was familiar personally with its members. Both Cullen and Brown had more in common with the older writers William Stanley Braithwaite and James Weldon Johnson because of the academic approach to their work and their interest in literary anthologies. Cullen, having edited and published Caroling Dusk (1927) for Harper's, was engaged in the more conservative project of literary anthologies rather than in little magazines. As such, he followed in the tradition of Braithwaite and Johnson. The latter's first anthology The Book of American Negro Poetry (1922) was an important precursor to the Renaissance. Cullen's work was succeeded by Brown's co-edited and even more inclusive The Negro Caravan (1941). Cullen also kept a hand in the black periodicals that had helped his career so much by writing a column for Opportunity called the "Dark Tower."

As the 1920s came to an end, some say the Renaissance did too. Political associations like the Urban League and the NAACP re-examined their original operating premise that artistic achievement could affect civil rights; they withheld their direct support of the earlier Renaissance goals (van Notten 170). Some critics have used the stock market crash of 1929 to situate an endpoint because of the onset of the Great Depression and the loss of economic security in the publishing world. West would set the date later, in 1934; "the day that we went to Wallie's funeral," she remembers, was the day it ended for her (Oral 181). One could argue that it was West, at that time, and not McKay who replaced Thurman as the group's less conspicuous

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260 West doesn't remember whom, but Jackman is a good possibility as it was a man.
261 Cullen earned a B.A. in English from New York University. (His thesis was on Edna St. Vincent Millay.)
262 WT to Claude McKay, 4 October 1928, WTP, JWJ, BLYU.
"leader." It was she who led young black writers through the uncertain 1930s by providing them with a place to publish. The same circle of friends who championed *Fire!!* and *Harlem* also rallied to support West in her effort to produce *Challenge* (1934).

West's move to Harlem marked the change from a published short story writer to an aspiring novelist. At least that was her plan. October of 1926 found the cousins getting acquainted with Harlem life and a completely new circle of friends, a surrogate family of writers and artists. Dorothy and Helene, like their fictional counterparts Judy and Victoria in *The Living Is Easy*, were away from Rachel West's influence and now guided by actress Edna Lewis Thomas (Oral 168). Both Dorothy and Helene enrolled in writing classes at Columbia, which West undoubtedly planned to use to complete her novel. She still had unfinished business as a playwright, however, and was holding on to the hope of writing a good drama for Irene Bordoni. She even met in December with Ray Goetz, Bordoni's husband who managed New York's Empire Theater, to explain "the play she had in mind" for his wife. Even so, West had probably put aside "The Emergence of Eleanor" after the disappointing feedback from Sydney Rosenfeld, whom she had retained from September through December of 1925 to help with the rewrite. Apparently, the actress still provided passes for the cousins, as Goetz informs West in a letter that "Miss Bordoni would like you and Helene to see the play 'Mozart.'"

For whatever reason, West's focus on Columbia was distracted early on. Very young and away from home for the first time, she must have found the commitment to the rigors of class work and the discipline of a writing schedule in competition with the endless attractions of Harlem and Manhattan. Apparently, some fairly significant (but unnamed) family problems at home affected her making progress in her studies at Columbia. It also seems that the money Isaac West sent his daughter and niece did not cover their expenses; they had to look for another source of income immediately through employment. If food consumption is any

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263 Ray Goetz to DW, 13 December 1926, DWP, B1F19, SLRI.
indicator of finances, the cousins were poor. Their idea of a real treat was a dinner of one frankfurter and pineapple juice at Nedicks (Oral 177). Fortunately, the Boston aunts sent them baked goods, judging from the weekly packages that arrived and the notes that promised more to come and on the same schedule.

Aunt Carrie Benson's first letters to her nieces help reconstruct what the cousins were doing during their initial settling-in period. They suggest that the Columbia writing classes were already in session in October of 1926, that actress Edna Lewis Thomas, the mother surrogate whom West mentions in "The Kitchen," was involved in the girls' affairs, and that Dorothy, having placed two short stories by July preceding the move, was already working on a novel in October. Aunt Carrie writes: "I'm very glad my little girls like the school there." She mentions her niece's current project: "I pray your book will come out alright." From this and later evidence, it seems fair to conclude that West was in a fiction-writing class to finish her novel fall term given by Dorothy Scarborough, a professor of English, a novelist, and an aficionada of Negro folk songs, that had been recommended to her by Blanche Colton Williams, who had moved from Columbia to Hunter College.

If West is correct in her Oral History, a short work titled "PART TWO" was probably the novel she was working on. "Personally," she claims, "I like writing about my family." "When I was nineteen years old I started this novel about Eugenia, Helene, and I" (207), that is, her two cousins and herself. "PART TWO," despite the title, has different characters and a different plot line from "PART ONE" to which it is attached in the West archives. The two pieces, however, are paginated jointly, "PART TWO" beginning on page forty-nine; thus, it could be that the two parts are simply missing an instructive transition that ties them together in a way not obvious to the reader. The plot of the latter piece begins in Boston and ends in Martha's Vineyard. It is about Tish and Steph[anie] who are twins, their cousin Jane, and the True family. Steph falls

264 Carrie Benson to DW, 15 October 1926, DWP, B1F12, SLRI.
265 Carrie Benson to DW, 15/18 October 1926, DWP, B1/F12, SLRI.
266 Carrie Benson to DW, [October 1926], DWP, B1/F12, SLRI.
267 Scarborough wrote "New Lights on an Old Song" for Charles S. Johnson's Ebony and Topaz (59) and, according to Johnson's "Who's Who," had written "On the Trail of Negro Folk Songs" (161).
268 Dorothy West, "PART TWO," unpublished ts., n.d., n. pag., DWP, B126, SLRI. A handwritten note places the story in 1929 when "Tish and Step were sweet sixteen." Dorothy Scarborough refers probably to
in love with Tony True, who attends Harvard and whose family lives on Martha's Vineyard where Steph says she wishes to remain for the rest of her life.

Stephanie's story, told in "A Cock Crowed," a likely continuation of "PART TWO" (but in longhand), is one of marriage, wifehood, pregnancy, in-laws, and friendship; and, at least in outline form, it promises a more harmonious world and potential for happiness on the Island than in any of the published stories set in Boston, earlier and later than this fragment. Issues of ambiguous gender and kinship, as well as female passive dependency are hinted at but not developed. The Island, where the True family lives, is an idyllic "heaven on earth," in Steph's view, like Shakespeare's Illyria or the biblical Garden of Eden. During the early stages of her pregnancy, Steph forms a brief friendship with the Island's Samson Lightfoot, an Indian youth. Samson sees the same "wildness" in Steph that he values in himself. Steph, however, does not like the comparison and responds to Samson: "I'm not a wild one. I'm a good wife," as though the two were mutually exclusive. Because of her physical body and appearance, her small breasts and short hair, which she herself calls attention to, Steph is often mistaken for a boy. Samson, who is not interested in her potential maternity, tells her it is a mistake to have the six sons she desires: "You will lose that leanness that makes us look like brothers dark and light." Possibly, West's intention here is for Samson to provide a physical representation of Stephanie's inner voice or to serve as her male alter ego. In either case, the point is that in making the choice of wife and mother, Steph must leave behind her true nature and even a competing sexuality. Just after this scene Steph speaks to her unborn child. "I think I am not like other girls," she says. "I think I am like Leah who is not like other women." Presumably, she refers to the biblical older sister of Rachel. Leah, who by custom must marry first, is veiled and substituted for Rachel at the altar. Jacob, who loves Rachel, discovers the deception after he is wed. The allusion hints broadly at Steph's concern about her sexual identity and her desirability and claim to womanhood, which is worked out this time in gender terms rather than in terms of

this draft in 1928.

269 Dorothy West, ["A Cock Crowed"], unpublished, handwritten ms, n.d., 18pp, DWP, B1F26, SLRI. An Oct. 1931 letter to Mollie Lewis reveals that West, at Oak Bluffs since August, thinks she is pregnant. The father would have been Harry Wharwick, a Tuskegee professor whom West dated. It is possible that this handwritten draft is from 1931 rather than 1926.
The desire for children and for distance from the mother are themes touched on in *The Living Is Easy* that probably grew out of this earlier work. Female creativity (also a theme in "PART ONE") expressed through childbirth seems a substitute for careers or career choices, a subject that Alice Walker explored in the 1970s in her work *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens*. Steph tells Dad True: "I wasn’t born to be anything much, not like Tony." She confides to Samson that she wants to have a boy because "boys get over their dependence." She rhapsodizes in an aside to her unborn child, which foreshadows Cleo Judson’s Christmas morning reverie where she questions her connection to her child. "My darling baby," Steph pleads. "Don’t be a girl because I would cherish you too much, and I would not be just me again."

Ultimately, on the level of meaning, "The Cock Crowed" is about belonging to the island when one cannot belong to oneself, just as the novel that follows is about the desire not to belong to one’s mother and the claim mothers have on their female children.

The above three unpublished manuscripts, "PART ONE," "PART TWO," and "A Cock Crowed," are significantly different in tone on the subject of marriage from West’s first two published stories. The contrast suggests that "The Typewriter" (July 1926) and "Hannah Byde" (July 1926) were written earlier, possibly in 1925, as they seem to look back to West’s parents’ problematic marriage. All five stories are of a piece with what West claims are her abiding subjects for fiction: "black people, my family, [and] my childhood" (McDowell 281). The two completed stories work as a pair; and given the proximity of their publication, they may have been written together, during the relatively free year after West’s graduation from high school. "The Typewriter" must have been sent off to *Opportunity* by the beginning of 1926 as West already knew in March that she had won a prize for it. Given her age and lack of experience, West probably modeled "The Typewriter" on her father and "Hannah Byde" on her mother as both stories deal with married couples with children or about to have children. They express irreconcilable circumstances and differences.

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271 "Hannah Byde," published in *The Messenger* 8 (July 1926), has never been reprinted.
Of "The Typewriter" West recalls the plot line and central meaning of the story, but she makes no connection to real people or circumstances. "I have a little notebook in there with notes for the story," she tells her interviewer: "poor man, maybe I said a janitor, rents a typewriter for his daughter who is taking typing lessons. She asks him to dictate a business letter to her one night and then he begins to dictate a letter each night, which gives him some kind of stature in his own mind" (Oral 269). What she does not include, or does not remember, is the emotional intensity and bottled rage in this "abject little" man of fifty-odd years (9), the same age as her father, or the similarity between the character and Isaac West. The unnamed man can only achieve a sense of importance and self-respect in a fantasy he role-plays with his daughter. By using the father's point of view, West keeps the focus of the story on him and not his child. He is a man who "more than anything did not want to go home," whose first reaction to his daughter's "clatter clatter" on the typewriter is that it is an insult to the little peace of mind he has left. He feels "the insane desire to crush and kill" (9). Throughout the story, the man contemplates many forms of violence that he will never commit as he is locked into a passive-aggressive personality. He "wondered vaguely if his hand would bleed if he smashed the glass" (10). "He began to shake the furnace fiercely. And he shook into it every wrong, mumbling softly under his breath. He began to think back over his uneventful years" (10) filled with unending "routine" and "monotony." Here one finds a strong connection between the father (and husband) in this story and the wife Hannah Byde, in the story of the same name: the total frustration of a tedious and unfulfilled existence, suffered by both black men and black women under certain circumstances.

"The Typewriter" does not say much about the couple's marriage or about the man's wife, except that the basis of the marriage is not love. The protagonist remembers that as a thirty-three-year-old waiter, he decided he would settle for the minimum in marriage, companionship and children. "There was no one to eat the expensive delicacies the generous cook gave him every night to bring home," he recalls of his bachelor life, and "he dared hope there might be a son to fulfill his dreams" (11). He has four daughters instead, Millie and Daisy, and twin girls who die. Net's evenings with her aging father and the "unresponsive back" she turns to her husband both suggest marital estrangement (12). But mostly, Net was "the usual tired housewife" with
the world-weariness of the working poor (12). She is unlike her husband in her coloring and in her attitude toward other blacks. Described as "large and yellow," with "naturally straight hair" (13), unlike her husband or daughters, Net calls her black tenants "niggers" when she is angry, and under circumstances that suggest she refers to their lower social class, which takes to be the cause of the behavior that bothers her (12).

The story's defining metaphors signal conflicting aims. The images of a "vast, white impenetrable" something and a "great wall of silence" (17) give the story a political subtext, that of a racialized society unwilling to grant black men the possibility of advancement in the business realm or in the realization of their dreams. However, the very concrete metaphor of the typewriter, which is associated with the daughter's, not the father's, eventual success, also suggests that, unlike his daughter, the man's capacity to dream exceeds his ability to act. The story ends in the figurative death of hope, the fantasy character J. Lucius Jones and all that he has come to mean. "Against that great wall of silence," the narrator states, "he [J. Lucius Jones] crashed and died [my emphasis]" (17). The actual man, without name, is left to resume the sterility of his former existence.

The typewriter itself—as image—has a dual function: to express possibility as well as loss. The instrument of communication among business operatives, the typewriter at first is symbolic of the father's inner state of irritation and frayed nerves. His hypersensitivity borders on the obsessive-compulsive. The machine is an objective correlative for all the forces outside his experience that serve to rattle and disturb him, now having invaded even his inner sanctum. Initially the sound of the machine interrupts the stasis at home that he calls "peace" (11). For months "he listened to the murderous 'tack, tack, tack' that was like a vampire slowly drinking his blood. If only he could escape. Bare a door against the sound of it" (11). When finally he snaps, the daughter innocently offers a solution. "At precisely quarter past nine when he, strained at last to the breaking point, uttering an inhuman, strangled cry, flung down his paper, clutched at his throat, and sprang to his feet" (13), he was stopped only by his daughter's call for help. "Dictate me a letter, Poppa. I c'n do almost sixty words a minute. You know, like a business letter. You know, like those men in your building dictate to their stenographers. Don't you hear 'em sometimes?" (13). In response to these words, the
angry little man's alter ego, J. Lucius Jones, is born, only to die when Millie no longer needs the typewriter and her father's help for practice because she has gotten the job she had been working toward.

"Hannah Byde," on the other hand, probably was completed in early 1926 as well, given the flurry of activity in the spring of that year when the cousins attended the Opportunity banquet and began to lay plans for their move to Harlem. As it was published in July, it is also possible that West wrote and/or polished it at Martha's Vineyard that summer and then sent it to Thurman in time for its July publication in The Messenger. The story appears on the surface to critique the black middle class and the empty lives of the wives typical of this class. These women form bad marriages and are left without meaningful work or creative outlets within the social status quo. Because it has an apparent class critique, the story better fit the publishing criteria of The Messenger than The Crisis or Opportunity. The innuendo of intra-racial colorism in the dynamics between the dark husband and the light wife also made it unsuitable for the latter two magazines but still within acceptable publishing guidelines for The Messenger. West, like Hurston, was eventually able to represent both sides of the "color parade," Thurman's words. Unlike Hurston's heroines, however, West's dark heroines are always more sympathetic than her light ones even though only one of them finds love and marries and none have children. Of the early short fiction, Hannah Byde's story is the most sympathetic exploration of West's several near-white characters' points of view and is the prototype for Cleo Judson in The Living Is Easy. In "An Unimportant Man," West develops the subplot of the dark woman who loses the man she loves to a light-skinned bride; whereas in The Wedding, West partially resolves this subplot by creating independent women characters who find that they can make choices to defeat their feelings of inferiority, the legacy of false consciousness about beauty and desire.

Minnie Jenkins, in "An Unimportant Man," is more typical of West's negative portrayals of light-skinned wives, and Zebediah Jenkins is prototypical of their passive-dependent and darker working-class husbands. These wives verbally abuse their husbands by using racial epithets for putdowns. Minnie says to her husband about his lack of assertion: "If you'd done more on your own book 'stead o' waitin' 'round for God to help you, you'd a got on faster. That's the main trouble with all o' you niggers" (141). On the other
hand, Zeb does not try to please his wife because he does not love her, having been attracted by her light coloring and Nordic features and having chosen her as a "trophy wife." He has left behind a darker love, Wanda, whom he believes would have made him happier. He remembers her as the dark, beautiful, passionate, sympathetic, lost love of his youth. He conjures up an image of her for use in his sexual fantasy life that substitutes for real intimacy with the woman he has married: "Dark flesh sank warmly into his. Hot, thick, sensual lips burned his empty mouth. The phantom woman who lay in the grip of his arms was more terribly real than the passionless woman who lay every night by his side" (138). Zeb blames Minnie for his failures: "He was hating Minnie and wishing passionately that he had never married her. The long, dark hair of his golden bride was the silken coil that had trapped him" (142). However, the narrative makes clear that Zebediah Jenkins is neither a good husband nor a good son, and he ends up not being a good father either. He betrays his daughter by forcing her into the same unwanted yoke of professional respectability that has made his own life miserable, convincing himself it is for her own good rather than resisting the pressures being brought to bear by his wife and mother.

Although the point of view is that of the husband, the narrative sympathy belongs with the couple's child, Essie. West uses the device of narrative distance from Zeb and Minnie Jenkins to make clear that neither parent is the center of consciousness of the story. She signals this intention by having her narrator first introduce Essie's father and mother in the third person and then continue on in the exposition of their characters for several pages before giving them names. As such, the story opens with a metaphor for the couple's relationship and the husband's attitude toward his wife: "He awoke to the dig of his wife's sharp elbow in the tender flesh of his side. .... He hated his wife" (137). On the other hand, the husband is also placed in a position of compromise, through his wife's negative perception of him: he "sat there, on the edge of the bed, in a humorous nightshirt that showed his thin legs" (141). The daughter's name, Essie, is the first given, then the grandmother's, Miss Lily, followed by Minnie's, and finally Zeb's. Zeb endures his wife because of the status of her color, and therefore her class aspirations. Minnie endures her husband's lack of ambition and success because she believes that, through her and her mother's encouragement, eventually he
will pass the bar exam and be an attorney, thereby raising her status in the community as well.

In the earlier story, "Hannah Byde," West makes use of some of the devices of literary naturalism two decades before Ann Petry and Richard Wright would create their own naturalistic landscapes to express the insurmountable odds in the worlds of their own defeated protagonists. West's protagonist is described from the beginning as a woman overwhelmed by the nature of her life. "Hannah, a gentlewoman crushed by environment, looking dully down the stretch of drab tomorrows littered with the ruins of shattered dreams [sic]" (197). However, at the point that we encounter Hannah in the narrative, she is at a psychological crossroads. The "sudden wave of nausea" she feels as she regards her husband is the objective correlative of the story of this thirty-year-old woman in an unhappy marriage and, unknown to her, in the early stages of pregnancy.

Imagery is so important to meaning that the story is also an exercise in imagism. The color "yellow" works on multiple levels to express the real and the symbolic: Hannah's actual skin color and her memory of a sun-filled youth, as well as her nausea and her cowardice. The setting of the story on the night of New Year's Eve mocks the woman's "stricken" discovery of her pregnancy as anything but a happy new beginning. Further, the ironic use of circle imagery signals the negative rather than the positive, the opposite of conception and birth and cycles of life or completion. "[T]he uneventual circle of her life" and Hannah's "mad, sick circle of the room" both suggest entrapment and dead-ends rather than natural life cycles or progressive courses of activity. "The great black circles under her eyes" and her "stiffening" in response to her husband's arms encircling her, suggest a death-in-life existence that stifles rather than fulfills Hannah. When George spins the jazz record on the record player, an act that is meant to calm Hannah, it irritates her to a pitch of uncontrollable laughter, symbolic of her eventual cycling into madness.

Additionally, the "knot" that binds together the jazz records, a third symbolic circular image, cannot be easily undone except with a sharp instrument. This tight knot is symbolic of Hannah and George's marriage, in the euphemism for marriage itself—to tie the knot—and in the tension of their intercourse. George's frustration reaches a climax when he takes his "razor-sharp knife" and cuts open the jazz records;
he then throws the still-open knife upon a table (198). Hannah, on the other hand, is so tightly wound that, like the unnamed father in "The Typewriter," anything sets her off into a rage. Her repressed anger is so intense that her mind is fixated on images of death and drowning. "There were moments—frightful even to her—when she pictured her husband's dead body, and herself, in hypocritical black, weeping by his bier; or she saw her own repellent corpse swirling in a turid pool and laughed a little madly at the image" (197). And, "Once, in her mad, sick circle of the room, she staggered against the table, and the hand that went out to steady her closed on a bit of sharp steel. ... She ran her fingers along its edge." The thought of suicide or self-mutilation feels like "freedom" to her at this point, the ultimate escape from herself (198).

Given Hannah Byde's characteristics, she can be seen as an early, albeit more extreme, version of Cleo Judson. West expresses the point of view of the light-skinned black woman, as she interacts within her race. She is not a "tragic mulatto" figure in the traditional sense. She is not a kept woman in a cottage in the clearing; she is not in love with a white man whom she cannot marry, but she is tragic for other reasons. In West's hands, women like Hannah, "yellow flower[s] in the wind," who do not work, primarily attract men of a lower social class who appear to their wives either as "not unkindly, ...giant[s]" or as "dangerous, savage beast[s]," physically and spiritually "coarse" and "ignoran[t]," with only "bodily wants" (197). Like Cleo, Hannah retreats into the sunny glow of nostalgia for her childhood as a way of coping with the present.

[There were times, too—when she took up her unfinished sack for the Joneses new baby—when a fierce, strange pain would rack her, and she, breath coming in little gasps, would sink to the floor, clutching at the tiny garment, and, somehow, soothed, would be a little girl again with plaited hair, a little eager, visioning girl—"Mama, don't cry! Some day I'll be rich an' ev'rything. You'll see, Mama!"—instead of a spiritless woman of thirty who, having neither the courage nor strength to struggle out of the mire of mediocrity, had married at twenty, George Byde, simply because the enticing honeymoon to Niagara would mark the first break in the uneventful circle of her life. (197)

Like Cleo Judson, Hannah's resistant orality is her physical strength. "[S]he had learned to whip [her husband] out of a mood with the lash of her scathing tongue," the narrator informs the reader. Unlike Cleo, however, Hannah has a death wish: "And now she waited, almost hoping for the miracle of his heavy hand blotting out her weary life" (197). The ironic use of "miracle" to signify death rather than life points to the
depth of Hannah's distorted perspective.

The use of a distanced narrator who employs the neutral "one," deliberately prevents a close identification with both Hannah and George, however. "One comes upon Hannah," the narrator begins the story (197). And, "One saw then the flatness of his close-cropped head," she says of George (198). In so doing, West privileges the female point of view while still leaving room for a different understanding of the situation at hand than Hannah herself can have, given her limited perception of her circumstances. This narrative device, also consistent with naturalist tenets, renders the characters as types rather than as individuals: "And yet one sees them daily, these sensitive, spiritless Negro women caught fast in the tentacles of awful despair. Almost, it seems, they shut their eyes and make a blind plunge, inevitably to be sucked down, down into the depths of dreadful existence" (197). Hannah is further described as believing that "only a long, grey twelve month of pain-filled, soul-starved days" was her lot (198). The kindly doctor Jim Hill's point of view is consistent with the narrator's, to a point, when he sees Hannah as a "morbid, self-centered woman" (198).

West's attempt to contrast Hannah with another type of woman on the basis of class is not developed enough nor is the racial motive that Dr. Hill attributes to Hannah's despair. The intent is to show that class and race are as inextricably bound as the knot that holds captive the "race" records. The "isolation" and "emptiness" of Hannah's "middle class existence," which she "loathes," is juxtaposed with the sociability and mindlessness of the downstairs neighbor Tillie: "the very recent, very pretty, very silly wife of Doctor Hill." She is "a newly wed popular girl finding matrimony just a bit cramping" (197). This kind of wife is very appealing to Hannah's husband George. She "spoke in the unmistakable tone of the middle-class Negro," (197) the narrator counsels. "Here was a congenial, jazz-loving soul, and child-like" (197). It is difficult, however, to see the two women as of a similar social class. What Doctor Hill believes about race is not entirely consistent with the narrator's view when he acknowledges to himself "how soft [Hannah's] bed of ease" would be if this "glorious golden woman [had] been born white" (198). The suggestion is that Hannah's light skin should entitle her to a more satisfying existence as a middle-class white woman. Given
the narrator's critique of middle-class existence, she would not agree that being white and middle class would solve Hannah's monotony or her lack of productivity any more than childbearing will.

"Hannah Byde," was the first of several stories leading to West's novel *The Living Is Easy* where the author continued to investigate the intricate "knot" of color and class. Gloria Hull describes this phenomenon as "[d]eep historical links between fair color and beauty, and fair color and class affiliation, [that] are not easily broken" (*Color, Sex, and Poetry* 17). When West first began to explore the point of view of light women like Cleo Judson, she did so with reserve. Interestingly, while her mother's coloring bothered her, her cousin Helene Johnson's similar color did not, suggesting that it was the uses to which color was put that was the real problem. It is clear that even later in life West still conflated light skin with beauty. An example of this unconscious association is evident in the following anecdote, which she relates in an interview, about her cousin Helene and herself at Carl Van Vechten's apartment.

And then the door opened, and here was this great big, enormous thing [Van Vechten], and we were very young. We sat down and landed in the same chair, and then looked.... See, what we wanted to do was just sit down quick and be inconspicuous. Oh, my God. We both sat down in the .... And she, my beautiful cousin—I don't mean she was physically beautiful. Well, she had my mother's complexion, very pink. (*Oral* 167)

Later in life West made a conscious decision to defend women like her mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother who through no fault of their own "were fair because they were the children of their masters" (*Oral* 153). As Hull would put it in her study of three other fair-skinned women, Alice Dunbar-Nelson, Angelina Grimke', and Georgia Douglas Johnson, on the basis of color alone they simply "reflected their nearness to the miscegenation of slavery" (*Color, Sex, and Poetry* 17). By the time West wrote *The Wedding*, she was able to create a light character like Shelby Coles and explore her point of view without rancor.

In her personal life, if the *Oral History* is in any way representative of her feelings, West remained divided between her own preoccupation with her mother's physical beauty (read color) and her desire to believe her mother's professed dismissive attitude about it. This ambivalence runs throughout the whole of West's oral testimony, taken in her seventies. "My mother was half white, and she lived and died without
ever admitting that she was half white," West recalls. "[B]ecause if she had said she was half white, she would have said, 'What difference does it make? My mother was a bastard and my father was a bastard'" (157). However, in the same discussion West reveals a less cerebral response to having a white-looking mother. "And I looked at my mother—I'll never forget—and my mother now is looking at me. And I said 'My mother is the most beautiful woman I ever saw.' Instead of saying, 'Isn't that wonderful?' I got frightened. I remember saying, 'Maybe she's so beautiful she doesn't want to be my mother—a mother'" (191). On the other hand, for Dunbar-Nelson, Grimke', and Douglas Johnson, Hull points out, "Large amounts of ambivalence, white blood, and caste privilege did not obliterate the basic race-color reality of these three women's existences" (Color, Sex, and Poetry 20). West's most ambitious attempt to bridge the color divide was to get close to the epicenter of the Harlem Renaissance and become a writer. She found a group of colleagues of a different generation from her parents whose attitudes about race were far less divisive. And, one can infer from the Oral History, especially, that she believed the appellation "writer" carried with it a status equal to that which her mother enjoyed because of her beauty.

The ideal of racial self-love and its artistic representation during the Renaissance was a worthy goal but one not easily accomplished, even in fiction. "The Harlem Renaissance was preoccupied with the array of Afro-American skin tones, ranging across (in Claude McKay's catalogue) 'chocolate, chestnut, coffee, ebony, cream, [and] yellow,'" Gloria Hull argues (Color, Sex, and Poetry 17). "This rainbow began to be celebrated in art, even if the entire spectrum was still not as widely accepted in real life, where the same old light-minded hierarchy operated. Of course, the matter of color has always had a heavier impact on black women. Like McKay, men rhapsodized about their teasing browns, chocolate-to-the-bones, and lemon yellows, but many still preferred to marry the paler shades" (17). Ample evidence abounded that the color parade had changed very little. In fact, Hull argues, "Even during this 'natural' period that glorified blackness and exploited primitivism, the stage show chorines were creams and high browns..., and Wallace Thurman, tortured himself by his own black skin, could relevantly present the agony of a self-hating dark heroine in his 1929 novel, The Blacker the Berry" (17). West's dark heroines of this period have not reached Emma Lou
Morgan’s age; they are all children, the youngest a newborn, the oldest ten years old. Apparently, in her 
earliest fiction, West understood the conflict better than the resolution. And of the three light-skinned women 
writers Hull has studied, “Though not of the ‘tragic mulatto’ variety,” she argues, “[their] situations came 
from ambivalences different from but no less complicated than those of Thurman’s Emma Lou. The roots of 
their color complexes and preoccupations can be traced to their personal history; the roots of their racial 
consciousness to the combination of personal history and American racism” (19).

Other writers in what would become West’s circle were already involved, not surprisingly, in 
cooperative literary projects that would become the hallmark of the younger generation that had been 
initiated in the Opportunity and Crisis contests. Cullen, at Harvard, had completed guest editing the Negro 
Number of Palms, published in October of 1926. He probably did most of the work during the summer as his 
May letter to James Weldon Johnson indicates. Using Opportunity stationary, he thanks J.W. Johnson for the 
copy of God’s Trombones and wants to know who will review it for Opportunity.272 Cullen had requested a 
submission from Johnson for Palms, but never received it, which is why Johnson is not represented in what 
would become a best-selling collection of New Negro poetry. Thurman and Nugent, already at Niggerati 
Manor, were collaborating with Hughes by mail as he was out of town at Lincoln, Bennett, Hurston, 
Douglass, and Davis on the upcoming Fire!! magazine that came out a month after Palms.

Although the Cullen-West relationship did not really begin seriously until 1931, Cullen was interested 
in West almost from the beginning of their meeting, most likely at the 1926 Opportunity banquet.273 West’s 
first note from Cullen, still a bachelor, was written on 19 October 1926, practically the day of her move to 
Harlem. He had sent it, however, to the wrong address, to Hurston’s apartment. Cullen apparently thought 
West would be either staying with Hurston or sub-letting by then,274 suggesting too that West had also 
formed a quick alliance with Hurston. The confusion had to do with Hurston’s sudden change of plans not to 
leave New York at this time, therefore postponing the cousins’ moving in, according to an

272 Countee Cullen to JWJ, 18 May 1927, JWJ, Series 1, B6/F109 (Cullen File), BLYU.
273 Cullen was at Harvard from 1925-27, in Paris in 1928 (Guggenheim), and then back in Harlem. He 
served as Assistant Editor for Opportunity and wrote his own column.
October/November letter. Cullen seems not to have contacted West again by letter until 1929. A year earlier, in 1928, Cullen used his Guggenheim in Paris and then married Yolande Du Bois that spring, on 9 April 1928. Within a year they were separated and Cullen was back in Paris at the same time that West was with the Porgy cast in London, which made renewing their acquaintance much easier and more interesting.

Not surprisingly, the highlight of West's correspondence of 1927 involves playwriting, plays, and the New York Theater. This change of focus from fiction writing might suggest the growing influence of Edna Lewis Thomas, the New York theater world generally, or West's desire to finish her play. Perhaps it was just a matter of scheduling that West had put off this play revision until spring term. However, by March, 1927, she received a letter from Kenyon Nicholson of Columbia, saying: "I am sorry you were forced to drop out of the play writing class, for from what I hear of your ability, you should be able to write a play." Apparently Nicholson had encouraged her writing in this format and about black life. He says in the same letter: "I am convinced that the big authentic play of the Negroes has yet to be written." If, however, West were in fact writing a play for Irene Bordoni as promised, it probably was not about black subjects, given Bordoni's French background. If the play was a revision of "The Emergence of Eleanor" and was indeed based on the lives of her mother and herself, it could easily be adapted for Edna Lewis Thomas, as she had the same coloring as Rachel West.

By May of 1927 Cheryl Crawford of the Theatre Guild had interviewed West in response to her query about work. "They had no office job," West recalls, "but they let me be a "super" (Oral 178). It is not clear from the letter or the interview when West actually began work, but by the time the original production of Porgy went into rehearsal in September at the Republic Theater, she was a "supernumerary," an extra who helped the stage manager start the play (178-179).

During this same time, Wallace Thurman was still promoting Fire!! despite the enormous financial debt he was under owing to the printing costs. Thurman's name continued on the magazine's letterhead as

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274 Countee Cullen to DW, 19 October 1926, DWP, B1F6, SLRI.
275 Kenyon Nicholson to DW, 5 March 1927, DWP, B1/F17, SLRI.
276 Cheryl Crawford to DW, 25 May 1927, DWP, B1/F12, SLRI.
editor in chief. In a letter to Langston Hughes at Lincoln, Thurman wrote that some of the authors published in the magazine were invited by the Civic Club to read from their work. Thurman had stood in for Hughes. The main substance of the letter, though, is discussion of the current financial woes of the proverbial starving artist: "Hard luck has hit us all. I paid Nevin his $175. I have paid $75 on the other debt. We still owe $250. I am a week behind in room rent. Eat when I get a free meal. Ho hum."277

Like Thurman, Zora Neale Hurston was ever the encouraging friend to Dorothy and Helene. Hurston's correspondence became more regular about the same time that West dropped out of Columbia and began working nights for the Theater Guild (Oral), during the early spring of 1927 while Hurston was still in Florida.278 In her March letter, Hurston congratulated the cousins and Thurman, presumably on entering the 1927 Opportunity contest (whose results were announced in May). "Give Wallace Thurman my congratulations—he deserves it, too. He has great ability," Hurston writes. And, she adds, "Here's hoping you run away with the contest this year, and many more."279 In a May letter Hurston hints at being left uninformed of the literary victory: "By the way, I hope you two ran away with the "Opportunity" contest. I know you did even though I have heard no such a thing down here in the swamps."280 Actually, it was Helene who took home a second prize for poetry for "Summer Matures" and a fourth for "Sonnet to a Negro in Harlem" (printed in the July 1927 issue of Opportunity).281 Other winners in the poetry division were Arna Bontemps for "The Return," which merited a Pushkin prize for the second time, and a first to Sterling Brown for "When De Saints Go Ma'ching Home." Georgia Douglas Johnson's "Plumes" won a first in the play division (198-199). West won a consolation prize for "An Unimportant Man" in the short story division.282

277 WT to Langston Hughes, [circa 2 January 1927], LHP, JWJ, BLYU.
278 Nothing in either of the West archives covers the three-month period between 13 December 1926 and 5 March 1927 when West had been in Harlem only two months. This may have been during "that time" when "traumatic things" were going on that "got all messed up" and that she would only speak about off the record (Oral 201). By March 1927, she has dropped out of Columbia. The "bitterness" to which she refers suggests that something of a very disturbing nature had happened.
279 Zora Neale Hurston ("ZNH") to DW, 24 March 1927, DWC, SCBU.
280 ZNH to DW, 22 May 1927, DWP, B1F8, SLRI.
281 Poetry judges were Joseph Auslander, W.S. Braithwaite, Carl Sandburg, Maxwell Bodenheim, Ridgeley Torrence, and Countee Cullen.
282 Short story judges were Theodore Dreiser, W.D. Steele, Eric Walrond, Zona Gale, Irita Van Doren, and
The "Special Buckner Awards," funded by George W. Buckner of St. Louis, Missouri in the amount of ten dollars, were presented to five contestants whose entries "showed conspicuous promise," according to the June 1927 issue of Opportunity. Winners in the short story category were a first and a third prize for Eugene Gordon for "Game" and "Buzzards," a second for Cecil Blue for "The Flyer," and a fourth for John P. Davis for "The Overcoat." True to form, Hurston, in a June letter, brushed off the slight of West not winning anything by saying: "Dear 'D': Congrats! Get 1st next time. Eatonville is lovely and gave me a big hand.

Initially the relationship between Hurston and the cousins centered on Hurston's apartment, probably when they met at the Opportunity banquet; but it is clear that a mutual respect for each other's writing is what kept it going. Hurston again offered her apartment in May of 1927 for sublet to Dorothy and Helene for the summer and until September:

Do you girls want my apartment for 3 months? You can keep it cheaper than you can your present quarters besides greater comfort insured. I shall not return until Sept. and by that time, I might be able to get a front apartment and let you keep it, having a hubby to look out for me, now.

Anyway, let me hear from you at once as I know several people who want it, and I cannot afford to keep it vacant. The man who had it is ill in Chicago, and had to give it up.

It is in this letter that she mentions she is now married: "Mrs. Herbert Arnold Sheen, if you please!" And, as it turned out, Hurston's husband took the apartment instead, while she remained in Eatonville. In June, Hurston writes to West: "Please give my husband a ring. He is at the apartment and I'm afraid lonesome." At this time, West's address with Helene was the Labor Temple, c/o Micoli, 244 E. 14th Street, which may have been the Center for Peace and Reconciliation, the sponsor for the Soviet film tour West participated in. This address was home from June 1927 through September 1927. In mid-August West was staying at 81 Smart Avenue, Flushing, Long Island, c/o Mrs. Johnson—probably Helene Johnson's mother's address where she was in service. It was not until February of 1928 that West was receiving mail at Hurston's apartment at 43 W. 66th Street. Earlier, in March, Hurston had written from Florida to West at the YWCA, mentioning

Harry Hansen.

283 ZNH to DW, 4 June 1927, DWP, B1F8, SLRI.
284 ZNH to DW, 24 March 1927, DWC, SCBU.
285 ZNH to DW, 22 May 1927, DWP, B1F8, SLRI.

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that she herself was "working on a novel...," but she claims in another letter two months later that because of
the "expedition" to Sanford, Florida, she has "given up writing things." She is also buying a "Nash coupe,"
she says. Desirous of being back in New York, Hurston writes, "I am lost to Bohemia forever. No more
parties--just work and work, well perhaps a little domesticity."

Through her friendship with Bruce Nugent and Wallace Thurman, West probably got the opportunity
to tour with Porgy, after she had been involved in the production as a "Catfish Row" extra. According to the
DLB, West had written the Theater Guild and asked to be hired as a writer (Ferguson 190). The Oral History
does not relate the story this way. According to archival material, West received a note in May from Cheryl
Crawford, assistant casting director at the Theater Guild, asking her to audition. At least by December,
West was in the show, as Rose McClendon was addressing mail to West c/o the Republic Theatre, New
York. Bruce Nugent continued in Porgy and toured with the cast, as he and West would do in London in
1929, with West as a last minute replacement. Nugent writes from Saint Louis in December of 1928: "Thank
my stars for the first time that you are not with the show." Apparently, the Company toured in Canada,
Buffalo, Toledo, Ann Arbor, and Dayton, where Nugent met Alice Dunbar-Nelson, about whom he says:
"And Mrs. Dunbar. You would have loved her." The show continued on to Milwaukee, and Chicago, which
Nugent really liked. Of it he says: "loved its shopping and theatrical districts, its art museums and little
theatre movements, my brother, and high brown society."290

During the summer of 1927, musician Harry T. Burleigh sent notes regularly to his younger friend. He
too mentioned her novel, giving it the same importance as West expressed when she shared it with all her
correspondents. "The news about your novel is wonderful," Burleigh writes. "I did not know you had one in
mind. What's it about? You are wise to allow yourself a year to finish it."291

The tradition of spending summers at Benson Cottage in the Vineyard was too compelling to abandon

286 ZNH to DW, 4 June 1927, DWP, B1F8, SLRI.
287 ZNH to DW, 22 May 1927, DWP, B1F8, SLRI.
288 Cheryl Crawford to DW, 25 May 1927, DWP, B1F12, SLRI.
289 Rose McClendon to DW, 12 December 1927, DWP, B1F11, SLRI.
290 Bruce Nugent to DW, 30 December 1928, DWP, B1F12, SLRI.
altogether, although since moving to Harlem, West no longer went for the whole summer as had been her practice. Already in August, Burleigh's letter has reached her in Long Island, offering to pay her fare to Oak Bluffs.292 Burleigh, who resided in New York City, spent summers on the Island as a boarder at Shearer Cottage located in the Highland Park area of Oak Bluffs and near the Wests' cottage. It is obvious from letters that he and Rachel West were well acquainted. Apparently West accepted because she received a letter addressed to Benson Cottage from her father.293 It seems that she and Helene were still there in September. A letter from Isaac West to "My dear darling sweet girls" indicates that he is lonely and has sent $50.00 to them "c/o Mrs. IC West, Oak Bluffs, Benson Cottage, Ma."294 They would both return in September for Porgy.

December of 1927 brought West a warm thank you from Rose McClendon at the Republic Theatre. McClendon, who played Serena in Porgy,295 had probably received flowers or a note of praise from her young admirer who had a long-standing habit of sending bouquets to her favorite actresses after a performance, beginning with Irene Bordoni in Boston. (This piece of correspondence presents a problem of interpretation as Porgy had opened at the Guild and had only moved to the Republic Theater much later. It is unlikely that McClendon was appearing in two plays at the same time.)

During Columbia's spring term, 1928, the cousins have finally taken possession of Hurston's apartment at 43 West 66th Street, but West was no longer attending classes. That did not stop her, though, from asking Dorothy Scarborough for her assistance. West probably did not want to lose touch with her Columbia contact. Scarborough responded to the query from her former student by agreeing to read her novel on her own time because her student's "work is such" that she couldn't come to class. Porgy had opened on 10 October 1927 and was still running during January and February of 1928, so West's job with the Company must be what Scarborough refers to. Her condition, however, is that West must promise to

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291 Harry T. Burleigh to DW, 1 August 1927, DWP, B1F4, SLRI.
292 Harry T. Burleigh to DW, 14 August 1927, DWP, B1/F4, SLRI.
293 Isaac West to DW, 4 September 1927, DWP, B1/F3, SLRI.
294 Isaac West to DW, 4 September 1927, DWP, B1F3, SLRI.
295 Rose McClendon to DW, 12 December 1927, DWP, B1/F11, SLRI.
finish the novel by June 1st. "You have a weakness of procrastination," Scarborough admonishes her.\footnote{Dorothy Scarborough to DW, 22 February 1928, DWP, B1F19, SLRI.} She generously adds that she will not charge Columbia's course fee or the University fee.

The publication of "Funeral" and "An Unimportant Man" in The Saturday Evening Quill several months later, in April and June of 1928, suggests that West had taken time off from her novel to write and/or polish two pieces of short fiction that were more or less guaranteed a place in the Boston little magazine. West claims in an interview with Deborah McDowell that she got involved in the Boston Quill Club at the invitation of Eugene Gordon, the Boston Post's short story editor, who had helped her place stories in the Post, starting when she was about ten. The all-black Club brought out one issue of the little magazine The Saturday Evening Quill, according to West (McDowell 268-69); in actuality, there were at least three. West's cousin Helene Johnson had placed several poems in Thurman's new magazine, Harlem, which came out in November of 1928, and Helene served on the editorial board. Given West's close connection with both Thurman and her cousin, she could easily have gotten her stories published in Thurman's eclectic magazine had she wished to. Because she chose another venue, it is likely that she found Harlem's format not literary enough for her work.

The writing of "An Unimportant Man"\footnote{"An Unimportant Man," published in The Quill June 1928, was reprinted in Columbia's New Copy (1929), Knopf's The Sleeper Wakes (1993), and West's Richer, Poorer (1995).} (published in June of 1928) may have been West's way of processing the failure at Columbia, or even her mother's disdain for her father's service in trade and his rough manner. As the female child in West's stories is always closely allied with the father because of color and temperament, one could say that the child's failure is the father's failure, and visa versa. "An Unimportant Man" dramatizes the conflict between art and pedagogy, between success and failure, between personal integrity and others' expectations, all issues of concern to young adults like Dorothy West making their way in the world. These conflicts may well have been central to her half-hearted achievement at Columbia, which her fiction seems to mirror. This story, like almost all of West's stories, adopts a generational view of family conflict but affirms the right of the younger generation to question the status quo. As always where a young
child is concerned, the child is betrayed through the weakness of the parent.

Essie Jenkins, the protagonist of "An Unimportant Man," resists her grandmother and mother's ambition of a college education for her, in an effort to uplift her and the race, they believe. She struggles, because of youth and a natural independence, to affirm her right to pursue her own course. The limitation of her choices of the moment is not the point; they are consistent with the trial and error nature of young children. What Essie does seem to understand intuitively is that adults make unhappy choices for bad reasons, and they are unhappy as a result. She wants none of this. "That's why I'm glad," she said, with the honesty of children, 'you're going to be a lawyer, and buy a big house, and be rich an' ev'rything. Then I won't have to be smart and make money for you and Mama and Gramma. And I can just be whatever I want. And I guess I'll be a dancer" (147). It is interesting to note that Cleo Judson in The Living Is Easy says almost the same thing except that she wants to be a singer, which was also true for Rachel West in real life.

Essie's father Zebediah Jenkins has a natural affinity for his daughter's point of view and at first takes her side. He sympathizes with her "natural impulse" toward "something that's beautiful" (150). He tells Essie, "It's hard...for colored girls to do things that are beautiful, like acting in plays, or singing in op'ra, or dancing in ballets" (150). His friend Parker's view is that "All nice colored girls are teachers" (154). Essie's response is that she'd rather not be a nice girl if this were the only choice (154).

Finally, after a "brutal awakening" to his own failure, Zeb vows he will not allow Essie to experience his fate of "self-revilement." Personal self-worth, in his changed view, is limited to educational achievement, so Essie must have it. His daughter, he believes, is already too much like him, the "idle dreamer." The irony of his decision to mold Essie's future is fairly obvious. Despite his best efforts to the contrary and his promise to his daughter, Zeb finally falls into line with his wife and mother. He will force Essie into their vision of a "higher pursuit" and thereby break her spirit. Zeb's mother had done the same to him—for his own good, she believed. Though his rationale is different, Zeb casts his "brilliant" and "beautiful" Esther to the same fate. "Essie owed it to herself," he reasons. "Essie owed it to her mother. Above all, Essie owed it to her race. That was it. He saw it now: the inevitable truth that Essie must face and brand upon her heart" (160). Thus,
the vicious cycle catches in its wake another member of the Jenkins family. It was Zeb's mother's inability to accept her son's "ordinary" nature that had created her ambition for him. That ambition in turn sets the bar so high and so far above his ability and desire that he finally cannot meet it. As for his daughter, "'Ain't a day goes by she don't need a spankin'," Miss Lily shouts. "'But Minnie's got the right idea. She's breakin' that gal's spirit young. And she'll only grow up to thank her" (154). Of course, the reader understands that the exact opposite will be true.

Three months after "An Unimportant Man" was published, in September, Dorothy Scarborough wrote to West in Oak Bluffs that a book contract was not forthcoming. It is impossible to tell exactly what of West's work Scarborough had sent to her publishing contacts at Harper's and Henry Holt, but it seems clear it was not a completed book draft, only a partial manuscript. She counsels her student to keep on writing despite what was actually a "nice rejection." Her diplomacy is appropriate and her encouragement kind, but it seems clear that she wanted West to move on to another manuscript: "Don't let this first rejection discourage you. Scarcely anybody has a novel accepted at the first offering. Just get started on your second and put your mind on that."298 Apparently West tried to put a good face on the disappointment and took Scarborough's advice. Aunt Carrie Benson wrote in November to her niece, who was back at Zora's apartment in Harlem: "I guess you are working hard on your book."299

Scarborough was probably right to encourage West to produce a novel as that is what publishers wanted ever since James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1921) began its serialization in *The Little Review*. Even short story master Ernest Hemingway knew that after Joyce's feat the market now demanded the great American novel. He recalls in his memoir *A Moveable Feast* that his imagist "novel" of 1925, *In Our Time*, was too much like a story cycle: "I knew I must write a novel" (75). West was in a similar position. She preferred short stories and might even have written a successful story cycle like Kate Chopin's *Bayou Folk* (1894) or Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919), but the genre was already passe by 1921. West knew that short fiction was her best medium: "I think of myself first as a short story writer," she tells Deborah McDowell (281), and

298 Dorothy Scarborough to DW, 17 September 1928, DWP, B1F19, SLRI.
that preference would plague her into the 1990s. Asked by McDowell as late as the 1980s why her stories hadn't been brought together into a volume, West responded:

They haven't been collected, because, as you know, short stories don't sell well. Literary agents try to gamble on using a novel by a writer to sell stories to magazines. I probably would not have written *The Living* or started the other novels [three others plus *The Wedding*] had it not been for the fact that stories don't sell. I love short stories; I think they are the most perfect literary form. A novel goes on forever and is a more difficult form to control. (281)

West's attempts to date and clarify her unpublished manuscripts are probably inaccurate. It seems that she started three novels that were never completed (McDowell 281). The novel prospectus for Dorothy Scarborough in 1928 and the manuscript given to Fannie Hurst in 1930 (with a Harlem setting) may or may not have been the same. What remains in the West Papers are three unconnected, unfinished fragments: "PART ONE," "PART TWO," "A COCK CROWED," and a longer piece, "Where the Wild Grape Grows." The latter, West seems fairly certain, was begun after *The Living* and was given to the same publisher Houghton Mifflin. "I wrote fifty pages of a novel, entitled, 'Where the Wild Grape Grows' and submitted it to Houghton Mifflin," she says. "They liked it and said it was 'beautifully written,' but they rejected it, because they didn't think it would sell as a novel" (McDowell 277). Some of its background, she adds, was incorporated into *The Wedding* (1995). However, a 1951 letter from Doubleday to West about a rewrite of a novel gives editorial suggestions about how to develop the older generation of characters found in "Where the Wild Grape Grows." It is clear they do not reference the True family of the earlier manuscript, so West was probably mistaken that Doubleday was interested in "PART ONE"/"PART TWO"/"A Cock Crowed, as a note attached to the manuscripts indicates. It is easy to understand West's confusion because both family stories are set in Boston and Martha's Vineyard. "A Cock Crowed" tells the story of the younger generation and a couple awaiting the birth of their first child; both the characterization and the quality of the writing suggest the work of a novice writer of twenty-one, West's age in 1928. On the

299 Carrie Benson to DW, 6 November 1928, DWP, B1F12, SLRI.
301 Doubleday to West, 13 April 1951, DWP, B1F21, SLRI.
other hand, "Where the Wild Grape Grows," in its earliest form, is a story about the older generation, of three sisters facing old age and death; it suggests a writer of more maturity. The fact that Doubleday was willing to read an unsolicited manuscript in 1951 makes it likely that West had already published her successful novel *The Living Is Easy* and that the manuscript was the product of a writer in her early forties. Biographically, this chronology would also make sense given the age of West's aunts and mother after whom the story is modeled.

Attached to "PART ONE" of a particular undated manuscript is the following handwritten note from West, dated September 1984: "My first attempt at a novel. I don't think I was 21. I think I was probably 19. (West would have been nineteen in June of 1926.) Internal evidence from "The Kitchen," dated 15 October 1924, suggests that West probably began the piece earlier, at seventeen. This may be the chapter of the novel, "fifty pages or so, that were typed and sent to a publisher." Her comment about the publisher wanting to see "more of the older members of Steph's family," however, does not fit the contents of the chapter the note is attached to. She is probably referring to the story labeled "Part Two" in the same folder.

West's third and fifth stories, "Funeral" (1928) and "Prologue to a Life" (1929), both published in the *Quill*, are drawn from a similar incident, the death of an eighteen-month-old child (*Oral 202-203*). "Funeral" also has to do with the death of West's grandfather, while "Prologue" also derives from material in the unpublished manuscript "PART ONE." In her *Oral History*, West recounts the memory related to the infant with whom she shared an empathic connection and for whom she assumed a mothering role. The deep structure of the passage, as the interviewer records the juxtapositions and associations, is as important to an understanding of West's psyche as is the creative uses to which the author puts this event in her fiction. Identification and understanding are expressed as being between the surrogate mother and the infant; they are color-free. Distance and difference are expressed as being between the speaker and her real mother (and aunt); they are color-coded. The speaker looks *at* (rather than in) a mirror. She does not see herself but the

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303 DWP, September 1984, B1F26, SLRI.
304 West probably means "Where the Wild Grape Grows." See previous citation.
reflection of another whose difference is expressed through color. Neither the daughter nor the mother sees a mirror image or even a likeness of herself when she looks into the reflected, mirrored eyes of the other. On a more symbolic level, the speaker expresses the physical and non-physical nature of identification. Unwritten and unspoken communication from one mind to another, which is the basis of telepathy, is different from the use of signs and signifiers of speech or writing. The fact that the speaker is also a storyteller, a writer, shows the signification process in use and how it resources color. West tells her interviewer:

I became a mother when I was ten years old. [T]his...family baby, came into the home, and we loved each other very much. .... And there was some telepathy or something, because I was coming home from school, and she would get up and go to the window, and there I was. They couldn't understand it. ...[T]his baby died. This is the way I tell the story, when I tell it to myself. I was very bright when I was ten years old—you'll see why I say that—and I was writing stories .... So that I loved this child very much. She had to go to the hospital.... She was only eighteen months old. She was very ill..., and she died. Well, I was in bed, and something waked me. .... And my mother, and my white...I remember my aunt's white face, and my mother's golden face, and they're looking in the mirror...because they are trying to be as far away from me as they can. I'm in the bed here, and the mirror...So I see their faces, and I hear my mother.... She said, "I don't know what to do about Dorothy. If I wake her up and tell her now, she'll never forget it. If I don't wake her up, she'll never forgive me." Because she was looking in the mirror, she saw that my eyes were open, so she came to the bed and she said to me..."And Sister died." (202-203)

In "Funeral," the twenty-one-year-old writer transforms the real event of the death of a beloved child and the death of her maternal grandfather into the death of a close relative for whom the family has little regard.305 On one level, the story offers a meditation upon the consequences of being unimportant. On another level, it takes on the subject of death to symbolize the end of the old, the blind uncle, and the birth of the new, the young writer. The story is told from the perspective of the child but uses a narrative voice that is obviously older and wiser, perhaps even an older persona of the younger character: "[Judy] did not weep because Uncle Eben was dead. She wept out of a vast pity at the anguish of the living" (60). The narrator creates distance between herself and family members other than Judy, Uncle Eben, and the "favorite aunt" by

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305 "Nine times out of ten the stories I write are real. I change the situation, but they are something that really happened. .... My grandfather died. Maybe that was it. He was a beautiful man. My mother and her sisters were impatient with him. I think he was senile, and he didn't last long. ...I remember saying to him—I didn't mean it, but it was bitterness—"Why don't you die, old man." I didn't say it out loud. "Because they don't want you anymore." I was mad with them I was fifteen, and I was helpless. There was nothing I could do" (Dalsgard 37).
using generic titles for them rather than names. She tells, for example, how "The large and lovely yellow
mother was eating heartily ham and eggs" (61) and how "The father’s head wobbled weakly" (65). Uncle
Eben and Judy, on the other hand, are referred to by name.

The conflict in the story is presented through the mother, but all the relatives except the favorite aunt,
and even the minister who officiates, share her hypocrisy. The "yellow" woman who wants "to raise her
daughter like a white child" is so concerned about money and so far removed from what is truly meaningful
in life that she cannot give old Uncle Eben a proper funeral. She publicly shuns the woman who loves him, in
spite of the fact that her husband, the deceased man’s brother, has extorted Uncle Eben’s money and
possessions, an inheritance that should have gone to Uncle Eben’s intended wife. The funeral inspires in the
family members an insatiable appetite for food rather than sympathy and a desire to mourn the deceased.
West uses their inappropriate hunger to symbolize their greed and tremendous physicality at the expense of
spiritual endowments. The child’s fear and estrangement from her mother are immediately signaled in the
opening line of the story: "Judy could not feel her mother" (60). This mother even forces her ten-year-old
child to comfort her father when he breaks down during the service, but Judy does not want to put a
"soothing hand" into her father’s; rather, she is "ashamed" of his weakness (65).

The foils to the mother are the "favorite aunt" and Eva Jenkins who are of a like mind. The latter is a
"gentle-voiced woman" whom Judy regards as "beautiful" (73). The favorite aunt says in contempt of her
relatives’ behavior: "People has got to lie flat on their backs before they find out what’s false and what’s true"
(71). When Judy proudly informs Mrs. Jenkins that she is going to be a great writer, the latter responds: "To
be really beautiful, Judy, is to come through pain and sorrow and parting without bitterness" (73). She herself
models this moral in her own gracious behavior in the face of Judy’s family and the loss of the man she
loved. But this advice only creates conflict in the child who, although at first she seems to be her mother’s
child in her behavior, soon realizes that she wants to be governed by the mother’s goodness rather than her
lies and greed (71).

The crisis for Judy comes when she realizes that, beyond the most basic facts of Uncle Eben’s life in
the obituary that is read over his body, there is no truth to what is being said about him. When the minister
mentions that the deceased leaves a "sorrowing niece," Judy is suddenly stunned into awareness and moves
away from the mother. She is beginning to see her own complicity in the charade of mourning relatives. "She
thought with shame: I have not really cried for Uncle Eben. I am not a sorrowing niece" (66). In her mind's
eye she remembers how when uncle Eben suddenly became blind, he was sent to a "Home" (66). When a
"brown and buxom and soiled" woman gets up to read a poem for Uncle Eben whom she doesn't know and
that was actually written for someone else, "composed for Pullman Brother Jesse's death in 1916," it is clear
to Judy these are borrowed words from a borrowed eulogizer (66):

Her attention was acute now. She was keenly aware of her own absorption. The egotism
that at all times swayed her was compelling her to store up impressions. She knew with
bitterness that when she was older and abler, the events of this day would crowd into her
mind with the utmost clearness and find release through her own particular medium of
words. Only as it might serve her as a plot for a story—and the horror of this overwhelmed
her—had the poor life and death of Uncle Eben any meaning. (67)

Most importantly, she realizes: "He had left no child, nor book, nor even ennobling longings to thread into
eternity the wisp of his spirit" (67). Judy, "was no longer contemptuous. Her heart swelled with compassion"
at this knowledge (69).

The burial of Uncle Eben gives rise to the birth of the writer. At first the child reacts only cerebrally to
the funeral, much like her mother, giving herself an appropriate reason for enduring the horror and sadness of
the day. "[S]he remembered she meant to be a great writer and must welcome every experience" (63). The
confused emotions and events connected with the ritual aspects of the mourning process, however, coalesce
into Judy's unexpected epiphany. She realizes not only that Uncle Eben's life and death do not matter to
anyone in the family, but also that her own indifference is beginning to affect her. "She was seeing deeply the
tragedy of commonplace existence" (65); that night she cried herself to sleep.

In real life, West relates how as a ten-year-old child she went to her beloved surrogate daughter's
funeral to take her home. "We go to the funeral. .... And my mother said, 'Go and look at Sister.' I went over
there, and I looked, and I came back and I said, 'There's a little dead girl in the coffin. Where's Sister?' I went
to the funeral. ... The reason I was so excited, I thought I was going to get her and bring her home." (Oral 202-203). In the story of "Funeral," blind old Uncle Eben's burial ceremony is resolved. Ten-year-old Judy, once her own eyes have been opened, can bring her uncle home with her, in her heart.

The same incident of untimely death is at the heart of the unfinished sketch "PART ONE," which probably was written before "Funeral." The draft of "PART ONE," after many changes and much development, becomes the short story "Prologue to a Life," published April 1929, in The Saturday Evening Post. The earlier version has slightly different subject matter from both of the published stories that are related to it: the troubled consciousness of an adolescent girl who is preoccupied with her own budding sexuality and creativity. In the typescript, the story is only seven pages long. It outlines the character of twelve-year-old Lily, almost thirteen, who is possessed by her twin brothers who had died before she was born, when they were ten. Lily is also her mother's name, now also dead from grief. Luke is her father. Ma Manda, Luke's mother, figures in the story as a mother surrogate.

The twins, whom Lily had never even known, are both real and symbolic. They become so much a part of Lily's emotional life that she believes in a telepathic connection with them. Using third person omniscient rather than first person, the narrator expresses for Lily what, because of her age, she is unable to express: "Ever since she could remember, their little lives had been her inner life." One must infer that Lily learns about her brothers through others, having had no first-hand acquaintance, and begins to interpret their meaning for herself. At some level, she must understand the connection between herself and the dead. She has replaced the twins for the living, her father and grandmother, but she will never replace the twins for her mother, who chose death over grief for her sons. Thus, the twins serve as metaphors both for loss and for unused creative potential.

Lily's story is abundant with images of conception and birth, sexual awakening, and suggestions of mysticism. It gestures toward a dramatization of "creation" as both "procreation" and "creativity." Young Lily, kneeling and gazing out the window, falls into a prayerful trance, induced in part by her almost gothic surroundings. The use of the gothic to express Lily's emotional turmoil, the degree of her obsession with
death, the fear it engenders, and the sexual tension just below the surface, is a very effective device. It has been raining all day. Dusk has just fallen. "Presently it would be a dream street in the mist, where the passing figures would be ghosts, and the motor horns would sound faint and sad." Suddenly, "Lily is filled with the spirit of the genius of the twins." Her small body "quivers." She feels "passionately beautiful as ever her mother had been" ("PART ONE"). The figurative use of the physical sex act and orgasmic release serve as correlatives for what West means to represent, the non-physical, even spiritual, creative act, or insight. The sexual metaphor works because implicit in the language used to describe its myriad manifestation—intimacy, penetration, insemination, fertilization, fertility, conception, inception—is parallel language expressive of non-sexual reproduction—imagination, creativity, understanding, perception, et al.

Lily's Whitmanesque experience of ecstatic union has religious overtones. Conception follows the climax of impressions and feelings, on the order, if you will, of the Immaculate Conception and Virgin Birth imagery of Catholicism: "She was choked with that grand exultation that was so brief, and breath-taking, and complete. She, and the twins, and the God-peace were one, and the one was the sublime reality, born of the undying soul that is of the eternal God..." ("PART ONE"). Then following the metaphor to its conclusion, rather than the appearance of the Christ Child, the spirit of love and redemption, we are given its secular equivalent: "a naked, simple, and fearless child given the strange name genius [my emphasis]" ("PART ONE").

The narration then returns the reader to a more explicit, even gendered, comparison between conception and creativity and the potential for woman as creator:

Now [Lily] was heavy with the child. She was no longer one with the twins and the God-peace. The twins were men, and the God-peace was of a Man. She was a woman, and she had drawn them into her body, for women are strange and strong, and in this moment, this one shining moment before birth, she was greater than the reality. She was its source. ("PART ONE")

"PART ONE," given its content, form, and style could have been written in 1923 or 1924. It is probably correctly catalogued in the "juvenilia" folder as it fits the mood of West's earliest writing, where her concerns are with ego, fame, genius, creativity, and mother love. It also fits the conception of the novel as
"romance" ("Senior Essay" [1924]). Young Lily, the story reveals, is not a "doer" like the twins. "Geniuses" are "doers," "People who write or sing," Ma Manda tells her. Lily is a "dreamer" who has "visions," and, she desires fiercely to write but cannot. The "words" are in her "heart," she believes. "They swell, and keep on swelling, and suffocating," but they won't come out. In other words, Lily is conceived of genius but has not yet birthed it. She first blames God, and then she feels ashamed.

It is at this very moment of utter sterility that Lily summons the twins again and becomes their mother surrogate. In other words, the twins represent the force of "words" and action ("doers") necessary to the accomplishment of creativity. "The twins come and talk to me. I'm not afraid. They're my little boys. I'm their mother. And they sort of drift into me like shadows. It seems to me that genius moves in me like a baby moves in its mother" ("PART ONE"). In a later scene with Ma Manda, Lily makes herself sick, regretting her inability to express the genius within her and her life of visions only. The implication of promise and lack of fulfillment, disappointment, and shame are themes West pursued in most of her early prose set in Boston and Martha's Vineyard.

When "PART ONE" was revised into a short story, sometime between 1925 and February of 1929, it was titled "Prologue to a Life" and plotted and resolved differently. Here, creativity is strictly biological, and mothers do not get the child they desire. It is as if West has given up on her own potential. Significantly, "Prologue" was published in April 1929 while West was on tour with Porgy in London, on the threshold of a different kind of creative journey, perhaps meant to substitute for her yet inauspicious authorship.

In the new version of the story, twenty-one-year-old Lily Bemus does not contemplate greatness for herself like the child of the twenties, ten-year-old Lily (of "PART ONE"). Rather, the turn-of-the-century woman considers her productivity as only in childbirth. "Though [Lily] felt that her talents were of a high order, she knew she would escape greatness through her lack of early training. And she had the mother instinct. Thus she would rather bear a clever child" (86). In "Prologue's" reworking of some of the elements in "PART ONE," it is Lily the mother who is "a little mad in her constant communion with her dead" (90). No mother-love is left for the dark infant girl who comes after the twins. She is born to a mother who has...
buried her beloved twins and would rather die in childbirth than accept a new baby as a replacement. However, the fact that this child is conceived in a rare moment of love between the parents, brought about as a result of the father's healing hands upon his grieving and seriously ill wife, suggests that spiritual atonement is enacted for the child after her birth, signified in her naming. The lily that blooms at Easter-tide is symbolic for the newborn of spiritual purity and redemption as the father names her "Lily." For the mother, who bears the same name, the lily signifies her physical nature and her color—fragility and whiteness ("lily-white"). Other connotations apply as well. Lily is privileged ("gilded" lily) and cowardly ("lily-livered"). West's giving of the mother's name to the dark infant and making of the naming of the infant a significant event has several implications. It allows the daughter to receive something important of her mother that her mother cannot freely give. It also complicates the color coding of the story.

Given the importance of naming in the story, it is instructive to compare "Prologue to a Life" with West's claim for her own naming by her mother and the names West appropriated for herself as pseudonyms.

The story goes that the day I was born, my father touched my hand and said, "Little Mary," the name of his mother. My father's middle name was "Christopher," hence "Mary Christopher," my pseudonym [for Challenge]. My mother didn't want me named, "Mary." Well, I was born at home, and, in those days, you had two weeks to name any baby that had not been born in the hospital. My mother couldn't decide on a name; she couldn't make up her mind. Well, the census man came to our house shortly before the two-week period was up [West has a June birthday] and asked my mother what she was going to name me. She had just finished reading a novel called Lady Dorothy Vernon of Hadden Hall. I don't know where the name "Elsie" came from, but she asked the census man, "What name do you like best, 'Dorothy' or Elsie?" Because he didn't care, he just said, arbitrarily "Dorothy." So that's where I got my name; the census man named me. (McDowell 267)

West doesn't mention her other pseudonym for Challenge, which was "Jane Isaac," that also shares in the father's name Isaac Christopher West (letter). About her other pseudonym, "The Highland Waterboy," for The Vineyard Gazette, she says the following. "Well the Gazette has a bird column that was done regularly by a woman who went on vacation and asked me to take over the column in her absence. Instead of signing my name, I called myself the Waterboy, and people actually believed that this woman, then over sixty, was a young boy" (281).

"Prologue" begins in 1896 and details the meeting, courtship, and marriage of Lily Bemis and Luke
Kane, clearly modeled on West's parents. Here, color and gender figure more significantly than in "PART ONE," as they will in the subsequent novel The Living Is Easy. Although we are told that Luke was "very much in love with [Lily]" (84), we also see by paragraph three that "her arms were golden, and her dark hair wavy and long" (84), and that Luke prefers Lily's color to his own (85). His mother Miss Manda Kane is not happy with her son's choice of this "low voiced yellow woman" for a bride because she understands the "inescapable bond of soft skin and hair" that will bind Luke to Lily even though Lily does not love him (86). Ultimately, for Luke, "Lily's light body was a golden mesh" (91), with the corresponding implication of "web," "snare," and "trap."

The relationship between Luke and his mother is similar in both stories, but Lily Bemis differs from Cleo Judson in several ways. The most important are her closer racial affiliation and the birth of twin boys before the birth of a daughter, whom she rejects. Despite working for a white woman and having no family in Springfield to influence her choices, Lily belongs to an A.M.E. (African Methodist Episcopal) church that she regularly attends. Unlike the characters created by West's contemporary Angelina Grimke, like Rachel, in her play of the same name, who will not bring more black children into the world, "Deep within [Lily] was an abiding ambition to see her race perpetuated" (86). Lily is attracted to Luke, who in this story is not older, because he is "somebody" in Springfield given his mother's and his enterprise and property. And in Lily's "supreme egoism she believed the male seed would only generate [cleverness]" (86).

Lily gets her heart's desire when she has twin boys. "[W]ith Lily's soft yellow skin and fine brown eyes," they are "completely sons of Lily" (88). The twins are represented as musical and academic prodigies, "the latent genius quickening" (89). They die in an accident at ten, which the mother believes she experiences telepathically. "She could see, as clearly as though she stood at the pond's edge," their drowning (89). They are buried together in the same coffin. Lily, from that time on, "was spiritually a dead woman walking in patient hope of physical release" (90). Luke, on the other hand, still has Lily as his heart's center. Luke "had no real conception of the genius of the twins" and would welcome another child (90), we are told.

In this revised story of "Prologue," the bereaved mother, not the artist (as in "PART ONE"), sits at the
window in reverie. In this case, the result is a chill that develops into a grave illness. Now the dreamer shudders from a very physical pain in her chest. Luke, with the "power of the Almighty in his hands," is allowed in to see Lily where she sleeps in the twin's room. Luke heals her body of its illness with a spiritual laying on of hands (91). One is reminded here of Preacher Coles in *The Wedding* and the West theme of spiritual regeneration.

The physical healing of Lily by her husband is like an exorcism.

Strength surged out of him—went swinging down through the arm upraised, flashed through his straining body, then shot down and tingled in his fingers which had melted into her breast. They were like rays, destroying. Five streams of life, pouring into her sick veins, fierce, tumultuous, until the poison and the pain burst into rivulets of sweat that ran swift and long down her quivering body, and presently left her washed clean and quiet and very, very tired. (92)

God, who the personification of "living," "life," and "love" in the story, is thanked (92). In Lily's "relief and gratitude and wonderment," she feels compassion for her husband's love and passion. She allows him to stay in her bed where, that very night, she conceives a daughter.

The pregnancy and birth send Lily into decline and death. She is described as "terrible in her fury" (92) at the discovery of her pregnancy; she is uninterested at the time of the birth. This child, she says, will be Luke's. And with Old Testament wrath, she denounces her second born: "This is your little black brat, d'you hear? .... [K]eep it or kill it. If it wasn't for my babies in heaven, I'd get rid of it with the deadliest poison. But I can't damn my soul to hell for a wretched child that may be born dead. And if it lives...I curse it to my despair!" (92-93). Lily is even more contemptuous when she learns the child is a girl.

This time, Luke cannot help Lily; he must transfer his love from wife to daughter to redeem the curse that the mother has placed upon her unborn child. However, as a result of his wife's death, Luke at first wishes the "tiny dark bundle" dead as well. Yet, when the father places his hand over the infant's heart to see if there is still life, her eyes open. Identification comes when the baby's "deeply blue" eyes, like his own, are filled with despair; Luke bonds immediately thereafter and can love her because of her "frailty" (94). His healing powers bring her back to life. Luke resuscitates his daughter by slapping her face and breathing life.
into her unresponsive lungs with the word "Lily" (94)—in symbolic terms—"life." The story concludes in an unresolved irony: "Lily was dead, and Lily was not dead. A mother is the creator of life. And God cannot die."

Earlier in "Prologue to a Life," God is associated with the "living," "life," and "love" that is, by association, that which cannot die. Now, the female child, Lily, represents His power. What cannot die, by inference, is the result of the author's creative act—the text. Thus, after the third recreation of the story of the death of the beloved infant "Sister" who could not return home with young Dorothy after the funeral, West is able to bring her baby back to life. This time, at the expense of the mother, the infant is spared.

West's short stories of the Renaissance period, especially those with troubled female protagonists, were worthy of publication in mainstream black periodicals. The fact that they were not has as much to do with women writers' lack of contacts and sponsorship and their problematic story lines as it does with exclusionary publishing practices on the part of black male editors. When the subject matter was on the wrong side of controversy, as West's stories often were, they were simply excluded. Placing "Funeral," "An Unimportant Man," and "Prologue to a Life" in The Saturday Evening Quill, during 1928 and 1929, required that West maintain ties to Boston and the Quill Club and spend time away from Harlem. It also ensured that her stories would not be read. Placing "Hannah Byde" in The Messenger because Wallace Thurman was willing to help his colleagues again kept West out of the main circle of writers and sponsors. The Messenger was considered third tier in 1926 to Opportunity and Crisis; it did not promote black writers or sponsor literary contests. Not surprisingly, "The Typewriter," with its sympathetic portrayal of a black male protagonist struggling against his own rage and white society's denial of his advancement, was the only story of West's that Opportunity accepted or rewarded. Like the popularity of Helene Johnson's "Sonnet to a Negro in Harlem," the singular success of "The Typewriter" reflects upon the tastes of black male editors and their power to control literary publication and promote male-centered agendas. Black women's stories were welcome if they did not explore the effect of black male power structures and sexist socialization on

Footnote: "Five Streams of Life" is also the title of an unpublished West novel.
black sisters, wives, or mothers. Zora Neale Hurston's "Sweat," which deals with just such a lethal combination of forces, a black man's entitlement to kill his hardworking wife, was published in Thurman's little magazine and not in Crisis or Opportunity. This same problem of content would plague Alice Walker into the 1980s, as was evident in the controversy over the representation of black men in The Color Purple (1983).

A very different story in this regard is that of male writers like Claude McKay who received extensive and unsolicited assistance—and one might add without gratitude or reciprocity—from other men with considerable resources and connections, like James Weldon Johnson, for example. Their correspondence serves as a good example of how literary careers are made and sustained. In January of 1928 James Weldon Johnson started what would become a long exchange of letters with Claude McKay, still in France, which followed him from Europe to North Africa and back again. After McKay left Morocco for New York in 1934, the two continued to correspond through 1937.

At the same time, West, who knew the Johnsons personally, could barely get the "Dean" of African-American Letters, by virtue of his appointment to Fisk in 1931, to write an introductory editorial for Challenge. His reluctance is more than obvious in the handwritten, unedited, and barely legible short statement he scrawled hastily at the bottom of West's own letter that was requesting a short piece of about two paragraphs. On the other hand, all of Johnson's lengthy correspondence with McKay is typed.

Johnson's interest in Sterling Brown is much easier to understand given their mutual respect and reciprocal work. Still, Johnson was very instrumental in Brown's early career that took Brown on to Harvard in 1931 for an M.A. degree. During the time of their most important correspondence, between 1930 and 1932, the two poets were both experimenting with the integration of folk forms into their poetry and the critique of the "narrow limitations of traditional dialect" about which they both agreed. They each spent considerable time reading and critiquing each other's work. Poems like Johnson's "St Peter Relates an Incident" and "Resurrection Day" and Brown's "Ma Rainey" and "When the Saints" received thorough

307 Sterling Brown to JWJ, 13 January 1931, JWJ, Sterling Brown Folder ("SBF"), Series 1, Box 4, Folder
readings. Johnson had requested permission to use Brown's poetry in the new edition of *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1931) that he had begun to revise in 1930. Brown, then twenty-nine, was asked to write a critical and biographical sketch of Johnson for *The Outline for the Study of Negro Poetry* (Harcourt, 1931) that would be published under Johnson's name. Johnson would then write the introduction for Brown's poetry collection *Southern Road* (1932) and promote it for a Pulitzer. Brown's letter of thanks is a good summary of the value of Johnson's mentoring and aid. "I have received inestimable help from you," Brown writes. "In the space you gave me in the *Anthology*, in your critical notice of my work, and in the chance you brought about for me to do the *Outline*. I want you to know, as you must know, how much I appreciate this." Brown's photograph, as well as McKay's, became part of Johnson's "exclusive gallery of celebrities."

The Johnson/McKay correspondence began after Harper and Brothers had asked Johnson, then Executive Secretary for the NAACP, to write a biographical introduction of McKay for his forthcoming book *Home to Harlem*. The fifty-eight-year-old Johnson's background and credentials made him a logical choice on the part of Harper's to introduce the thirty-eight-year-old Caribbean poet to his American public as a novelist. Johnson was already a distinguished poet (*God's Trombones*, 1927), anthologizer and critic ("Preface" to *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, 1922); he had grown up in Florida where he worked among Cubans in the cigar manufacturing trade, and had lived in Venezuela and Nicaragua. McKay was quite happy in North Africa and at first had no desire to return to New York until the 1930s, even though Johnson immediately communicated his desire to McKay that he come to live in Harlem.

McKay's personal history is that of an Afro-Caribbean. He was born in the West Indies and lived there during the whole of his early life and his English education. His dialect poetry was chiefly experimental, an attempt to express the roots of the island's folk culture; in a sense, the language came to him first-hand, although it was not his own manner of speech. Indeed, he became interested in folk speech at the

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66 (1,4,66), BLYU.
308 JWJ to Sterling Brown, 18 May 1932, JWJ, SBF, 1,4,66, BLYU.
309 Sterling Brown to JWJ, 30 Nov. 1931, JWJ, SBF, 1,4,66, BLYU.

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urging of his folklorist friend Walter Jekyll. What is important is that this prompting came at the very beginning of McKay's career when he was only twenty-two. *Songs of Jamaica* (1912) and *Constab Ballads* (1912) were the result of this partial collaboration. The first collection tries to encapsulate a fellow Jamaican's encounter with the peasant life and speech of the Island. The second, with considerably more of himself, stems from experiences McKay had in 1911 when he worked briefly as a police officer. Both works are written almost exclusively in dialect and mark McKay's attempt "to define his literary voice in form and content" (Hathaway 489-90). Ten years would pass before James Weldon Johnson would discourage the use of dialect as an American black poetic medium in the Preface to his anthology *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1922). McKay's move toward standard idiom while still using racial material in his fourth poetry collection *Harlem Shadows* (1920) was very successful (490), and perhaps it was this that interested Johnson.

McKay's impatience with white American and British socialists after a time had to do with his belief that they lacked commitment to issues of race. His decision in July of 1922 to try a hard-line brand of socialism brought him to Soviet Russia where he attended the Third Communist International even though he was given no credentials. His participation clearly signaled his "dissatis[f]action with left-wing efforts to confront racism" (Hathaway 490). Before this time, McKay had very little experience with rank-and-file organization. He was shortly a member of the International Workers of the World (IWW) and had some connection to the African Blood Brotherhood (490). As an intellectual, McKay's effort on behalf of leftist politics would be expressed naturally through his creative and expository writing. His book *Negroes in America* (1923), written in Russia, "offers a Marxist interpretation of the history of African Americans" (490). Again, it is interesting to speculate on the reason why McKay wrote about American racial politics rather than West Indian or British racism. His experience of race in Jamaica, England, France, and, later, in North Africa and Spain was essentially based on the experience of European colonialism. Despite that difference, American black writers respected McKay's work, as is obvious in the correspondence.

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310JWJ to Sterling Brown, 17 May 1937, JWJ, 1,4,66, BLYU.
McKay began to associate with African American intellectuals in earnest mid-point in his career and with very positive results. In 1923, after leaving the Soviet Union—a year before the Civic Club dinner and two years before the Opportunity literary contests—McKay lived for a time in Paris and Berlin. In Paris, he began seeking out Americans, both white American expatriates and black artists. Among the latter were Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen, Jean Toomer, Jessie Fauset, and Alain Locke (490). Locke included McKay's poetry in Survey Graphic (1924). Harper's, with James Weldon Johnson's help, contracted McKay's subsequent novels, beginning with Home to Harlem (1928). Besides James Weldon Johnson, McKay maintained lengthy correspondences with Langston Hughes and Wallace Thurman.

The letters McKay wrote to Johnson focused on McKay's writing and his negotiations with immigration to return to the United States. In April, he mentioned that he was working on another book: Banjo would be finished by November, he believed. He reassured Johnson that he wanted to be in the United States by the end of 1928; however, it would be another six years before he immigrated and only then through Johnson's indispensable intervention. McKay seemed to feel the need to justify his absence from Harlem. He told Johnson that when he left the United States in 1922 it was "with the intention of returning in about six months." He believed, correctly, that his having been in Soviet Russia would present a problem. It is clear that Johnson gave Home to Harlem the favorable review that the "hidebound Negro Papers"—The Amsterdam News, The Tattler, and The Pittsburgh Courier—did not. One of the papers had gone so far as to charge McKay with "obscenity and selling-out after his hand-and-knees crawling before Garvey, while that personage was obscenely selling out and wasting the wealth of the Negro masses."311

McKay also felt the need to justify his controversial work as of a piece with his previous political consciousness. His claim to Johnson about writing Home to Harlem was "I have not deviated in any way from my intellectual and artistic ideas of life." Then he went on to explain what those ideals were, hitting at the heart of what was already an important idea taking shape in Harlem: representations of class and black life. The manner in which McKay interchanges "low class Negro life" with "the proletariat," however, makes

311 Claude McKay to JWJ, 9 May 1928, JWJ, Claude McKay Folder ("CMF"), Series 1, Box 13, Folder 309
it unclear exactly what his real point was. Whatever distinction he was drawing, he was not referring to Alain Locke's "folk."

I consider the book a real proletarian novel, but I don't expect the nice [white] radicals to see that it is, because they know very little about proletarian life and what they want of proletarian art is not proletarian life, truthfully, realistically, and artistically portrayed, but their own false, soft-headed and wine-watered notions of the proletariat. With the Negro intelligentsia it is a different matter, but between the devil of Cracker prejudice and the deep sea of respectable white condescension I can certainly sympathize, though I cannot agree, with their dislike of the artistic exploitation of low-class Negro life. We must leave the real appreciation of what we are doing to the emancipated Negro intelligentsia of the future, while we are sardonically aware now that only the intelligentsia of the superior race is developed enough to afford artistic truth.312

McKay is most expressive when he writes subjectively about cross-cultural experience without the use of political jargon. His natural instinct, like Thurman's, went more toward feature journalism than fiction.

The following description to Johnson of a scene in North Africa is more evocative than anything in Home to Harlem and is seemingly without an agenda. McKay writes of his current sojourn:

Morocco is a great adventure for me—all the races of the world are here, struggling, fighting and living topsy-turvy together. Plenty of color among the Arabs and Negroes. Here at Fez I have been entertained in the homes of many Arabs—attended a Negro wedding at Casablanca and two Arab weddings here. They were barbaric affairs, dancing that would make a Harlem cabaret look like nothing at all. At the feast we tore the mutton and fowl with our fingers and stuffed our mouths full, but it was a little too much for me when they scooped up the vegetables with their hands and after tasting it threw back what was left in the same common dish.

The Mullahs, the Jewish quarters, are not nearly as interesting as the Medullar, the Arab quarters, but they are interesting when compared with the ghettos of New York. In the dirtiest and smallest parts of the Mullahs I feel as if I were in the cradle of the Armenian ghettos. Here you find Jews and Arabs, big young men, peddlers, going around in long shirts and often barefooted and obviously worse off than the same class of Negroes in the South and in the West Indies. The hatred between Arabs and Jews is strong—social, traditional and economic. The Jews under the French regime have certain privileges over the Moroccans, such as selling strong drink, and I have noticed in some instances where they take advantage of that privilege to fleece the Arabs. Here everybody is trying to get the best of the other in a greedy [riotous] way that [ticks]. And that is a big... difference between the business here from the grim thing it is in Europe and in America.313

Johnson's previous diplomatic experience was invaluable in negotiating McKay's return to New York.

In his first effort to arbitrate the deadlock, Johnson wrote to Assistant Secretary of State Carr on behalf of

\[1,13,309]\, BLYU.

312 Claude McKay to JWJ, 30 April 1928, JWJ, CMF, 1,13,309, BLYU.
McKay, suggesting McKay be issued an immigration visa as a "resident alien returning" rather than under a quota system. (Ultimately he was put on a British quota list.) Johnson also sent Carr a copy of *Home to Harlem*—as if to prove the residency claim was valid. Additionally, he instructed Eugene Saxon of Harper's to send a press release about the novel to two hundred and fifty black newspapers.\(^{314}\)

Wallace Thurman, who seems never to have crossed paths with James Weldon Johnson or to have been particularly solicitous of him, was also writing to McKay. *Harlem*, the magazine, was on Thurman's mind. He describes to McKay his intention for the new publication. It is to be eclectic, nonpartisan, non-generational, and non-racial in its orientation. Most importantly, it will not be limited to the purely literary as *Fire!!* had been. Thurman had learned his lesson that black little magazines could not compete with literary anthologies or black periodicals. Rather, *Harlem* will include "fiction, poetry, essays, literary and economic studies, debates on racial and non-racial issues, articles on current events, and special departments on the theatre and current literature";\(^{315}\) in other words, it will be something like *Nation* in format. The new magazine was intended to fill the void created by the mainstream periodicals, as Thurman explains in the same letter: "*The Crisis* and *The Messenger* are dead. *Opportunity* is dying. Voila here comes *Harlem*, independent, fearless and general, trying to appeal to all."

One intellectual to another, Thurman tried in an earlier letter to McKay to distinguish between his feelings for Harlem itself and his criticism of Negro society and Negro writing. Harlem, "which was just coming of age," was being hampered by the "Negro bourgeoisie" (*The New Republic*). His public "debunk[ing]" of "this Negro literary renaissance" (*The Independent*) and its first flowering with the "Negro Poets" (*The Bookman*) had to do with the former. Harlem provided him with opportunities he could have found nowhere else; yet, fame had come too easily. With characteristic sarcasm, Thurman summarizes his own dubious career for McKay. He says that he was a poet because of one poem, a critic because of two

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\(^{313}\) Claude McKay to JWJ, 10 November 1928, JWJ, CMF, 1,13,309, BLYU.

\(^{314}\) JWJ to Asst. Secretary Of State Carr, 27 February 1928, JWJ, CMF, 1,4,308, BLYU; Claude McKay to JWJ, 5 September 1929, JWJ, CMF, 1,13,309, BLYU; JWJ to Eugene Saxon, 5 May 1928, JWJ, CMF, 1,4308, BLYU.

\(^{315}\) WT to Claude McKay, 4 October 1928, WTP, JWJ, BLYU.
articles, an actor because of a walk-on part, a novelist because of a book contract, a playwright because of a
play opening on Broadway, and all in two and a half years. He also flatters McKay by claiming he is eager to
read *Home to Harlem* and review it for *The Bookman*.

A self-described "outsider" to everything but his own little group, Thurman shared with McKay his
growing sense of alienation because he believed McKay would understand. He characterizes himself as "a
pariah among his own people." Personally, others saw his marriage to Louise Thompson as something of an
anti-social act. Professionally, his "critical claws" and his attempts to be "critically truthful and bring some
order into a literary stampede" were generally met with opposition and hostility.

Thurman's tense position in regard to his colleagues may also have been a matter of editorial "taste"
and control, but not necessarily among the younger writers. In mid-October, shortly before *Harlem's*
publication, business manager and managing editor S. Pace Alexander wrote to encourage *Fire!!* patron
Dorothy Peterson not to abandon the newest project. Apparently Alexander wanted to assure Peterson that
Thurman's past "selfish treatment" of her should not stand in the way of her renewed financial assistance. She
herself is crucial to "a really cooperative magazine" and "a bigger thing than a Wallace Thurman venture."

We are all agreed on one point—that, technically we have a man well fitted for the post of
director. Good taste, is undoubtedly, a very necessary quality in an editor. You may have my
word that, should Wallace be again found wanting in that quality he will have the (more or
less) staid advice and objections of the managing editor to contend with.

...Wallace has rescinded his request that I include in his contract "full editorial authority."
We are to decide jointly on all matters pertaining to editorial policy in the endeavor to
create and maintain a well-balanced, independent, untagged publication.

The "we" appears to be Alexander, Bruce Nugent, and Alain Locke. The specter of an old warrior seems
apparent here as does the matter of patronage, in this case from black financing.

Zora Neale Hurston was ever a great Thurman admirer. She wrote to West and Helene Johnson from
New Orleans (where she was working on a hush-hush project) in November: "Bully for the new magazine

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316 WT to Claude McKay, 3 February 1928, WTP, JWJ, BLYU.
317 WT to Claude McKay, 3 February 1928 and 4 October 1928, WTP, JWJ, BLYU.
318 S.P. Alexander to Dorothy Peterson ("DP"), 13 October 1928, DP File, JWJ, BLYU.
[Harlem], shall hurry home to do what I can." And later in December, "Wish I could help out on Harlem but it is impossible at present. I'm heartbroken over being bound to silence." 

II

A combination of circumstances—economic, personal, and professional—kept West away from Harlem during most of 1929. Her unexpected trip to London with Porgy, the news that Edmund O'Brien meant to use "The Typewriter" in his Best Short Stories of 1926, and the confirmation that "An Unimportant Man" would be reprinted in Columbia University's Copy were highpoints of the year. Collectively, they must have helped allay the letdown of not getting a book contract and dropping out of Columbia. Losing the Columbia network was a major setback for a young woman barely twenty years old and with precious few resources, but youth also gave her resilience. As West was fond of saying: "We lived on hope," else her career could have ended before it had begun.

Every member of West's Harlem support group had plans to be out of town for large portions of 1929. Thurman, it turned out, was gone most of the year. Hurston had still not returned from Florida. Harlem took up much of Thurman and Helene Johnson's time in the early spring; then they went on the road with the play in April, and Thurman continued on to California from Detroit where Harlem had its last booking. He was in Santa Monica in June while West was in London. When she returned in July and went on to Oak Bluffs, Thurman was at his grandmother's home in Utah, writing, he says. "Aunt Hagar's Children" was finished, and a "new novel" (probably Infants) begun. These changes might explain why West leapt at the chance to go to London with Porgy in March after previously declining to accompany Nugent on the U.S.-Canada tour in January and February. The time seemed ripe for reconnoitering and trying something new, and West did seem to be casting about for another direction where she could both earn and learn at the same time and

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319 ZNH to DW and Helene Johnson, 22 November [1928], DWP, SLRI.
320 ZNH to DW, 5 December 1928, DWP, SLRI.
321 WT to DW, [5 June 1929], DWP, SLRI.
322 WT to DW, [30 August 1929], DWP, SLRI.
shore up some support for her future endeavors.

Back at home in Boston during January and February of 1929, West was receiving mail at 470 Brookline Avenue as well as in care of The Saturday Evening Quill, 32 Copley Street, Cambridge. The year began well as Angus Burrell, Assistant Professor of English and then secretary of the Columbia Writers' Club, wrote to West in care of the Quill to ask permission to reprint "An Unimportant Man" in the 1929 Copy (1924-1929). According to the publicity brochure, the executive board of Columbia University's little magazine was reprinting "a selection of students' published work." How a Boston little magazine like the Quill got into the hands of the Columbia University faculty is interesting to speculate upon. Most likely West sent a complimentary copy to Dorothy Scarborough, who then recommended the story; or its editor, Eugene Gordon, had been conscientiously promoting the magazine.

Why West was in Boston at this time is not clear. She may have needed to put in some time on the Quill or with the Quill Club. Isaac West may have needed to use the 43 W. 66th Street apartment. He was in the process of expanding or moving his fruit trade into Brooklyn. In the fictional parallel, Bart Judson, in The Living Is Easy, talks about the winter months after New Years as being the slow time for the import fruit trade, and in the novel he is finally forced to relocate his business to Brooklyn. Apparently the same was true for Isaac West. Rachel West never liked Harlem, so it is unlikely that she would have made the extra effort to join her husband there in the winter since Helene was living in the apartment. Later, in the spring, she does spend time with Helene, but probably in Manhattan, and she moved in with her husband when Helene went on tour with Harlem to Detroit. Whatever the reason, Isaac West was in New York in January and February of 1929 as he writes to his wife and daughter in Boston: "I Have Every thing I need. Thank the Lord I am all Set for Winter. All I ask you all keep well and Happy. You will get all the food and mony you need. I thank got I Hade good luck on tues. He is With me all the time." And later he writes, "Will send you next week

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323 Angus Burrell to DW, 4 January 1929, DWP, B1F17, SLRI.
324 Donald Clark to DW, 26 November 1930, DWP, B1F17, SLRI.
325 Isaac West to DW, [1 January 1929], DWP, B1F3, SLRI. Note: the letter has been transcribed exactly as it was written.
Helene Johnson did need the Harlem apartment during the beginning of 1929 and had the money for rent as she had been hired as a dancer in Thurman's play Harlem. She was either in rehearsal or already performing during the time Isaac West was sharing the flat with her. When Dorothy returned from London in June, she also went back to her mother's house in Boston and from there on to Oak Bluffs. However by December 1 she had traded places with Helene. Presumably, Isaac West was still in Harlem and her roommate.

Whatever the reason, after only two years in Harlem with the goal of producing a novel, West returned to the short story form and her Boston connections. She had placed two stories in black periodicals—both in 1926—with two reprints in the white press, a laudable achievement for someone who hadn't even celebrated her twenty-first birthday. However, without a connection to Columbia and with the necessity of an income, perhaps the Porgy hiatus was inevitable. Within this context, the failure of the book contract was foreseeable if not inevitable. Had Dorothy Scarborough not believed in her student's talent, she would not have approached her own publishers. Jean Toomer's praise of West's prize-winning short story was indeed correct. West had talent that could be nurtured, but she did not have McKay's luck finding sponsors, well-wishers, and patrons.

It was not that West was really torn between acting and writing, but that the former provided an actual paycheck along with an equally fascinating milieu. Looking back on her first dramatic experience, West recalls its highlight: "Reuben Mamoulian was the director, and he was called the boy genius of Broadway. And many things you see now, Reuben Mamoulian started" (Oral 178). At twenty-one, West was still young enough to want to see the world and smart enough to understand the value of seeing it in the company of performers like Rose McClendon and Edna Lewis Thomas. "This is so sudden because some one backed out at the last moment, and Cheryl immediately thought of me," West writes. The unexpected trip to London in March with Porgy and Bruce Nugent took West away from writing for a while and must have been a mixed blessing. Perhaps the single-minded devotion to publish in New York had been found wanting.

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326 Isaac West to DW, [1 January 1929] and [January or February 1929], DWP, B1F3, SLRI.
Perhaps like Essie Jenkins, in "An Unimportant Man," West simply wanted to live her maxim: "I belong to myself" (McDowell 266) and, by inference, not to Harlem or to the black or white publishing worlds.

Before March, West was in Boston with no idea that she would soon be leaving for London. In the meantime, she may have been considering trying her hand again at playwriting, especially after Thurman's phenomenal success with his play *Harlem*. Being in Boston placed West in proximity to the Allied Art Center at 275 Huntington Avenue and to Maud Cuney-Hare, its director. Born in 1874 and a graduate of the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston, although not a native Bostonian, Cuney-Hare was a multi-talented woman. She was an accomplished musician and music historian and anthologist, a biographer, a poet, and a playwright. Thirty-three years older than West, she shared with her young friend having had a father who had been born into slavery (Shockley 334-36). Fifty-five years old in 1929, Cuney-Hare seems to have met West before, and, from her correspondence, appears to have been solicitous of the younger woman's Harlem experience and writing ability. The Center had advertised its mission in *Theater Arts Magazine*. Its resources were being marshaled, through a holistic approach, it stated, to identify and develop the artistic potential of black children, an ambition certainly in line with West's own personal goal. Their brochure reads:

> to discover musical, literary and dramatic talent and to encourage the same; to arouse interest in the artistic capabilities of the colored child; to call attention to his or her aspiration and later to seek an open door of opportunity that colored youth may fittingly contribute to the new and tremendously important wave of art development in America.

The Allied Art Center's goals were not unlike the intentions of the interracial cooperation in the arts in New York surrounding the *Opportunity* and *Crisis* dinners and contests, except in its regional focus. The Center meant "Through Art to cultivate friendliness with all racial groups and to become one of the noteworthy streams in the making of an ideal New England and American spirit." The white philanthropist Louise Winsor Brooks, according to the Center's publicity brochure, financed Cuney-Hare's enterprise.

Cuney-Hare wanted in particular to organize a "little theatre movement." Thus, she too may have had a part in rejuvenating West's interest in the theatre. The Center already had "Theatrical Work-shops"—

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327DW to Rachel West, [March 1929], DWP, B1F1, SLRI.
"Altruistic in purpose and cosmopolitan in character," taught by faculty at Emerson College and Boston University. Classes were offered in play production, and the Center produced amateur plays, both in studio and public formats. "Ah," exclaims Cuney-Hare, "if we had just a small intellectual group, wouldn't it be fun?" It is clear that she addresses West as a colleague with authority in matters of the arts. She writes: "I need not explain to you that a Little Theatre Movement is far, far from the Amateur Dramatic Club!" It seems too that the elder thespian intends to produce plays by West. "Yes, I am quite in earnest about that play you are to do for us. In spite of our enthusiastic discussion, we would produce your play should it be of the 'lowly' or 'high-brow,' the race or the universe." Perhaps Cuney-Hare refers to the unfinished "Emergence of Eleanor," given the allusion to risky subject matter. West's two-month tour with Porgy in London seems, unfortunately, to have ended her contact with the Center and with Maud Cuney-Hare because the project was never discussed further.

For McKay, on the other hand, 1929 was the beginning of direct support and sponsorship from James Weldon Johnson, which McKay seemed to expect. This is important because when he came to court Dorothy West in 1934, he behaved in a similar manner. While still in Tangiers, McKay asked Johnson to "represent him at the Harmon Award ceremony"; he felt awkward about it because of his "pagan" sensibility and the fact that nothing "of Christian morality" could be detected in his writing. Johnson complied and sent McKay the $400.00 check and gold medal. Apparently the elder writer was also overseeing the publication of McKay's next novel. He informed McKay that "Walter [White] has read the galley proof of 'Banjo' and thinks it a good book." Probably on that basis, Johnson allowed White to review it. True to form, McKay was furious with the results. He complained to Johnson that Walter White's review of Banjo was "malicious and pretentious."

This same 5 September 1929 letter also helps explain McKay's very different experience of color.

328Maud Cuney-Hare to DW, 13 January 1929, DWP, B1F2, SLRI.
329DW to Rachel West, [March 1929], DWP, B1F1, SLRI.
330Claude McKay to JWJ, 1 February 1929, CMF, JWJ, BLYU.
331JWJ to Claude McKay, 13 February 1929, CMF, JWJ, BLYU.
332Claude McKay to JWJ, 5 September 1929, CMF, JWJ, BLYU.
from West's. The differences in their racial views and color consciousness made the 1930s, and not the 1920s, the perfect time for McKay to return to Harlem. McKay, who was very dark, says that he and all his brothers married mulatto women and that he has distant mulatto relatives who pass in the United States. "In my village," he writes, "I grew up on equal terms with white mulattos and a certain class of black children because my father was a big peasant and 'belonged.' The difference in the islands," in McKay's view, "is economic and not racial." On the other hand, a 1931 letter to Johnson hints at demons similar to those shared by Thurman and West and a fairly radical solution:

The social side of the life that is blind to racial and color prejudices appeals to me greatly and as the religion is mostly great poetry, I can conscientiously subscribe to it, as a poet. I have taken a little house, a Dar Hassani, here in Tangier out in a native village about a mile from the town. It is quiet and has a terrace with a small view of the bay. The little town is very worldly and cosmopolitan, but the real native life is far removed from it. The mentality of the natives is medieval and an American needs an historical background to understand and appreciate them. I am trying to pick up a little Arab, but it is difficult absorbed as I am in my writing. However, I am seriously contemplating becoming Moslem.333

West eventually would come to a view similar to McKay's despite her initial experience of color prejudice and her initial tendency to blame "white mulattos" rather than the institution of slavery and white racism. She, however, had to create her own safe environment in Harlem and Oak Bluffs and, more importantly, to enter the middle class through her art.

Having temporarily given up on white literary connections of her own, West allowed friend Wallace Thurman to interest her in publishing a collection of short stories and to act as an unpaid literary agent. Now at Macaulay publishers, he was once again in a position to promote his colleagues' talent. Even as the return to short fiction seemed to be her immediate goal, or maybe just Thurman's good sense, West had not given up entirely on novel writing. By early 1930, she had a manuscript to give to Fannie Hurst. From the exchange of letters, it seems that the novel was centered in Harlem; thus, it was a new work in progress and not the same manuscript that Dorothy Scarborough unsuccessfully brokered for her in fall of 1928.

Even before she tolerated Thurman's hounding, West apparently had decided that the London tour
would be a busman's holiday. She made the most of the voyage out and the voyagers, particularly her intimates, for dramatic material. After all, she saw the trip as the "opportunity of a lifetime," something every writer deserved. It would expand her horizon considerably, she believed, and so she took, quite literally and at face value, as it were, its potential for providing new material for fiction.  

Wallace Thurman, who knew his friend's propensity to write from experience, had no trouble recognizing the biographical influences of West's traveling companions, her guardian, actress Edna Lewis Thomas, her Theater Guild agent, Cheryl Crawford, and her friend Georgette Harvey, who would also go to Soviet Russia with her. Critiquing a short story (impossible to identify), Thurman writes:

About Simone. I cannot guess who she is positively, nor do I believe she is specifically any one person. I saw in her a composite of Cheryl and Georgette Harvey (God forgive me this patent disparity, but she seemed to have la belle Harvey's power and force of will and Cheryl's aesthetic pretensions). Am I by any chance lukewarm? And did I not sense something of Edna Thomas in Bersis. And Crown's Bess in Jessica. And is it possible on recapitulation to say that Simone is all Cheryl?

In an April 6, 1929, letter from her mother, just after arriving in London, West is offered encouragement in her writing pursuits. As this is West's first real correspondence with her mother, having had none during the first years in Harlem, including the initial Harlem run of Porgy, it seems that the fact of her mother's effort now to stay in touch with her daughter must be significant. One can speculate that something about the combination of London and getting published, even if only in a Boston magazine, had changed Rachel West's attitude toward her daughter's creative pursuits. Rachel West had a life-long love affair with the New York theater, and she was perhaps seeing in her daughter's opportunities a version of what she herself had wanted and missed out on. At any rate, West's mother was pleased to see the copy of The Saturday Evening Quill with another story of her daughter's in it. One wonders, given the content of "Prologue to a Life," published in the April 1929 issue of the Quill, if Rachel West actually had read it, given its scathing critique of the mother figure. At any rate, she does become something of a "stage mom" when she writes to push her daughter, not to get distracted and to make good the forthcoming collection of stories:

333 Claude McKay to JWJ, 25 May 1931, CMP, JWJ, BLYU.
334 DW to Rachel West, [March 1929], DWP, B1F1, SLRI.
Dot, do for my sake write that other short story quickly and send it to your publishers. Did Helen[e] tell you he is crazy about your two Wallie gave him but must have a third one to make the book as large as he wishes it. Dot please write directly to the publishers and find out all about it.  

Mrs. West repeated her advice in a second letter to her daughter: "Write your third story as soon as you can so we can surely have your book out by Sept., but I think you should write to the Publishers your self." 

Apparently the juggling act proved difficult for West as she found the need to justify her inaction. Her response to her mother was reasonable but also a stall tactic: "I think I will wait a bit before I write to the publishers, as I am uncertain where I shall be to receive their answer." By way of explanation, she added: "Porgy closes the 25th of May, and we do not yet know whether we go on to the continent or return home." Shortly thereafter West has a better sense of her schedule when she writes: "Porgy's run has been extended for perhaps six weeks and then indefinitely if the play continues to be a success. After the notice of its closing business picked up remarkably and every night we play to a practically full house." It is clear that in London West did not find enough time to write to finish the story that everyone seemed so solicitous of.

Thurman didn't give up as easily as Rachel West, however. In June, when West was back in Boston from London, she received a letter from him still pushing for a third story. He informs West once again that the reader at Macaulay's is ready and willing to pursue the project but that the ball is in the writer's court:

[The reader] agreed with me that there was not enough for a volume, and that the second story was in need of more work. It reads as if written rather hastily and altho good needs polishing. Send me number three if you wish. I will shoot the whole thing back to them. Should they accept all is well. If not, Harper's is the next best bet. I will guarantee you an immediate answer from Macaulay's. I have the other stories with me. I await the third. There is nothing more definite that I can say. The polishing can come later. The material is there, for any publisher to judge, and I can vouch for your ability to put on the finishing touches.

Thurman considered himself something of a literary critic, and had, no doubt, good intentions in his

335WT to DW, [1929], DWP, B1F11, SLRI.
336Rachel West to DW, 6 April, 1929, DWP, B1F2, SLRI.
337Rachel West to DW, 18 April [1929], DWP, B1F2, SLRI.
338DW to Rachel West, [13 May 1929], DWP, B1F1, SLRI.
339DW to Rachel West, [1929], DWP, B1F1, SLRI.
340WT to DW, [5 June 1929], DWP, B1F11, SLRI.
advice to West. Of the Renaissance inner circle, he had the only periodical publishing experience, and the several essays he had published during this time presented him as a critical insider to the Harlem Renaissance. However, he did seem to step over the line of good judgment when he counseled his friend on her personal life:

My dear Dot I do not want you to become promiscuous nor to sacrifice your virginity purely because I ventured the opinion that it seemed to me your stories lacked passion and that your virginal state might be in some vague way responsible. .... Be discreet and be adventurous is a good motto for the literary tribe.  

The conclusion to Thurman's letter is overstated, especially as regards Nella Larsen's work. The real intention of his somewhat flip remarks about other women writers was to distinguish the two groups of older and younger writers and to encourage West, as a member of the younger group:

After Macaulay lets try Harper's and all the rest. Somebody has to be congenial. I have written most eloquently to Mr. Furman of Macaulay's damning the easily published and untalented Fausets and Larsens and pleading for recognition of potential talent from a newer and renovated generation.

As the letter of West to which Thurman referred does not exist, it is hard to understand the context of how West's sexual experience became a subject for discussion or who raised the specter in the first place. Perhaps West had begun to see that her lack of experience was limiting her creative efforts. She probably believed, along with her friends Nugent and Thurman who verbalized it often enough, that sexual liberation was important to the health of the mind and body. She probably understood by now that her artistry was sparked by experience transformed by the imagination. However, it would be more than two years before she would have her first sexual experience with Harry Wharwick, whom she had met in Harlem through her roommate Molli Lewis sometime in October of 1931.

During the late summer of 1929, back at Oak Bluffs and her mother's cottage, West continued to plan in the direction that the *Porgy* tour had led her. In a letter to Thurman she suggests the idea of a Parisian artists' colony, a plan she had first hatched with Countee Cullen in their correspondence. Thurman's reply:

And Dot, so cosmopolitan now. A traveled lady planning to spend the winter in Paris!! The

\[341\] WT to DW, [1929], DWP, B1F11, SLRI.
\[342\] WT to DW, [1929], DWP, B1F11, SLRI.
idea of a colony intrigues me although such things generally turn out to be stupid unless colorful personality abounds, and then it grows tedious and unproductive. However should I be able I shall flee to Europe this fall.343

As of the same 30 August 1929 letter, West still had not sent the third story to Thurman. "I await the story. I am all eager to see it. Shoot it to me," says her friend. The manuscript of "The Cock Crowed" reflects both of the sentiments expressed in West's letters of this time. Her desire, like many artists, was to find the ideal setting in which to create and the maturity that came from the knowledge of life, love, and sexual experience. West never got to Paris, but she did travel to Soviet Russia in 1932.

Meanwhile, Cullen's interest in West was still speculative and half-hearted. Already separated from Yolande in 1929 when he visited West in London, Cullen spent considerable time socially with her and Edna Lewis Thomas, but nothing came of it.344 In October, he wrote:

What of the contemplated trip to Paris and the Utopian household we were to set up? Augusta Savage is here and Eric Walrond, and a few other people who might be worthy inmates. But since you and I were to be the guiding spirits of the venture, all must hang in abeyance until you come. Do come soon.345

And, Cullen asked: "Has the book been placed?" From his query, it seems that West still spoke of ambitions to complete a novel by the end of the year. This might explain why she had not been able to write the short story Thurman wanted. By November or December, she has traded places with Helene Johnson and was back in her apartment in Harlem.

Although Cullen and Yolande divorced in 1930, he never seemed serious in his intentions toward West until 1931. In fact, he had spent the better part of the year after his divorce with friend Harold Jackman. In 1931, however, Cullen initiated a correspondence that went on regularly for seven months, during which time he was mostly in Europe and New Jersey. When looking back on her relationships with Harlem Renaissance men, West always put Cullen together with McKay as though there were a subconscious connection. At the same time, she always distanced the two men from others of her close friends. For the

343 WT to DW, 30 August 1929, DWP, B1F11, SLRI.
344 DW to Rachel West, [13 May 1929], DWP, B1F1, SLRI.
345 Countee Cullen to DW, 10 October 1929, DWP, B1F6, SLRI.
346 Countee Cullen to DW, 10 October 1929, DWC, B1F2, SCBU.
most part, West respected Cullen for his art; she considered him, not Hughes, the preeminent poet of the Renaissance (Roses 48). She had a hard time finding the words to explain Cullen's motive for courting her. "Countee wanted to marry me because he wanted to go teach, and he thought I would make a good wife," is what she tells Genii Guinier (Oral 180). Reading between the lines of this statement and of an important letter Cullen sent to West, one could surmise that the marriage would be a convenience to ensure his respectability before the administration and his colleagues at Dillard where he was appointed to the faculty in 1934.

Cullen writes in a letter to West from Paris:

I have been thinking a great deal about you since I left New York, after having seen you the other day. You have no idea how tremendously flattered I am that you like my novel. Now, if Charles S. Johnson likes it too, when I show it to him next week, I shall really begin to feel that perhaps after all I can do a completed piece of prose. So far you, Ama, Harold, and Edward have given me much encouragement. And just before I left New York, John phoned me to say that Harper's was willing to accept the novel [One Way to Heaven] on the basis of what I showed them, and would give me a royalty advance.

But I have been thinking of you in other connections. You are a fascinating and loveable child, but it all comes back to the point that you are a child, in spite of your terrible yearning toward grown-up-ship and sophistication. I like you too much to want to hurt you ever even so slightly in no matter how remote a future. You and I have never had a real heart-to-heart talk about those things which must figure very greatly in our lives if we are to have the supreme relationship to one another; and I am fearful lest you are more sanguine about your knowledge of certain things and your ability to bear them than you are actually emotionally equipped to do so. When I return we must talk, love, earnestly, and confidently. Till then, work hard on your novel, keep sweet and remember me with kindness.347

It seems they don't have the serious talk from Cullen's 7 May 1931 letter to West after he has gotten back from Paris, but soon to return. In the meantime, West had gone to Soviet Russia with Langston Hughes and Henry Lee Moon (who proposed marriage to her there, according to her Oral History testimony) and returned again in 1933. Two years later, in July of 1933, Cullen brings up the issue again in a letter from Paris.

No, we never spoke of the future that last evening in New York; mainly, because I should have spoken first, and I am such a coward. All my life I have been afraid of something: darkness, lightning, people, people's feelings, and most horribly of myself. You are such a sweet epitome of gentleness that I never know where to begin with you when it is a question of something other than literature or plain gossip, or gaiety. There is so much that you

347 Countee Cullen to DW, 16 April 1931, DWC, B1F2, SCBU.
should know before there can be a real and utter understanding. Perhaps I shall be braver in the fall when I return .... Then if I am brave, we must discuss a host of things.  

It is clear that West herself was more flattered by Cullen's attention than the prospect of marriage because simultaneously she had relationships with at least two other men. One, in the early winter months of 1931, was with a mysterious "blonde boy" whom only Helene Johnson seems to have known about and while West was staying at Edna Lewis Thomas', 1890 7th Ave., Apt. 2-A, City. The other was with Tuskegee professor Harry Wharwick in the late summer of 1931; she even had a pregnancy scare, judging from an exchange of letters with roommate Mollie Lewis.  

Sonnet in Absence

This is a land in which you never were,
A land perchance which you may never see;
And yet the length of it I may not stir,
But your sweet spirit walks its ways with me.
Your voice is in these Gallic accents light,
And sweeter is the Rhenish wine I sip
Because this class (a lesser Grail) is bright
Illumined by the memory of your lip.

Thus would I have it in the dismal day,
When I fare forth upon another ship,
The heart not warm as now; but cold, and clay;
The journey forced; not, sweet, a pleasure trip.
Thus would I take your image by the hand,
But leave you safe within a living land.

Helene Johnson's response to her cousin's letter suggests that West was also considering inter-racial coupling, in Ann DuCille's terms, or marriage. Helene writes in February from 470 Brookline Avenue:

I have been thinking about my Dorothy and think you ought to marry whoever you want no matter what he is like, if you love him. When you have your little baby...you can do as you like about separation .... Your baby will be very very very healthy!
We are all so glad that you are happy and popular and in love.

348 Countee Cullen to DW, 16 July 1933, DWP, B1F6, SLRI.
349 Mollie Lewis to DW, 22 October 1931, DWP, B1F13, SLRI.
And as far as abnormality goes I don't think that's important at all. We may be ourselves, if we were in a different environment.350

A month later, when Helene writes again in response to her cousin's request to borrow her party dress, she offers some assurance: "I know how you feel about the blonde boy. I'm sure Ike [Isaac West] will give you something so you can go to Klein's."351

No letters to and from Dorothy West to Harry Wharwick are extant. Only a poem by him that West kept together with her papers attests to their relationship.

Migra [Suin?] Sed Pulchra
-Hymn to the Blessed Virgin
(written for Dorothy West)

Tower of Ivory, hear Thy child
whose skin is ivory bright
Help me to bear the black man's taunt
The insults of the white.

O House of [Gold?], I cry to Thee
Thy maid of golden brown
Grant me to hold my head erect
Despite the white world's frown.

"So black Thou art but comely too,"
Thy children sing to Thee,
O dusky maid, guide Those aright
Thy son of ebony.
--Harry Wharwick

New York, May 31, 1932

Left to her own devices in 1930, West spends the first seven months of the year promoting her work in vain. This time she had reason to believe that Fannie Hurst, her childhood idol, was willing to offer editorial advice on her novel with a view to arranging for its publication. The introduction was made through Zora Neale Hurston, Hurst's former secretary. Helene Johnson writes from Brookline Avenue to West back at 43 West 66th Street: "Congrat. about Fannie Hurst. I'm sure something splendid will come out of it. ....

350 Helene Johnson to DW, 24 February 1931, DWP, B1F9, SLRI.
351 Helene Johnson to DW, 2 March 1931, DWP, B1F9, SLRI.
Dot, anyone with your nerve has got to accomplish a simple thing like selling a novel."

Apparently through Hurst, West had access to Hurst's literary agent Elisabeth Marbury. West remembers that Marbury "had a salon in Paris with Elsie De Wolfe" and that when she returned she "started the whole Sutton Place development. And that was the period when I knew her" (Oral 168-69). She describes Marbury as having a "booming...American voice" and being a devoted viewer of "Amos and Andy" (169). A February 1930 letter to West from Marbury makes promises that are never kept: "Do not think ya are forgotten! On the contrary, I am planning a fine campaign for ya. Whenever ya feel ya want to talk love do not hesitate to call up--I am more anxious than I can express to help you to make your dreams come true." Marbury would prove ineffective in whatever efforts she might have made on West's behalf. By January of 1931 Marbury has had an "ms" of West's called "Five Streams and Seven Oxen" read by a Miss Raphael, whose judgment "Miss Fannie Hurst swears by," according to Marbury. Ruth Raphael, the Associate Editor of Cosmopolitan Book Corporation, probably read the same manuscript Fannie Hurst saw earlier that year. Unfortunately, Marbury informed West: "I don't think it any use peddling the story around until you have really worked on it as per lines indicated." Marbury was to hang on to it until West's imminent return to New York. Meanwhile West seems to have revised the plot, but tried another agent and advisor closer to home.

Seven months later "Five Streams and Seven Oxen" was sent to Walter White of the NAACP. He seemed to share the same opinion as the previous reader of the story outline. "I'm delighted to know the book is moving along so well," he wrote to West in Oak Bluffs. "What you tell me of the plot is an excellent beginning but does not give me much of an idea as to the story itself. You will remember that Ruth Raphael's comment on the first plot submitted was to the effect that they wanted a story and not a personally conducted

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352 Helene Johnson to DW, 3 December 1929, DWP, B1F9, SLRI.
353 Elisabeth Marbury to DW, 17 February 1930, DWP, B1F19, SLRI.
354 Elisabeth Marbury to DW, 8 January 1931, DWP, B1F19, SLRI.
tour of Harlem." Apparently the manuscript was intended for young readers as White tells West in the same letter: "I am going to buy two or three children's stories of the age group we are aiming at. I shall send them along to you if you wish so that you may see just what sort of stories are being put out." West heard from Ruth Raphael in October of 1931 that she was, regrettably, being transferred to Farrar and Rinehart's International Magazine. "I don't need to tell you how sad I am, and how sorry I am that I'm not to be godmother to your brain child." The "script" apparently was returned to Marbury, and she, in turn, sent it on to Harper's, for three days after Marbury's letter to West, Cullen says that "John" has returned West's manuscript to him. Upon a second reading, Cullen says: "I am enthusiastic about everything except the ending which seems too much of a slow down. The conversation is so good, and much of the straight writing is quite biblical. Something must come of it." There are numerous mentions of the novel throughout 1931, including encouragement from Grace Neil Johnson when West called her to say she feared she would never finish the "wretched novel." It was apparently completed and revised by May of 1932, but was never published.

In the meantime, 1931 brought better luck to West's associates. Cullen completed a play with Arna Bontemps and finished his novel One Way to Heaven by September of 1931. Arna Bontemps finished God Sends Sunday and was the guest of honor at a reception for him given by Zora Neale Hurston, Countee Cullen, Roberta Bosley, and Dorothy West at the home of Bessye Bearden, 154 West 131st Street. The hosts requested of James Weldon Johnson that he "say a few commendatory words." Elmer Anderson Carter, the new editor of Opportunity sent his regrets even though he expressed that he has been "very anxious to meet those whom [he has] considered the vanguard of the literary renaissance of the Negro, and in the names

355 Walter White to DW, 31 August 1931, DWP, B1F11, SLRI.
356 Ruth Raphael to DW, 1 October 1931, DWP, B1F19, SLRI.
357 Elisabeth Marbury to DW, 7 October 1931, DWP, B1F19, SLRI.
358 Countee Cullen to DW, 10 October 1931, DWP, SLRI.
359 DW to Grace Neil Johnson, 7 March 1931, JWJ, Dorothy West Folder (DWF), BLYU.
360 Countee Cullen to DW, 26 September 1931, DWP, SLRI.
361 DW to Mr. and Mrs. James Weldon Johnson, 5 March 1931, JWJ, DWF, BLYU.
that are in your letter, [he recognizes] a good portion of that number." Zora finished the play Fast and Furious and had it produced, but it "only lasted a week," according to Cullen, and was "trivial and unworthy of [Hurston's] talent," in his view. And Thurman was progressing with Infants of the Spring.

Writer Fannie Hurst and philanthropist Elisabeth Marbury must have at first seemed to West like manna from heaven; however, nothing came of either connection despite West's large investment of time. If anything Marbury ended up insulting West as much as Hurst had. Rather than affirming that West had talent and subsidizing her as she had Wallace Thurman, Marbury told West that what she liked best about her was her reticence: "You have known me for two years, and you know that I am a very rich woman, and you have never asked me for any money," she tells West. West's response years later to her interviewer was complete chagrin: "Because I'm not a beggar, and she knew that I was a poor young writer. But I had an art...what did she want me to do, crawl?" (Oral 169).

West's correspondence with Fanny Hurst was short-lived and does not seem to have resulted in much more than an exchange of letters. It began in March of 1930 and ended in April. It seems the two women lived only a few blocks apart as Hurst's apartment was at 27 West 67th Street, and West lived at West 66th Street. Hurst writes: "I was gratified to receive your letter. It sounds as if the machinery was rolling along on oiled hinges. The joy of writing is worth the torment, so why not keep at it hard. I feel sure that you have power. Come around and see me." Already in possession of West's manuscript, Hurst made an appointment for the 30th to see her. Then, having been herself "summoned" by Elisabeth Marbury--"and Miss Marbury's invitations are always summonses to appear before her tomorrow," Hurst rescheduled with West. "I will call tomorrow to arrange a new appt. as I am anxious to talk to you about your work. In the meantime, I will ask Bess to leave the ms at your house on her way home tonight. As I suspected, she did not understand me when I asked her to return it with my last note." And, shortly thereafter, in another note:

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362 Elmer A. Carter to DW, 7 March 1931, DWP, B1F11, SLRI.
363 Countee Cullen to DW, 10 October 1931, DWP, SLRI.
364 Fannie Hurst to DW, 12 March 1930, DWP, B1F7, SLRI.
365 Fannie Hurst to DW, 17 March 1930, DWP, B1F7, SLRI.
366 Fannie Hurst to DW, 4:40 p.m., Wed., DWP, B1F7, SLRI.

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I have read the opening part of your book and I think it is extremely interesting and well written, and whatever criticism I have at this time (and there is some) I do not feel justified in passing it on to you because I think that you should give yourself full reign and write along lines most natural to you. Bear in mind, however, your tendency to be sketchy and jumpy in your technique. Nobody in the world can help you in that except D.W. Let me know how you progress.367

Hurst's final letter came at the end of April. "I am sailing for Europe on Friday and I do hope that when I come back you will have a full-fledged novel to show me. Any news of the other material?"368 It is not clear what "material" Hurst had in mind.

West reveals in her Oral History the nature of Fannie Hurst's insult. Hurst had actually asked her to help with serving at one of her parties in exchange for pay as Hurston had done. West was understandably offended and refused. She "was not used to that sort of thing," she confesses. West did not like the manner in which Hurston was exploited either. "Fannie Hurst and Carl Van Vechten used to have parties and invite Zora to entertain. Do you know what I mean? She told those wonderful stories of hers. I always resented it...I knew that she did that" (172).

August 1930 found West and Cullen back in their paternal homes, Oak Bluffs and New Jersey, and Cullen echoing his oft repeated refrain, but with no follow-through: "I want to read your book."369 From late October through December, West remained in Boston at 470 Brookline Ave. Helene wrote to her from New York where she was rooming with Zora: "Hurry up and finish the old novel." Zora may come with Helene for Thanksgiving in Boston. "No, that mysterious woman, Zora's boss [Fannie Hurst], does not know I'm working for Zora. Will let you know how it turns out."370

In November of 1930, the Columbia Writers Club contacted West. A circular addressed "To students and ex-students in the Columbia University Special Courses in Writing" came to her in Boston to notify members and former members of recent changes in the literary magazine. Renamed New Copy, the publication was to present the reading public with a volume of unpublished works that have "interest for

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367 Fannie Hurst to DW, 26 March 1930, DWP, B1F7, SLRI.
368 Fannie Hurst to DW, 28 April 1930, DWP, B1F7, SLRI.
369 Countee Cullen to DW, 25 August 1930, DWP, B1F6, SLRI.
370 Helene Johnson to DW, 23 October 1930, DWP, B1F9, SLRI.
readers" but don't fit "any contemporary periodical market." The Board regretted to say that it could no longer pay for submissions. The change in venue was a combination of current market realities with Wallace Thurman's belief in sophisticated literary publication. West seems to have modeled Challenge/New Challenge on Copy/New Copy.

Receiving mail from the Columbia Writers Club prompted West to get in touch with her former teacher. Scarborough, the new program chair for the Writers Club, got an unexpected response to the Club mailing from West in Boston requesting some editorial help. Scarborough's January 1931 letter expressed interest in knowing if West was still working on her novel, for "it had good promise," she wrote. She says she "shall be glad to read it and criticize, etc.," and that "there will not be any charge." "I am glad to take an interest in an interesting story begun in my class." The letter included an announcement of the "special meetings" the Club will hold for audiences with writers. The selection gives an idea of the writers whom the writing students and the faculty were interested in: M. Andre Mauroes, C. Caldwell Dobie, and Marc Connelly, the author of Green Pastures.

Meanwhile, Claude McKay, back in Paris, seemed to be preparing to replace Wallace Thurman as New Negro critic at large; he was writing to Johnson for literary fodder. He wanted three numbers of Crisis for an article on Negro writers and criticism he was writing. He wanted Braithwaite's 24 September speech on Negro writers delivered at NAACP, Du Bois' December 1926 review of Van Vechten's Nigger Heaven, and James Weldon Johnson's 29 July article on Negro writers and Negro criticism ("Negro Authors and White Publishers"). He also wanted a copy of The Book of American Negro Poetry. Presumably Johnson honored all requests. On literary matters, McKay informed Johnson that he had written no poetry in five years. "Desolate," the last poem, had appeared in Cullen's 1927 anthology. McKay also shared that he was making plans to get Hughes' novel translated, and he told Johnson that Johnson Bradley [Harper's?] liked Black Manhattan and that he will return to Jamaica for his next book.

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371 Columbia Writer's Club to DW, 26 November 1930, DWP, B1F17, SLRI.
372 Dorothy Scarborough to DW, 7 January 1931, DWP, B1F17, SLRI.
373 Claude McKay to JWJ, 29 September 1930, CMF, JWJ, BLYU.
In July of 1933, McKay was in Morocco with a host of worries. Discouraged that his latest book (Gingertown?) was not a commercial or critical success, impatient about the tedious delays around his British quota number, and frustrated that his flirtation with the Bolsheviks and association with the Eastmans was making a return to Harlem difficult to negotiate, McKay had hatched a new plan. Now, he was seeking a sponsoring organization that would be willing to invite him to the United States might. Failing that, McKay figured that he could pose as a writer in need of first hand material for another book about New York. Johnson responded encouragingly, "New York is your market and the U.S. is your field. Furthermore, we the Negro writers need you here." He suggested Walter White of the NAACP as useful in facilitating McKay's reentry. He complimented McKay on "The Strange Burial of Sue" in Gingertown.

January of 1934 brought with it another set of requests from McKay. Johnson reported that he had solicited a Guggenheim for McKay that would provide a scholarship for living expenses, a visa, and a travel allowance, but, unfortunately, the Guggenheim did not award the fellowship. In February, McKay wrote to Johnson at Fisk, in c/o Max Eastman, to say that he would sail from Cadiz to New York. McKay also congratulated Johnson on his autobiography Along This Way. Then McKay wrote, in care of A.A. Schomburg, that he wanted money from the Rosenwald fund and he wanted Charles S. Johnson to sponsor him. Johnson in turn responded that he could not be of help with the Rosenwald Fund. He suggested Carnegie. McKay asked for the return of his Harmon gold medal c/o Schomburg. He ended by congratulating Johnson on the professorship at New York University. By April of 1935, McKay had an apartment at 214 West 63rd Street, New York. By then, Johnson was suggesting the Rosenwald fund for the Africa book.

Apparently McKay was still dealing with the fallout from Home to Harlem's resemblance to Nigger

374 Claude McKay to JWJ, 23 July 1933 and 30 October 1933, CMF, JWJ, BLYU.
375 JWJ to Claude McKay, 30 September 1933, CMFP, JWJ, BLYU.
376 Claude McKay to JWJ, 8 February 1934, CMF, JWJ, BLYU.
377 Claude McKay to JWJ, 12 April 1934, CMF, JWJ, BLYU.
378 JWJ to Claude McKay, 12 April 1934, CMF, JWJ, BLYU.
379 Claude McKay to JWJ, 6 October 1934, CMF, JWJ, BLYU.
380 JWJ to Claude McKay, 20 April 1935, CMF, JWJ, BLYU.
Heaven. It may have been the juggernaut preventing the funding. McKay told Johnson:

There was nothing to imply that I was contemptuous of a Negro bourgeoisie and its aspirations, that the book was not concerned with that class. It was an episodic account of a rough-and-ready Jack-of-all-trades, a type that I know and admire, and I thought that my hero and heroine were as different from Van Vechten’s as a rotten egg was from a fine apple picked up in the grass.

He concluded that Negroes must “realize the strength of their cultural group” to get anywhere, as in Russia, Spain, and Africa.381 Be that as may be, Max Eastman confirmed that Home to Harlem had put the liberals and radicals against McKay.382 Then, as if justifying himself, McKay decided to offer a defense of himself.

He did not go back on his principles, he claimed:

I went into Russia as a writer and a free spirit and left the same, because I was always convinced that however far I was advanced in social ideas, if I could do something significantly creative as a Negro, it would mean more to my group and the world than being merely a social agitator.

He did admit, however, that his experiences in Europe and Africa had made him "less cock sure about radical theories, especially as related to propaganda among Negroes...."383 He had read Johnson’s latest book and wanted to discuss two points with him: "communism and labor."384

Although Dorothy West was tied to the black working class, she was never herself a radical; nonetheless, she seemed destined to attract radicals, to be influenced by them, and then to find they had betrayed her, with the exception of Thurman. Her thirteen-month experience of living in Bolshevik Russia during 1932 and 1933 only deepened those working class sympathies, but she never referred to herself as a Marxist, a communist, or a socialist. About her trip to Russia, she has said, "[T]hey tried and failed to make a communist of me" (McDowell 271). It was owing to the decade of the 1930s that her experience with editing Challenge (1934-1937)/New Challenge (1937) was literally book-ended by her relationships with Claude McKay and Richard Wright, both doctrinaire Marxists. They came to represent just two of many "unfavorable odds," in Gloria Hull’s words, that West and other black women writers were struggling against
to create personal and artistic selves. McKay, under the guise of friendship, tried to highjack West's writers away from her for his own organization after she had already begun collecting submissions for her magazine in 1934. Richard Wright, under the guise of financing, redirected her magazine toward the polemics of the South Side Writers' Workshop and then decided to replace her entirely in 1937. "So they just pulled the magazine out from under you?" West was asked. "Yes," she responded. "I got a letter from Richard Wright's lawyer" (McDowell 272). Without missing a beat, she says, she stopped publication (Remember). She was not about to reward Wright's indecency. Her "legacy" would be directed elsewhere, West assured Deborah McDowell. "I'm leaving [it to] you" (McDowell 282).
CONCLUSION

Coming to terms with a subjectivity that was comfortable for her and compatible with her family was a life-long challenge for Dorothy West. Late in life, she even found it hard to admit that she had kept a diary, calling it a “journal” instead as if she could not imagine herself writing anything as subjective as a diary. She has shared in her Oral History and elsewhere in other interviews that she actually meant to destroy these personal documents but was not able to because of the “writer” in her (206, 213). Truly, it was this authorial persona that had made her personal journey to self-identification possible, although for many years it was a troubled path. Even as a subject for her fiction, which was almost entirely autobiographical, at age seventy, West confessed not to be “really in it” (207). “[T]o write about me... Personally, I like writing about my family, but I cannot—I told you that...I started this novel about Eugenia, Helen, and I? I bet I had no.... I bet I was not really in it. Perhaps I can’t see myself” (207).

Not being able to “see” herself became the greatest challenge of Dorothy West’s life’s journey. No one wants to appear a stranger to members of her family, yet West felt like one when she beheld their camera images. As is true for almost every human being, the child first encounters herself in the eyes of others, especially in the eyes of her primary caregiver. “You don’t look at yourself,” West explained. “You look at your family” (Oral 186). “I think [that is] why I have such an objection to pictures, because I know that I don’t look like my family” (186). Young Dorothy especially did not look like her mother. “Rachel,” she admitted saying to her mother, “if you wanted me to do all that, you should have had a beautiful daughter” (208), by which she meant “a daughter who looks white like you.” In order to move beyond the child’s understanding, Dorothy West had to get beyond her own overidentification of race with skin color because of the negative construction her mother had placed on black people and on racial identity in general. To find an identity within her particularly constructed family, to find an identity as the black woman she knew she was, West first had to admit to the whole of her family’s history, which she had denied during the heady days of the Harlem Renaissance. Then, she followed in writer Alex Haley’s path; she looked to these “roots” inevitably ensnared in slavery. What makes a family, she came to see, was their common history, not their hair, eyes, noses, and complexions.
When asked by Genii Guinier what she would like included in a biography about herself, Dorothy West suddenly became tongue-tied. Her first response was not to want one, it seemed, as though a biography would be too intrusive an incursion into her fragile subjectivity. "I don't know," she said. "Because I'm a very private person" (Oral 206). After considering the question a little more, however, she went right to the heart of what mattered most to her, her identity as a black woman, and how it might best be expressed. Prioritizing her life differently from the interview she had just given, she decided to set the record straight about her ancestry. Her preference, she said, was to honor her "American roots." By this she did not mean her Scottish great-grandfather for whom her great-grandmother bore eleven children without benefit of marriage (206). This "tenth of a quart of Scottish blood," she said, did not have "some yearning for Scotland" (207), did not have the need to assert its "whiteness." In other words, no "call of the [Scottish] blood" had roused in her a desire to know it. "[T]hat ancestor," her mother had told her, "was the meanest man this side of hell" (206-207). The brevity of the statement in no way mitigated the wrong she knew had been done to the women in her family. To clarify, West explained: "I don't mean that I'm interested just in my roots, but I mean, I am interested in black people a hundred years ago, or a hundred and fifty or so forth. And so, just like the novel I'm writing now [The Wedding], it begins about four generations ago—which is the point of it, that these were slaves—and in the end they are doctors...but they began as slaves" (207). Allowing the "writer" in her to complete this novel that was sixty-eight years in the making became the means by which West finally discovered and affirmed the strength of her cultural group. It became the mirror in which she could finally recognize her resemblance to the rest of her family and perceive the image of her own deeper self.

Dorothy West's fiction was primarily a quest for self-definition. Ultimately, she followed the path of Alex Haley and sought her "roots" across the generations in a slave past. In a life-long struggle with her mother's conflicted values, she came to embrace what her mother could not; she did so through a broad acceptance of her race with all its vagaries of color and mixed ancestry. At its best, Dorothy West's life was spent learning to recreate and then to love herself. And at its best, her fiction expressed that struggle to create and to love.
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