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Red by Association: New Negro Communism and  
Wallace Thurman's *The Blacker the Berry*

Maria Pack Milligan

A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

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## ABSTRACT

Red by Association: New Negro Communism and  
Wallace Thurman's *The Blacker the Berry*

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The decades following the collapse of the Soviet Union have seen an increased interest in uncovering the relationship between New Negro era authors and intellectuals and the radical leftism that had such a widespread influence in the twentieth century. Scholars are reanalyzing the life and works of figures like Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, W.E.B. Du Bois and others in light of each author's interaction with and acceptance of communist and socialist ideals. These studies trace these radical connections in an effort to better understand New Negro authors and their work during a time of revolution and social upheaval.

There is still much work to be done, however, in the study of those African American authors who were not directly allied with these movements, but nonetheless were vital voices in the radical atmosphere of the time. One such author is Wallace Thurman, an influential editor and writer who is connected to communism and socialism in undeniable ways, but also seems ideologically distant from his radical leftist peers. Examining Thurman's body of work as a part of a larger revolutionary trend reveals that though his views differed from and often reacted against communist rhetoric as he understood it, Thurman did use that rhetoric to form his own radical ideology.

Thurman's most famous novel, *The Blacker the Berry*, gives insight into both the radical change that the author hoped for, as well as his vision of the best way to bring about that change. The novel's protagonist, Emma Lou Morgan, represents those individuals who cannot quite manage to fit into a mass movement because her dark skin and psychological issues with her own race and skin color prevent her from easily molding herself to the ideals of others. Emma Lou's struggle for mental independence reveals that though Thurman longed for large-scale, radical reform, he also insisted that no such reform was possible without first helping individuals to overcome their personal psychological barriers.

This study of Thurman and his radicalism not only shows that not all revolutionaries of the time were communists, it also begins the work of tracing a New Negro radicalism that was connected to the communist and socialist movements, but also included veins unique to each author's social, racial, and geographic position.

Keywords: Wallace Thurman, *The Blacker the Berry*, New Negro, Communism, Radicalism

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Red by Association: New Negro Communism and Wallace Thurman's *The Blacker the Berry*

### **Thurman the Bolshevik? Reevaluating New Negro Radicalism**

In a 1926 *Messenger* article about visiting his hometown of Salt Lake City, Utah, after spending time away in Harlem, Wallace Thurman relates an interesting interchange with a man selling newspapers. Thurman, ever a voracious reader, had tried to buy what he calls his “regular quota of reading matter,” which included periodicals such as *The New Republic*, *The Nation*, *The Living Age*, *The Bookman*, *The Mercury*, and *The Saturday Review of Literature* (“Quoth” 91). After searching for these magazines in vain through every Salt Lake City newsstand, Thurman says, “At the only stand that had ever heard of these publications the proprietor advised me to pay him in advance and he would order them for me as he did for a few other of his customers who were crazy enough to read such junk. He capped it all by enquiring whether or not I was a Bolshevik” (91). Thurman does not elaborate on just what the vendor might have meant by “Bolshevik,” though in popular usage in the United States at the time the term was specifically used to refer to those sympathizers of Lenin and his Russian Social-Democratic Party who successfully took control of Russia after the October Revolution in 1917. More broadly, Americans were using the term to refer to communists in general (“Bolshevik”).<sup>1</sup> Though the incident is meant to convey the conservatism, “dullness and asininity” of Utah citizens (Thurman, “Quoth” 91), it does bring up an interesting question that has little to do with the reading habits of the people of Salt Lake City: just how much of a Bolshevik was Thurman?

Though Thurman's connections to communism, socialism, and the budding nation that would become the Soviet Union are hardly negligible, they are also complicated and contradictory. Thurman was never an official member of the CPUSA, nor did he make any reference to having attended any of the party meetings. Yet his connections to the movement are

many, if less direct than membership in the Communist Party. In 1925, Thurman became the managing editor of *The Messenger*, a magazine founded in 1919 by two young radicals who were inspired by the Russian socialist revolution and communist dream and used the magazine as a platform for their political ideals. Philip Randolph, one of these founding editors, still ran the magazine when Thurman came on board and still called himself a socialist.<sup>2</sup> Randolph was certainly not the only radical with whom Thurman associated. In fact, the author seemed surrounded by others far more invested in communism and the Soviet system than he was, including a mentor (Arna Bontemps), wife (Louise Thompson), roommate (Langston Hughes), and correspondent (Claude McKay). Each of these New Negro figures had direct connections with the Soviet Union, including (aside from Bontemps) traveling to Russia and other Soviet countries to see the promised racial equality in person.<sup>3</sup> These connections to communism appeared in Thurman's work as he wrote communist characters into his novels and mentioned communism in letters and essays throughout his life.

For each connection to communism in Thurman's life and work, however, there is also a sense of ideological distance between the author's views and those of his communist contemporaries. By the time Thurman joined the staff of *The Messenger* in 1925, the magazine had already given up many of its more radical stances.<sup>4</sup> By 1929 Thurman himself was describing the magazine as just "supposedly socialistic" ("Marcus" 277). This shift in the magazine's politics gave Thurman an opportunity to shape the magazine as he saw fit, and his focus was elsewhere than workers' rights and a communist revolution. In addition, though Thurman admired each of the communist intellectuals with whom he interacted, included some of Hughes's radical poetry in *The Messenger*, and in 1928 called McKay a "true revolutionary" ("Letters to W.E.B. Du Bois" 165), he did not seem to find the answer to his social concerns in

communism and the Soviet uprising. Each connection we find between Thurman and the radical leftism that so many of his peers embraced seems counterbalanced by an ideological difference that calls into question just how much Thurman embraced these ideas.

But do the complications inherent in Thurman's connections to radicalism mean that readers and scholars are better off ignoring them? As has been pointed out by scholars like Barbara Foley, William Maxwell, and James Smethurst, ignoring or apologizing for such connections was the default critical position for most of the span of the Soviet Union's existence.<sup>5</sup> In the aftermath of "Red Scare" politics in the twentieth century, first in the years following the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 and again after the Second World War, the trend among reviewers and critics was to ignore or explain away the connection of writers and organizations to communism and leftist radicalism. Because some of these critics saw communists as dangerous anti-capitalists, they assumed anyone associated with the radical movement (which, by definition now and at the time, called for a change at the root of something, "touching upon or affecting what is essential and fundamental" ["Radical"]) must be either deeply misguided or outright dangerous. So in order to distance African American authors from these stereotypes, many commentaries, especially from the end of World War II to the end of the Cold War, focus on the ways communism failed these authors instead of how the movement inspired them.<sup>6</sup> Others attribute the interest in radicalism as passing "postwar militancy" and prefer to focus instead on the aesthetic aspects of the Harlem Renaissance period (Foley 2).

The problem with these anti-communist or apologetic approaches, as Smethurst explained in 1999, is that they "reinforce the notion of black writers, and indeed all writers associated with the Left to one degree or another, as dupes or opportunistic cynics" (6).

Smethurst, along with Foley, Maxwell, Kate Baldwin and others, attempts to remedy this



misunderstanding and gap in scholarship by exploring the connections to communism and the Soviet Union that have been traditionally obfuscated but are nonetheless vital. Foley goes so far as to call the involvement of African Americans in leftist politics “one of the best-kept secrets of U.S. history” (viii). In studying the connections between communism and New Negro authors and intellectuals, these scholars have shown that leftist radicalism is too central an ideology to the understanding of many of these African American intellectuals to be ignored, explained away, or glossed over. Fortunately, in recent decades (especially after the fall of the Soviet Union and an uneven easing in American/Russian diplomatic relations), scholars have begun to examine the ties between African American literature and culture and communist and Soviet ideals and history.

In contributing to the growing body of work about the New Negro era and leftist radicalism, however, scholars like Maxwell and Foley have often largely focused their study on authors who had direct connections to the communist and socialist movements or the Soviet Union itself. On the one hand, this vein of research shows how deeply communism and the Soviet system impacted those authors who unmistakably embraced these revolutionary trends, including some highly influential figures in the New Negro movement, like Claude McKay and W.E.B. Du Bois. On the other hand, expanding our study of these kinds of radical movements to include authors who are not overt sympathizers to the communist cause changes our understanding of the New Negro era because it more accurately portrays the breadth of influence the revolutionary atmosphere of the time had on New Negro identity and literature. By including in this study of revolutionary trends authors with less direct ties to radical leftism, we arrive at a greater recognition that communism and the Soviet Union and the radical atmosphere of which they were a part had influence beyond those authors and figures in the New Negro movement

who joined the political party or traveled abroad to see the Soviet experiment in action. At the same time, tracing these connections shows us that not all radicals were communists, and other authors worked for radical change through different means. As we continue to peel back the social and political biases promoted by the Cold War, scholarship on the New Negro movement must place increased emphasis on tracing these radical connections in an effort to understand better the works and attitudes of New Negro authors during a time when revolution and social upheaval were a powerful reality.<sup>7</sup>

This article examines Wallace Thurman and his novel *The Blacker the Berry* (1929) as an integral part of the New Negro radicalism that also includes communism and the Soviet project. By drawing on Paul Giles's notion of parallax zones, I explore a series of indirect connections that occur in spheres in which there is "no spatial or corporeal proximity but, rather, an unsettling interplay between near and far" ("Antipodean" 23). Giles's conceptual lens is particularly fitting for this study because the complicated relationship between Thurman's life and work and the radical movements of the time seems to embody this "unsettling interplay between near and far." Though Thurman was not a communist and focused on individual progression more than mass movements, his dreams of the future often seemed more in line with those of his radical peers than those of his more conservative contemporaries, like Alain Locke. In drawing on the notion of parallax, I frame Thurman and the New Negro Soviet sympathizers as writing and agitating within separate zones, but both looking toward a common goal: the radical reorganization of social structures in order to achieve inter- and intra-racial equality. In doing so, I use the evidence that Thurman provides to extend the discussion of radicalism within the New Negro movement by including an author who may not have been a communist but was nonetheless a vital voice in the revolutionary vein of New Negro politics. In examining these revolutionary

parallax zones, I trace a radical vein in Thurman's work that may not be quite so apparent without an exploration of the author's connection to communism. I also explore Thurman's work as a way to understand how these political movements affected the African American community at large and how Thurman offered an alternative voice to the other radical trends of the time.

Drawing on sources including the works of Thurman's communist-sympathizer contemporaries, primary documents from the Soviet Union and the CPUSA, and the works that Thurman himself wrote, edited, or published, I argue that Thurman's work is both a product of and a reaction to the radical leanings of the time. Juxtaposing these two contemporary radicalisms shows that *The Blacker the Berry* critiques communism's proffered solution to racial and social discrimination and can be read as Thurman's own radical manifesto on the race question. In tracing these revolutionary connections, I depart from scholars who have presented *Blacker* as an autobiographical account of Thurman's struggle with his own blackness, a road map to the redefining of race, gender, and sexuality in Harlem, or even a much-needed examination of intra-racial prejudice.<sup>8</sup> A study of *Blacker* and Thurman's other writings, when framed in parallax with the Soviet and communist cultural influences of the 1920s, shows us that Thurman, although not a communist, was certainly a revolutionary in his own right in that he, too, pushed and hoped for radical social upheaval. Beyond changing our understanding of Thurman himself, these connections also open new areas of study between the New Negro movement and leftist radicalism that have been largely unexplored. Even as the Soviet revolution reshaped the radicalism of those who rallied behind the communist cause, other New Negro intellectuals, like Wallace Thurman, shaped forms of radicalism that are connected to Soviet communism and yet unique to each author's social, racial, and geographic position.

### **Parallax Prejudice: The Red Scare and Intra-Racial Stereotypes**

Thurman's novel tells the story of Emma Lou Morgan, a dark-skinned girl born in Idaho to an African-descended family obsessed with lightness. From her earliest memories, Emma Lou has been taught that she is doomed to fail because of the color of her skin. The book follows Emma Lou through her education in California and move to Harlem where she attempts to find success in her professional and private life. Unfortunately, to Emma Lou, personal success means marrying a lighter-skinned man so her children won't have to suffer as she has suffered, which leads her to go through a series of men who are clearly wrong for her: Weldon, a medical student turned Pullman porter who uses her because he wants companionship while passing through Boise (69), Benson, a perpetual student who is "as ugly as he is stupid" (202), and Alva, an alcoholic "sweetback" whose professions of love for Emma Lou always coincide with his need for money or a babysitter (207). The only thing these men have in common is their supposedly pleasing skin colors, ranging from the "deep burnish" of Weldon's bronze skin (62), to Alva's complexion that was "neither yellow or brown but something in between" (103), and even to Benson's near whiteness (201). Through these botched relationships and years of crippling insecurities, Thurman follows Emma Lou's progress as she faces the haunting reality of intra-racial prejudice both from those around her and from her own nurtured prejudices.

While the plot of *Blacker* does not seem immediately relevant to communism or socialism, Paul Giles's notion of parallax zones permits an exploration of the novel's crucial, if oblique, relations to these radical movements. Though Thurman was often in close physical proximity to New Negro communists and socialists, his ideology seems distant from that of his radical peers. However, because each of these points of view looks toward a common object—the radical reorganization of social structures in order to achieve inter- and intra-racial equality—

we can use their parallax relationship to gain a new perspective on both viewpoints. In describing parallax zones, Giles uses theorist Slavoj Žižek's critical method of parallax, which is the displacement of an object that occurs when we change our position of observation. While distant from each other, the two points of view have in common the object they point toward, though each sees that object differently. This commonality allows us to juxtapose two points that would otherwise seem distant and unrelated in order to move beyond traditional and often limited views and understandings of those points and their relation to each other. In his 2006 book *The Parallax View*, Žižek argues that this kind of parallax perspective is beneficial because "one of the most effective critical procedures [is] to cross wires that do not usually touch" (ix). In his own work, Giles shows the value of this critical procedure by adapting Žižek's method to juxtapose geographical areas which have no corporeal proximity, but which seem akin to each other in other historical, political, or cultural ways (*Global 222*; "Antipodean" 23). Giles insists that he does this "not to gloss over their local differences but to track the historically variable nature of their interrelationship and the complicated ways in which these domains have intersected over time" (*Global 222*).<sup>9</sup> Instead of using these parallax zones to juxtapose disparate geographical areas as Giles does, I use his concept to focus on the ideological parallax between Wallace Thurman and *Blacker* and the radical leftism of the time. With the juxtaposition of these two contemporary radicalisms, we can begin to appreciate the interdependencies between Thurman's writing and things Soviet and communist.

One insight we gain into Thurman's life and work from this theory of parallax zones that we may lack otherwise comes in the form of parallax prejudices. Several scholars have discussed the excitement and tumult surrounding 1917, which saw Marxist theories put into practice as Russian bolsheviks overthrew the tsarist regime and established a socialist government. This

revolution increased the excitement about and hope for the implementation of communism and socialism on a global scale.<sup>10</sup> As Soviet and communist influences increased, however, many officials and citizens feared that communism was a disease that would infect and destroy America and the world, and the chief carriers of this “Red virus” were immigrant workers.<sup>11</sup> This fear of radicalism built on the nativism that was already an American tradition to increase the sense that all things foreign were inherently threatening to those who found safety in one hundred percent Americanism.<sup>12</sup>

This is not to say that foreign phobia and nativism began with the birth of the Soviet Union. In fact, the fear and hatred of foreign races and classes that increased dramatically due to “Red Scare” politics had been going on for decades previously. For instance, well before the “Red Scare,” John Hobson explained in his 1901 book *The Psychology of Jingoism*, “the inverted patriotism whereby the love of one’s own nation is transformed into the hatred of another nation, and the fierce craving to destroy the individual members of that other nation, is no new thing” (1).<sup>13</sup> However, the heavy emphasis on the potential for a working class uprising that came with communism led to an escalation in this prejudice. The discontent among the working classes was closely aligned in many nervous officials’ minds with the discontent among African Americans in the face of racial prejudice, which led to the Red Scare being increasingly linked with racial unrest. In 1919, for example, the *New York Times* included an article that warned readers against the dangers of race riots and specifically linked these riots to the spread of Bolshevik propaganda: “When the ignorance that exists among Negroes in many sections of the country is taken into consideration the danger of inflaming them by revolutionary doctrine may be apprehended. It is held that there is no element in this country so susceptible to organized propaganda of this kind as the less informed class of ignorant Negroes” (“For Action”). This

widespread fear of Bolshevist propaganda and its potential to ensnare racial minorities led to more violence against African Americans. In fact, in his story, “Trial by Lynching,” which was first published in Moscow during his stay there, Claude McKay describes a man who joined the KKK “when the threat of Bolshevism appeared like a bomb with a lighted fuse” (10). That the fear of radicalism prompted this character to align himself with a group infamous for its racial prejudice shows just how far this anti-foreign prejudice had spread and become intra-national inter-racial prejudice. The increasing presence of communism and Bolshevism on the world stage led to increased racial prejudice and violence within the United States.<sup>14</sup>

Looking at the increased race prejudice and race-inspired violence in terms of Thurman and his novel gives us new insight into the phenomenon: what happens when a minority and persecuted race, which traditionally has sought entry into the United States’ dominant culture, finds itself in an atmosphere of fear and suspicion—especially when that fear is directed toward racial minorities as foreign elements? It is no surprise that African Americans were not immune to the phobia of all things foreign, and as we can see in Thurman’s life and works, these supposedly foreign elements could turn on each other as a result of the widespread panic.<sup>15</sup> This hysteria contributed to rifts within the African American community, and led to increased intra-racial prejudice. In *The Blacker the Berry* we see those from the south and those with darker skin as foreign elements,<sup>16</sup> a dangerous distinction in a time when foreignness was tantamount to treason.<sup>17</sup>

Emma Lou’s foreignness is continually reinforced in *The Blacker the Berry*. From the opening pages we learn that through Emma Lou’s veins flows “some of the best blood of the South” (28). On one level, this valorization of blood may seem analogous to the race-pride oriented “Race Catechism” published in the first issue of a pan-African nationalist magazine, *The*

*Crusader* (1918), which asks, “Why are you proud of your race?” and answers, “Because in the veins of no human being does there flow more generous blood than in our own; in the annals of the world the history of no race is more resplendent with honest, worthy glory than that of the Negro race” (“Race Catechism” II). Unfortunately for Emma Lou, the “best blood of the South” that her family is so proud of is actually the blood of “Marse George,” and her relatives’ pride comes from being more white than others of their race. In the eyes of her mother and grandmother, this makes them more fortunate than those who “could not boast of having been seduced by some member of southern aristocracy, or befriended by some member of a strolling band of Indians” (*Blacker* 30). Because Emma Lou’s family has some true 100% American (read: Anglo Saxon) blood (albeit diluted), they can lay claim to an American heritage that their darker counterparts cannot. It is as though a higher concentration of white blood makes one immune to what Foley has called the “virus of discontent” which so terrifies an America desperate to be cleared of foreign elements (140).<sup>18</sup> Unfortunately, because Emma Lou does not bear the visible signs of white blood that her family so cherishes, she is seen as a foreign element and is persecuted for it. Emma Lou’s family is terrified of being “classed with those hordes of hungry, ragged, ignorant black folk arriving from the South in such great numbers, packed like so many stampeding cattle in dirty, manure-littered box cars” (26), and Emma Lou is a too-present reminder of their own racial heritage. Thurman calls this intra-racial prejudice a “failing of man” (“Negro Life” 39),<sup>19</sup> and unfortunately, this “failing of man” seems particularly pronounced in the era when the world was at war, revolutions abounded, and some saw a growing Soviet influence as a dark threat on the horizon.



### Thurman Takes on Communism

The notion of parallax becomes especially useful in reshaping Thurman scholarship when we look beyond the repercussions of prejudice in each parallax zone and into the way Thurman's work and career challenge and differ from the communist ideas that he saw and understood in his peers' work. Thurman's unique perspective on radical change seems both connected to and distant from that of his communist peers. It is neither a stretch nor an artificial conceptual superimposition to put Wallace Thurman and these peers in parallax, since Thurman himself seems to keep communism at once present in his work but also separate from his philosophy. For example, Thurman includes a communist in the group of New Negro intellectuals and artists that form the backbone for his second novel, *Infants of the Spring* (1932). This radical, Glenn Madison, insists during intellectual discussions that African Americans should "join hands with the workers of the world and overthrow the present capitalistic regime" because they are, after all, "of the proletariat and must fight [their] battles allied with them, rather than singly and selfishly" (238). Raymond, the owner of the house that acts as a gathering place, responds quietly, "All of us?" while others laugh and brush Madison's comment aside (238-39). While these fictional New Negro artists and intellectuals coexist with the ideas of communism and respond to them (even if it is sometimes with derision), they tend to look at radicalism from a different vantage point, as shown by how often they ignore Madison's comments or quickly change the subject.

Before *Infants*, however, Thurman took on communism directly in an essay in his collection *Aunt Hagar's Children*,<sup>20</sup> establishing both his sympathy for the radical goal to reshape world politics and cultures and his skepticism that communism can actually accomplish that goal. In "The Coming Revolution" the author speaks of a "Communist friend" who spends hours trying to convince Thurman that communism is the way for African Americans to receive

equal political and social rights. In turn, Thurman responds that though he has little faith in a communist revolution (or any revolution, for that matter) to bring about lasting change, he does insist that he would gladly encourage African Americans to be part of the revolution if it would help them “for one moment emerge from their innate sluggishness, massacre their ministers, and perhaps, in the interim, give birth to a few exceptional individuals capable of arising above the mob, Communism, Christianity, and all other such doctrines to become master intellects and creative giants” (“Coming” 283). The author says that if a communist revolution were in fact capable of producing such superior individuals, “bring it on” (283).

This anecdote sets up Thurman’s own understanding of how he is looking at radical change from a different vantage point than his communist peers. From Thurman’s standpoint, communism was insufficient because it is incapable of bringing about true change, since it was simply replacing one misguided regime with another. However, Thurman was in agreement with his radical contemporaries in that he, like his communist friend, did not find capitalism to be the answer. After listening to protestations that communism is the way to free African Americans from social and political inequalities, the Thurman of “The Coming Revolution” wonders why they should “expect any more from such a possibility than [they] have already received from the substitution of so-called democracy for aristocracy” (283). Thurman longs for the “upheaval” of a revolution, but insists that communism “does not necessarily augur the coming of a millennium” (283). This attitude contradicts Alain Locke’s insistence that the feeling of race was “radical in tone but not in purpose” and that the New Negro was a “‘forced radical,’ a social protestant rather than a genuine radical” (11). While a so-called “genuine radical” seeks to attack the current regime at its roots and tear down American democracy, these “forced radicals” reach out “as yet to nothing but American wants, American ideas” (12). Far from valorizing American

ideas, Thurman instead questioned the “so-called democracy” and “so-called Christianity” that replaced the aristocracy and paganism of the past (“Coming” 283).

In another essay, Thurman disparages those of his race who merely “sought sympathy and pled for pity” and valorizes those like Claude McKay, who express their objections to social customs and race relations in “strong, biting language” (“Negro Poets” 208). Because McKay was a “fighting poet” who wrote “revolutionary-protest poetry” and refused to accept a system that encouraged racial inequities, he was for Thurman a true radical (208). Both in “The Coming Revolution” and his praise of Claude McKay, Thurman recognized that he and the communists had a similar radical end in mind: the overhauling of the present regime and a future in which people could rise above political restraints. His methods for getting there, however, differed in relation to his unique perspective on race and radicalism. Though this essay does not offer a specific alternative, *The Blacker the Berry* and Thurman’s other work trace Thurman’s radicalism. Examining Thurman’s body of work and influence shows us how his views differed from and in some cases reacted against communist rhetoric as he understood it to form his own radical ideology of individual independence to bring about mass change.

Thurman’s work at *The Messenger* provides a useful starting point for this study of parallax radicalisms because during his time as managing editor Thurman worked closely with Philip Randolph, one of the magazine’s founding editors who was once an open supporter of the Soviet Union and did not deny being a socialist even after he stopped using the magazine as a forum to voice his Soviet leanings. *The Messenger* also provided a valuable platform for social commentary because it was well-established as an influential forum for political and social thought.<sup>21</sup> Even as Randolph shied away from his more aggressively radical stances, his newly-hired managing editor was reinforcing a radicalism of his own. Though his time at *The*

*Messenger* was short lived, Thurman's influence on the magazine is clear in the shift from a periodical almost exclusive focused on workers' rights and the Pullman porters to one that was also concerned with publishing and celebrating the literary works of Negro artists. The first call for literary submissions came in the February 1926 issue, just two months after Thurman began his work as managing editor: "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" ("Announcement" 58). These calls continued until Thurman left the magazine halfway through 1926 (the last call of this kind was published in June of that year). Though Thurman's literary revolution of *The Messenger* was short lived, it did help the young editor shape two periodicals of his own: *Fire!!* and *Harlem: A Forum of Negro Life*. Each of these periodicals focused on the work of young African Americans artists and authors. In fact, they seemed to go in the direction that Thurman promised to take *The Messenger* just before he left. In the July 1926 issue, Thurman explained the necessity of a publication that would "keep the public apprised of current trends and, perhaps, serve as an agent provocateur for new energies and new aspirations" ("The Messenger" 209). As evidenced by his focus on literary submissions, Thurman hoped these "new energies and new aspirations" would spur New Negro culture and thought, in addition to getting the Pullman porters a living wage.

Thurman found an opportunity to develop his own radical periodicals when in 1926 he left *The Messenger* to edit and write for *Fire!!* and later *Harlem: A Forum of New Negro Life*. Though each of these magazines failed after only one issue due to financial problems, they gave Thurman the chance to shape his own radicalism as it grew out of his opinions and those of the other younger New Negro artists with whom he was closest.<sup>22</sup> Because *Fire!!* came on the heels of *The Messenger* it seemed to be a continuation of what Thurman started in his work on the

once-socialist magazine. The subtitle of *Fire!!*, “Devoted to Younger Negro Artists” seemed to echo Langston Hughes’s credo published in *The Nation* five months before the publication of this new journal:

We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn’t matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly, too. The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs. If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn’t matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves. (“Negro” 694)

The inner strength that Hughes calls for and celebrates came with the individual expression that *Fire!!* encouraged. Thurman not only endorsed the validity of this expression by creating two periodicals as platforms for individual thought and experience; he went so far as to say in a 1929 letter to William Jourdan Rapp that “It has always been my theory that a Negro who achieved personal success could fight his way past racial barriers. I still believe in that despite my own disillusionment on many occasions” (Thurman, “Letters to William” 135). Thurman doesn’t explain what he means by “personal success,” but since it is a letter to Rapp, with whom Thurman worked on various scripts for plays, he may have been referring to publishing or producing literary or theatrical works.

Initially, this may seem like an iteration of the “American Dream” of social mobility. As long as Thurman and those like him work hard enough, they can overcome any difficulty. However, it is key here that personal success does not guarantee the achievement of freedom from racial barriers; instead, it gives people the ability to fight their way past barriers. After

asserting his conviction that personal success has this effect, Thurman goes on to tell Rapp about countless instances in which the author had encountered inter- and intra-racial prejudice because of his especially dark skin (135-36). There are clearly still social problems that impede racial equality, but Thurman is convinced that if African Americans can achieve personal success, they will be in a much better place to fight these prejudices.

In *Fire!!* and *Harlem* Thurman offered his young peers the chance to achieve this personal success by publishing works that expressed their individual convictions. Thurman hoped that by so doing he could encourage others who read these publications to act to create change. In his editorial essay in *Harlem*, Thurman says the journal “[w]ants to impress upon the literate members of the thirteen million Negroes in the United States . . . the necessity of sublimating their inferiority complex and their extreme race sensitiveness and putting the energy, which they have hitherto used in moaning and groaning, into more concrete fields of action” (“Editorial” 217-18). Though Thurman supported the idea of social revolution, he argued that no concrete action or revolution of societal norms could be taken until these men and women overcome their psychological and social struggles with their own race. Through Thurman’s influence in *The Messenger* and on into *Fire!!* and *Harlem*, it became clear that the author felt he could have the most influence to change things for the better by exposing the public to works of literature and art, since he felt they could help eliminate this inferiority complex.

It seems only fitting, then, that if we want to see just how Wallace Thurman’s brand of radicalism offers an alternative view to that of his communist peers we must look to the literature that he produced. So what is it in *Blacker the Berry*, published two years after *Fire!!* and two months after *Harlem* that offers a different method than that of communism to achieve a radical result? The most recognizable theme in the novel—intra-racial prejudice—is not particularly

revolutionary by itself. In fact, Thurman had read several other works that focus on the same theme. During Thurman's time as managing editor of *The Messenger*, the magazine included poems and stories about the injustices of this prejudice. In a satirical section written by George Schuyler in 1926, we hear about a girl who bears a striking resemblance to the Emma Lou that would be introduced to the world three years later. Schuyler says of his dark-skinned heroine, "Heroically had she swallowed arsenic tablets and used every other known (and unknown) means of lightening her skin, but after two years of earnest application she had only attained a facial hue two shades lighter than her upper arms" (307). Later, Thurman would include in *Fire!!* a story by Zora Neale Hurston about another Emma that is also obsessed with her own dark skin color, to the detriment of her happiness and success in life (7).

Even *The Messenger's* need to bring in advertising revenue may have provided inspiration for Thurman's novel. Based on his own awareness of intra-racial prejudice, Thurman must have noticed that in the months during and surrounding his time as editor, *The Messenger* was filled with advertisements for and descriptions of skin-lightening methods and effects. The back page of every issue of *The Messenger* during Thurman's tenure carried an advertisement that claimed that "No greater force is working to glorify the womanhood of our Race than Madam C. J. Walker's Wonderful Hair and Skin Preparations" (Madam 160), which treatments included a cream called "Tan-off" that promises to remove unsightly dark pigmentation in the skin. And, in a poem that he published in *Fire!!* Langston Hughes refers to "a passing girl / With purpled powdered skin" ("Railroad" 21). So, in spite of the critical commonplace regarding *Blacker's* innovations of the thematic of intra-racial prejudice, the fact that Thurman portrays a dark-skinned character who is ashamed by and averse to her own and others' blackness is not what makes his novel so unique.

What sets *The Blacker the Berry* apart from these other commentaries on intra-racial prejudice is that with a view into Emma Lou's psyche and situation comes a sense that Thurman's character could defy prejudice as easily as she reinforces it if she chose to do so. The tragedy here is that as walking proof that intelligence and worth are not directly correlated to skin color, Emma Lou has the potential to be a destabilizing force that convinces others to rethink their assumptions. Because Emma Lou cannot change her own mind about color prejudice, however, she cannot act as a catalyst for change. As Emma Lou leaves to nurse the light-skinned Alva and risks her reputation and career in the process, Gwendolyn, Emma Lou's friend and neighbor at the Y.W.C.A., says in a rage, "There's probably something in this stuff about black people being different and more low than other colored people. You're just a common ordinary nigger! God, how I despise you!" (208). Gwendolyn has always insisted that she is free of the intra-racial prejudice that is so rampant in Emma Lou's life, but here she resorts to the rhetoric of others around her because she does not know how to deal with an Emma Lou that seems determined to reinforce the prejudicial paradigms that she so resents.

Intra-racial prejudice from those around her is a factor in Emma Lou's inability to break out of her situation, but it is not the only cause, since so many of her poor decisions come from her own sense of inferiority. No wonder Thurman expressed disappointment in *Blacker* later in the same year it was published. In the autobiographical "Notes on a Stepchild," Thurman says the novel was interesting only because he had exposed conditions "to which Negroes choose to remain blind and about which white people remain in ignorance. But in doing this he realized that he had fixed the blame for these conditions on race prejudice, which manifestation of universal perversity hung like a localized cloud over his whole work" (444). Though race prejudice is certainly a problem worth battling, Thurman seems to argue here that there is more



to the problem than this prejudice. The “cloud” of unrealized potential surrounding *Blacker* comes from the insistence that it is about race prejudice and nothing more.

Putting *The Blacker the Berry* in parallax with what Thurman saw and heard from his communist peers can help us discover what the novel has to offer along with and beyond a critique of race prejudice. Taking a parallax view also helps us see how Thurman’s road to revolution differed from that of his communist peers, since many of the methods for social change and equality that Thurman critiqued in his novel are those methods that his communist acquaintances emphasized. First of all, financial independence and education don’t help Emma Lou gain the equality she is looking for. Thurman saw several claims in his time at *The Messenger* that economic equality and upheaval were the answers to the race problem. In an advertisement in *The Messenger*, advertisers claim that *The Modern Quarterly* is “The only radical and revolutionary magazine in America that is avowedly inter-racial, prints articles by Negroes in every issue, and sees economic revolution as the only solution to the ‘race problem’” (Modern 159). This insistence that social advancement through economic revolution will solve the race problem continues in the magazine as Frank R. Crosswaith argues that what sets the New Negro apart “is not so much his classical adventures as it is his gallant strides made in understanding the social system under which he lives and in a realization of the tremendous importance of economics in an effort adequately to solve what is loosely termed the ‘Negro Problem’” (173).

Thurman’s peers weren’t the only ones making this argument. In fact, Thurman himself made a similar claim in an editorial in *The Messenger* just before leaving. He assured the readers of this magazine that within its pages they will find “expert dissertations on economic current of Negro life, which current is manifesting itself more and more as THE current” (“The Messenger”

209). Yet despite the fact that Thurman's socialist peers and acquaintances, and Thurman himself at one point, were insisting that the economic problem was the root of the other problems African Americans faced, this is not the case for Emma Lou. Her suffering has more to do with individual and cultural attitudes than her economic condition. Emma Lou cites the advice of Campbell Kitchen, her employer and mentor, who tells her that "economic independence was the solution to almost any problem. When she found herself a well-paying position she need not worry more. Everything else would follow and she would find herself among the pursued instead of among the pursuers," and Emma Lou embraces this idea (*Blackler* 200). Later, however, once the heroine gains that independence, she realizes "Campbell Kitchen had told her that when she found economic independence, everything else would come. Well now that she had economic independence she found herself more enslaved and more miserable than ever" (212). The key comes as Emma Lou wakes up to the horror of her situation and determines to make more productive changes. She thinks, "If people came into her life—well and good. If they didn't—she would live anyway, seeking to find herself and achieving meanwhile economic and mental independence" (217). As Thurman's communist peers tout economic independence as the path to social equality, Thurman argues that economic independence means nothing without mental independence, and it is this mental independence that the author makes the first step in his glorious revolution.

As he pushes for this mental independence, Thurman also reacts against what he sees as the homogenization of a mass movement that comes before the individual members of such a mass achieve this mental independence. In "The Coming Revolution," Thurman's communist friend envisions a utopia in which "the doctrine of equal social and political rights for Negroes would be so thoroughly inculcated into the masses that they would soon accept it as a natural

course of events. Inter-marriage would be urged to bring about assimilation and closer relationships between the races” (283). Thurman smiles, yawns, and responds that his friend’s “faith in the masses is a rather naïve illusion,” and sarcastically asks him “when the masses have ever been anything but sheep following the leader who happened to ring the loudest bell” (283). We see another answer to this utopia in Emma Lou’s experience. This inter-marriage and “assimilation” have been her family’s dominant philosophy for generations. Instead of increasing inter- and intra-racial understanding, however, this philosophy has made it impossible for Emma Lou’s family to accept her because she does not fit the homogenized mass. Because her family members have passed their color prejudices on to Emma Lou, she persistently feels like a “fly in a pan of milk” (*Blacker 22*), a perpetual outsider in the world that she should be a part of. As she buys into the utopia of the homogenous mass, Emma Lou shuts herself out from her own happiness.

### **Fighting for Mental Independence**

Looking at Thurman in parallax with communism and socialism illuminates not only Thurman’s answer to the problem of racial and social inequality, but also how that answer grows out of an atmosphere of mass social movements and revolution. Emma Lou’s situation is the counterpoint to the argument that if everyone would immediately join these radical movements, the world would progress to universal equality. Thurman insists that until Emma Lou can be free of her own mental barriers, no mass movement can save her. Emma Lou is not only broken down and imprisoned by the corrupt system that supports inter- and intra-racial prejudice, but by her own mental barriers. Like his communist peers, Thurman wants to free Emma Lou from the prison walls that enclose her, but in this case he focuses on first breaking down mental barriers before any mass social change can be accomplished. While Thurman’s fictional communist

Glenn Madison insists that it is better to “join hands with the workers of the world” than fight “singly and selfishly” (*Infants* 238), and while socialist Randolph’s *Messenger* calls all Pullman porters that wish to be a “real man and brother” to join the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (Brotherhood 158), Thurman’s Emma Lou stands desperately in need of an individual revolution. Where the communists call for a revolution to throw off the shackles of capitalism and economic inequality, Thurman calls first for a revolution to release individual talents and intelligence from the barriers of stigma and prejudice that hold them back.

In tracing Emma Lou’s struggle for freedom, *The Blacker the Berry* shows how Thurman reshapes the course of revolution by pushing against the idea of individuals joining mass movements before they have come to understand their own desires, needs, and prejudices. Every time Emma Lou attempts to join one group or another, either its prejudices or her own hold her back. The first “mass” movement that fails to free Emma Lou is that of the blue vein society, made up of people determined to band together under the flag of whiteness and eliminate all darker elements. From their motto, “Whiter and whiter every generation” (*Blacker* 29) to their desperate flight “to the Rocky Mountain states which were too far away for the recently freed slaves to reach” (26), the founders of the blue vein society have done their best to set themselves apart from the darker members of their race. Because the past has held suffering and heartache, the members of the blue vein society set themselves up as the opposite of the unappealing system (or culture) of the past (blackness) and gathers under the common flag of lightness.

Emma Lou has been so indoctrinated in this ideology that she sees her dark color as a prison. Between her blue vein family and her abusive stepfather, whose greatest wish had been “to pass for white and march unhindered by bars of color to fame and fortune” (32), the color line for Emma Lou is a wall, imposing and impenetrable. The prison imagery here parallels that

of W.E.B. Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk*, when he says, “The shades of the prison-house closed round about us all: walls strait and stubborn to the whitest, but relentlessly narrow, tall, and unscalable to sons of night who must plod darkly on in resignation, or beat unavailing palms against the stone, or steadily, half hopelessly, watch the streak of blue above” (8). Emma Lou is firmly trapped by this prison because the blue-vein movement she so wants to be a part of cannot account for a family member who should by blood have automatic admittance to this society but whose dark skin represents everything the movement stands against. Hence, though Emma Lou believes in the blue vein theory that light skin is better, she is inherently an outcast from it since despite employing every means possible to lighten her skin (including “bleachings, scourgings, and powderings”), Emma Lou’s color has remained unaffected (*Blacker* 21). Emma Lou represents everything her family members and the blue vein society have set themselves up in opposition against, so she cannot fit into the ideology they have created. In this case, Emma Lou fails to join the movement because her visible difference from the other members of her family makes it too difficult for her to conform to a movement devoted to similarity and whiteness.

Emma Lou is not only inhibited by the color of her skin, however. She is also prevented from a connection to others by the barriers against blackness that she has built up in her own mind. These barriers are clearly illustrated by Emma Lou’s experience with Weldon at the town picnic. Weldon “led her to a huge boulder which jutted out, elbow like, from the side of a hill, and which was hidden from the meadow below by clumps of bushes” and “as the darkness of night more and more conquered the evanescent light of day, their lips met, and Emma Lou grew lax in Weldon’s arms . . .” (63). In this place where bushes shield her from the disapproval of her family Emma Lou can dream of future happiness, unmarred by racial prejudice. Because the sexual act is elided, it may represent the freedom that Emma Lou has so longed for, in which her

skin color doesn't preclude her from happiness. After the ellipsis, however, the problem of barriers still persists. It is interesting that though the darkness of night is the power that enables Emma Lou to have this moment of joy and hope, there is no room for darkness (or blackness) in the dream future that Emma Lou envisions: "A glorious panorama of the future unrolled itself in her mind. There were no black spots in it, no shadows, nothing but luminous landscapes, ethereal in substance" (64). Joining Weldon behind the bushes has not changed Emma Lou's conviction that anything dark is inherently a blemish in her life and on her future. She cannot envision inter- and intra-racial equality because her dream world still excludes the blackness that she so laments. Emma Lou's dreams of this beautiful white future slip away as she emerges from this experience to find herself still stuck in a cycle of self-hatred and intra-racial prejudice. Even after the sexual encounter that seems to promise acceptance and freedom, Emma Lou is still trapped by her own mental understanding of freedom, which has no room for darkness and thus no room for her.

After firmly establishing the presence of Emma Lou's mental barrier, Thurman continues to illustrate the dangers of an undifferentiated mass movement when such barriers exist. In later attempts to find a group to which she can belong, Emma Lou gives in to the idea that the way to inclusion is assimilation. In an effort to gain inclusion into the groups that she admires as the "right sort of people" (46), she imitates those who exclude her. Because the world in which she resides despises those with dark skin pigmentation, Emma Lou treats these darker-skinned students and associates as the enemy, and struggles with them accordingly. When Hazel, a dark-skinned southern student, begins to follow her around, Emma Lou "resented being approached by any one so flagrantly inferior, any one so noticeably a typical southern darky, who had no business obtruding into the more refined scheme of things" (42). In the attempt to include herself in the group of those who "matter," Emma Lou puts herself in opposition to those who, like her,

are not included. Thurman says of this act, “Emma Lou was essentially a snob. She had absorbed this trait from the very people who had sought to exclude her from their presence” (50). So used to her own exclusion at the hands of others, Emma Lou seeks to succeed by excluding others. How is Emma Lou to join with “the workers of the world” (or students, in this case) as communist character Glenn Madison desires, if by supporting their values she also excludes herself?

Emma Lou’s attempts to join a group or find a movement to which she can belong leave her frustrated and no better off because she is still lacking the mental independence that Thurman values. What would have happened to Thurman’s heroine if she had focused her efforts on radical introspection, instead of on finding others to boost her up? Had she embraced the ideas of universal equality not just for masses of people, but first for herself, could Emma Lou have moved beyond her own prejudices and created lasting change? Interestingly, the way Emma Lou reinforces the same stereotypes that she fights against seems akin to a complaint many had about the Soviet Union, which could also be applied to McCarthyists and others trying to fundamentally change attitudes and actions. Žižek says of the 1928 Stalinist revolution, “In all its brutal radicality, *it was not radical enough* in effectively transforming the social substance” (*In Defense* 152). Instead of creating truly revolutionary change, Stalin settled for killing millions by means of forced collectivization, man-made famine, and ruthless prison camps. Increasingly, Stalin was guilty of the same top-down control that made the working class revolt against the Tsar in the first place. Because the Soviet state did not go far enough, nor in the right direction, Žižek argues that it failed to create real, lasting change or break down the oppressive systems the revolutionaries fought against (152).

Though it may seem untenable to compare Stalin's atrocities to Emma Lou's struggle for a legitimate voice and presence in a culture that rejects her for her skin color, Žižek's condemnation of the Soviet system can also describe Thurman's protagonist: as she fights for opportunity and equality she is "*not radical enough*" for Thurman because she fails to achieve lasting change, at least within the pages of the novel. Though Emma Lou feels deeply the injustice of being judged based solely on skin color, instead of confronting this injustice directly she veers off into elitism and intra-racial prejudice, thus reinforcing the prison-like walls of opposition that have created inequality in the first place. Though Emma Lou does not recognize her own power to bring down intra-racial prejudice and her own mental dependence on her family's opinions throughout the novel, there is hope that in the end she may yet do so. As she wakes up to the reality of her self-destructive life with Alva, Emma Lou finds herself questioning the belief system and "blue-vein" society that she has fought so long to be a part of. She is "tired of running up blind alleys all of which seemed to converge and lead her ultimately to the same blank wall" (*Blacker* 217-18). Though Emma Lou has been grappling with this wall the entire novel, for the first time we see her face her own intra-racial prejudice directly, instead of relying on the people she tries to either alienate or befriend in order to conquer the problem. She muses, "After all, it was the end that mattered, and one only wasted time and strength seeking facile open-sesame means instead of pushing along a more difficult and direct path" (217). For Emma Lou, this path must mean moving beyond her own mental barriers first, since failing to do so has made all her other efforts ineffective.

Of course, it is impossible to be sure where Emma Lou's "difficult and direct path" will lead. The vague, uncertain ending, however, may be what makes Thurman's work so valuable and honest. The complexity of these racial and situational constructions leaves us hoping that



Emma Lou will get past her own color prejudices, while recognizing that Thurman does not pretend that the problems of race can necessarily be solved by one woman deciding in a small, dingy apartment with a no-good drunk lover that she may let go of the racial barriers that have caused her so much grief. Thurman's radical view still points toward a massive reorganization of the social structure, which can't be accomplished by Emma Lou herself. She can, however, participate in making a change as she pushes along that difficult path to first achieve mental independence and then move to the mass revolution Thurman longs for in "The Coming Revolution."

Thurman's unique view in contrast to the radical mass movements of his peers is best explained by Raymond in *Infants of the Spring*, who argues,

One cannot make movements nor can one plot their course. When the work of a given number of individuals during a given period is looked at in retrospect, then one can identify a movement and evaluate its distinguishing characteristics.

Individuality is what we should strive for. Let each seek his own salvation. To me, a wholesale flight back to Africa or a wholesale allegiance to Communism or a wholesale adherence to an antiquated and for the most part ridiculous propagandistic program are all equally futile and unintelligent. (240)

Thurman's character seems to argue, like Thurman, that until others like Emma Lou can reach a level of mental independence that allows for creativity and progress, there will be no effective mass movement. This offers an alternative point of view to that of Thurman's radical peers, many of whom push for "wholesale allegiance to Communism" as a way to overcome individual challenges. Emma Lou's experience in *Blacker* is a reinforcement of Thurman's non-communist radical viewpoint in response and opposition to the communist and socialist ideals of immediate

mass radical movements because she represents the needs of individuals who do not easily shape themselves to fit the demands of such a movement. Perhaps because Thurman had his own experiences of not fitting in easily to other groups, his perspective allowed him to emphasize this critical first step to revolution.

### **Radical Literature for Radical Change**

So Thurman, looking forward to radical change from his unique viewpoint, insisted that a mass movement will accomplish nothing unless there is first a change in individual understanding and attitudes. In the preface to *Aunt Hagar's Children*, Thurman speaks of himself in the third-person:

He has no panaceas to offer, no sure-fire theories for the solution of the race problem. In fact he considers those items to be of secondary importance, for it seems to him that the so-called Negro problem resolves itself more and more into a personal matter for each and every Aframerican. Those who can escape will.

Those who cannot must suffer the consequences. (Author's Preface 234)

When Thurman looked at the other radical movements of the time, he decided they were incapable of transforming the African American experience because in his mind there was no one solution that would prepare every individual to push for radical change. At the same time, Thurman encouraged the revolutionary atmosphere that forced African Americans to “emerge from their innate sluggishness” (“Coming” 283) and make a change. In order to inspire the mental independence that would support revolutionary change, Thurman turned to literature. Rather than publishing political tracts or radical calls to arms, Thurman preferred the stories of individuals who grapple with these larger issues within themselves. Seeing the stories of individuals could inspire other individuals to look inward, instead of first to the masses to secure

happiness and success. While he (correctly) predicted that there would be no American communist revolution in his own lifetime (“Coming” 283), Wallace Thurman did see hope that as more young Negro artists published their work and told their own individual stories and those of their characters, they could help themselves and others achieve the mental independence for which Thurman advocated. At the same time, Thurman’s push for radical social change shows that the radical movements of communism and socialism had a far greater impact than just winning people to the communist cause. In fact, the spread of these movements created an atmosphere of radical possibilities for which some may not have dared hope otherwise. The Russian revolution, for example, inspired Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, W.E.B. Du Bois and others to look to a communist model for a radical shift toward equality in racial politics. Socialism inspired the young Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen to publish a magazine that fearlessly tackled issues of race and radicalism in an attempt to improve working conditions. And all the talk of revolution inspired Wallace Thurman to push the literature of young Negro artists into the spotlight so it could take a more central role in bringing about lasting change.

In a tribute to Thurman after his death, Dorothy West said, “He was our leader, and when he died, it all died with him” (80). But what was it about Thurman’s death that led to the death of an era in West’s mind? Perhaps it was the loss of an editor with a focused determination to create and publish periodicals written by young, experimental Negro artists. Perhaps it was the death of an author who was determined to write both beautiful and socially relevant prose. Either way, in dying young, Wallace Thurman deprived the New Negro movement (of which he was reluctantly and unintentionally a part<sup>23</sup>) of a true revolutionary. Viewing this radicalism from parallax zones—radical communism on one hand and radical New Negro aesthetics on the other—offers a window onto a New Negro landscape that is less confined by ideological or physical borders

than it has previously been. Without this view of Thurman's radicalism in parallax with communism, it is difficult to see the radical end of his focus on individualism. Not only does understanding Thurman's radicalism expand Thurman scholarship, it also adds breadth to the study of New Negro radicalism in general.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Thurman himself uses the term “Bolshevists” in reference to political radicals in his 1926 *Messenger* article, “In the Name of Purity.” He mocks the government for a war-time measure “prohibiting the admittance of anyone who might preach a doctrine subversive to the best interests of the government of the United States” and claims “[t]his bill was specifically aimed at Bolshevists” (86).

<sup>2</sup> In the December 1926 issue of *The Messenger*, Randolph not only said, “I am a Socialist,” but went on to claim that “some of the world’s greatest minds are socialist” (“A. Philip Randolph” 381). He insists in June of the next year, on the other hand, that the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, the promotion of which had become *The Messenger*’s chief concern, was most decidedly not affiliated with the Soviets: “The old bogey, manufactured out of whole cloth, that your movement was ‘red,’ inspired by Moscow, has been completely exploded and retired forever” (“State” 185). Though socialists and Soviets are not the same thing, it is interesting that Randolph had become so eager to distance himself from the Soviet Union.

<sup>3</sup> Kate Baldwin has researched these visits (especially McKay’s and Hughes’s) extensively and describes the events and their effects in her book. See McKay and Hughes 25-148 and Louise Thompson 22.

<sup>4</sup> Historian Theodore Kornweibel says of Philip Randolph, one of these founding editors who was a sympathizer of the Soviet cause in 1919, that “out of practical necessity Randolph shelved his earlier radicalism in the hopes of being more successful in organizing black workers to gain entry into the mainstream labor movement. It would have been counterproductive to staff a union or movement with radical members and garb it with revolutionary doctrine, for there were enough obstacles of race to want to avoid the additional one of radicalism” (189).

<sup>5</sup> See Foley 1-69, Baldwin 1-24, Maxwell 1-12, and Smethurst 1-17.

<sup>6</sup> Maxwell describes the way these post World War II commentaries focus on the “[m]anipulation, disillusionment, and betrayal” and thus fuel the second red scare (see 2-3).

<sup>7</sup> This approach offers an interesting contrast to Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s argument in “The Trope of a New Negro and the Reconstruction of the Image of the Black.” Gates traces the development of the trope of the New Negro from the way radical socialists used it to encourage African Americans to stand up for themselves to Alain Locke’s “measured coopting of the term from its fairly radical political connotations” for his own literary movement (135). Thurman, with his emphasis on literary works, may seem to fall into Locke’s camp, but a study of this young author’s radical leanings shows that his version of racial progress differs from both of these definitions of the New Negro. Studying Thurman can add another layer to our understanding of what the New Negro did and does represent.

<sup>8</sup> On *Blacker* and Thurman’s struggle with his own blackness, see Davis. On *Blacker* as a road map to Harlem’s race, gender, and sexuality issues, see Scott. On *Blacker* and the question of intra-racial prejudice, see Du Bois, “Browsing,” as well as Thompson and Keith.

<sup>9</sup> This statement comes after Giles explains the relationship of South America and the American South. This study proves fruitful because “it is the ways in which any given region configures itself in relation to the world around it that determines its internal sense of its own identity” and often that identity does not conform to “the spatial coordinates of U.S. national agendas” (222). In putting these two regions in parallax, Giles is able explore their historically significant interrelationship.

<sup>10</sup> See Foley 8-69, Maxwell 15-61, and Baldwin 1-24.

<sup>11</sup> Foley talks about this “Red virus” phenomenon and its implications in foreign and domestic racial and cultural attitudes and policy extensively in *Spectres*, 11-12 and 139-151.

<sup>12</sup> See Foley 139.

<sup>13</sup> Richard Gambino describes the result of this fear and prejudice before the Red Scare in his book, *Vendetta: The True Story of the Largest Lynching in U.S. History*. The book tells the story of the 1891 mass murder of Italians in New Orleans. The racial prejudice against Italians at the time was so bad that when President Harrison called the mass murder “an ‘offense against law and humanity,’ there was talk in Congress of impeaching him” (5).

<sup>14</sup> The connection between the Soviet Union and African Americans was not only propagated by those in the United States who bought into this foreign phobia. The Soviet Union itself played an integral role in tying radical foreignness and blackness together in what communists called the “Black Belt Nation” thesis, published in the *The Daily Worker*, the newspaper that was the organ of the CPUSA, in February of 1929. Officially called “The 1928 Comintern Resolution on the Negro Question in the United States,” this thesis asserts that the Negro workers had

reached a stage of development which enables [them], if properly organized and well led, to fulfill successfully [their] double historical mission: (a) To play a considerable role in the class struggle against American imperialism as an important part of the American working class; and (b) To lead the movement of the oppressed masses of the Negro population. (3)

The Soviets saw great potential in the black working classes to fight for a socialist uprising. The Soviets spoke of the African Americans in the “Black Belt” in much the same way they talked about the suffering serfs working under a feudal tsarist regime: “American imperialism utilizes

every possible form of slave exploitation (peonage, share-cropping, landlord supervision of crops and marketing, etc.) for the purpose of extracting super-profits” (14). This kinship with Russian serfs, though comforting for those African Americans who sympathized with communist ideals, would have proven terrifying for American officials and citizens who thought a red revolution would spell the end of all things right and good in the nation. Foley talks about this thesis, its origin and repercussions. See 15-16.

<sup>15</sup> Theodore Kornweibel says of this trend, “With this mentality given public sanction, it should come as no surprise that black Americans, too, were sucked into the vortex of popular hysteria, xenophobia, and paranoid suspicion. After all, nativism and intolerance of the foreigner and foreign, subversive ideas were no white Anglo-Saxon monopoly” (10).

<sup>16</sup> Thurman himself may have felt like a foreigner in the Harlem he called home. In *Blacker*, as Emma Lou is making her way around the rent party, Truman Walter (representing Thurman himself), confesses to Cora Thurston (Zora Neale Hurston) that he does not know what hoppin’-john is, to which Cora replies disdainfully, “Another one of these foreigners,” and goes on to ask “Didn’t they have any out in Salt Lake City?” (150). Brian Russell Roberts explains Thurman’s (and Emma Lou’s) status as an outsider in this scene in more detail (95). Because both Thurman and Emma Lou are foreign elements in the Harlem scene, they may seem susceptible to the radical virus that runs rampant among those who are not viewed as completely American.

<sup>17</sup> One of the most famous examples of this crime of foreignness is the trial and execution of Nicola Sacco and Bartolemeo Vanzetti, who were convicted of a murder they maintained they did not commit. After their execution, they became symbols of working class martyrs and heroes



who were persecuted for their race and political standpoint. For more on this trial and its effects on race and international relations, see Lyons 7-10 and 199-206.

<sup>18</sup> It is an interesting irony that as the members of Emma Lou's family were doing their best to be as mulatto as possible, the United States government was getting rid of the mulatto category from the census and grouping all African Americans together. See Foley 123.

<sup>19</sup> Thurman also speaks of the cause of this failing: "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" 44).

<sup>20</sup> Thurman completed this book of essays in 1929, but did not see it published in his lifetime. He did, however, send the manuscript to Langston Hughes and others that year to read ("Letters to Langston" 126).

<sup>21</sup> In the same month that Thurman started work on *The Messenger*, Randolph called the magazine "a journal which is recognized by the scholars and thinkers of America and Europe as constituting the biggest, most constructive and enduring contribution to the social, political, and economic thought of the race in the last twenty years, if, indeed, not in its entire history" ("Reply" 379).

<sup>22</sup> For more on these magazines, their inspiration and influence, see Singh and Scott 2 and 18-19.

<sup>23</sup> In a letter to Claude McKay, Thurman says of his own career, "Three years have seen me become a New Negro (for no reason at all and without my consent)" ("To Claude McKay" 17).

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