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New Women and New Negroes: Archetypal Womanhood in *The Living Is Easy*

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Cleo, walking carefully over the cobblestones that tortured her toes in her stylish shoes, was jealous of all the free-striding life around her. She had nothing with which to match it but her wits. Her despotic nature found Mr. Judson a rival. He ruled a store and all the people in it. Her sphere was one untroublesome child, who gave insufficient scope for her tremendous vitality. —Dorothy West, *The Living Is Easy* (1948)

In her novel *The Living Is Easy*, Dorothy West depicts protagonist Cleo Jericho Judson as a woman who, in attitude as well as attire, is fundamentally at odds with her society's gendered division of space and labor. Physically marked as alien to the world of public commerce, Cleo derides the social order that limits her access to the marketplace and relegates her to the home. If Cleo's narcissistic efforts to extend her influence beyond the domestic sphere render her an atypical heroine, they also render her an ideal character through which to revisit the gender politics of African American modernism. Cleo's poor fit within her pre-World War I context raises the question of how late 19th- and early 20th-century ideals of womanhood and racial citizenship colluded to circumscribe women's identities, narrowly defining their roles even as the dawn of New Negrohood promised African Americans greater self-determination and social mobility. The empowered, independent woman whom West creates in Cleo marks a significant break with the masculinist archetypes of canonical African American modernism. Indeed, one is more likely to locate this unconventional modernist subject in the company of another, more subversive, turn-of-the-century archetype: the New Woman.

Let me caution from the outset that my intent here is not to create a totalizing, all-representative model that might be christened New Black Woman, but rather to explore the usefulness of deploying New Womanhood as a means of differently articulating black women's identities in the modernist period. In her study of the British New Woman, Ann Heilmann offers the following character sketch: "The harbinger of cultural, social and political transformations, the New Woman epitomized the spirit of the *fin de siècle*. Her political demands reflected the crisis of the *ancien régime* beleaguered by issues of class and race, authority and ideology, while her 'sexual anarchy' exacerbated deep-seated anxieties about the shifting concepts of gender and sexuality" (1). Mapping this paradigm onto the cultural context of the 1920's United States, critic Maria Balshaw similarly identifies the New Woman as a discomfiting individual whose "emancipation" disrupted the era's notions of "managing the body as a means of controlling the body politic" (130). One finds reflected in these

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analyses of New Womanhood early 20th-century concerns about the social, economic, and political shifts brought about by "a new world of science, war, technology, and imperialism" (Baker 4). Furthermore, if one thinks of management of the black female body—through the deployment of "safe" archetypes and icons—as an integral strategy of rehabilitating and re-presenting early 20th-century African American identities, what could prove more anxiogenic than a woman who would seek to reclaim individuality, to access power, to wrest control of her body, and by extension, her self(hood), from overarching ideologies of group identity?

A brief detour reveals that it was conformity, not individuality, around which many key notions of late 19th- and early 20th-century African American citizenship were constructed. In her landmark work on turn-of-the-century black women's domestic fiction, Claudia Tate describes the impulse to idealize "black domesticity," images of which were deployed to counter "[d]ominant racist constructions and conventions," as a manifestation of "political desire" (14). Within this context, articulating black women's identities through traditional visions of wife- and motherhood represented social reform, not complacency. Yet while defining African American womanhood in these terms did effectively counter slave-era racial stereotypes, this characterization also depended upon a no less constricting archetype imported from the Victorian era: the "true woman." The product of the "cult of true womanhood," which stressed "domesticity, moral and sexual purity, submissiveness to authority, and removal from public affairs" (Ammons 7), the true woman had her African American analogue in the figure whom Tate christened the "true black woman" (Tate 97).

Scholars have alternately emphasized the discursive possibilities of appropriating true womanhood and critiqued the limitations of both the Victorian construct and its African American socio-literary revision (Ammons 8, Giddings 47); for the purposes of this essay, however, my interest lies in the convergence, or perhaps, collision, of these archetypes with the lives of characters in Harlem Renaissance women's fiction. If, as historian Paula Giddings contends, "the cult [of true womanhood] caused Black *women* to prove they were *ladies*" and "forced White *ladies* to prove that they were *women*" (54, italics added), then novels such as West's *The Living Is Easy* demand a revised, modernist conception of political desire, one in which economically and socially privileged African American women struggle to come full circle, that is, to shed the constraints of a protected "lady-hood" for the freedom of an empowered womanhood. As a result, when West's protagonist trades on the discursive power of domesticity, her concern is not so much advancing the cause of the New Negro, but rather advancing that of the new, improved Cleo.

When considered alongside masculinist characterizations of modernist-era African American citizenship, characterizations that often echoed the rhetoric of true black womanhood, Cleo's prioritization of self over community reads as aberrant. In his provocative 1920 essay "The Damnation of Women," W. E. B. Du Bois attributes the titular predicament to the restrictive, socially constructed opposition between women's parental duties and their intellectual and occupational pursuits (164). Advocating women's self-determination and social advancement, Du Bois envisions a "future woman" who would enjoy unrestricted access to education, financial independence, and "motherhood at her own discretion" (164-65). The essay culminates in an apparent vision of race- and gender-blind national citizenship: "[W]e will pay women what they earn and insist on their working and earning it; we will allow those persons to vote who know enough to vote, whether they be black or female, white

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or male; and we will ward race suicide, not by further burdening the over-burdened, but by honoring motherhood, even when the sneaking father shirks his duty" (185). By the passage's conclusion, however, women's citizenship has become a primarily domestic, maternal enterprise. The shift is all the more remarkable given Du Bois's earlier claim that limiting women to the occupation of homemaker constitutes domestic imprisonment (181). This seeming contradiction in fact reflects the complex, contentious relationship between racial identity, national and group citizenship, and gender roles within modernist African American social discourse. Thus, in spite of the neutral language that precedes it, Du Bois's identification of "honoring motherhood" as a means of "ward[ing] race suicide" reinforces gender-specific notions of spheres of movement and influence (185).

In spite of the *Messenger*'s decidedly progressive labor politics, an editorial in the journal's July 1923 "New Negro Woman's Number" echoes Du Bois's rhetoric.[1] Here, the generic Negro woman has become the archetypal New Negro Woman. The editorial celebrates the figure's contributions to fields ranging from politics to science only to undermine this acknowledgment by explaining—and emphasizing—the New Negro Woman's charge "to create and keep alive, in the breast of black men, a holy and consuming passion to break with the slave traditions of the past" ("The New Negro Woman"). Foregoing any additional reference to the New Negro Woman's professional accomplishments, the editorial emphatically concludes that her greatest task is to aid in the New Negro Man's "attainment of the stature of a *full man*, a free race and a new world" ("The New Negro Woman"). Even as this collaboration yields a break with the past, then, as suggested by the repeated stress on newness, the rupture does not result in the same social or symbolic trajectory for both collaborators: the "new world" is opened up to the New Negro Man only when the New Negro Woman's responsibilities as domestic partner supercede her accomplishments as an autonomous individual. While the New Negro Man would re-produce the (image of the) race through labor and art, the New Negro Woman would, as nurturer and companion, quite literally reproduce the race.[2]

Reading the social relevance of modernist-era women principally through domestic roles exposes still another link in the chain of Black modernist types: that of woman-as-timeless-(and often silent)-bearer-of-culture, evoked through the revival of an "ancient past as both grounds and inspiration for a re-empowered present" (Rado 296). In a critique of artistic representations of this ideal, Anne Stavney observes, "Iconized and idealized, [the black woman] is without agency in contemporary racial and social protests, and without ground(s) in the modern urban landscape" (549).[3] Whereas the independence of Du Bois's "future woman" is mediated through the prism of domestic responsibility, the images critiqued by Stavney manage the power of the primitive maternal ideal by rendering her spatially and temporally groundless: she is pure archetype, a figure that exerts influence only from a distant, mythical space (Stavney 548). From appropriated Victorian archetype to resurrected African icon, these various negotiations of African American womanhood share a common inclination, that of positing the black woman as an instrument of rather than an agent in the modernist project of reforming the present through the appropriation or revision of the past.

Set principally in Boston, *The Living Is Easy* chronicles Cleo Judson's attempts to reconstitute her southern childhood and family in her adopted northern home. Her husband Bart's successful produce business leaves

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Cleo with few concerns beyond maintaining their household and raising their only child. Bored and restless, Cleo capitalizes on her husband's wealth and docility to lure her sisters—but not their husbands—to live with her in Boston. Cleo's scheme succeeds, but not without undermining each sister's sense of self-worth and depleting the family's financial resources, increasingly tenuous as the twin threats of war and modernization drain Bart's business. At novel's close, Bart, forced to sell his holdings and search for work in New York, leaves a stunned Cleo "boss" of the family (West 344). Although Cleo is the novel's narrative focus, West complements her anti-heroine's characterization with the depiction of two very different counterparts: Althea Binney, impoverished daughter of the Black Brahmin Binneys, and Lenore, the beautiful, wealthy gaming-house proprietor known as "The Duchess."[4] Through these women's interactions, West weaves, amidst the principal story of a woman's quest for power gone wrong, the subplot of a society's regulation of gender roles gone terribly right.

Through these women's actions, amidst the principal story of a woman's quest for power gone wrong, West weaves the subplot of a society's regulation of gender roles gone terribly right.

Of West's distaff triumvirate, it is Cleo who seemingly conforms to typical representations of early 20th-century African American womanhood. Her family confers Cleo the domestic status of wife and mother, and Bart's commercial success assures her social status as an apprentice to the Black Brahmin community. Under these circumstances, Cleo's preparations early in the novel to move her family from an apartment in Boston's South End to a home near the more prestigious area of Brookline read as the responsible actions of a conscientious parent who wishes to secure a better education for her school-age child. Yet West uses this relocation, the first of many throughout the novel, not to highlight Cleo's devotion to her family, but to reveal the character's ambivalent and often conflicted relationship to it. More intent on exercising an individualized citizenship than a collective one, Cleo engineers the move to Brookline for her own social and economic advancement.

Indeed, despite its superficial conformity to New Negro visions of "model" middle-class African American family life, Cleo's marriage represents a subversion of, rather than submission to, social dictates. Denied an academic and financial education because such opportunities would place her dangerously close to the province of men (West 25, 28), a teen-aged Cleo decides that the most expedient means of escaping her employer-patron's surveillance is to accept Bart's marriage proposal. By anchoring her identity to Bart's name, Cleo gains the freedom to circulate outside of the home; her position as a "morally and sexually pure" New Negro wife dissociates her from the character flaws proscribed by true black womanhood (Stavney 543). Motherhood likewise assumes a strategic valence for Cleo. Whereas a New Negro mother might view her child as an individual to be trained in the ways of racial and national citizenship, Cleo views Judy as a pawn in her quest for social power. Hence, Cleo hires Althea Binney to transform Judy into a "proper Bostonian" to whom her mother can "point with the pride of ownership" (West 39, 40), an ownership that in turn legitimates Cleo's social status where the circumstances of her southern, working-class birth cannot. Furthermore, Judy is destined to remain an only child. Cleo ignores Bart's subsequent sexual advances,

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thus depriving Judy of siblings and "the race" of future citizens. By refusing to permit her role as wife and mother to prescribe her sexuality, Cleo fails to fulfill the ideals of New Negro womanhood.

The negotiation and contestation that mark Cleo's familial relationships likewise inflect her interest in the true woman pursuit of "household management" (Ammons 7). Because her status as a woman of the early 20th-century African American bourgeoisie identifies the home as her rightful place, Cleo intends to manipulate that sphere with absolute authority. Rather than replicate the patriarchal domestic tableau enacted by her beloved mother, who selflessly served spouse and children, Cleo envisions a home in which she reigns over "an extended family corporation" consisting of Bart, Judy, Cleo's sisters, and their children (duCille 114). Although the financial backer of this project, Bart proves an unwelcome guest in the newly reconfigured household because his masculinity as traditional sign of power threatens Cleo's dominance. This gendered stigma extends to Cleo's infant nephew Tim, whom she meets with the thought that "it really was too bad he had to be a boy" (West 166). Tim's infancy serves the dual function of restricting his movement in the house and neutralizing the danger posed by his nascent manhood, and West is careful to contrast the ebullient childhood scampering of Cleo's nieces with the immobility of Tim, who remains largely "trapped in a crib" (200). With all vestiges of masculinity safely contained (Bart is physically relocated from the master bedroom to a smaller, remote bedroom), Cleo proceeds to manipulate the domain to which true womanhood and, arguably, New Negrohood, assign her.

I pointedly use the word *domain* rather than *home* because, as Ann duCille artfully observes, "Cleo would be *king*, not mother" (114, original italics). Consequently, as Cleo's relationships with Bart and Judy are refracted through her political desire, so her support of her sisters reflects her determination to answer Bart's public, uncircumscribed power with proof that she can "bend a household of human souls to her will" (West 71). Even before their arrival in Boston, the siblings' respective relationships with Cleo are implicated in her struggle to exercise an independent, self-defined womanhood:

> This large patent-leather pouch held [Cleo's] secret life with her sisters. In it were their letters of obligation, acknowledging her latest distribution of money and clothing and prodigal advice. The instruments of the concrete side of her charity, which instruments never left the inviolate privacy of her purse, were her credit books, showing various aliases and unfinished payments, and her pawnshop tickets, the expiration dates of which had come and gone, constraining her to tell her husband, with no intent of irony, that another of her diamonds had gone down the drain. (3-4)

In contrast to the "stylish shoes" that impede her mobility (70), Cleo's purse, which functions as both ornamental object and furtive portfolio, enables her to reconfigure gender roles to suit her purposes. This alternative vision suggests that although Cleo may fail to meet New Negro Woman standards, she might more successfully embody those of the New Woman.

No such qualification is needed for the Duchess, the second in West's trio. The child of a Black Brahmin maiden seduced and enshrined by a white Beacon Hill bachelor, she is an outcast in both the world from which her mother was exiled and the one against which her father rebelled. Although the Duchess is "ash-blond" and "patrician" (West 101), her interracial heritage places her, according to Beacon Hill standards, on the wrong side of the line "between a man who *looked* white and a man who *was* white" (101, italics added). Conversely, although the personification of the hue, wealth, and grace that would otherwise delight Black Boston, the Duchess is denied access to this society because of the

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manner in which her mother exited it. She emerges from her parents' deaths a wealthy young woman in control of a sizeable fortune, the well-appointed "family" home in Boston's West End, and a successful in-house gambling business.

Begun by her father as a means to "while away the night[s]" spent with her mother (109), the gaming enterprise—another redefinition of domestic space—becomes the center of the Duchess's plan to integrate herself into her mother's caste. The project owes its success to the Duchess's business acumen, the hallmark of which is the calculated replacement of her father's white clients with Black Boston's finest men. The principal target of this strategy is Carter Binney, the dean of black society. It is to Carter that the Duchess's mother turns in her quest to die with her honor restored: the ailing woman hopes to see her daughter married, with Carter's assistance, to Cole Hartnett, scion of an equally if not more esteemed black family. The Duchess looks to Carter's assets after the Black Brahmin leader derails this plan and precipitates her mother's death by engineering Cole's engagement to his daughter Althea. Drawn by the promise of easy winnings, a heavily mortgaged Carter returns to the elegant West End home to gamble, to win, and, at the Duchess's directive, to lose. His run ends with the Duchess in control of his property and "every penny of the money from his cashed-in insurance and his wife's jewels" (West 115).

Through this achievement West captures two of the signal anxieties of the modernist era. Like Cleo, the Duchess represents a destabilization of gender roles; in subverting the power base from which Carter Binney dispenses social (dis)approbation, she operates outside the paradigms of a nurturing true black, New Negro, or primitive womanhood. Where the Duchess's mother is powerless before Carter, he, after repeated visits to the gaming tables, becomes socially and financially powerless before the Duchess. This reversal of power fittingly coincides with another key anxiety of the modernist era: the restructuring of the early 20th-century economy and, for the characters in *The Living Is Easy,* its subsequent impact on the African American elite. By hastening her opponent's ruin, the Duchess completes the work begun by mechanization:

> [Carter Binney] had been the awe-inspiring owner of a tailoring establishment in a downtown shopping center. His rent had been several thousand dollars a year, and his income had been triple that figure. His daughter and his son at Harvard had had the best of everything. Then the ready-made suit grew in favor, and a well-dressed man was not ashamed of his appearance when he wore one. Where Mr. Binney's store had once stood, a great department store soared seven stories and sold readymades at a price that would have sent Mr. Binney spinning into bankruptcy sooner than he did. (93)

Similar fates greet the Hartnetts, who refuse to accept the automobile as a serious threat to their livery stable, and Cleo's husband Bart, who ignores her advice that he consider how emerging chain stores will impact his business. Against this backdrop, the economically savvy Duchess appears to be the anti-New Negro woman, a thoroughly modern and, thus, thoroughly anxiogenic figure who would dare use her management skills to run a business rather than a household. The Duchess consolidates her power by assuming responsibility for a male-centered enterprise, adapting its operations to suit her own ends, and successfully cultivating the client base necessary to implement her new master, or, perhaps more accurately, mistress plan.

The resolution of the Duchess's feud with the Binney family underscores the character's position as the apparent antithesis of true black womanhood. She plans to marry Carter Binney in exchange for his assets, which are then to be returned to his children; instead, the Duchess is offered—and accepts—the matrimonial hand of Simeon, Carter's only son.

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While this framing of marriage as socioeconomic transaction hardly contravenes patriarchal marital conventions, the manner in which the transaction occurs does. In a deal that prompts another revision of Tate's concept of political desire, the Duchess's marriage to Simeon is brokered through a gynocentric circuit of influence that begins with Althea, to whom Carter confesses his predicament; continues on to Cleo, whom Althea enlists to confront her father's creditor; and eventually ends at the Duchess, to whom Cleo suggests Simeon as a more valuable acquisition than the elder Binney. Neither of the prospective grooms plays a prominent role in this drawing-room deal. As a woman who threatens families, brings men to their ruin, and brokers her own marriage, the Duchess seems poised to be no more of a New Negro helpmate to Simeon than Cleo is to Bart.

The Duchess as Lenore, however,—for Lenore is the Duchess's birth name and, moreover, the sign of her private, nonprofessional persona—reads as an ideal candidate for true black-New Negro womanhood. Her dual naming proposes a distinction between the Duchess as empowered, atypical modernist woman and Lenore as a more traditional, less subversive representation of African American womanhood. Even prior to her social rehabilitation, Lenore engages in racial uplift by favoring the students who frequent her establishment: Lenore "paused, then said proudly, 'And the young men have never lost, the young men putting themselves through college' " (West 115). Here Lenore appears to speak not as a savvy proprietor, but as a concerned patron, if not foster mother, investing in the future of "the race." In a reversal of Cleo's attempt to transform her home into a domestic enterprise, Lenore transforms what has been explicitly marked a site of commerce, commodification, and control—particularly when one thinks of her mother's refusal and/ or inability to leave the house after being seduced by her father—into a site of nurturing and (upward) mobility. In these acts Lenore exercises power to encourage New Negro success. As an appeal to this altruism, Cleo frames her proposition of Simeon as Lenore's opportunity to "help [him] save *The Clarion*" (116), his progressive yet unprofitable newspaper. This suggestion reframes Lenore's marriage as an act of charity rather than one of revenge and facilitates her transformation from "the West End Duchess" into Lenore Evans Binney of Cambridge.

In keeping with her critical view of Cleo and Bart's marriage, West does not present Lenore's socio-geographic migration as a felicitous one. As a wealthy, independent outcast, the Duchess possesses an uncontested power that other women do not enjoy; as a Black Brahmin wife, Mrs. Simeon Binney relinquishes her power as well as her name to her husband and her newly established racial and social identity. Even as Cleo relishes her triumph in trading Simeon as a marital commodity, the narration mourns the loss of Lenore's independence and self-determination: "Simeon had great intelligence. Lenore had depth and loveliness. Their children would inherit this richness. The race would be strengthened. Lenore belonged to her unborn daughters. Her soul was not hers to give or keep while the life strain was in her loins" (119). That is, racial citizenship requires the depletion of Lenore's individual vitality, which, siphoned to produce and sustain future New Negroes, will be sacrificed for the sake of group social advancement. Whatever authority and identity Lenore possesses before her marriage, the institution holds for the character prospects very similar to those found in traditional deployments of true black and New Negro womanhood: her redefinition through and subsumption to the roles of wife and mother. Ultimately, though, Lenore's New Negro Woman aspirations prove as short-lived as the character herself: a devout Roman Catholic, she refuses to consummate her marriage to the

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Protestant Simeon and thus forecloses her claims to "honorable" wife- or motherhood.

One must turn to Althea, then, the least assertive, least engaging member of West's triumvirate, to locate the character who reflects and is rewarded by the precepts of New Negro womanhood. Once married, Thea, as she is known to family and friends, borrows enough of Cleo's intractability to demand a higher standard of living from her husband, but not so much that she would "take any unladylike interest" in the means that enable him to furnish this lifestyle (West 318). Likewise, Thea benefits from Lenore's entrepreneurial spirit without being touched by its stigma: while Lenore's money helps restore the Binney name to its former splendor, her premature death conveniently opens the role of mistress of Simeon's home to a newly divorced Thea. If archetypal modernist representations of black womanhood can encompass neither Cleo's "tremendous vitality" nor Lenore's tainted fortune, they can provide ample scope for Thea's genteel womanhood. Indeed, Thea not only "triumphs," but also suggests the emergence of yet another archetype: the True Negro Woman, a composite whose 19th-century qualities of femininity and gentility are updated sufficiently enough to affirm early 20th-century archetypal conceptions of black women. Thea as True Negro Woman is the typical African American modernist heroine.

As Cleo's and Lenore's respective failures to embody New Negro ideals of womanhood stem in part from their interest in or management of money, so Thea's iconic status is reinforced by her relative disinterest in economic capital. Material goods hold little interest for her because, given her birthright, they neither reflect nor determine her status: "She had worn the best when there was money. When there wasn't, she had been too sure of herself ever to wonder if clothes made the woman" (West 258). However captivating, Cleo and Lenore remain outsiders who test the limit(ation)s of Black Brahmin society. The distinction between insider and outsider, tradition and modernity, is placed into sharper relief when the narration momentarily assumes the voice of the black elite: "The young matrons like dear shabby Thea assured the succession of colored society. And the outlanders like handsome Mrs. Judson were bringing their money where it was badly needed" (246). This collective assessment casts Thea in the woman-identified role of reproducing "colored society" and Cleo in the nontraditional role of financing this project, albeit through her husband's money. Lenore performs a similar function by placing her wealth at Simeon's disposal, thus leaving Thea the only character with an unimpeachable claim to the non-threatening timelessness of either true black or New Negro womanhood. A True Negro Woman, she "remove[s]" herself "from [the] public affairs" that money—with its suggestion of commerce and the world outside the home—represents (Ammons 7).

The manner in which other characters read Thea's gentility likewise protects the integrity of her True Negro womanhood. When the Duchess seizes the Binney family assets, Thea enlists the help of a more resourceful ally: "[Cleo] looked at Thea and felt pity and impatience that Thea looked so confoundedly helpless. It would be like sending a lamb to slaughter to expect her to hold her own with a vulgar creature in a gambling dive" (West 96). Even more noteworthy than Cleo's intervention are the actions of Thea's brother Simeon, who, just as his wife seems poised to replace Thea as the luminary of Black Boston, resolves to prostitute himself to preserve his sister's social position: "The Duchess had asked these women to tea. She would give other affairs. Thea's friends would flock to the house in which Thea had presided. And the Duchess would win them over. She had started her own campaign tonight. Well, he would start one of his own. He was handsome,

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brilliant. Women liked him, had even wanted him. They would learn that the road to his heart lay through Thea" (265).[5] As Thea becomes more comfortable with, or willfully oblivious to, the unsavory frameworks supporting her lifestyle (I use "framework" in the plural given that Thea's husband Cole, a young doctor, supplements their meager income by performing illegal abortions), so she regains her social dominance and, by extension, her "quiet assumption that being born a Binney was an immunity" to scandal, disgrace, and hardship (318).

The juxtaposition of this triumph with the defeat of Thea's more transgressive peers reveals the collusion of gender and class expectations in West's apparent reinterpretation of the "damnation" of women. *The Living Is Easy* concludes with Lenore dead and Cleo weakened by the negative impact of Bart's departure on her presumably self-sufficient, gynocentric empire. Thea, on the other hand, is expeditiously divorced from Cole and returned to the Binney name and home. The very Black Brahmin society that cannot absorb outsiders Lenore and Cleo—for both characters exercise power in a manner that raises the specter of New Womanhood rather than the banner of New Negrohood—can countenance the "homecoming" of insider Thea: "Those less intimate and socially secure, who had wondered during Cole's trial what their attitude toward his wife should be if he were sentenced, were profoundly relieved to have it decided for them at [his mother's] funeral. . . . Thea, whom black did not suit, did look a pathetic figure, and everyone had the most generous feelings for her. Thus their first meeting after Cole's imprisonment passed off beautifully in perfect surroundings" (317-18). In this display of communal acceptance, Black Boston affirms its insular existence and approves Thea's restoration by representing the character and her circumstances in a socially palatable light. Once back in the Binney home, Thea will ostensibly become the True Negro companion that Lenore could not be and mother (to a child conveniently named after his uncle) that Cleo could not be.

It is important to note that the narrative does not leave Thea's ascendance unproblematized. On the contrary, the investment of such influence in the character who most conforms to archetypal black modernism forms part of West's critique of modernist conceptions of African American womanhood. If in general Thea's restoration to social prominence depends on the actions of others, in particular it relies upon the mistreatment of other women: Cole's patients and Simeon's lovers become the expendable objects that Thea's iconic status exempts her from being. While Cole's profitable abortion practice results in the death of a young immigrant woman, Simeon's infidelity precipitates the premature death of his wife. An irritated Cleo answers Thea's plea to help the ailing Lenore with an incisive internal monologue: "What did Thea have to worry about? . . . Certainly she was not distressed because the Duchess was dying, even though it could be said that Simeon was morally responsible. Thea should be accustomed to men killing women for her" (316). Although West does not posit Cleo as either a consistent women's advocate or a reliable narrative informant, she does position the character here as a means to question both Thea's relative calm in the face of these deaths and the social order that accepts them as tragic yet justifiable expenditures. For the True Negro Woman's identity, like that of the New Negro, seems to be consolidated at the expense, in Thea's case tragically literal, of individuals who fall outside the purview of New Negro representation.

Written against the grain of such consolidations, *The Living Is Easy* discourages any tidy embrace of a masculinist, archetypal modernism. Thea's True Negro Woman is exceptional, not representative, and the "reward" for this exceptionality is domestic partner-

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ship with a man who resents women as much as, if not more than, he loves his sister. If Lenore and Cleo are damned to death and defeat, respectively, by a society incapable of accommodating women's identities that exceed or contravene wife- and motherhood, Thea is damned to the sterility and isolation of an existence created, celebrated, and constrained by archetypal notions of modernist-era African American womanhood. If such notions indeed provide "insufficient scope for [women's] tremendous vitality" (West 70), in *The Living Is Easy* the burden of insufficiency ultimately rests not with West's atypical modernist women, but with the archetypes that seek to circumscribe them.

Notes

1. Founded by A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen in 1917 and published until 1928, the *Messenger* was a key African American periodical during the Harlem Renaissance. Less involved in the artistic aspects of the movement than the NAACP's *Crisis* or the National Urban League's *Opportunity*, the *Messenger* focused primarily on socialism and union politics. In 1925, the *Messenger* became the official publication of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. See Johnson and Johnson 57.

2. In the interest of space, I have omitted an extended discussion of Alain Locke's seminal 1925 essay "The New Negro"; I want to note here, however, that Locke's gender-specific language, which articulates a male New Negro, conforms to Du Bois's implicit and the *Messenger*'s explicit suggestion that the Negro woman's principal role was to encourage the New Negro from the position of wife and mother.

3. Literary examples include Du Bois's "The Damnation of Women," which evokes "dusky Cleopatras, dark Candaces, and darker, fiercer Zinghas" in its discussion of African American womanhood (166). In the field of visual culture, Stavney offers an illuminating reading of Winold Reiss's *Brown Madonna*, the portrait featured on the frontispiece of the first edition of Locke's *New Negro* anthology. Stavney argues that along with its idealized depiction of black motherhood, the portrait's "prefatory location . . . situates the true black woman outside the discursive body of black writing defined by the text" (Stavney 546). From this reading one might deduce that the true black woman precedes but does not participate in the modernist project(s) represented by the New Negro.

4. For more on the origins and history of Boston's black elite, to which the phrase "Black Brahmin" refers (as a reflection of the black elite's parallel and imitative relationship to Boston's white elite, known as the Brahmin cult) and to which Dorothy West's family belonged, see Gatewood 119-23 and also Cromwell.

5. Although Simeon is depicted as one of the most race conscious characters in *The Living Is Easy*, this political consciousness is contrasted with the character's less than admirable attitudes toward women. In a critique of the androcentric underpinnings of black nationalist discourses, Simeon's passionate defense of his sister is filtered through reasoning that borders on misogyny. When Cleo dictates the terms of his marriage to the Duchess, Simeon responds, " 'The world is too full of women who feed on men. As the devoted brother of one of them, I have no choice but to accept the terms that will enable Thea to feed on Cole' " (140). Just prior to the decision to designate his bed the seat of the "Committee for the Defense of Althea Binney" (260), Simeon scorns the "cruelty" with which Thea's friends accept a woman "who had been nothing until he had given her the name that was Thea's before it was hers" (265). Without assuming a one-to-one substitution, we might consider the juxtaposition of Simeon's racial progressiveness and his gender retrogressiveness to the masculinist views on race discussed earlier in the article.

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