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Imagining Freedom in a Post-Emancipation "Pigmentocracy": Wallace Thurman, Toni Morrison, and Tupac Shakur

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Abstract

This article focuses on the above mentioned artists' endeavors to imagine, advocate, and/or articulate freedom in a "pigmentocra[tic]," 20th-century America. As any definition of freedom is reciprocally determined—to imagine freedom is to imagine freedom from something—I will specify what that something is (or somethings are) and assess the relative successes and failures of the variously presented strategies of resistance, destruction, and/or escape. For example, Pecola in *The Bluest Eye* imagines that emancipation from the quotidian familial violence she is a victim of pivots on a change in her appearance or her absolute disappearance. By contrast, in the same novel, Claudia exhibits a precocious capacity to recognize the potentially harmful power of grand narratives. I have chosen "imagining" in the title as it acknowledges freedom's conceptual dynamism and subjectivity, that it is being explored (mainly) through fiction, and crucially, that freedom–for some African Americans– remains a fiction.

Keywords

freedom, slavery, music, rap, Tupac, Thurman, Harlem Renaissance, Morrison, Hip Hop, meta-narratives, violence

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After the Thirteenth Amendment was made to the U.S. Constitution in 1865, most African Americans[1]—finally governed by the law as opposed to the "Simon Legree lash" (Thurman, 1929/1996, p. 28)[2]—faced a new, political and cognitive challenge. Between the abuses of slavery and the White metanarrative of the "land of the free" (Key, 1814), "freedom" for African Americans became a more complex ideological concept that provoked many revisions in the 20th century. In this article, I will focus on the endeavors of three African American artists to imagine, advocate, and/or articulate freedom in a "pigmentocra[tic]" (Hazlip, 1996, p. 14)[3] 20th-century America: Wallace Thurman's (1929) *The Blacker the Berry*, Toni Morrison's (1970/1999) *The Bluest Eye*, and a selection of rap music by Tupac Shakur. Ironically, as any definition of freedom is reciprocally determined—to imagine freedom is to imagine freedom *from* something—I will specify what that something is (or somethings are) and assess the relative successes and failures of the the variously presented strategies of resistance, destruction, and/or escape. For example, Pecola in *The Bluest Eye* imagines that emancipation from the quotidian familial violence she is a victim of pivots on a change in her own appearance ("I want [my eyes] blue" [Morrison, 1970, p. 138]) or her absolute disappearance ("[p]lease, God . . . make me disappear" [33]). For her, this ultimately fails as she misinterprets the problem and seeks impossible solutions that eventually drive her mad. By contrast, in the same novel, Claudia exhibits a precocious capacity to recognize the potentially harmful power of grand narratives. On beauty, for example, she says that the "*Thing* to fear was the *Thing* that made *her* [her classmate Maureen Peal] beautiful and not us" (Morrison, 1970, p. 58). While accurately locating the problem, she also acknowledges the limits of her potential to change "what all the world had agreed [on]" (p. 14). This leads her to critically reinterpret that "we [are] not free, merely licensed" (p. 163). I have specifically chosen the word "imagining" in the title as it acknowledges freedom's conceptual dynamism and subjectivity, that it is being explored (mainly) through fiction, and crucially, that freedom for some African Americans is still a fiction, to which Shakur accords in "Letter to the President" (1999) as follows: "How hypocritical is Liberty?/That blind bitch ain't never did shit for me." Finally, I have deliberately included rap music in this study not only because its form and content are relevant but also because excluding it would be to exercise the same canonical value judgments (comparable with "the *Thing*") that exclude the genre from academic enquiry in general.

In his novel, *The Blacker the Berry*, Wallace Thurman presents a simultaneously ridiculous and sobering account of the challenges faced by his protagonist Emma Lou who is born with "blue black" (p. 29) skin in a "semi-white world, totally surrounded by an all-white one" (Thurman, 1929, p. 24). Emma

Lou's life experience is one of hyperbolized labels: She is a "tragic mistake" (p. 31) who incites "boisterous guffaws . . . or pain-induced, tear attended grief" (p. 24) in those "people in her world" who "never went halfway in their recognition or reception of things black" (p. 24). Thurman uses such extremes in order to dually ridicule what John Edgar Wideman (1990) calls the "limits of our collective imagination . . . of either/or terminal distinctions," and to bemoan the inescapability of linguistic associations that homogenize humans labeled as Black with "harbinger[s] of bad luck [and] insignias of mourning" (Thurman, 1929, p. 24). This inherent linguistic racism is established even by definition, as "the quality of being black is due physically to the complete absence or absorption of light" ("black, adj. and n," 2014). Thus, the insistence of racially demarcating the American from the "Black American" renders the latter an optical paradox: a visually negative *visible* minority. Richard Wright used similar phrasing when he coined the term *negative American* in *White Man, Listen!* He wrote,

> [S]ince color easily marks [the African American] off from being an ordinary American, and since he lives amidst social conditions pregnant with racism, he becomes an American who is not accepted as an American, hence a kind of negative American. (Wright, 1957, p. 40)

Thurman, Morrison, and Shakur figuratively perform this somatic racial prefixing on a meta-level via their immediate formal and textual references to color. The two novels have color in their titles (*The Blacker the Berry, The Bluest Eye*), and rap music is a predominantly African American art form that has no White predecessor. Incidentally, the first line heard in the song, "Keep Ya Head Up" ("[s]ome say the blacker the berry, the sweeter the juice" [Shakur, 1993c]), is the same anonymous "Southern saying" as that which is referenced by Wallace Thurman in his novel. This foregrounding of color consequently contextualizes anything that succeeds it as inescapably "race-specific" (Morrison, 1970, p. 171). Artistic form is also relevant here. By using the novel form, the works of both Morrison and Thurman are among the "pioneering efforts" of African American writers (such as Du Bois and Zora Neale Hurston) who aimed "to legitimize black vernacular in serious fiction" in order to be "heard in a white literary tradition" (Wideman, 1990, p. xiv). Indeed, Morrison has cited her own use of "speakerly, aural [and] colloquial" language in *The Bluest Eye* as an attempt to "transfigure the complexity and wealth of Black American culture into a language worthy of the culture" (Morrison, 1970, p. 172). That said, the contradictory need for "legitimiz[ation]" and "transfigur[ation]" is somewhat reminiscent of the White endorsement of slave narratives, for example, L. Maria Child's

Introduction to Harriet Jacobs's (1861) *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl.* Therefore, there is an inevitable irony present in the shaping of Black vernacular to the conventions of a form that originated in Western Europe and thus also to the confines of an ideological space that created—to borrow from Muhammad Ali—"the lie that white is better than black" (quoted in Hauser, 1991) Muhammad Ali, quoted in Thomas Hauser, *Muhammad Ali: His Life and Times*, p. 188.

Contrarily, Shakur's use of form has no such identity crisis. As a descendent of jazz, blues, sermonizing, and racial protest, the origins of rap music are solidly African American.[4] Although rap music is less free in form than the improvisational style of early jazz (mainly a result of recording equipment and commercial distribution), it still, like jazz, was created with the deliberate intention of running "counter to the traditional values of mainstream culture" (Chuck Philips, 1992, on Dan Quayle). Rap music's discursive marginalization in academic criticism is therefore unusual considering jazz and blues music's smooth incorporation into interdisciplinary fields of study (the discourse surrounding Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, for example). In light of this, rap's absence from literary criticism is especially curious as it is more akin to poetry than any other musical genre (in that it is spoken not sung) and can be analyzed with the same tools, as I will demonstrate later.[5] Rap music has proved (via its global popularity and cultural influence)[6] to be a vehicle of (economic) emancipation for those artists who have achieved commercial success. It has also been cited as an important representative voice for those living in inner-city urban chaos (Philips, 1992) and as a political critique that exposes the contradictions of American culture ("they've got money for wars, they can't feed the poor" [Shakur, 1993]). So, while the creation of African American music has been an anarchy of sorts (even as it exists and thrives within a global capitalist framework), the music also provided (and provides) solace and solidarity for members of its audience. Shakur (1993) himself commends Marvin Gaye for making him feel "like black was the thing to be."

In *The Bluest Eye*, it is Cholly who has the closest relationship with music. When his wife Pauline first sees him, he actually embodies it: he "came with his own . . . kind of city-street music," which for her is the "redemption, salvation [and] mysterious rebirth" that she had long-awaited (Morrison, 1970, pp. 88-9). In contrast, Cholly sees committing to Pauline as a type of imprisonment: the "sheer weight of sameness [drives] him to despair and [freezes] his imagination" (p. 126). As such, Cholly feels that "only those who talk their talk through the gold of a musician . . . could give true form to his life . . . and give it its final and pervading ache of freedom" (p. 125). Cholly's interpretation of freedom is, however, like the music he listens to, entirely

anarchic. Abandoned by his mother, rejected by his father, and bereft of his Aunt Jimmy, he is "[d]angerously free" of authority and therefore free to be as "tender or violent" (p. 125) as he chooses. Cholly is especially dangerous to his own family who suffer the most acutely from his tendency to behave "based on what he felt at that moment" (p. 127). For his daughter Pecola, this leads to the most tragic juxtaposition of tenderness and violence when he "fuck[s] [her] tenderly" (p. 129) Cholly projects onto Pecola a version of his own twisted journey to adulthood. His first sexual encounter is traumatically interrupted by armed White gunmen, and Pecola is raped as she is on the verge of becoming a woman. Amanda Putnam has explained that, in Morrison's texts, the perpetuation of such twisted violence is owed to the "child perception" of maternal abandonment that is subsequently carried into adulthood (Putnam, 2011). Although it is difficult to sympathize with Cholly, he does experience this maternal trauma and twice over: his mother first tries to throw him onto a "junk heap" and then, upon his rescue, he flees (p. 103). In this instance, freedom from maternal responsibility has, with Putnam's reasoning, incited a cycle of violence so contorted that it destroys Pecola psychologically and the unborn child she conceives. Morrison corroborates this herself more generally by saying that the "extremity of Pecola's case stemmed largely from a crippled and crippling family" (Morrison, 1970, p. 168). The literal reproduction of death and perpetuation of hatred in the Breedlove family thus makes their surname highly ironic, particularly as Pecola must refer to her own mother as Mrs. Breedlove, whereas the White girl Pauline lovingly nannies is allowed to call her "Polly" (p. 83).

Shakur referenced an alarmingly similar (true) story in his debut single as a solo artist: 12-year-old "Brenda" who "never knew her moms [*sic*]" is impregnated by her cousin and eventually gives birth to a baby she throws away (Shakur, 1991). These individual stories, while atypical, allude to wider sociological patterns in African American family structure, which have been traced back, by some social theorists (such as Frazier, 1966) to the disorganization and instability wrought by slavery. Shakur's use of the plural "moms," for example, points to the ubiquity of matriarchal, single-parented, and extended African American families (Ruggles, 1994). Shakur (1993) proposes that breaking the cyclical reproduction of "a race of babies/That will hate the ladies, that make the babies" means abandoning misogyny ("heal our women"), abolishing paternal absence, and condemning rape: "since a man can't make one,/He has no right to tell a woman when and where to create one" (Shakur, 1993). Whereas the community that surrounds Pecola absolves itself of any responsibility for her undoing—choosing instead to speculate on whether or not Pecola herself was to blame—Shakur foregrounds communal liability and the necessity of collective change. By using the first person plural, he rhetorically

poses a series of questions in which he is also implicated: "I wonder why we rape our women, do we hate our women?" (Shakur, 1993). The repeated alliteration of the "w" that links "we" to "women" reinforces and repeats his earlier point that "we all came from a woman." Accordingly, in the audio recording, Shakur puts significant vocal emphasis—both in volume and stress—on the words "woman" and "women" making it clear that a reassessment of negative attitudes toward women is essential to the creation and maintenance of racial pride. "Teaching pride" to an African American, he said, came before "teaching education," because without self-respect, inter-or intra-racial harmony cannot flourish (Shakur, directed by Peter Spirer, 2002).

Shakur outlines the consequences of racial self-hatred in "Changes" as below:

I see no changes, wake up in the morning and I ask myself

Is life worth living? Should I blast myself?

I'm tired of being poor and even worse, I'm black

My stomach hurts, so I'm looking for a purse to snatch.

Cops give a damn about a Negro,

Pull the trigger, kill a nigger, he's a hero. (Shakur, 1998b)

In accessible terminology, Shakur concurs with the "inferiority complex" theory formulated by Franz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks*. Where Fanon explained that the "black man['s]" inferiority complex was the "outcome of a double process: . . . primarily, economic; subsequently, the internalization—or, better, the epidermalization—of this inferiority" (Fanon, 1967, p. 11), Shakur says, "I'm tired of being poor and even worse, I'm black." His rhetorical contemplation of suicide and the close reference to (presumably White) "cops" and their power to "kill" also reflect what Fanon called the "psychoexistential complex," which, he theorized, was a result of "the juxtaposition of the white and black races" (Fanon, 1967, p. 11). The economic, racial, somatic, and legal struggles Shakur names in these lines are such that emancipation is violently conceived of as from the "poor . . . black" self. Compared with the use of the first person plural in "Keep Ya Head Up," the use of "I" isolates the speaker from the plural "cops" and creates the power dynamic (between the criminal justice system and vulnerable Black males) that Shakur battled with throughout his life and work. The monosyllabic

consonance, hard alliterative "b" and "p" sounds and the flat "a" sound of the half rhyming verbs (black, blast, ask, snatch), effectively matches the verse's violence and dissonance. In fact, the only perfect rhyme in the above passage is disturbingly "trigger" and "nigger," which—accidentally or not—connects race (and racism) to the gun culture that eventually claimed Shakur's own life.

Comparatively, in *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola displays a quiet "psycho-existential[ism]" that portends her eventual psychological demise. When Pecola realizes that she cannot physically remove herself from her surroundings as her brother can, she experiments with psychological "methods of endurance" (Morrison, 1970, p. 32). At times, this is literally a death wish: "[s]he struggled between an overwhelming desire that one [parent] would kill the other, and a profound wish that she herself could die" (p. 32). At other times, she imagines her whole body disappearing until just her "tight, tight eyes [are] left" (p. 33). When her own resources are spent, she helplessly invokes the aid of an absent (White) God, and finally, in her desperation, goes to Soaphead Church (a pedophile with a God complex) to ask for blue eyes (p. 138). Pecola exemplifies a failure to conceive of freedom in any sort of cathartic, operational way. Despite the violence that she experiences being the manifestations of other characters' "exquisitely learned self-hatred," (p. 50) her response is to "fold into herself, like a pleated wing" (p. 57) and imagine that transforming her own eyes will affect a change in what she is forced to see: "[i]f she looked different, beautiful, maybe Cholly would be different, and Mrs. Breedlove too. Maybe they'd say 'Why, look at pretty-eyed Pecola. We mustn't do bad things in front of those pretty eyes'" (p. 34).

The failure in Pecola's reasoning is that she only conceives of herself as an object to be seen, as opposed to a subject that can see and execute critical agency: Pecola can "see only what there was to see: the eyes of other people" (Morrison, 1970, p. 35). This paradigm is cleverly embodied in Morrison's title as the eye (aurally, the "I") that sees and shapes the world is turned into an object that is seen and shaped by the world instead: *The Bluest Eye*. It is this external projection of herself, the "black e mo ya dadd sleeps necked" (p. 50) version, that Pecola accepts as objective truth. This is also closely related to Du Bois's theory of "double-consciousness," a specifically racial affliction that stems from "always looking at one's self through the eyes of others" (Du Bois, 1903). Pecola literally enacts this double-consciousness but does so with a pathological narcissism that leads her to hallucinate another self. This "schizophrenic double voicedness" (Awkward quoted in Putnam, 2011) is simultaneously comforting and distressing to Pecola as it fluctuates between her fantasy of kindness and aesthetic validation and cruel reminders of the most traumatic events of her life. This fantasy paradoxically reassures

her of the impossible fiction that she has "[p]rettier than Alice-and-Jerry Storybook eyes" (p. 158) and comforts her through affectionate pet names ("*honey*" [154]), thus relieving her of the weight of her given name that was inspired by a film plot in which "this mulatto girl hates her mother 'cause she is black and ugly" (p. 52). Conversely, Pecola is grounded by repeated trauma when she is forced to corroborate the facts of her undoing: "*You said he tried to [rape] you when you were sleeping on the couch . . .* / It was when I was washing dishes" (p. 158).

The saddest, terminal image of Pecola's failed attempts to escape her world is that of her flailing arms that make her look "like a bird in an eternal, grotesquely futile effort to fly" (Morrison, 1970, p. 162). Her self-composition has become so fractured that even her bodily conduct is incongruent with her double-voiced dialogue. Amanda Putnam argues that Pecola is a "tragic example of the destructive power of accepting white beauty standards" (Putnam, 2011). This is true to the extent that she uncritically spends "[l]ong hours . . . looking in the mirror, trying to discover the secret of the ugliness" (p. 34) without questioning, as Claudia does, the aesthetic paradigm that has made her "ugly" in the first place. Claudia successfully (and literally) deconstructs White beauty standards by dismembering her "blue-eyed Baby Doll" in order to "see of what it was made, to discover the dearness, to find the beauty" (p. 14). The problem for both of these girls, however, is that they have learned (or eventually learn), as Mrs. Breedlove has, to "[equate] physical beauty with virtue" and by so doing have "stripped" and "bound" their minds (Morrison, 1970, p. 95). This discursive unfreedom of what Morrison calls a "white idea" (Malin Pereira, 2000)—that of physical beauty as a virtue—is textually embodied by the closed gaps in the Dick and Jane story that begins and interludes the novel ("motherfatherdickandjane" [2]). By putting Pecola at the center, Morrison opens these gaps to new, horrifying imaginative possibilities.

Comparatively, in *The Blacker the Berry*, Emma Lou also learns that "her face" rather than her self or her learning will "be her future identification tag" (Thurman, 1929, p. 23) in society. Like Pecola, Emma Lou learns her inferiority via a matrix of external forces that either bemoan "the tragedy" of her "too black" skin (pp. 21-3) (as her family do) or abuse her (Emma Lou is financially exploited by her lover, Alva). Compared with Pecola, however, Emma Lou learns these inferiorities—and to perpetuate the same condescension—from within an isolated, self-affirming community of "blue veins,"[7] rather than from the mass production and dissemination of White images. This at least means that she is not racially insecure. In fact, Emma Lou does not "[mind]" being Black at all (p. 21) (!), and when she is among her White schoolfellows, she relishes her "dark, outlandish difference" and her "immunity from

[the] ephemeral mob emotion" (p. 23). What she does inherit from her forebears though is the opinion that "class" directly correlates to the shade of one's skin: the "whiter" shades being entitled to "more respect and opportunity and social acceptance than the more pure-blooded Negroes" (p. 28). As such, Emma Lou is rendered an outcast within her own family and community.

Furthermore, her ostensible rejection of their values eventually proves false. Despite "escap[ing]" (Thurman, 1929, p. 215) her home in Idaho ("a backward town out of the mainstream of modern thought"), she propounds the same rhetoric as that which causes her own social marginalization. When she meets Hazel Mason in Los Angeles, for example, she classifies her "as a barbarian who had most certainly not come from a family of the best people." Her subsequent flight to Harlem "to escape Los Angeles" (p. 215) is also counterproductive as it is there that she becomes so ostracized by her color that she harms her body physically in the pursuit of lighter skin: She bleaches it with peroxide and "Black and White Ointment" and eats "arsenic wafers" (p. 115). The methods she uses to literally shed her skin do nothing but cause her further bodily damage: The wafers "give her pains in the pit of her stomach" and the bleach "[burns her] skin" (p. 115). Her subsequent attempts at concealing her dark skin with "an excess of rouge and powder" are similarly absurd and imbue in her such a heightened "color-conscious[ness]" that "any time someone mentioned or joked about skin color, she immediately imagined that they were referring to her," even when, in most cases, she is discussed and pointed out because of her make-up and not her skin (p. 210).

Emma Lou's color consciousness corresponds to Fanon's argument that "[c]onsciousness of the body is solely a negating activity" (Fanon, 1967). For Emma Lou, her excessive bodily self-consciousness means that she literally pursues "negating activit[ies]" that damage her mind, her body, and her relationships. In her torment, she is advised by the writer she meets (Campbell Kitchen) that "economic independence was the solution to almost any problem," but when she finally achieves the American Dream against all odds, she finds herself "more enslaved and more miserable than ever" (Thurman, 1929, p. 200). Although Thurman was writing before the civil rights movement in 1929, it is interesting that *The Bluest Eye* (originally published in 1970) and Shakur's music (produced in the 1990s) repeat a similar theme: that access to the freedoms espoused by American national rhetoric depends on the literal negation (or complete destruction) of the Black self (as shown by Pecola and Emma Lou) or, as Claudia and Cholly in *The Bluest Eye*, and Shakur in his own life demonstrate, a violent reassessment of these paradoxical cultural values.

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Notes

1. Term used in lieu of "Black American" on editorial advice from *Journal of Black Studies*. American spellings used on same recommendation.
2. The "Simon Legree" lash is a reference to the slave overseer in H. B. Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, used by Wallace Thurman (1929), *The Blacker the Berry*.
3. Shirlee Taylor Hazlip calls America a "pigmentocracy," explaining that "skin color has been put on a vertical chromatograph with the lightest color, usually called 'white,' at the top, and the darkest color, generally labeled 'black,' at the bottom" in the Introduction to Wallace Thurman, *The Blacker the Berry.*
4. Interestingly, rap music also makes frequent use of the (synthesized) cross-rhythm hemiola of Sub-Saharan African music (Gerald Early, 2014).
5. Of course, the ironic project of "legitimizing" rap music, in this essay, must be acknowledged.
6. Shakur has sold 75 million records worldwide (Greenburg, 2011).
7. The "blue veins" are "so named because all of its members were fair-skinned enough for their blood to be seen pulsing purple through the veins of their wrists" (Thurman, 1929).

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