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# Uncloseting the Harlem Renaissance: A Look at the Movement Through a Queer Lens

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Uncloseting the Harlem Renaissance: A Look at the Movement Through a Queer Lens

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## **I. Introduction**

The Harlem Renaissance was an influential and important literary movement that occurred in the early twentieth century and centered around the culture and people living in and around Harlem, New York. The exact parameters of when it ended are debated; it is generally considered to have lasted at least through the mid-1930s; however, some critics put the end dates as late as the 1950s. The primary stages of the movement are generally agreed to have begun in the late 1910s. Harlem became a migration destination for black workers from the South, as well as for educated blacks who made Harlem their cultural epicenter. The area had been home to white European immigrants, but with the burgeoning black middle class moving into Harlem at the turn of the 20th century, the area experienced a drastic change in demographics. The influx of blacks created an air of racism in Harlem, oftentimes violent, which led to white Europeans to flee the area, in episodes of so-called “white flight.”

This migration from the South to the North by blacks represented a widespread change in the United States after the abolition of slavery. Named the Great Migration, mass communities of blacks traveled North for more opportunities. World War I created plentiful industrial opportunities, which were attractive enough for black rural Southern communities to move to urban Northern areas. It is this industrialization, and the First World War specifically, that had a direct influence on the Harlem Renaissance’s inception, as it was these ambitious black urban areas that sprouted a large concentration of people who supported each other during a time of cultural creativity. In the 1930s the movement started to decline, largely due to the effects of the Great Depression.

It is during this high period during and after World War I that mainstream black culture began to thrive in Harlem, and the nascent stages of the Harlem Renaissance began. 1917 saw the premiere of *Three Plays for a Negro Theatre*. These plays were written by Ridgely Torrence, a white playwright, and featured black actors. The work was significant in that black characters were depicted as fully fledged people, with wide ranging feelings and complex emotions, and rejected blackface and the minstrel stereotypes that were popular of the day. James Weldon Johnson referred to the production of these plays as “the single most important event in the entire history of the Negro in the American theater” (Gates 931). Another landmark of the movement’s inception is Claude Mackay, after having written seminal poems on the black diaspora and black urban experiences in 1917, published his 1919 sonnet, “If We Must Die.” This poem introduced a political perspective on the black urban experience on the cultural stage that had not previously been addressed. “If We Must Die” never specifically addresses race by name, but its tone of defiance was taken by readers to be a response to the violent riots and lynchings taking place nationwide. At the Harlem Renaissance’s first dawn, Johnson and Mackay were two of first pioneers depicting contemporary black urban life in America.

Not everyone embraced the idea of a “Renaissance” emerging from black culture. Hubert Harrison, the so-called “Father of Harlem Radicalism” argued that the “Negro Literary Renaissance” disregarded “the stream of literary and artistic products which had flowed uninterruptedly from Negro writers from 1850 to the present.” Harrison also stated that referring to it as a “Renaissance” was mostly a white invention. His argument was that it is in fact, condescending, to refer to this movement as a “Renaissance,” because saying so undermines the quality of art produced prior, the implication being that slave and abolitionist art is somehow

primitive (and therefore inferior) compared to the art of their so-called enlightened contemporary age, which he believes it was not.

There was no singular unifying theme of the art of the Harlem Renaissance. Some of the movement's major themes were depicting modern black life in the North, the aftereffects on slavery on black life, institutional racism, and progressive politics. One of the overarching themes of these elements was an unconcealed display of racial pride, a theme that will share its ideas with the New Negro, described in more detail in a later chapter. While the movement was predominately black, it was not completely black. Obviously, it relied heavily on its black clientele, black publications and black-owned businesses; however, it also depended heavily on white patronage for support. Carl van Vechten was one such white patron, and he provided support through both patronage and publication to the Harlem Renaissance's premier artists. The motivations of these white patrons varied. Some who were involved with the movement sincerely wanted to help to unify races and were genuinely concerned with defying racist attitudes. Others saw the movement as just another extension of "primitive" culture and thought it nothing more than an amusement and a fad of the time, not taking its message seriously.

In the end, the Harlem Renaissance was more than just an artistic movement. It was successful in that it brought the black experience to the forefront of American thought. Its proliferation of progressive politics and manifestation of a new racial consciousness made a massive impact on black society, and society in general. It redefined how the United States viewed its black population, and how the world also viewed them. The migration of Southern blacks to the North changed the landscape of American history. It altered the image of blacks as rural and undereducated and instead represented them as members of an urbanite cosmopolitan class. This

progression heavily influenced the black communities around the country and shaped their future motivations by means of greater self-awareness, social progress, and determination. It is easy to see how the Harlem Renaissance influenced later generations of black cultural, socio-economic, and political movements, namely the post-World War II civil rights movement and the Black Pride movement of the 1970s.

From this brief history, it is evident that the Harlem Renaissance's racial history is clearly defined. What isn't clearly defined, however, is the movement's queer history. In "Insolent Racing, Rough Narrative: The Harlem Renaissance's Impolite Queers," Michael L. Cobb makes assertions as to how "explorations about queer sexuality and African-American literary production suffer from an inability to queer, substantially, the cultural expressions of race, especially once race becomes the organizing rubric under which a culture articulates a literary tradition" (328). This is saying the sexual undercurrent, in particular of works of black artists, is all but hidden when that sexual undercurrent is anything other than heterosexual in nature. The Harlem Renaissance, which was and is looked upon as the apex of black cultural enlightenment, struggled both then and now to identify the queerness that was the driving force for much of its success.

One of the bigger mistakes regarding the reading and analyzing the work of the Harlem Renaissance is to interpret it solely from the lens of a racial narrative. Cobb quotes from Henry Louis Gates, Jr., in reviewing the film *Looking for Langston*, that the Harlem Renaissance was "surely as gay as it was black, not that it was exclusively either of these" (329). So it has to be asked why this cultural movement attaches itself to its racial aspect, but less so to its queer one, when both were crucial to its inception and success. While the racial influence was obviously a stronger connector of the pioneers of the time, as it's safe to say that most (but not all) of the

revolutionaries of the movement were black, perhaps not as overwhelming a majority were queer; however, the queer population was significant enough that it should be at least acknowledged and its references embraced. Cobb further quotes, “yet, this, in view of its emblematic importance to later movements of black creativity in this country, is what makes the powerful current of homophobia in black letters a matter of particular interest and concern” (233). This homophobia in the black artistic community (and, to a greater extent, the black community in general) is a pointed, yet loaded, observation, one that is unfortunately deep-seated, and still persists even today, although less so, the examples of which you see demonstrated in the black arts of today, with hip-hop music being the most obvious example due to its explicit lyrics. Cobb summarizes this attempted downplaying of influence of queerness on the black artistic community of the time, saying “[i]ndeed, minimized discussion of the black queer's exclusion from the emergent African-American literary canon not only points to a lack in what counts as 'appropriate' themes for race criticism, but such a stubborn exclusion also points to the plentitude of homophobia in critical black letters” (329). What is being stated here is clear: the black artistic tradition interprets homosexuality as improper at best and evil at worst, deeming its influence on artistic expression all but irrelevant.

Cobb singles out Richard Bruce Nugent in his condemnation of queer exclusion from the black literary canon. Nugent was one of the few openly gay writers of the Harlem Renaissance, a quality which made him all but a posthumous pariah when reflecting on the movement. Cobb writes:

Poignantly, the critical and literary neglect of one of the most explicitly queer writers of the Harlem Renaissance, Richard Bruce Nugent, echoes Gates' concern that there is a repetitive desire not to risk mixing the African-American literary tradition with



a sustained and systematic discussion of same-sex sexuality. Nugent's virtual absence from the black literary and cultural scene seems significant because he is often credited with being the first African American to write and publish a story with explicit homosexual content. Whether this is true or not, his early crossing into the taboo territory of same-sex sexuality has cast him into the role of race traitor, and, as a consequence, he provides a fruitful place to begin asking more detailed questions about race and queerness in the Harlem Renaissance's literature. Significantly, Nugent becomes a re-occurring and rich icon of the queer in Harlem, and his penchant for insolence, as we shall see, is certainly an issue. (329)

This neglect of Nugent's literary contribution to the Harlem Renaissance is very telling, as is mentioned above, it plays into the homophobia that still exists in black contemporary culture. The mere fact he is credited as being the first black person to have written and published a story with candid homosexual content is alone worth mentioning in the cultural overview and impact of the Harlem Renaissance. To have his contributions to the movement simply swept under the rug is a testament of a bigger problem in the black community's dealing of issues they view as illicit. It is also interesting that Cobb uses the term "race traitor" to describe Nugent's treatment in his place in the literature of the Harlem Renaissance. A general definition of "race traitor" would be a person who is perceived to hold opinions that are against the best interests of his or her race. Cobb is stating that by Nugent being open about his homosexuality and being overt in his stories of homosexual desire, he is somehow held in the view of a traitor, by other artistic blacks, against black ideals and black progression. Nugent must have been aware of this perception by others, which is where his "penchant for insolence" comes into play; his insolence can be seen perhaps as a defense mechanism for how he was treated by others, or alternatively as an act of defiance against those who deemed him inferior or radical, or a combination of both. Because of his openness regarding his homosexuality and his unfair treatment thereafter in his place in the literary canon of black literature, he can be seen as a gay Harlem icon. Cobb writes:

Although Nugent's most queerly-explicit story, "Smoke, Lilies, and Jade, A Novel, Part I," is often-anthologized in smaller gay anthologies after having originally appeared in the short-lived 1926 journal edited by Wallace Thurman, Langston Hughes, Gwendolyn Bennet, Aaron Douglas, John Davis, Zora Neale Hurston, and Nugent himself (publishing under the pseudonym Richard Bruce), the story often remains absent in anthologies and work on the Harlem Renaissance. For instance, even though the importance of the journal *Fire!! A Quarterly Devoted to the Younger Negro Artists* is duly noted in the *Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, Nugent's story escapes anthologized comment or reprint. This editorial choice suggests that a literary object like Nugent's, important for its perceived groundbreaking engagement with a previously taboo queer theme, is not a special concern in the fraught, but nevertheless important, work of consolidating a canon of African-American literature. And by no means are the Norton editors the only ones who deemphasize Nugent's literary importance in black letters: Arnold Rampersad, in his introduction to the newest edition of *The New Negro*, describes Nugent as "far more concerned with his gay identity than with his sense of race or ethnicity" (xxi). Moreover, the surprisingly small mass of archival research, scholarly work, and sustained interest on Nugent also implies that racial excavations of this queer author are not a priority. (329)

Here, Cobb mentions the blatant omission of Nugent's overtly queer story as reemphasizing the point that a homosexual theme in black literature is seen as somehow a detriment to the black cause, and black literature in general. Cobb calls Nugent's queer story a "groundbreaking engagement with a previously taboo queer theme," which implies that besides its achievement in breaking barriers with regard to its homosexual content, it is actually a good, well-written story, thereby worthy of inclusion in any anthology of the Harlem Renaissance or black literature in general. The most provoking sentence in the above quote comes from Arnold Rampersad's introduction to a revised edition of *The New Negro*. Referring to Nugent as "far more concerned with his gay identity than with his sense of race or ethnicity" is a blatant attempt at undermining Nugent's literary endeavors. A statement such as this can make a modern reader wonder aloud at what exactly Rampersad means. In our modern time, seeing Nugent's exclusion in literary anthologies, to a contemporary audience, makes one think that Nugent isn't the one far more

concerned with his sexual identity than his racial one. It seems that those doing the excluding seem far more concerned, as they are the ones who are bringing it up, by omitting his literary contribution, and by noting the small scholarly research that has been done on his work, in comparison to the others writers of the time.

So, if overtly homosexual content was so incendiary at the time, why was such a story included by its editors in a black literary publication such as *Fire!!*? Quoting cultural historian Eric Gerber, it is explained that “[Wallace] Thurman decided that in order for *Fire!!* to be truly daring, two particularly sensational pieces were needed: one on homosexuality, the other on prostitution. He [Thurman] flipped a coin to determine who [Thurman or Nugent] would write what.” Cobb continues, “Nugent, as we know, wrote the homosexual piece that would help shock a different kind of African-American literary recognition; he wrote the kind of piece that was intended to get the journal 'banned in Boston' (Smith 214)” (330). So here, it is inferred with this statement that “taboo” subjects, such as homosexuality and prostitution, were actively sought for the magazine in order to attract attention (and notoriety), yet these subjects were not seen worthy of literary value on their own accord. This makes Nugent's dismissal in literary accounts of the Harlem Renaissance all the more poignant. Cobb quotes Alain Locke, in his review of *Fire!!*, calling the group a “charging brigade of literary revolt,” and stating “the strong sex radicalism of many of the contributors will shock many well-wishers and elate some of our adversaries” (331). When reflecting on the accounts of the Harlem Renaissance, it seems that the adversaries won out in the retelling of the movement. Locke, acting as an “advisor” to the editors of *Fire!!*, put a certain strain on the creativity of the younger Harlem artists. He is referred to as one of the older icons that needed to be torn down to make way for the emergence of the new movement, and as Cobb

states, “as a counterpart to Nugent's iconicity, Locke enters into [...] the conservative forces needing to be contradicted in order for queerness to be articulated” (330). But while Locke tried to turn the magazine's pushing against conservative mores into a negative thing, the editors of the magazine thought it positive, a necessary radicalization intended to push boundaries in the name of creativity. Cobb states:

Locke's characterization of the journal's radicalism is completely in-line with the editors' expressed desire: when one writes a piece on homosexuality, one will then have a troubling aesthetic rupture, and one will then shock readers. The good modernist catalogue of Joyce, Anderson and others gives way to the rushed imitation of the traditionally-coded queer literary tradition of decadence, producing effete echoes of something naughty, something that does not recall the more polite and “clean” flesh values that Locke would prefer to have representing Harlem and his New Negroes. (332)

The “New Negro: An Interpretation” was Alain Locke’s anthology of black fiction, poetry and essays. He named this anthology after “The New Negro,” his term for the philosophy of the flourishing cultural scene of the Harlem Renaissance as he perceived it. In essence, the philosophy was grounded in “race-building,” and the idea that blacks no longer hold themselves to the standards of whites, but create their own standard that is equally valid. This was to be accomplished by political activism and self-reliance, and to be enforced as an ideal for other blacks through the actions of its upholders as a positive example. Locke, who was gay himself, subscribed to a certain homosexual code of conduct, that is, one does not speak about such things in public. In “Strange Fruits,” Mason Stokes speaks about the other side of queer Harlem, the one of which Locke was a member, stating, “alongside this flamboyance, there was another queer Harlem, one that cloaked itself in the garments of middle-class respectability” (61). It was this side of Harlem that he hoped his New Negroes would aspire to. This idea of “race-building” is also another reason why Locke

was so critical of Nugent, as he didn't subscribe to the buttoned-up attributes of queer Harlem, thus putting him squarely in the "race-traitor" camp in Locke's view.

The above description of Locke's critique of *Fire!!* lies at the heart of the movement's motivation. The editors of *Fire!!* aimed for the "troubling aesthetic rupture," in the hopes of shocking their readers, yes, but perhaps also to encourage more innovative black creative thought. By comparing themselves to James Joyce and Sherwood Anderson, part of the "good modernist catalogue," they hoped to achieve the same techniques in black literature, something that conjures up something sinful and depraved, and therefore truthful, instead of the gentility and implied insincerity that Locke was looking for to represent his culture. Cobb goes on to mention how it is easy to feel disdain at the very society one is rebelling against, and that can be translated into disrespectful behavior, but Cobb is also suggesting that this attitude can also be used as armor:

The tool of contempt is wielded by characters who become too individual, and, as a consequence, are coded as bohemian, lazy, and, most dangerously, queer. Yet, instead of allowing these codings – codings handed down by people too invested in a polite and restrained articulation of race – to disable a radical rearticulation of race and individual, the editors of the journal exploit the designations' toxic and damning connotations. In other words, the artists use their young, Bohemian insolence, their queer figural positions, to slap convention and usher in the possibility of new forms of artistic and narrative expression. The artists take on the pathology evoked by a contest between the collective and the individual, and yield the possibility of new forms that enable queer and race to exist within the same literary articulation. [...] The young artists exploit the abjectness of queer form, the rudeness of a queer image or symbol, to create a new form of black literary expression. (343)

Here, Cobb is treating contempt as a dangerous weapon, to be used against those who deem individuality as threatening to the collective race. The younger black artists are embracing their queer moniker, almost taunting the conservative collective to refer to them as such, so as to give their radical movement power in the aim of unleashing a new mode of conduct. In the battle

between the old-school collective and new-school individual, the persona of disrespect of the old guard is seen a badge of courage with which to pioneer a new school of thought.

In analyzing Nugent's "Smoke, Lilies and Jade," Cobb makes the analogy that "being straight means race fidelity; being queer means violating the collective by becoming too individual" (346). This opinion is yet again parallel to the earlier description of Nugent as a "race traitor," that being heterosexual is somehow being in align with your race and queerness is a rebellious act of individualism. Cobb concludes with a statement on why the Harlem Renaissance is crucial in the scope of queer literature:

The Harlem Renaissance is important for a queer literary tradition not only because it presents queer criticism with archival material and primary texts, but also because it gives us a possible explanation for why so much of contemporary queer visibility is reliant and thrives on death narratives and unconventional forms. [...] Queers take large risks when they wander outside of the club, Harlem, or the restrained, closeted spaces of their own particular counterpublic spaces of same-sex intimacy. In order to become public, to offer a specifically queer reference, one must break with the established form, and offer something that might seem toxic to the very self one chooses to express in such publicity. (347)

Here, Cobb states that the use of unconventional forms in literature and queer visibility as we know it today is unequivocally due, in part, to the Harlem Renaissance. This visibility, however, often takes the tone of "death narratives," the reasoning of which will be explored in greater detail later. Queers, Cobb states, live on the perpetual outskirts of their everyday lives, and that forces them to take risks that a heterosexual person might not even consider. To be seen for who you really are, as a queer person, sometimes requires a deliberate act of defiance. To do this, you may need to be brash and be seen as insolent in the process. Cobb argues that Richard Bruce Nugent achieved this, to the detriment of his own literary legacy, but to the cultural advantage of queer visibility in literature.

## II. Richard Bruce Nugent and the Literature of Uncoded Homosexuality

This section more closely focuses our look at Richard Bruce Nugent. In the foreword to *Gay Rebel of the Harlem Renaissance: Selections from the Work of Richard Bruce Nugent*, Henry Louis Gates Jr. states that “Bruce Nugent linked the black world of the Harlem Renaissance with the gay world of bohemian New York. As Thomas Wirth points out, Nugent was 'the first African American to write from a self-declared homosexual perspective.' Moreover, he was the first writer who directly raised the issue of what being black and gay might have to do with each other, three full decades before James Baldwin's novel *Giovanni's Room* appeared in 1956” (xii). So it only makes sense that we begin with Nugent, in an effort to connect the two facets of the Harlem Renaissance, that are often read as separate strains of the same movement. In reality they were not, and the only way to fully understand the movement is by a simultaneous interweaving of the racial and sexual themes throughout the works of the time. An attempt will be made to do that with a close reading of Nugent's work.

In *Gay Rebel*, Wirth writes:

Nugent was the first African-American to write from a self-declared homosexual perspective; his work therefore occupies an honored place in the now-burgeoning literature of the gay black male. An openly gay black youth who moved in circles – white and black – where same-sex erotic interest was pervasive but rarely acknowledged publicly, Nugent illuminated, through his life and work, conundrums of race, sex and class that are of considerable current interest. (1)

In our modern-day readings of literary texts, intersectionality has become not only commonplace, but imperative in the analyzing of literature, in order to fully grasp the complex layers of a given text. In the case of Nugent, his work can be viewed as only being truly understood when critiquing the layers of black male and gay male identities. These themes in his writing are

inherently overlapping and interdependent. Wirth mentions that “Nugent was obviously influenced by both the crosscurrents of the Harlem Renaissance and the evolving gay male literary tradition” (1), meaning that Nugent felt he was contributing to both literary sectors, and by doing so carving out his own niche.

It is also noteworthy that Nugent was able to move freely between white and black circles. Nugent was a very light-skinned black man, and the ability to be accepted among white society as a black person was no small feat in the early 20th century, and from that one would infer that Nugent was aware of the freedom of movement that being light-skinned allowed him. So the earlier remark from Rampersad in *The New Negro* that Nugent was “far more concerned with his gay identity than with his sense of race or ethnicity” rings particularly untrue, as his work is consciously aware of and draws upon experiences stemming from fluidity of movement among races, and fluidity of sexuality and the overlapping circles of each environment.

Upon the inception of *FIRE!!*, the contributors of the journal called themselves the “Niggerati,” an obvious impudent play on a word associated with intelligence, pretension and, more importantly, a decidedly white audience. Wirth states about the Niggerati's intent:

The Niggerati figured among the more independent and rebellious of the younger talents, who by 1926 had begun to chafe at the subtle and not-so-subtle censorship involved in always putting their best feet forward for the sake of racial uplift. Like their white contemporaries of “the lost generation,” they were convinced that great art must be based on “truth,” however disagreeable that truth might be to some. (13)

The Lost Generation, the contemporaneous modernist literary movement that grew out of the end of World War I, had major themes that were brutal and unbuttoned, not adhering to the rules of polite society. The “truth,” in the writings of this period, refer to life's gritty and depraved occurrences which are as much a part of human existence as polity and manners, and the Niggerati



thought those things are worth talking about in art. If their white contemporaries can mention these things, the black artistic elite should be able to speak about them as well.

This intent further expands the idea previously mentioned about sexuality and being seen as a “race-traitor.” By using sexuality and other themes as a form of rebellion against “racial uplift,” these artists are seeking to create “great art” through the means of rugged individualism. Langston Hughes published the Niggerati's manifesto: “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 build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves” (14). There is a sense of legacy in this statement. These writers hoped to create work that not only expressed their truth, but also hoped to preserve a certain ignition of fire that could be related for generations of black people to come. There is also a sense of freedom in Hughes's words that also conjures up images of being emancipated from slavery, free from the shackles imposed on them by whites and their standards.

It was in this first and only issue of *FIRE!!* that Nugent published his story “Smoke Lilies and Jade.” Written in a stream of consciousness, its explicit homoerotic detail made it the most controversial piece in the publication. It describes Alex, a young man who goes out at night and meets a male stranger, and then embarks on a sexual encounter with said stranger. Nugent's talent is on full display here, as the work is beautifully written, lush with imagery and invokes a certain dream-like state:

... Alex turned over and blew another cloud of smoke ... was all life like that ...  
smoke ... blue smoke from an ivory holder ... he wished he were in New Bedford  
... New Bedford was a nice place ... snug little houses set complacently behind

protecting lawns ... half-open windows showing prim interiors from behind waving cool curtains ... inviting ... like precise courtesans winking from behind lace fans ... and trees ... many trees ... casting lacy patterns of shade on the sun-dipped sidewalks ... small stores ... naively proud of their pseudo grandeur ... banks ... called institutions for saving ... all naive ... that was it ... New Bedford was naive ... after the sophistication of New York it would fan one like a refreshing breeze ... (78)

From a literary standpoint, this sample of Nugent's vivid descriptions invokes a certain aesthetic, keeping in line with the modernist influence of the Lost Generation and other white contemporaries, who frequently used non-traditional literary practices in their work, such as run-on sentences, or even just fragments, to create a certain musicality and conjure a certain feeling in the text as it's being read. By doing this, Nugent brings the reader into Alex's vision, and as such the reader is invited into the dream, envisioning what he envisions.

Alex has various contemplations as he lingers on his bed, about himself and his relationship to his father's death, and as he decided to get up and goes walking in the night, his thoughts turn to misunderstanding of masculinity and of artists:

... why was it that men wouldn't use perfumes ... they should ... each and every one of them like perfumes ... the man who denied that was a liar ... or coward ... but if ever he were to voice that thought ... express it ... he would be misunderstood ... a fine feeling that ... to be misunderstood ... it made him feel tragic and great ... but maybe it would be nicer to be misunderstood ... no great artist is ... then again neither were fools ... they were strangely akin these two ... (79)

It is easy to equate this reference to perfume as a symbol of an effeminate, and therefore potentially queer, male insight. It is also easy to equate this musing on misunderstanding to queerness, and the traditional plight of repressed homosexuality, and what it means to have your identity mistaken as a queer person, or purposely obfuscating your identity because of it. The idea of feeling "tragic" and "great" is a typical stereotype in the realm of creatives. Some see great

artists as having tragic lives, which somehow intensifies their greatness. Nugent is also drawing parallels to the tragedy of an artist and tragedy of being gay. The death of the queer character in literature was, and, to a lesser extent, still is, common in moralistic tales of depravity. What makes “Smoke, Lilies and Jade” unusual is that the queer protagonist does not face a gruesome demise. Instead, he is portrayed as an interesting and thoughtful character who is worthy of the reader’s sympathies. Cobb states:

Nugent offers a narrative form that instead of killing the queer character, instead of forcing the queer’s rudeness to shock her or him right out of existence (like the short-lived *Fire!!* itself), Nugent produces a narrative that kills its own pristine veneer, at the level of the sentence, not at the level of the body. He produces an elliptical roughness, reminding us that the queer deaths that seem necessary in most narratives (even Giovanni has to die in Baldwin over twenty years later) are not really murders but metaphors. This seems vital given the most irrefutable cultural death logic of a world that would prefer to see the queer’s literal death. (347-348)

The mention of the elliptical structure as a “roughness” that is a tool used to disrupt the glossy exterior of the text, Cobb assesses that this is Nugent’s way of producing the queer death, without the queer person having to die. The use of the queer death in literature is an implication of the queer as somehow wicked or evil, and the trope is used as a cautionary tale. It is also used as a way to introduce a queer character into a story without ruffling the feathers of the reader. By killing the character off it is still within good taste to read the story; after all, his demise is well deserved, being queer and all, hence Cobb’s mention of “a world that would prefer to see the queer’s literal death.” But instead, Nugent uses the ellipses to tell the story, rebelling against societal norms through radicalization of literary devices. By doing so, Nugent is able to save his queer protagonist from a fatal end, while still dismantling the gentility of the traditional literary form.

As the story progresses, Alex keeps walking into the night, and eventually meets up with the stranger. As they play the initial game one does when first encountering someone they don't know on the street, it is then described how they went back to Alex's apartment:

... they walked in silence ... the castanets of their heels clicking accompaniment ... the stranger inhaled deeply and with a nod of content and a smile ... blew a cloud of smoke ... Alex felt like singing ... the stranger knew the magic of blue smoke also ... they continued in silence ... the castanets of their heels clicking rhythmically ... Alex turned in his doorway ... up the stairs and the stranger waited for him to light the room ... no need for words ... they had always known each other .....

as they undressed by the blue dawn ... Alex knew he had never seen a more perfect being ... his body was all symmetry and music ... and Alex called him Beauty ... long they lay ... blowing smoke and exchanging thoughts ... and Alex swallowed with difficulty ... he felt a glow of tremor ... and they talked ... and slept ... (81-82)

Nugent's imagery here is masterful. The musicality in the steps (castanets, rhythmically clicking heels), the illuminating visuals (blue smoke, blue dawn, glow of tremor) all help to transport the reader into the scene, as if one is a bystander witnessing this interaction between two men. His use of imagery also creates a hallucinatory-like haze, and what follows in his description of Alex's dreams as he drifts off to sleep creates a certain delicacy:

... Alex slept ... and dreamed .....

he was in a field ... a field of blue smoke and black poppies and red calla lilies ... he was searching ... on his hands and knees ... searching ... among black poppies and red calla lilies ... he was searching and pushed aside poppy stems ... and saw two strong white legs ... dancer's legs ... the contours pleased him ... his eyes wandered ... on past the muscular hocks to the firm white thighs ... the rounded buttocks ... then the lithe narrow waist ... strong torso and broad deep chest ... the heavy shoulders ... the graceful muscled neck ... squared chin and quizzical lips ... Grecian nose with its temperamental nostrils ... the brown eyes looking at him ... like ... Monty looked at Zora ... his hair curly and black and all tousled ... and it was Beauty ... and Beauty smiled and looked at him and smiled ... said ... I'll wait Alex ... and Alex became confused and continued his search ... (82-83)

This matter-of-factness in describing the naked male form standing in front of Alex conjures a certain tenderness. This is not a description of the queer facing hostility, or guilt, or

shame. Starting from the bottom and working his way up the male figure, each detail is described. A reader will take notice of the mention of the male form's *white* legs and thighs). Race isn't an explicit factor in this story but it is still important to notice that the male of his dreams is white (his current lust interest, Beauty, is Spanish). With his muscular physique and Grecian nose, he is Adonis material, the personification of the perfect male form. We, the readers, find ourselves gazing up at this male form with Alex, as the illusory description fully transports the reader into the scene, as Wirth states:

Even in the context of underground homoerotica, which was by then well established, "Smoke, Lilies and Jade" was unique - a forthright, uncoded invitation of the reader of any sexual orientation to enter the interior consciousness of a bisexual man and assume a homophilic subjectivity. There is none of the guilt and anguish that had previously characterized most writing about male same-sex desire and that would continue to dominate gay literature for many decades. "Smoke, Lilies and Jade" celebrates sexual attraction between men with exquisite sensitivity, without apology or prurience. (41)

This is what makes this story trailblazing. It is the acclamation of same-sex desire, while being transparent in its motivations, and told with such tenderness and compassion, that make this work unique; and, as a testament to its elegant mechanics, completely worthy of analysis and literary study.

Nugent's continued use of imagery point to his literary inspirations. Take this sample from the text that makes use of his illusory talents:

... and Alex awoke ... Beauty's hair tickled his nose ... Beauty was smiling in his sleep ... half his face stained flush color by the sun ... the other half in shadow ... blue shadow ... his eyelashes casting cobwebby blue shadows on his cheek ... his lips were so beautiful ... quizzical ... Alex wondered why he always thought of that passage from Wilde's Salome ... when he looked at beauty's lips ... Alex flushed warm ... with shame ... or was it shame ... he reached across Beauty for a cigarette ... Beauty's cheek felt cool to his arm ... his hair felt soft ... Alex lay smoking ...

such a dream ... red calla lilies ... red calla lilies ... and ... what did it all mean ... did dreams have meanings ... (83)

It is plain to see that Nugent's inspiration and knowledge of aestheticism clearly informs his writing. Aestheticism (also known as Decadence, specifically relating to the French movement) was a late 19th century British and French intellectual and artistic movement. It was characterized as emphasizing aesthetic values over socio-political ones. The French Decadent artists coined the term *l'art pour l'art*, from which the term "art for art's sake" became a well-known mantra pertaining to the ideals of the movement. The Decadent writers believed that the arts need not have any educational purpose; it need only to be beautiful. It should simply provide the reader sensual pleasure, and not provide moral messages or sentimentality. These Aesthetic writers developed a cult of beauty and fully believed that was basic factor of art. Nugent was very taken by this literary movement, and its influence is clear in his writing. Wirth writes:

As a gay writer, Nugent began squarely in what might be characterized as the tradition of perfumed decadence. This line of development began with the publication of Joris-Karl Huysmans notorious novel, *A rebours*, in Paris in 1884, continued with his contemporaries in England in the 1880s and 1890s and flowered in the United States in the 1920s in the novels of Carl van Vechten. Associated with this literary tradition were artists like Aubrey Beardsley, the illustrator of the written version of Wilde's play *Salome*, and Erté, the Russian-born Parisian who dominated the pages of Harper's Bazaar during the 1920's. (41)

*À rebours* is the story of Jean des Esseintes, an eccentric young man who tries to escape contemporary society by withdrawing into an ideal world of his own creation. There are comparisons to be made between *À rebours* and "Smoke, Lilies and Jade." The most obvious is that both stories are written almost exclusively from the solitary perspective of their protagonist. Another is the male protagonists in each story go out in night and pick up a stranger for a sexual encounter. In Huysmans' story however, the homoeroticism, while nearly as

explicit, takes a much more negative tone. Wirth paraphrases from Huysmans regarding Des Esseintes's homosexual encounter: "The young man's 'arm brushed that of Des Esseintes, who slowed his pace as he thoughtfully considered the young man's mincing walk.' A 'mistrustful relationship' followed, which 'lasted for months: Des Esseintes could no longer think of it without a shudder; never had he submitted to a more seductive, more compelling servitude, never had he experienced such dangers, yet never had he felt more painfully fulfilled'" (42). From this quote, it is very clear to see how Nugent was influenced by the decadent literature that had preceded him.

The Aesthetic writers were also very heavy on symbolism, and it is clear to see that influence manifested in "Smoke, Lilies and Jade:"

... through his half-closed eyes he could see Beauty ... propped ... cheek in hand ... on one elbow ... looking at him ... lips smiling quizzically ... he wished Beauty wouldn't look so hard ... Alex was finding it difficult to breathe ... breathe normally ... why *must* Beauty look so long ... and smile *that* way ... his face seemed nearer ... it was ... Alex could feel Beauty's hair on his forehead ... breathe normally ... breathe normally ... could feel Beauty's breath on his nostrils and lips ... and it was clean and faintly colored with tobacco ... breathe normally Alex ... Beauty's lips were nearer ... Alex closed his eyes ... how did one act ... his pulse was hammering ... from wrist to finger tip ... wrist to finger tip ... Beauty's lips touched his ... his temples throbbed ... throbbed ... breathe normally Alex ... (84)

Throughout these snippets of the text, the effect of synesthesia is very heavily incorporated in this story. Synesthesia is the (usually involuntary) stimulation of one sense by another sense, and was very popularly used by the Decadent writers. In "Smoke, Lilies, and Jade," the frequent correlation of words, colors, and music is a deliberate invocation by Nugent of the visual and auditory senses, almost seeming to invoke them interchangeably. The repetition of "wrist to finger tip" and the sensation of touching lips thereby invokes a certain

tactile element, invoking yet another sense. All of these literary elements speak to Nugent's heavy influence by Decadent and Aesthetic ideals.

The importance of the technical style in "Smoke, Lilies and Jade" is just as, if not more important, than the invocation of moods and feelings. Mention was made earlier on the ellipses as metaphor for the queer death, instead of the literal killing of Alex. Nugent's use of ellipses is also a dramatically modern technique, one that creates a certain mood as mentioned above, but also one, that Cobb argues is an intentional provocation. He writes in "Insolent Racing:"

Immediately, the reader must wander through the text's innovative form; the text is composed entirely in an elliptical style; the entire story is a collection of phrases divided by ellipses, calling to our attention, as most modernist works do, the form used to express a thought or a feeling, especially thoughts or feelings that contradict literary tradition [...] [Alex] prefers to think and explore his contrariness, his different relationship to his father's death, and, later, his different relationship to sexual desire. It is through the medium of his smoky fragmented thoughts, Alex's desires find expression, despite their potentially scandalous forms. (344).

Nugent conjures up the mood and feeling of the text by both the literal form (use of ellipses) and by illusory description (the "medium of smoky fragmented thoughts."). Both of these elements work together to create a feeling for the reader that is successfully executed, one that revels in the expression of the protagonist as the reader progresses through his thoughts.

Cobb continues:

In the short story, the ellipsis is a crucial way to break with stricter literary expressions. In the OED, one definition of ellipsis reads, "the omission of one or more words in a sentence which would be needed to complete the grammatical construction or fully to express the sense." What makes Nugent's story innovative is that the ellipses do not necessarily thwart the narrative's ability to tell a coherent story - once he gets beyond the ellipses, one can read the story fluidly, as if it were any stream of consciousness narration; [...] the ellipses are still serving a narrative role - they serve to describe the grammar necessary for the production of such a shocking, queer text. (344)



This is what makes Nugent's story so successful. By using the ellipses, the reader does not feel like he or she is missing anything from the text. In fact, instead of removing something from the narrative, it fills in the gaps of the text, and the story still reads in a cohesive way. The stream of consciousness is actually accentuated by this use of ellipses to progress the story.

Cobb makes one last observation about Nugent's textual choices. He comments on the stranger being referred to as Beauty: "And there is something thrilling about Nugent's appropriate choice of nickname for his queer love object, Beauty - it accentuates the desire for the question of art to not only be a question of race, but also a question of sexuality" (348). It is this observation that once again disproves Rampersad's earlier comment about Nugent only caring about his sexual identity and not his racial one. Nugent does care that the parallels be made. Beauty is Spanish, and not accidentally. To Nugent, both of these distinctions are equally important and need to be cross-referenced in order for him to be fully understood and appreciated, and he was well aware of that.

Wirth sums up Nugent's importance in the literary scene: "As a writer, Nugent stands at the intersection of two separate literary traditions – black and gay. For his significance to be properly assessed, he must be viewed simultaneously from both perspectives. The wider context – American culture as it evolved during the first third of the twentieth century – must be considered as well" (40). This sentiment should be echoed in the wider reading of work from Harlem Renaissance writers. The intersectional reading of work through a black lens and queer lens helps to fully analyze and appreciate the richness of these texts.

### **III. Langston Hughes and the Tradition of Coded Language**

It is worth starting this section with the statement that Langston Hughes's homo- or bisexuality has never been confirmed. In "Reclaiming the Corporeal: The Black Male Body and

the ‘Racial Mountain’ in ‘Looking for Langston,’” Chi-Yun Shin mentions that Isaac Julien’s film, *Looking for Langston*, got into hot water with the Hughes estate, stating:

[n]o doubt in part to the film’s homosexuality, the film provoked an antagonistic response from the Hughes Estate which sought an injunction against showing the film in the US. In response to the Estate’s legal claim, which was one of copyright infringement, Julien had to have Hughes’s poetry replaced on the soundtrack. Furthermore, when the film was screened at the New York Film Festival in 1989, the audience was informed that owing to a copyright dispute the film’s sound would be blocked out in two archival sequences of Langston Hughes’s reciting his poetry. Clearly the legal difficulties Julien experienced with the Hughes estate themselves constitute one key to understanding black masculinity as a highly policed terrain. However, as many commentators have pointed out, the film is not a documentary that seeks to find the truth about Hughes’s sexuality. The film, described by Julien as a mediation, is a ‘poetic’ montage of various archival materials, dramatized segments, poetry readings, and music from the past and present. (201)

Shin relates the legal trouble that Julien found himself in with the Hughes estate as being subject to the “highly policed terrain” of black masculinity, which is an interesting suggestion. As mentioned, the film *Looking for Langston* has nothing to do with Hughes’s personal sexual proclivities. While Hughes’s family sued on the basis of copyright infringement, the underlying suggestion of policing black masculinity suggests that they just didn’t want Hughes’s work connected to a film with homosexual overtones, (and probably also rejected use of the name “Langston” in the title) and used the copyright violation as an excuse to have his poetry removed from the film. While speculation is rampant, there is simply no concrete evidence that suggests Hughes was, in fact, homosexual. Similarly, there is no evidence that suggests he wasn’t either. But by treating heterosexuality as the “default sexuality,” as western society so often does, means that Hughes gets put, by society and presumably by Hughes family, into the “straight until proven otherwise” camp of sexual activity. In the first volume of his biography of Langston Hughes,

Arnold Rampersad suggested that Hughes wasn't homosexual at all, and went to great lengths to not present publicly any particular proclivity:

His fatalism was well placed. Under such pressure, Hughes's sexual desire, such as it was, became not so much sublimated as vaporized. He governed his sexual desires to an extent rare to a normal adult male: whether his appetite was normal and adult is impossible to say. He understood, however, that Cullen and Locke offered him nothing he wanted, or nothing that promised much for him or his poetry. If certain of his responses to Locke seemed like teasing (a habit Hughes would never quite lose with women, or perhaps, men) they were not therefore necessarily signs of sexual desire: more likely, they showed the lack of it. Nor should one infer quickly that Hughes was held back by a greater fear as a homosexual than his friends had: of the three men, he was the only ready, indeed eager, to be perceived as disreputable. (69)

By stating that Hughes showed lack of sexual desire, Rampersad is suggesting that Hughes was perhaps asexual. However, in volume two of his biography of Hughes, Rampersad does state that Hughes's interest in certain men was observed, stating "...Hughes found some young men, especially dark-skinned men, appealing and sexually fascinating. (Both in his various artistic representations, in fiction especially, and in his life, he appears to have found young white men of little sexual appeal.) Virile young men of very dark complexion fascinated him" (336). Carl van Vechten, one of Hughes's close friends, stated that he also wasn't certain of Hughes's proclivities, but didn't believe, as Rampersad did, that Hughes was asexual:

When Carl van Vechten said that he "never had ... any indication that [Hughes] was homosexual or heterosexual," he was not suggesting that Hughes was asexual or did not desire. Instead, he was remaining faithful to Hughes himself, who studiously cultivated a suspicion of sexual identity and attended with much more interest to the conditions of queer sociality. Hughes resisted name and fixing his desire, not out of internalized shame or the logic of the closet, but out of what bell hooks proposes we might think of as his "perverse regard" for desire itself, its mysteries and uncertainties. (Vogel 418)

These seemingly contradictory accounts do nothing to divulge, one way or the other, Hughes's true feelings. All this speculation, however, didn't stop gay anthologies and queer

theorists from claiming Hughes as one of their own. The argument has been made that Hughes' poetry contains coded language, in the spirit of Walt Whitman, that illuminates certain subtleties that can be interpreted as being homosexual in nature. In *Gay Rebel*, Wirth writes that "[e]ven Nugent, one of Hughes's closest friends in 1925 and 1926, was unable to state unequivocally whether Hughes was sexually attracted to men or not although he suspected Hughes was" (55). This queer reading of Hughes's poetry can be seen as infusing his poems with a richness, and owing to its greater appeal. In stark contrast to Richard Bruce Nugent's approach to the topic of sexuality in his writing, the poetry of Langston Hughes is a much less flamboyant, but no less arresting, approach to homosexual themes. His poetic style was simple yet elegant, with stark language that held a cadence and musicality inspired by jazz.

Some of the poetry that is referred to as perhaps homosexual in nature is extremely circumspect. Wirth writes,

Some of Hughes's early poetry can be interpreted as the expression of same-sex desire, but that work is only a tiny part of his enormous oeuvre. Nonetheless, those examples are notable. 'Consider Poem [2]'.  
(55)

I loved my friend.  
He went away from me.  
There's nothing more to say.  
The poem ends,  
Soft as it began, -  
I loved my friend. (55)

This example asks more questions than it answers. Who is this friend? Why did he go away? What kind of love did the speaker have for his friend? Romantic? Platonic? Who is the speaker of this poem? One of the most appealing things about Hughes's poetry is that he almost never makes clear whom the speaker is. There is not much to be taken from this particular poem,

thus, much can be infused. To give a queer reading to this poem would be to suggest that the speaker is male (perhaps Hughes himself, perhaps not). “He went away from me” can suggest any number of reasons, perhaps he fell in love with another, perhaps he died, perhaps he left town for any number of circumstances. “The poem ends / soft as it began” adds a tenderness to the mood of the poem, which perhaps might suggest a sensual or sexual feeling for his “friend.” The ambiguity of the both the speaker and the “friend” allow for various possible suggestions of meaning behind the poem, which together work convincingly into a queer reading of this poem.

Another Hughes poem, “Boy,” can be read as an expression of sexual desire:

He was somewhat like Ariel  
And somewhat like Puck  
And somewhat like a gutter boy  
Who loves to play in muck.

He has something of Bacchus  
And something of Pan  
And a way with women  
Like a sailor man.

He was straight and slender  
And solid with strength  
And lovely as a tree  
All his virile length.

He couldn't have been a good man,  
All shut up in a cell  
'Cause he'd "rather be a sinner,"  
He said, - "and go to hell." (Wirth 56)

In the first stanza, the speaker refers to Ariel, the sprite from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, and Puck, the sprite from Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The speaker is describing a youthful fellow, perhaps a playfully mischievous man who doesn't take himself too seriously by playing in muck. In the second stanza, the speaker references Bacchus, the Roman name for

Dionysus and god of wine, grape harvests, ritual madness, and religious ecstasy, and Pan, god of the wild, nature, shepherds and flocks. Referencing both gods is suggestive of this unnamed boy's sexual prowess. Both Bacchus and Pan were companions to nymphs, and are often represented in art with phallic symbolism. Comparing this boy to a sailor alludes to his promiscuity, at least specifically with women. In the third stanza, the speaker is describing the boy's physical characteristics, strong and slender, and "lovely as a tree," and then alluding to his virility, which is again a symbol of a strong sex drive. Only in the last stanza do we hear from the boy himself. First the speaker provides another character assumption – "He couldn't have been a good man / All locked up in a cell" – suggesting that this boy has been to prison. Then the boy responds that he would rather be a sinner and go to hell than to be a good man, presumably because sinners have more fun, alluding back to Bacchus and Pan with their penchant for wine and frivolity. Again, we are left with questions: who is this Boy? Who is the speaker? What is the relationship of the speaker to the Boy? The ambiguity that we don't know the gender of speaker can easily paint him as a man who looks at the Boy from afar, either wanting to be him, or lusting after him. Hughes purposely doesn't provide too much information, and leaves it up to the reader to fill in the blanks.

Besides a brief mention of a sailor in "Boy," Hughes's eloquence about sailors has been well-documented. "Port Town" is another poem whose context is perhaps sexually ambiguous:

Hello, sailor boy,  
In from the sea!  
Hello, sailor,  
Come with me!

Come on drink cognac,  
Rather have wine?  
Come here, I love you,  
Come and be mine (Wirth 56)

The first stanza uses Hughes's typical concise language. The speaker is in a port town and he or she sees a sailor boy, and then asks the sailor to accompany him or her somewhere. The second stanza asks the sailor boy what he prefers to drink, the implication being that it doesn't matter, he or she loves him, just be with him or her. Again, the same questions resurface: who is the speaker? Who is this sailor boy? What relationship do they have, if any? There is also an air of impermanence and longing, a fleeting feeling in the air. Does he or she really "love" the sailor, or does he or she just love him right now, for what he can provide, namely sexual satisfaction and relief from loneliness?

The simple elegance of Hughes's poetry is obvious, yet also understated. There is something fragile about the ambiguity of the speakers in his poems. In "Heroic 'Hussies' and 'Brilliant Queers': Genderacial Resistance in the Works of Langston Hughes," Anne Borden states:

To Hughes, identity is inseparable from, and indeed central to, one's artistry. His work is strengthened by a poetic imagination which enters the consciousness of those with varying experiences. Hughes's images are at times disturbing, also comforting, alternately sad and joyous, and directly connected to his identity as a Black man, who heard the voices of many - white and of Color, male and female, gay and straight, within and without himself. (333)

This is a very poignant description of how identity is so crucial to Hughes's work. Borden is suggesting that his poetry doesn't simply take the voice of a male speaker, or female speaker, or a white speaker or a black speaker. Hughes permeates all identities, they are the voices he has heard from others and these are the voices inherent within him – that when combined within Hughes's identity create these unique voices of speakers of various races, genders, and sexual identities. The "poetic imagination" lies within the reader, whoever might be reading his poem at

the time, who brings to his or her reading of his work a specific set of past experiences, specific identities, who is infusing these past experiences into the reading. Hughes, on the other hand, puts forth his words, and these words act as a vessel for interpretation. But the point Borden really makes is that for all Hughes's effort at completely stripping himself from his words, they are never totally objective. Hughes is still a black man, and his words are still as objective as they can be, while still coming from the mind an individual with a particular identity. No matter how little Hughes brings of himself into his work, he still permeates in the text for no other reason than *it is his*, and it is impossible for anyone to strip away his or her own identity completely in his or her artistic output.

Another poem that has been interpreted as having a homosexual undercurrent is "Desire."

Desire to us  
Was like a double death,  
Swift dying  
Of our mingled breath,  
Evaporation  
Of an unknown strange perfume  
Between us quickly  
In a naked  
Room. ("Desire")

This mention of "us" utilizes Hughes's typical style of an ambiguous speaker and ambiguous object of attention. The double death is can be a reference orgasm by both parties (*Le Petit Mort*), or could just be a reference to danger of having a homosexual encounter, the "desire" itself like a double death for daring to partake in an illicit action. "Swift dying / of our mingled breath" is a reference to the comedown after sex. "Evaporation / Of an unknown strange perfume" is an interesting line, because is the perfume strange because it is unknown? Or for some other reason? The enjambment between "In a Naked / Room" is compelling. One sees the word "naked"



and jumps to conclusions that the speaker is referring to himself or herself and the person he or she is with. But they're not the only two naked. The room is bare as well. It is easy to plug just about any combination of genders in this room, which makes it easy to read this poem as a homosexual encounter.

Another poem of Hughes's with purported hidden meaning is "Joy."

I went to look for Joy,  
Slim, dancing Joy,  
Gay, laughing Joy,  
Bright-eyed Joy—  
And then I found her  
Driving the butcher's cart  
In the arms of the butcher boy!  
Such company, such company,  
As keeps this young nymph, Joy! (Johnson 54)

This poem is deceptive in that it's easy to conclude that "Joy" must be a woman. The speaker even refers to "Joy" as "she." But there are alternate readings of this poem that can provide different, and even more convincing conclusions. Joy can be read as metaphor for the feeling or emotion evoked by a male object of affection. The opening lines describe Joy as "Slim, dancing, Joy / Gay laughing Joy / Bright-eyed Joy." This capital-J Joy can be a mood for the person the speaker is really looking at. When the speaker finds "her," Joy is "driving the butcher's cart / In the arms of a butcher boy!" This leads to the possibility that Joy could *be* the butcher boy, or someone in the cart with the butcher boy. "Such company, such company / As keeps this young nymph, Joy!" is the implication that there is something unsavory about keeping the butcher boy's company. Or alternatively, as previously suggested, the speaker finds Joy in the butcher boy's arms and marvels at how Joy can be found where you least expect it. By Hughes keeping the poem

loose, with no names, places or sense of time, it is easy to incorporate various meanings in his work.

Yet another poem with potential homosexual content is “Water-Front Streets.”

The spring is not so beautiful there—  
But dream ships sail away  
To where the spring is wondrous rare  
And life is gay.

The spring is not so beautiful there—  
But lads put out to sea  
Who carry beauties in their hearts  
And dreams, like me. (Johnson 55)

As usual, the first stanza begins with Hughes’s vague locations (“The spring is not so beautiful there—” where’s there?) and vague speaker (who is speaking?). But “there” is a place where dreams die, and as their ships sail away, “to where the spring is wondrous rare” – again where would that be? – the speaker appears to speculate that life is better in that new place, with a beautiful spring. The second stanza begins as the first, lamenting a non-beautiful spring, but the next two lines are telling: “But lads put out to sea / Who carry beauties in their hearts” is a description of sailors being shipped back out. As was mentioned earlier, Hughes’s penchant for sailors has been documented. It has been suggested that Hughes wrote many letters and unpublished poems to a man he was supposedly involved with that he called Beauty. Knowing this information about Hughes, a reader can easily speculate about the nature of this poem. Does the speaker carry Beauty in his heart, as well as dreams? It is not suggested that this poem is autobiographical, but it does lend itself to a homosexual interpretation.

Another poem with much speculation surrounding it is Hughes’s poem “Trumpet Player.”

The Negro

With the trumpet at his lips  
Has dark moons of weariness  
Beneath his eyes  
where the smoldering memory  
of slave ships  
Blazed to the crack of whips  
about thighs

The Negro  
with the trumpet at his lips  
has a head of vibrant hair  
tamed down,  
patent-leathered now  
until it gleams  
like jet—  
were jet a crown

the music  
from the trumpet at his lips  
is honey  
mixed with liquid fire  
the rhythm  
from the trumpet at his lips  
is ecstasy  
distilled from old desire—

Desire  
that is longing for the moon  
where the moonlight's but a spotlight  
in his eyes,  
desire  
that is longing for the sea  
where the sea's a bar-glass  
sucker size

The Negro  
with the trumpet at his lips  
whose jacket  
Has a fine one-button roll,  
does not know  
upon what riff the music slips

It's hypodermic needle

to his soul  
but softly  
as the tune comes from his throat  
trouble  
mellows to a golden note (“Trumpet Player”)

The first stanza is a very sensuous description of a black trumpet player. Body parts are described (lips, eyes, thighs), and even though it evokes imagery of slaves being brought over on the slave ship, the language to describe the trumpet player is quite lush (“smoldering memory”) for a man who seems fatigued and world weary as he reflects on the past black experience. The second stanza describes his hair, how it has been slicked down (“tamed”) in a style that was very popular with black musicians at the time, resembling a patent-leather crown on his head. The third stanza describes the music emanating from the trumpet players, how smooth the music is (“honey / mixed with liquid fire”) and the passion and feeling evoked from the rhythm (“ecstasy / distilled from old desire”). The “old desire,” as described in the fourth stanza, is a yearning for the moon and sea. But the trumpet player’s moon now is his spotlight on stage, his sea is merely liquor in a bar glass.

The fifth stanza is again a description of the trumpet player, this time his clothes, as he sinks into the music, apparently unaware of when he lets the music take over his thoughts, but it does. The final stanza describes a man whose pain is assuaged by music. Again, the same questions arise: who is the speaker? What is the relationship of the speaker and the trumpet player? Depending on the answer to these questions, this poem could be another example of homoerotic admiration.

Another Hughes poem with a more obvious queer undercurrent is “Café: 3 A.M.” simply because it specifically addresses this demographic:

Detectives from the vice squad  
with weary sadistic eyes  
spotting fairies.

*Degenerates*  
some folks say.

But God, Nature,  
or somebody,  
made them that way.

Police lady or Lesbian  
Over there?  
*Where?* (Vogel 411)

The first stanza has a somewhat violent undertone. It is 3 o'clock in the morning. The police officers who have entered have the café have "sadistic eyes," implying that they are purposely singling out anyone who looks like a "fairy," for no other reason than to cause pain or discomfort to them. The second stanza has "degenerates" in italics, emphasizing what others, and presumably also the cops, think of these people. But the third stanza takes an almost sympathetic tone regarding these individuals who are about to be raided. The idea that they were made this way, by "God, Nature, or somebody," implies a certain compassion, that the speaker feels perhaps they shouldn't be targeted for something that is just a part of his or her fabric of identity. The closing stanza asks a question, is that a police lady or a lesbian? The emphatic "where?" at the end draws the reader to also look across the room to see who we are looking at, to see if the reader can tell whether we are gazing upon a cop or lesbian. Of course, our modern sensibility would instantly argue that she can be both, but this last stanza also invokes a feeling using what we would term today "gaydar." The same questions that we have been facing in the other poems we have been looking at also arise here: who is the speaker? Is the speaker actually inside the café or looking

from outside as the cops are about to raid? Is the speaker one of the “degenerates” of which he or she speaks?

“Café: 3 A.M.” needs to be delved into with more detail. In “Closing Time: Langston Hughes and the Queer Poetics of Harlem Nightlife,” Shane Vogel states that this poem draws references to the afterhours club, and that what goes on after hours has an inherent illicit nature that can be compared to the illicit nature of queer culture of that time. Vogel writes:

Closing time marks the passage to the time and space of afterhours, a temporality that unfolds in defiance of city and moral law to create fugitive spaces like the afterhours club. The afterhours club allows for a heterogenous assortment of figures and subjective possibilities, especially as they consolidate disparate nightlife populations into their operation. Afterhours sociability brackets the world “out there” and creates a sense of an autonomous time and place where normal social configurations are undone or done differently. Sitting at the interface of racially mixed and sexually deviant social space, such clubs were often important institution sites of black commercial urban recreation and amusement, as well as part of a network of spaces - bathhouses, city streets, piers and waterfronts, rent parties, YMCAs, “black and tans” - through which semipublic sexual cultures developed. (402)

Here, Vogel is explaining that such afterhours businesses, such as a café that is open at 3 A.M., became safe havens for people who could not otherwise conduct themselves freely during the day, either because of society stigmas or laws that were enforced during daylight hours. Afterhours places repealed the norms of society and it was in these darkened spaces that homosexuals could be free in expressing their identity, blacks and whites can patronize the same institutions, and other “taboo” behaviors could be expressed without retribution. It is these haunts that Hughes took to visiting, wherein he became a keen observer of the individuals who frequented these places. In explaining just how important these spaces became in the queer community of Hughes’s time, Vogel writes,

In expanding the “boundaries of normalcy,” in the words of historian George Chauncey, such spaces not only shaped the emergence of a modern gay and lesbian community, but also more broadly created new possibilities for momentarily close contact, public intimacy, and affective exchange. Thus while afterhours is one condition of possibility for a homosexual subculture, it is not synonymous with it. Instead, afterhours marks a time of subjective possibility that could include but always exceeds the closures of “sexual identity” as such. (43)

Vogel has put forth an interesting observation here. By referring to these spaces “expanding the ‘boundaries of normalcy,’” Vogel gives direct credit of contemporary queer communities to the institutions that originally housed these spaces. Queer culture is obviously much more mainstream that it used to be and therefore much less subversive, but it was the initial use of these afterhours spaces that provided the grouping of likeminded individuals to come together, and become the generally more lenient (for the most part) society we have today. Vogel continues:

What makes these congregations queer is not the teleology of sexual object choice, but these subjects’ relations to dominant society. The afterhours club, as sociologists Julian Roebuck and Wolfgang Frese show, constitutes a setting “for deviants to act ‘normally’ and for ‘straights’ to act ‘deviantly.’ In other words, like the epistemological reversal Hughes effects in “Café: 3 A.M.,” the afterhours club twists and reverses - queers - the normalizing inscriptions of time and space. (406)

The way Vogel describes the afterhours club “queering” time and space is very poignant. This is the crux of Vogel’s argument - that the afterhours club allows for the role reversal of the dominant versus the minority roles in society. Which asks the question, when Hughes spent time at the afterhours club, which role was he taking part in? Was he the closeted homosexual allowed to be his authentic self, or the heterosexual acting out his most deviant desires? Was he doing neither? Was he doing both? It was evident Hughes was very familiar with this life, as he personally spent much of his time in afterhours establishments, observing the clientele:

Hughes was familiar with these queer social spaces and befriended many people who are known to have engaged in non-normative sexual behaviors. Hughes recalls the

Hamilton Lodge Ball as the place “where men dress as women and women dress as men” and they all assemble in a “queerly assorted throng on the dancing floor” in his memoir *The Big Sea*. (Moore 25)

It is clear Hughes had an affinity for this afterhours scene, whether an active participant or merely and observer. These real-life patrons of these institutions were obviously fodder for the characters in his work, but was that merely all? Obviously, it’s impossible to say. But is clear he drew from his own personal experiences of frequenting this queer scene. This may be the only instance the reader has of Hughes injecting himself into his poem, albeit indirectly. The poem also has an air of being from a different time, as Vogel states:

Café: 3 A.M. is the only oeuvre where Hughes explicitly references the terminology of homosexual deviance (“degenerates,” “fairies,” and “Lesbians”), and the poem’s thematic interest in indeterminate and uncertain identity resonates with the vice policing of the Progressive Era and its pre-closet sexual epistemologies. In fact, though the poem was published in the 1950s, there is nothing to suggest that it does not take place in the 1920s, looking back to a time when sexual group identifications allowed for a greater movement of desire. It is, in many ways, a poem out of time, harkening back on the eve of a sexually and politically conservative decade to an earlier moment. (408)

This description of “Café: 3 A.M.” complements the questions that have been raised throughout this close reading of Hughes’s poems. His purposeful ambiguity of his speaker, the relationship the speaker has with the object of his attention, can be made to fit any scenario. In “Café: 3 A.M.,” we don’t even know what decade this poem is set. It could have been at the time it was written, the 1950s, or it could have hearkened back to Hughes’s youth, the 1920s during the height of the Harlem Renaissance. But the poem’s direct use of the words “degenerates,” “fairies” and “lesbians” marks a shift in Hughes from coded language to more direct references, perhaps in direct response to the staunch conservatism sweeping the nation at the time the poem was written. Vogel states that “Hughes’s commitment from early in his career to the musical and sexual



underworlds of Harlem's nightlife and his valorization of the black folk as something other than a mass to be elevated often made it a challenge to assimilate his work into the cultural uplift endeavors of the black middle class" (Vogel 408). "Café: 3 A.M." reflects the atmosphere of society at the time, and Hughes is holding up a mirror to the attitudes of the prevailing society, with its vice policing of people they deemed a detriment to the majority's character. Vogel states:

The death that marks the limit of nightlife in Hughes's poems is the return to that mode of official participation in American life that Lauren Berlant calls "dead citizenship." Dead citizenship ensures and enforces a correspondence between act and identity within the space and time of abstract nationality and privatized heterosexuality. Even as Harlem Renaissance leader like W.E.B. Du Bois, Alain Locke, and Charles Johnson were fighting for full participation in American citizenship, many black queer writers and performers – including Hughes – were challenging the sexual and class normativity on which that citizenship was based. The characters in Hughes's cabaret poems are not "good" racial or American subjects, nor are they always black proletarian voices. They are criminal and lumpen objects who implicitly critique and consciously reject the imperative of dead citizenship, racing the clock for as long as they can. (414)

This idea of "dead citizenship" is interesting. The argument is that Hughes was fighting against this dead citizenship – the idea that the only citizens of the country whose voices matter are those who uphold a moral tradition of heterosexuality, not just in public but in private as well – in the name of challenging preconceived notion of class and sexual identity, and challenging what it means to be normal, or if there even is such thing as normal. Many characters in Hughes's poems are not upholders of the race. They are reprobates who resist this "dead citizenship," providing an alternate view of life lived not to the norms set for by society, but lived by one's authentic identity.

Not all of Hughes's characters are criminals with queer or otherwise suspect backgrounds. The most obvious Hughes work with more blatant homosexual overtones is Hughes's short story

entitled “Blessed Assurance.” Written much later in Hughes’s career, in 1961, long after most agreed was the end of the Harlem Renaissance, it is worthy of mention here because it deals with the theme of black male queerness and the scope of that queerness in a religious environment. Hughes had long been solidified as a literary icon of black letters by the time “Blessed Assurance” was published, which makes it very interesting to note the time in Hughes’s career that he publishes an overtly queer themed work. In *In the Life and In the Spirit: Homoerotic Spirituality in African-American Literature*, Marlon Rachquel Moore states that the timing of this work into Hughes’s oeuvre is noteworthy:

The appearance of “Blessed Assurance” might seem significant simply because it could offer insight into the rumors that Hughes had maintained inconspicuous homosexual relationships with the domestic partners and travel companions who were often seen accompanying him after he bought a townhome in Harlem in 1948. But even in the rebellious, revolutionary spirit of the 1960s, the politics of the day were such that the Harlem poet laureate would risk his standing as literary royalty were he to make such an acknowledgment. By then he was an elder of the arts [...]. He was very much a respectable representative of the race. (24)

It is interesting to note that Hughes was a “respectable representative” of black artists. After all, it was this idea of “respectability” that he was vocal about dismantling, the idea that only those who adhere to society’s rules about “upholding the race” are deemed worthy. But while his characters may have sordid backgrounds and may have had different experiences, it is one thing to write a story about such people, still another to vocal express your homosexual tendencies as being part of your personal life. “Blessed Assurance” may have been the way to externalize the internal for Hughes. He was older and secure in his career, and a short story of a father battling with his young queer son veiled in a religious tale may have been an outlet he needed without giving himself away.

As Moore states, one of the prevalent things about this short story is how the queer character is utilized:

The real importance of “Blessed Assurance,” though, is that in it Hughes does not deploy gender transgression solely for comedic purposes (as he does in his plays). At the age of sixty-one, he created a space for addressing effeminate masculinity in a church community by offering a tale of an aging father, John, struggling to accept his son’s homosexuality. [...] With humor, sarcasm, and the poet’s keen ability to capture truth in tiny snippets, “Blessed Assurance” illustrates how, in E. Patrick Johnson’s words, the body is the one organizing site of multiple and competing signifiers within the black church service. John’s queer son, Delmar, is one such body. He stands at the center of the story as a site of triangulated and competing signifiers of black masculinity: the patriarch, the preacher, and the “punk.” (27)

This is a very interesting observation that details how Hughes framed his short story. As was mentioned above, the queer character wasn’t inserted in the story for comic relief, but as a symbol of resistance against two overtly dominating forces in a young black man’s life, his church and his father. The father’s reaction to the son’s burgeoning homosexuality is at times both funny and sad:

That Spring he asked, “Delmar, do you have to wear *white* Bermuda shorts to school? Most of the other boys wear Levi’s or just plain pants, don’t they? And why wash them out yourself every night, all that ironing? I want you to be clean, son, but not *that* clean.” ... Another time, “Delmar, those school togs of yours don’t have to match so perfectly, do they? Colors *blended*, as you say ... The boys’ll think you’re sissy.” ... Once again, desperately, “If you’re going to smoke, Delmar, hold your cigarette between your first two fingers, not between your thumb and finger like a woman.” (28)

John’s desperate attempts to get Delmar to change by pointing out his son’s effeminate tendencies makes for a bittersweet reading of this story. You can sympathize with the father for not understanding his son, but at the same time you hope Delmar maintains his strength to be true to his own identity. Delmar is described in the story as a “brilliant queer,” a well-rounded individual who excels in school. But in this particular quote above, his brilliance is also physical,

shining above other black boys in manner of dress of behavioral patterns. He is brilliant in the sense of cleanliness, which relates to female domesticity, by his nonconforming sense of fashion, and most importantly, by the holding of a cigarette, a suggestion of posturing and swagger in the pose of masculine disaffection. While we don't wish Delmar to be forced to change by his father, it is easy to see John's perspective, as he is steeped deeply into society's conditioning of black masculinity:

John's attempts to "correct" his son's behavior represent hegemonic blackness and, from his perspective, he is doing what is best for his son. He is concerned about his son's transition into adulthood because "the boy is colored [and] Negroes have enough crosses to bear." In other words, John is aware that the obstacles of systemic racism are varied and nebulous enough to thwart black men's dreams without the additional fallout from the homophobic surveillance of sexuality in and outside black communities. To be black and identifiably queer is to be marked for social (and sometimes physical) crucifixion. So, John is concerned about the weight of the homosexual stigma for Delmar, and crucially, for himself because Delmar's improper performance of masculinity reflects directly on John as the patriarch. (29)

These points that John makes are not without merit. He knows how difficult life as a black man can be, the intrinsic discrimination a black man receives simply for existing. So to add the discrimination of being homosexual to his already tough situation, John is trying to make Delmar conform to the behavior of heterosexual masculinity. Today we refer to this as "straight-acting," in the hopes of "passing" for heterosexual. At first this makes John not seem so terrible, as he seems more interested in making sure Delmar is *perceived* as heterosexual by others, not that he necessarily has to actually be straight. But then John makes certain comments that suggest he not just simply trying to get his son to "pass," but is in fact himself homophobic:

"God, don't let him put an earring in his ear like some," John prayed. He wondered vaguely with a sick feeling in his stomach should he think it through then then [sic] think it through right then through should he try then and think it through should

without Blacking through think Blacking out then and there think it through? John didn't. (30-31)

Here, John's denial about his son's homosexuality is seemingly more than just concern for his son's well-being in a hostile society. The thought of his son being gay gives him a literal "sick feeling in his stomach," and trying not to black out takes great physical and emotional stress. The thought of coming to terms with (and perhaps accepting?) the fact his son might be homosexual is perhaps outside the grasp of his cognitive reach, at least for now. His attempt to "think it through" that his son might be queer failed miserably. His uneasiness is steeped in the old-school tradition of what being a "respectable" upholder of the race means, and the changing landscape of that tradition with the civil rights movement taking hold in Delmar's generation and redefining black representation is something that hasn't yet fully reached John.

It is worth noting, however, that Delmar doesn't take heed to his father's wishes to present himself in a more heteronormative light. In fact, he is encouraged to embrace his difference and his queerness against the pressure from his father by the minister of music in his church. Moore states, "As the story continues, it becomes clear that John competes with other influences, other representations of manhood in Delmar's life. In spite of his efforts to dull it with normative correctives, Delmar's queerness remains radiant." (29-30). The minister here is an important figure to the story and is also cast as an effeminate character. The character of effeminate church leaders is somewhat common in black stories of this time set in a church environment, and the minister here is no different, a widespread notion being that ministers of music in black churches frequently were in fact effeminate, and often lead the gay subculture that exists in black churches.

Moore sums up his argument by stating:

“Blessed Assurance” is a Gay Christian Narrative that successfully transforms gender transgressions into a critique of heterosexism and hegemonic blackness through its blend of sacred music and gender nonconformity, as well as the characters’ appropriation of the *Book of Ruth* for their same-sex romance. [...] When Hughes places the celebrated oath of loyalty from the *Book of Ruth* into the mouth of the “sweet” choirboy, he illuminates the queer erotics that often surge through the homosocial bonds in gospel choirs. (37-38)

The *Book of Ruth* in contemporary readings has become interpreted as a model for lesbian relations and female self-sufficiency, although it not completely certain that that was the allusion Hughes was making here. What is certain, however, is that Hughes is successful in using the church as a sacred and holy space and challenging the ideas of heteronormativity in black culture. A queer reading of Langston Hughes is imperative in understanding and appreciating the deeper meanings of his poetry. His short story “Blessed Assurance” is his most overtly homosexual story, which lends itself to the idea that a queer reading of his earlier work is not only useful, but necessary. Whether Hughes was gay in real life is irrelevant in the understanding and appreciating the queerness of his work. His speakers were gay and straight, white and black, male and female, and he seamlessly permeated all these identities, by being none of them.

#### **IV. Final Thoughts**

What else is there to be said regarding reading the work of the Harlem Renaissance with a queer lens as well as a racial lens? Plenty. Given the evidence above, a queer reading of Langston Hughes illuminates his poetry and gives meaningful interpretation to his sparse, simple language. This sparseness and ambiguity, of course, is argued by some as being intentional. Hughes wants the reader to interpret in between the lines to fully understand his meaning. His careerlong devotion to purposely obfuscating who the speakers of his poems are, and the nature of the relationships of those the speakers were addressing, combined with his commitment to be purposely vague

regarding his romantic and sexual encounters, leads one to believe that perhaps this is all an elaborate ruse. But if so, so what? This doesn't take away from his poems. Just the contrary: this mystique only adds a complexity to his work that analyzing solely on the surface doesn't provide. It forces the reader to do some work on his or her end, with the takeaway being an enriching cultural and reading experience.

For the work of Richard Bruce Nugent, on the other hand, a queer analysis of his work is absolutely crucial for the reader's interpretation. Nugent is much more overt than Hughes in his representation of homosexuality in his writing. But it is plain to see that both writers benefit from this particular reading of his work. Without interpreting the queer component alongside the racial component of each writer's work, the reader misses out on the richness and complexity of layers of the text. The racial element may be more prominent, and in the case of Nugent, the queer element may be just as prominent, if not more so, but it is up to the reader to figure out what's really going on in the text, and may require some deciphering of coded language. To not do so is to not fully comprehend these rich works.

This queer reading of texts isn't only beneficial to Hughes and Nugent. Many Harlem Renaissance works have either coded or overt homosexual themes, and it would be incomplete to not view them in conjunction with their racial and sexual congruencies. From Nella Larsen's *Passing*, to Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, many works from this movement demand a queer reading of the text alongside its racial reading to fully be appreciated, and readers of the current generation look to be more open to allowing this intersectionality to inform their digestion of these complex and layered texts.

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