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The Space Between “Seen” and “Unseen:”
Queer People and the 1915-1945 New Negro Renaissance

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts
of
the City College of the City University of New York.

by
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In November of 1926, a group of New Negro artists, writers, and activists created the first and only edition of *Fire!!*, edited by novelist Wallace Thurman.¹ The magazine's creators originally intended for it to be a quarterly publication but lacked the funding to continue. *Fire!!* was created by a younger generation of New Negroes and "devoted to the younger Negro artists"² who dissented from the dominant ideas put forth by the leaders of the New Negro Renaissance and used the magazine to spread their own views on the 1915-1945 New Negro Renaissance.³ The magazine featured various works of art including short stories, poems, drawings, plays, and excerpts from longer literary works. It effectively served as a counter movement to the ideas of the New Negro that were put forth by the "talented tenth," or educated elite of the New Negro Renaissance.⁴ The contributors of *Fire!!* felt the image of the New Negro should not be characterized by only the upright, hardworking, middle class Black American leaders such as W.E.B. Du Bois and Alain Locke. They felt the New Negro Renaissance's depictions of Black America in fiction should not focus on describing "Black culture as it ought to be," but rather that "it should be described as it really is" and not omit subjects that 1920s society considered taboo.⁵

Many younger New Negroes wanted to include representations of queerness in art and literature and spark open discussions on sexuality, from which the dominant New Negro

¹ *FIRE!!*, no. 1, November, 1926, 1-47.

² *Ibid*, 1.

³ For the purpose of this paper, the New Negro Renaissance will be defined between 1915 (the year Booker T. Washington, the embodiment of "Old Negro ideas" passed) and 1945 (where New Negro writings shift focus as a result of the ending of WWII). The term "New Negro Renaissance" will also be used in place of "Harlem Renaissance," which limits the movement to Harlem and ignores its broader spread.

⁴ W.E.B Du Bois, "The Talented Tenth," *Teaching American History*. September, 1903, <https://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/the-talented-tenth/>, Accessed April 17, 2019.; Phrase coined by Du Bois referring to educated Black leaders.

⁵ Martha Jane Nadell, *Enter the New Negroes: Images of Race in American Culture* (Cambridge: 2013), 72-73.

narrative often steered clear.⁶ *Fire!!* was just one of many publications and writings started by New Negro activists such as Wallace Thurman and Richard Bruce Nugent, who disagreed with the popular image of the New Negro that was put forth by Du Bois and Locke, both commonly considered the founders of the New Negro Renaissance. Writers such as Wallace Thurman and Richard Bruce Nugent sought to upset the ideas at the forefront of the movement and disagreed with Du Bois' notion that all art inherently serves as propaganda. Thurman felt that art could be separated from the artist's experience and did not feel that all writing had to be political in nature.⁷ One of the most controversial taboos that these writers dealt with in their work was homosexuality.⁸ Nugent, an openly gay man, included overt references to homosexuality in many of his writings, such as "Smoke, Lilies and Jade," because he felt it deserved representation in the New Negro Renaissance. Thurman's writings about homosexuality, however, made more covert references.⁹ He wrote about his personal struggles with sexuality through the lens of female characters, and though he did not publicly refer to himself as a Queer man, he kept his sexual orientation ambiguous. When asked about his sexuality he would admit to participating in or performing "homosexual practices" but not to being "identified as a homosexual." Thurman frequently described himself as merely being open to sexual

⁶ Granville Ganter. "Decadence, Sexuality, and the Bohemian Vision of Wallace Thurman." *MELUS* 28, no. 2 (2003): 90.; Sexuality in this paper will mean more than just sexual orientation, it will also refer to sex and the idea of being open about sexual acts.

⁷ W.E.B Du Bois, "Criteria of Negro Art," In *The Crisis Reader*, edited by Sondra Kathryn Wilson, 315-325. New York: Random House Inc. 1999 (Excerpts from 1918-1930).; Wallace Thurman. "High, Low, Past, and Present: Review of The Walls of Jericho, Quicksand, and Adventures of an African Slaver," in *Harlem: A Forum of Negro Life*, vol. 1, no. 1 (1928).

⁸ George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 227.

⁹ Nadell, *Enter the New Negroes*, 79.; Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, *On the Shoulders of Giants: My Journey Through the Harlem Renaissance*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2007), 104.

experiences.¹⁰ Thurman also took issue with the manner that the New Negroes before him portrayed sex-work and financial desperation. He attempted to paint the realities of these situations rather than moralize about them in his literary works.¹¹ As Thurman and Nugent expressed through their writings, queerness and the taboo surrounding it were very much a critical part of the New Negro Renaissance, yet often overlooked in favor of images of the upright, hardworking, middle-class Black American held to be the ideal standard of the New Negro. Younger New Negroes like Thurman and Nugent pushed to shift the New Negro image away from this strictly heteronormative, middle-class narrative. This project will analyze the development of the dominant New Negro image and younger Queer New Negroes' push back against it. Furthermore, despite public reception of same-sex attraction and oppression of Queer people by the heteronormative mainstream, this project argues that both overt and covert queerness fit into the idea of the New Negro. Additionally, this project will argue that Queer writers and activists forged physical and literary spaces within the New Negro Renaissance, effectively making their own Queer New Negro Renaissance within the larger movement. These actions stood in the face of Victorian ideas about gender and sexuality, from which the founders of the New Negro Renaissance derived their ideal of the movement. Furthermore, younger generations of New Negroes forced queerness away from being strictly "unseen," and into the public sphere in a way that could be shared and made available to more people through the creation of Queer spaces in literature and in Harlem nightlife. Thus, these New Negroes blurred the lines between what ideas could be "seen" and "unseen."

¹⁰ Anna Pochmara, *The Making of the New Negro: Black Authorship, Masculinity, and Sexuality in the Harlem Renaissance* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2011), 177-178.; Ganter, "Decadence, Sexuality, and the Bohemian Vision of Wallace Thurman," 87.

¹¹ Jabbar, *On the Shoulders of Giants*, 102.

A Note on Scope and Language

Although much of the writing and literature produced in the New Negro Renaissance is centered around New York City, this movement was not limited to Harlem or New York state. Due to time and length constrictions, this project is largely focused on New York City. It is important to acknowledge, however, that this limited focus is not meant to speak for the entirety of the New Negro Renaissance, or to imply the movement only occurred in New York. Furthermore, while this project speaks to the experiences of many Queer people in 1920s and 1930s New York, it is important to note that much of the existing literature on Queer studies does not account for the fact that Black and white Queer people rarely shared a “universal” Queer experience. “Closeted” white men who often engaged in the same spaces as Black Queer men still had access to privileges as white men that many people of African descent did not experience. Additionally, this project focuses predominantly on openly Queer New Negroes, or New Negroes believed to be Queer through allusions shown in their artistic writing, correspondence, or through theories argued by other scholars in the field. It must also be noted, however, that while this project focuses on New Negroes, Queer people also existed outside of this movement and the spaces mentioned in this project.

As a final note on scope, this project focuses overwhelmingly on Queer men as opposed to women, largely because source material on Queer women involved in the New Negro Renaissance is scarce. Furthermore, while this project attempts to speak to class differences between working class Queer New Negroes and the middle class, its central focus is largely on the middle class. This is because much of the dominant New Negro imagery and literary work is centered around middle-class ideals. My work will primarily focus on the literature produced during the New Negro Renaissance, as well as some seminal work from the end of the nineteenth century that I believe shaped future ideas and attitudes during the New Negro Renaissance. I am

placing an emphasis on works from some individuals that I feel are central to the nuances within the movement, such as Alain Locke and W.E.B. Du Bois. I acknowledge Locke and Du Bois as two of the founding fathers of the New Negro idea, despite their differing viewpoints. I will also focus on Wallace Thurman, Countee Cullen, Richard Bruce Nugent, and other contributors to *Fire!!* — a seminal work for the younger generation of New Negroes — and other writers and figures who included Queer themes and subtexts in their work, such as writer Nella Larsen, and Maple Hampton, an openly Queer performer. I will use extensive personal correspondence and a few recordings of oral interviews to add a more personal perspective to my analysis of these leading figures. Lastly, I will draw extensively from newspapers and tabloids to paint a picture of Black and white mainstream heteronormative cultures at the time, and their attitudes towards both queerness and blackness. While this is my main list of source material, this is by no means an exhaustive list.

There are also several notes I want to make on language use and word choice. Most notably, I have chosen to capitalize the word “Black” throughout this project. In this context, the word “Black” is being used to describe a racial identity, and ethnic and cultural group, rather than as a color or mere descriptor. This is a style choice that has also gained notoriety in recent years in colloquial use, AP style news publications, and academic texts.¹² The Chicago Manual of Style has also acknowledged this change.¹³ I will not be capitalizing the word “white” because while white was recognized as a race in this period, it typically referred to a skin tone description

¹² “Explaining AP Style on Black and White,” *Associated Press*, July 20, 2020. <https://apnews.com/article/9105661462>; Nancy Coleman, “Why We’re Capitalizing Black,” *New York Times*, July 5, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/05/insider/capitalized-black.html>; Gabrielle P. Foreman, et al, “Writing about Slavery/Teaching about Slavery: This Might Help.” community-sourced document.

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1A4TEdDgYslX-hlKezLodMIM71My3KTN0zxRv0IQTOQs/mobilebasic>

¹³Chicago Manual of Style, “Black and White: A Matter of Capitalization, June 22, 2020, <https://cmosshtoptalk.com/2020/06/22/black-and-white-a-matter-of-capitalization/>

rather than a shared cultural and ethnic experience. Furthermore, white people generally did not share the same experiences of discrimination as a result of their skin-color. Similarly, the terms “Negro” and “New Negro,” when used in their historically appropriate contexts, will also be capitalized. Writer and New Negro activist, James Weldon Johnson made the case for the capitalization of “Negro” in his 1918 article “Negro with a Big N.” He argues that Negroes are “separate people with different needs from the rest of the population.”¹⁴ W.E.B. Du Bois similarly wrote to the *New York Times* in 1926, expressing that “the use of a small letter for the name of twelve million Americans and two hundred million human beings [is] a personal insult.”¹⁵ The paper later acknowledged their formal adaptation of this change in 1930.¹⁶ Furthermore, though no longer in use today, the use of the word “Negro” will be employed within its historical context throughout this project.

When referencing Queer people in my personal analysis, I will simply refer to them as “Queer,” as a blanket term for anyone who did not conform to the heteronormative lifestyle observed during this period, similarly to the way it is used as a blanket term by the LGBTQ+ community today. Though this word was once also used in a pejorative sense, it has more recently been reclaimed by the LGBTQ+ community, and the way I will be using it is similar to its use as a self-identifier today. This is because many of the words Queer people in this period used to self-identify, such as “bulldagger” and “fairy,” had specific connotations to certain people within particular contexts, which is why I feel they are insufficient to use as blanket

¹⁴ James Weldon Johnson makes a case for and refers to “Negroes” as “as separate people with different needs from the rest of the population.”; James Weldon Johnson, “Negro with a Big N” in *The Selected Writings of James Weldon Johnson, vol. 1*, 1918.

¹⁵ Nancy Coleman, “Why We’re Capitalizing Black,” *New York Times*, July 5, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/05/insider/capitalized-black.html>

¹⁶ “Negro with a Capital ‘N,’” *New York Times*, March 7, 1930. <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1930/03/07/96906444.html?pageNumber=20>

terms.¹⁷ I will also be capitalizing “Queer” because, similar to “Black,” and “Negro,” it will be used as an identity and not just an adjective. Furthermore, I will occasionally employ the term “gay” to refer to anyone who expressed or acted on sexual or romantic attraction to the same sex, and I will use the terms “homosexual” and “homosexuality” to refer to same-sex attraction.

These terms were commonly used within this historical context and in many of the references I use on gender and sexuality studies, and are terms many Queer people used to self-identify by in a broad sense. I will not use the term “LGBTQ+,” as this is an acronym that did not exist during the time I am studying, and I want my analysis to be as historically accurate as possible while still conveying my arguments. I will also refrain from using the commonly used terms “sexual invert,” “third sex,” “sissy,” “sister,” “flaming faggot,” “pansy,” “nance,” and “she-man,” which are sometimes used in Queer theory books to add historical context, as well as in some of my source material. I am making this choice because though Queer people occasionally used some of these words to self-identify, they were mainly used as identifiers and pejoratives by outsiders to the Queer community. Unless these terms are specifically used in a primary source text I am citing, I will refrain from using them. This is done not to be ahistorical, but rather, to avoid reifying pejoratives and offensive terms and constructs.

I also want to take some time to explain how many nineteenth and twentieth century Americans understood gender and sexuality (used to refer to sexual attraction and sexual acts), as it is different from the way these two constructs are understood today and I do not want to conflate the two. Historian George Chauncey explains that many people understood sexuality in the early twentieth century not as “the extent of their same-sex desire or activity (their “sexuality”), but rather the gender persona and status they assumed.”¹⁸ Furthermore, men defined

¹⁷ Chauncey, *Gay New York*, xxii-xxiii.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 47.

as “fairies” were understood to have a “gender inversion,” taking on effeminate characteristics and behaviors, as it was commonly thought that one’s gender determined their sexuality. Hence the term “sexual inverts” was commonly used to describe people who expressed same-sex attraction.¹⁹ Homosexual men, who were regarded as “effeminate” for their attraction to men and other “feminine” qualities associated only with women according to the confines of the gender binary at the time, were regarded as “virtual women,” rather than men, or “members of a ‘third sex’ that combined elements of male and female.”²⁰ This is not to be confused with “non-binary” as we understand the term in today’s Queer theory and popular culture, as in the early twentieth century there was no room for other interpretations of gender beyond the hegemonic middle-class gender binary used prolifically in the West. Furthermore, as Chauncey notes in reference to understanding how queerness and homosexuality was conceptualized in the early twentieth century, in 1904 Dr. William Lee Howard argued that:

Sexual inverts’ ‘sexual desire for their apparent own sex’ was ‘really a normal sexual feeling,’ because the inverts were actually women (who naturally desired men) even though they appeared to be men (for whom such desire would have been perverted). He explained this apparent paradox by asserting that although the inverts had male bodies, they had female brains, and by reminding his readers that the brain, rather than the anatomy, was ‘the primary factor’ in classifying the sex of a person.²¹

Furthermore, similar to the way this wording should not be understood the way “non-binary” or “transgender” are in the twenty-first century, the term “bisexual” also had different connotations. Whereas today, the term refers to people who are not exclusively attracted to one gender, in the early twentieth century, it referred to “individuals who combined the physical and/or psychic attributes of both men and women.”²² In other words, bisexuality described

¹⁹ Ibid, 48.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid, 48-49.

²² Ibid, 49.

individuals who were thought to be both male and female. I will occasionally use the term “bisexual” throughout my analysis when used directly in a primary source, but it is important that the readers of this project understand that in this historical context it has similar meaning to blanket terms like “Queer” and “homosexual,” rather than exclusively meaning attraction to multiple genders. Lastly, while my research will focus on different conceptions of sexuality and gender, I will not be explicitly focusing my analysis on transgender or non-binary people as we understand them today, unless they are explicitly mentioned in a particular text. This is because of the way many people in the early twentieth century explicitly understood gender and sexuality in relation to the strict gender binary, as well as a lack of extensive primary source material describing transgender and non-binary people as we understand them today. Even if some of these figures may be understood as transgender or non-binary by today’s definitions, I will be referring to historical figures by whatever pronouns they used to self-identify, or others employed to describe them. This is to avoid transposing present-day social norms and ideas onto the past. While I recognize historical understandings of gender and sexuality can be problematic by today’s standards, I also believe it is important to write about people in the ways that they understood themselves and their own lives at the time.

Birth of the New Negro

In 1895, national orator Booker T. Washington delivered the “Atlanta Compromise Speech” at the Cotton States and International Exposition in Atlanta, Georgia to a mostly white audience.²³ Washington, speaking to the Black audience members, many of whom were either formerly enslaved or descendants of formerly enslaved people, claimed that “our greatest danger

²³ Booker T. Washington, “1895 Atlanta Compromise Speech,” (speech, Atlanta, Georgia, September 18, 1895), George Mason University, <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/39/>.

is that in the great leap from slavery to freedom we may overlook the fact that the masses of us are to live by the productions of our hands.”²⁴ This speech gained Washington national popularity among the Black community, and he became a leader for Black advancement and entrepreneurship. Washington made it known through this speech that he wanted to encourage formerly enslaved people and their descendants to hone the vocational skills that they had acquired while enslaved and use them for economic advancement, rather than seeking out higher education. Five years after his “Atlanta Compromise” speech, Washington went on to found the National Negro Business League to encourage Black entrepreneurship and established his reputation as a leader of Black economic advancement.²⁵

In 1903, however, Northern intellectual, college professor, and founding member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), W.E.B. Du Bois published *Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches*, where he offered opposition to Washington’s proposal to use the vocational skills learned while enslaved for economic advancement in an essay titled “Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others.” Du Bois wrote, “Mr. Washington represents in Negro thought the old attitude of adjustment and submission.” He claimed that Washington’s proposition at the “Atlanta Compromise” speech asks that Black people give up “political power, insistence on civil rights, [and] higher education of Negro youth.” Du Bois then wrote of the “duty” that Black men have to demand their rights directly and challenge Washington’s old views of complacency and submission to injustices.²⁶ Du Bois used this essay to challenge the dominant post-Reconstruction thought regarding the role and place of

²⁴ Ibid.; Foreman, “Writing about Slavery.”

²⁵ “Calendar,” *The Independent*, July 13, 1914.

<https://archive.org/stream/independen79v80newy#page/n53/mode/1up>

²⁶ W.E.B. Du Bois, “Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others,” *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches*, (Chicago: A.G McClurg, 1903), 19-20.

<http://sites.middlebury.edu/soan105tiger/files/2014/08/Du-Bois-The-Souls-of-Black-Folks.pdf>

Black people in American society. Du Bois began to sow the seeds of what would later become the established idea of the New Negro.

Booker T. Washington died in 1915. Ten years later, the New Negro Renaissance had fully taken off under Du Bois' vision for Black advancement and middle class ideals and a 1925 special edition of the *Survey Graphic* magazine solidified the prevailing New Negro idea. This edition, titled "Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro" and edited by Alain Locke, specifically focused on Black life in Harlem. Locke attempted to further develop the idea of the New Negro and wrote that "the Old Negro had long become more of a myth than a man."²⁷ Here, Locke describes a sense of optimism as New Negroes look towards the future rather than the "unfavorable past" and begin "moulding a new American attitude."²⁸ Locke later expanded his ideas expressed in the *Survey Graphic* into an anthology titled, *The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance*, which became the voice of the New Negro generation.²⁹ Voices like those of Du Bois and Locke promoted optimism and opportunity for future generations of Black Americans. They encouraged Black men to attend institutions of higher education and become part of the Black middle class "at a time where 23 percent of their race was illiterate."³⁰ This new view for an educated Black elite middle class soon became the hegemonic idea of the New Negro. Du Bois called for these college-educated New Negroes, or "the talented tenth," to lead the next generation of Black Americans to success.³¹ Hence, the widely recognized image of the New Negro became that of a polished and upright Black intellectual, not bound by the ills of his

²⁷ Alain Locke, "Enter the New Negro," *The Survey Graphic (Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro)*, March, 1925, 1. <http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai3/migrations/text8/lockenewnegro.pdf>

²⁸ Ibid, 3.

²⁹ Alain Locke ed., *The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Albert and Charles Boni, Inc., 1925). (Reprint 1992).

³⁰ Gregory Holmes Singleton, "Birth, Rebirth, and the 'New Negro' of the 1920s," *Phylon*, vol. 43. No. 1 (1982), 5.

³¹ W.E.B Du Bois, "The Talented Tenth," in *The Negro Problem*, ed. Booker T. Washington, (New York: J Pott and Company, 1903), 33-75.

past, but rather endowed with leading the future of the race. This vision of the New Negro was informed by Victorian ideas of morality and heteronormativity carried forth into the early twentieth century, and would later be the same idea that younger New Negroes would rebel against and use to forge their own definitions that included a wider allowance for homosexuality and working class plights.

From the Victorian Period to the New Negro

The turn of the twentieth century brought new opportunities and social beginnings for many Black Americans. For most white Americans, this transitional period meant shying away from old Victorian conventions, whether it be styles of dress, new understandings of class, or shifting gender roles. Old ideas of honor and masculinity shifted as well, with an industrializing America bringing white women into the workplace and changing previous understandings of gender and masculinity, as well as family and relationship dynamics. For the white working class, this meant more freedom for intermingling between men and women, and more independence for white women.³² For Black Americans, the rise of the genteel middle class meant different definitions of masculinity and gender as well. For the rising Black middle class, an emphasis on education and leisure time — not to be confused with idle time — symbolized status and wealth. Manliness was defined by the ability to not only provide for one's family, but also to have time to enjoy leisurely activities and comforts, while middle class Black women did not have a need to work and could afford to stay home as housewives.³³ Remnant Victorian ideas also crept into the twentieth century, particularly the idea of sexual “purity” and morality.

³² Christine Stansell, “Working Class Youth: The Gals and Boys of the Bowery.” in *Major Problems in the Early Republic, 1797-1848: Documents and Essays*. ed. Sean Wilentz, (D.C: Heath and Co. Publishing, 1992), 200-207.

³³ Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*, 8-9.

Black elites attempted to replicate these ideas as a means of dispelling negative racial stereotypes left over from slavery. Leading figures like W.E.B. Du Bois and Alain Locke came to symbolize this prolific ideal of the educated heteronormative Black bourgeoisie class. They also represented this transitional period between conservative Victorian ideals predominantly centered around Anglo-Americans, and the rise of a Black elite class.

This ideal of Black middle-class heteronormativity proliferated deeply throughout the New Negro Renaissance, with many of these ideals often acting as a cover for a more covert form of queerness that happened behind the closed doors of the middle-class home. Because of Victorian bourgeois ideals centered around sexual purity and chastity, and stereotypes from slavery that depicted Black women as hyper-sexual and impure, Black women's promiscuity and queerness in particular became huge taboos within the New Negro Renaissance.³⁴ This is especially evident in New Negro popular fiction, which often hid illicit ideas of sex and same-sex attraction under the guise of middle-class performativity. Nella Larsen's novella, *Passing*, in particular emphasizes these ideas. Middle-class Black women, often hyper-aware of stereotypes left over from slavery that depicted them as promiscuous and immoral, imitated Anglo-American ideas of Victorian purity, despite the general promiscuity and "sexual openness" that rose in public attitudes among working class Black and white Americans during the 1920s.³⁵ These replications of purity and morality only acted as a cover, however, for more covert ideas of sex and sexuality. In *Passing*, Larsen portrays both Clare Kendry and Irene Redfield, the novella's protagonists, as the Black middle class ideal. Both women can "pass" for white and Clare is even married to a white man, which provides both women with more social mobility than their

³⁴ Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019) 28-29.

³⁵ Deborah E. McDowell "Introduction" in *Quicksand and Passing*, (New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 1996), xiii.

working class counterparts. Furthermore, both have time for leisurely activities like tea, shopping, and event organizing, and Irene, the narrator, according to scholar Deborah McDowell, is depicted as “the perfect, nurturing, self-sacrificing wife and mother, the altruistic ‘race woman.’”³⁶ Despite this seemingly perfect, surface level imagery, both women are in sexless, unfulfilling marriages, and struggle with an inner “yearning” representative of their hidden sexual desires for each other.³⁷

The idea of lesbian yearning or longing is not unique to Larsen’s *Passing*, as this idea has existed in literature and popular culture for centuries before the New Negro Renaissance, starting with the ancient Greek poet, Sappho, who wrote poems and songs with sexual undertones that expressed a sense of longing and desire for romantic love and physical intimacy with other women.³⁸ In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century “romantic friendship” between women grew as a publicly recognized phenomenon between white middle class women during the Victorian period. As these women remained constrained to the domestic sphere, Anglo-American men assigned them asexual attributes centered around emotion, rather than sexuality and logic, which were associated with the “Ideal Man.”³⁹ Within this framework of gender and sexuality, it seemed only natural for lonely housewives to seek out passionate relationships and intimacy with other female “soul mates.” This is evident in the novella *Passing*, as Clare Kendry — lonely and dissatisfied with her life — seeks out a close friendship with her childhood friend Irene Redfield, and writes to her “for I am lonely, so lonely...cannot help longing to be with you again, as I have never longed for anything before.”⁴⁰ Much of the language that came out of

³⁶ McDowell, “Introduction,” xxiv.

³⁷ Ibid, xxviii.

³⁸ Leila J. Rupp, *Sapphistries: A Global History of Love Between Women*, (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 31-33.

³⁹ Rupp, *Sapphistries*, 127.

⁴⁰ Nella Larsen, *Passing*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1929), epub 190.

literature at this time depicting these romantic friendships, however, carried sexual subtexts when referencing other women. Many women loving women were depicted in poetry and literature under the guise of romantic friendship and forbidden desire, for both same-sex attraction and sexual desire in women were considered taboo. The idea of romantic friendship allowed a space for middle class women to safely conceal hidden sexual desires and romantic intimacy between women. Feminist studies scholar Lelia Rupp argues that “expressions of love, longing, and commitment were central to romantic friendship.”⁴¹

While in theory romantic friendships coexisted with heterosexual marriage, this was often not the case in reality. Rupp contends that many romantic friends remained single, and felt their love to be incompatible with their friends’ marriages.⁴² Women who had the privilege of not marrying instead formed long term marriage-like relationships with their romantic friends, known in the northeast as “Boston marriages.”⁴³ This idea of experiencing repressed homosexual desires within the framework of a heteronormative middle class marriage is evident throughout *Passing*. Most dramatically, Larsen expresses within the subtext of the novella that the two cannot coexist, hence the reason behind Clare Kendry’s tragic death. McDowell contends that Irene must quell her sexual desire for Clare, an act that can only be achieved with Clare’s death.⁴⁴ Larsen heavily implies in the final pages of text that Irene pushes Clare through the window, where she falls to her death. “It was that smile that maddened Irene. She ran across the room....and laid a hand on Clare’s bare arm. One thought possessed her. She couldn’t have Clare Kendry cast aside by Bellew [her husband]. She couldn’t have her free.”⁴⁵ After Clare falls from the window, Larsen writes “Irene wasn’t sorry. She was amazed, incredulous almost,” revealing

⁴¹ Rupp, *Sapphistries*, 129.

⁴² *Ibid*, 130.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 130-131

⁴⁴ McDowell, “Introduction,” xxix.

⁴⁵ Nella Larsen, *Passing*, epub 293-294.

Irene's feelings of relief at Clare's death, for if she were free from her marriage there would be little stopping the two from being together.⁴⁶ McDowell explains that because Clare is "a reminder of that repressed and disowned part of Irene's self, Clare must be banished," for Clare represents the forbidden sexual desire and same-sex attraction that Irene tries so deeply to repress.⁴⁷ The murder or death of Queer characters is a common occurrence throughout literature and film, with their deaths often serving as a remedy for the sinful transgression of homosexuality.⁴⁸ Larsen disguises this symbolism, McDowell argues, as a double entendre for racial passing. She uses more common literary themes like racial passing to disguise a deeper subplot that explores more "dangerous" literary themes of same-sex attraction, Black women's sexual desires, and "passing" for the heteronormative middle class ideal paraded by the fathers of the New Negro Renaissance.⁴⁹

While the founding fathers of the New Negro Renaissance, W.E.B. Du Bois and Alain Locke both upheld middle class Victorian ideas about moralizing sexuality well into the twentieth century, they differed greatly in their approach to art and creative expression, which would become central to the idea of the New Negro, as well as a means for Queer New Negroes to express themselves through literature. Du Bois is known for his essay "Criteria of Negro Art," in which he famously argues all art is propaganda rather than aesthetics.⁵⁰ Historian Jeffrey C. Stewart further elaborates on Du Bois' approach to art, arguing that his view of art was moralizing, and that any art that did not teach traditional Black middle class values based in

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ McDowell, "Introduction," xxix.

⁴⁸ Wendy Laura Belcher, "Same-Sex Intimacies in the Early African Text Gädlä Wälättä Petros (1672): Queer Reading an Ethiopian Woman Saint," *Research in African literatures* 47, no. 2 (2016): 20–45.

⁴⁹ McDowell, "Introduction," xxx-xxxii.

⁵⁰ W.E.B. Du Bois, "Criteria of Negro Art," *Crisis* Vol. 32, October 1926, 290-297.

https://allisonbolah.com/site_resources/reading_list/DuBois.pdf

Victorian ideals actively eroded them.⁵¹ Stewart asserts that Locke directly split from Du Bois' views on art and aesthetic appeal, arguing in his essay "Negro Youth Speaks" that younger generations of New Negroes wanted a "lusty vigorous realism" in their art.⁵² Locke directly juxtaposes new and old generations within the same movement by contrasting these goals of "lusty vigorous realism" with "the elder generation of Negro writers," who expressed themselves "in cautious moralism and guarded idealizations," or the same type of traditional moralism and middle class values that Du Bois preached in "Criteria of Negro Art" and in his other endeavors.⁵³ This point of contention between "the elder generation" and "younger artists" is present in many texts and artistic works created throughout the New Negro Renaissance, most notably in the aforementioned *Fire!!*, where young New Negro writers sought to distinguish themselves and their work from that of older traditionalists.

The writers of *Fire!!* managed to set their work and intended audience of younger, more radical New Negroes apart from earlier New Negro texts that proclaimed the need for an upright, moralistic, Black middle class namely through the content they included in the magazine. Most notably, the compilation contains themes of premarital sex, working class struggle, opposition to traditional gender roles, and homosexuality. *Fire!!* is a physical manifestation of Locke's ideas surrounding art, as it is a magazine created for the sake of art or aesthetics, while simultaneously rebelling against the Victorian ideals of closed-door taboos. Stewart argues that while Locke and Du Bois disagreed on the primary purpose of New Negro art, Du Bois also saw an art movement based on beauty and aesthetics as "a slippery slope to decadence and homosexuality."⁵⁴

⁵¹ Jeffrey C. Stewart, *The New Negro: The Life of Alain Locke*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 523.

⁵² Alain LeRoy Locke, "Negro Youth Speaks," in *The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance*, (New York: Atheneum, 1925), epub 101-110.

⁵³ Ibid.; W.E.B. Du Bois, "Criteria of Negro Art," *Crisis* Vol. 32, October 1926, 290-297.

https://allisonbolah.com/site_resources/reading_list/DuBois.pdf

⁵⁴ Stewart, *The New Negro*, 523.

Furthermore, while Du Bois might have privately practiced adultery, he did not agree with public mention of homosexuality, sex work, or other taboo displays of decadence, therefore intentionally excluding queerness from his ideal image of the New Negro.⁵⁵

Du Bois set strict boundaries between “private” and “public.” He felt that illicit sex in the form of sex work, adultery, or homosexuality should be kept behind closed doors. This attitude is not unique to Du Bois, however, as he — like many others at the time — attempted to emulate more conservative Victorian ideas of sex and gender roles. Furthermore, it is possible the ideas he argued were fundamental to the uplift of a Black genteel class were derived from ideas of manliness that emerged in the late nineteenth century as Anglo-American justifications for upholding a social hierarchy that placed white men at the top.⁵⁶ Such ideas of masculinity emphasized the idea of the man as the provider for a heteronormative family, taking focus away from aesthetic leisure and activities deemed “effeminate,” which in the case of the New Negro Renaissance, would mean idle time, decadence, and producing art for art’s sake. These ideas of manliness also served as the foundation for bourgeois respectability.⁵⁷ There is a continuous theme throughout Du Bois’ work of non-normative sexual relations and ideas surrounding gender posing a threat to the rise of a respectable Black middle class, and the image of Black people as perceived by white Americans.⁵⁸

Du Bois' rather Victorian ideas of gender and sexuality are deeply embedded in his vision for the future of the New Negroes. This is apparent even in his personal life, most notably when he marries his daughter Yolande off to his New Negro protégé, the prominent poet Countee Cullen, in a spectacle of heteronormative bourgeois performance. Historian Mason Stokes claims

⁵⁵ David Levering Lewis, *W.E.B. Du Bois: The Fight for Equality and the American Century, 1919-1963*, (New York: Owl Books, Henry Holt and Co., 2000), 267.

⁵⁶ Pochmara, *The Making of the New Negro*, 22.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 21.

⁵⁸ Stewart, *The New Negro*, 523.

the Du Bois-Cullen wedding is “yet another kind of pageant” that serves as the type of propaganda Du Bois had in mind for the New Negro image and the inauguration of the next generation of New Negro heirs.⁵⁹ Du Bois rigorously fought his daughter Yolande, who wanted a more lavish wedding, for a respectable ceremony reflective of his New Negro ideals.⁶⁰ The wedding held more significance than just upholding the image of the New Negro; it also represented the birth of a new generation. Du Bois had long written of the loss of his first-born son, his life’s incommensurable disappointment, as his son would have been the heir to his New Negro legacy. In his essay, “Of the Passing of the First-Born,” he writes that upon his son’s birth he “saw the dream of my black fathers stagger a step onward in the wild phantasm of the world; heard in his baby voice the voice of the Prophet that was to rise within the Veil.”⁶¹ Thus, David Levering Lewis argues, the wedding between Yolande and Countee Cullen was to be a carefully arranged union between “two phenomenal bloodlines” — never mind that Cullen was adopted — that would produce “a uniquely endowed life force” that would destine the future of the race to greatness.⁶² Mason Stokes further contends that this idea of “new birth in Harlem” is strictly heterosexual, and that heterosexuality had become an organizing framework for America’s Black future, particularly through use of language describing heterosexual union and birth.⁶³ This heterosexual imagery is ironic because even at the time of his wedding to Yolande Du Bois, Countee Cullen’s homosexuality was an “open secret.” Lewis notes Cullen’s dedicatory signature to Harold Jackman — Cullen’s alleged partner — under the poem “Timid Lover,”

⁵⁹ Mason Stokes, “Father of the Bride: Du Bois and the Making of Black Heterosexuality,” in *Next to the Color Line: Gender, Sexuality, and W.E.B. Du Bois*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 291.

⁶⁰ Stokes, “Father of the Bride,” 292.

⁶¹ W.E.B Du Bois, “Of the Passing of the First-Born,” in *The Souls of Black Folk*, (Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Co., 1903), 141-142.

⁶² Lewis, *W.E.B. Du Bois*, 222-224.

⁶³ Stokes, “Father of the Bride,” 293-294.

found on a rare copy of *Fire!!* in the Atlanta University Library, with the words “I who adore exotic things/would shape a sound/to be your name, a word that sings/until the head goes round.” Furthermore, Geraldyn Dismond Major, a writer for the *Tattler*, recalled fifty years later that, at the time, she thought the Du Bois-Cullen pairing to be “absurd.”⁶⁴ It is possible Du Bois had heard the rumors about Cullen’s sexuality prior to the wedding, rather, he likely chose to completely disregard them as gossip.

Even if Du Bois did remain completely ignorant, correspondence between Du Bois and Cullen shortly after the April 1928 wedding describes the newlywed’s marital troubles in the bedroom. In these letters, however, Du Bois remains in ignorance, insisting that it is Yolande’s inexperience that is to blame for the couple’s lack of marital sex, fully placing the blame for their “trying” honeymoon on his own daughter.⁶⁵ By September 1928, Du Bois resigns himself to the idea that the marriage will likely not last, advising Cullen that “Yolande stay until Christmas” when Mrs. Du Bois can come visit, in order to quell any “unkind gossip and enable the break to come after a decent interval.”⁶⁶ It is likely that Du Bois was well aware of the gossip surrounding the union and the scandal divorce so soon after the wedding would cause, yet later in this letter he continues to hold out hope for the marriage, as he persuades Cullen — his symbolic heir — to be understanding of Yolande’s supposed inexperience, and give the marriage some time. He writes to Cullen to give sex advice based on Victorian ideas of women’s sexuality and purity. He urges Cullen to understand that “the sex mating of a man and a girl is often disappointing...young men usually assume that their brides will undeniably have the same sexual desire for them as they have. This belief is seldom so. I believe that most honeymoons are disappointing.”⁶⁷ This

⁶⁴ Lewis, *W.E.B. Du Bois*, 225.

⁶⁵ Countee Cullen Papers, Box 2, Folder 6, Amistad Research Center at Tulane University, New Orleans, Louisiana.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

belief is reflective of Victorian ideas that women were asexual, as female sexual desire was considered scandalous and immoral.⁶⁸ It also reflects the default assumption that Cullen was heterosexual, even though many knew otherwise. The fact that Du Bois so readily blamed Yolande and Countee's sexual incompatibility on her supposed lack of desire for sex, rather than entertain the possibility that Cullen could be gay indicates that not only were his beliefs about sex and sexuality firmly rooted in the Victorian era, but also that he fundamentally believed homosexuality to be incompatible with his vision of New Negro middle class heteronormativity. Despite the open secret of Cullen's sexuality, however, in a somewhat contradictory twist Du Bois continued to encourage him to not let this matter interfere with his work, reminding Cullen "your career has been very dear to me from the beginning and I had dreamed of fine things from the marriage."⁶⁹ These words indicate that while the marriage may have been Du Bois' dream for the future of the New Negro, he was content to remain willfully ignorant of Cullen's homosexuality in support of his otherwise brilliant work, here detaching Cullen the individual from the idealized New Negro vision otherwise conveyed through his work. This contradiction implies that though Du Bois may have willed the New Negro to rest on a heterosexual framework, this was simply not the case, and Du Bois was willing to similarly look past this "open secret" in favor of the larger goals of his generational image. In this way, the New Negro ideal as it existed within the heteronormative middle class, is in itself — just like the wedding — a matter of heterosexual "drag" performance.

Du Bois' ideas for the New Negro Renaissance replicated heteronormative white middle class ideas from the Victorian era, and carried these ideas well into the twentieth century. That is not to say, however, that queerness could not exist within the idea of the New Negro at all, and

⁶⁸ Rupp, *Sapphistries* 127-128.

⁶⁹ Countee Cullen Papers, Amistad Research Center at Tulane University, New Orleans, Louisiana.

while Locke and Du Bois may have disagreed to a degree on which matters should be “public” and “private,” both men came from backgrounds of respectability and Victorian ideals. Locke, in many ways, was an embodiment of Du Bois’ ideals. Though he supported many up and coming younger New Negro artists and writers who may have “scandalized” Du Bois’ image of the New Negro with their references to homosexuality and fluid gender roles, he mostly lived his life as a gay man in private, and attempted to maintain his “respectable” image, while upholding Victorian ideas of morality and an intellectual Black middle class.⁷⁰ Furthermore, despite Du Bois’ insistence on a heterosexual foundation for the New Negro image, queerness was permitted to exist within the idea of the New Negro in many of the ways Locke’s lifestyle embodied. This is evident in *Passing*, as the novel carries a lesbian subtext and inner conflict hidden beneath the surface of the name. Through using more common topics such as racial passing and the trope of the “tragic mulatto,” Larsen is able to explore deeper taboos such as women’s sexual desire and same-sex relationships.⁷¹ The Du Bois-Cullen wedding further evidences the performance of the New Negro as depicted through heterosexual ideals. While many at the time knew Cullen was gay, the wedding continued as a show of performance for future generations of New Negroes. Even after the marriage’s dissolution two years later as a result of obvious sexual incompatibility, Du Bois continued to place Cullen on a pedestal for what the New Negroes ought to be. While queerness may not have been an openly accepted facet of the New Negro Renaissance, its existence was fundamental to the work and image of the New Negro. Furthermore, the subtle acknowledgement of queerness’ existence within structures of middle-

⁷⁰ Stewart, *The New Negro*, 523-524.

⁷¹ David Pilgrim, “The Tragic Mulatto Myth.” Ferris State University <https://www.ferris.edu/HTMLS/news/jimcrow/mulatto/homepage.htm>; McDowell, “Introduction,” xxx-xxx.

class heteronormativity and Victorian morality paved the way for queerness' more covert existence within the New Negro Renaissance.

New Negro Controversy

While Du Bois and Locke spearheaded a literary New Negro Renaissance that embodied the voices of a generation of Black Americans, a younger “more bohemian” group of Harlem New Negroes contested the meaning of the very movement.⁷² In 1925, a young Wallace Thurman moved to Harlem hopeful of obtaining literary success and eager to join the New Negro Renaissance. After only a year, however, Thurman became disillusioned with the idea of the New Negro as the founders of the movement presented it. While Thurman agreed with the New Negro idea to look beyond slavery and stereotypes of the past, he frequently attacked aspects of the New Negro agenda that focused on art as propaganda and its portrayals of Harlem life.⁷³ Thurman criticized the New Negro Renaissance for only presenting “the butter side up” of Black life. He believed these portrayals, which limited the movement to heteronormative middle-class intellectual ideas, were as bad as the stereotypes the movement was trying to move past, condemning contemporary New Negroes to “stereotypes of the past.”⁷⁴ Martha Jane Nadell quotes Thurman’s writings in his essay “Negro Artists and the Negro” and his responses to Carl Van Vechten’s provocative book *Nigger Heaven*. She writes that Thurman wanted Black literature and art to not only be created by Black Americans, but also to include taboo subject matters such as sexuality, sex-work, and colorism, in addition to representations of the

⁷² Bohemian in a 1920s context refers to people who did not conform to societal norms and often involved themselves in “interzones,” or places where there was interracial mingling and open expression of sexuality and queerness.

⁷³ Jabbar, *On the Shoulders of Giants*, 102-106.

⁷⁴ Nadell, *Enter the New Negroes*, 73.; Wallace Thurman, “Negro Artists and the Negro,” *New Republic*, LII (Aug. 31, 1927)..

“proletariat rather than the bourgeois...people who were not totally white American in every aspect save color of the skin.”⁷⁵

Fire!!, in many ways, served as a manifestation of the desire that Thurman and others had to portray a more complete representation of Black life in Harlem. Thurman and a group of friends, including Richard Bruce Nugent, who wrote openly of homosexuality and spoke freely among peers about his own same-sex attraction; Zora Neale Hurston, who wrote about colorism and “passing;” and Langston Hughes, whose poetry was often critiqued by other Black writers who felt it was too taboo for the New Negro image — despite his reputation as the Renaissance “poster-child” — among others, collaborated to create *Fire!!*. The magazine served as a representation of modernist New Negro stories and artwork that pushed the envelope on both the middle-class ideal of what the New Negro “ought to be” and the white heteronormative ideals of the American mainstream. In *Enter the New Negroes: Images of Race in American Culture*, Martha Jane Nadell writes that this second generation of New Negroes was “trying to do more than push the boundaries of acceptable representations. They were trying to fashion a new, modern African American aesthetic.”⁷⁶ *Fire!!* and its very production — the magazine was produced by young Black bohemians and not backed by white patrons like Van Vechten, which was common of literary pieces produced by Black writers during the Renaissance — represented a break from Victorian ideas about gender and sexuality, literature, and New Negro imagery and practices.

Following the 1926 publication of *Fire!!*, New Negro activist Charles S. Johnson published *Ebony and Topaz, a Collectanea* in 1927. *Ebony and Topaz, a Collectanea* brought ideas of sexual freedom to the forefront of the New Negro Renaissance with its vivid illustrations

⁷⁵ Ibid, 73.

⁷⁶ Ibid, 78.

by Charles Cullen. These drawings are presented in concurrence with a collection of Black works of literature.⁷⁷ Cullen's drawings celebrate sexual freedom and the Black body through depictions of nudity accompanied by the symbolic usage of wings to represent freedom of expression, though not all the figures are explicitly identifiable as Black, adding a multi-racial aspect to the publication. Furthermore, these illustrations depict androgynous features without clear distinctions of gendered anatomy, symbolizing a break from the traditional gender binary upheld through Western ideas of heteronormativity. Cullen's drawings celebrate sex and sexuality through a representation of blackness free from gender norms. The drawings in *Ebony and Topaz, a Collectanea* bring a new perspective to the New Negro Movement, as they push the boundaries of what would be accepted by heteronormative America and the mainstream New Negro Movement.

Creating Harlem's Queer Spaces

Queer people often lived between the paradox of being simultaneously "seen" and "unseen," largely because of the taboos surrounding homosexuality in the early twentieth century. While queerness did exist within the public sphere of consciousness, the public's acknowledgment of its existence largely served to fulfill a desire for local gossip and scandal. A 1930 edition of *The New York Age* describes a scene of "scores of males of pronounced effeminate traits," who "gracefully disported themselves in beautiful evening gowns" and "females rigged up in masculine attire" at one Hamilton Lodge masquerade and civic ball rendezvous at the Rockland Palace, an infamous event hall located on 155th Street and Eighth

⁷⁷ Cullen, Charles. In *Ebony and Topaz: A Collectanea*, edited by Charles S. Johnson, 9, 80, 116, 136. New York: Opportunity National Urban League, 1927 (1971 Reprint).

Avenue.⁷⁸ Similarly, a 1931 edition of *Broadway Brevities*, a notorious national tabloid devoted to gossip and scandal, describes a scene of “anywhere from fifty to a hundred men and boys, with painted faces and dyed tresses” singing and dancing among a crowd of sailors in Brooklyn, under a headline that boldly proclaims “Third Sex Plague Spreads Anew! Sissies Permeate Sublime Social Strata As Film Stars and Broadwayites Go Gay.”⁷⁹ In 1924 the tabloid also ran a series called “Nights in Fairyland,” dedicated to outing individuals by name and exposing locales where Queer folks patronized.⁸⁰

Those who were caught or suspected of engaging in “homosexual relations” were convicted of public indecency, and fined or jailed. Wallace Thurman recalls such a scenario from years prior in a 1928 letter to his friend and confidant, playwright William Jourdan Rapp. Thurman recounts that in 1925, shortly after he had moved to New York City, he entered a restroom at the 135th street Harlem subway stop, where he was solicited by a loitering man who let him know “what his game was.” The man offered Thurman two dollars to perform sexual acts on him. Thurman accepted but was then immediately arrested by two hidden “plain clothes men” and fined twenty-five dollars or three nights in prison.⁸¹ Unable to afford the fine, Thurman opted to do the time, writing to “his only friend in New York” to bail him out. Thurman then goes on to describe how his friend borrowed money and passed it along to a minister friend, who came to bail him out. This minister also “belonged to the male sisterhood,” however, and “took a great interest in Thurman,” demanding that Thurman meet his requests to guarantee his silence

⁷⁸ “Hamilton Lodge Ball is Scene of Splendor, Rockland Palace is Rendezvous for the Frail and Freakish Gang,” *New York Age*, (New York, NY), Feb 22, 1930. newspapers.com scan. Accessed November 10, 2020.

⁷⁹ John Swallow Martin, “Third Sex Plague Spreads Anew!,” *New Broadway Brevities* v.3, no. 1, Nov 2, 1931, Courtesy of the Billy Ireland Cartoon Library & Museum at Ohio State University.

⁸⁰ James F. Wilson, *Bulldaggers, Pansies and Chocolate Babies: Performance, Race, and Sexuality in the Harlem Renaissance* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2010), 29-36.

⁸¹ Wallace Thurman to William Jourdan Rapp, JWJ MSS 12 Box 1 Folder 1, May 7, 1928. Courtesy of Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

about the scandal, which Thurman allegedly refused. After the incident, Thurman noted in correspondence with Rapp that news of his scandal spread across Harlem, even reaching his soon-to-be ex-wife Louise in Reno. Louise only added her own accounts of Thurman's "sexual incompatibility" — the reason for their pending divorce — to the story, yet Thurman insisted to Rapp that he was not "a homo," and that the scandal spread with no evidence on account of a "certain group of Negroes" that relished in this gossip.⁸² This account is significant because it not only shows the sensationalism of same-sex attraction, as the rumor spread across Harlem and even reached Thurman's ex-wife in Reno, but it also sheds light on Thurman's private life and the taboo and criminalization of homosexuality.

When looking at Thurman's account on a surface level, it reads as merely gossip. It is reasonable to assume his account is genuine and that Thurman, a newcomer to Harlem, entered the 135th Street bathroom only to use it for its intended purposes. But when paired with his later statements regarding his failure in maintaining his "marital relationship" and his admission that after some physical difficulties supposedly on his wife's part, he had "lost all sexual feeling for her," one may become skeptical that the sex acts Thurman performed in the 135th Street subway bathroom were merely financially motivated.⁸³ Alluding to his wife's apparent sexual shortcomings is also a euphemism similar to that used by Du Bois in reference to Cullen's bedroom struggles, which Du Bois suggested were Yolande's fault.⁸⁴ Furthermore, while it is possible Thurman simply stumbled upon the bathroom, tabloid allusions to "plague-spots" and "extraordinary masquerades of its kind" suggest knowledge of queer meeting spaces was publicly known and accessible, and Thurman may have been well aware of the meeting spot on

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Countee Cullen Papers, Box 2, Folder 6, Amistad Research Center at Tulane University, New Orleans, Louisiana.

135th Street, especially since the man who solicited him was a repeat offender.⁸⁵ Thurman's account of the minister who bailed him out and demanded "his pound of flesh to keep silent" is also dubious.⁸⁶ It appears to be missing key details, as according to Thurman's retelling, the minister spread the rumor of Thurman's same-sex attraction and did not appear fearful of his own involvement in the story, a detail that may have similarly resulted in his own social shunning or arrest. Thurman swears that he is not gay but that the story is a cruel rumor spread on account of a lack of evidence and desire for gossip, though Thurman himself provides no evidence to refute the story other than his word. Whether this analysis correctly points to Thurman experiencing same-sex attraction or not, it would have been in his best interest to cover it up and move forward from the incident. As gossip and society columns have displayed, queerness was hugely scandalous in the 1920s, and to be openly Queer surely would have impacted Thurman's career and reputation and could have resulted in jail time. In many instances, gossip around homosexuality was dangerous. Morality policing based on Victorian ideas of gender and sexuality was not unique to the New Negro founding fathers or limited to essays and literature either. Reformists often established publicly funded initiatives to snuff out sex-workers, homosexuality, and miscegenation in urban centers, and anyone caught engaging in or frequenting locales for "indecent behavior" or "segregated vice" could be subject to legal consequences in addition to these spots being shut down.⁸⁷

In 1927, a year before Thurman's letter retelling the scandal to Rapp, the New York City Police Department (NYPD) began its infamous raids of popular nightclubs and bars in Harlem in

⁸⁵ JWW MSS 12 Box 1 Folder 1, May 7, 1928.; John Swallow Martin, "Third Sex Plague Spreads Anew!," *New Broadway Brevities* v.3, no. 1, Nov 2, 1931, Courtesy of the Billy Ireland Cartoon Library & Museum at Ohio State University.

⁸⁶ JWW MSS 12 Box 1 Folder 1, May 7, 1928.

⁸⁷ Kevin J Mumford, *Interzones: Black/White Sex Districts in Chicago and New York in the Early Twentieth Century.*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 22-33; Jonathan Ned Katz, *Gay/Lesbian Almanac: A New Documentary*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1983).

search of “indecent” behavior, such as sex work and the “existence of black/white homosexual institutions.”⁸⁸ The Committee of Fourteen, which worked in concurrence with the NYPD to uncover spaces of “public indecency,” referred to their “special investigations” in Harlem that searched for Queer people as investigations looking for “dives that catered to specialized types of degeneracy and perversion,” rather than explicitly stating the nature of these investigations in their public reports. This was done to avoid alarming the heteronormative public about the existence of Queer enclaves, which were only “allowed” to exist when the public demanded gossip.⁸⁹ Their terminology, however, not only demonized homosexuality and interracial mingling, but also denied Queer people’s humanity. Furthermore, many of these investigations were centered around curbing miscegenation that occurred between Queer people in Harlem nightclubs and dance halls. Reports of Queer Black people almost always include references to white Queer people, with one report noting “certain cafes patronized by both Negroes and whites, and were [considered to be] the seat of male solicitation.”⁹⁰ A large reason for this is because white bohemians and Queer people often made their way to Harlem to go “slumming,” or deliberately participate in Black/white “interzones” for the practice of sexual pleasure or entertainment, before returning to their homes downtown.⁹¹ This is yet another example of how white urbanites, some of whom were also Queer, commodified Black Queer spaces for their own entertainment, but often at the expense of those who actively participated in these spaces.

Sociologists and doctors in the early twentieth century also used race to theorize about the origins of homosexuality, with theories like “social reverse complexion,” which argued that “color or racial difference substituted for the gender difference in the sexual relationship.”⁹² In

⁸⁸ Mumford, *Interzones*, 79.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 74-75.; Katz, *Gay/Lesbian Almanac*.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 134-146.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 76.

Interzones: Black/White Sex Districts in Chicago and New York in the Early Twentieth Century, historian Kevin Mumford notes prison reformer Margaret Otis's 1913 observations of female inmates. Otis created the theory of "situational lesbianism," where she argues that the difference in color between female inmates substituted for the lack of gender difference in their relationships.⁹³ This is similar to Chauncey's observations of many early twentieth century conceptions of gender and sexuality, which operated strictly within the gender binary and assumptions of inherent heterosexuality. These conceptions of gender and sexuality suggested for example, that gay males have "female brains." Theories like "social reverse complexion" and "situational lesbianism" assume heterosexuality is the only viable attraction. This inherent opposite-sex attraction was thought to run so deep that anyone who did not conform either had the wrong body to accompany their brain, or opted for dating outside their race as a stand in for their inability to date someone of the opposite gender.

Many Queer New Negroes began to encourage private parties as they were forced away from public spaces due to the increased frequency of police raids, danger of arrest and public homophobia. Private parties or social gatherings to discuss intellectual ideas were frequently held in the homes of wealthy Black socialites or in ballrooms they rented for drag shows.⁹⁴ These parties were often more risqué and open to interracial and Queer mingling than more mainstream social events hosted in public spaces. Socialite A'Lelia Walker — whose mother, Madame C.J. Walker, became rich from her hair products made for Black women — was known for hosting extravagant parties at her home in Harlem. In 1924, the influential Black newspaper the *New York Age* described one of her parties as a "brilliant affair" and explained that "the guests

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Wilson, *Bulldaggers, Pansies and Chocolate Babies*, 14.

assembled at eleven [at night] and dancing was enjoyed until early Monday morning.”⁹⁵

Walker’s parties, however, were known among Queer circles for more than just their extravagance. Upon admittance to one of Walker’s legendary parties, Mabel Hampton, a prominent Black entertainer and activist for lesbian rights, described a mixed racial scene, with attendees — all without clothes — lounging around, and on close examination she noticed that “the men were lying on top of other men, and the women were lying on top of other women.”⁹⁶ Private parties were important for the gay community because they operated beneath the radar of oppressive public homophobia and allowed for a free flow of ideas and collaboration amongst the gay artists, writers and performers that contributed to the New Negro Renaissance. Similarly, many Queer New Negroes shared the same social circles and intimacies. Wallace Thurman was good friends with Harold Jackman, the alleged partner of Countee Cullen, a poet and ex-husband of Yolande Du Bois. The two often exchanged book recommendations on Queer topics and attended parties together.⁹⁷

More common than the private parties hosted by wealthy Black socialites were “rent parties,” hosted by working class Black Americans. Though they were not exclusively held by Queer people, rent parties provided entertainment, food, and bootlegged drinks. Those hosted by Queer people also provided a space outside of the “threatening public spotlight” focused on Queer people — all while offering financial assistance to Black Harlem residents.⁹⁸ At the door, attendees would pay a small fee, usually intended to help the host pay their exorbitantly high rent for the month, which was implemented by white landlords to deter further Black tenants from

⁹⁵ Ibid,13.

⁹⁶ Ibid,13.; Interview with Joan Nestle, May 21, 1981, transcript in the Mabel Hampton Collection, Lesbian Herstory Archives.

⁹⁷ JWJ MSS 12, Box 1, Folder 4, 1928-1934 Courtesy of the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

⁹⁸ Wilson, *Bulldaggers, Pansies and Chocolate Babies*, 40.

moving to Harlem. A 1927 report by the Urban League found that “48 percent of the renters [in Harlem] spent more than twice as much of their income on rent as comparable white New Yorkers.” The same report also found that “a fourth of Harlem’s families had at least one lodger (twice the white rate) and that an unknown number of households practiced a ‘hot bed’ policy.” Hot bed policies referred to the practice of different lodgers who work different shifts at different times of the day sharing the same bed.⁹⁹ Rent parties and hotbed policies both worked to combat the exorbitant cost of rent in Harlem. Rent parties were prolific among poorer, working class Black Harlem residents and are referenced frequently in literature. In Wallace Thurman’s short story, “Cordelia the Crude,” where the story’s narrator and two friends visited “a Saturday night house-rent party in a well-known whore house,” the party is described as “a chaotic riot of raucous noise and clashing color all rhythmically merging in the red, smoke filled room.”¹⁰⁰

Among these often lewd and chaotic rent parties there were also many “women only” parties; Hampton noted that “the bulldykers would come and bring their women with them...they danced up a breeze...they were all colored women. Sometimes we ran into someone who had a white woman with them.”¹⁰¹ These parties were not only important for giving Black women, especially lesbians, a sense of sexual freedom and independence, but rent parties among both Queer and heterosexual Black Americans also served to provide Black entertainers with exposure. Many notable blues and jazz performers, as well as comedians and specialty performers, gained their fame and popularity through their appearances at private parties. Thomas “Fats” Waller, Bessie Smith, and Jackie “Moms” Mabley, in addition to less-known

⁹⁹ David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem was in Vogue*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1981), 107-108.; Osofsky, Gilbert. "A Decade of Urban Tragedy: How Harlem Became a Slum." *New York History* 46, no. 4 (1965): 330-355. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23162615>.

¹⁰⁰ Wallace Thurman, “Cordelia the Crude,” *Fire!!*, no. 1 (1926): 6.

¹⁰¹ Wilson, *Bulldaggers, Pansies and Chocolate Babies*, 14.; Bulldyker was another term to refer to a lesbian.

amateur performers, all started their careers with rent party performances. After these performances, entertainers might have moved on to bigger acts at “Harlem nightclubs, in Black vaudeville, and perhaps eventually on Broadway.”¹⁰² Some performances were even later appropriated by more mainstream performers and audiences as they gained popularity.¹⁰³ Performances at rent parties and the opportunities for success that they provided offered many Queer Black entertainers and artists a means to make a decent living. Furthermore, these events provided more than just entertainment and social mingling opportunities for both Black and white Queer people as they also served as a political and social critiques on mainstream 1920s society and managed to further blur the lines between visibility and obscurity within Harlem during the New Negro Renaissance.¹⁰⁴ Queer performers were similarly able to blur the boundary between the “unseen” world and more “seen” spaces within the New Negro Renaissance through drag balls, where male and female impersonators would perform for large audiences of Queer people and bohemians. Unlike the more covert rent parties, drag balls were hosted in spacious dance halls, casinos, and clubs, and were a public spectacle to behold.¹⁰⁵ Drag balls were sold-out events that often entertained a mixed racial audience. Despite their immense popularity, however, these events were still covertly advertised. Their advertisements in Black newspapers such as the *New York Age* often promoted these events as “masquerades and civic balls,” with no indication of their more covert appeal to Queer people.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰² Eric Garber, “A Spectacle in Color: The Lesbian and Gay Subculture of Jazz Age Harlem,” in *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*, ed. Martin Bauml Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey, Jr. (New York: NAL Books, 1989), 323.; in Wilson, *Bulldaggers, Pansies, and Chocolate Babies*, 14-15.

¹⁰³ *Ibid*, 14-15.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid*, 32-33.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid*, 80.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid*, 83.

Drag balls in Harlem and Greenwich Village — a notable site for “bohemians,” Queer gatherings, and interracial mingling — were a few of the limited public spaces that people could be openly Queer and even then, the attendees risked being publicly outed by tabloids. White Queer people were particularly attracted to Black Queer spaces and drag events within Harlem as they often compared the oppression and struggles they faced for their homosexuality to the oppression of Black people by white American mainstream culture.¹⁰⁷ Both Black and white Queer men participated in drag balls and impersonated women. Furthermore, they often competed in the same drag competitions for monetary prizes and acclaim. These competitions were extravagant, sold out affairs that were noted as such in popular literature, tabloids, and fiction. As the narrator of *Strange Brother* (1931) — a popular novel about a gay man and his heterosexual female best friend in New York City, modeled after the author, Blair Niles — describes the scene of a drag ball, where the dance floor was a “mass of feathers and sparkling bangles, and the costumes resembled every period and style of women’s dress.”¹⁰⁸

House parties and clubs that catered to same-sex mingling were not the only spaces where Queer people connected and shared ideas during the New Negro Renaissance. Queer people also existed in shared, non-physical literary spaces under coded language and euphemisms. This figurative presence paralleled the physical existence of Queer people in the early twentieth century, ever present but only “seen” when searched for, visible as people only to those within the same spaces or viewed as little more than fuel for scandal or gossip by the mainstream heteronormative public. Under close reading, however, numerous works detailed covert queerness and same-sex attraction in literature, often depicting a less romanticized,

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 29-36.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, 85.; Blair Niles, *Strange Brother* (London: Gay Men’s Press, 1991; orig. 1931), 210–11.

working class vision of Harlem that represented a more “accurate” depiction of the New Negro Renaissances’ undercurrents.

Fire!! (1926) was in many ways, an embodiment of these ideas and the younger generation of New Negroes’ desire to create a more “accurate” depiction of the New Negro Renaissance.¹⁰⁹ Originally intended to be a quarterly publication, *Fire!!* lacked the funding to continue after its initial issue, but its impact nonetheless is indicative of a younger generation of New Negroes, many of them Queer or involved in Queer circles, who dissented from the mainstream ideas of the New Negro Movement. They used the magazine to spread their own views on the New Negro Renaissance, showcasing many of Harlem’s taboos, such as working-class struggle, same-sex attraction, and dissent towards traditional gender roles.¹¹⁰ The magazine featured various works of art including short stories, poems, drawings, plays, and excerpts from longer literary works. *Fire!!* served as a representation of modernist New Negro stories and artwork that pushed the envelope on both the middle-class ideal of what the New Negro “ought to be” and the white heteronormative ideals of the American mainstream. The text confronted many twentieth century traditionalist ideas about gender, and sexuality, and highlighted themes of working-class struggle.

One of the most riveting and controversial short stories featured in *Fire!!*, “Smoke, Lilies and Jade” by Richard Bruce Nugent, brings attention to the emotional limitations of traditional masculinity as the protagonist, Alex, struggles to grieve for his father while adhering to male gender archetypes. The story does not just tackle the limitations of masculinity, but also the confusion associated with discovering and coming to terms with one’s sexual orientation. This confusion is represented through the consistent use of the ellipsis without any real form of

¹⁰⁹ *FIRE!!*, no. 1, November, 1926, 1-47.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid*, 1.

punctuation, and the figurative “smoke” that Alex peers through as he attempts to force himself to fit into society’s complex gender roles and heteronormative standards. Upon his father’s death, Alex, a young child, weeps at his father’s memory. His mother, however, tells him “you mustn’t cry Alex...remember you have to be a little man now,” to which Alex, in his haze, ponders “and that was all...didn’t other wives and sons cry more for their dead than that?” When Alex is older and becomes sexually involved with another man, Adrian (even though Alex is also in love with a woman, Melva) he questions why he never felt the same attraction towards his female friends or even his other male friends. Nugent writes, “Alex wondered more and more why he liked Adrian so...he liked so many people... Wallie...Zora...Gloria...Gweny...oh many people...and they were friends...but Beauty [Adrian]...it was different...he knew other people who were beautiful...Fania and Gloria...but he had never been confused before them.” By the end of the short, Alex finally accepts his queerness, and realizes it is possible for him to be in love with a woman and sexually attracted to man — “one *can* love two at the same time.”¹¹¹ Nugent, one of the few openly gay men that took part in the Renaissance, used the text to create a literary “safe space” within the movement for those questioning their sexuality, or who otherwise did not conform to traditional Victorian gender roles. The piece represents not only a break from an idealized idea of Black masculinity present throughout other Renaissance texts, but also an overt reference to same-sex attraction and dissent against societally imposed heteronormativity.

Wallace Thurman also published a similarly taboo short literary work titled “Cordelia the Crude” in *Fire!!*. Thurman’s story follows Cordelia, a young girl who lacks a true sense of identity or direction, as she spends her days visiting a theater where men go to solicit sex. After going home with a man who kisses her and leaves her with two dollars, she ends up working in a

¹¹¹ Richard Bruce Nugent, “Smoke, Lilies and Jade,” *Fire!!*, no. 1 (1926): 33-48.

brothel months later, describing the man as her first customer. The story is controversial within the New Negro Renaissance and in 1920s mainstream literature because it discusses sex-work and Black sexuality without openly condemning it. It also depicts some of the “less-desirable” elements of Harlem, like poverty and “illicit” sex.¹¹² Thurman often included covert references to homosexuality in his writing and tended to add auto-biographical aspects into many of his stories (most notably in *The Blacker the Berry*). In “Cordelia the Crude,” Cordelia’s character — a young girl who arrives in Harlem without social connections or direction in life — is reminiscent of Thurman, who, while not as young as Cordelia, arrived in Harlem destitute, without social connections or much of a plan for his future. Furthermore, Cordelia wandering through Harlem before eventually performing sexual acts for money is not unlike Thurman when he arrives to Harlem, confused and looking for work before he is picked up at the 135th Street subway stop for homosexual acts in exchange for two dollars.¹¹³ It is also notable that Thurman refers to Cordelia as a “potential prostitute,” who had not yet realized “the moral import of her wanton promiscuity” and “was quite particular about the type of male to whom she submitted.”¹¹⁴ This is interesting because it suggests that Cordelia’s primary reason for sex work was not out of destitution, but more so out of her own desires and acts of rebellion. Thurman does not attempt to make “Cordelia the Crude” into a moralizing story against the evils of sex-work, but he gives Cordelia her own agency and empowers her to make her own decisions about her sexuality. If taken as a parallel for Thurman’s own life and actions, this not only contradicts his claim of performing homosexual acts merely because of his need for money, but the narrative

¹¹² Wallace Thurman, “Cordelia the Crude,” *Fire!!*, no. 1 (1926).

¹¹³ Wallace Thurman to William Jourdan Rapp, JWJ MSS 12 Box 1 Folder 1, May 7, 1928. Courtesy of Courtesy of Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.; Ganter. “Decadence, Sexuality, and the Bohemian Vision of Wallace Thurman.” 86-89.

¹¹⁴ Thurman, “Cordelia the Crude.”

of the story itself also stands in direct contradiction to the ideas of morality paraded by older New Negroes like Du Bois.

Critics did not receive *Fire!!* and its representations of New Negro life well. Even Alain Locke, who half-heartedly welcomed it, commented that “the young Negro evidently repudiates any special moral burden of proof along with any of the other social disabilities that public opinion saddled upon his fathers.”¹¹⁵ Moreover, the creators of the magazine attempted to distance themselves from Locke’s vision by refusing the funding he initially offered to the magazine in its early stages.¹¹⁶ The magazine’s themes proved too radical and controversial to sell many copies, and at a production cost of one thousand dollars and a sale price of one dollar per copy, it was simply not profitable. Furthermore, many of the unsold copies of *Fire!!* were destroyed in a mysterious basement fire and the magazine was ultimately unable to secure funding for a second edition.¹¹⁷ Regardless, the magazine represented taboos within the New Negro Renaissance in new, more overt ways than previously had been written and represented within the larger literary movement. These works created another “space” for Queer New Negroes, both figurative and physical, as they created same-sex and gender non-conforming representations within the working class that proved the existence of Black queerness beyond a scandalous gossip column. The magazine’s creation also physically brought together many New Negro writers and creatives who may have been Queer and gender non-conforming.

The death of *Fire!!* did little to deter Thurman and the younger New Negro generation from a desire to “found a wholly new type of magazine, one which would give expression to all groups.”¹¹⁸ Thurman later went on to create the similarly short-lived literary journal, *Harlem: A*

¹¹⁵ Nadell, *Enter the New Negroes*, 84.; Goesser, “The Case of Ebony and Topaz,” 86-111.

¹¹⁶ Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, *On the Shoulders of Giants: My Journey Through the Harlem Renaissance*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2007) 85.

¹¹⁷ Nadell, *Enter the New Negroes*, 84.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid*, 84-85.

Forum of Negro Life, in which he published essays critiquing the ideas promulgated by the forefathers of the New Negro Renaissance.¹¹⁹ In 1932 Thurman also published a satire on the founding figures of the New Negro Renaissance, *Infants of the Spring*, in which he not only mocked the ideas of Locke and Du Bois, but also wrote Queer representations of New Negro writers and activists. Paul Adrian, a flamboyant character who closely resembles Nugent, is openly gay, while the story's protagonist Raymond is symbolic of Thurman himself.¹²⁰

Throughout the story, Raymond becomes closer with Stephen, a white immigrant from Denmark and the two become intimate friends and roommates. Their friendship is also heavily suggestive of a more intimate sexual relationship and the two move in together quickly after meeting, even though "white people don't live in Harlem."¹²¹ Furthermore, Thurman uses the novel itself to editorialize on his own thoughts about the direction of the New Negro Renaissance. The novel most infamously details a debate between Raymond and Dr. Parkes (representative of Thurman and Alain Locke), in which Dr. Parks proselytizes about the need for New Negroes to protect their reputations. Dr. Parkes argues "this is a new day in the history of our race. Talented Negroes are being watched by countless people...they are waiting for you to prove yourselves worthy so they can help you. Scandal stories in the newspapers certainly won't influence the public favorably."¹²² Raymond's response to this is to say "my habits and my life are my own business. I intend to live just as I please, regardless of yellow journalism, of a public which might offer me material aid should I, in their opinion, prove myself worthy."¹²³ This debate can be read as an almost direct reference to the debate between the elder and younger generations of

¹¹⁹ Wallace Thurman. "High, Low, Past, and Present" in *Harlem: A Forum of Negro Life*, vol. 1, no. 1 (1928).

¹²⁰ Wallace Thurman, *Infants of the Spring*, (Mineola: Dover Productions Inc., 1932).

¹²¹ Thurman, *Infants of the Spring*, 26.

¹²² *Ibid*, 197-198.

¹²³ *Ibid*.

New Negroes as far as what material should be produced as part of the New Negro image and how New Negroes should represent their lives publicly. Just two years after the novel's publication, Thurman passed from tuberculosis.

Queer advocates within the New Negro Renaissance worked to provoke the Black community and the heteronormative white American public into acknowledging their existence, even when it meant violent police raids of their private spaces and open criticism from their mentors. Works like *Fire!!* and *Ebony and Topaz: A Collectanea*, that were written and published by Queer artists, writers and activists, created a new Queer New Negro Renaissance as they pushed the boundaries of representing sexuality and gender nonconformity in a white heteronormative American society. Wallace Thurman's *Fire!!* acted as a voice of dissent against Locke's ideas of the upright, middle class New Negro. Moreover, the works that succeeded it not only represented the taboo aspects of the New Negro Renaissance and 1920s Harlem, but they also signified a development within the movement itself. The redefining of the New Negro's success in America, an idea that started with the appropriation of ideas from the white genteel class, developed into an intellectual movement that challenged old definitions of masculinity within the New Negro Renaissance. Furthermore, writers and performance artists, such as drag queens, worked to push queerness out of private spaces and into the public sphere in a way that could be shared and made available to more people. This provocative movement started by Queer New Negroes not only worked to shape the development of the New Negro Renaissance as a whole, but also helped to create a new, Queer Black movement within the Renaissance that challenged the boundaries of "seen" and "unseen" queerness and added what could be perceived as a Queer contribution to a larger Black movement.

Redefining Masculinity and the Taboo of Queerness

Prior to the twentieth century, Black men were excluded from old institutions of masculinity — Victorian masculinity in the nineteenth century was typically tied to white men’s land ownership and lineage — so it was essential for the twentieth century New Negroes to establish a definition of masculinity that included them.¹²⁴ Some Black activists, such as Booker T. Washington and Alain Locke, focused on appropriating old Victorian ideals of masculinity and modifying them to fit Black men in America. In *the Making of the New Negro: Black Authorship, Masculinity, and Sexuality in the New Negro Renaissance*, Anna Pochmara argues that Booker T. Washington promoted an ideal of masculinity similar to the Victorian model based on genteel patriarchy, which he believed could be achieved through vocational work. She argues that Locke championed what she calls “producerist masculinity,” which focuses on “productivity and activity in the public sphere.”¹²⁵ Hegemonic masculinity, or the masculinity that holds the most social power in American society, has historically excluded not only Black men, but also Queer men and much of the working class. This definition is apparent in Du Bois’ “The Talented Tenth,” where he expresses desire for Black men to achieve a higher education and shape the future of America through teaching the generations of Black Americans to come.¹²⁶ According to Gail Bederman “the power of manhood, as the middle class understood it, encompassed the power to wield civic authority, control strife and unrest, and to shape the future of the nation.”¹²⁷

The younger New Negroes challenged the mainstream New Negro attempt to shape the identity of Black men through this re-establishment of old gender norms. Those such as Wallace

¹²⁴ Pochmara, *The Making of the New Negro*, 10-11.

¹²⁵ *Ibid*, 11.

¹²⁶ W.E.B Du Bois, “The Talented Tenth,” in *The Negro Problem*, 33-75.

¹²⁷ Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917*, (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 14.

Thurman countered this definition of masculinity with a form of dandyism-based masculinity.¹²⁸ Dandyism, a movement transplanted from Europe and not unique to Black Americans, focused on enjoying the pleasures of life with a heavy emphasis on aesthetic appeal. Pochmara points to Christopher Lane's reading of dandyism as a rebellion against bourgeois ideology in that the dandy "expressed his class dissent by disdaining labor and affecting an indifference to economic advantage."¹²⁹ This idea of dandy-masculinity stood in direct objection to the "producerist masculinity" promoted by Locke and Washington's idea to appropriate the genteel patriarchy through vocational work.¹³⁰ Additionally, in her article "The Dialectics of Dandyism," Elisa Glick analyzes dandyism in the context of Oscar Wilde — the prototype for many twentieth century gay writers — and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. She claims that "a wide range of historians and cultural critics have placed the dandy at the center of debates about the history of the homosexual in the West, the history of modern culture, and the role of the Queer in constructions of modern identity."¹³¹ Glick's theory, however, could also be applicable in the case of the New Negro Renaissance when looking at figures like Thurman. Many of the New Negroes such as Thurman and Nugent — in writings like "Smoke, Lilies and Jade" — challenged the hegemonic view of masculinity crafted by the forerunners of the New Negro Renaissance. These writers challenged the New Negro's ideas of masculinity both covertly through their work, and more overtly through their very existence. These dissenting writers were often known to be queer, either openly or as an "open secret." They also promoted a dandy-based

¹²⁸ Pochmara, *The Making of the New Negro*, 144.; Dandyism is also sometimes synonymously referred to as "bohemian masculinity;" in Pochmara's book.

¹²⁹ Pochmara, *The Making of the New Negro*, 175.

¹³⁰ Ibid, 174-176.; David Mazella, *The Making of Modern Cynicism*, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007), 208-209. Pochmara, *The Making of the New Negro*, 11.

¹³¹ Elisa Glick, "The Dialectics of Dandyism," *Cultural Critique*, No. 48 (2001): 129.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/1354399.pdf>; Thurman also makes references to gay dandies throughout his novel, *Infants of Spring*.

ideal of masculinity that, similarly to Glick's theory on dandyism, both rejects the order established by the founding New Negroes and revolts against heterosexual norms.¹³²

Thurman's dandyism differed from that of Du Bois and the traditional meaning of the term. Thurman defined dandyism through the idea of the male "sweetback." He claimed that "male parasites, known as sweetbacks, dress well and spend their days standing on street corners, playing pool, gambling and looking for some other 'fish' [working class Black women] to aid in their support."¹³³ These male sweetbacks were a product of the higher ratio of Black women in Harlem to Black men, in addition to the difficulties that Black men often faced in finding employment. As a result, many men lived off the wages of their female counterparts and became known as sweetbacks, or a form of male sex-workers. Thurman himself fit his own definition of sweetback as he was one of the many Black youths that had moved to Harlem and, unable to find a job, relied on the money and kindness of others and spent his days milling about the city.¹³⁴ This lifestyle also points to a bigger distinction between the middle-class founding fathers of the New Negro Renaissance, many of whom often worked as professors or editors for prominent Black publications, and the younger generation of New Negroes, who were largely supported by white philanthropists like Carl Van Vechten and William Jordan Rapp, and funded by older New Negroes in order to produce their creative works. Furthermore, though the idea behind the sweetback is not unique to Harlem or Black men, Thurman associated the sweetback phenomenon with Black Americans and non-Anglo-Saxon European immigrants, particularly those from Eastern and Southern Europe, who at the time were not perceived as white. Both

¹³² Ibid, 131.; Elisa Glick, "The Dialectics of Dandyism," 129-163.

¹³³ Wallace Thurman, "Negro Life in New York's Harlem: A Lively Picture of a Popular and Interesting Section," in *The Collected Writings of Wallace Thurman: A Harlem Renaissance Reader*. Ed. Amritjit Singh and Daniel M. Scott III. (New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 60.; Pochmara, *The Making of the New Negro*, 172, 247.;

¹³⁴ Wallace Thurman letters to William Jourdan Rapp, JWW MSS 12 Box 1 Folder 1, 1928-1929, Courtesy of Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

groups migrated from rural areas to North American urban centers.¹³⁵ Thurman considered the sweetback phenomenon to be a negative consequence of urbanization that stood in direct opposition to Du Bois and Locke's optimism regarding urbanization. Thurman's idea of the parasitic sweetback dependent on Black female labor directly attacked the idea behind Locke's anthology, *The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance*, which focused on the independent Black male who was the face and embodiment of the New Negro and "producerist" masculinity.¹³⁶

Much like the leaders of the New Negro Renaissance, who were critical of un-productive masculinity and open discussion of taboos, mainstream American culture among both Black and white people remained strictly heteronormative.¹³⁷ Sexual relations, even between heterosexual couples in the upper and middle classes, were expected to be left behind closed doors and to only occur between married men and women. Popular culture and publications often referred to Queer people as "sexual inverts" or "sexual deviants," and same-sex attraction was considered to be perverted and crude.¹³⁸ Others considered same-sex attracted people to be of a "third sex" that was neither male nor female, but rather combined both elements of femininity and masculinity. This line of thought existed because the hegemonic heterosexual middle class ideal simply did not hold space for queerness within the gender binary, and as a result, needed a new category to even accommodate the idea of any deviations from traditional gender roles or heterosexual attraction.¹³⁹ Despite this apparent inability to fathom queerness, queerness did exist within the margins of popular culture. Bookstores and libraries did stock popular Queer literature — such

¹³⁵ Pochmara, *The Making of the New Negro*, 173.

¹³⁶ Ibid, 173.

¹³⁷ Ibid, 173.; Taboo in this context refers specifically sex between both heterosexual couples and Queer people, it also refers to sex workers and references to queerness.

¹³⁸ George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 227.

¹³⁹ Ibid, 48.

as *Strange Brother* (1931) and *The Well of Loneliness*, (1928) both written by white women — but these stores frequently “othered” these books and lumped them into the “colored section,” as a catch-all for anything unlike the “default” white-heteronormative middle class ideal. This practice transplanted the stigma that Queer novels carried onto Black novels, which already had a stigma among the white heteronormative mainstream because they were written by Black Americans, thus allowing bookstores to keep up with demand for popular “risqué and sex books” without tainting their own white, heteronormative image. Bookstores knew that Queer literature would sell — hence why they stocked it — but they also did not want their image to be associated with selling gay or “perverted” books. This further exemplifies how queerness was an open secret within the American public and mainstream popular culture; booksellers knew there was a demand for gay literature but did not want to openly cater to gay patrons.¹⁴⁰ The irony here is that bookstores commodified and profited from both queerness and blackness but did not want to be openly associated with the sale of these books, thus creating a hidden queer “space” within the “colored section” of bookstores. This phenomenon also speaks to the intersection of race and sexuality, as both were often “othered” together, even though they were not always explicitly related as well as the ways in which Queer people could be simultaneously both “seen” and “unseen.”

Conclusion

The New Negro ideal was inherently filled with contradictions. As time went on, its definition shifted to accommodate different ideas pertaining to the middle and working class. Many of its founding fathers came from an educated elite middle class, and much of the New

¹⁴⁰ Mumford, *Interzones*, 74.; Blair Niles, *Strange Brother* (New York: Liveright Publication, 1931).; Radclyffe Hall, *The Well of Loneliness* (United Kingdom: Jonathan Cape, 1928).

Negro imagery they promoted was centered around Victorian morals and ideas about gender and sexuality. While Du Bois and Locke marked the transitional period between shifting nineteenth and twentieth century social ideas, the younger generation of New Negroes that followed them pushed the envelope on acknowledging taboo ideas like sexual desire, sex work, homosexuality, and non-conformity to gender roles. This is not to say intellectuals like Du Bois and Locke were wrong in presenting an image of the New Negro as upright, middle class elites, or that their morals and ideas were strictly Victorian, but it is important to acknowledge that based on the writing and literature produced during this time, there is no one definition or idea of the New Negro. It is no secret that countless New Negroes were Queer — scholars have written a number of books on this subject — but it is important to acknowledge that gender identity and sexuality cannot be so simply separated from the individual. In a time when middle class standards were strictly governed by heteronormative performance and gender conformity, the act of even implying Queer sexual desires in literary subtexts was risky. In order to exist in a time when the public strictly policed sexual desire and gender, Queer people had to engage in a daily performance of heteronormativity. From feigning ignorance when picked up from a known Queer meeting place by police, to the heavily publicized Cullen-Du Bois wedding, to even disguising lesbian subtexts behind ideas of racial passing in literature, Queer New Negroes engaged in a form of “drag performance” to emulate a particular ideal. While Victorian ideas may have heavily influenced social attitudes in the early twentieth century, including the idea of the New Negro, working class efforts to challenge gender roles and freely express sexuality also contributed to this idea. Queerness fit into the idea of the New Negro, not just because many New Negroes happened to be Queer, but because ideas and perspectives of gender heavily influenced what the “ideal” New Negro should be. The fact that many New Negroes were Queer and produced New Negro imagery under the guise of promoting an inherently heterosexual

middle-class ideal in itself challenged the idea that the middle-class ideal is inherently heterosexual.

It is not enough to simply recognize that some New Negroes may have been Queer or wrote about Queer themes in their more controversial works. Scholarship on the New Negro Renaissance should recognize that, for many people, queerness was an inherent part of what it meant to be a New Negro. Queer New Negroes not only existed in a heteronormative society that violently policed same-sex desire and gender non-conformity, but they also stood in the face of the strictly heterosexual New Negro image sold by founders like Du Bois and Alain Locke. As scholars, it is important that we recognize not only the danger in openly living in this contradiction, but also that queerness is more than just a sexual preference. Rather, it is a critical identity that influences and informs one's worldview. Furthermore, the spaces Queer people created within the movement not only served as spaces for self-expression and entertainment, but also as spaces to cultivate creativity and ideas about new visions of what the New Negro could be. When we study gender, sexuality, and race it is important to view these as social constructs that are facets of identity, not just descriptors. It is impossible to look at a social and cultural movement without considering the role of gender, sexuality, and race, especially in a time when ideas of these social constructs were not very flexible or inclusive. Studying these identities is also important to how we conceptualize society today. These representations throughout history are also important to fully understanding the context, nuance, and sometimes contradictory nature of historical movements and social developments.

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