

## Queer Studies and the New Negro

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Abstract: Henry Louis Gates Jr. referred to the Harlem Renaissance as, “surely as gay as it was Black, not that it was exclusively either of these,” (NMAAHC). Repressed queer content is presented by many queer contributors to *The New Negro* anthology through fiction, poetry, drama, and essays on African American history by means of gender non-conformity and same-sex eroticism. I will argue that the element of queer consciousness is present in the anthology through a queer aesthetic, translation of queer authorship, and depictions of same-sex desire and gender non-conformity.

According to Henry Louis Gates Jr., the Harlem Renaissance was, “surely as gay as it was Black, not that it was exclusively either of these,” (NMAAHC). Queer history in relation to the Harlem Renaissance is often over-looked, despite the fact that Black queer artists were some of the most influential contributors to the cultural movement. Many Black queer writers and poets contributed to *The New Negro* anthology: Alain Locke, Richard Bruce Nugent, Countée Cullen, Claude McKay, and Langston Hughes. Although many Black queer writers of the Harlem Renaissance identified themselves gay, most of them did not publish overtly queer content in Alain Locke’s *The New Negro* anthology, a collection of African American art such as fiction, poetry, drama, essays, and music. In *The New Negro Aesthetic*, by Jeffrey Stewart, he claims, “art was one of the very few spaces in which Negroes, according to Locke, could be

completely and utterly themselves,” (Stewart *xxvi*). However, through the display of repressed queer content within the anthology, we can understand that Locke wanted Black creators to be “completely and utterly” themselves— unless it meant being gay. Locke avoids including direct queer content; but nonetheless, a queer aesthetic appears— passages celebrating gender non-conformity, same-sex eroticism, or transgressive spaces where societal boundaries can be crossed. The element of queer consciousness is present in the anthology through a queer aesthetic, translation of queer authorship, and depictions of same-sex desire and gender non-conformity.

Black queer people were forced to hide their homosexual identities during the Harlem Renaissance because they faced a double taboo and gay sexual relationships became illegal. According to “Something Changed: The Social and Legal Status of Homosexuality in America as Reported by the New York Times,” by Lauren Berard, the first gay rights organization: The Society for Human Rights, was founded in 1924 by Henry Gerber. In 1925, the vice president of the society, Al Meininger, was arrested for having sexual relations with another man. Soon after, the society’s president and secretary were also arrested; “guilty just by being homosexual,” (Berard). Queer content and representation were repressed as Black queer people were forced to hide their true identities in order for them to be accepted and respected by the white majority, and in order to keep themselves safe against prosecution. These deeply embedded feelings of queer shame in American culture are why lesbian, gay, and queer critical readings of literary works are so important to the discovery of otherwise forgotten queer writers in history. Stewart refers to African Americans during the Harlem Renaissance as, “people of reinvention,” (Stewart *xxvii*); but Black queer people were having to do more than just “reinvent” themselves; they had to adhere to the white masses and conform to the expectations of white America— which

emphasized heteronormativity. Having read Louis Tyson's *Critical Theory Today*, I was able to read Locke's *The New Negro* with a queer, lesbian, and gay critical approach. Pieces in the anthology may not be radically queer on the surface, yet still have a "homosexual dimension" to them, which may have been natural for queer writers at the time (Tyson). Despite having to mask their queer identities to the public, many authors' contributions to *The New Negro* were fundamentally queer and can be seen as so if read through a queer critical lens.

Richard Bruce Nugent, otherwise known as Bruce Nugent or Richard Bruce, contributed fiction pieces to *The New Negro* that hint at male same sex attraction. According to Stewart, "Locke was able to see that Harlem was an epoché— a transcendental space in the United States where the soul-numbing natural attitude of cultural racism and homophobia were suspended," (Stewart xxxiii), yet Locke chose to only publish repressed queer content in the anthology. Nugent's published piece in *The New Negro*, "Sahdji," only partially hints at queer relationships. This piece of fiction correlates with artwork done by Aaron Douglas, which encompasses a large black female figure surrounded by an assortment of geometric shapes such as pyramids and wavy rays of the sun, as well as three smaller female-esque figures. Nugent's story emphasizes black female beauty and Afro-centric culture on the surface, but the story also includes gay undertones between the male characters. These undertones can be seen as Nugent writes, "Numbo idolized Mrabo... Numbo was a young buck.... Would do anything to make Mrabo happy," (Nugent 113). The idolization of Mrabo shows Numbo's fascination and adoration with Mrabo. Nugent's literary style often uses ellipses to create a sense of content left unsaid within the story and to continue thoughts that would otherwise end with a period in standard sentence structure. Nugent's story continues to have a "homoerotic dimension" as the piece ends with the two young men, Mrabo and Numbo. At this point, Nugent writes, "Mrabo stood unflinching...

but Numbo, silly Numbo had made an old.. Old man of Mrabo,” (Nugent 114). After Sahdji reclaims her sexuality and decides her own fate, Mrabo is left without her, and the only other character left is Numbo. Nugent’s contribution of fiction hints at same-sex attraction and has a homosexual dimension.

The gayness in Nugent’s writing is not always as elusive as it was in pieces such as “Sahdji,” some of Nugent’s far queerer works were not, however, published in *The New Negro*. By comparing his far queerer contributions to his contributions in *The New Negro*, the reader can see Alain Locke’s limitations when it came to including overtly queer content in the anthology. In 1926, *Fire!! Magazine* was created by Wallace Thurman in response to the restrictions placed on Black writers by promoters of racial uplift (Clark). One of the most renowned writers of this magazine was Langston Hughes, who explained the magazine’s purpose as, “to express ourselves freely and independently—without interference from old heads, white or Negro,” (Clark). Unlike other queer writers of the Harlem Renaissance who remained closeted, Stewart claims, “the New Negro embraced Richard Bruce Nugent not only as a person but as a writer of same sex stream-of-consciousness interracial love poems like ‘Smoke, Lilies and Jade,’” (Stewart xxxiii). The acceptance of Nugent’s gay writing may be what prompted him to be less elusive to same sex attraction in his writing, and the reason he chose to publish his work in Thurman’s experimental periodical. Nugent’s piece, “Smoke, Lilies, and Jade,” was published in the first and only edition of *Fire!! Magazine*. Nugent, under the name “Richard Bruce,” writes about a man named Alex who can best be described as bisexual. Alex is a poor Black artist who is discovering his sexuality and fascination with another man, who he calls “Beauty.” In his piece, Nugent writes, “when he looked at Beauty’s lips... I would kiss your lips... he would like to kiss Beauty’s lips... Alex flushed warm... with shame... or was it shame,” (Nugent 37). In

this passage, Nugent displays his complex writing style as he switches between omniscient narration and first-person narration, while also continuing his signature style using ellipses. He uses the ellipses in this case to exhibit the anxiety that goes along with discovering one's sexuality. The tension builds between Alex and Beauty as Alex becomes more and more fixated on the idea of kissing Beauty. Nugent's language here is significant because he, as a man, passionately describes male beauty. The repetition of "lips" and lips imagery is an example of an author's use of language to describe same sex attraction and eroticism. The figurative language Nugent uses in this passage such as, "Alex flushed warm," describes Alex blushing at the thought of kissing this man and he goes on to explain his character's feelings of shame at the thought. The feeling of shame is often associated with homosexuality because anything outside of the heterosexual norms is often deemed shameful in Western culture. This shame is part of internalized homophobia, experienced by many homosexual identifying people, and can be described as, "the gay person's direction of negative social attitudes toward the self," and, "[can be] further characterized by an intrapsychic conflict between experiences of same-sex affection or desire and feeling a need to be heterosexual," (Frost, Meyer). A study done by scholars from the National Library of Medicine states that people experiencing internalized homophobia are more prone to have depressive symptoms and, in some extremes, internalized homophobia can lead to the rejection of one's sexual orientation (Frost, Meyer). Nugent's character's feelings of shame are critical to understanding the harmful conventions intertwined in American culture.

Countée Cullen remained closeted in the 1920s, but his literature indefinitely contains gay undertones, which may have been his poetic escape from the homophobic injustices that became his reality. Stewart suggests that writers such as Countée Cullen and Langston Hughes remained closeted because of, "the homophobia of Black progressive circles," (Stewart *xxxiii*).

However, the homophobic oppression they faced in America stemmed long before Black progressives. Cullen was raised by his grandmother until she passed away; he then went to live with Reverend Frederick Asbury Cullen and his wife, Carolyn, in Harlem (Tulane). Raised in a religious household, Cullen was never able to embrace his queer identity and live a life as an openly gay man. One essay in *The New Negro*, titled “The Negro Digs Up His Past” by Arthur A. Schomburg, explains, “The bigotry of civilization which is the taproot of intellectual prejudice begins far back and must be corrected at its source,” (Schomburg 237). Therefore, the prejudices Cullen faced for being Black, existed as part of a far bigger problem of societal bigotry. According to the National Museum of African American History & Culture, “[Cullen] often focused on racial ideas and discrimination, Cullen was never considered radical and was often criticized by the African American community for being too ‘safe,’” (NMAAHC). However, I would argue many of his poetic contributions in *The New Negro* contain gay undertones, oppositions to the Black church, and reference to alcohol consumption, which would all be considered radical in the ‘20s.

Countée Cullen’s poems in *The New Negro* anthology contain gay undertones and he often associates queerness with transgressive spaces. Most of Cullen’s writings cultivate a queer aesthetic with the depiction of transgression and transgressive spaces— common spaces where gay or queer identifying people got together and engaged themselves in illegal or otherwise taboo, activities: consuming alcohol, dirty dancing, same-sex relations, or interracial dancing. In *The New Negro Aesthetic*, Jeffrey Stewart writes, “The New Negro aesthetic had a particular relation to space and a relationship to sexuality, representing the emergence of a Black Queer Aesthetic from the Harlem drag queen balls to the intimate spaces in public places that Black gays and lesbians curated in clubs like Smalls Paradise in Harlem,” (Stewart). The depiction of

transgressive spaces can be found throughout the anthology where a gay aesthetic appears. The New Negro aesthetic urged writers to find new language and explore their sexual identity. For example, Cullen's poem "Harlem Wine," incorporates language of rebellion with reference to nightclubs, dirty dancing, and illegal alcohol consumption during the prohibition. Cullen's poem has an alternate end-rhyme, meaning that every other line in his poem rhymes. In the final stanza of Cullen's "Harlem Wine," he writes, "So it can woo an artful flute / With loose, elastic lips, / Its measurement of joy compute / With blithe, elastic hips," (Cullen 9-12). In this stanza, we see language of rebellion with an alternate end-rhyme scheme, as Cullen describes promiscuous topics: dirty dancing and sexual pleasure. The gay undertones of this poem can be seen in the lines, "So it can woo an artful flute / With loose, elastic lips," (Cullen 9-10), as these lines are presumably an allusion to oral sex and Pan, the Greek God of lust. The "flute" is a symbol in Greek mythology, deriving from the instrument played by the satyr, known today as "Pan's flute." According to an article titled, "Democracy Limited: The Politics of Respectability," the author explains respectability politics as, "the way that people attempting to make social change present their demands in a way that are acceptable to the dominant standards in their society," (Nuñez-Franklin). Cullen adheres to respectability politics by presenting the promiscuity of dirty dancing, homoeroticism, and sexual propriety as a direct result of alcohol consumption. His final line of the poem reads, "With blithe, ecstatic hips," (Cullen 12); Cullen's diction here, specifically the use of "blithe", adheres to the social guidelines dictating acceptable behavior—suggesting that dancing in such a way is improper. He associates wine consumption with music and dirty dancing (in the nightclub scene), thus radically supporting the notion that consuming alcohol results in the crossing of heterosexual boundaries and the blurring of color lines. I believe Cullen published this poem to express his queer identity and the blurring of color lines,

while simultaneously complying with respectability politics. Queer expression is often associated in the text with queer aesthetic spaces, where transgression was normalized.

Countée Cullen's poetic contribution to *The New Negro*: "She of the Dancing Feet Sings," was a direct attack on the Black church, and possibly his response to the outwardly homophobic rhetoric of the Black church he was brought up in. Cullen's poem contains elliptical queer references, as well as prompt oppositions to religion. In the first stanza of his poem, Cullen uses speech acts to present a rhetorical question, as he writes, "And what would I do in heaven, pray, / Me with my dancing feet, / And limbs like apple boughs that sway / When the gusty rain winds beat?" (Cullen 1-4). Here, Cullen is rhetorically asking: How do I reconcile a Black religious tradition? Questioning religion in such a way is often associated with queerness because of the outward religious opposition to homosexuality. Cullen continues to incorporate alternate end-rhymes in this poem as he rhetorically questions Black religious tradition. In the second stanza, Cullen writes, "And how would I thrive in a perfect place / Where dancing would be sin, / With not a man to love my face, / Nor an arm to hold me in?" (Cullen 5-8). I believe Cullen's female narrative voice is deliberate within this poem, as a directly queer narrative voice would be seen as overtly radical and presumably would have not been accepted by Locke to be published within the anthology. However, a gay critic may still suggest reading the poem with queer intention, seeing as though Cullen himself may have been writing about his own absence of male attention and affection. I argue that Cullen's religious upbringing was the antecedent scenario that provoked him to write a poem opposing the Black church. In the final stanza, Cullen writes, "The wistful angels down in hell / Will smile to see my face, / And understand, because they fell / From that all-perfect place," (Cullen 13-16). This final stanza suggests Cullen's willingness to go to Hell, as he deliberately turns his back on the church. This stanza



mocks the church and suggests that it is better to be a king in Hell, than a servant in Heaven. A queer reading of this poem supports Cullen's religious oppositions as a product of the disapproval of his sexuality by the Black church.

The work of historically heterosexual writers in *The New Negro* also provoked a queer aesthetic through their display of transgressive sexuality and the breaking of societal gender norms. In his book, Stewart writes, "race was but one defining characteristic, along with class, gender, and sexual orientation," (Stewart *xliii*). Beyond race, African Americans were defined by their class, gender, and sexuality. Stewart continues, "although the famously closeted Alain Locke never mentioned sexuality in his answers to Du Bois and other critics," (Stewart *xlii*). Locke suppresses queer content in his anthology, while simultaneously publishing pieces that display transgressive sexuality and reversed gender norms. Willis Richardson's contribution to *The New Negro* anthology, incorporated gender non-conformity and female empowerment. At the end of the play, the mother of the story, Jane, is overcome with a sense of empowerment as she concurrently embodies the New Negro Woman. Jane gives Ben Carter the chance to pay for the harm he has caused her family, by requesting that he pay for her two youngest children's education. This plea would be considered an embodiment of the New Negro Woman because of its efforts towards better education. Trouble ensues and Ben Carter refuses to comply with Jane's request. Richardson then concludes with an enraged Jane, "She looks for the gun— picks it up— sits down at centre table— starts to reload it— fumbles the cartridges— and then suddenly as she says 'Oh Lawd,' puts them in her bosom again," (Richardson 195). Here, we are left with a phallic symbol (the gun), and Richardson's use of black vernacular to depict Jane's transgressive response. Through a display of matriarchal power and reversed gender norms, Richardson contributes to the queer aesthetic within the anthology.

The depiction of female empowerment and transgressive sexuality continues throughout the text as other historically heterosexual writers, such as Jean Toomer, contribute to *The New Negro*'s queer aesthetic. Stewart categorizes Toomer's writing as he writes, "The younger Negro artists as modernists have the same slant and interest, as is unmistakably shown by Jean Toomer's *Cane*," (Stewart 28). Toomer's similarities to other Negro artists emerge beyond "slant" and "interest," and rather, participate in the much more prominent queer aesthetic. Toomer's excerpt from *Cane*, "Carma," begins, "Carma, in overalls, and strong as any man," (Toomer 96). Toomer's display of female empowerment and gender non-conformity within the text begin right away— a powerful statement, claiming his female character's strength to be equal to that of a man. The story continues with transgressive sexuality, affairs, and once again displays a woman holding a phallic firearm. The work of these contributing authors was consciously transgressive, and they voluntarily took part in cultivating the queer aesthetic within *The New Negro*. Stewart claims, "In 1923 from a relatively low plateau of previous problem fiction, Jean Toomer's *Cane* rose to unprecedented artistic heights," (Stewart 400). Locke was aware of Toomer's success with *Cane*, despite its transgressive approach. The pieces Locke decided to publish were chosen methodically and with purpose. Stewart continues, claiming that *Cane*, "soared above the plane of propaganda," (Stewart 400). Therefore, Locke was aware of *Cane*'s radical conception, and nevertheless, he included an excerpt that contributes to *The New Negro*'s queer aesthetic through transgressive sexuality and gender non-conformity.

Locke's decision to suppress overtly queer content in *The New Negro* anthology for white appeasement, nevertheless failed to prevent a queer aesthetic from emerging. Beyond race, Black people in America were forced to characterize themselves and subject themselves to heteronormativity to appeal to white America as they worked to reinvent their race as

intellectuals and natural born creatives. At the start of *The New Negro* anthology, William Stanley Braithwaite, writes, “From his very beginning in this country the Negro has been, without the formal recognition of literature and art, creative,” (Braithwaite 29). Therefore, African Americans have always been creative, but now their artistic and intellectual endeavors will be appreciated and respected by the rest of America. Queer history is a part of Harlem Renaissance history, as many of the period’s most famous writers were historically homosexual or gender non-conforming. The queerness of the Harlem Renaissance cannot be overlooked when exploring its history because sexuality and gender were fundamentally important to the identities of Black queer writers of the New Negro movement.

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