

Author



Women-Loving Women: Queering Black Urban Space during the Harlem Renaissance

Samantha C. Tenorio

Women's Studies

Being interested in matters of intersectionality, Samantha Tenorio wanted to pursue research that looked at the intersectional identities of the Harlem Renaissance's women-loving women. With the help of Professor Scheper, she was able to produce a project that illustrated the benefits of looking at sites and forms of cultural production of the Harlem Renaissance through a queer lens, in order to see how certain transgressive identities, such as that of the women-loving women were informed. Samantha is working towards her Ph.D. in African American Studies at Northwestern University.

Abstract

The experience of black “women-loving women” during the Harlem Renaissance is directly influenced by intersectional identity, or their positioning in the intertwined social hierarchies of race, gender, class, and sexual orientation. Considering contemporary terms like lesbian and bisexual, it is difficult to define the sexual identity of many famous black women of the early twentieth century, such as Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Bessie Jackson. However, their work both on and off the stage contributes to the construction of Harlem Renaissance identities that transgress both racial and sexual conventions. At a time of racial segregation, but also of ideologies of uplift within the black community, social spaces existed in Harlem where sexual “deviance” and race-mixing could be articulated and seen explicitly. Using song lyrics, literature, and scholarly work on social and cultural spaces of the time period from 1919 to 1939, this paper speaks to the benefit of a queer lens as it analyzes how certain forms and sites of cultural production, specifically the blues, the cabaret, and literature, informed the formation of these transgressive identities.

Faculty Mentor



Tenorio's research focuses on identity formations and counterpublic spaces in the early 20th century U.S. and engages with a recent body of scholarship on the Harlem Renaissance that foregrounds race, sexuality, and performance studies. Using Black Queer Studies frameworks, she examines how power operates in social institutions and looks at the production of “counterpublic” spheres, analyzing “how certain forms and sites of cultural production, specifically the blues, the cabaret, and literature helped to construct transgressive identities.” She was interested in how archives are contested domains for the repository of history and memory. Her analysis of these Harlem spaces and cultural practices revealed how queer Black females performed counterdiscourses that challenged the hegemonic racialization and gendering of cultural and social spaces.

Jeanne A. Scheper

School of Humanities

Key Terms

- ◆ Blues
- ◆ Cabaret
- ◆ Harlem Renaissance
- ◆ Intersectional Identity
- ◆ Literature
- ◆ Queer Lens
- ◆ Women-Loving Women

Introduction

During the Harlem Renaissance (1919–1939), “woman-loving woman” was a term used solely by and for women within the black community. The term was used by Ruth Ellis to describe women who engaged in same-sex sexual relations (Welbon 1999). It implied a particular intersectional identity¹ of race, gender, sexuality, and often class, due to the systemic impact of racism that produced wealth inequality, wherein the woman-loving woman’s identity as a black, often working class, woman of non-normative sexuality located her at the lowest position of almost all social hierarchies in the United States. As such, each layer of the woman-loving woman’s intersectional identity was and is highly contested within the nation’s societal structures.

History informed the ways in which this contested identity was able to exist during the Harlem Renaissance. Slavery and its legacy, emancipation, the institution of Jim Crow segregation, and the subsequent Great Migration are all historical moments that affected the ways in which women-loving women formed social spaces, in both the public and private sphere, or operated within those that already existed. Scholars have documented the existence during the Harlem Renaissance of gay and lesbian spaces such as drag balls, rent parties, buffet flats, and speakeasies, to apply modern labels anachronistically. The documentation of gay and lesbian spaces within this period is important to the history of black women, the black community as a whole, as well as to that of the Harlem Renaissance, and remains in need of further study.

The goal of this paper is not to document specific instances of anachronistic lesbian experiences in the history of the Harlem Renaissance. I offer a queer perspective on the social and cultural spaces of the Harlem Renaissance (here I use “queer” to refer to identities of deviance and transgression of the socially constructed normative that is set forth by the mainstream). I examine the ways in which these sites and forms of cultural production resist both white supremacy and black uplift ideology while at the same time providing a space for, and even fostering, the transgression of racial and sexual norms. It can be said that these new spaces even allowed for the expression of lesbian sensibilities. I focus specifically on the ways in which the blues, the cabaret, and literature articulated these transgressions and aided the formation of new identities, such as that of women-loving women.

Before I analyze these three specific sites and forms of cultural production, I contextualize this research in relation to queer theory as a whole, and to the marginalization of black queer women’s experiences in particular. I then look at the blues as a cultural space wherein black women and men’s newly achieved sexual freedom could be expressed. Blues artists and audiences felt it was productive to express nonnormative ideas and identities, including that of the bulldagger, a term used to describe a masculine women-loving woman.

Identities also extended beyond the blatantly queer, and included that of the working-class woman of color, non-normative in the sense that she was a counter to the middle-class white woman who was often idealized in mainstream music of the time. I then examine the cabaret, which as a site, rather than a form, of cultural production like the blues, was a social space where “criminal intimacies”² took place and thus allowed for sexual “deviance” and race-mixing to be articulated and seen explicitly. Specifically, it is the cabaret’s afterhours that allowed these criminal intimacies, as it defied, after closing time, inherently, or consequently, municipal and moral law.

Finally, I show how literature illustrates the ways in which race and the cultural processes of racialization³ are inextricably bound to questions of sexuality and sexual identity. For during the Harlem Renaissance, black women’s literature created a space in which black women writers could combat socially and culturally constructed stereotypes, articulate nonnormative desires and queer attitudes, and provide authentic stories of black men and women. As I demonstrate in the following sections, all three of these forms and sites of cultural production provide insight into the important history of women-loving women.

Challenging Queer Theory

Within the interdependence of mutual (nondominant) differences lies that security which enables us to descend into the chaos of knowledge and return with true visions of our future, along with the concomitant power to effect those changes which can bring the future into being.
Audre Lorde (2007: 111–12)

2. Shane Vogel defines this term in his 2009 book, citing Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, as “relations and relational narratives that are not legible or recognized as valid by dominant discourses and social institutions.” He goes on to write that “they offer a horizon of possibility for social and sexual contacts that were transient, contingent, non-normative, and emergent.”

3. I use this term in reference to the 1994 work of Michael Omi and Howard Winant who define racialization as an ideological process and “the extension of racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified relationship, social practice or group.

1. The use of the term intersectional identity comes from Kimberlé Crenshaw’s concept of intersectionality (1991).

Queerness in Theory

In her essay “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?,” scholar Cathy J. Cohen states that “at the intersection of oppression and resistance lies the radical potential of queerness to challenge and bring together all those deemed marginal and all those committed to liberatory politics” (Cohen 2005: 22). In theory, queerness and the practice of queer politics allow for the creation of a space in opposition to dominant norms—a space where transformational political work can begin—as the above quote poignantly demonstrates.

In queer theory, the sexual subject is understood to be “constructed and contained by multiple practices of categorization and regulation that systematically marginalize and oppress those subjects thereby defined as deviant and ‘other’” (ibid. 23). Thus, it should seem apparent that the theoretical conceptualizations of queerness are crucial for those that sit on the outskirts and have multiple layers to their identity as they cannot be served or recognized through traditional single-identity-based politics. However, in most practical applications of queerness and queer politics, such as the propagation of queer issues, the entire community is instructed to focus solely on the single shared identity of queerness (understood here to refer only to “deviant” sexuality or transgender identity) and put aside all other layers of their identity, such as race, class and gender. This is in direct opposition to what Cohen (2005) determines the sexual subject under queer theory to be—constructed by multiple practices of categorization. Under Cohen’s definition, the contemporary identity of queer black women, or the historically located identity of women-loving women, are prime examples of queer theory’s sexual subject. Yet, in current queer politics, the stance of the gay white man is the position most often assumed and unmarked.

Privilege in Practice

Often, the idea of privilege is discussed in terms of the white heterosexual man who “lives on the white side of race, the male side of gender, and the straight side of sexual orientation” which makes him, in this sense, the norm or the point of reference to which all others are compared (Carbado 2005: 192). In his work, scholar Devon W. Carbado discusses the experience of those on the other side of race, gender, or sexual orientation and how we must deal with what he calls negative identity signification, wherein we simultaneously live with as well as contest our nonnormativity, where our identities often or always have negative social meanings (ibid. 193). He maintains that systems of social identity are almost always bi-directional, in that there always exists a beneficiary and a victim of every identity

(ibid. 194). However, as Barbara Flagg states in her work, “to be white is to not think about it”; because whiteness is the racial point of reference, the norm, white people are able to “relegate their own specificity to the realm of the subconscious” (Flagg 1994: 953, 963). In other words, the normative individual remains unconscious of this privilege, rarely acknowledging their normativity—because they do not have to.

According to Carbado⁴, this privilege can manifest itself in two ways. The first is what he describes as “an invisible package of unearned assets that [they] can count on cashing in each day” and the second is those disadvantages that are not experienced because of their position in the social hierarchy (Carbado 2005: 195). What is repeatedly forgotten or disregarded within the queer community is difference; it is difficult for many within the queer community to recognize their privilege because they are often on the non-receiving end of the benefits of privilege. A community based on identity politics, the queer community often disregards privilege and makes claims to homogeneity. Thus those with multilayered marginalized social identities frequently have difficulty finding a place within the larger queer community, which most often primarily concerns itself with the white or white male experience, and often ascribes to ideologies of what Lisa Duggan calls homonormativity, the appropriation of heteronormative ideals and constructs into LGBT culture and individual identity (Duggan 2004: 50). This serves to fragment LGBT communities into hierarchies of worthiness, where people within the community that come the closest to mimicking heteronormative standards of gender identity, as well as racial and class identity, are deemed most worthy of receiving rights.

Those with multilayered marginalized social identities are unable to locate themselves within the community because “as homonormative formations achieve cultural normativity by appealing to liberal capital’s regimes of visibility, the immigrant, the poor, and the person of color suffer under the state’s apparatuses—apparatuses that render them cultural antitheses of a stable and healthy social order” (Ferguson 2005: 65).

Queer Theory in my Research

The *Black Queer Studies* reader came out of a conference held in North Carolina in 2000⁵ in response to what was considered a disregard for the black experience in queer

4. Though Carbado discusses these two categories in relation to male gender privilege, I consider it to extend to all other social identities and realms of privilege.

5. The Black Queer Studies in the Millennium conference is referenced in the introduction of the Black Queer Studies reader. Please reference this for more information.

theory, as well as that the field of African American studies has acknowledged the presence of black queers and their experience but has yet to step up to the challenge of dislodging “the field’s profoundly heteronormative character” (Harper 2005: 113). I can only speak to my own experience when I say that I have found a lack of regard for black issues within queer theory and a marginalization of black queers within the field of African American studies that manifests itself in the lack of scholarship within the field that considers the queer experience. The composition of the *Black Queer Studies* reader attests to the fact that a space has been carved out for black queer issues, but there is still a call for more research—a need for work that speaks to the intersection of race and sexuality. Research concerning the history of queer black women is crucial to both fields as it illustrates that questions of race are inextricably bound to those of sexuality—that they are in no way mutually exclusive. The following sections show how race and sexuality are intertwined and how this was constantly articulated in the blues, the cabaret, and literature—crucial sites and forms of cultural production during the Harlem Renaissance.

The Blues: Articulating a Newfound Freedom

Though emancipation occurred in 1865 with the passing of the 13th Amendment, many black women and men could not express this freedom economically. Their economic status in America had not undergone any radical change; they were still impoverished and victims of institutional racism, and they were still largely denied the economic and political components of freedom (Davis 1999: 10). Sexuality, and sexual relationships, was one of the most tangible areas for black women and men in which “emancipation was acted upon and its meanings were expressed” after freeing themselves from slavery (ibid. 4). Sexuality was one of the few domains in which black people could do as they wished; radical change had expressed itself in the form of their personal relationships. As scholar Angela Y. Davis states, it was “the first time in the history of the African presence in North America [in which] masses of black women and men were in a position to make autonomous decisions regarding the sexual partnerships into which they entered” (Davis 1999: 4). Instead of the right to vote or entrance into the economic sphere demonstrating the divide between life before and after emancipation, it was the sovereignty black women and men claimed in their sexual matters that illustrated freedom. The blues, especially in contrast to the music produced by black slaves in America, allowed for the expression of individual emotional needs and thereby illustrated black women and men’s newly achieved sexual

freedom. It comes as no surprise that the blues became an important cultural space for the black community.

Slave Music

Slave music was a collective music, which “centered on a collective desire for an end to the system that enslaved them” (Davis 1999: 4). In discussing singing and dancing among slaves, Frederick Douglass wrote that, “Slaves sing most when they are unhappy. The songs of the slave represent the sorrows of his heart...At least, such is my experience” (Douglass 1960: 38). Douglass is stating this in contention with the idea that slave music is evidence of their contentment and happiness under the institution of slavery, but his statement also illustrates the collective and often assumed to be categorically male discourse of this musical form.

Though slave music illustrated intense emotions and desires, sexual desire was rarely found in this musical form, which was in part due to the slave system’s economic management of procreation, which “did not tolerate and often severely punished the public exhibition of self-initiated sexual relationships” (Davis 1999: 4). This is not to say that sexuality was wholly absent from the slave narrative but that in their collective nature, the musical forms under slavery could not adequately express the nature of black sexuality after emancipation—that of the individual.

The Blues

In comparison to slave music, the blues, the predominant post-slavery African-American musical form, offered a space to many newly free black women and men to express their sexual desires much more individually. In other words, the blues “articulated a new valuation of individual emotional needs and desires” that was not present in slave music and “was aesthetic evidence of new psychological realities within the black population” (Davis 1999: 5). The first of these realities was marking the black woman or man as an individual which was illustrated by way of most blues music being performed by one singer with the accompaniment of a band. The blues also ushered in a popular culture of performance where distinct lines were drawn between performer and audience, one vastly different from the culture of slave music, which called for one collective voice. Interestingly, the performer that emerged in the post-slavery musical form was predominantly a female figure. Although men’s blues did indeed mention sexual love, “there was an even more pronounced emphasis on love and sexuality” in women’s blues (Davis 1999:11).

Unlike religious and secular slave music, the blues illustrated sexuality as a tangible expression of freedom, which poi-

gnantly defined its secularity (Davis 1999: 8). Blues music, though secular, did not inhabit the same space as mainstream popular music. In actuality, the discussion of sexual love in women's blues was much different than the romantic love discussed in mainstream music, with the former often blatantly contradicting the latter. For one, the woman often discussed in mainstream music was of the white middle-class and was thereby generally relegated to the domestic sphere, but was meant to apply to women from all racial and socioeconomic backgrounds (Davis 1999: 10). Such an assertion established a disconnect between the social expectations being discussed in mainstream popular music and the social realities of many black women's lives. The blues offered a distinct perspective on the realities of black working-class women of the post-slavery period.

In women's blues the protagonists were seldom wives and almost never mothers, not because the blues rejected motherhood but because "the blues woman found the mainstream cult of motherhood irrelevant to the realities of their lives" (Davis 1999: 13). Instead, the women depicted as protagonists in women's blues were independent and "free of the domestic orthodoxy of the prevailing representations of womanhood through which female subjects of the era were constructed" (Davis 1999: 13). The blues was thus able to present itself as a space in which the authentic stories of working-class black women could be told. However, the blues went beyond simply functioning as a space for narrative; it provided a space for community building for working-class black women. First and foremost, as audience members and performers alike, black women were able to structure a working-class model of womanhood through the blues (Davis 1999: 46). What was most powerful about this structure was that it was ideologically independent of the middle-class model of "true womanhood."⁶ This is not to say that the middle-class ideology was wholly absent from the blues but that working-class women, with their own ideology in hand, had established a relation to the middle class, sometimes affirming but also deviating from it whenever they saw fit.

This deviation is a reflection of the blues' articulation of non-normative identities. Though not necessarily queer in terms of sexuality or sexual orientation, the blues can be understood as presenting a queer perspective inasmuch as it promotes women's independence and autonomy as a new womanhood. The lyrics of the blues provide a glimpse into this autonomy but also illustrate women's complexity, moving between the ideals of the middle class and the reali-

ties of the working class. Blues artists like Gertrude "Ma" Rainey and Bessie Smith often sing of a woman who has sexual agency and is not afraid to stand up to men, but more importantly, is not afraid to stand up to the middle-class ideology of what it means to be a "true woman."

A Safe Haven: Women-Loving Women on Stage

The entertainment world offered a special social opportunity for women-loving women because they could capitalize on their otherness to boost popularity and spark interest, as "woman loving" was often seen as sexy and bold. For women-loving women, whose social options were more limited due to their doubly-marginalized state than those of their male counterparts, the support offered by the black entertainment world was especially important (Garber 1989). By entering the show business life, many women-loving women were able to earn a good income, limit their social contact with men, and move within a predominantly female social world, largely escaping the generally heteronormative world. Such famous blues singers of the time like Bessie Smith, Gertrude 'Ma' Rainey, Gladys Bentley, and Alberta Hunter purposefully seemed to present the image of themselves as bisexual, or purveyors of same-sex female relationships, in order to spark the interest of their audience. Though this image may have been a ploy they used to protect themselves from discrimination, the interest it generated among audiences cannot be ignored. Though bisexuality was seen as provocative or sexy by audiences, there is also evidence suggesting that many preferred to identify publicly as bisexual rather than strictly women-loving, as the former gave the impression of being adventurous whereas the latter was often perceived as a disease (Faderman 1992: 74–5).

Though these famous blues singers' public relationships with women, as well as the explicit nature of their songs, caused many to question their sexuality, it was the way in which their visibility and articulation of queer desires informed the creation of new nonnormative identities that allowed for a queer reading of their work and their personhood. Many of the songs sung by these famous women had lyrics that were inundated with both coded language and explicit references; one famous example is Ma Rainey's 1929 "Prove it on Me Blues" in which she almost explicitly announces her love for women:

It's true I wear a collar and a tie,
 Makes the wind blow all the while
 Don't you say I do it, ain't nobody caught me
 You sure got to prove it on me.
 Say I do it, ain't nobody caught me

6. This term is used by Angela Davis but also dates back to Barbara Welter's essay "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820–1860"

Sure got to prove it on me.
 I went out last night with a crowd of my friends,
 They must've been women, 'cause I don't like no
 men.
 Wear my clothes just like a fan
 Talk to the gals just like any old man
 (A. Davis 1999)

Often referred to as a song of resistance, the song features a women-loving woman character, who is declaring her sexual interest in women while challenging broader society to “prove it on” her. Here, Rainey declares her independence from the middle-class ideology of “true womanhood” while simultaneously presenting a challenge to broader society that blatantly questions authority. Rainey is explicit in her description of women-loving, but it is the challenge that is important, as it illustrates how the blues often declared sexual freedom as a form of resistance. Furthermore, it is not just the character’s sexual interest in women that marks this song as queer but the way in which her appearance is described as masculine, and therefore deviating from binary gender expectations. The narrator mentions her appearance, which visibly marks her transgression and allows for her resistance to be seen explicitly. Therefore it is not only her nonnormative sexual desire, but her nonnormative gender expression that markedly challenges societal standards and authority.

Similarly, the use of coded language and explicit references in the song “B.D. Women’s Blues,” (1935) sung by Lucille Bogan, also known as Bessie Jackson, illustrates how the blues articulated nonnormative desires. Though the meaning of “B.D. women” could be overlooked, those that listened closely could ascertain the implication if they paid attention⁷ to the lyrics:

Comin’ a time, B.D. women ain’t gonna need
 no men
 Comin’ a time, B.D. women ain’t gonna do need
 no men
 Oh they way treat us is a lowdown and dirty sin
 B.D. women, you sure can’t understand
 B.D. women, you sure can’t understand
 They got a head like a sweet angel and they walk
 just like a natural man

The “B.D. woman” discussed in this song refers to a “bulldyke” or “bulldagger,” which is a masculine women-loving woman, similar to the character described in “Prove it on Me Blues,” who is often distinguished by her masculine clothing, mannerisms, and general attitude. Though it does not discuss visible markers, this song references a distinct queer identity through the use of coded language. However, it is not a nonnormative desire that is articulated here per se, instead it is the B.D. women’s non-normative identity. The line “B.D. women ain’t gonna need no men” describes the deviation from normativity that is expressed by way of a separation from men. This line does not simply imply a separation from men, but also implies a future departure from male-dominated structures of heteronormativity that saturate the U.S. However, the B.D. woman is not only defined by her disregard for men but also by her likeness to a “natural man.” She is defined in direct relation to men. This song therefore illustrates a queer perspective in that it implies a liberatory politics but it also articulates a queering of gender.

Aside from the similar queer attitudes and desires depicted throughout these two songs, there is also a comparable sense of pride and heroism. In “Prove it on Me Blues,” though the narrator’s “appearance” is unorthodox, which allows the audience to conjure images of otherness; it is obvious that as she invites confrontation, she is an outlaw, one whom Faderman deems a “culture hero in an oppressed community” (Faderman 1992: 77). Similarly, in “B.D. Women’s Blues,” the tone is one of uplift, wherein the singer looks forward to a time in which no men will be needed and implies a sense of pride in a women-loving woman’s competence as she deems a B.D. woman to be just as capable as her male counterpart.

Such depictions of pride and cultural heroism could be considered manifestations of the tolerance for women-loving within the music industry, and within Harlem as a whole. More importantly, these examples of the blues speak to a challenge being brought to bear on structures of normativity. Furthermore, it was not so much that these songs may have “outed” women like Ma Rainey and Lucille Bogan but that these women, through their music, challenged constructions of womanhood and articulated transgressions of racial and sexual norms that allowed for the average female listener to identify with this newly constructed identity. The following section shows how the work of blues women like Ma Rainey and Lucille Bogan on the cabaret stage shared in the articulation of queer attitudes and gender play, which was crucial to the cabaret’s success as a site of cultural production that fostered varied racial and sexual subjectivities.

7. However, Faderman suggests the listener “took whatever her or she wanted out of the songs. To the heterosexual male they were provocative. To the potentially bisexual female they were suggestive and encouraging. To the lesbian they could be affirming” (Faderman 1992: 78).

The Cabaret: Queering Time and Space

As a space where the divisions between audience and artist were blurred and race-mixing could occur, the cabaret allowed contact between groups that were hitherto divided. The cabaret, as a site of cultural production, queered time and space by extending beyond normative spatial and temporal boundaries. Spatially, the cabaret allowed for the mixing of what normative structures of performance and policed segregation would define as distinct groups. This allowed space to be queered by way of the fluidity and movement that occurred between distinct worlds of artist and audience, of black and white. Temporally, by staying open after closing time, the afterhours club reorganized the framework of time sanctioned by the state (Vogel 2009: 112).

In moving from operating legally to illegally, the afterhours cabaret offered patrons a new system of time wherein they were able to extend beyond what Vogel calls “sanctioned possibilities for sociality” (ibid. 112). For its patrons, the afterhours of the cabaret signaled forms of racial and sexual congregation that functioned against normalizing social relations, which were only possible due to the cabaret’s queering of both time and space. Furthermore, as deviant expression was encouraged by the late-night milieu and the consumption of alcohol (Vogel 2009: 54), the cabaret sought to confound narratives of racial and sexual uplift. Race-mixing, class-mixing, and the subsequent gender play, which all took place in the queered spatial and temporal boundaries of the cabaret, stood in direct opposition to uplift ideology while simultaneously resisting white oppression. Thus, an entire school of thought, which sought to present an alternative to—a critique of—the more popularly respected uplift ideology of the time, chose for its namesake this important site of cultural production.

Cabaret as Counterpublic and the Temporality of Afterhours

In his work *Publics and Counterpublics*, Michael Warner defines counterpublics as “being structured by alternative dispositions or protocols, making different assumptions about what can be said or what goes without saying” and that a counterpublic is at some level aware of its subordinate status to the public (Warner 2002: 56). In its deconstruction of spatial boundaries, as well as its queered temporality, the cabaret can be defined as a counterpublic, offering those who frequented it an alternative to public norms and conventions, in defiance of the state and its hegemonic structures. The cabaret reorganized divisions in space, which allowed art-

ist and audience to intermingle among each other, thereby altering normative structures of performance, and fostering race-mixing in direct defiance of segregation.

While queering space, the cabaret simultaneously queered time through its operation in the temporality of afterhours. In its afterhours operation, the cabaret became inherently defiant of municipal and moral law that sought to regulate the “questionable morality of the lower classes” that the cabaret represented (Vogel 2009: 56). This regulation of time was extremely important to the state as both familial reproduction and capitalist productivity were constituted and maintained by way of the normative temporal order (ibid. 112). The importance attached to time is therefore crucial to understanding the fact that the cabaret’s queering of time fostered the transgressions of racial and sexual norms, because it was already operating in defiance of them.

Informing Criminal Intimacies

Within the cabaret, these transgressions were most often made explicit by way of criminal intimacy due to the cabaret’s spatiality and temporality. Citing the autobiography of vaudeville impresario Jesse Lasky, Vogel recounts a cabaret scene that tells of an expanding stage that slid over the orchestra pit and “put the performers on handshaking intimacy with the first row patrons” (Vogel 2009: 39). This speaks to the physical, or what Vogel calls public,⁸ intimacy of the cabaret that brought together artist and audience. Glancing at the cabaret photos⁹ in archives of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in New York, I immediately noticed the way in which the spatial boundaries of the cabaret, which were in no way stringent, fostered intimacy. Though the ephemeral quality of the photos made it difficult to see the scene clearly, the lack of a raised stage in some photos was instantly apparent. At Connie’s Inn¹⁰ for instance, the stage, which was also used as a dance floor, was in the center. Its flooring was different than that of the seating area but it was not raised like the stage of an opera house, the opera house being commonly linked with uplift ideology as a space of proper sociality. The lack of a raised stage illustrates how the cabaret, which was ideologically opposed, was also structurally or architecturally defiant of uplift.

8. See Vogel’s chapter “American Cabaret Performance and the Production of Intimacy,” *The Scene of Harlem Cabaret*, 39–73.

9. Unfortunately, the images found at the archive cannot be displayed in this paper because they require permission from the archive as well as fees.

10. Image of Connie’s Inn: Interior of Connie’s Inn. Photograph and Print Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations. (Vogel 2009: 67).

Unlike the spatial arrangement of the opera house, the cabaret fostered intimacy, as the audience, who were already seated at tables rather than in rows, often sat around the stage. The audience sat in such a way that allowed for the performer to move among and around the tables during her performance, consistent with the handshaking intimacy that Lasky describes. Photos, like that of Small's Paradise,¹¹ illustrate that when the cabaret pictured did have a raised stage it was still often located in the center and had openings on either side that let the performer step down and once again move among the audience, allowing the stage to double as a dance floor. Also, due to the placement of the stage and the seating arrangement, the cabaret allowed for lines of sight that were not available in settings like the opera house. While patrons often turned their chairs to face the artist during a performance, they also had the option of keeping their bodies turned towards their table. Furthermore, because there was seating on at least three sides of the stage, patrons were also in each other's line of sight (Vogel 2009: 64). Such perspectives fostered intimacy within the audience as well as between audience and artist. This intimacy between audience and artist is particularly important in analyzing the cabaret as a queer counterpublic when considering an artist like Gladys Bentley who often partook in gender play in her performances. Images of Bentley often show her in a fitted suit with matching top hat and cane, illustrating how at least within the space of the cabaret, performers found it productive to perform gender. Such performances were a visual representation of queer attitudes sung about in the blues—a representation of nonnormativity in general.

Like the intimacy between artist and audience, the cabaret fostered mixing between other groups that were expected, most often by the state, to be distinct. Segregation was still very much enforced during the Harlem Renaissance and yet many cabarets were frequented by both black and white patrons. Often participating in an activity known as slumming, a new form of urban amusement at the time, white people regularly frequented Harlem's cabarets to “see for themselves how the poorer classes live[d]” (Heap 2009: 17). Thus, not only did slumming often manifest itself as race-mixing, it was fundamentally a form of class-mixing. Both the race- and class-mixing that took place within the cabaret speaks to a movement between worlds. This movement between races and classes illustrates the way in which the cabaret's spatiality, and its lack of boundaries, worked hand-in-hand with the fostering of criminal intimacies. Here the race-mixing speaks directly to questions of sexual-

ity as segregation laws are understood to have been enacted because of a fear of miscegenation and a protection of white sexuality. Therefore race, and the deconstruction of boundaries of protection, within the cabaret must be considered in relation to sexuality. Here the two are inextricably bound—when talking about race-mixing it is not just race that must be considered, but the implications of sexuality as well.

Similar to the way in which sexuality informs race-mixing, class-mixing is informed by gender. As the cabaret fostered class-mixing it became inherently linked to questions of gender. As discussed before, “true womanhood” was understood to be a middle-class ideology that positioned women in the private sphere. Yet the black women that frequented these cabarets could not partake in “true womanhood” by virtue of their very working-class identity as they worked in the public sphere in various occupations. By entering into the public sphere, these women were by definition failing to perform the proper conventions of gender. Thus, not only did the cabaret's spatiality speak to concepts of race and class, it also had implications for both sexuality and gender. The following section continues to examine how the expectations for “true womanhood,” especially within the terms of uplift ideology, informed the experience of black women.

Literature: Confronting Black Sexuality through a Queer Lens

Nella Larsen, one of the most important novelists of the Harlem Renaissance, spoke to a queer politics as well as expressions of black women's sexuality. Her work was heralded by both those of the Cabaret School and by W.E.B. DuBois, who was a steadfast believer in uplift ideology and the New Negro movement. Both her books, *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929), confront issues of black female sexuality in a most compelling way. Often criticized for simply employing the figure of the “tragic mulatta,” a popular literary trope of the time, she has been overlooked by critics throughout the years. However, in agreement with many other scholars such as Cheryl A. Wall (2007), Deborah McDowell (2007), and Jeanne Schepher (2008), I see her fiction as representing a complex narrative that is not one of tragedy but is actually compelling in its criticism of uplift ideology as well as gender, racial, and sexual norms.

All three of Larsen's protagonists, Helga from *Quicksand* and Irene and Clare from *Passing*, illustrate the dangers and constrictions of middle-class life and racial uplift. This, however, in no way implies that their stories must be read

11. Image of Small's Paradise: Interior of Small's Paradise. Photograph and Print Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations. (Vogel 2009: 68).

as tragic. In actuality, the stories of these three women articulate a poignant resistance to uplift in their illustration of mobility as well as their expression of non-normative desire and sexuality. Though these stories are told within the confines of marriage and family ties, this is merely a consequence of the fact that Larsen ran in the circles of both the Cabaret School and uplift ideology, and thereby was tied to both schools of thought. It is apparent that Larsen wanted to confront issues of black female desire but that she was also constrained by a desire to appeal to black women's middle-class respectability (McDowell 2007: 371). In other words, Larsen could only hint at the idea of black women as sexual subjects under the cover of traditional narrative conventions, such as the figure of the "tragic mulatta," which was often the most attractive option for black female writers of the Harlem Renaissance as it was often seen as the least degrading (Wall 2007: 362).

The Theme of Resistance

Although Larsen was compelled to work within certain conventions, she was nonetheless able to provide compelling critiques of the country and time in which she was living. Mobility is a theme that signals sentiments of resistance throughout her work. The practice of passing, as well as physical relocation, are literary tropes employed by Larsen that speak to ideas of movement or mobility as signs or practices of resistance. As Scheper states in her critical analysis of *Quicksand's* protagonist, "Larsen's positioning of her protagonist Helga Crane as 'leaving,' only to 'have to come back' signals neither failure nor resignation to the inevitable return home, but a strategy of resistance that many modernist women adopted mobility" (Scheper 2008). Helga's constant movement throughout the book, from Naxos to Chicago to Harlem to Denmark, back to New York City and ending in Alabama has been read as a search for control over her emotional and psychological states (Davis 2002: xxi). However, I understand her movement to be a resistance to uplift, which often manifests as a resistance to the restrictive nature of marriage and the subservience Helga believes it to entail.

The story opens with Helga being extremely dissatisfied with Naxos, the school at which she teaches, and its education practices, and her plan to leave immediately. She is visibly marked as different from her fellow teachers as she is often described wearing rich colors and fanciful jewelry whereas the other female teachers restricted themselves to black, gray, brown, or navy blue, which were seen as respectable colors (Davis 2002: xxi). Her choice in clothes is often employed by Larsen as a symbol of her resistance to uplift ideology and what Helga deemed the constant quest of its

followers to suppress the race's "most delightful manifestations, love of color, joy of rhythmic motion, naïve, spontaneous laughter" (Larsen 2002: 21). Here, though Larsen is writing this in explicit reference to color and clothes, she is also speaking to uplift ideology's resistance to anything that deviated from the proper morality and respectability of the "talented tenth"—deviances such as those articulated in the blues and the cabaret. This uplift ideology is central to the reason Helga desires so fervently to quit her position at Naxos, as she believes that the school "had grown into a machine" and was now a "show place in the black belt, exemplification of the white man's magnanimity, refutation of the black man's inefficiency" (ibid. 8). Her decision to leave Naxos, though seemingly spontaneous, is founded on her opinion of the "race problem," which is apparently both deep-rooted and long-standing. Her subsequent movement to Chicago and then to Harlem illustrates a need to escape the restrictions of uplift, yet she finds that uplift has found its way to Harlem as well. She finds herself disliking everyone in Harlem, even her friends, and once again the reader realizes that her distaste stems from a resistance to uplift and the race problem.

Here it is not necessarily the "advancement" of the race that she finds a problem as it was in Naxos; rather, it is the hypocrisy she finds in the actions and words of her friends. Larsen again points to the blues and the cabaret when she writes of the hypocrisy of Anne Grey, the woman that houses Helga in Harlem, stating "she aped [white people's] clothes, their manners, and their gracious ways of living. While proclaiming loudly the undiluted good of all things Negro, she yet disliked the songs, the dances, and the softly blurred speech of the race" (ibid. 51). Here it is apparent that Helga's immediate move from Harlem to Copenhagen is based primarily on this hypocrisy concerning the race problem, and though abrupt, is again understood to stem from a long-standing struggle with the restrictions of an ideology that she is attempting to escape. This constant movement therefore can be seen not as a sign of psychological issue or instability, but on the contrary, as Scheper contends, as a mode of agency (Scheper 2008).

Her later move from Copenhagen back to Harlem is again a move of resistance, yet this time more specifically tied to the restrictions of marriage. Though Helga finds problems with the way in which her aunt and uncle seem to put her on display by draping her in extravagant and exotic fashions, it is the proposal by Axel Olsen that ultimately convinces her that another move is necessary. Her response to Axel Olsen's proposal is extremely telling wherein she responds, "But you see, Herr Olsen, I'm not for sale. Not to you. Not

to any white man. I don't care at all to be owned. Even by you" (Larsen 2002: 89). It is obvious that their difference in race plays into her decision to deny Olsen, but it is the ownership that concludes her reply, and thereby her thought process. She refuses the ownership, and implied subservience, that marriage entails.

It is apparent that Helga's constant movement is a resistance to restrictions, restrictions that are associated with uplifting the race and protecting a specific moral code of racial and sexual norms. Both her general distaste for uplift, and its hypocrisy, as well as her rejection of marriage illustrate that her movement is an action of agency and therefore can be read as a sign of independence, a nonnormative behavior for the "respectable" middle-class woman.

Relating Racial Movement to a Queer Politics

Though an act of agency, the movement employed by Larsen can also be read as relating to the theme of mobility and fluidity that is present within queer politics. The figure of the "tragic mulatta" employed by Larsen in *Quicksand* illustrates a point of mediation, or a movement between two worlds, one constantly taking part in criminal intimacies. Helga is eternally caught between two worlds, yet being a victim of the "one-drop rule"¹² she is always marked as ultimately belonging to the black race. Here, though she is of mixed-race, her experiences illustrate that the bi-racial character cannot exist; she must always be defined as ultimately belonging to one race, and when this individual's races include black, she is always labeled as such. This marks the limitations of the tragic mulatta's movement, but still speaks to a movement that is a constant theme of queer politics.

Similarly, but not at all equivalent, racial passing implies a more fluid movement between the worlds of black and white. Both Irene and Clare, the protagonists of *Passing*, partake in passing for their own gain, though doing so in differing degrees. Their movement between the worlds of black and white represent a fluidity that speaks to a queer reading of *Passing* and can be read as representing sexual mobility in that segregation was established in order to protect the (sexual) purity of the white race. This protection is what makes Clare's passing, and marriage to a white man, that much more compelling. Her passing is in direct opposition to segregation and the fear of miscegenation, which are based on the sexual reproduction of a pure white race. Thus, Clare is a symbol for the transgression of both racial and sexual boundaries—her racial fluidity as well as

her transgression both speak to a queer, or transgressive and nonnormative, reading of Larsen's fiction.

Expressing Non-Normative Desire

This queer reading has also been more explicitly tied to sexuality. Subtextual readings of *Passing*, and some would argue *Quicksand* as well, reveal lines of queer or nonnormative desire. The desire felt between the female protagonists in *Passing* speaks to the expression, which many would consider almost explicit in nature, of nonnormative—or queer—desire. The banter that ensues between Clare and Irene, as well as the sexual overtones of Clare's letters to Irene, has been read as an expression of sexual feelings between the two women.¹³ It is this desire that I assert to be the reason that Irene may have been at fault in Clare's death. A representative of stricter regard for middle-class respectability, Irene becomes fearful of the consequences that Clare brings to her life by virtue of her very presence in it. Irene sees Clare as a threat to her family and her marriage, which she seems to hold in the highest regard. This protection of family can be understood as a protection of one of the primary institutions of uplift ideology and thus her queer, or non-normative desire, for Clare must be suppressed and sacrificed for the good of her family, and her race. In *Quicksand*, the lines concerning Helga's sexual desires are beautifully written and expose a black female sexuality that ran counter to the sexuality of uplift ideology and politics of respectability—again tying sexuality to race. It is apparent that a queer reading of Larsen's fiction constantly ties race to sexuality, continuously showing that the two are inextricably bound.

Conclusion

Race and sexuality must be considered simultaneously, and must not be understood to be mutually exclusive. Categories of race, specifically of blackness and whiteness, as they were articulated during the Harlem Renaissance, were built on particular conceptions of sexuality. The black body is perceived as threatening to the "purity" of the white population, implying a need for white sexuality and reproduction to be protected. According to practices of racialization during the periods of slavery and segregation, and even beyond, the black body, be it female or male, was deemed hypersexual and predatory in nature. As such, because race, sexuality, and gender are historically tied, it is critical to consider these three aspects of identity in tandem. As Siobhan Somerville posits in her work *Queering the Color Line*, to consider sexuality and race as separate categories does not

12. This is a historical colloquial term used in the United States for the social classification of individuals with any African ancestry as black.

13. McDowell discusses this queer subtext more explicitly in her work "Black Female Sexuality in *Passing*"

allow for the study, or even the existence, of an identity that is both raced and sexualized—specifically an identity that is both black and queer. Thus, to consider these categories as mutually exclusive does not allow for the existence of women-loving women, whose identities are simultaneously informed by every one of their positions in the social hierarchies of race, gender, class, and sexuality.

Yet, as I and many scholars before me have shown, these compelling women did exist. Their identities were informed by important sites and forms of cultural production during the Harlem Renaissance. The blues, the cabaret, and literature all played a crucial role in nurturing the emergence of new identities such as that of women-loving women inasmuch as all three sites of cultural production articulated or fostered transgressions of racial and sexual norms. The blues, in its expression of working-class experience and gender play, produced a new womanhood and challenged structures of heteronormativity. The cabaret, in its queering of both time and space, constructed intimacies that were defiant of both the state and normative conceptions of gender. Literature, in its representation of black female sexuality, combated stereotypes employed by structures of white supremacy while simultaneously resisting and providing a critique of the highly popular and influential ideology of racial uplift. Together these crucial facets of what many deemed low brow culture of the Harlem Renaissance transgressed both racial and sexual norms and created a space and time in which women-loving women could affirm their existence.

Acknowledgements

For their assistance and support I would like to thank my faculty advisor Dr. Jeanne Scheper, Dr. Lilith Mahmud, Dr. Alice Fahs, as well as my family and friends. Thanks also to the Undergraduate Research Opportunities Program for funding my research. I would like to thank the many people who read and commented on various drafts of this paper: TeKeyia Armstrong, Vanessa Hadox, John Romero, Chelsea Azevedo, Ruby Chang, Geraldo Raygoza, Phanith Sovann and Laura Wallace. I would also like to thank Ashley Hughes for her constant encouragement and ceaseless aid in my research. Lastly, my deepest thanks to Dr. Angela Y. Davis for taking the time to hear my thoughts and providing the feedback that inspired this paper.

Works Cited

Carbado, Devon W. "Privilege." Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology. Durham: Duke UP, 2005.

Cohen, Cathy J. "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?" Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology. Durham: Duke UP, 2005.

Crenshaw, Kimberlé W. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," Stanford Law Review, Vol. 43, No. 6., (1991): 1241–1299.

Davis, Angela Y. Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday. New York: Vintage, 1999.

Davis, Thadious M. Introduction. Quicksand. By Nella Larsen. New York: Penguin, 2002.

Douglas, Ann. Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s. New York: Noonday. 1995.

Douglass, Frederick. Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960.

Duggan, Lisa. The Twilight of Equality?: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy. New York: Beacon, 2004.

Faderman, Lillian. Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America. New York: Penguin (Non-Classics), 1992.

Ferguson, Roderick A. "Race-ing Homonormativity: Citizenship, Sociology, and Gay Identity." Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology. Durham: Duke UP, 2005.

Flagg, Barbara. "Was Blind, but Now I See: White Race Consciousness and the Requirement of Discriminatory Intent." Michigan Law Review 91 (1994): 953–63.

Garber, Eric. "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 Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey Jr., 318–31. New York: Meridian, 1989.

Garber, Eric. "Tain't Nobody's Business: Homosexuality in Harlem in the 1920s." The Advocate 13 May 1982.

Harper, Phillip Brian. "The Evidence of Felt Intuition: Minority Experience, Everyday Life, and Critical Speculative Knowledge." Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology. Durham: Duke UP, 2005.

- Heap, Chad C. Slumming: Sexual and Racial Encounters in American Nightlife, 1885–1940. Chicago: University of Chicago, 2009.
- Larsen, Nella. Passing: Authoritative Text, Backgrounds and Contexts, Criticism. Ed. Carla Kaplan. New York: W.W. Norton &, 2007.
- Larsen, Nella, and Thadious M. Davis. Quicksand. New York: Penguin, 2002.
- Living with Pride: Ruth Ellis @ 100. Prod. Yvonne Welbon. Dir. Yvonne Welbon. 1999. Videocassette.
- Lorde, Audre. “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House.” Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches. Berkeley, Calif.: Crossing, 2007. 110–13.
- McDowell, Deborah E. “Black Female Sexuality in *Passing*.” Passing: Authoritative Text, Backgrounds and Contexts, Criticism. By Nella Larsen. Ed. Carla Kaplan. New York: W.W. Norton &, 2007. 363–79.
- Omi, Michael, and Howard Winant. Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s. New York: Routledge, 1994.
- Scheper, Jeanne. “The New Negro Flaneuse in Nella Larsen’s *Passing*” African American Review Fall-Winter (2008).
- Somerville, Siobhan B. “Introduction.” Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2000. 1–14.
- Somerville, Siobhan B. “Inverting the Tragic Mulatta Tradition: Race and Homosexuality in Pauline E. Hopkin’s Fiction.” Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2000. 77–110.
- Vogel, Shane. The Scene of Harlem Cabaret: Race, Sexuality, Performance. Chicago: University of Chicago, 2009.
- Wall, Cheryl A. “Passing for What? Aspects of Identity in Nella Larsen’s Novels.” Passing: Authoritative Text, Backgrounds and Contexts, Criticism. By Nella Larsen. Ed. Carla Kaplan. New York: W.W. Norton &, 2007. 356–63.
- Warner, Michael. Publics and Counterpublics. New York: Zone, 2002.