

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

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Abstract:¹

The experience of black “women-loving-women” during the Harlem Renaissance is directly influenced by what Kimberlé Crenshaw terms intersectional identity, or their positioning in the social hierarchies of race, gender, class, and sexual orientation that are simultaneously intertwined. Considering contemporary terms like lesbian and bisexual, it is difficult to define the sexual identity of many famous black women of the early 20th century, such as Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Bessie Jackson to name a few. However, their work both on and off the stage contributes to the construction of identities during the Harlem Renaissance that transgress both racial and sexual conventions. Although these social identities emerged from a long history of slavery and sexual oppression, they nonetheless produced a seemingly free space for the expression of lesbian sensibilities in the black community during the Harlem Renaissance. At a time of racial segregation in America, 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 between 1919 and 1939, this paper analyzes how certain forms and sites of cultural production, specifically the blues, the cabaret, and literature helped to construct these transgressive identities.

Introduction

During the Harlem Renaissance, women-loving women were located at the lowest position of almost all social hierarchies, including race, gender, sexual orientation, and usually class, due to the systemic impact of racism that produces wealth inequality. The term “woman-loving woman” was first used by Ruth Ellis to describe women that partook in same-sex female sexual relations (Welbon 1999). It was a term used solely by and for women within the black community, and therefore it implied a particular “intersectional” identity of race, gender, and sexuality.² Each layer of the woman-loving woman’s intersectional identity is highly contested within the societal structures of the United States.

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² The usage of the term intersectional identity comes from Kimberle Crenshaw’s concept of intersectionality (*Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color*, Stanford Law Review, Vol. 43, No. 6., 1991, 1241–1299).

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 of gay and lesbian spaces during the Harlem Renaissance such as drag balls, rent parties, buffet flats, and speakeasies, to use such labels of sexual orientation 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 will always be in need of further study. In this paper, however, my goal is not to document specific instances of anachronistic lesbian experiences in the history of the Harlem Renaissance. I will be looking instead at sites and forms of cultural production between the years of 1919 and 1939 as they relate to racial and sexual “deviance,” to offer a queer perspective on the social and cultural spaces of the Harlem Renaissance. I will be examining 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 will be focusing specifically on the ways in which the blues, the cabaret, and literature articulated these transgressions, which could be said to have informed the formation of new identities, such as that of women-loving women.

Before I begin this analysis of these three specific sites and forms of cultural production, I will contextualize this research in relation to queer theory as a whole, and to the marginalization of black queer women’s experiences in particular. I believe this context is necessary to the understanding of why it is crucial to articulate these histories. I will then look at

the blues as a cultural space wherein black women and men's newly achieved sexual freedom could be expressed. Within the culture space of the blues, artists and audiences felt it was productive to express non-normative ideas and identities. These identities included that of the bulldagger, a term used to describe a more masculine woman-loving woman, but also extended beyond more blatant queer identities, and included that of the working-class woman of color rather than the middle-class white woman that was often sung about in mainstream music of the time. I will then examine the cabaret, which, as a site of cultural production rather than a form of cultural production like the blues, was a social space where "criminal intimacies"³ took place and thus allowed for sexual "deviance" and race-mixing to be articulated and seen explicitly. Specifically, it is the cabaret's existence in the temporality of afterhours that made the allowance of these criminal intimacies most possible as it became, after closing time, inherently, or consequently, defiant of municipal and moral law. Lastly, I will show how literature illustrates the ways in which race and the cultural processes of racialization⁴ 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 could combat socially and culturally constructed stereotypes as well as articulate non-normative desires, queer attitudes, and provide authentic stories of black men and women. As I will elucidate in the following sections, all three of these forms and sites of cultural production provide vital insight into the important history of women-loving women.

³ Shane Vogel defines this term in his 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" (*The Scene of Harlem Cabaret: Race, Sexuality, Performance*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 2009, 22). For more information on this concept see Vogel's text or *Sex in Public* by Berlant and Warner.

⁴ I use this term in reference to the 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" (*Racial Formation in the United States from the 1960s to the 1980s* [New York: Routledge, 1986], 64).

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 (Lorde 2007: 111-12)

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). Thus, queerness and the practice of queer politics in theory allows for the creation of a space in opposition to dominant norms—a space where transformational political work can begin—as the above quote by Audre Lorde poignantly demonstrates. In queer theory, according to Cohen, 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 extremely 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, which is to say the propagation of queer issues, the entire community is instructed to focus solely on the single shared identity of queerness and put aside all other layers of their identity—put aside all other differences. This is in direct opposition to what Cohen 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 and 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—you are either the same as him or different from him (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). As shown, he maintains that systems of social identity are almost always bi-directional, which is to say that there always exists a beneficiary and a victim of an identity (*ibid.* 194). However, as Barbara Flagg states in her work, “to be white is to not think about it,” which means that because whiteness is the racial point of reference, or the norm, white people are able to “relegate their own specificity to the realm of the subconscious” (Flagg 1994: 953, 963). In other words, those who are positioned on the “other” side of the various social hierarchies encounter the ramifications of their marginalized social identity more often than those who are positioned on the side of reference realize their privilege—because they do not have to.

This privilege can manifest itself in two ways according to Carbado.⁵ 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). As noted earlier, these privileges are often not recognized by those that experience them but by those who are categorically and systematically barred from them.⁶ As previously mentioned, what is repeatedly forgotten or disregarded within the queer community is difference. It is often difficult for many within the queer community especially, to recognize their privilege as they are often on the non-receiving end of the “invisible package of unearned assets” because of their queer identity. A community based on identity politics, the queer community often disregards privilege and makes claims to homogeneity. Thus it has come to pass that 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 (Duggan 2004: 50). She defines homonormativity as the appropriation of heteronormative ideals and constructs into LGBT culture and individual identity. 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, and I would include racial and class identity, are deemed most worthy of receiving rights.

⁵ 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.

⁶ However, it must also be noted that Carbado’s discussion extends beyond the binary of the white heterosexual man and those that are different—all others—and considers those that fall between the binary, and considers the privileges they encounter.

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). In other words, queer politics’ common ascription to white, and most often male, positionality simultaneously ascribes to the hegemonic ideologies of the U.S. that serve white male privilege and inherently oppresses those with multilayered marginalized social identities, which within the queer community most often translates into people of color. Furthermore, those that fall on the “normal” or referential side of social hierarchies, outside of sexual orientation, often do not understand or even realize their privilege over and against those that fall on the “other” side. It is because of this marginalization as well as the unwillingness to acknowledge white, and white male, privilege that many of those with multilayered and marginalized social identities, specifically LGBT people of color, do not necessarily associate themselves with the unmarked “queer” identity. Instead, they have fashioned their own terms that better encompass their lived experience as people who encounter the disadvantages of various social hierarchies simultaneously.

In my Research

The *Black Queer Studies* reader came out of a conference held in North Carolina in 2000⁷ in response to what was considered a disregard for the black experience in queer theory, as well as what Philip Brian Harper mentions in his work concerning felt intuition,⁸ that the field of

⁷ 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.

⁸ The exact article can be found in *Black Queer Studies* (2005) and is entitled “The Evidence of Felt Intuition: Minority Experience, Everyday Life, and Critical Speculative Knowledge.”

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 in my own research I have found that there is a lack of regard for black issues within queer theory and that there is still 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. I do believe that 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 more work to be done that speaks to the intersection of race and sexuality. Research concerning the history of queer black women is crucial to both fields as it aims to illustrate that questions of race are inextricably bound to those of sexuality, they are in no way mutually exclusive. I will show in the following sections 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

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 (Davis 1999: 4). Though emancipation occurred in 1865 with the passing of the 13th Amendment, many black women and men could not express their freedom economically, which is to say that 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 (*ibid.* 10). The Great Migration, which rode the heels of World War II, brought over 700,000 black people to major cities in the North like Chicago, Detroit, Philadelphia and New York, in an attempt to flee the blatant oppression they encountered in the South (Douglas 1995: 73-4). Sexuality was the 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 had in their sexual matters that illustrated freedom. Thus it comes to no surprise that the blues became an important cultural space for the black community. The blues, especially in contrast to slave music, 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.

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 of course 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 what Davis calls the slave’s 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 its collective form, the musical forms under slavery could not adequately express the 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 in a much more individualistic manner. 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 the marking of the black woman or man as an individual

which was illustrated by way of blues music being performed, in majority, by one person's voice with the accompaniment of a band. As such, the blues also ushered in the popular culture of performance where distinct lines were drawn between performer and audience, 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 that is the blues was largely a female figure and though men's blues did indeed mention sexual love, in women's blues "there was an even more pronounced emphasis on love and sexuality" (Davis 1999:11).

Unlike religious and secular slave music, the blues illustrated sexuality as a tangible expression of freedom, which poignantly 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 inasmuch as the former often blatantly contradicted the latter. For one, the kind of woman that was often discussed in mainstream music was that of the white middle-class and was thereby generally relegated to the domestic sphere, but was meant to apply to all types of 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 of black working-class women of the post-slavery period that reflected their reality.

Davis points out that in women's blues the protagonists were seldom wives and almost never mothers, which was 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 black women, at least those of the working-class, could be told. However, the blues went beyond simply being a space for narrative and provided a space for community-building for working-class black women. First and foremost, as audience members and performers alike, through the blues, black women were able to structure a working-class model of womanhood (Davis 1999: 46). What is most powerful about this structure was that it was ideologically independent of the middle-class model of “true womanhood.”⁹ Yet 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, could now work in relation to the middle class, sometimes affirming it but also deviating whenever they saw fit.

I understand this deviation to be 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, as it moves between the ideals of the middle-class and the realities 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, one who is not afraid to stand up to the middle-class ideology of what it means to be a “true woman.”

⁹ This term is used by Angela Davis but also dates back to Barbara Welter’s essay “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860”

A Safe Haven: Women-loving Women on Stage

The entertainment world offered a special opportunity for women-loving women in terms of their social opportunities because it was a world in which their otherness could be capitalized in order 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 than those of their male counterparts, due to their doubly-marginalized state, 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, move within a predominantly female social world, and had hopes of 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 a purveyor of same-sex female relationships, in order to spark the interest of their audience. Though this may have been a ploy 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 that suggests that many preferred to publicly identify 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 blue 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 non-normative identities that allows 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 "Prove it on Me Blues" from 1929 where 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
 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 man¹⁰

Often referred to as a song of resistance, the song features a woman-loving woman character, who is declaring her sexual interest in women and challenging broader society to "prove it on" her. Here, I assert that Rainey is declaring 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 as a form of cultural production often declared sexual freedom as a form of resistance. Furthermore, it is not just the character's sexual interest in women that is crucial to marking 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 that she wears a collar and a tie, which visibly marks her transgression and allows for

¹⁰ Lyrics found in Angela Y. Davis' *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*.

her resistance to be seen explicitly. Therefore it is not only her non-normative sexual desire, but her non-normative gender expression that markedly challenges societal standards and authority.

Similarly, the usage of coded language and explicit references in the song “B.D. Women’s Blues,” (1935) sung by Lucille Bogan¹¹ illustrates how the blues blatantly articulated non-normative desires. Though the meaning of B.D. women could be overlooked, those that were listening closely could ascertain the implication if they paid attention¹² 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 woman-loving woman, similar to the character described in “Prove it on Me Blues,” who is often distinguished by her masculine clothing, mannerisms, as well as general attitude. Though not discussing visible markers, this song references a distinct queer identity through the use of coded language. However, it is not a non-normative desire that is articulated here per se, instead it is the B.D. women’s non-normative identity that is the focus. The deviation from normativity is expressed by way of the separation from men that is described in the line “B.D. women ain’t gonna need no men.” This line does not simply imply a separation from men, but also implies what I understand to be a future departure from male-dominated structures of

¹¹ Lucille Bogan also went by the name Bessie Jackson.

¹² 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).

heteronormativity that saturate the U.S. However not only is the B.D. woman 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 insomuch as 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 that is depicted. 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, and who 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 her noting of a woman-loving woman’s competency as she deems a B.D. woman to be just as capable as her male counterpart. Such depictions of pride and heroism could be considered manifestations of the tolerance for women-loving within the music industry, and within Harlem as a whole, but 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. In the following section I will show 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.

The Cabaret: Queering Time and Space

As a space where the divisions between artist and audience were blurred and race-mixing could occur, the cabaret allowed for contact between groups, which were hitherto divided, to exist. By extending beyond normative spatial and temporal boundaries, the cabaret, as a site of cultural production, literally queered time and space. Spatially, the cabaret allowed for the mixing of what normative structures of performance and policed segregation define as distinct groups. In this allowance, space was actually queered by way of the fluidity and movement that occurred between distinct worlds of artist and audience, of black and white. Temporally, inasmuch as the cabaret stayed open after closing time, the temporality of afterhours reorganized the framework of time sanctioned by the state (Vogel 2009: 112). In its movement from operating legally to illegally, the cabaret and the temporality of afterhours 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 signals forms of racial and sexual congregation that function against normalizing social relations, which are only possible due to the cabaret’s queering of both time and space. As deviant expression was encouraged by the late-night milieu and the consumption of alcohol, 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, it should come to no surprise that 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.

*Queering Space: Cabaret as Counterpublic*¹³

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, I define the cabaret as a counterpublic, offering those who frequent it an alternative to public norms and conventions, which is in defiance of the state and its hegemonic structures. The cabaret reorganized divisions in space, which allowed artist and audience to intermingle amongst each other, thereby altering normative structures of performance, and fostered race-mixing in direct defiance of segregation.

Queering Time: The Temporality of Afterhours

While queering space the cabaret simultaneously queered time through its operation in the temporality of afterhours. Vogel refers to closing time as a temporal event and to afterhours as a temporal register (Vogel 2009: 110), wherein the cabaret’s operation past closing time and into afterhours literally queers time as it defies the regulation of time enforced by the state. In its operation within the temporality of afterhours, the cabaret became inherently defiant of municipal and moral law which sought to regulate the “questionable morality of the lower classes” that the cabaret stood for (*ibid.* 56). The regulation of time is extremely important to the state as both familial reproduction and capitalist productivity are 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.

¹³ As defined by Michael Warner in his work *Publics and Counterpublics*

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 in his book 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,¹⁴ intimacy of the cabaret that brought together artist and audience. At first glance of the cabaret photos found 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 Inn¹⁵ for instance, the stage, which was also used as a dance floor, was in the center and 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 a symbol that is 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.

Unlike the spatial arrangement of the opera house, various photos illustrate that the cabaret fostered intimacy insomuch as the audience, who were already seated at tables rather than in rows, often sat around the stage, and in line with the handshaking intimacy that Lasky speaks of, sat in such a way that allowed for the performer to move amongst and around the

¹⁴ See Vogel's chapter "American Cabaret Performance and the Production of Intimacy," *The Scene of Harlem Cabaret*, 39-73.

¹⁵ 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).

tables during her performance. Furthermore, photos, like that of Small's Paradise¹⁶, 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 allowed for the performer to step down and once again move amongst the audience, it also allowed for the stage to double as a dance floor. 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. Such perspectives fostered intimacy both 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—of non-normativity 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, what Chad Heap calls 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

¹⁶ 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).

did slumming often manifest itself as race-mixing it was fundamentally a form of class-mixing. Both the race-mixing and class-mixing that took place within the cabaret speaks to a movement between worlds. This movement between black and white, as well as between working-class and middle-class, illustrate the way in which the cabaret's spatiality, and lack of boundaries, worked hand-in-hand with the fostering of criminal intimacies. Here the race-mixing speaks directly to questions of sexuality 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, and thus 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 were often a part of the working-class and could not partake in "true womanhood" by virtue of their very identity as working-class 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. In the following section I will continue to examine how the expectations for "true womanhood," especially within the terms of uplift ideology, informed the experience of black women as I elucidate how Nella Larsen's work speaks to a queer politics as well as expressions of black women's sexuality.

Literature: Confronting Black Sexuality through a Queer Lens

Nella Larsen was one of the most important novelists of the Harlem Renaissance. Her work was heralded by both those of the Cabaret School as well as 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 Scheper (2008), I see her fiction as representing a complex narrative that is not one of tragedy and 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 or constrictions of middle-class life and racial uplift. However this in no way implies that their stories must be read as tragic. In actuality, as I will soon contend, 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 subjects and conventions.¹⁷

¹⁷ The traditional narrative subject is the figure of the “tragic mulatta” as it was often seen as the least degrading and thus the most attractive option for black female writers of the Harlem Renaissance (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 runs throughout the fiction of Nella Larsen that signals sentiments of resistance within her work. The practice of passing, as well as physical relocation, are both literary tropes employed by Larsen that speak to the idea 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 badly 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 illustrate a need to escape the restrictions of uplift, yet she finds that uplift has found its way to Harlem as well. She was happy in Harlem for a time but as chapter nine of the story opens, "it didn't last, this happiness of Helga Crane's" (*ibid.* 50). 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. Yet here it is not necessarily the "advancement" of the race that she finds a problem, like in Naxos, but 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 and back to Harlem is again a move of resistance, yet this time more specifically tied to the restrictions of marriage. Though Helga finds problem 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.

Here 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 non-normative 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 who is constantly taking part in criminal intimacies. Helga

is eternally caught between two worlds, yet being a victim of the “one-drop rule”¹⁸ she is always marked as ultimately belonging to the black race. Here, though she is of mixed-race, her character illustrates 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 constantly a 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 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 inasmuch as segregation was established in order to protect the purity of the white race. This protection is what makes Clare’s passing, and marriage to a white man, that much more compelling. Here 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, I understand Clare and her passing to be a symbol for the transgression of both racial and sexual boundaries. Her racial fluidity as well as her transgression both speak to a queer 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, uncover lines of queer, or non-normative, desire. The desire felt between the female protagonists in *Passing* speaks to the expression,

¹⁸ This is a historical colloquial term used in the United States for the social classification of individuals with any African ancestry as black.

which many would consider almost explicit in nature, of non-normative—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.¹⁹ 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, of 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. Here it is apparent that a queer reading of Larsen's fiction constantly ties race to sexuality, continuously showing that the two are inextricably bound.

¹⁹ McDowell discusses this queer subtext more explicitly in her work "Black Female Sexuality in *Passing*"

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 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 if they were 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. I contend that the blues, the cabaret, and literature all played a crucial role in informing the formation 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.

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Harlem Renaissance 100 is a community led celebration marking the landmark 100th anniversary of... The precision and skill these legendary musicians honed during their military service was passed on by members of the Harlem Hell fighters who, upon returning to the United States, became band directors at these colleges and universities. See more. Harlem Renaissance 100. Harlem Renaissance 100 Virtual Salon: Styling - What defines contemporary Black style? Sunday, October 25th at 4pm. RSVP <https://www.eventbrite.com/e/harlem-renaissance-100-virtual> The Harlem Renaissance was the development of the Harlem neighborhood in New York City as a Black cultural mecca in the early 20th Century and the subsequent social and artistic explosion that resulted. Lasting roughly from the 1910s through the mid-1930s, the period is considered a golden age in African American culture, manifesting in literature, music, stage performance and art. Poetry, too, flourished during the Harlem Renaissance. Countee Cullen was 15 when he moved into the Harlem home of Reverend Frederick A. Cullen, the pastor of Harlem's largest congregation, in 1918. These renaissance men and women were the heroes of people like my grandfather, people who might have completely written off their accomplishments had they known about their personal affairs. I wonder if the invisibility began there, as a "look the other way" attitude. And did our Black heterosexual ancestors pass this on to us? But once again, Black Queerness is moved to the side, out of sight and out of mind. Regardless of how my family, the black community or Harlem has treated me, I love of them! :) Loading Reply to This Comment.