

Erased but Not Forgotten

Highlighting the Black/Gay Experience in America during the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and the Repression that Resulted from this Narrative's Erasure

Haven Rice

ABSTRACT: The Harlem Renaissance is a decade known for its fluidity and non-conformity that allowed for a thriving underground culture where Black queer Americans could organize and interact as long as they remained hidden. While the queer community and the Black community flourished independently, the Black queer community was left behind in the wake of great progress for Black Americans, erased from the historical narrative despite its major contributions to Black and queer advancement. This presentation will examine how the Harlem Renaissance (1920s-1930s) fostered an underground network that allowed for the expression of the natural fluidity of sexuality and gender, unavailable to the heteronormative White Western society that existed above ground. Secondly, despite the Black queer community being credited for Black and queer progress, it was simultaneously victimized by a Black society so desperate for progress that it conformed to the colonial way, developing internalized racism and constructing an elite, heteronormative hierarchy through discursive distancing. This presentation will argue that the Black queer American experience of the Harlem Renaissance was erased from the historical narrative by White, Black, queer and straight masculinities and that the repression of this community further subordinated both the Black and Queer communities.

KEYWORDS: Queer History, Black History, American History, Marginalization History, Community History, History, Cultural History, Black Queer History

The Harlem Renaissance is a decade known for its fluidity and non-conformity that allowed for a thriving underground culture where Black queer Americans could organize and interact, as long as they remained hidden. During this period, the queer community and the Black community each flourished independently, however, the Black queer community was left behind in the wake of great progress for Black Americans, erased from the historical narrative despite its major contributions to Black and queer advancement. The exploration of these erased histories and the major figures who built them raises a question: how did American masculinities (Black and White) and American queerness intersect with Black American queerness during the Harlem Renaissance?

The Harlem Renaissance (1920s-1930s) fostered an underground network that allowed for the expression of the natural fluidity of sexuality and gender, unavailable to the heteronormative White Western society that existed above ground, in the mainstream. However, despite the Black queer community being credited for much Black and queer progress, it was simultaneously victimized by a Black society so desperate for progress that it conformed to colonial ways, developing internalized racism and constructing an elite, heteronormative hierarchy through discursive distancing. Finally, despite criticism and backlash from within the Black queer community about its

own erasure during the 1920s, the damage was done, and long-lasting oppressive institutions had developed to maintain its marginalization. This paper will argue that the Black queer American experience of the Harlem Renaissance was erased from the historical narrative by White, Black, queer and straight masculinities, and that the repression of this community further subordinated both the Black and Queer communities.

Defining Relevant Terminology

Some terms used in this paper require definition for clear comprehension. "Queer" and the like will be used as an umbrella term for those who identified as non-heterosexual and/or non-cisgendered. In this historical context, this will mostly reference those who used the labels; lesbian, gay and bisexual. In addition, this text will discuss the masculinities that were systematically employed to support the oppressive heteronormative society of the United States. While masculinity is generally used to describe the attributes of men and boys, in this paper, it will also refer to the tools hegemonic masculinities used to maintain dominance and subordination. Within this hierarchical context, White, heterosexual men were at the top of the hierarchy and homosexual people of colour were subordinated to the very bottom. Further, it is critical to note that both men and women can uphold the patriarchy.

An Introduction to the Renaissance

While the American Civil War ended in 1865 with the abolition of slavery, reconstruction failed to establish a stable base upon which Black Americans could flourish, with its failures being especially visible in the South. The greatest struggle for the Black population was against White male “Redeemers” who felt the need to “intimidate” and “reassert their control over rebellious Blacks,” in the hope that they could bring back the greatness of the Antebellum South.¹ In response to the failures of reconstruction, African Americans from the Southern United States began to make their way north and city-ward in what became known as the Great Migration, which continued from 1910 into the 1970s. Large Black communities developed in many of the big Northern cities, such as Detroit, Buffalo and Chicago. But it was Harlem, a neighbourhood in New York City, that would become the “Mecca of the New Negro,” as coined by Alain Locke in 1925.² It offered more economic and safe housing opportunities for Black Americans than the South, due to the “demands of war industry coupled with the shutting off of foreign migration.”³ It presented a “democratic chance” for marginalized people to improve their conditions as America evolved from “medieval [...] to modern.”⁴ With the greatest concentration of “so many diverse elements of Negro life,” Harlem entered a period of prosperity that brought artists and audiences North.⁵ This eventually created a mythology that had “Whites [...] pouring into Harlem — into Black America — to see, hear, and touch the supposed primitive superior birthright of Black artistry and sexuality.”⁶ Harlem became notoriously “deviant,” “disrupt[ing] the so-called [American] normality of heterosexuality and racial purity.”⁷ This centre for Afro-American art and the explosion of self-conscious creativity sparked a renaissance rooted in queer Black culture.

Private Parties and the Underground Queer Network

While the Harlem Renaissance was celebrated for its unique ecosystem of arts and culture, the Black queer community contained within continued to be oppressed. Harlem’s delights were promoted in ways that allowed the public to consume them without knowing they were rooted in queerness. To thrive, the Black queer community took its institutions and traditions underground, creating networks that could go unnoticed. Private parties were one of the most common functions of the period, “serv[ing] as a safe space in which those experiencing same-sex desire could experiment with their sexuality and meet other like-minded people” while still being able to hide their sexual orientation from those that were not “in the life.”⁸ Commonly known as “rent parties” or “pay parties,” guests were charged an entry fee in exchange for “a night of food, Prohibition Era drinking, dancing and music, while also contributing financially to a fellow neighbour’s rent.”⁹ The parties were often segregated by gender and in some cases, race, to ensure that those attending with a member of the same sex did not raise questions within the larger Harlem community.¹⁰ The curious nature of Harlem was its duality, where queer Black people could experience a “free life” doing “anything [they] wanted” provided they never publicly expressed their attraction to the same sex.¹¹ “While Black Harlemites may have acknowledged the existence of rent parties, they would not have easily accepted a party of women desiring women,” or men desiring men.¹² To protect themselves and those they were with, Black queer people had to abide by the social expectations laid out by dominant White heteronormative society. They had to disguise their feelings in public, not only in the ways they interacted with others, but in how they presented themselves. For example, women rarely wore pants “because they had to come through the streets” to get to the parties, “negotiating not only the police but also Black Harlem.”¹³

¹ Alain Locke, “The New Negro: An Introduction,” in *The New Negro: An Interpretation*, ed. Alain Locke (New York City: Albert and Charles Boni, 1925), 3; Ibrahim X. Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America*. Bold Type Books, 2017: 259.

² Ernest Julius Mitchell II, “Black Renaissance: A Brief History of the Concept,” *African American Literary Studies: New Texts, New Approaches, New Challenges* Vol. 55, no. 4 (2010): 644.

³ Locke, “The New Negro,” 6.

⁴ Locke, “The New Negro,” 6.

⁵ Locke, “The New Negro,” 6.

⁶ Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning*, 327.

⁷ Thaddeus Russell, “The Color of Discipline: Civil Rights and Black Sexuality,” *American Quarterly* 60, no. 1 (March 2008): 101–28; Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning*, 310.

⁸ Emma Chen, “Black Face, Queer Space: The Influence of Black Lesbian and Transgender Blues Women of the Harlem Renaissance on Emerging Queer Communities,” *Historical Perspectives: Santa Clara University Undergraduate Journal of History* 2, no. 21 (2016): 23; Cheryl D. Hicks, “Bright and Good Looking Colored Girl’: Black Women’s Sexuality and ‘Harmful Intimacy’ in Early-Twentieth-Century New York,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 18, no. 3 (September 2009): 441.

⁹ Hicks, “Bright and Good Looking Coloured Girl,” 440.

¹⁰ Hicks, “Bright and Good Looking Coloured Girl,” 440.

¹¹ Hicks, “Bright and Good Looking Coloured Girl,” 440.

¹² Hicks, “Bright and Good Looking Coloured Girl,” 440.

¹³ Hicks, “Bright and Good Looking Coloured Girl,” 440.

These restrictions on free existence in Harlem were also experienced by female performers of the decade. Many would have private “intimate relationships with other women” while simultaneously maintaining a “professional stage image.”¹⁴ They were allowed to be “portrayed as ‘explicitly sexual beings’” as long as their desire was aimed towards a member of the opposite sex.¹⁵ If they reflected “queerness” slightly, they were sent to the “musical underground” [which] foster[ed] a clandestine gay culture that was active but private and nocturnal.¹⁶ In the wake of criticism towards homosexuality and homosexual behaviour, only the performers who refrained from explicitly expressing their queer identity — or if they did, they did so only through coded language — were able to survive. For artists like Ma Rainey who publicly adopted a “queer personae,” openly dressed more masculine in the “butch” fashion and wrote and sang songs like *Prove It on Me Blues*, which is considered to be one of the first pieces of lesbian lyricism, the backlash from White mainstream society often meant the end of their careers.¹⁷ One of Paramount’s top-selling artists, Ma Rainey was dropped by the recording label only a couple of months after the release of *Prove It on Me Blues* in 1928. The label had even released advertisements encouraging people to buy the new record with a poster featuring Rainey dressed in butch fashion flirting with two women while a police officer looked on, calling it a “scandal.”¹⁸ Rainey not only toyed with gender in her attire, but also in the ways that she socialized with women, taking on the masculine role of the established social binary. However, provided women like her maintained an appearance of their assigned gender roles in public, they could do as they wished in private. For women in American society, it was established by rigid patriarchy that “you don’t eat” without male approval.¹⁹

Racializing Sexuality to Maintain Social Order

While women’s homosexual behaviours were treated as less of a legitimate threat to the social order because of their low station within the patriarchy, the treatment for gay men, including Black gay men, was much more reactive. Black men were to be viewed as paragons of masculinity who fought



“Prove it on Me Blues” Advertisement, *Chicago Defender*, September 22, 1928. Accessed from “Obscure Queer Blues.” Obscure queer blues script & gallery, November 2014. <https://queermusicheritage.com/nov2014s.html>.

daily to uphold the hierarchy and rise through its ranks. After the First World War, perceptions of masculinity and the ideal man had shifted to be much more hegemonic, needing to restore male dominance over the predominantly female workforce that had filled essential roles during the war. Additionally, President Harry S. Truman’s decision to desegregate military posts after the war provided a show of potential progress for Black Civil Rights as a reward for their masculine presentations and efforts. In the 1920s, medical and scientific “construction[s] of homosexuality” emerged to try to understand how a man could possibly be attracted to another man.²⁰ In one model, the dominant binary is perpetuated, believing that homosexuality could only be possible if one of the men experienced a gender inversion, “appropriat[ing] the female gender cultural mode,” while the other continued to “perform[...] the masculine role and [didn’t] distinguish [between] his relations with men” and women.²¹ In response to this betrayal to heteronormative society, homosexual men were further feminized by being described with

¹⁴ Chen, “Black Face, Queer Space,” 21.

¹⁵ Chen, “Black Face, Queer Space,” 21.

¹⁶ Chen, “Black Face, Queer Space,” 21.

¹⁷ Chen, “Black Face, Queer Space,” 21-22.

¹⁸ “Prove it on Me Blues” Advertisement, *Chicago Defender*, September 22, 1928.

¹⁹ Hicks, “Bright and Good Looking Coloured Girl,” 441.

²⁰ Kevin J. Mumford “Homosex Changes: Race, Cultural Geography, and the Emergence of the Gay.” *American Quarterly* 48, no. 3 (September 1996): 397.

²¹ Mumford, “Homosex Changes,” 397.

floral words such as “pansy” or “lily.” The terms became so popular “in the 1920s and 1930s that they were sometimes simply called ‘horticultural lads.’”²² By employing this discursive distancing, masculinities were able to separate themselves from homosexuality, an important distinction within the American social hierarchy. Similarly, “racialized gender inversion” was applied to explain why White women would engage in sexual affairs with Black women, claiming that Black women were manly enough that they could be used as a “substitute for the opposite sex” to fulfill a “White women’s heterosexual desire.”²³ With these explanations for gay and lesbian activity, the dominant binary appeared to remain as legitimate as “homosexuality was heterosexuality; the unnatural was natural.”²⁴

In a social model of explaining homosexuality, queerness was most often associated with Blackness, by distinguishing works that discussed homosexuality not as homosexual “but rather by locating [them] within another, readily available system of social and spatial hierarchy — race.”²⁵ Homosexual novels found themselves more often in the “coloured section” than anywhere else, inherently “racializ[ing] the homosexual text” and therefore racializing sexuality.²⁶ This stigmatized link became especially problematic when a “drag dance” was shut down by police in New York City, and after being studied by an “authority on sexual desires,” the patrons were labeled as having a kind of “social reverse complexion syndrome.”²⁷ Fearing that this syndrome could spread into the White population, groups like the Citizens’ Association of New York refocused their efforts into investigating Harlem’s interracial homosexual clubs. “The interracial nature of the encounter[s that would occur in these clubs] add[ed] a second element of transgression to the homosexuality.”²⁸ The Committee of Fourteen report released in 1927 identified Harlem as a hotspot for homosexual behaviours and alerted local police to the presence of “Black/White” homosexual clubs, stigmatizing speakeasies because of their location in African American neighbourhoods and because of the racial mixing they permitted.²⁹ This led to an increased police presence in New York’s identified “sex districts,” all of which happened to be

where African Americans socialized.³⁰

Erasing Black Queerness from Within

With queer activity labeled a sexual disorder, it became crucial for heteronormative Black people to separate themselves from queer culture, thereby giving them a more legitimate claim to a place in society. Popular Black authors W.E.B. Du Bois and Alain Locke both believed “in the power of Black art and literature for racial uplift.”³¹ However, Locke maintained that Black artists should only “depict themselves positively in order to raise the public reputation of Black people as a whole.”³² Du Bois agreed, arguing that “Harlem’s writers [should] avoid scandalous topics or low-life depictions” in order to create a vision of a “respectable Black middle class.”³³ Despite being gay himself, Locke’s greatest literary work, “The New Negro”, an essay that supposedly details the entirety of the Black American experience, includes no mention of sexuality or same-sex desire, erasing the Black gay narrative from this piece of history.³⁴

As a new generation of Black queer writers emerged in the 1920s, so did criticisms of Locke’s and Du Bois’ erasure of the Black queer American experience. Writers such as Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston took a more radical approach to art, writing on topics such as “homosexuality and prostitution” and rejecting Locke’s and Du Bois’ belief that honest representation was a burden.³⁵ Calling themselves the “Niggerati,” they were “possibly the first known fully antiracist intellectual and artistic group in American history.”³⁶ They rejected class racism, cultural racism, historical racism, gender racism, and even queer racism and sought to help the African American “climb [...] the Racial Mountain” to “discover himself” and the “beauty of his own people.”³⁷ In Hughes’ “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” he describes an “urge within the race towards whiteness,” desiring “to be as little negro and as much American as possible.”³⁸ Attempting to persuade people away from assimilation, Hughes’ greatest criticism of Locke and Du Bois was that they had been lost to their elitist concept of art and literature and were no

²² Simon Dickel, *Black/Gay* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2011), 90.

²³ Hicks, “Bright and Good Looking Coloured Girl,” 447-448.

²⁴ Hicks, “Bright and Good Looking Coloured Girl,” 448.

²⁵ Mumford, “Homosex Changes,” 396.

²⁶ Mumford, “Homosex Changes,” 396.

²⁷ Mumford, “Homosex Changes,” 399.

²⁸ Dickel, *Black/Gay*, 92.

²⁹ Mumford, “Homosex Changes,” 403.

³⁰ Mumford, “Homosex Changes,” 403.

³¹ Dickel, *Black/Gay*, 80.

³² Dickel, *Black/Gay*, 80.

³³ Dickel, *Black/Gay*, 80-81.

³⁴ Dickel, *Black/Gay*, 81.

³⁵ Dickel, *Black/Gay*, 81.

³⁶ Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning*, 324.

³⁷ Langston Hughes, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” *NATION* (June 3, 1926): 692.

³⁸ Hughes, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” 692.

longer loyal to the truthful depiction of the African American experience.³⁹ By evaluating how white they must become for Black people to succeed in the United States, Hughes demonstrates how the dominant White western society has constructed and socialized an oppressive hierarchy that encourages marginalized communities to further oppress themselves, under the illusion that only those who are best assimilated will be rewarded. Hence why the Black community was so resistant to any queer expression that could hurt their progress.

While Hughes' claims were legitimate and fell on desperate ears, DuBois, who had a greater following and stronger literary foundation, found them to be "traitorous."⁴⁰ Locke had already begun to write about this new generation of Black artists in a way that maintained his whitewashed view of Black progress. He wrote in "The New Negro" that Black Americans were experiencing a "renewed [sense of] self-respect and self-dependence" separate from African American history, which painted the Niggerati in a negative light, as opposed to how they had established themselves in Hughes's "The Racial Mountain."⁴¹ He also warned that if Black Americans didn't understand and align themselves with "the ideals of American institutions and democracy" they would experience a "more calculated prejudice" and continued paternalism from the dominant race.⁴² This perceived threat to their progress was enough to convince many Black Americans that their best chance to demonstrate their loyalty to the social order was to oppress others within their own communities by targeting queer members. The result was the erasure of a representative black queer narrative. The "politically narrow and racially exclusionary" way of American modernism meant that Black writers from the Harlem Renaissance were excluded from modernist anthologies throughout the remainder of the twentieth century. As a result, Niggerati arguments such as those posited by Hughes were suppressed from the historical narrative until the 1970s and the African American Studies movement.⁴³ While "these 'New Negroes' helped to spark the Renaissance, they had no monopoly on its future."⁴⁴

Repercussions and Conclusion

The key to the survival of the Harlem Renaissance was its ability to remain unseen. As long as Black queer culture practiced sexual repression, remained segregated and underground while its members abided by their assigned social roles in the light of day, it could go on. But when it inevitably intersected with the greater Harlem population, Black queer artists began to experience targeted oppression. At first, this marginalization came from homosexuality being seen as an inherently Black disorder by heteronormative White society. It then became a tool for Black elites to develop a more nuanced social hierarchy, in which homosexuality was illegitimized and criminalized "within the eyes of the Black community."⁴⁵ The over policing of predominantly queer and Black neighbourhoods that followed these imposed prejudices and stigmas further instilled internalized racism and homophobia into these marginalized groups. The literary erasure of the Black queer American experience by writers like W.E.B. DuBois and Alain Locke set the tone for further queer oppression within the Black community through Civil Rights texts like *Giovanni's Room* and *Moynihan's The Negro Family*.

To conclude, in an effort to be awarded civil rights from a dominant population, marginalized groups, like African Americans or queer Americans, will align themselves with the interests of the dominant group by marginalizing weaker minorities within their own communities. The hierarchy that ensues should demonstrate that the oppressors are enlightened and assimilated into the White heteronormative society, worthy of their civil rights. Consequently, those that are oppressed are vulnerable to all of society's plights at the bottom of the hierarchy and any progress that they are caught enjoying is removed both from them and the historical record.

This paper has demonstrated that the "fragility and fluidity" of the Harlem Renaissance's sexuality, biological sex, race and aesthetics categories were unable to survive the pressures of 1920s American masculinity.⁴⁶ As a result, the Harlem Renaissance could not continue into the 1930s and Black communities were subject to enduring stigmatization and over policing, which remain persisting challenges today.

³⁹ Dickel, *Black/Gay*, 81.

⁴⁰ Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning*, 325.

⁴¹ Locke, "The New Negro," 10.

⁴² Locke, "The New Negro," 10.

⁴³ Dickel, *Black/Gay*, 82.

⁴⁴ Mitchell, "Black Renaissance" 650.

⁴⁵ Dickel, *Black/Gay*, 87.

⁴⁶ Dickel, *Black/Gay*, 94-95.

Work Cited

PRIMARY SOURCES

Hughes, Langston. "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain." *NATION* (June 3, 1926): 692-694.

Locke, Alain. "The New Negro: Introduction." In *The New Negro: An Interpretation*, edited by Alain Locke, 3-16. New York City: Albert and Charles Boni, 1925.

"Prove it on Me Blues" Advertisement, *Chicago Defender*, September 22, 1928.

SECONDARY SOURCES

Chen, Emma. "Black Face, Queer Space: The Influence of Black Lesbian and Transgender Blues Women of the Harlem Renaissance on Emerging Queer Communities." *Historical Perspectives: Santa Clara University Undergraduate Journal of History* 2, no. 21 (2016): 19-29. <http://scholarcommons.scu.edu/historical-perspectives>

Dickel, Simon. *Black/Gay*. Münster: LIT Verlag, 2011.

Hicks, Cheryl D. "Bright and Good Looking Colored Girl': Black Women's Sexuality and 'Harmful Intimacy' in Early-Twentieth-Century New York." *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 18, no. 3 (September 2009): 418-456. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20542731>

Kendi, Ibrahim X. *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America*. Bold Type Books, 2017.

Mitchell II, Ernest Julius. "'Black Renaissance': A Brief History of the Concept." *African American Literary Studies: New Texts, New Approaches, New Challenges* 55, no. 4 (2010): 641-65. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41158720>

Mumford, Kevin J. "Homosex Changes: Race, Cultural Geography, and the Emergence of the Gay." *American Quarterly* 48, no. 3 (September 1996): 395-414. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30041687>

Russell, Thaddeus. "The Color of Discipline: Civil Rights and Black Sexuality." *American Quarterly* 60, no. 1 (March 2008): 101-28. <https://doi.org/10.1353/aq.2008.0000>.

