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Queer Orientations:

Desire, Race and Belonging in Queer American Literature, 1900-1940

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

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in English

by

Eric Hosbach Newman

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Queer Orientations:

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Professor Yogita Goyal, Chair

"Queer Orientations" moves between the Harlem Renaissance and American modernism to show the shared strategies and tropes through which early-twentieth-century queer American writers articulated their queerness and oriented themselves in the world as queer. Working through the frames of diaspora, Orientalist fantasy, the struggle between individuality and community, camp aesthetics and the scrapbook *roman a clef*, these writers offer us a varied and compelling account of how queers navigated belonging and relation during a moment when same-sex desire was caught between medical and ethnic theories of identity and subjectivity. By putting black and white writers in dialogue—Claude McKay and Willa Cather, Richard Bruce Nugent and Edward Prime-Stevenson, Nella Larsen and Djuna Barnes, Wallace Thurman, Charles Henri Ford and Parker

Tyler—I demonstrate the centrality of race to queer identification *and* how race distinguishes encounters with shared tropes and representational strategies. McKay's queer black diaspora offers an ephemeral utopia of transitory male community as a challenge to frameworks of diaspora grounded in the heterosexual family and the trauma of slavery. Cather's fiction reveals how diasporic racial histories appealed to white queers estranged from their biological families and communities of origin. Nugent and Prime-Stevenson adapt Orientalist tropes to imagine a transnational, multiracial queer kinship and relocate themselves in alternate origin stories beyond the limited constructions of family and race. In their writing about same-sex female relationships, Larsen and Barnes strip the cosmopolitan gay male identity from the first two chapters of its utopian glamour to reveal how differences in desire and type simultaneously allure and disappoint the queer subject. Thurman, Ford and Tyler develop a queer aesthetic within the autobiographical novel to preserve the worlds they saw fading from view in the 1930s. Drawing together often separated movements and authors, I offer a reading of early twentieth century queer modernist literature that demonstrates the dynamic relationship between the Harlem Renaissance and American modernism. Across chapters, my research relocates the conceptual force of contemporary debates in queer studies about desire, race and belonging in an earlier historical moment, excavating this archive's wrangling with queerness at a moment in history and tracing the echoes of that struggle across the twentieth century and into the present.

The dissertation of Eric Hosbach Newman is approved.

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INTRODUCTION

Desire, Race and Belonging in Queer American Literature, 1900-1940

A kaleidoscopic world surged and ebbed in early twentieth century queer American fiction by black and white authors. In Claude McKay's novels, a black writer's journey from Harlem to Marseilles captures the Black diaspora in the bodies of boys from Cameroon and Dakar as they collide in sexual dance or in the furtive fingers of pansies and dandies touching in the gin-soaked clubs of Prohibition America. In Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood*, a quack gynecologist living in Paris argues with his fellow queers over the best places to cruise for sex with as much energy as if they were founding "a new order of government."[1] A young white ex-pat recovering from the stings of homophobia at home finds romance and queer kinship in a strapping Hungarian soldier he meets at a café. In Harlem, a frustrated white, gay musician bursts into tears when he hears Countée Cullen's poem "Heritage" recited at a bar, feeling Cullen's "words as if they were [his] own."[2] A young African American man dressed as a geisha glides through the queer masquerade balls of New York, where he reconnects with the estranged white father who becomes his lover and clandestine husband. Two black women struggle against the normative conventions of their middle class communities, finding excitement and disappointment in the bodies of other women as they strive to build a freedom they cannot find. As the 1930s wear on and the queer coteries and haunts they used to love fade from view, black and white queers look back on a decadent decade with a mix of pain and pleasure, feverishly recording their experience in all its lush ambivalence for a

[1] Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood / Ladies Almanack* (New York: Quality Paperback Book Club, 2000), 116.

[2] Blair Niles, *Strange Brother* (New York: Arno Press, 1975), 56.

future to come.

What motivates these lines of flight, as black and white queers orient themselves in the world and articulate their lives in this literary archive? In what ways do they imagine new worlds and filiations at a time when the unparalleled public visibility of queer bodies in urban centers coincided with open confusion about the identity and subjectivity of those who went by the names Uranian, invert, fairy, pansy, dandy and bulldagger? How do these texts absorb and recast the signs and codes of their surrounding culture to build an aesthetics and politics distinctly their own?

Queer Orientations: Desire, Belonging and Race in Queer American Literature, 1900-1940 attends to these questions by distilling a theory of queer desire from the work of same-sex interested authors from the Harlem Renaissance, American Modernism and their peripheries. Examining work by Claude McKay, Willa Cather, Richard Bruce Nugent, Edward Prime-Stevenson, Nella Larsen, Djuna Barnes, Wallace Thurman, Charles Henri Ford and Parker Tyler, I outline the shared tropes, representational strategies, anxieties and affects that signal a variety of often competing queer desires in their work. While these desires take various forms across gender and race, they generally proceed along three common lines: the desire for liberation from origin and the freedom to construct their own origin stories, a simultaneous desire for racial others and a desire *to be* those racial others, and, finally, a desire for permanence at odds with their general embrace of the ephemeral pleasures of queer contact that seemed to offer an alternative world for them to inhabit.

These desires are, in Mobius strip fashion, both what orients queers in this archive and the effect of their orientation towards scenes, objects and others. In this vein, I follow

some lines from Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology*, in which she offers queer orientation as a condition of being "turned toward certain objects, those that help us find our way" and which conditions "how we inhabit spaces as well as 'who' or 'what' we inhabit spaces with."[3] *Queer Orientations* thus traces out how characters in this literary archive are shaped and moved by desires that attach them to certain objects and persons while detaching them from others. While I am careful to mark the ways in which their desires do not always get realized and moments in which they resist the thing they nonetheless desire, I understand their desiring movement as always oriented, so to speak, by the hope for a better, freer life. As they work toward that better life, they also open up questions about what same-sex desire means during a period when such desire was very much under-construction, indeterminately "queer" rather than "gay" or "lesbian" or "bisexual" in the way those terms signify desire and identity today.

In the sweep of time from the global scandal of the Oscar Wilde trials in 1895 to the sexual liberation that exploded during Prohibition in the 1920s and the legal crackdown on homosexuality that followed as the country lurched into the Great Depression, World War II and the dawn of the McCarthy era, queer Americans in metropolitan cities founds themselves or others like them the subject of public spectacles that were both condemnatory and celebratory. George Chauncey's account of the emergence, flourishing and retreat of a public gay culture from 1890-1940 challenges still-dominant cultural myths about early-twentieth-century homosexual culture as

[3] Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 1.

isolated, invisible and predicated on negative self-image.[4] While the dazzling connections across bodies and countries in my authors' texts reflect Chauncey's historical account, they also challenge his tendency to find a resistant, self-assured queer identity in them. Queers in my archive are often ambivalent in their accounts of queer desire and relation, sometimes succumbing to feelings of bitterness or failure while at other times transforming scenes of difficulty and disconnection into ephemeral utopias. While I find Chauncey's understanding of how homosexuals fashioned a life that fit their desires and social formations during the period extremely useful for capturing the wide range of associations that constellate something like queer subjectivity in these texts, I find that such creative play often went in different directions at once; hence, the ambivalence that characterizes this archive.

Queer Orientations argues that writers in this period used literature as a space to understand and preserve inchoate experiences and identities emerging around the scene of early-twentieth-century sexuality. From this perspective, queerness is not merely incidental to their writing, but rather saturates and informs their encounters with race, nation, origin, and the novel. I have organized these encounters into four core areas of exploration: how queers encounter diaspora as racial condition and as model for queer ontology, Orientalist fantasy and cross-racial identification, the failure of queer relation, and queer memorial aesthetics as a technology of historical preservation. As it pursues the ways in which queers orient and understand themselves, this dissertation articulates a theory of queer desire in early-twentieth-century American literature caught between the pull of belonging and an individualism or autonomy that is often seen as antithetical to

[4] George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Makings of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 2–5.

the scenes of relation that circulate in this archive. On the one hand, the queer desire for belonging grounds much of this archive's engagement with queerness as a site of fungible racial identification, including cross-racial identification, interracial desire and the desire to be free of race altogether. On the other hand, the desire for individuality or autonomy shapes the forms of relation that proceed from a desire for flexible belonging, especially cruising, in which ephemeral attachment to bodies is seen as a site for maximizing pleasure without concretizing relations into forms that become a burden for the subject.

In addition to providing a framework for understanding the ambivalence of desire during this period — its tendency to move in several, sometimes contradictory, directions — the dissertation's approach to queer American literature also enables us to tell a fuller story about the imbrication of queerness and race during the period as well as the relationship between the Harlem Renaissance and American Modernism more generally. In tandem with work by historians including George Chauncey, Ann Douglas and Siobhan Somerville, this dissertation reveals the ways in which queer identity was structured by not only the logic of race but also by then-contemporary discourses of race, especially with regard to diaspora as a model for imagining belonging and origin across time and space. Somerville's *Queering the Color Line* delineates the ways in which homosexuality emerged as a social identity directly in connection to the binary discourse of black/white, fusing blackness and queerness together at the site of a "deviant" identity determined by a hegemonic white and heterosexual culture. My research demonstrates how queers across the color line used that fusion of sexual and racial identification as they worked to articulate and imagine their queerness. This phenomenon influenced

white queers' recognition of themselves and their feelings of alienation in the discourse of racial struggle and history, while black queer writers often figured queerness as that which set them apart from their community and the bonds of a racially determined social and cultural identity. The ways in which the imbrication of race and sexuality are taken up by queer subjects in this archive cache out quite differently according to the subject's race or gender, even if the desires and strategies they use to identify themselves as queer are strikingly similar.

Finally, the ambivalent swing between belonging and alienation in this archive demonstrates the ways in which queer authors across milieus and literary movements took up and reframed for themselves some of the staple features of modernist literature in America. Their desire to belong – to a community, to a nation, to a race – in many ways puts them at odds with their mainstream modernist contemporaries, and thus a queer modernism searches out new forms of community and attachment to other bodies, races and nations. At the same time, the various aesthetic and affective homologies that saturate the texts in this archive reveal the linkages between white and black modernisms in American literature, enabling us to see how each was shaped in conjunction with the other at the site of a queer aesthetics and politics.

Scenes of Encounter

Queer Orientations revisits and traverses these literary scenes in ways that intervene in a variety of approaches to the period and its key figures, extending and connecting critical strains across disciplines including queer modernist literary studies, diaspora studies and contemporary queer studies. On the macro-level, these efforts are

aimed at broadening the racial lens of queer modernist studies that is still predominantly white-identified by putting queers of color and white queers in dialog, complicating debates about queer relationship to origins and queer desires for or resistance to the romance of community. Likewise, I have taken a position that recognizes no unified queer desire, identity and community from the writers in this study, but which rather sees their work as expressive of a deep ambivalence – sometimes bordering on confusion and incoherence – about relation to origin, others and the self as a part of a queer subjectivity-in-development during the period. In doing so, I have stepped away from the tempting tendency to shape the contours of queer modernism to meet the political prerogatives of the present — either as the embodiment of a radical or regressive queer political vision — in order to present their attempt to wrangle with the lines of flight that proceed from their orientations in ways that attend to their density, complexity and ambivalence.

Studies of queer modernist literature have tended to see the period as the embodiment of a number of discursive and political positions within queer history that stand as a corrective to what is often regarded as a kind of fallenness in contemporary LGBTQ politics. From this perspective, early twentieth century queer forebears are understood to have a useful purchase on questions of gay and lesbian identity, community and a persistent melancholy within queer subjectivity that indicates impasses crying out for a reinvigorated, radical queer politics in the present. In other words, queer writing from nearly a century ago meets many of the aspirations of an anti-assimilationist queer politics as expressed during the 1990s and early 2000s as a challenge to the nation form and the disclosure of a unified gay or lesbian identity. In these ways, queer modernist studies has also tackled both how queers across the twentieth century relate to the past as

well as the value of the modernist past for queer critics and politics in the post-millennial present.

One of the most influential studies for the type of work that I set out to do in *Queer Orientations* has been Christopher Nealon's *Foundlings: Gay and Lesbian Historical Emotion Before Stonewall*. Using the figure of the foundling, Nealon argues that early- and mid-twentieth-century gays and lesbians were split between contemporary medical and ethnic models that at once explained their identity to them and offered them an important sense of community beyond their isolation in the heterosexual family. On the one hand, queers could imagine themselves as "inverts" — subjects whose deranged psychology gave them the outward appearance of one gender, but the inner life and sexual preferences of the opposite gender — or as belonging to a sexual race that could be located in the historical presence of literary and cultural celebrities like William Shakespeare, Walt Whitman, Leonardo Da Vinci, Oscar Wilde and others. Nealon's study understands the queer yearning for an historical identity as one that anticipates a transhistorical "reunion with some 'people' or sodality" that could at once explain and resolve their thrownness in a world organized by the heterosexual family romance.[5] Nealon's brief articulation of the "diasporas of artisanal sensitives" that populate Willa Cather's novels and the "lesbian passion" that leads her to "make white women look like Indian boys or white boys look like black women" operate as a form of resistance to the pressures of heterosexual marriage and family[6] has been taken up in my thinking about diaspora as a particularly attractive model for white queers to understand their relation to

[5] Christopher Nealon, *Foundlings: Gay and Lesbian Historical Emotion Before Stonewall* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 2.

[6] Nealon, 92.

others both in the past *and* in the present. Thickening Nealon's archive by expanding its monochromatic account of queer desire for belonging during this period, my work in *Queer Orientations* explores how racial difference functioned as a strategy for queer identification across the color line.

Scott Herring's work in *Queering the Underworld* glosses the sort of subversive potential that critics find in the annals of queer modernism and challenges the longing for queer history that Nealon's writing addresses. Taking as his object the tradition of slumming literature and its investment in providing "normal readers" access to "subcultural legibility," Herring argues that queer modernist writers like Djuna Barnes thwart that urge for such knowledge by writing novels that are "fantastically anti-mimetic, representational wasteland[s]."[7] In such ways, Barnes and her contemporaries "break any promise of sexual legibility" for their readers in the past and for us as readers in the present. This convincing reading helps us gain purchase on some of the difficulties that plague Barnes' readers, and yet the claim that she thwarts our will to know is challenged by my analysis of her investigation of the mystery of queer desire and the impossibility of durable relation in *Nightwood*. If Barnes didn't want to provide a clear account of lesbian life in American and Europe during the early twentieth century, her characters are nonetheless remarkably interested in understanding their desires and the impasses that arise in their efforts to suture themselves to others. Likewise, while Herring claims that Barnes' writing and the pornographic photo collages of Carl Van Vechten refuse any clear historical access to the communities they capture, I argue that these texts and others in my study are sites of an affective history, a catalog of feelings that articulate how

[7] Scott Herring, *Queering the Underworld: Slumming, Literature, and the Undoing of Lesbian and Gay History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 16, 20.

queers negotiated identification and relation to the world. Such a catalog, I suggest, does provide an important connection between the past and the present.

The investment in affect as an index of queer identification and literary form has also been a point of departure for my engagement with Joseph Boone's masterful survey of queer modernist literature in *Libidinal Currents*. Boone's study makes a clear argument for queer modernist literature as a subset of mainstream modernism in which literary form and its political valences are shaped by the topography and culture of gay urban enclaves. The cross-racial identification that Boone describes in his reading of Blair Niles' *Strange Brother* — a process by which white queers identify themselves with racial, sexual and gendered others in order to free themselves of their own social categorization as gendered, racial and sexual subjects[8] — has been useful in formulating my own account of those imaginative crossings. I have expanded Boone's scope to think about how cross-identification works more broadly, not only in the cross-identification among white and black queers, but also how both groups identified with Orientalist fantasy in order to generate alternative filiations to race, nation and the family. While I find Boone's claim that the "worldliness, sophistication or disaffection" that structures the "resistance to interiorization" in queer modernist literature convincing, that sense is challenged by an expanded archive that treats the quest for the self and its relation to others as a central, if often frustrated, preoccupation of queer literature during this period.[9] By looking at their affects and affective impasses – what these characters appear to want and how they struggle to access it – my archive of queer modernist texts offers a

[8] Joseph Allen Boone, *Libidinal Currents: Sexuality and the Shaping of Modernism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 265–67.

[9] Boone, 206.

profoundly introspective wrangling with the incoherence and inescapable pull of queer longing and identification across race.

When Heather Love takes up the negative affects of queer modernist writing – its emphasis on suffering, abjection and loneliness – she does so to point out the persistence of those feelings in the queer present. Fundamental to Love's project, and much contemporary queer theory, is the question of how we relate to the past and what we expect to find there. Love doesn't want us to look back at queer history for affirmation, consolation or the promise of progress, but rather as the site of a shattering and impossible longing that we still feel in the present.[10] Love's intervention here follows a movement in queer literary studies that prioritizes the recognition of transhistorical trauma, often landing on melancholy as a particularly rich subject for explorations of queer affect. This trend has been contested by Michael Snediker, who challenges critics including Lee Edelman, Leo Bersani, Judith Butler and Lauren Berlant who treat melancholy as the privileged site of queer truth by exploring how "queer optimism" and pleasure might exist alongside or even in place of pain as a sustaining force for marginalized subjects.[11] In turning to the novelists who structure my study, I join Snediker in rethinking the archive that Love describes as "littered with the corpses of gender and sexual deviants,"[12] finding in its place an oscillation between pleasure and pain that allows queer characters to shape their own worlds through the possibility of contact with other

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[10] Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 43–45.

[11] Michael D. Snediker, *Queer Optimism: Lyric Personhood and Other Felicitous Persuasions* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 1–42.

[12] Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*, 1.

bodies and cultures. I am also encouraged by the moments of hope and utopian longing that characterizes much of the work I study here.

In my exploration of queer modernist writing, I have also worked to show how these oscillating affects play out across the color line, connecting more white-identified accounts of queer modernism with queer studies of the Harlem Renaissance. Taking Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s observation that the Harlem Renaissance was 'surely as gay as it was black,"[13] I have sought to illuminate not only how race shaped queerness in this archive but also how queerness shaped racial identity. A.B. Christa Schwarz's pioneering recovery of the "transference between race and sexuality" in the Harlem Renaissance as well as her biographical rendering of McKay, Nugent, Thurman and Countee Cullen's same-sex attraction — has been especially useful in the explorations of diaspora, racial fantasy and utopian longing in this study. Likewise, Shane Vogel's attention to the ways in which cabaret performance during the 1920s shaped the literary aesthetic of a queer Harlem Renaissance interested in "imagin[ing] alternative narratives of sexual and racial selfhood" and an uplift ideology outside of black bourgeois imperatives has been important for thinking through the alternatives and impasses of queer community in McKay and Larsen's fiction. While my interest is not in the alternative visions of uplift or the relationship between scenes of nightlife performance and literary form, Vogel's effort to provide a more expansive account of black queerness' cultural production and future-oriented vision have influenced my excavation of how queerness (re)directs narratives of origin, relation and possibility in Harlem Renaissance literature.

[13] Henry Louis Gates Jr., "The Black Man's Burden," in *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, ed. Michael Warner (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 233.

Essential to my thinking about encounters between queerness and race has been recent work on queer diaspora. Following in the wake of queer of color critique's emergence in the early 2000s[14], this work has focused on contesting narratives of diaspora from critics including Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy that prioritize heterosexuality in their saturation with the language of production, reproduction, purity and impurity. Gayatri Gopinath's challenge to these frameworks has insisted on a queer diaspora that (re)defines home and belonging "outside the logic of blood, purity, authenticity and patrilineal descent"[15] in ways that permit a more mobile and labile relationship to origin. Likewise, David Eng's writing on queer diaspora's capacity to imagine "other forms of family and kinship"[16] that help the queer diasporic subject navigate the complex relationship to race and nation undergirds much of my analysis. In addition, Martin Manalansan's account of how queer Filipino diasporic communities invent and reinvent traditions from their culture of origin in order to flourish in new contexts has help me see

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[14] Queer of color critique was first explicitly articulated as an analytical framework in Roderick Ferguson's *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique*. Building on the work of black feminist critics including Cathy Cohen, Barbara Christian and Audre Lorde, Ferguson's study defined queer of color critique as an analytical practice that understands racism as a cultural and political articulation that operates "generally as gender and sexual regulation" in ways that produce gendered and sexual otherness as marks of concatenating difference (3). See: Ferguson, Roderick A. *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004.

As queer of color critique has moved into nearly all fields of critical studies, it has become an important tool for contemporary queer theory and queer literary studies as it has shifted away from its origins in psychoanalysis to broader questions of globalization, neoliberalism, citizenship and cultural production, among other concerns. For a holistic mapping of these new directions, See: Eng, Halberstam and Muñoz. "What's Queer About Queer Studies Now?" *Social Text*. 23: 3-4 (Winter 2005). 1-16.

[15] Gayatri Gopinath, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 187.

[16] David L. Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 16.

how queers "play with the world" in order to realize, to the greatest extent possible, the fleeting utopias they seek out.[17]

While the work of queer diaspora theorists from post-colonial and global cultural studies has formed the basis of my theoretical approach to thinking the queer diaspora I am tracking in this dissertation, my work is also in conversation with a flurry of recent studies exploring the relationship between queerness and the African diaspora. Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley's pathbreaking work has recognized that "the black Atlantic has always been the queer Atlantic," marking the gaps in Gilroy's theorization of the Black Atlantic that have failed to account for "how queer relationships were forged on merchant and pirate ships, where Europeans and Africans slept [together]…[a]nd how queer relationships emerged in the holds of slave ships that crossed between West Africa and the Caribbean archipelago."[18] The *GLQ* special issue "Black/Queer/Diaspora" (in which Tinsley's article first appeared) drew together critics including Jafari S. Allen, Anna-Maurine Lara, Xavier Livermone and others committed to building out black queer studies and queer of color critique through readings of "radical black and Third World lesbian feminist art, activism and scholarship" from the post-World War II period.[19] Such studies move from Tinsley's historical moment to the present to account for how queerness shapes and is shaped by contemporary global black culture. One of the most important contributions to thinking black queer diaspora in the contemporary period has

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[17] Martin F. Manalansan, *Global Divas: Filipino Gay Men in the Diaspora* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 126–51.

[18] O. N. Tinsley, "Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic: Queer Imaginings of the Middle Passage," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 14, no. 2–3 (January 1, 2008): 191–92.

[19] Jafari S. Allen, "Black/Queer/Diasora at the Current Conjecture," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 18, no. 2–3 (2012): 211–48.

been Kobena Mercer's writing on how black gay British filmmakers have negotiated the loss of queer black identity across time and space, producing in its place a highly aestheticized and celebratory process of black gay image-making.[20] My contribution to this ongoing work has been to turn to the Harlem Renaissance as a fresh and underexplored site for queer encounters with diaspora that are grounded in pleasure and utopian possibility rather than trauma and loss. This is especially true in the work of Claude McKay, where the pleasure of queer contact converge and diverge from standard accounts of diaspora, creating out of the wreckage of the past a "luxuriant living up"[21] through the experience of ephemeral utopias.

That question of utopia, or the emphasis on the utopian turn of much of the literature surveyed in *Queer Orientations*, has been guided by the scholarship of José Esteban Muñoz. Though Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia* addresses a body of queer cultural production from a later era and emerges from the discipline of performance studies, his theorization of queerness as a "rejection of the here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world"[22] informs much of my readings in McKay, Cather, Barnes, Larsen, Thurman, Nugent, Ford and Tyler. These writers' works chart the lines of flight that take queers away from the insufficiency of origin to help them imagine new forms of pleasure and attachment across a range of racial and national contexts. Although many of the formations and filiations surveyed here end in states of

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[20] Kobena Mercer, "Dark & Lovely: Black Gay Image-Making," in *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 221–32.

[21] Claude McKay, *Banjo: A Story Without a Plot* (Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1929), 322.

[22] José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 1.

compromised or thwarted happiness, I also see a reflection of Muñoz's refusal of "the romance of singularity and negativity"[23] in this archive, especially in their straining to produce what he describes as "the affective and cognitive maps of the world that a critical queer utopianism can create."[24] This critically queer utopianism is the longing for a world or relation that exists at the horizon line, just beyond our grasp but orienting us toward something beyond the perils of the present. This is an orientation shared by all of the authors in my study.

Queer Evidence

As I explore how queer desire shapes the relation to origins and community that circumscribes subjectivity in this archive, my approach to these texts has been to treat them as ethnographic studies. In some of the production histories that surround these novels, that approach is natural: Claude McKay, for one, explicitly notes that he started writing *Banjo* (1929) as a response to Leopold M. Senghor's encouragement that he write something about the male community he circulated in in Marseilles[25]; Ford, Tyler and Thurman's novels are thinly-veiled accounts of their lives as writers in New York during the 1920s[26]. In other cases, it has been a result of how I understand the line between fiction and the real in this archive. It should be obvious that many of these novels are autobiographical to a greater or lesser extent, and that not a small number of them can be

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[23] Muñoz, 10.

[24] Muñoz, 18.

[25] Claude McKay, *A Long Way From Home* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1970), 221.

[26] Steven Watson, "Introduction," in *The Young and Evil* (New York: Gay Men's Press of New York, 1988).

categorized as *romans a clef*. The protagonist of Cather's "Paul's Case" (1905) is based on the author's nephew and the narrator of *Sapphira* is revealed to be Cather herself. Barnes wrote *Nightwood* (1936) about her turbulent and passionate relationship with the American sculptor Thelma Wood. Nugent's writing almost always references either himself or a barely disguised version of his friends and fellow writers. In Prime-Stevenson's *Imre: a memorandum* (1906), Oswald's expatriate flight from Britain to Hungary in search of a culture where homosexual love might flourish mirrors almost exactly the author's flight from America to Italy, where he felt he had found a more accepting world. Even if it weren't the fact of literary history that, as these authors tease out queer subjectivity and relation to the world in their fiction they are also working out how that subject position functions in the real world, it is nonetheless true that most of these novels are directly concerned with documenting a people, culture, or crisis in relation in ways that are ethnographic in character. From these novels, we learn about spaces, practices and modes of relation that give us purchase on how queers who straddled the mainstream literary establishment and the bohemian avant garde understood themselves in the world across race and gender. In place of first person narratives, these novels stand as a sort of queer record that can tell us stories about early-twentieth-century queer American experience.

My approach to evidence, or a particular way of reading queerness in these novels, has been informed by Muñoz's writing on the gesture and the ephemeral as the locus proper of queer evidence. Muñoz argues that, because "queerness has an especially vexed relationship to evidence" that emerges from the historical tendency for surveillance cultures to use evidence of queerness as a means of identifying and disciplining queer

subjects, queer studies must think beyond "traditional" understandings of evidence and explore instead "the trace, the remains, the things that are left".[27] This critical attunement to can help us not only recover queerness from its fugitive remainders, but also to see in gestures and ephemera queer strategies for self-expression against a hostile world and often through aesthetic forms hostile to queer presence. This has been especially helpful in thinking through the queer presence in Claude McKay, Willa Cather and Countée Cullen's writing. Of course, this evidence work has also been honed by Eve Sedgwick, whose early criticism pays particular *political* attention to the syntactical and grammatical disclosures of queerness in modern novels by same-sex loving authors including Henry James and Willa Cather.[28]

It is evident from my list of authors — Claude McKay, Willa Cather, Richard Bruce Nugent, Edward Prime-Stevenson, Nella Larsen, Djuna Barnes, Charles Henri Ford, Parker Tyler and Wallace Thurman — that *Queer Orientations* is neither a survey of the traditional canon of modernist literature nor the traditional canon of early-twentieth-century LGBT literature. Moving between and often outside the coteries of the Harlem Renaissance and Modernism, my archive seeks to excavate a broader reservoir of queer writing with an emphasis on shared affects, identifications, representational tendencies and aesthetic concerns rather than on a defined *movement*. As a consequence of this emphasis on what is shared across the color line, my work reveals the ways in which the boundaries often drawn between the Harlem Renaissance and American Modernism – as well as the authors who fall outside of those camps – are porous,

[27] Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 65–67.

[28] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 1–23, 73–102, 167–76.

evidence of a far more mutual constitution and influence than provided for by movement-identified histories.

This porousness is evident in the texts themselves and their account of a queer desire, politics and aesthetics shaped across race and canon. Black queer writers including Wallace Thurman and Richard Bruce Nugent frequently cite figures including Oscar Wilde, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, the European Decadents and others as central to their understanding of literature and queerness. Likewise, a number of my white queer writers account for their queerness by reference to racial others, especially African Americans, as evocatively shown in a scene from Blair Niles' *Strange Brother* (1931) in which her white gay male protagonist comes to queer consciousness while listening to Countee Cullen's "Heritage" (1925). It is striking to me that the shared affects, approaches and identifications of white and black authors in my study should speak so powerfully across their often segregated literary coteries; evidence, I suggest, for an affective link that at once supersedes social divisions and, as the study demonstrates in each chapter, is shaped by those divisions. In order to identify those common features of the literature surveyed in *Queer Orientations* and the ways that race nuances them, each chapter is organized as a dialog between a black author and a white author. The source of the connections in each chapter is the authors' shared investment in a particular frame for interrogating queer experience (the appeal of diaspora and Orientalist fantasy for articulating a queer relation to origin, race and the world), conflicting desires (the longing to belong and to live as an unbound, autonomous subject), and aesthetic tendencies (the embrace of camp and the scrapbook novel as modes of survival and preservation). Those connections lead to pairings that flout canons and coteries, enabling a more nuanced vision of queer desire

and imagination in the early twentieth century than one might otherwise get, especially with regard to the difference that race makes to a shared yearning for belonging, romance and relation to the world.

Following Queer Desire: an Itinerary of Our Lines of Flight

The first half of the dissertation is a rather utopian opening in which authors draw imaginative connections across race and geography in order either to recuperate a damaged set of relations to origins, family and nation or to invent affirmative histories and kinships seemingly out of whole cloth. As they do so, the authors in this section write about feelings of estrangement that lead to feelings of felicitous, if ephemeral, attachment to national, ethnic and racial others. For Claude McKay, that means cruising the bodies of the Black diaspora to find the pleasure-in-difference that keeps his protagonists moving forward and finding joy in a world structured to bind them to scenes of disenfranchisement, penury and pain. For Willa Cather's white queers from the plains and Pittsburgh, affinity for the glamour, fierceness and far-flung kinship they associate with tales of the Black and Jewish diasporas provides liberation from their unhappy origins in the countryside or industrial town. Shifting from the Black diaspora to Orientalist fantasy, Edward Prime-Stevenson reimagines Hungarian history to enable an Orient-identified Hungary to be the queer spiritual home of his gay ex-pat narrator, discovering in his romance with a gay soldier a homecoming to long-buried kinship. Richard Bruce Nugent's Orientalist fantasy of a mixed-race "geisha man's" queer racial identity, origin and filiation as the man marries and then falls out of love with his estranged white father. The vision of these writers is expansive in this part of the

dissertation, imagining new relations to others that redefine race, origin and family on their own terms.

In Chapter 1, "A Queer Diaspora: Claude McKay, Willa Cather and Communities of Feeling," I look at two very different writers in order to think about how queers navigate questions of origin, kinship and belonging. My reading of McKay's *Home to Harlem* (1928) and *Banjo* (1929) restages those novels as works narratively structured and politically informed by the practice of gay male cruising. As form and function, cruising encounters diaspora not as a narrative of loss steeped in the history of the African slave trade, but rather as a site for pleasurable contact with endlessly proliferating differences between the black bodies that come into contact in Harlem or the French port city of Marseilles. That their connections to other men wear out over geographic distance and time isn't rendered as tragedy, but rather as an opportunity to connect with other men or to meet former connections again in a new context. By relocating the narrative of the Black diaspora from an open, long-historical wound into an infinite global matrix of pleasures, McKay's queer diaspora is a resource for flourishing rather than failure. He also offers queer diasporic community as a form of making family through the ecstasies of male-male contact that are an escape from the rigid confines with which the novels treats heterosexuality. Turning to Willa Cather's writing, I demonstrate how feelings of dislocation from the heterosexual family and place of origin draw her white queer characters towards diasporic tales of far-flung kin. Working with Christopher Nealon's off-hand observation that Cather's fiction is centered around "diasporas of lonely sensitives," I parse what diaspora means to her characters and the resource that racial others afford to the male protagonists of "The Sculptor's Funeral" (1905), "Paul's Case"

(1905), and *One of Ours* (1922) as resources for imagining filiation with a community beyond home and country. I conclude the chapter with a reading of Cather's autobiographical novel, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940), that focuses on the young narrator's fascination with the stories of resilience and bravery told about two of the female slaves who lived on her family's plantation. As these women become sources of identification and desire for the narrator – who visually consumes their bodies in the retelling just as she consumes their stories – I show how white queer cross-racial identification at once inhabits a coalitional imaginary across the color line, but also produces itself by keeping racial others fixed as abject and traumatic figures. If McKay's queer encounters with diaspora reconfigures a relation to origin away from trauma and towards pleasure, Cather's narrators borrow the trauma of racial and ethnic others in order to build a more pleasurable world for themselves.

In Chapter 2, "A Queer Orientalism: Richard Bruce Nugent and Edward Prime-Stevenson's Cross-Racial (Af)filiation," I examine how Orientalist fantasy is taken up by black and white authors as both a queer signature and as a site of malleable racial, national and filial origins. In Nugent's "Smoke, Lilies and Jade" (1926), objects and rituals associated with the Orient invoke a sensorium of opium intoxication that frees him from the fixity of thought and identity, allowing him to articulate his erotic desire for another man and his identity as an artist in the tradition of Oscar Wilde. In *Gentleman Jigger* (c. 1928-1933, p. 2008), yoga practice and the techniques of the *Kama Sutra* are taken up as active strategies for producing art and navigating the dangers the young protagonist faces as he moves through a series of Mafiosi lovers. These threads are drawn together in Nugent's *Geisha Man* (c. 1933-1934, p. 2002), a posthumously published

fragment novel written on scraps of paper. The story centers on an interracial man who dresses as a traditional Japanese geisha and roams the streets and parties of New York City looking for the father/lover/husband who abandoned him as a child decades ago in Osaka. Leavening Orientalist fantasy as an escape from race with a recognition of the racist logic that underlies that fantasy, Nugent's writing explores how marginalization and racialization are produced and reproduced, even by those whose lives have been shaped by such processes. Turning to Edward Prime-Stevenson's gay romance *Imre: a memorandum* (1906), I explore the difference between Nugent's self-critical Orientalist fantasy and Prime-Stevenson's fetishistic delight in the foreignness of his protagonist's Hungarian lover. When Oswald meets the solider Imre, he instantly falls for what he describes as his "Oriental" charm and grace, eventually declaring himself Hungarian, devoted to a new king and country. If both authors use Orientalist fantasy in order to imagine their queer protagonists as distinct, bonded to some other kin and nation beyond the United States, we see again how white queer identification operates by keeping racial and ethnic others fixed as fantasies and how a black queer perspective shows considerably more awareness and nuance to such cross-racial identification. Taken together, Nugent and Prime-Stevenson queer the classic tropes of Orientalist fantasy in order to fashion cross-racial, transnational queer relation to the world. As they reinvent kinships across race and space, these queer writers revel in the pleasures of queer life while demonstrating a developing awareness about its costs.

The second half of the dissertation takes a decidedly darker turn, confronting the limits of the utopian relations set forth in the first half as queer characters struggle to maintain their connection to others and find a begrudging, painful freedom in lonely

autonomy. While the protagonists of Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood* (1936) and Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929) may have the same freedoms of transnational movement and independence that their male counterparts in the first half of the dissertation do, they do not resolve in the same happy attachments between members of same-sex community. The protagonists of these novels yearn for a space in which they might succeed alone, disappointed or unable to live in relation with the various women in whom they see romance or a future. While the novels of Charles Henri Ford, Parker Tyler and Wallace Thurman revel in scenes of gay partying and sex, they are also exceedingly anxious about the durability of the ecstatic life they record. While tensions between race and sexuality remain as pronounced in these later novels as they have in their earlier counterparts, they squarely face the possibility of queer erasure, bending the novel form between anti-sentimental camp and the *roman a clef* in order to capture and preserve queer life for a future yet to come. Leavening the rather easy optimism of the first two chapters with the challenges of living queer in the early-twentieth-century, the last two chapters work out how limitations on queer life were navigated by male and female authors across the color line.

In Chapter 3, "An Impossible Community: Nella Larsen, Djuna Barnes and the Crisis of Queer Belonging," I look at two novelists whose women-oriented protagonists' freedom of movement and attraction to various women cannot forestall their feelings of alienation from scenes of romance and community. I read *Nightwood* (1936) as a break-up tale in which protagonist Robin Vote falls for both Nora Flood and Jenny Petherbridge but, because each woman's desire for history, kinship and attachment are different, she cannot stay in relationships with either of them. As she cruises lovers across countries

and oceans, Robin's mobility leads her not to a series of pleasurable encounters, but rather to a trail of wrecked loves as she searches for a romance that won't force her to confine herself to the prison of a fixed, permanent partner. For Barnes' characters, the impossibility of romantic relation and the crisis of belonging that it instantiates does not hinder their search for an elsewhere where they might find felicitous attachment. Turning to Larsen's novels, I find a similar oscillation between utopian possibility and disappointment for the female protagonists of *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929). As Helga Crane attaches herself to women who promise her a new life throughout *Quicksand*, she soon finds them dissatisfying, either because they do not match her aesthetic taste or her longing for ecstatic community. If relationships with women always offer a new source of hope to Helga, they are always unable to secure for her the freedom from the burden of race and family that she longs for. In *Passing*, the queer attraction between Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry promises both an escape from race and from the strictures of their communities. While this mutual attraction is a source of fantasy for a life not lived, Irene is ultimately unable to surrender the security of her home and reputation in order to hazard the freedoms suggested by Clare's sensual smile. Rather than bring the two women together, their mutual attraction pulls them apart, ending the novel in Clare's dramatic death and the end of all queer possibility. By drawing Barnes and Larsen together, I argue that not only can we see the ways in which mobility and autonomy failed to secure the utopian vision of gay male writing for women, but also to mark the ways in which the very desire for belonging that motivates much of my archive's queer pursuit of happiness often finds uneasy resolution in the conformity and pressure that attends membership in any community.

In Chapter 4, "A Queer Memorial: Wallace Thurman, Charles Henri Ford, Parker Tyler and the Queer Historical Novel," I look at *Infants of the Spring* (1932) and *The Young and Evil* (1933) to consider how these queer *romans a clef* embrace camp and common representational tropes in queer literature from the period as a practice of history-keeping. Rebutting popular critical strains that figure *Infants of the Spring* as a bitter repudiation of the Harlem Renaissance's more radical wing of black artists, I revisit the novel as deeply mournful of a movement and possibility that had faded away at the time of Thurman's writing. The novel's party scenes offer us a glimpse of the utopian possibility nestled within the black queer formation that Thurman dubs the "Niggerati" as interracial sexual contact promises both the protagonist and his milieu the possibility of overcoming racial segregation, while the "emotional hangover" that follows shows the fissures in race and relation that make such a utopian dream impossible in the present. In *The Young and Evil*, Charles Henri Ford and Parker Tyler struggle to capture the rhythms and fantasy of their queer life in a novel that explodes all over a queer fantasia of New York. As their characters plumb parties and encounters with law enforcement, they struggle to understand what homosexuality is and what it signifies, moments in which *The Young and Evil* becomes a sharp and moving account of queerness at the beginning of the twentieth century in all its confusion and ambivalence. In both novels, my analysis bears witness to the urgency of representation and preservation that drove their authors to write and to the shared aesthetic strategies – camp and the *roman a clef* —that enabled them to use the formal malleability of the novel to capture scenes of queer life beyond the proscriptions of sentimental romance or didactic realism that defined the fiction of their day.

In the coda that closes *Queer Orientations*, I meditate on the uses of queer modernist literature today. I argue that these texts help us see the impasses that attend our vision of queer progress across time, attending to both what we expect from queer relation — the triumphant narrative of the arrival into one's "queer family," for example — and how those promises at once motivate and frustrate queer encounters with community and others. I also etch out some of the trajectories for black and white queer American literature in the period following World War II, noting how queer modernist literature helps us to see the long durée of the centrality of race to queer identity. Finally, by exploring the representation of early-twentieth-century queer life and romance in Cheryl Dunye's *The Watermelon Woman* (1996) and Isaac Julien's *Looking for Langston* (1989), I claim that the persistent desire for this particular past in the queer present performs similarly creative acts of history-making and remaking as the source texts and periods on which contemporary queer culture draws. Rather than see our investment in queer modernist culture as a signal of our fallen politics or the persistence of trauma, I argue that queer modernist literature helps us see a relationship to the past that is not merely damaged or damaging. Rather, it points us to the site of an ongoing quest for a better world that has not yet arrived and which, in Muñoz's utopian figuration of queerness, may ever exist for us on the horizon as the ideality toward which our desires are oriented.

CHAPTER ONE

A Queer Diaspora: Claude McKay, Willa Cather and Communities of Feeling

Countée Cullen's "Heritage" (1925) is often read as a universal expression of the modern African-American subject's embattled connection to racial roots in an African culture, community and history severed by the experience of slavery and diaspora. "*What is Africa to me?*" asks Cullen's narrator, torn between belonging to a modern, Christian America and the call of an African past that entreats him to "Come and dance the Lover's Dance!/ In an old remembered way."[1] However, there is a curious detail rarely discussed in criticism (and sometimes even excised from reprints) that brings a queer valence to Cullen's landmark poem: its dedication to Harold Jackman, Cullen's lover.[2] Jackman was the groomsman with whom Cullen took off on a Paris honeymoon, leaving his bride, W.E.B. Du Bois's daughter Yolande, behind in New York to the hectoring fanfare of the local black press. The marriage would last only two years, during which correspondence

[1] Countée Cullen, "Heritage," in *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader*, ed. David Levering Lewis (New York: Penguin, 1994), p.244-247, ll. 90, 80-83.

[2] Straight-washed versions of the Harlem Renaissance tend to identify Harold Jackman as "Cullen's closest friend," the term used in the explanatory notes printed in the *Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (2004, 2nd ed.). Thomas Wirth claims that while both Cullen and Jackman "were sexually interested in other men," there is little hard evidence of a sexual relationship. A review of Cullen's correspondence, especially letters to Jackman from the years 1923-1926, tells a different story. Cullen's desperate longing for Jackman's attention and the "dignified pain" he associates with news of Jackman's "crushes"—Jackman was, as George Chauncey details in *Gay New York*, known as "the most handsome man in Harlem"—indicate an attachment far beyond mere homosocial friendship. See: Cullen, Countee. Letters to Harold Jackman 1923-1926, Box 1, Folder 19-20, Countee Cullen Collection 1903-1946, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University; and Thomas H. Wirth, "Introduction," in *Gay Rebel of the Harlem Renaissance: Selections from the Work of Richard Bruce Nugent* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 29.

between Du Bois, his daughter and Cullen reveals the couple's struggle with sexual incompatibility and the extremely close relationship between Cullen and Jackman. [3]

The dedication of "Heritage" to Jackman brings the question of queerness to the poem's representation of diasporic disconnection to a pastoral, heterosexual vision of Africa. Those "Strong bronzed men" and "regal black/Women from whose loins [Cullen] sprang" mark the site of an origin and its genealogical reproduction to which the poet is twice estranged, cut off from both Africa and heterosexuality.[4] Overwhelmed by his imaginative tour through the place of origin, the speaker observes "wild barbaric birds" and "massive jungle herds" trampling through the "defiant grass" where ambiguously gendered "young forest lovers lie," while the thundering beat of "great drums throbbing through the air" causes the narrator to cover his ears for fear of going deaf.[5] Further, the speaker observes that the "book one thumbs" to find out about Africa leaves certain characters "unremembered": the "bats/ Circling through the night" and the stealthy "cats/ Crouching in the river reeds,/ Stalking gentle flesh," figures that suggest a sexual presence lurking in the shadows.[6] Throughout the poem, the narrator's words suggest a

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[3] For a thorough account of the Cullen-Du Bois wedding, *the* defining social event of black American intellectual life during the 1920s, and Jackman's role in its demise, see: Jacqueline C. Jones, "'So the Girl Marries': Class, the Black Press, and the DuBois-Cullen Wedding of 1928," in *The Harlem Renaissance Revisited: Politics, Arts, and Letters* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 45–62.

[4] Cullen, "Heritage," ll. 4–5.

[5] Cullen, ll. 4–5, 13-17-21.

[6] Cullen, ll. 31–36. The nightliness of these figures corresponds to queer modernist alignment of the night with homosexuality, as is the case in Joseph Boone's reading of Barnes' *Nightwood* and Nugent's "Smoke, Lilies, and Jade" in Joseph Boone's account. See: Boone, Joseph Allen. *Libidinal Currents: Sexuality and the Shaping of Modernism*, 204–287. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998.

double signification that captures not only diasporic "connection and disconnection"[7] to Africa as origin, but also a queer disconnection to the heterosexual narratives that reproduce and articulate that origin. In other words, the dedication poses a question about how queers, and queerness, might encounter the black diaspora and the question of origin beyond the heterosexual family and its reproduction.

Much of the emerging debate about how to conceptualize queer diaspora has wrangled with models proposed by foundational thinkers including Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy.[8] Hall figures diasporic subjectivity as that which emerges amid bifurcating claims of racial origin as constitutive of the "true" self or as a "process of becoming that articulates the subject as an evolutionary product of braided geopolitical histories."[9] This vexed ontological status organizes diasporic identity around the affective and embodied pole of an origin that is both real and unreal, neither locatable in a fixed past nor wholly imagined. Diasporic "histories have their real, material, and symbolic effects," Hall

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[7] These are the terms that critic Joanne Hyppolite uses to describe the Haitian-American condition. Haitian-Americans experience a double-otherness in that they are neither accepted as "American" in the U.S. nor as "Haitian" in Haiti because of they are caught between two languages, two cultures, two places. See: Joanne Hyppolite, "Dyaspora," in *The Butterfly's Way: Voices from the Haitian Dyaspora in the United States* (New York: Soho Press, 2001), 7–12.

[8] It is important to note that both Gilroy and Hall's work emerges from a particular Black British engagement with diaspora sociology and aesthetics. Such an approach tends to place more emphasis on postcolonial identities and struggles germane to the relationship between the historical British Empire and its colonies as constitutive of (Black British) diasporic identity. By contrast, the African American context centers the conditions and experiences of slavery in the United States. There is also a distinct temporal difference between these discourses. Black British identity largely emerged in the middle of the 20th century following successive waves of Caribbean immigration to England identified with the so-called "*Windrush* generation;" the diasporic thinking I track in this chapter belongs to early twentieth century American culture and its literary representation. As such, Black British discourses refer both to a more immediate diaspora from former British colonial centers to England *and* the longer historical diaspora of African peoples out of Africa at the hands of the Atlantic slave trade.

[9] Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), 224.

explains, "[b]ut it no longer addresses us as a simple, factual 'past,' since our relation to it, like the child's relation to the mother, is always-already 'after the break.'"[10] In his seminal theorization of the Black Atlantic, Gilroy recuperates that filial break as the incubator of new, anti-nationalist political subjectivities. He extends Hall's argument in order to understand racial identity and its attendant cultural products as admixtures, the very terms of which—creolisation, métissage, mestizaje, hybridity—name "the processes of cultural mutation and restless (dis)continuity" that generate the revolutionary relation of the diasporic subject to essentialist discourses of race and nation.[11] Thus, diaspora offers a mode of association at the crossroads of identity, one in which the subject negotiates the pull of varying institutional sites of belonging—race, nation, culture—in ways that destabilize all such monolithic institutions.

Writing in the wake of Hall and Gilroy, scholars of queer diaspora have further examined how queerness explodes the fixed relationship to origins and genealogy that undergird their accounts of diaspora. Gayatri Gopinath takes both Hall and Gilroy to task for the maleness and heterosexuality of their visions of diaspora, for leaving off the table the ways in which queers and women reorient questions about a relation to an origin-image that excludes both women and non-heterosexual subjects. Gopinath is equally wary of the ways in which the proliferating differences Gilroy and Hall celebrate as constitutive of diasporic culture are "produced on the terrain of [a] corporate globalization" that colludes with imperialist interests bound up with the erasure of gender and sexual minorities *within* communities of color. A queer diaspora, Gopinath argues,

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[10] Hall, 226.

[11] Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 2.

challenges any easy relationship to tradition, culture and national belonging without recourse to dominant nationalist cultures or to Western understandings of sexual identity and organization.[12] Thus, the turn to origin is always a remaking of "the space of 'home' from within" such that the violence, exclusion and political possibility of origin become visible and open to critique.[13] As such, a queer diaspora suggests "alternative forms of collectivity and communal belonging that redefine [origin] outside of a logic of blood, purity, authenticity, and patrilineal dissent"[14] in ways resonant with the queer longing that suffuses Cullen's poem.

Published two years before Gopinath's *Impossible Desires*, Martin Manalansan's *Global Divas* explored similar territory in examining the "alternative" collectivities forged among gay Filipino men in New York City that reshape and challenge the solidity of national and extra-national cultures. Rather than articulate itself through pre-existing frameworks of gender, sexuality and nationality, *bakla* identity emerges amid "shifting positions and conditions" that structure its "mercurial and dynamic" forms of self-(re)presentation.[15] The relationship to "home," as a site of ethnic inclusion and homosexual exclusion, must be negotiated across the "postcolonial cultural and psychic displacement" that informs queer Filipino migration to the United States.[16] These negotiations take the form of cultural performances (drag pageantry and a unique Filipino gay male argot) that activate a national nostalgia while at the same time reinventing

[12] Gopinath, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures*, 11.

[13] Gopinath, 14–15.

[14] Gopinath, 187.

[15] Manalansan, *Global Divas: Filipino Gay Men in the Diaspora*, x.

[16] Manalansan, 137.

cultural traditions abroad in ways that make them more gay inclusive than in their homo-exclusive "home" culture. Drag performances of the Santacruzan religious ritual — itself the hallmark of Spanish colonial presence in the Philippines — for example, are a scene in which gay Filipino men in the diaspora "play with the world" in ways that enable these "diasporic deviants" to articulate their experiences as immigrants, postcolonial subjects and gay men.[17] It is that postcolonial experience that forges the core of Manalansan and Gopinath's critique, each taking aim at the homogenizing global gay identity organized by the white gay gaze in the West.

If Manalansan and Gopinath's work helps to better articulate the ways in which queers of color negotiate their displaced relationship to origins in diaspora, their models are not entirely apt for articulating the particularity of Cullen's struggle in "Heritage." "Home" for the South Asian, Southeast Asian and Cuban[18] queer publics that populate the writing on queer diaspora since the turn of the twenty-first century refers to a site of specific, *lived* postcolonial memory. It is the absence of that specific lived memory that Cullen struggles with as the problem of "heritage" for the black diasporic subject "three centuries removed" from the diverse linguistic, cultural and spiritual traditions collapsed into an "Africa" imagined as a homogenous nation-continent. In other words, origin marks a place from which the subject has been severed by a rift in time, language and

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[17] Manalansan, 143.

[18] While Manalansan and Gopinath center their analysis on queer diasporas in a Southeast Asian and South Asian context, respectively, there has been a substantial volume of work on Latino and black queer diaspora in a Cuban context from scholars including José Estéban Muñoz, Jafari S. Allen and Benigno Sánchez-Eppler. See: Jafari S. Allen, *¿Venceremos? : The Erotics of Black Self-Making in Cuba* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 1–18; José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 119–200; Benigno Sánchez-Eppler, "Reinaldo Arenas, Re-Writer Revenant, and the Re-Patriation of Cuban Homoerotic Desire," in *Queer Diasporas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 154–82.

culture that the black diasporic imaginary overcomes by identifying that origin in an entire continent rather than the specific national, linguistic and cultural practices of the more circumscribed national and/or geopolitical contexts in which Gopinath and Manalansan situate their critiques. Such differences make a direct mapping of queer diaspora theory based in South Asian, Southeast Asian and Cuban populations fraught for those looking to articulate a *black queer diaspora* in the Western hemisphere. If theorizing diaspora is centrally concerned with how subjects negotiate "home" between origin and the diaspora, its models depend a great deal on the specific geopolitical history of the diasporic subject.

In the past decade, a small but influential group of critics working in black diaspora studies has moved to address this question of historical specificity in articulating and recuperating a queer black diaspora. Chief among these is Kobena Mercer's analysis of black gay filmmaker Isaac Julien's *Looking for Langston* (1989), a film that creatively mines the ambiguity surrounding Langston Hughes' sexuality and the scene of the Harlem Renaissance to reconstruct a black gay identity – one that is never singular, but rather multiple, indeterminate – from the vantage point of Julien's late twentieth century black British subject position. Mercer argues that Julien's creative representation of a fictional homosexual relationship between Hughes and another black man (one that borrows the names "Alex" and "Beauty" from Richard Bruce Nugent's "Smoke, Lilies, and Jade") functions both to produce a highly aestheticized, and therefore celebratory, black gay image and to explore how "the loss of access to the object of desire [can become] the very source of fantasy itself."[19] Natasha Tinsley's pathbreaking reexamination of Gilroy's Black Atlantic recuperates it as an historical process that has

[19] Mercer, "Dark & Lovely: Black Gay Image-Making," 225.

always also included a "queer Atlantic," one in which same-sex intimacies "[emergent] in the holds of slave ships" tell their own story of the traumatic movement from West Africa to the Western hemisphere.[20] Scholars including Jafari S. Allen and Tavia Nyong'o have explored the trajectories of contemporary art in the Black Radical and Third World feminist traditions, alongside homophobic and anti-black constructions of the global AIDS crisis in order to complicate the easy homogenization of black queer identity as it gets taken up in diaspora discourse since the 1970s.[21] These studies are themselves informed by the turn to queer of color critique first articulated by Roderick Ferguson's *Aberrations in Black,* in which Ferguson extended black feminist inquiry to focus specifically on queerness and its relationship to economic and social discourses of black identity.

While these studies have been essential both for their groundbreaking work in conceptualizing a black queer diaspora, there has not yet been sufficient attention paid to its articulation during the Harlem Renaissance, one of the most important and influential movements in black American cultural production. A notable exception has been Shane Vogel's pathbreaking work on the so-called Cabaret School of the Harlem Renaissance. Vogel explores how the underworld and transgressive cabaret scenes of Harlem's "everynight life" offered an alternative imaginary of "social organization, relationality, and ethics" for black life, indeed, a new vision of uplift sharply distinct from the

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[20] O. N. Tinsley, "Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic: Queer Imaginings of the Middle Passage," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 14, no. 2–3 (January 1, 2008): 191–192,

[21] See: Allen, "Black/Queer/Diasora at the Current Conjecture"; Tavia Nyong'o, "'I've Got You Under My Skin': Queer Assemblages, Lyrical Nostalgia, and the African Diaspora," *Performance Research* 12, no. 3 (2007): 42–54; Nadia Ellis, *Territories of the Soul: Queered Belonging in the Black Diaspora* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).

respectability politics of W.E.B. Du Bois and the black middle class.[22] While I share Vogel's interest in how queerness informs the politics of the Renaissance, the question of diaspora is not his central focus. Thus, a turn to the question of diasporic consciousness in the queer Harlem Renaissance offers an important opportunity to explore how queerness encounters diaspora at the height of its nationalist discourse in the era's engagement with Pan-Africanist and black internationalist thought. A queer Harlem Renaissance populated by figures including Claude McKay, Richard Bruce Nugent[23] and Countee Cullen challenges and bolsters the very conceptual frames of diaspora articulated by Gilroy, Hall and others. If the Harlem Renaissance's queer diaspora speaks to the hybridity and diversity of global black cultures in ways analogous to these thinkers, it also tends to supplant the traumatic hauntology of slavery in favor of the pleasures of contact between bodies as that which binds and defines diasporic community. It was that emphasis on the pleasures of the racially, sexually and economically-mixed milieu of Harlem's bar and cabaret scenes that many have credited with the politics, aesthetics and downfall of the Harlem Renaissance as the United States moved into the Great Depression.

Exploring the articulation of queer diaspora in the Harlem Renaissance also enables us to confront the way in which early twentieth-century queers oriented themselves in the world across the color line. As I argue in this chapter, queer diaspora

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[22] Shane Vogel, *The Scene of Harlem Cabaret: Race, Sexuality, Performance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 17, 13.

[23] I am thinking here of Nugent's short story, "Sahdji," set in an ahistorical African tribal village. The story moves around a love triangle between a chief's son, the chief's wife and the son's admiring male friend that resolves in regicide. See: Richard Bruce Nugent, "Sahdji," *Gay Rebel of the Harlem Renaissance: Selections from the Work of Richard Bruce Nugent* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 63–74.

offers us both an understanding of the particular ways that queerness inflected the diasporic imaginaries of Harlem Renaissance writers *and* the tremendous appeal of diaspora for white queers struggling to understand their own place and history at the turn of the century, when ideas about homosexuality were split between medical and ethnic discourses.[24] That is to say, that where queer meets diaspora in the search for a "home," it also offers adaptive modes of identification that gesture toward the queer social-yet-to-come predicated on the proliferation of difference and its attendant pleasures. Black and white authors encounter the substance and structure of that utopian desire differently. One need look no further than the reception of Carl Van Vechten's polemical novel *Nigger Heaven* to understand the critique of white queer cultural appropriation of black culture as a central tension in the interracial aesthetics and politics of the Harlem Renaissance. This question—of white queers' appropriation and objectifying fascination with black culture at the beginning of the twentieth century—will be addressed in the present discussion of Willa Cather's fiction and will remain a central concern for considerations of white queer orientation and identification throughout the dissertation.

The following chapter addresses the possibilities emergent in thinking about queer diaspora at the beginning of the twentieth century by my reading of a rather strange pair: Claude McKay and Willa Cather. I begin the first half of the chapter by reading the

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[24] Nealon, *Foundlings*, 5–7.
The prevalence of the ethnic model, both in the early twentieth century and in the gay political movements of the post-Stonewall era, can also be explained by the imbrication of racial and sexual marginalization during this era. That imbrication is the subject of Siobhan Somerville's *Queering the Color Line*, which argues that popular and legal understandings of homosexuality emergent in American culture in the early twentieth century were markedly reliant on the black/white binarism of the color line. Somerville's work demonstrates that, far from being unrelated, race was essential to the cultural construction of homosexuality in American life, a legacy that we live with even today. See: Siobhan B. Somerville, *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture*, Series Q (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 1–38.

difference that queerness makes to the diasporic scenes of McKay's *Home to Harlem* (1928) and *Banjo* (1929), claiming that whenever we see diaspora in these two popular novels, we also see queerness. I argue that queerness is inextricable from the texts' cruising movement and that its articulation of a queer diaspora aligns with and challenges the frames provided by Gopinath, Manalansan, Hall and Gilroy. These contestations generally center on the constitution of a fractured and hybrid subject through pleasure rather than historical trauma, the longing for "home" as an object that might be fashioned and mobilized on one's own terms, and the queer diasporic subject's unique relationship to the forms of social intelligibility attached to institutions like the family, community and nationality. In the second half of the chapter, I turn to Willa Cather's short fiction and her Pulitzer Prize-winning war novel *One of Ours* (1922) to chart the expression of a white queer diasporic feeling — what we might call, following Raymond Williams, the appropriation of a "structure of feeling" from black diaspora narratives[25] —recuperating the latter not as Cather's singularly "patriotic" novel but to instead reveal the ways in which it is deeply ambivalent about the very concept of patriotism. In other words, a queer reading of the novel troubles the very stability of the national imaginary that would seek to claim her protagonist as "one of ours." I also explore the protagonists' queer identification through temporal, spatial and affective feelings of dislocation that are often articulated in reference to the Jewish and Black diasporas. Finally, I turn to Cather's last novel, the semi-autobiographical *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940), to explore how

[25] Williams' terminology, originally used to indicate the yet-to-be-worked out forms of thinking at a given historical moment reliant on the fissures between legal and administrative discourse and its literary manipulation as a form for making life and its conditions intelligible, is adapted here to think about how a particular mode of cultural self-articulation may be adapted across categories of racial and sexual experience. See: Raymond Williams, "Structures of Feeling," in *Marxism and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 128–35.

cross-racial desire and filiation makes possible the queer, anti-normative femininity of the novel's narrator (who is revealed to be a younger Cather at the end of the novel). In doing so, I wish to show white queer diasporic feeling as appropriation and as a homologous structure of feeling, as both a strategy for queer identification and a problem. Taken together, McKay and Cather's queer diasporas give us purchase on their shared anti-nationalism and their openness to difference as linked modes of queer orientation and identification in the world at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Queering Diaspora in *Home to Harlem* and *Banjo*

Written and published while Claude McKay moved between France and North Africa, *Home to Harlem* (1928) and *Banjo* (1929) offer readers one of the earliest representations of modern black diasporic life. Charting the subjects' movement through the speakeasies, cabarets and back alleys of Harlem and Marseilles, the novels articulate themselves through the music, languages and scenes that attest to the cultural hybridity characteristic of Hall and Gilroy's writing on the cultures of black diaspora. Critics including Brent Hayes Edwards and Winston James have provided thoughtful analysis of the ways in which music and a revolutionary proletarian politics function to suture disparate global populations of black men *and* provide an alternative to the respectability politics that distinguished many Renaissance writers.[26] However, such studies often neglect to take into account the ways in which McKay's diaspora is articulated alongside and often through representations of queer counterpublics of dandies, pansies, wolves,

[26] Brent Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003); Winston James, *A Fierce Hatred of Injustice: Claude McKay's Jamaica and His Poetry of Rebellion* (New York: Verso, 2001).

and fairies[27] who move between the periphery and center of critical scenes. That pleasure is also achieved through the relational logic and practice of gay male cruising that I understand as the structure and mode of nascent political self-discovery that shape these novels. That is to say that gay cruising brings together bodies in *Home to Harlem* and *Banjo,* fomenting the orgiastic scenes and powerful homoerotic charge that informs their account of diasporic feeling. It is my contention that this persistent queer presence in *Home to Harlem* and *Banjo* informs both the centrality of a rebellious, queerly embodied pleasure to McKay's representation of diasporic community as a new "model of the social"[28] *and* a love of difference that expands our understanding of diasporic culture beyond the fixity of ethnic or racial communities. As such, the novels allow us to see a utopian vision—anti-nationalist and anti-capitalist, among others—of a simultaneously unified and individuated community rendered at the conjunction of queerness and diaspora.

Whereas Hall and Gilroy emphasize the history of slavery and racial injustice at the heart of diasporic experience and community, McKay's *Home to Harlem* explores diaspora through the good-time revelry in which the narrator luxuriates in the different

[27] These terms, which have more or less continued their circulation in gay argot up to the present, perhaps warrant some definition. Dandies perhaps has the most historical specificity in this regard, referring to men who paid incredible attention to forms of dress that at once reinforced and destabilized normative understandings of masculine self-presentation and concern for fashion. Pansies and fairies both refer to same-sex interested men who present in more typically female-gendered ways; both are often understood to perform the passive rather than active role in sexual encounters with men, a tendency that feminized them in popular and subcultural understanding. On the opposite end of the spectrum, wolves are same-sex interested men who perform the active role in sexual encounters with men, as a consequence of which they might often not be understood or labeled homosexual by others. As their moniker suggests, wolves may have a more predatory, aggressive nature with their sexual partners.

[28] Edwards, *Practice of Diaspora*, 219.

"types"[29] produced by transnational and interracial routes of a global black culture. The novel's interest in "the beauty of colored skins that Negroes are just now beginning to discover," was the singular achievement lauded by Du Bois, whose otherwise scathing review of its ecstatic, erotic realism left him feeling "distinctly like taking a bath."[30] Where pleasure is the decided emphasis, slavery is in fact only mentioned twice: once in an offhand way when describing wandering protagonist Jake Brown as the "big, good slave" (41) of the woman with whom he is "living sweet," and in more sustained fashion during a discussion of the Haitian Revolution when Jake and Ray, the novels' representation of McKay as an educated transnational aesthete, first meet aboard a Pullman train bound for Philadelphia. In the first instance, "slave" is used not so much to call up the history of black suffering, but rather to articulate how the novel understands heterosexual coupling. In the second example, slavery is articulated as a universal experience of oppressed peoples throughout history rather than the exclusive heritage of the African diaspora. Further, the slave past is invoked not to lament a lost culture or to tell stories of black suffering, but rather to tell tales of black liberation and self-determination. This pivot, I argue, significantly reorients the reader's understanding of the relationship between the trauma of slavery and diasporic identity.

After their initial introduction over queerness and literature—Jake engages Ray, who is reading about Alphonse Daudet's writing on beauty of the "leshbian" poet Sappho—Ray's discussion of Haitian history gives Jake both a sense of racial pride and makes him "feel the wonder of the world" and his place in it (132-133). What Jake thrills

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[29] Claude McKay, *Home to Harlem* (Lebanon, N.H.: Northeastern University Press, 1987), 57. Subsequent references will appearance in-text as parenthetical citations.

[30] W.E.B. Du Bois, "Two Novels," *The Crisis*, June 1928, 201.

to hear is the story of how the "universal spirit of the French Revolution had reached and lifted up the slaves far away in [Haiti]," slaves who embraced "the beautiful ideas of the 'Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité' of Mankind" under the leadership of Toussaint L'Ouverture (134). It is the story of L'Ouverture's revolution that most fascinates Jake:

> For the first time [Jake] heard the name Toussaint L'Ouverture, the black slave and leader of the Haytian slaves. Heard how he fought and conquered the slave-owners and then protected them; decreed laws for Hayti that held more of human wisdom and nobility than the Code Napoleon; defended his baby revolution against the Spanish and English vultures; defeated Napoleon's punitive expedition; how tragically he was captured by a civilized trick, taken to France, and send by Napoleon to die broken-hearted in a cold dungeon. (132)

What Ray and Jake dilate upon here are not tales of suffering, but tales of liberation about "Haytian slaves" who won, defended and constructed a nation of their own design. The central tragedy of this re-telling of Haitian history[31] is not slavery, but rather the French capture of L'Ouverture as a moment of stalled possibility for a leader not "allowed to finish his work."

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[31] McKay's choice of Haiti seems of particular interest to the present discussion, especially given that he might well have chosen his native Jamaica as the homeland of his autofictional character. McKay's homeland remembered so beautifully in the poems of *Constab Ballads* (1912) and *Harlem Shadows* (1922).

This is most likely because the history of Haiti, and L'Ouverture's revolution in particular, provides a black liberationist narrative in stark contrast to the history of peoples of African descent Jamaica and the United States. Whereas Haiti's slave population was self-emancipated in 1793 after two years of uprisings throughout the country, slavery did not end in Jamaica until 1834 and was brought about not by the self-realized efforts of the island country's slaves, but rather by the Parliament's emancipation of slaves throughout all of the British Empire. While Haiti certainly had its immediate post-emancipation crises, these were probably less problematic to McKay than the virtual perpetuation of slavery in the indentured servant system of the Apprenticeship System until 1838.

The distinction between these two national histories—and the lines of demarcation between McKay and Ray that they inscribe—mark two different approaches to the story of slavery and emancipation in the Western world, one a story of self-actualized liberation and the other a catalog of injustices that the world (and black British subjects) were considerably slower to remedy. Likewise, they also mark a different way of relating to the slave past as the unifying historical narrative that provides the basis for diasporic imagination.

Much as Ray's discussion of Haitian history and identity recasts the historical tale of African slavery from unfathomable suffering to triumphant liberation, so too do the moments in which *Home to Harlem* envisions diasporic community. Such community emerges across the various clubs and cabarets of *Harlem* less as an historical process than as a wondrous, sensual possibility enabled by a cosmopolitan blackness in which "[a]ncient black life [was] rooted upon its base with all fascinating new layers of brown, low-brown, high-brown, nut-brown, lemon, maroon, olive, mauve [and] gold" (57). The queer erotics of such a community are euphorically described in a sojourn to the Baltimore, one of the novel's central cabaret clubs.

> Dandies and pansies, chocolate, chestnut, coffee, ebony, cream, yellow, everybody was teased up to the high point of excitement.
>
> '*Crazy, plumb crazy about a man, mah man…'*
>
> The saxophone was moaning it. And feet and hands and mouths were acting it. Dancing. Some jigged, some shuffled, some walked, and some were glued together swaying on the dance floor. (32)

A ballad for a neglectful and unobtainable lover-man, the cabaret song offers a sensorium of erotic and racial community demonstrated by the plural "feet," "hands" and "mouths" that come together under its "moaning" chorus. Inextricable from this rainbow vision of black modernity are those "dandies and pansies" whose cruising movement and sensual contact are the novel's index of a modern diasporic life, as typical and omnipresent as jazz and blues in the world of *Home to Harlem*, that reflects Edwards' understanding of diaspora as fomenting a "new model of the social."

One of the fascinating threads in the novel is the co-emergence and fusion of queer counterpublics and diasporic community in ways that challenge normative libidinal

and capitalist economies.[32] Jake ends up frequenting the speakeasy of Madame Suarez because he finds the Congo—that "throbbing little Africa in New York" which is *Home to Harlem*'s first image of global blackness—too interested in "[the] art of flirting money out of hypnotized newcomers" (104). While Jake enjoys the opportunity to "luxuriate with charmingly painted pansies among the colored cushions" gathered in the "new world" of Madame Suarez's speakeasy, the narrator begins to rework the surrounding tableaux into an image of both African mythohistory and interracial harmony. The "rich-browns and yellow-creams" that dance before Jake suddenly "resembled the wonderfully beautiful pictures of women of ancient Egypt" (105) and the queers of all colors gathered there constellate a "strange un-American world where colored meets and mingles freely and naturally with white" (106). The music at Madame Suarez's club, the type of jazz "forcing everybody into amatory states and attitudes," is both a form of entertainment and an object that traces the transnational routes of jazz through "Paris and Cairo, Shanghai, Honolulu, and Java" (107). This scene of queer interracial contact and diasporic unity is "killed" by the sudden appearance of the vice squad that rounds up the socioeconomic cross-section of Suarez's clients and uses the power of the court system to close the Baltimore and other sites of queer refuge frequented by Jake and his friends. The closure of the Baltimore (and the foreclosure of its nascent political and sexual community) virtually enforces segregation as "Negro proprietors" of similar establishments refuse entry to white and mulatto patrons for fear that they may be vice agents in disguise (111).

[32] These two registers are never far from view in the social critique that structures McKay's novels. One particular way of reading the utopian vision of these works would emphasize their desire to locate a mode of sexual relation beyond the economic structure of heteronormative life. That sexual relation is almost singularly imagined in the ecstatic joy that envelopes the queer figures orbiting the peripheries of the diasporic scenes they virtually conjure.

The "strange un-American world" where queer and heterosexual, black and white, domestic and foreign meet is precisely the world that Ray longs for in his intensely utopian daydreams. One night aboard the Pullman train, Ray dreams of a "blue paradise" bedecked with the exotic creatures and experiences of queer fantasy.

> [C]ourtiers reclining on cushions soft like passionate kisses; gleaming-skinned black boys bearing goblets of wine and obedient eunuchs waiting in the offing…men and women and animals, beautiful to see and love…[where] [t]aboos and terrors and penalties were transformed into new pagan delights, orgies of Orient-blue carnival, of rare flowers and red fruits, cherubs and seraphs and fetishes and phalli and all the most-high gods. (158)

While Gary Holcomb makes much of this scene as an anarcho-Marxist queer tableau in his reading of *Home to Harlem*,[33] I am rather interested in the ways that Ray's dream world models the sexualized egalitarian atmosphere of Madame Suarez's speakeasy. The common beauty of "men and women and animals" is juxtaposed against Orient-identified orgies while the "fetishes and phalli" that embellish Ray's vision of a mythical African past accent the throbbing dance floor tableaus of diaspora in Harlem.

While Ray's phallic imaginary might reinforce the androcentrism Gopinath identifies in normative diaspora discourse, such images proffer queer diaspora as a refuge from the fraught reality of contemporary black life. Further, they offer a mode of imagining black community and life outside of the capitalist structure of heterosexual coupling, a social form that both Ray and the novel struggle against. While Jake "takes life easy" in love, Ray finds that "some strange thing" gets in the way of his heterosexual encounters at Madame Laura's Philadelphia buffet flat (195-196). When "some strange thing seem[s] to hold him back from taking the girl in his arms," Ray and the narrator

[33] Gary Edward Holcomb, *Claude McKay, Code Name Sasha: Queer Black Marxism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Gainesville University of Florida Press, 2007), 95–101.

give themselves over to the alternate erotics of "some sensual dream of…black youth burning naked in the bush" punctuated by "the marshaling of spears of the sacred frenzy of a phallic celebration" (196-197). The return of the phallus as the sign of "some dim, far-away ancestral source" uniting the undulating bodies grooving on the dance floor in transhistorical pleasure articulates the novel's vision of diaspora through a powerfully homoerotic sensorium. Those phallic spears are also the sign under which Ray can imagine a nebulous collectivity of "Black lovers of life caught up in their own free native rhythm…celebrating the midnight hours in themselves, for themselves, of themselves in a house in Fifteenth Street, Philadelphia" (197). The apparent adaptation of the most famous lines from Lincoln's "Gettysburg Address" suggests the fusion of queerness, diaspora and nation amid the everyday experience of what Edwards describes as McKay's black vagabond culture.[34]

The buffet flat's queer vision of a nascent social formation unable to be neatly folded into racial or national categories is further signaled by the arrival of an Irish police officer who, rather than raid the premises, comes to toast Madame Laura before going on patrol. Laughing at her guests' fear of the "man in blue," Madame Laura sings an impromptu song about the natural affinity of black and Irish cultures: "Flixy, flaxy, fleasy,/ Make it good and easy,/ Flix for start and flax for snappy,/ Niggers and Irish will always be happy" (198-199). As if to accentuate this unexpected unity, Madame Laura tells the assembled that she "has a little Irish" in her ancestry. While Madame Laura's mixed racial heritage at once points to the historical production of diasporic bodies through sexual contact between different ethnic and national cultures, the felicitous harmony of that mixed heritage challenges the singularity of the diasporic relationship to

[34] Edwards, *Practice of Diaspora*, 200–203.

origins. At various moments in both *Home to Harlem* and *Banjo*, the appearance of white bodies (the majority of which are Irish-identified) at the periphery of diasporic scenes highlights both the cross-racial contact in McKay's queer sensorium and the love of difference that attends his celebration of diasporic life and culture.

It is in Ray, McKay's autobiographical character, that the solidity of nation *or* race as identitarian categories is challenged most pointedly and in which we see the particular problems faced by the queer subject alienated from all forms of socially intelligible collectivity. A mere chapter before the national fantasy of black bodies "celebrating the midnight hours in themselves, for themselves [and] of themselves," Ray observes that there "must be something mighty inspiring in being the citizen of a great strong nation" (154). This particular feeling of national belonging is ascribed to the "white citizen" whose nationalist enfranchisement enables him to "say bold, challenging things like a strong man" (154). Blacks, Ray reasons, could never quite understand or access such feelings, a distinction that connects the very "keen ecstatic joy a man feels in the romance of being black" with the absence of a national identity (154). Yet, even blackness seems a weak foundation for group identity, as Ray questions "[w]hy he should have and love a race" to which he is "chain-ganged" by both "Man and nature" (153). Marked outside of such order, Ray later observes that he feels "alone, hurt, neglected, cheated, almost naked" (226), even among his own race. If community—as nation, as race, or as culture—was the very dream through which the Russian formalist authors Ray identifies as his "spiritual masters" marched into the "vast international cemetery of this century" (227), then he must seek out some other, less alienating organization of life.

If Ray's feeling of loneliness and isolation are identified as "awful queer" (200) by Jake, feelings in which we can recognize the traditional narrative of tragic queer subjectivity, *Home to Harlem* also offers alternative visions of queer life that would negate those tragic narratives. The novel's only openly homosexual character, Billy Biasse, affirms that the unattached queer life might provide endless pleasure in place of the pain associated with heterosexual coupling. Fending off Jake's insinuation that being "henpecked" by a woman is certainly better than "being a wolf,"[35] Billy refutes the notion that there is anything dissatisfying about his life.

> "Ise a wolf, all right, but I ain't a lone one," Billy grinned. "I guess Ise the happiest, well-feddest wolf in Harlem. Oh boy!" (88)

Billy both claims his homosexuality and rejects its characterization as anything less than a satisfying life, concluding with an ejaculation—"Oh boy!"—that names both sexual joy and the object of that joy. Further, by pronouncing himself the "happiest, well-feddest wolf in Harlem," Billy transforms the loneliness associated with the epithet "wolf" into a public of wolves that circulate in Harlem. What is so striking about these contestations is both their transformation of the negative associations assigned queer sexuality and their modeling of a queer sociality that leads to a happy life universally denied *Home to Harlem* and *Banjo*'s heterosexual romances. Queerness, as cruising movement and ephemeral pleasure offers a model of the social that enables the subject to flourish in diaspora.

Before turning more fully to the articulation of a queer black diaspora in *Banjo*, I want to conclude this reading of *Home to Harlem* by exploring the queer family Jake imagines making with Ray as an example of the forms of sociality that the novel longs

[35] The term "wolf" is meant to imply, variously, that Billy is a top in his sexual relationships with men and that he has no long-term or stable relationship of care (ie. a "lone wolf").

for beyond heteronormative filiation. As Ray prepares to leave Harlem for a seafaring adventure abroad, Jake mourns the pending separation from his friend:

> Jake gripped Ray's shoulder: "Chappie, I wish I was edjucated mahself."
> "Christ! What for?" demanded Ray.
> "Becaz I likes you." Like a black Pan out of the woods Jake looked into Ray's eyes with frank savage affection and Billy Biasse exclaimed:
> "Lawdy in heaben! A li'l' foreign booze gwine turn you all soft?" (272)

Since education and "savage affection" are often fused with queer knowledge and desire in *Home to Harlem*—recall that Ray's first introduction as an intellectual occurs when he rhapsodizes to Jake about Sappho and Daudet, and the scenes which conjure images of a mythohistorical pre-colonial African sensorium are deeply homoerotic—Jake's longing for education and his "frank savage affection" for Ray offer points of queer identification for McKay's presumably heterosexual protagonist. Such a reading finds support when Billy Biasse confirms the homoerotics of Jake's longing by chiding him for "turning soft." That this queer longing is fueled by the extra-national force of "foreign booze" likewise suggests that such feelings and "wish[es]" are oriented toward an otherness and elsewhere that is the queered origin of diasporic subjectivity.[36] Much like the desire for a return to origins that is consistently refuted and thwarted in McKay's writing, Jake's image of a happy alternate future congeals in the impossible dream of making a family with Ray.

> 'Ef I was edjucated, I could understand things better and be proper-speaking like you is. . . . And I mighta helped mah li'l sister to get edjucated, too (she must be a li'l' woman, now), and she would be nice-speaking like you' sweet brown,

[36] Nadia Ellis has also invoked the figure of an "elsewhere" as the site of a powerful affective pull for black queer diasporic subjects. That affective charge is maintained in the tension between "a persistent sense of the insufficiency of existing modes of belonging" and "an awareness that new forms remain inspiringly elusive" (3). That they remain "inspiringly elusive" rather than frustratingly or traumatically out of reach, points to the pleasurable yearning towards an impossibility that marks black queer diaspora apart from its heterosexual correlate. See: Ellis, *Territories of the Soul: Queered Belonging in the Black Diaspora*, 1–17.

> good enough foh you to hitch up with. Then we could all settle down and make money like edjucated people do, instead a you gwine off to throw you'self away on some lousy dinghy and me chasing around all the time lak a hungry dawg.' (273)

Couched in the language of upward mobility, Jake's vision of a stable future with Ray is limited to the family form, a form that here seems to have queer implications for binding men together. Marrying Jake's sister is certainly the closest that Ray can come to marrying Jake himself; indeed, by marrying Jake's sister, Ray *becomes* part of his buddy's kinship structure. The queerness of the kinship structure here is that the women entirely drop away; rather, they are only points of connection that suture Ray and Jake such that the former doesn't "throw [himself] away on some lousy dinghy" and the other won't be left "chasing around all the time lak a hungry dawg."

However much Jake longs for kinship with Ray, *Home to Harlem* closes with a rather familiar and distinctly heteronormative solution to the problem of the diasporic male body loosed from the solidifying structures of the conjugal family. In the novel's final chapter, Jake reconnects with Felice, the female presence that bookends the novel, and heads off with her into "an atmosphere of dreams" that the two "were lost in for a week" (314). While this may be the apparent solution to Jake's cruising, even in those heady final chapters McKay's narrator appears deeply suspicious about the ending of his own story. Consider the novel's final image of diasporic community:

> They were all drawn together in one united mass, wriggling around to the same primitive, voluptuous rhythm...Haunting rhythm, mingling of naive wistfulness and charming gayety, now sheering over into mad riotous joy, now, like a jungle mask, strange, unfamiliar, disturbing, now plunging headlong into the far, dim depths of profundity and rising out as suddenly with simple, childish grin. And the white visitors laugh. They seen the grin only. Here are none of the well-patterned , well-made emotions of the respectable world. A laugh might finish in a sob. A moan end in hilarity. That gorilla type wriggling there with his hands so strangely hugging his mate, may strangle her tonight. (337-338)

The bizarrely sequenced modifiers that describe this diasporic milieu—voluptuous/haunting, charming gayety/mad riotous joy, disturbing/childish—suggest the persistent instability that a relationship with Felice would seem to make whole. As if to make this all the more clear, the narrator remarks that the tableau described exhibits "none of the well-patterned, well-made emotions of the respectable world," but rather an unstable world in which sadness may be turned to joy, mirth into misery, erotic affection into murderous rage. That Jake "has no thought of that now," of those contradictions and doublings the structure the world in which he circulates, can be attributed to his partnership with Felice, a partnership that "weaves an atmosphere of dreams" instead of reflecting reality. That final line also suggests that the temporary happiness he has managed to secure with Felice in the present may not last for Jake in the future; he too may be that man "strangely hugging his mate" only later to want to "strangle her." It is worth noting the extreme violence that appears to append itself to the internal dynamics of heterosexual partnership like a deadly rumor in McKay's writing, here and more generally, is a violence absent from his representation of same-sex relationships[37] and homosocial fraternity. In this, too, we shall see a particular homology between McKay and Cather's treatment of gender, violence and pleasure as a feature of their fiction's queer worldmaking.[38] The limited imaginary of same-sex intimacy's social forms in *Home*

[37] The clearest example of this is the relationship between Big Blonde and Petit Frere in *Romance in Marseilles*. The relationship is internally harmonious and happy, only encountering violence or pain when it confronts homophobic elements in external society. See: Claude McKay, *Romance in Marseille.* (London: Exeter University Press, 2001).

[38] This term is borrowed from José Muñoz, who uses it to identify the creative practice(s) through which queers or color refashion cultural objects, performances and identities against the proscriptions of dominant or hegemonic ideology in order to make a space for themselves in the

to Harlem—that which necessitates that Jake imagine his relationship with Ray only through marital suture, and achieve a fleeting happiness only through heterosexual partnership—is both critiqued and vastly expanded in the foreign terrain of *Banjo*, where the looseness and ephemerality of queer life expressed by Billy Biasse structure the very forms of social attachment that make a black queer diaspora livable.

Queer Sociality and Survival in *Banjo*

Published just a year after *Home to Harlem*, *Banjo* picks up roughly where its predecessor left off, transporting us across the Atlantic from Harlem to Marseilles. In place of Jake, the reader watches as Lincoln Agrippa Daily, known to his friends as "Banjo," cruises the down-but-not-out underworld of the French port city's bistros, bars and cabarets looking for a few friendly faces with whom he might share a meal, a song or, even better, an endless round of drinks. The homosocial wanderlust of *Home to Harlem* is amplified in McKay's second novel, which uses Banjo and his cruising, carousing buddies to theorize a black queer diaspora culture as a mode of survival, socio-economic critique and political resistance. As such, the novel primarily questions what it means to inhabit and survive black modernity — the on-going struggles of people of African descent in the wake of slavery and emancipation in Europe and North America — a question that puts pressure on and finds potential in the contemporary black subject's relationship to Africa and Africanicity. Such questions are never entirely answered; Africa is both invoked and sarcastically dismissed in ways that make it an unstable or incomplete source of connection among the black bodies of all nations that circulate

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world, in order to (re)make the world on their own terms. See: Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, 1–36.

through Marseilles. What connects the bodies that undulate through the novel's orgiastic scenes is a promiscuous and powerful sensuality, a *feeling* that pulls blacks (and some whites or "pinks") together in an international groove that offers a flourishing, if not utopian, form of life that I have been suggesting is McKay's particular vision of a queer diaspora.

Despite its much stronger emphasis on the black internationalist politics and diasporic discourse percolating across the Atlantic in the 1920s, *Banjo* almost entirely avoids the discussion of slavery and its relationship to black modernity. Rather, the novel prioritizes pleasure over historical trauma as the connective tissue of diasporic identity. An early description of the transnational black public that takes shape along the docks of Marseilles clearly identifies this aesthetic and political imperative:

> Senegalese, Sudanese, Somalese, Nigerians, West Indians, Americans, black from everywhere, crowded together, talking strange dialects, but, brought together, understanding one another by the language of wine.[39]

The "language of wine" here is synonymous with a language of pleasure, a way of relating to one another not through shared pain, but through the ecstasy of intoxication. This sentence condenses some of the novel's more ideologically tricky moves: preserving the national and geo-cultural particularity of blacks from Africa, North America and the Caribbean, while finding in moments of sensual contact the possibilities of a male camaraderie that elides, without ever transcending, national difference. At the Café African, one of the novel's central bars, *Banjo* offers another way of understanding the connective tissue that sutures a global black community: the flows of capital.

> The magic thing had brought all shades and grades of Negroes together. Money. A Senegalese had emigrated to the United States, and after some years had

[39] McKay, *Banjo*, 36. Subsequent references to the novel will appear in-text as parenthetical citations.

> returned with a few thousand dollars. And he had bought a café on the quay [the Café African]. It was a big café, the first that any Negro in the town ever owned. (45)

To posit that a capitalist venture, and the "money" in which it finds its material expression, "brought all the shades and grades of Negroes together" in Marseilles is to argue at once that capital is both an abstract object that controls global black life *and* that which global black life might manipulate in order to make a place for itself in the world on its own terms. Further, it enables the proliferation of the social spaces in which "all the joy-lovers of darkest color" can be secured against an external world hostile to black existence, as demonstrated by the numerous encounters with international police and border agents in *Banjo*.

The novel pushes further to explore the ephemerality of such spaces and experiences, a condition that necessitates the emergence of a distinct, cruising sociality at the edges of diaspora that helps the subject survive the instability generated by the international flows of capital. As the narrator lauds Banjo as "a great vagabond of lowly life," it defines that social orientation as a "dream" that Banjo was "perpetually pursuing and realizing in odd ways, always incomplete but never unsatisfactory" (11). That life in diaspora might be "always incomplete but never unsatisfactory" returns us at once to the central incompleteness of diasporic identity as addressed by Gilroy and Hall, but extends that encounter such that the condition of living "after the break" might be "never unsatisfactory" if one only has the proper relation to it. In *Banjo*, that proper relation is an endless cruising between homoerotic scenes that transforms loss and oppression into a fugitive joy that enables Banjo and the gang to play just beyond the reach of hegemonic Western civilization and its systems of control. That fugitive joy discovered in the feeling

of a cruising community is perhaps the closest that *Banjo* comes to explicitly identifying diaspora's capacity to let the novel's black subjects the be "their human selves in an inhumanly alien world" (322).

These scenes of diasporic collectivity are sutured to queer desire and performance in ways that demand the attention of those who would explore the novel's articulation of diaspora. As Banjo and his friends play the Café African crowd into a frenzy, the narrator fixates on the "Senegalese boys" who "dance better male with male or individually, than with girls, putting more power in their feet, dancing more wildly, more natively, more savagely" (48). The narrator soon becomes fixated on the "exquisite movement" of a "coffee-black boy from Cameroon and a chocolate brown from Dakar…danc[ing] a native sex-symbol dance" (50). Same-sex contact puts the male dancers in closer contact with that indefinable thing that is their "native" or "savage" origin, while the image of those bodies together evidence the ways in which diaspora puts global black bodies into queer relation. This is not to say, however, that there are not moments when *Banjo* engages more familiar understandings of diaspora and diasporic subjectivity, particularly with regard to slavery. However, as I will demonstrate below in my reading of "The Blue Cinema" episode, McKay challenges such history as the basis for thinking black diaspora.

"The Blue Cinema" ties together the many threads of diaspora, race, aesthetics, sexuality and capitalism that are the major concerns of both *Home to Harlem* and *Banjo*. The title of the chapter refers to a pornographic theater that Ray, a Martiniquean graduate student and a group of white American tourists go to experience. However, before the Americans enter the scene and take the gang to the Blue Cinema, the Martiniquean student and Ray have a long discussion about racial identity in which Ray explains that

the student, who wants to hold himself separate from the other black patrons at the Café African, "can't get away from the Senegalese and other black Africans any more than you can from the fact that our forefathers were slaves" (200). Ray emphasizes that, if it is to succeed, the "racial renaissance" taking place in New York must search its "racial roots" in order to find the unique thing that enables black life to struggle, endure and enchant. The point is reinforced a few moments later when an argument erupts about the animosity between the French West Indians and the "native Africans." As the discussion grows increasingly heated, one particular comment puts into relief the entire foundation of diaspora relationality.

> "*Fils d'esclaves! Fils d'esclaves!*" cried a Senegalese sergeant…'[The French West Indians] think we are the savages and that they are the 'white' negroes. Why, they are only the descendants of the slaves that our forefathers sold.' (203)

In this exchange, slave heritage is deployed as an epithet that divides rather than unites the black diaspora community in Marseilles. The transformation of the slave past into an epithet rather than a mark of unity challenges the construction of global black identity in the particular terms of a Western black experience (especially its British and American versions) and the very notion of shared racial roots that might be constructed around the history of slavery. Indeed, the unevenness of historical experience marks a point of departure in thinking diaspora that demands a new understanding of what or wherein lies the connection to "racial roots" beyond the slave experience that is so central to the models developed by critics such as Gilroy.

How might one hold together the longing for difference *and* the longing for a solidifying group feeling against the hegemonic force of Western civilization? The answer to such a question may be found in what I have argued above is the movement

and relational logic of gay male cruising that sutures and discovers the diaspora publics to which these novels give representation. That cruising can be located not only in the queer gaze that fixates on the sensual contact between the dandies, pansies and male bodies that populate both novels, but also in the longing for male-male contact that provides Jake and Banjo an escape from the difficulties of heterosexual coupling and binds them to Ray. Such wandering contact offers a mode of sociality that might help them survive the particular forms of modernity that constellate the early twentieth century (and which continue to structure the early decades of the twenty-first century). If the normative critique of cruising is that it breaks off (and even avoids) the permanent, monogamous attachments that are alleged to structure the good life as expressed in twentieth century mass culture, cruising enables the possibility of accessing pleasure for populations systemically denied pleasure. It is, as I will demonstrate below, the very ephemerality of cruising attachments that offer a way of managing one's abject position in the world such that happiness might be found in fugitive movement and non-attachment.

If cruising is at once the form and function through which contact is imagined across national boundaries in *Home to Harlem* and *Banjo*, the sensual experience in which diaspora finds its most poetic expression as a site of perpetual itinerancy, it also offers McKay's characters a unique orientation to the world that undergirds the novels' utopian vision of diaspora. It is hard not to read a valorization of cruising's characteristic promiscuity and anonymous pleasures in Ray's poetic love of difference.

> Man loves individuals. Man loves things. Man loves places. And the vagabond lover of life finds individuals and things to love in many places and not in any one nation. Man loves places and no one place, for the earth, like a beautiful wanton puts on a new dress to fascinate him wherever he may go. (137)

Cruising brings out a love of difference that transcends the limits of nation, language and origin as it moves the body through ephemeral and powerful contact with a range of anonymous partners. As eroticized travel, cruising in McKay's novels is oriented toward the utopian "beauty of other horizons,"[40] the possibility of an encounter with others that does not adhere to national, racial or class distinctions, but which promiscuously finds love everywhere. Incapable of being satisfied by one object, cruising finds satisfaction in many, and, in its peregrinating movement, constellates a home that is permanently transient and abstract rather than concrete and localizable.

The problem of "home" that first erupts in *Home to Harlem* and is queerly resolved in *Banjo* connects McKay's writing to recent critical considerations of the black queer subject's productively disjointed relationship to the fixity of origin in normative communities.[41] In cruising the black diaspora for moments of ephemeral pleasure and affirming contact, McKay's characters discover "home" as a collection of feelings and experiences that move with the subject and buoy him against life's difficulties. The heteronormative resolution of *Home to Harlem* comes undone when Jake reappears in *Banjo*. Jake reemerges in Marseilles after leaving the "homes" he tried to make or imagine in Felice and Harlem. Rather than fixed in a domicile, city or relationship, home emerges across *Home to Harlem* and *Banjo* as that which is discovered in the perpetual

[40] McKay, 137.

[41] In the introduction to *Black Queer Studies: a Critical Anthology*, Sharon Holland describes the queer subject's relation to home as the site of an "estrangement" from "biological family" and community that drives the subject to new varieties of knowledge and identification that themselves produce "the very friction necessary for 'culture' to survive." Home, in other words, marks a problematic space where messiness and alterity may provide unique resources for building a future. See: Sharon P. Holland, "Introduction," in *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), ix–xiii.

movement and ephemeral attachments between men epitomized by the novels' cruising narratives. Cruising, in other words, finds a home everywhere in a world where the traditional, closed-off home is no longer a stable object for building and maintaining a happy life. In its promiscuous openness to the other, and in its refusal to invest in any one object as a sustainable resource for pleasure or happiness, cruising in these novels offers a mode of surviving the conditions of capitalist modernity.

As such, *Banjo* and *Home to Harlem* participate in what José Esteban Muñoz calls queerness's "great refusal of an overarching here and now" that rejects "a normal love that keeps a repressive social order in place."[42] What persists in the place of normative security is a queer network of blissful but ephemeral relationships among transnational communities of men that buffer them against a precarious world structured by the promiscuous flows of capital. When Banjo takes a job in Nice and Monte Carlo, his absence causes the gang to fall apart and Ray mourns the recognition that "the spell had been broken" (222-223). Banjo soon returns, but the crisis of stability is revisited again when he lands up in the hospital. Reflecting on these experiences, Ray reasons that the brutality of modern life forecloses the stability of any affirming connection or experience.

> He wanted very much to leave taking intact the rough, joyous, free picture of the beach boys' life in the regimented rhythm of the Ditch. He felt that time, circumstance and chance had contributed to fill it full of a special and unique interest that he would never find there again.…But life is so artistically uncompromising, it does not care a rap about putting a hard fist through a splendid plan and destroying our dearest artifice. (248)

What Ray grasps here is that the joyous and rough quality of the life he wishes to hold onto is contingent on its ephemerality. Joy seems that much greater, relationships that much stronger because they are broken off before they have the chance to exhaust or

[42] Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 133, 134.

complicate themselves. In Harlem, Marseilles and everywhere in between, relationships are always exciting and rarely disappointing precisely because they are impermanent.

In such ways, cruising offers a queer practice of diaspora, one that prioritizes pleasure over historical trauma as a resource for living in the present. To return again to the problem of "home" in *Home to Harlem* and *Banjo*, cruising offers a way to forge the sort of attachments that bolster the subject against a precarious world haunted by the violence of the state, especially against people of color. It also reorients our understanding of diaspora in ways that challenge the desire and necessity of a return to origins all the while transforming the marker of failed subjectivity (impermanent or broken attachments that epitomize life "after the break") into the marker of a flourishing subjectivity (the network of subjects cruising each other along the routes of diaspora). The practice of a cruising diaspora further enables us to think of fracture as itself a source of pleasure—generating what Ray calls those "splendid and interesting types" (208)—that can also be a resource for combatting and surviving a hegemonic Western civilization that oppresses and polices its racial and sexual others.

My investment in McKay's *Banjo* both aligns with and departs from Brent Hayes Edwards' reading of the novel as a unique point of mistranslation between French and English readers who encounter one another in the novel's transnational reception and through the songs played throughout. Edwards traces the history by which such revolutionary thinkers as Senghor and Cesaire passed the novel to their fellow students "whose eyes were opening up to reality"[43] as well as the celebration of the novel as a documentary of Marseilles' "congested alleyways, dark habitations, seedy bars, and

[43] Edwards, *Practice of Diaspora*, 188.

sinister denizens" that faded away after WWII. A queer reading asks what new possibilities the students' eyes were being opened to, what other messages were being communicated as part of the novel's vision of diaspora, a vision that lingers upon the queer male bodies circulating between its margins and the center. Such a reading also marks the novel's documentarian aspects as an attempt to preserve the queer worlds generated by men who dance together and disappear. If the novel is a resource for thinking "racial roots" as a pathway for racial renaissance, then we must think about what role sexuality plays in the articulation of those roots as well as the manner in which other racial roots (Irish, Indian, Russian, etc.) offer McKay models for thinking blackness. Such questions expand and complement the very hybridity, adaptation and transnational cultural process with which Edwards identifies black diaspora aesthetics.

While I agree with Edwards' contention that *Banjo* is at once "the most emphatically transnational black novel of the interwar period" and a staunchly "radical critique of black internationalism,"[44] I argue that a black queer diaspora helps navigate this apparent contradiction. Edwards locates in the loose musical group formed by Banjo "a new model of the social" capable of institutionalizing the characters' "easy good-time interaction."[45] That performing institution, which Edwards identifies as a vagabond internationalism, "is [an] inherently open and wandering" representation of the diasporic condition.[46] Yet, as I have shown, queerness and cruising offer another equally compelling "model of the social" that makes sense of the novel's diasporic tableaus and its orientation to non-attachment as a means of surviving black modernity. Further,

[44] Edwards, 210.

[45] Edwards, 219.

[46] Edwards, 215.

queerness gives us purchased on a nuanced account of the sexual and racial politics that go into the "model of the social" that we might ascribe to "vagabond internationalism." The opening to such thought may be glimpsed in Edwards' struggle with the categorization of McKay's aesthetics and politics as "primitivist."

> This is much less the atavistic primitivism, the primitivism that hinges around some 'racial' essence, that we have been taught to consider the dominant theme of *Home to Harlem* and *Banjo*, and much more a position that understands 'primitive' as the basis of another ethical system, one *exterior* to the crushing logic of 'civilization'—as the foundation for a fine-tuned insistence that 'the most precious thing about human life is difference.' (223)

The contestation around the term "atavistic" captures the interventions in early twentieth-century discourse around race *and* homosexuality that McKay's writing makes on the sly. As a discourse of fallenness or brokenness—the very stuff that generates the taxonomy of the "invert" or the "deviant"—homosexuality is transformed in McKay's writing into the pageantry of everyday being, a pageantry that cannot be marked off or apart from either the life of the men in Marseilles or the way that the narrative gaze longingly considers their bodies. Likewise, McKay's writing offers the queer sociality of cruising as an alternative "ethical system" of attachments and detachments predicated upon an openness to difference that does not swallow the subject up into homogenizing registers of social intelligibility. Like blackness, queerness offers McKay's novels a fugitive identity, a field of play in which the subject must negotiate a world structured to keep him or her at the bottom, and to rescue from that world pleasure and a capacity for self-love. Thus, I argue that queerness offers a complementary alternative to the role Edwards claims is played by music in the novel as a "place [where] the black boys stand" with "no other 'plot,' no other ground or foundation, whether nation or narrative, engine or economy, that [could]

contain them."[47] Queerness might be just such a force, capable of containing without containment, open to unlimited iterations and performances, open always to difference as it reaches toward the horizon line of a social yet-to-come.

Queer Origins in Willa Cather's Short Fiction

Before turning from the queer diaspora of McKay's novels to its homological correlate in Willa Cather's fiction, I want to briefly revisit the object with which this chapter opened: Countée Cullen's "Heritage." While Cullen's wrangling with his relationship to roots poses a series of rich questions for exploring the complexity of a black/queer/diaspora, I want to explore the ways in which "Heritage" offers a source of self-recognition and identification for white queer experience by looking briefly at the poem's appearance in Blair Niles' *Strange Brother* (1931). Primarily narrated by a heterosexual, white female journalist, the novel focuses on the life of Mark, a closeted white gay music teacher, who draws her into the interracial queer life of 1920s Harlem. During a night out with his Harlemite friends Caleb and Jacob, two straight black men whose friendship with Mark challenges the homophobia that is often supposed to adhere to black American culture even today, Mark listens raptly as a singer performs a version of Cullen's poem. Moved to tears, Mark tells his companions that he feels "those words as if they were my own,"[48] as if Cullen's articulation of disconnection to the African past were the same as Mark's disconnection to heterosexuality. Such a connection is not merely incidental to this moment, but rather part of a longer practice through which the narrator explains that Mark had "always identified himself with the outcasts of the earth,"

[47] Edwards, 240.

[48] Niles, *Strange Brother*, 56.

and that it was the "Negro's" suffering that "bound Mark to him."[49] The scene offers critic Joseph Boone a strong example of the "cross-identification" between racial and sexual otherness that adheres to queer modernism, one in which "shared, though different, experiences of discrimination and marginality" enable queer subjects to identify with racial others.[50] Boone's helpful reading may be extended by thinking the ways in which the centrality of diaspora discourse in the scene—it is important, after all, that the poem to which Mark responds so emotionally is not just a poem about race, but a poem about *diaspora* and *heritage*—suggests that something more than a notion of "shared, though different, experiences" is at stake.

I turn to this moment in *Strange Brother* because of the way that it verbally and affectively stages the appeal of diaspora as a model that might explain white queer feelings of dislocation *and* disenfranchisement. Mark comes to Harlem as an exile from his communities of residence and employment. Harlem is where he can be himself precisely because he is not "among his own kind," a home that welcomes him as the person that his real "home" does not. Cut off from origins, Mark's tears over Cullen's poem are the product both of what Boone describes as his longing for "community" rather than merely sex *and* what I argue is Mark's longing for a model that can articulate the specific feelings of social, geographic and genealogical isolation that structure his white gay experience. How are we to understand the imaginaries that would make it possible for a white gay male to recognize himself in Cullen's poem about his frustrated relationship to African heritage? Is Mark's cross-identification simply racial

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[49] Niles, 56.

[50] Joseph Allen Boone, *Libidinal Currents: Sexuality and the Shaping of Modernism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 272.

appropriation, or is does it indicate a homological structure of feeling that might enable us to trace the form and feeling of queer diaspora across the color line? If these homological feelings articulate a shared queer relation to home as well as a fugitive otherness that structures the aesthetics and political imagination of early twentieth century queer American literature across the color line, what are the risks inherent in those feelings? Such questions simultaneously point us toward the possibility of a coalitional identity politics on the axis of (racialized) sexual difference and to an intersectional critique of the risks inherent to such coalitional imagination.

Willa Cather's fiction evokes such questions in their articulation of what Christopher Nealon glancingly identifies as the author's "diaspora of lonely, artisanal sensitives."[51] Nealon's quick abandonment of this term later in his study inspires the present reading which, keeping the term, explores the manifestation, function and origins of queer diasporic feeling in the work of Cather, work in which queer or queer(ed) male protagonists[52] struggle to negotiate feelings of displacement from their communities and families of birth. Certainly, a partial answer to that question lies in Nealon's interest in marking out moments in which Cather rejects the "heterosexual marriage plot of the realist novel" in order to "create a community bound by its inability to assimilate to

[51] Nealon, *Foundlings*, 2.

[52] I use "queer(ed)" here to call attention to the fact that none of Cather's characters are explicitly outed in any of her tales by today's standards for hetero/homo identity. If the critic's job is not to seek out the moment that "outs" a character, a move that serves rather little purpose here in tracing such fleeting things as feelings and longings, then his or her task falls to the analysis of the relationship between the subject and the external worlds that ripple outwards from him in widening circles of attachment: family, friends, community, region, nation, etc. Failure to be folded into such institutions is often rendered in terms of failed heteronormativity in Cather's fiction.

married family life" as a way of identifying her queerness.[53] My interest in the wandering search for community in Cather's writing is located in the diasporic register and sources of the disconnection and failure that motivate her characters' movement to an elsewhere that might serve as a more proper ground for a subjectivity so at odds with their genealogical origin. In thinking about the trouble that circumscribes the boundaries of "home" for McKay in clearly identifiable diasporic terms, I want to trace a similar relationship in Cather's early short stories, namely "The Sculptor's Funeral" and "Paul's Case," both from her first short story collection, *The Troll Garden* (1905). I argue that these stories lay the groundwork for thinking Cather's writing through the lens of queer diaspora because they mark out a similar estrangement from origins and an attempt to locate that self in the elsewhere of an ephemeral and transient queer lifeworld structured by the proliferation of difference rather than the solidification of national, sexual or racial identities. The gesture outward of these early stories comes to happy fruition in Claude Wheeler's journey to his death in France at the close of *One of Ours* and to a more troubling sense of their pre-history in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*.

"The Sculptor's Funeral" is essentially the story of a corpse's trip home that marks the insufficiency of origin either to make sense of the queer subject or to persist as an optimistic space to which the queer can return, enfolded in the warm embrace of sustaining roots. Harvey Merrick, the sculptor named in the title, has died in Boston and his remains have been ferried back to his childhood home in Sand City, Kansas under the watchful eye of Henry Steavens, the "young stranger"[54] who is one of Merrick's beloved

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[53] Nealon, *Foundlings*, 14.

[54] Willa Cather, "The Sculptor's Funeral," in *Collected Stories* (New York: Random House, 1992), 200. Subsequent references to this text will appear in-text as parenthetical citations.

pupils. Gathered about the coffin is an entirely male cross-section of the townsfolk who proceed, each in his own way, to mourn the loss of Sand City's misunderstood native son. From the onset of the story, Steavens struggles to reconcile the disjuncture between the master artist to whom he was devoted in Boston and this uninspired "little Kansas town" on the prairie (197).

> Henry Steavens started about him with the sickening conviction that there had been a mistake, and that he had somehow arrived at the wrong destination. He looked at the clover-green Brussels, the fat plush upholstery, among the hand-painted china placques and panels and vases, for some mark of identification,—for something that might once conceivably have belonged to Harvey Merrick. It was not until he recognized his friend in the crayon portrait of a little boy in kilts and curls, hanging above the piano, that he felt willing to let any of these people approach the coffin. (200)

Here, in rather explicit terms, the narrator outlines the problem of origin for queer subjects whose "home" bears no "mark of [self] identification." Tellingly, the one item that does attenuate Steavens' anxiety is a younger Merrick's self-portrait "in kilts and curls." The other "home" objects—in the form of dull-colored furniture and objets d'art—exist almost in opposition to the effeminized self-portrait that identifies the ostensibly true origin of Harvey Merrick as a figure of his own creation. Thus, it is not origin that bears the mark of queer identification here, but rather self-representation. In other words, queer origin is rendered here as autopoietic production. Since his community of origin is unable to render the aesthetic desires, cosmopolitan wanderlust and feelings of difference constitutive of his identity, Merrick's painting creates his own history as a "little boy in kilts and curls" and it is indeed *only* such self-representation that enables Steavens to recognize his mentor's belonging to this misfit "home."

The denigrating memorials offered by various townsmen only highlight Merrick's disconnection from his place and culture of birth. They ridicule Merrick's decamping for

the "East" as a young man, his love of drink and his "ladylike voice" (204-206). From such stories, Steavens constructs the "whole miserable boyhood" of his teacher, struggling to understanding how "[a]ll this raw, biting ugliness had been the portion of the man whose mind was to become an exhaustless gallery of beautiful impressions" and whose touch upon the world "had left a beautiful record of experience—a sort of ethereal signature; a scent, a sound, a colour that was his own" (204). This disjuncture between the "ugliness" of origin and the "beautiful impressions" through which the sculptor transformed the world also distinguishes the concrete normativity of life in Sand City and the ephemeral immateriality of Merrick's queer touch. That touch is only perceptible to cognoscenti like Steavens, who understands that "the real tragedy of his master's life" was neither "love nor wine" but instead the "yearning of a boy, cast ashore upon a desert of newness and ugliness and sordidness, for all that is chastened and old, and noble with traditions" (205). The alignment of that longing with "a shame not his own and yet so inescapably his," and which must be secreted away from family and friends, is one of the story's more familiar narratives of queer coming-to-consciousness. Merrick's yearning for an origin into which his being may be more easily assimilated identifies both the desire to belong to the world through an imagined, ennobled history validated by tradition *and* a queer resistance to the pull of a genealogical origin from which he feels himself estranged. In other words, Merrick searches for a history that he cannot find, for a ground he cannot access and does so in ways that recall the *feeling* of Cullen's entanglement in "Heritage."

The ambivalence of Merrick's longing for a return to origins in spite of their insufficiency is mirrored in what the reader learns of Jim Laird, Merrick's childhood

friend. As the sole figure in whom Steavens can recognize "the feeling, the understanding" of his beloved teacher, Laird provides the story's example of what happens when the queer(ed) subject maintains attachment to the community of birth. Laird and Merrick had traveled East to college together in the hopes of becoming "great men," before Laird returned home while Merrick remained in the East. Chastising the townsfolk for the broadsides dished out over Merrick's coffin, Laird recounts the ways in which the community transforms its misfits into "whipped dog[s]" that do the town's commercial bidding. Laird's invective exposes the corrupting influence of the place of origin on those who might aspire to something different. What difference connects Laird and Merrick is obfuscated in the story, though the narrator depicts Laird as a broken, grieving lover. As Laird sinks into dissipation, the narrator observes that the "thing in [Laird] that Harvey Merrick had loved must have gone under ground with Harvey Merrick's coffin" (210). In the end, the community that Merrick escaped kills his erstwhile comrade left behind: "Jim got the cold he died of driving across the Colorado mountains to defend one of Phelps's sons who had got into trouble out there by cutting government timber" (210). In this final haunting line, the reader mourns one of Sand City's queer sons sacrificed and burnt up to preserve the heterosexual reproduction of origins located in his defense one of the town's troublesome "sons."

A similar fate haunts the protagonist of "Paul's Case," the tale of a queer teen boy who escapes home only to take his own life when it seems inevitable that he will be forced to return. Perhaps one of the Cather's most famous short stories, "Paul's Case" was one of the singular examples used by critics including Eve Sedgwick and Judith Butler to recover the artist as a lesbian and gender nonconformist. What concerns me

here is not if or how Paul can be identified as queer—such is clear to even a casual reader of the short story—but rather how his queerness informs his imaginative relation to origins and others. Disidentified with the community of his birth, Paul creates a ground for himself in the itinerant and international milieu of the theatre, imagining himself into the far-flung romantic landscapes of a world much broader than Pittsburgh. The diasporic register of Paul's longing is signaled both by the narrator's alignment of the young boy's world of matinee idols with the "subterranean" life of Jews living in London as well as the repeated metaphor of cut flowers that symbolize aesthete homosexuality and being cut off from origins.

Paul's disidentification[55] with his origins at once mirrors and extends that of Harvey Merrick in more explicitly anti-nationalist, anti-capitalist and anti-reproductive terms. The narrator charts Paul's movement from the "fairy world" of the local theater, with its "exotic, tropical world of shiny, glistening surfaces and basking ease" to his home on Cordelia Street as a process of "sinking back forever into ugliness and

[55]This term is adopted from José Muñoz, who uses it to describe the process by which queers of color strategically encounter dominant aesthetic forms in ways that neither assimilate nor reject them, but rather transform them in order give voice to minoritarian cultural experience and its political appeal(s). Here, I use the term in one sense to think about how a white queer subject also transforms concepts like "home" and "culture" to make them translatable to the community he binds himself to in the theater. The theater, as stage and dressing room, becomes the site of performative possibilities whereby the white queer subject can imagine and play with/in the boundaries of available identifications in a way that comes closer to articulating an unrepressed self capable of challenging the normative institutions (school, family, middle class Protestant community, etc.) that made Paul seek out the theater and its performative capacities in the first place. By using a term identified with *queer of color* critique to describe white queer identification, I also deploy it in a second sense to mark the white queer subject's relationship to identificatory strategies developed for and by racialized others, a relationship that rests on appropriation and cross-identification. In this second sense, white queer disidentification reveals a particularly interesting triangulation of the white queer identity between the claims of "home" or "origin" and an affinity (imagined and desired) for racialized others, including Jewish, Black and, as we shall see in the second chapter, Asian bodies, communities and histories. See: Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, 1–37.

commonness…the flavourless, colourless mass of every-day existence."[56] Arriving in his bedroom, Paul's disdain for home takes the shape of a resistance to nationalist inscription, community responsibility and the spectre of a dead mother who haunts the short story as an absent origin.

> The end had to come sometime…his up-stairs room and its horrible yellow wallpaper, the creaking bureau with the greasy plush collar-box, and over his painted wooden bed the pictures of George Washington and John Calvin, and the framed motto, "Feed my Lambs," which had been worked in red worsted by his mother, whom Paul could not remember. (175)

The narrator—whose consciousness, it is worth adding, seems to be synonymous and distinct from Paul's—here marks the fusion of state, faith and family into the image that governs the room to which Paul loathes returning. The motto "Feed my lambs," from John 21:15, instantiates love as devotion to the young, a cultural mandate doubled by the description of Paul's neighborhood just a few sentences later:

> It was a highly respectable street, where all the houses were exactly alike, and where business men of moderate means *begot and reared large families of children*, all of whom went to Sabbath-school and learned the shorter catechism, and were interested in arithmetic; all of whom were as exactly alike as their homes, and of a piece with the monotony in which they lived. (175, emphasis added)

The prodigious reproductivity of the community of birth is the very mandate of a relation to origins that Paul is unable to follow and thus marks the insufficiency of origins to be a ground for "the kind of boy [Paul] had always wanted to be" (184). That disjuncture between the kind of boy Paul is expected to be and the kind of boy that he wants to be—a desire that is nearly indistinguishable from being able to openly express the kind of boy that Paul *is*—necessitates the search for a people and a place that might properly be his.

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[56] Willa Cather, "Paul's Case," in *Collected Stories* (New York: Random House, 1992), 175. Subsequent references to the text will appear in-text as parenthetical citations.

The people and place to which Paul feels he belongs are the itinerant stage performers who traffic in and out of Carnegie Hall from far-flung regions of the globe. Paul spends "every available moment loitering" in the dressing room of one of the more prominent young actors, Charley Edwards, finding a place where he "really lived" and which offers him access to a world from which he might have come. Perhaps the story's most fascinating off-hand description is the sudden alignment of the backstage area—itself the origin of what eventually appears on stage as the public performance—with the secret enclaves of diaspora Jews:

> It was very like the old stories that used to float about London of fabulously rich Jews, who had subterranean halls, with palms, and fountains, and soft lamps and richly appareled women who never saw the disenchanting light of London day. So, in the midst of that smoke-palled city, enamored of figures and grimy toil, Paul had his secret temple, his wishing-carpet, his bit of blue-and white Mediterranean shore bathed in perpetual sunshine. (179)

The imbrication of fantasy and cross-ethnic identification generates both Paul's sense of spiritual origin ("his secret temple") and a place in the world (the "blue-and-white Mediterranean shore bathed in perpetual sunshine"). The connection Paul imagines across space, from underground London to the Mediterranean shores, unifies the disparate locales and identities as his fantasy models demonstrate the reach of diaspora culture. When Paul runs away to New York City to be with "his own people," he likens the theater to "an enchanted palace, built and peopled for him alone" (184-185). As he attaches to this new community, the facticity of his Pittsburgh origins begins to fall away: "He doubted the reality of his past. Had he ever known a place called Cordelia Street […] Ah, that belonged to another *time and country*" (185, emphasis added). Thus, the autopoietic mode of queer orientation adapts and supplants origins, history and

temporality. In other words, Paul's discovery of "home" here is achieved through an active play with his world.

Ultimately, it is the threat of his father's arrival in New York to drag his son back to the rejected origin that prompts Paul's suicide. The ephemerality of entering into relation with the proper time and country from which he might have come is underscored by the return of the biological father, under whose gaze "all the world had [suddenly] become Cordelia Street" (188). As Paul contemplates his suicide before jumping onto the train tracks, he curiously identifies with the carnations in his coat pocket, "drooping with the cold…all their red glory over" (189). The carnations are of the same "scandalous red" (171) variety, clipped and bound together, that Paul wore in defiance of his school's attempts to discipline him at the opening of the story. These cut flowers are not only an aesthetic escape from the doldrums of Pittsburgh life, they are the metonymic embodiment of Paul's desired and fatal condition. Cut off from their roots, they bloom for only a moment and then die:

> It occurred to him that all the flowers he had seen in the show windows that first night must have gone the same way, long before this. It was only one splendid breath they had, in spite of their brave mockery at the winter outside the glass. It was a losing game in the end, it seemed, this revolt against the homilies by which the world is run. (189)

Paul's identification of the flowers with both the world of the theater and an exuberant living for oneself against the oppressive, alienating forces of home and capital marks them as a symbol of what I've been suggesting is this queer diasporic longing. This embattlement with origin as a space that cannot contain or entirely explain the queer subject, and thus must be exceeded or adapted to clear a space for queer flourishing, connects McKay and Cather at the site of queer diaspora's structure of feeling. However,

whereas McKay's characters flourish in their queer ephemeral communities at the edges of diaspora, Paul does not survive separation from an origin that refuses to relinquish him. Thus, while his death renders Paul the fantasy of journeying to the "blue of Adriatic water, the yellow of Algerian sands," it delivers his body "back into the immense design of things," back into the origin from which he cannot escape (189).

Claude Wheeler's Feeling of Kinship in *One of Ours*

That longing for elsewhere likewise defines Claude Wheeler's search for community and existential meaning in Cather's *One of Ours* (1922). Derided by critics who dubbed it a naïve representation that celebrated romantic militarism instead of excoriating the brutal futility of World War I,[57] *One of Ours* might equally be described as a novel about a boy who wants to join any group – the circus and, later, the military —

[57] Perhaps the most famous of these is Ernest Hemingway's "review" of the novel in a note sent to Edmund Wilson, claiming that Cather had taken all of her battlefield descriptions from *Birth of a Nation* and "Catherized" them. Condescending that the "poor woman" was simply out of her depth, Hemingway was equally mystified as to why the novel had been awarded the Pulitzer Prize and affronted by a public that seemed to be "taking it seriously." Wilson was perhaps a bit more direct, dubbing the novel a "pretty flat failure" in his *Vanity Fair* review, calling into question the judgment of early Cather supporters such as H.L. Mencken. Incidentally, Mencken himself would dismiss the novel as a representation of war in "the standard model of the lady novelist," which is to say, naïve and superficial. A similar flavor inflects Sinclair Lewis's critique of the novel as a "romance of violinists gallantly turned soldier, of self-sacrificing sergeants, [and] sallies at midnight" (Qtd. in Acocella, 18-19). As Joan Acocella observes, these critiques articulate the disjuncture between (exclusively male) modernist representations of war as a futile and deadly engagement with false national consciousness and the sort of heroic war narrative that Cather appeared to be writing. Arguing that, though the novel has "problems" in its second half—"Claude's transformation from dismayed farm boy into valiant infantryman is too quick, unreal"—Acocella represents the contemporary reception of the novel as conflicted and equivocating on the value of war and its effect on the individuals to whom Claude gives representation (18-19). In *Memorial Fictions: Willa Cather and the First World War,* Steven Trout reasons that the novel performs an "ironic unmasking of military romanticism" that reveals the "paradoxical nature of war and of the idealism it inspires" (53). Despite these contemporary recoveries, the novel receives little critical attention, especially when compared to *The Professor's House* which much more regularly populates the contents of journals and course syllabi. See: Joan Acocella, *Willa Cather and the Politics of Criticism* (New York: Vintage, 2002); Steven Trout, *Memorial Fictions: Willa Cather and the First World War* (Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press, 2002).

that will take him away from home. While his family can hardly understand his interest, Claude thrills to take in the spectacle of the calliope "screaming down Maine street at the head of the circus parade."[58] What the circus promises as spectacle and fantasy is similar to the appeal of the theater in "Paul's Case": a glimpse of the queer characters who live their lives beyond the confines of a suffocating hometown. It is also the site of homosocial encounter, as Claude leaves his family to go "looking for some of the neighbor boys" (950) as soon as they get to the town center where the circus parade is taking place. It is among such groups of men—those which recall in feeling and form, if not in content, the fleeting communities of men from McKay's novels—that Claude Wheeler finally finds the "home" he's been searching for beyond the place of origin, a place where he matters and belongs.

That community of like-minded men takes its most significant and final shape among the Marines with whom he is deployed to France. Whereas Claude was marked outside the norms of his community of birth—his feelings and style of dress are different from his kin and the other townspeople, and he is not considered attractive or normal—he finds pleasure and unity in the band of boys with whom he travels on the open expanse of a "violet coloured sea" (1158).[59] Claude's affect, channeled by the narrator as he gazes across the deck, takes on a romantic tone.

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[58] Willa Cather, "One of Ours," in *Early Novels and Stories*, The Library of America (New York: Library of America, 1987), 950. Subsequent references to the text will appear in-text as parenthetical citations.

[59] What cannot be missed here is the alignment of the color purple, especially when described as "violet," with the suggestion of queerness. Even at the beginning of the century, both the color purple and flowers of various kinds were associated with male homosexuality. Thus, the spectacle of watching a "broad purple sun go down into a violet coloured sea" encapsulates both the visual and floral signs of homosexuality as well as the onset of night, a period associated with all manner of queer figuration in Cather's writing as we shall see in a moment.

> Already, from among hundreds of strangers, half a dozen stood out as men [Claude] was determined to know better. Taking them altogether the men were a fine sight as they lounged about the decks in the sunlight, the petty rivalries and jealousies of camp days forgotten. Their youth seemed to flow together, like their brown uniforms. Seen in the mass like this, Claude thought, they were rather noble looking fellows. In so many of the faces there was a look of fine candour, an expression of cheerful expectancy and confident goodwill. (1157)

As the narrator's cruising gaze takes in the tableau of louche male bodies, it witnesses a curious sense of unity that moves between the broad and the particular. While there are six soldiers out of the "hundreds" that Claude wants a deeper intimacy with, he also feels the general intimacy of being with these fellow men whose "youth seemed to flow together," transforming them into a community of pleasure anchored in purpose. The utopian nature of this male community — one that resounds in intriguing ways to the scenes of male camaraderie in McKay's *Banjo* — is signaled in their casting aside the negative affects of training camp (the "petty rivalries and jealousies") and adopting a "cheerful expectancy" and bonhomie among one another. As one unnamed marine describes it, the military unit becomes a kind of surrogate family and, in their ceaseless movement across the ocean and throughout the world, becomes a mobile form of home. "I never felt the lack of home," the soldier explains. "Now the U.S. Marines are my family. Wherever they are, I'm at home" (1158). Filiation thus emerges as adaptive and wandering rather than based on a shared history or genealogy.

A particularly interesting feature of *One of Ours* is that whenever Claude imagines a less alienated existence, he usually does so by way of an alternate racial affiliation. Swimming naked in a local pond, the narrator describes Claude's longing for, and his belonging to, a race of "children of the moon," a people to which he is bound by feeling rather than blood or concrete history.

> Those people whose hearts were set high needed such intercourse [with confidants]—whose wish was so beautiful that there were no experiences in this world to satisfy it. And these children of the moon, with their unappeased longings and futile dreams, were a finer race than the children of the sun. This conception flooded the boy's heart like a second moonrise, flowed through him indefinite and strong, while he lay deathly still for fear of losing it. (1100)

This shadow race, with their "unappeased longings" and wish for "beautiful" experiences beyond the reach of the world, suggests a queer eroticism further emphasized by the penetrative image of a reverie of racial recognition that "flooded the boy's heart like a second moonrise," an essence that "flowed through him indefinite and strong" while he swims naked and alone.

The "race" that is articulated in the passage is not merely some abstract fantasy with no correlate in the real world. Rather, it emerges out of historical linkages that Claude draws between this "race" and the peoples of ancient Egypt, the Middle East, and the broad historical experience of slavery and imprisonment. Claude's reveries of the "children of the moon" also summons forth mythohistorical fantasies of origins that draw upon images of the black and Jewish diasporas.

> For some reason, Claude began to think about the far-off times and countries [the moon] had shone upon. […] But the moon, somehow, came out of the historic past, and made him think of Egypt and the Pharaohs, Babylon and the hanging gardens. [The moon] seemed particularly to have looked down upon the follies and disappointments of men; into the slaves' quarters of old times, into prison windows, and into fortresses where captives languished. (1099-1100)

The eruption of "race" into Claude's imaginative identification with the "children of the moon" here becomes explicitly diasporic in its invocation of the Jewish diaspora in his fantasies of "Egypt and the Pharaohs" of Exodus. These cross-racial feelings of kinship correspond to the "feeling of kinship" that David Eng ascribes to a queer diaspora in which "other forms of family and kinship […] [that] denaturalize [the] heteronormative

discourses of racial purity."[60] While for Eng these are the creative resources marshalled by queers of color as they negotiate the complex nexus of belonging to race and national origin, Claude expresses that same labile play with origin and "race" as the sort of white queer diasporic feeling this chapter has been tracking in Cather's work. The invocation of slavery and the "disappointments of men" also appear to map Claude's feelings of masculine failure — an index of his queerness at several moments in the novel — onto the historical tragedies of people of African and Jewish descent (depending on how one reads the mention of slavery and Egypt). It is thus an identification at the site of explicitly racialized trauma that Claude identifies with his suffering as a mode of belonging to an abstract diaspora of "the race of the children of the moon."

Claude's longing for community leads him to seek out national attachments that make him feel connected to a world that isn't so isolating. The looseness of his imaginary enables him to find that attachment in a longing for France rather than America. The war doesn't turn Claude into an *American* nationalist, but rather provides the conditions for him to feel a desire for belonging to the elsewhere he imagines he has found abroad.

> *La France*. How much that name had come to mean to him, since he first saw a shoulder of land bulk up in the dawn from the deck of the *Anchises*. It was a pleasant name to say over in one's mind, where one could make it as passionately nasal as one pleased and never blush. (1245)

Rather than a journey away from home, Claude's military travel to France is expressed as a homecoming, a return to the place that he might have come from. As an elsewhere that appeals to him on the basis of its difference from his place of origin, *La France* offers a place for the sort of expression and pleasures that would cause shame at home. Wheeler's longing for French national feeling is couched in romantic and filial language whereby he

[60] Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy*, 14.

imagines a man's "love" for his country as the mandate to "love its trees and flowers; to nurse it when it was sick, and tend its hurts with one arm" (1240). France is a passionate attachment, in other words, that Claude can call out by name and do so with pleasure in place of shame. Where origins fail to make sense of this queer white subject, an openness to difference enables him to discover a fugitive space among communities that do not belong to him and which might serve the function that "home" never has. In this sense, I agree with Marilee Lindemann's suggestion that the queer body challenges a hegemonic and homogenous discourse of national identity, and her argument that Cather's writing expresses a desire that "the queer not be excluded from the terms and conditions of citizenship."[61] However, Claude's story also indicates that the queer subject's identification as a citizen is mobile and pliable. The complaint is less about being denied a particular citizenship, but rather citizenship as a kind of general belonging in which the queer can attach to any nation beyond the strictures of fixed origin, blood or national purity. Claude's open and wandering filiation, his longing for a passionate nationalism wherever he can find it, troubles who the "ours" in *One of Ours* refers to. Rather a national "ours" located in a particular geopolitical state, the collective "ours" may be the mobile site of queer home-making that exceeds the bonds of geopolitical group identity in its desire for difference.

Difference itself may also be seen as what compels Claude's fixation and longing for attachment to others, emerging as the hallmark of a community where he might belong. Some of the most anguished moments of longing in *One of Ours* are also those moments in which Claude faces an unbridgeable cultural divide. Queerness curiously

[61] Marilee Lindemann, *Willa Cather, Queering America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 35–36, 73.

percolates through these exchanges that are also about finding a home and connection with others. In an especially interesting example, Claude is approached by a young French boy asking him for the time:

> "*Voulez-vous me dire l'heure, s'il vous plait, M'sieu' l' soldat?"*
>
> Claude looked down into his admiring eyes with a feeling of panic…His tongue went dry, and his face grew scarlet. The child's expectant gaze changed to a look of doubt, then of fear. He had spoken before to Americans who didn't understand, but they had not turned red and looked angry like this one; this soldier must be ill, or wrong in his head. The boy turned and ran away.
> Many a serious mishap had distressed Claude less. He was disappointed, too. There was something friendly in the boy's face that he wanted . . . that he needed. (1192-1193)

Claude's attachment to the boy—his sense that there is "something" in the boy that "he wanted"—is also a desire for communication and contact. The nature of that contact is rendered ambiguous by double valence of the boy's question. Literally translated, the boy is asking Claude for the time. In the queer world of the early twentieth century, such questions were code for soliciting a homosexual encounter for both "trade" and gay men alike.[62] The encounter's queer overtones are further indicated by Claude's "turn[ing] red" and the reflection of his own desire appearing as an ephemeral, ambiguous "something" in the boy's face. Likewise, what may appeal to Claude is the boy's condition of not being understood, a feeling that provides an imaginative point of identification.

This dynamic can also be seen in Claude's romantic reaction to the songs of a gardener singing in a language he doesn't understand. Difference enables a fluid space

[62] Querying a stranger for a match in a foreign language is also the catalyst for a cruising encounter in Richard Bruce Nugent's "Smoke, Lilies and Jade," explored in greater detail in Chapter 2. As George Chauncey notes, gay men often used a variety of linguistic and performative strategies in public to indicate same-sex desire and solicit partners. See: Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Makings of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940*, 187–92.

for fantasy projection in which Claude can imagine "how much it must mean to a man to love his country" (1243).

> Down in the garden Louis was singing. Again he wished he knew the words of Louis' songs. The airs were rather melancholy, but they were sung very cheerfully. There was something open and warm about the boy's voice, as there was about his face—something blond, too. It was distinctly a blond voice, like summer wheat-fields, ripe and waving. Claude sat alone for half an hour or more, tasting a new kind of happiness, a new kind of sadness. Ruin and new birth; the shudder of ugly things in the past, the trembling image of beautiful ones on the horizon; finding and losing; that was life, he saw. (1243)

As with the boy in whom Claude sees "something that he wanted," the unintelligibility of Louis' songs draws him closer to the community in which he circulates as a foreigner. Forged in unintelligibility, Claude's feeling of connection to Louis enables him to at once imagine a belonging to race or nation – regardless of what songs Louis might be actually singing, Claude understands them as national songs – and to shrug off the "ugly things in the past," directing his gaze towards the "beautiful [images] on the horizon."

This moment of connection through difference is punctuated by the appearance just a few paragraphs earlier of Cather's central metaphor for the connection and disconnection that her queer characters feel to land and home: the prairie flowers that grow in a horticultural diaspora. Pausing to reflect on the intensity of patriotic love, Claude notices "a group of tall, scraggly plants…of the evening primrose family, the *Gaura*, that grew along the clay banks of Lovely Creek, at home" (1241). The connection between expatriate and native prairie flowers orbits around the queer diasporic feeling that I've been mapping in Cather's work in the sense that both are able to find themselves rooted far from home. By virtue of their flourishing afar, they represent that sense of "connection and disconnection" foundational to theories of diasporic consciousness and subjectivity. Though the historical trajectories of their exile condition are quite different,

the openness to difference and the pleasures of a connection found *in* disconnection animate the lives of McKay and Cather's protagonists, binding them together in a queer diasporic feeling. Much like McKay's vision, queer diasporic feeling in Cather's fiction is structured by the ephemerality of pleasurable contact. Claude walks away from Louis with the pleasure and sadness of knowing that "he had left something on the hilltop which he would never find again" (1244). A queer diaspora, as I've been arguing throughout this chapter, sustains itself in the ability to find and celebrate ecstasy in the momentary, and to value that ecstasy precisely because it is momentary. Such relations make the world open for these queer subjects estranged from home, culture and nation. As such, the delight in ephemerality evoked in both authors' work orients their queer protagonists and enables them to flourish outside of the institutions that structure and uphold the normative organization of life. Beyond marriage, beyond the family, beyond the heterosexual romance, and beyond the romance of nation and the community of origin, Cather's queer boys from the plains states and steel towns articulate ways of feeling and imagining relation to others that secure them to pleasure and fulfillment, even if it is only ever evanescent.

Consuming Others: Interracial Desire in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*

Sapphira and the Slave Girl, which Cather began writing in 1937 and published on her birthday in 1940, brings into view a much more troubling yet instructive sense of how the white queer cross-identification with diasporic others functions in Cather's fiction. The novel invokes the history of slavery in the United States, fixating on the traumatized black female body as a site of desire and identification in ways that reinforce

the racist ideology the novel appears to be against. Set in ante- and post-bellum Virginia, the novel details the relationship between Nancy, a young mulatto slave girl, and her cruel mistress, Sapphira Colbert. Mistakenly suspecting her husband Henry's devotion to the young and beautiful Nancy as an amorous attachment, Sapphira mistreats the woman and conspires to have a maleficent relative, Martin Colbert, rape her as punishment for an "offense" never committed. Henry and Rachel, the Colberts' only child, help Nancy avoid Martin and flee to freedom in Canada. At the conclusion of the novel, Nancy returns to the plantation from which she'd fled twenty-five years earlier to reunite with her mother, Till, and to visit those who helped her escape. Sapphira and Henry are both dead, but awaiting Nancy in their place is Rachel's unnamed daughter. In these final pages, this unnamed daughter is revealed to be the narrator and, in and odd autobiographical postscript, a fictional version of a young Cather.

Cather described the novel as a "home story" and acknowledged that it was drawn from her earliest childhood memories in Virginia prior to the Cathers' relocation to Red Cloud, Nebraska. As Hermione Lee explains, the turn towards this particular past was motivated by Cather's frustration at the "'evil' let loose in the world" after World War I and her desire to capture "a narrative of the *terrible* in domesticated form." Cather was dismayed to see the "destruction" of the world that she remembered as a child in the wake of modernization between the wars and the novel thus repairs those damaged scenes in the present by returning to the "pastoral conventions" of her childhood memories. Yet Lee points out that the "family past" which Cather reconstructed in *Sapphira* is inseparable from slavery, and thus the novel proceeds with "ambivalence"

around the violent and evil history that is part of her nostalgia.[63] This ambivalence around the issue of slavery makes the novel "embarrassing reading" according to Lee and other critics, including Toni Morrison, whose scathing critique I will review in greater detail below. While understandable, the critical neglect that this "embarrassing" quality has given rise to misses the opportunity presented by it for understanding Cather's relationship to racial and ethnic others, to the pastoral as a scene of beauty and alienation, and to her conflicted view of modernity that are among the most vital in Cather studies. Further, it misses an opportunity to explore white queer relation to racial otherness – blackness in particular – as a site of identification that uses and reinforces racist oppression in order to enable that racial other to emerge as both an object of desire (a love object) and platform for white queer alterity (an identity object).

Sapphira lets us see how interracial erotics and cross-racial identification provide a sense of history, belonging and an autonomous female identity to Cather's narrator, the author's younger self. What must be explored, then, is the violence to women and racial others that purchases these constellations of origin and identity. The novel's turn to women, as is perhaps clear from the above gloss, is also a turn to the traumatic — to the threat of rape, to the dailyness and omnipresence of violence through which slavery articulated black female embodiment and identity — markedly different from the short fiction reviewed here or *One of Ours*.[64] In such ways, even though the novel's politics appear to be staunchly anti-slavery and aspiring to a freer version of womanhood for its

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[63] Lindemann, *Willa Cather, Queering America*, 357–58.

[64] One may already hear objections to this reading regarding "Paul's Case," though it is important to remember that, while tragic, Paul's suicide is also an act of *autonomous* radical rejection of the culture of origin. Prior to the suicide, Paul's experience in the theater and during his brief stay in New York generate pleasures of the sort denied, both by the slave system and the narrative that gives it representation, Nancy.

young narrator, the union imagined and desired between the black female protagonist and the white characters depends on the history and effects of slavery. This union is achieved in three distinct movements that follow more or less chronologically throughout the novel. First, the white characters' relationship to black characters is consistently imagined as a kind of loose interracial family. Second, the white narrator's visual dissection of an exoticized and eroticized black female body offers an accessible embodiment of resistant or empowered femininity. Third, the text pulls those two images of the black female body together as a strategy for giving the white female narrator both a history and an identity.

Throughout the novel, Henry Colbert's sense of the *filial* relationship between his white family and its black slaves—the very engine of his budding abolitionist sentiment—serves to simultaneously naturalize and denaturalize race relations under the slave system. This filiation is marked in both his strong sense of the genealogical relationships between slaves and of the family relationship that those slaves bear to their white masters. When Sapphira announces at the beginning of the novel that she plans to sell Nancy to a friend in a nearby town, Henry refuses on the basis of family ties: "Nancy least of all! Her mother is here, and old Jezebel. Her people have been in your family for four generations […] She stays here."[65] When Sapphira suggests that Henry's sudden "family feeling" is owed to both a secret sexual interest in Nancy and the rumor that she was fathered by one of his cousins, he flatly denies both claims and insists that Nancy's father was in fact "a painter from Baltimore" unrelated to the Colberts (782). In such ways, Henry simultaneous claim and disavowal of Nancy as family marks as well his ambivalence about the "peculiar institution" that binds black and white subjects together

[65] Willa Cather, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (New York: Library of America, 1990), 781. Subsequent references to the novel will appear in-text as parenthetical citations.

as family while at the same time threatening to pull them apart along the axes of the human/not-human and owner/property relationships. This dehumanization reaches its apotheosis in Henry's later reflection that "ever since she was a child, Nancy had seemed to him more like *an influence than a person*" (885, emphasis added). This notion of the black female slave as an "influence" rather than a "person" is, I argue, fundamental to understanding the instrumentality of the black female body in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* as that which affects and orients its white female narrator in the world. "Influence" also gives us purchase on the function of the sexualized and exoticized black female body as an idealized and spectacular locus for the types of attachments and celebrated alternative femininity for which the novel strives.

The preeminent, or at least first, figure of such female embodiment is Old Jezebel, the 95-year-old slave matriarch who is Nancy's grandmother, Sapphira's former nurse and most trusted, affectionate companion. Noted for being "the only one of the Colbert negroes who had come from Africa" and descended from "a fierce cannibal people," it is Jezebel's tale of surviving the Middle Passage as a strong woman that "could never be tamed" by her male captors that makes her story so fascinating to the young female narrator (829). Regarding her through the eyes of the slave ship's skipper, the narrator dilates over descriptions of Jezebel's "remarkable" body—"tall, straight, muscular, long in the legs […] a well-shaped creature"—which the skipper values as being "worth any three of the women—as much as the best of the men" (830). It is Jezebel's body and her control over the body that commands the skipper's respect after she bites one of the mate's hands. Though his decision to bring her above decks is a brutal form of torture—she is bound by a "light chain" to the deck "in all weathers" and afforded minimal

clothing—the child narrator sees it as a scene of Jezebel's awesome power, noticing that "she always laughed aloud when [he] passed with his arm in a sling" (830). Indeed, images of Jezebel's tortured body, "seamed with welts and bloody cuts" are accouterments of her "proud indifference" and her resolve noted in the fact that "there was no plea for mercy in her eyes" (830). In these descriptions, Jezebel emerges as a defiant and heroic character, one whose refusal to be tamed is of particular interest to the narrator, who appears to further delight in tales of Jezebel that paint her as monstrous (a "cannibal," for example), stories in which she breaks the norms of feminine behavior. This fascination perhaps explains why the narrator includes the detail of Jezebel's bizarre request, on her deathbed, to have "a li'l pickaninny's hand" as her last meal (827). Such moments use cannibalistic desire as a source of pleasure and strength for Jezebel that bears a troubling relationship to the visual consumption of black bodies that here and elsewhere accretes history and identity to the child narrator.

The brief but powerful description of Old Jezebel's life—she dies soon after we learn her backstory—yoke together queer desire, identification and white supremacist caricatures of the slave body. The horror which the narrator appears to treat only as salacious and interesting backstory recalls Hortense Spillers' analysis of white approaches to the black body that structured both the Moynihan Report and the racial imaginary I note here in Cather's *Sapphira*. Spillers identifies four primary "meanings and uses" of the captive African body that are particularly important to consider here: its character as a "source of irresistible, destructive sensuality," its contradictory reduction to a mere "thing" that represents its "being for the captor," its "captured sexualities" transmuted into a "physical and biological expression of 'otherness,'" and its concomitant

"potential for pornotroping."[66] Spillers argues that these uses are "interlocking" and mutually constituting rather than independent of one another. That imbrication can be seen in Cather's description of Jezebel's body, in how the narrator's fascination with her relies on the same techniques of assigning "otherness," irresistibility and destructive potential to the black female body and, in so doing, treat it as an object for pleasure, desire and identification. It is the narrator's uncritical consumption of such othering that enables the novel to elide the horrific violence of Jezebel's backstory and to (re)produce her as an object of fascination and a model of defiant womanhood.

Sapphira closes with Nancy's return to the Colberts' farm after the Civil War, a return that signals the rise of a "new generation" that will have new understandings of race and gender. From the perspective of the white child narrator, this return is to the scene of world that is ambivalent about the changes that have taken place.

> This new generation was gayer and more carefree than their forbears, perhaps because they had fewer traditions to live up to. The war had done away with many of the old distinctions. The young couples were poor and extravagant and jolly. They were much given to picnics and camp-meetings in summer, sleighing parties and dancing parties in the winter…The women made social calls, went to the post office and the dressmaker, on horseback. A handsome woman (or a pretty girl) on a fine horse was a charming figure to meet on the road; the close-fitting riding-habit with long skirt, the little hat with the long plume. (929)

While the obvious *whiteness* of this "gayer and more carefree" generation living under Reconstruction and the seeming remorse at the "lost traditions" of "old distinctions" is hard to escape, it is arrival of a modern woman in this passage that I find most compelling. The appearance of such a "handsome woman" riding on horseback to her daily errands cuts a striking figure, illuminating the novel's fascination with the emergence of an autonomous female identity that it observes in the female slaves from

[66] Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (Summer 1987): 64–81.

the past and in this woman on horseback in the contemporary moment. The ambiguity of those "old distinctions" enables the narrator to simultaneously signal the erasure of the slave system and its perpetuation in Reconstruction under barely altered forms in the South. While such erasures are only imaginable for a white subject, it produces the sort of loose matrix through which Cather's narrator can identify herself with Nancy as a feminist model *and* as her people.

The novel's final chapter makes much of these slippages between the past, present and future as it brings Nancy and the child narrator together. Nancy exists as a missing piece of her personal history, a name that she's heard "[e]ver since I could remember anything," ghosted in a song about a "yaller gal" who lived on the family farm (931). The "scene" of Nancy's return, the narrator explains, "had been arranged for my benefit," as she and Till wait for Nancy to walk through the door. That tableau equalizes their filial claims on Nancy as real and imagined family. These claims are frustrated by Nancy's difference, one that isn't registered as racial but rather vocal: the "unfailing distinctness" of Nancy's voice and its ability to "put into many words syllables I had never heard sounded in them before" (933). This quality marks a distinction that "repelled" the narrator, who notes that the sounds are not the same ones her father makes, a break in the fantasy of Nancy as family. Yet that difference also attracts the young narrator to Nancy.

The narrator's fixation on Nancy's physical body marks both her keen interest in the black female body and in taking her out of the matrix of racial difference that would forestall a connection between the black woman and the white girl. One of the narrator's first descriptions of Nancy models her as an exotic, cosmopolitan other that inspires irresistible excitement.

> When Nancy laid aside her long black coat, I saw with astonishment that it was lined with grey fur, from top to toe! We had no coats like that on Back Creek. She took off her turban and brushed back a strand of her shiny, blue-black hair. She wore a black silk dress. A gold watch-chain was looped about her neck and came down to her belt, where the watch was tucked away in a little pocket. (932)

The narrator's visual consumption of Nancy's body is inflected by a barely submerged erotic desire. The tactile suggestion of Nancy's "long black coat…lined with grey fur," a journey from the exterior to the interior of the striking figure, moves from top to toe with a Sedgwickian exclamation point that graphically draws our attention to the point hidden from view but which is the destination of the exclamation mark's (and the narrator's) visual vector. Much like the coat that doesn't exist anywhere in Back Creek, Nancy's "turban" and "black silk dress" lend her a foreign and exotic air that inspires the narrator's own visual travel along the "gold watch-chain" that comes down to Nancy's belt where it is "tucked away in a little pocket." Here in Cather's last novel, the visual spectacle of the black female body offers a foundational example of the exotic other's function as an object of queer identification that I have argued attends much of Cather's prior fiction.

The erotics of this encounter, as described by the narrator who cannot pull her eyes from roving up and down Nancy's body, are redoubled in her fixation on the woman's "movements" at the foot of the bed. Yet as that erotic register seems to peak, the narrator syntactically represses the sort of "carefree" feelings earlier marked to have been set loose by the "new generation" in which a "handsome woman" like Nancy comes riding into town alone.

> "I liked to see her move about,—there was something so smooth and measured in her movements. I noticed it when she went to get her handbag, and opened it on the foot of my bed, to show us the pictures of her husband and three children […]

> She could stay exactly six weeks; then she must go back to Montreal to get the house ready for the return of the family."(933)

One can hardly avoid a similarly Sedgwickian reading of that comma as a beckoning finger interrupted or barred by the hard line of the em-dash, stalling the narrator's fixation on Nancy's "smooth and measured" movements "at the foot of my bed." The unnecessary grammatical blockage serves to suppress the potential union thwarted by the revelation that Nancy already has a "house" and a "family" (indeed, a *life*) outside of the narrator. The syntax breaks soon after the revelation of Nancy's family back in Canada, a family that marks her outside of the narrator's longing for filiation. Suddenly, the text becomes clipped and matter-of-fact. Having that life beyond the narrator, Nancy no longer appears as belonging to her. The change in syntax thus demonstrates the narrator's frustration at not being able to easily assimilate Nancy into her fantasies of kinship and personal history.

This desire for domination, a desire for black women to be fixed in and as narratives that appeal to the white narrator's sense of identity, history and family relations is central to the novel's vision of the relationship between women and between races. Along these lines, Toni Morrison argues that the central "problem" of *Sapphira* is "trying to come to terms critically and artistically with […] the power and license of a white slave mistress over her female slaves."[67] Sapphira's disability, Morrison argues, is only overcome by the "power and license" she wields such that the surrounding "black bodies become her hands and feet, her fantasies of sexual ravish and intimacy with her husband"

[67] Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 18.

as well as "her sole source of love."[68] The instrumentality of these black female bodies is further underscored for Morrison by the lack of maternal feeling between Till and Nancy, itself the result of the racist presumption that "slave women are not mothers; [that] they are 'natally dead,' with no obligations to their offspring or their own parents."[69] Morrison closes her critique observing that the child narrator uses the black characters in her tale as instruments that enable "her own desire for a *safe* participation in loss, in love, in chaos, in justice," instruments whose potential autonomy she consistently subverts at every turn. This analysis shares Morrison's concerns, especially with regard to the instrumentality of black female bodies in pulling together the broken body of Sapphira and the identity of the child narrator. However, I want to complicate some of the anti-maternal elements of the novel by suggesting that they are also related to the narrator's desire for the aggressive, autonomous femininity that she glimpses (or believes she glimpses) in Nancy and Jezebel. From the perspective of a young white narrator, who is the child version of an author whose earlier works prominently feature male and female characters marked by gender non-conformity and an embattled relationship to home and family, the anti-maternal may suggest an alternative queer womanhood which the narrator desires.

In keeping with Morrison's critique of the violence and racism through which the Africanist presence manifests itself in *Sapphira*, my reading here indicates how a similar violence attends white queer identification and fascination with black female bodies in the novel. In other words, the narrator's racist and erotic images of black female bodies are strategic representations through which she can imagine and authorize her non-normative identity. As such, they highlight the ways in which white queer cross-

[68] Morrison, 26.

[69] Morrison, 21.

identification with racial others both depends on and supports the traumatic experience of those others. In this way, Cather's final work casts a different light upon the approach to racial and ethnic others in the earlier fiction, most especially in view of what I've identified as those works' queer diasporic longing. The pleasures of difference that structure the rejection of origins and the search for other, less hostile origins for Cather's white queer protagonists not only depend on what Morrison identifies as the "*safe* participation" of these white subjects in the experiences of racial and ethnic others, but also on the adoption of racist narratives that fix those others *in and as different*. From this vantage point, we can see that while McKay and Cather tend to treat difference as an unalloyed good in their fiction – a route to connection with others that itself becomes the basis for a less alienating relationship to self and origins — we would be wise to be attentive to the ways in which approaches to difference across the color line may produce possibilities for one subject precisely by keeping other subjects fixed in their precarious place.

In an essay on queer encounters with global hip-hop in the wake of the AIDS crisis, Tavia Nyong'o observes that the invocation of a singular Africanicity—he cites the recent ad campaign "We Are All African"—tends to divide such a global black collectivity into "the overdeveloped and underdeveloped world that…cuts diaspora itself, rendering global blackness a stranger to itself."[70] This position is challenged by the forms of queer diasporic feeling articulated in an archive of early-twentieth-century American writing in which, as I've been arguing through a comparative reading of Claude McKay

[70] Nyong'o, "'I've Got You Under My Skin': Queer Assemblages, Lyrical Nostalgia, and the African Diaspora," 44.

and Willa Cather, that strangeness (or the strangeness of those "strangers" one encounters in such global feelings) is precisely the glue that sutures diaspora at the site of proliferating, pleasurable difference. Such an archive responds, albeit unevenly, to what Nyong'o, Gopinath, Manalansan and others identify as queer diaspora's challenge to the whiteness and normativity of a transient, global queerness that cannot be fixed or assimilated into rigid identity categories. Cather's white queers articulate their queerness as a longing for a diffuse, global elsewhere of recuperated or imagined origins, always in reference to racial others that are sites of that attachment primarily because of their difference from the subject on filial, racial or national grounds or, in the case of *Sapphira*, that are renegotiated as imagined family relation. McKay's cruising communities in Marseilles and Harlem refuse the singularity of a global black identity in favor of pleasurable contact with multiplicity and difference that elides state surveillance. For both authors, queer *feeling* exceeds or transforms origin narratives and the relations traditionally imagined in them. Racial and national identifiers become loose and adaptable, capable of being transported and transmuted, although in different ways and with different effects, by black and white queer subjects whose orientation to the world is secured by the appeal of that which is different but which *feels* the same. In Cather's rejection of origins and McKay's rejection of "home" and a homogeneous global black identity, these early-twentieth-century examples of queer diasporic imagination meet Gayatri Gopinath and other queer diaspora theorists' call to imagine networks of belonging outside of the "logic of blood purity and patrilineal descent"[71] as a corrective to the reproductive, genealogical assumptions that undergird Gilroy and Hall's models of diaspora.

[71] Gopinath, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures*, 197.

Pairing Cather and McKay allows us to think through the ways that black and white queers found themselves at odds with the world into which they were thrown and to compare the strategies through which they attempted to imagine non-alienated connection to others. Race and its history divide their experiences, but their writing demonstrates a similar structure of feeling that connects Ray to Claude, Paul and Merrick. These characters search themselves out in the strangeness of the world, never satisfied with folding themselves back into the culture of their origins, never certain that such histories can explicate their emergence as queer subjects in the present. Open and wandering, they encounter themselves in the proliferating others who are not themselves, whose identities and habitations expose a barrier that is also a point of connection. Those connections, to racial and national others, are some of the strange crossings that a queer diaspora enables us to see. However, as Cather's writing makes clear, we must remain vigilant about the difference that race makes to those crossings.

If the queer diaspora I've been tracking throughout this chapter enables us to link the work of two disparate authors in similar structures of feeling, they also allow us to glimpse the queer possibilities set forth in diaspora. Cut off from home and its attendant cultural, sexual and social systems of knowledge, diaspora adapts that knowledge within new contexts in ways that produce innovative forms of sociality and contact, new ways of seeing the self in relation to others as well as the potential hazards of those forms. It is not, of course, incidental that the movement and dislocation associated with narratives of diaspora are often paired with sexual and cultural panic wherever diasporic bodies collect.[72] A queer diaspora enables us to see the ways in which sexuality and race are

[72] Nayan Shah's *Stranger Intimacies* explores these issues through the intersection of race, sexuality and vice law in the Western United States during the early twentieth century. Focusing

produced as objects of mutually constituted suspicion. It also enables us to see a new model of the social emergent in the longing that structures queer diasporic experience, a model that resists homogenizing the individual into larger groups such as race and nation. McKay's novels demonstrate, time and again, the manner in which "Africa" names a diverse set of cultures and experiences that cannot be conscripted into a unified movement as easily as a black nationalist imaginary might argue. Yet those differences are not a barrier for McKay; rather, their difference is precisely what makes diasporic encounters pleasurable. Similarly, Cather's queer characters are drawn to cultures and people distinctly different from themselves, yet they find in those often-insurmountable differences the possibility of a social order that might be capable of absorbing all types. As writers working between global wars, McKay and Cather's queer diasporas also address their era's struggle to imagine communities that are not exclusive or jingoistic, communities in which passionate feeling and attachment do not demand conformity but rather permit and revel in difference.

This optimistic or utopian vision does not mean to run away from the very problematic forms of exclusion and encounter that still attend the writing of both authors. Though figures such as *Banjo*'s Latnah offer a rejoinder to the claims of sexism and misogyny that assail McKay,[73] the virtual exclusion of any other female from the "fleeting

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especially on the Chinese immigrant population in and around San Francisco during this period, he locates the rise of medical fears about roving immigrant populations in a parallel sex panic about men and women severed from the normativizing institutions of home. See: Nayan Shah, *Stranger Intimacy: Contesting Race, Sexuality, and the Law in the North American West* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011).

[73] Heather Hathaway, for one, notes the ways in which McKay's female characters are rendered as "beasts" or one side of "virgin/vamp dualism." See: Heather Hathaway, *Caribbean Waves: Relocating Claude McKay and Paule Marshall,* 132. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).

communities of men" that structure *Banjo*'s queer diasporic sociality is an index of the text's limited vision. This misogynistic vision may likewise be traced in Cather's fiction, where men enjoy freedom and pleasure while women are subjected to brutality, trauma and disdain. In contrast to McKay, Cather's approach to racial others trades in objectification and fetishization, forms of attachment that do violence to the very people in whom her protagonists appear to find self-recognition. These early twentieth century modes of queer orientation to the world thus encourage us to be mindful of not only the ways in which new sodalities and models of the social may be generated out of queer feeling, but also to the ways in which those feelings can rely on and replicate racist and misogynist fantasies of domination and submission.

CHAPTER TWO

A Queer Orientalism: Richard Bruce Nugent and Edward Prime-Stevenson's Cross-Racial (Af)filiation

Moving from the last chapter's concern with diaspora, this chapter takes up the function of Orientalist fantasy as a site of cross-racial identification and filiation in the work of Richard Bruce Nugent and Edward Prime-Stevenson. Nugent is renowned as the singular "out" homosexual member of the Harlem Renaissance, a status that marginalized his literary and visual art during the period and its scholarly consideration almost a century later. Prime-Stevenson is known, under his pseudonym Xavier Mayne, as a sexologist and the writer of one of the earliest gay American novels (and one of the few gay pre-Stonewall gay novels that does not end in tragedy). While neither writer circulated in the same literary milieus, they both prominently feature Orientalist fantasy in their writing as a central part of their expression of queer identity and romantic longing. Their work, thus, helps us to grasp the function of Orientalist imaginaries in a much wider range of queer literature from the early twentieth century. The various Oriental figures and objects scattered about the pages of early twentieth century queer literature—a jade cigarette holder, a red and black lacquer cigarette box, the faces and gestures of Chinese domestic servants, the patriotic song of the Magyars, the self-securing folds of an elaborate kimono—function as signals of a character's queerness, as a safe haven from Western taboos on homosexuality and gender nonconformity, and as the possibility of an alternative filiation to a different race and nation.

Though their image-repertoire[1] for the Orient draws from the deep well of popular Orientalism,[2] the ways in which Nugent and Prime-Stevenson deploy them cannot be readily described by our typical frameworks for understanding these cultural representations and appropriations. At least one of those differences lies in the movement between a passive consumption of queer associations with the Orient in popular culture and the authors' active work to make the Orient a space for queer identification and

[1] The term comes from Roland Barthes' *A Lover's Discourse*, in which he claims that "[t]hroughout any love life, figures occur to the lover without any order, for on each occasion they depend on an (internal or external) accident. Confronting each of these incidents (what 'befalls' him), the amorous subject draws on the reservoir (the thesaurus?) of figures, depending on the needs, the injunctions, or the pleasures of his image-repertoire" (6). The utility of the image-repertoire for my project is its functional translatability—its status as a possible "thesaurus"—as a set of signifiers that might give shape to the inchoate experience of the "amorous subject" as a sort of "encyclopedia" of affect forms and habitations (7). The image-repertoire, thus, isn't static but rather a set of mobile identifiers that render, often in unstable ways, the subjectivities and subject positions through which the subject can understand itself. This instability enables the queer subject to draw from the image-repertoire of Orientalism while recasting its meaning for his or her identity and self-representation. See: Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, Paperback edition (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010).

[2] There is a long tradition of Orientalist representation in the West, but the dynamic most relevant here are developments in the associations with which the West confronted the Orient in the twentieth century. American theater shifted representations of Asian peoples and environs away from the "Yellow Peril" narratives of the 19th century toward those that celebrated the East as a "fantasy world that could be used as a criticism of the modernization or could function as a form of escapism" for audiences (119). This is not to say that the "Yellow Peril" variety of representation was absent at the turn of the twentieth century—far from it, as Nayan Shah's work on representations of Asian migrants in turn of the century San Francisco has shown. Rather, it was no longer the singular, dominant mode of Oriental representation. Amy Sueyoshi's work on the relationship between Yone Noguchi and Charles W. Stoddard identifies a strain in late nineteenth and early twentieth century American culture that came to see Japan as a "cure to a cultural malaise brought on by industrialization," prompting Americans to "turn to Japan to regain a more spiritual and pure civilization" (32). For critical histories of these and other Orientalist representations at the beginning of the twentieth century, see: Krystyn R. Moon, *Yellowface: Creating the Chinese in American Popular Music and Performance, 1850s-1920s* (New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press, 2005); Sean Metzger, *Chinese Looks: Fashion, Performance, Race* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2014); Amy Haruko Sueyoshi, *Queer Compulsions: Race, Nation, and Sexuality in the Affairs of Yone Noguchi* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2012); Daniel Y. Kim, "The Legacy of Fu-Manchu: Orientalist Desire and the Figure of the Asian 'Homosexual,'" in *Writing Manhood in Black and Yellow: Ralph Ellison, Frank Chin, and the Literary Politics of Identity*, Asian America (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), 124–59.

flourishing. This distinguishes queer Orientalism from a more recognizable Orientalism that produces the Western subject in relief, as the ghosted opposite of the Orient. In the latter iteration, self-knowledge is generated obliquely by negation; the desiring subject is defined by his difference from the objects of his Orientalist fantasy. This set of flows joins with Sara Ahmed's discussion of "the Orient" as an "orientation" or "supply point" for queerness. For Ahmed, such approaches to the Orient-as-orientation renders Oriental otherness as more than "simply a form of negation, [rather] it can also be described *as a form of extension*" by which the body "extends its reach by taking in that which is 'not it.'"[3] The queer engagement with Orientalist fantasy that I will track in this chapter joins and departs from this useful analysis. Nugent and Prime-Stevenson take in the Orient as the "'not' it" of white Western and African American identity that marks them apart from family and nation as queers. However, they do not do so as a form of extension, but rather as a relocation that leaves behind extant origins for a new filiation in the elsewhere they imagine in the Orient. This will most clearly be the case in Prime-Stevenson's *Imre: a memorandum* (1906), in which a British ex-pat (a stand-in for the American author) flees the homophobia of his home country to find a lover and a new national, ethnic identity in a Hungary he associates with the Orient and the ideals of gay male friendship. Yet it is also the case in Nugent's writing, where the Orient reframes the boundaries of race lived within the black/white binary of U.S. culture and which queers, in fascinating ways, the family.

To get a sense of the relations and imaginaries bound together under queer Orientalism, let us first consider a scene from Nugent's *Geisha Man* (c. 1933-1934, p.

[3] Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, 115.

2002). The novel, which exists only in fragment form[4], is a surreal tale of tragic love in which Gale Kondo, a mixed-race man[5] who dresses and identifies as a Japanese geisha. In the following scene, Kondo, dressed in a "gown of silver poppies," observes the glittering queer milieu at a drag ball of the sort common to Harlemite culture of the 1920s.[6]

> We arrived late, and the dance floor was a single chaotic mass of color. Abbreviated ballet skirts of pink, blue, silver and white dancing with Arab sheiks in fantastic colors … Turks with bright ballooned trousers, curled pointed boots and turbans with sweeps of brilliant feathers and sparkling glass gems … pirates in frayed trousers, bloody shirts, headbands, earring and tattoos … houri girls … fashion girls … Apache Indian, Spanish, Dutch and Japanese girls. One man resplendent in the third-dynasty costume of a Chinese bandit king. Court dresses of Louis XIV … hula girls and boys … clowns and deaths and pirouettes … Indian temple dancers … evening gowns and the black and white of full dress. Boys dressed as girls and simpering sadly. Girls dressed as boys and bulging in places. Corked clowns and stage takeoffs. A peacock gown with a train of iridescent green being broken if held and trampled if not. Flame kings and snow queens. Bathing beauties and Greek Gods. I recognized an Eastern prince as an Armenian acquaintance. Laughter, noise, petulance, brawls, perfumes; dust, dim lights, slippers, floors, arguments—perspiration. Trampled handkerchiefs, bits of costumes, swishing of silks, caress of fans, coquettish glances, bare knees, empty liqueur bottles…overturned glasses, wetted straws cigar bands and cigars, jangle

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[4] The existing chapters, transcribed and arranged by the late Nugent archivist Thomas Wirth from small slips of colored paper, roughly 3x5 inches and inscribed with various colored inks preserved in Nugent's papers at the Beinecke Library, have been published in the Wirth-edited collection of Nugent's writing and art, *Gay Rebel of the Harlem Renaissance* (2002). The version from which these citations are made is that printed in the above collection. See: Richard Bruce Nugent, "Geisha Man," in *Gay Rebel of the Harlem Renaissance: Selections from the Work of Richard Bruce Nugent* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 90–112. Subsequent references to this novel, and to all other Nugent works cited hereafter, appears parenthetically in text.

[5] Though never explicitly stated, it can be deductively reasoned that Kondo, who later refers to himself as "the first Negro ever to write a ballet" (109), is of mixed African American and white ancestry. While we never learn any details about his mother, the story reveals that his father is white.

[6] Such balls, which often took place in public halls such as the Hamilton Club, have been held in Harlem since at least the turn of the 20th century and were a visible and popular feature of Harlem nightlife. In a brief but important mention of such events, Langston Hughes observes that these "dance[s] [have] been going on for a long time" and were popular enough to have drawn "male masqueraders of the eastern seaboard, who come from Boston and Philadelphia, Pittsburgh and Atlantic City to attend." See: Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea: An Autobiography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993), 273–78.

> of bracelets. Pit-pit-p-p-pit of broken beads striking the floor, rolling and bouncing … then crack and crunch as they were ground under heels. Laughter and perfume and costumed greetings…heavy overtone of voices, clink of ice in glasses, blare of an orchestra and the scrape and thud of many feet.
>
> It was intoxicating. Don was lost at once. And I was accosted by men. For a dance. May I see you home? All alone? Lonesome? Beautiful costume! Entering for the prize? Myriad remarks and stares, flattering in their very crudeness.
>
> I was dancing with a handsome Turk. He was whispering little exciting breaths in my ear and surreptitiously kissing me. The feel of his muscles! His thighs darted into the folds of silver poppies, connecting with electric simplicity ever so often through the metallic flowers. The body feel of him! I was floating on music and sensuality. (Nugent, 100-101)

The "chaotic mass of color" that Kondo sees as he enters the ball offers a world in which identifiers such as nation, race and gender are refashioned in the play of costume and performance. The "Arab sheiks in fantastic colors" and the "Turks with bright ballooned trousers" aren't actual Arabs or Turks, but rather men (or women) of indeterminate racial and national identity posing in costume with "sparkling glass gems" in place of the riches of international royalty. Likewise, the transhistorical and global Orientalist pageantry of "Indian temple dancers," a "third-dynasty […] Chinese bandit king" and "hula boys and girls" call into question whether or not the "Apache Indian, Spanish, Dutch and Japanese girls" are actually people of those ethnic and national identities or if they are merely dressed to appear that way. The indeterminacy of real and performed identities is extended to the terrain of gender, with the "boys dressed as girls" and the "girls dressed as boys." At the ball, the performance of identity gives attendees the chance to try on new identities and potentially transform into a different person, one that *feels* more like oneself.

These slippages enable Kondo to fashion himself as a "geisha man," a freedom that fulfills a desire we may identify as queer. Prior to the ball scene, Kondo mourns that

he was not born a woman, and therefore is not free "to dress in flowing silks and silver and colors always, with a modish mannish look and gestures. With perfumes and lace. And attention" (100). The ball's suspension of "authentic" identities frees Kondo to dress himself "in flowing silks" and to carry himself in a "modish mannish" manner that flouts gender norms. It also, of course, invites the attentions of a "handsome Turk," who may be enjoying a similar freedom in his costume and the fantasy of dancing with a "real" Japanese geisha. This play of appearances enables the two men to come together on the dance floor under the performance of amorous heterosexual coupling, "his thighs darting into the folds of [Kondo's] silver poppies," as Kondo gives himself over to (hetero)sexual rapture. What are we to make of this scene? The traditional frameworks that we might use to analyze this multiracial and multinational queer milieu—Orientalism, imperial fantasy, and cosmopolitanism—all seem operable here. Yet, none of them offers an entirely sufficient explanation of the dense network of cross-racial and cross-gender fantasy that Kondo finds "intoxicating."

Orientalism seems perhaps the most apt framework to use here. The pageantry of the ball clearly traffics in Orientalist figures, yet they operate outside of the clear historical, colonial or imperial projects that typically ground our understanding of Orientalism in the work of colonial writers such as Rudyard Kipling or metropolitan authors such as Arthur Conan Doyle. When Edward Said describes Orientalism as the West's vision of the East as a "place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, [and] remarkable experiences,"[7] he does so in view of a direct relationship between that imaginary and Western European colonial projects in the Middle East and Asia during the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries. Key to sustaining the cultural imaginary of

[7] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, 1st Vintage Books ed (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 1.

those projects was the broader ideological vision of the absolute moral and cultural superiority of the West over a preciously antiquated, primitive and sexually decadent East. Such a system was particularly adept at dehumanizing the Oriental other, turning him or her into an object of imperial fascination, reducing the complexity of human life to a sexual inclination mapped onto a cultural fetish. Yet, as the foundation of current debates about modernism and Orientalism[8], this schema for understanding West-East relations does little to explain the Orientalism of *Geisha Man* and Prime-Stevenson's *Imre: a memorandum*, the tale of a gay man who flees homophobia in the U.S. for Hungary, where he falls in love with a soldier and cross-identifies with his lover's "Oriental" race. In Prime-Stevenson's novel, an Orientalized Hungary is imagined as superior to the West precisely because of its capacity to offer a safe space for queer expression. While the author fetishizes this queer Orient through primitivist erotics — his protagonist's Hungarian lover is represented as having cat-like grace and a "natural" racial grace and physique—it is simultaneously represented as a more modern, civilized culture than England or America, which the narrator associates with "barbarism."[9]

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[8] For example of studies of Orientalism in Western modernism, see: Christopher Bush, *Ideographic Modernism: China, Writing, Media* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Christine Froula, "Proust's China," *Modernism/Modernity* 19, no. 2 (April 2012): 227–54; Colleen Lye, *America's Asia: Racial Form and American Literature, 1893-1945* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2005); and Ernest Fenollosa, *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1936). For studies of parallel modernisms in the Asia and Pacific regions, see: Helen Sword, Mary Ann Gillies, and Steven G. Yao, eds., *Pacific Rim Modernisms* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009); Lydia He Liu, *Translingual Practice: Literature, National Culture, and Translated Modernity in China, 1900-1937* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995); Roy Starrs, ed., *Rethinking Japanese Modernism* (Boston: Global Oriental, 2012); and Shumei Shi, *The Lure of the Modern: Writing Modernism in Semicolonial China, 1917-1937* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001).

[9] Edward Prime-Stevenson, *Imre: A Memorandum* (Orchard Park, NY: Broadview Press, 2003), 120. Subsequent references to the novel will appear in-text as parenthetical citations.

Said's secondary strain of Orientalist ideology—that which promises a "rebirth" or renewal of the West through the Orient[10]—seems equally at odds with the use of Orientalist fantasy in this archive. Nugent and Prime-Stevenson seem intent on dispensing with the West altogether in order to make themselves a home and identity in the Orient. This aspect puts Nugent's work beyond the realm of current scholarship on Afro-Orientalism, a set of relations scholars use to describe either the presumed coalitional capacity of African American and Asian political movements or the strategy by which African Americans made claims for themselves as U.S. citizens precisely by emphasizing the foreignness of their Asian American counterparts. [11] While recent research on the relationship between homosexuality and Orientalism might seem a natural fit for thinking through the work of Nugent and Prime-Stevenson, that research engages with colonial projects in Asia and the Middle East that are neither the setting nor substance of these writers.[12]

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[10] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, 1st Vintage Books ed (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 117–19.

[11] In *Race for Citizenship*, Helen Jun explores how Asian Americans and African Americans were racialized by the U.S. state in very distinct ways, yet relied on each others' racialization in order to stage political arguments for their inclusion in the nationalist fabric of the United States. In *Interracial Encounters*, Julia Lee refutes the binary relation between Afro-Asian relations as either "irrevocably antagonistic" or "romanticized…by a shared history of racism" (3). Her study considers the interdependence of African American and Asian American subjectivities as mutually constituted identities that were pushing a "transnational perspective" that could resolve the "tensions in their interracial relations" by looking for community formations beyond the nation-state (20). Bill Mullen's landmark study, *Afro-Orientalism*, explores the ways in which African American authors linked such as Du Bois their particular political struggle with the independence struggles of Asian nations. He puts particular emphasis on Du Bois's *Dark Princess*, for its articulation of a unified Afro-Asian international that could combat white supremacy and violence on a global scale. See: Helen Heran Jun, *Race for Citizenship: Black Orientalism and Asian Uplift from Pre-Emancipation to Neoliberal America*, Nation of Newcomers (New York: New York University Press, 2011); Lye, *America's Asia: Racial Form and American Literature, 1893-1945*; Bill Mullen, *Afro-Orientalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

[12] Robert Aldrich's *Colonialism and Homosexuality* is vital for understanding the position of the colony as a site for accessing and developing homosexual encounters denied in Western culture;

Conjoined in many ways to Orientalism, imperialism has been seen by some critics to be the key to understanding early twentieth century queer fascination with the Orient. Fiona Ngô offers the compelling argument that Nugent's work represents both an engagement with and resistance to an imported "imperial logic" that works "to locate the origins of queer acts outside modern European civilization" and develop "a queer aesthetic formed from the knowledge regimes of British, French, and U.S. empires."[13] Yet, Nugent's protagonist seems disinterested in anything to do with "modern European civilization." Movement in *Geisha Man* is limited to Harlem and its nearby environs, and Nugent appears to have been much less taken with the francophilia of many African American writers during the first half of the twentieth century. Further, Kondo's triangulated white, black and Japanese identity seems beyond the reach of a recognizable *imperium,* imported or otherwise, at the onset of the twentieth century in Harlem.[14] As a

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however, it focuses entirely on same-sex loving writers who journeyed to the colonies and how their homosexual experiences there manifested in their writing about those colonies. As a result, his examples are drawn from French and British writers (with the lone exception of Charles W. Stoddard) whose direct colonial experience neither Nugent nor Prime-Stevenson possessed. Further, Aldrich's analysis does not address the relationship between the search for queer origins and queer Orientalist fantasy. Aldrich's work has been extended most recently by Joseph Boone's *Homoerotics of Orientalism*, which explores the Western construction of the Middle East as a space of male homosexual practice and desire in ways crucial to understanding current geopolitical crises. Boone's primary intervention is to revisit Said's *Orientalism* in order to show its correlation with anxieties about homoeroticism and homosexual desire. See: Robert Aldrich, *Colonialism and Homosexuality* (New York: Routledge, 2003); Joseph Allen Boone, *The Homoerotics of Orientalism* (New York: Columbia, 2015).

[13] Fiona I. B. Ngô, *Imperial Blues: Geographies of Race and Sex in Jazz Age New York* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 103.

[14] The topic of U.S. imperialism has been ascendant in the past decade or so in the American academe. Yet it is important to note that studies Donald Pease and Amy Kaplan's critical volume, *Cultures of United States Imperialism*, locate that topic in texts that engage U.S. relations with the Philippines, Latin America and Africa as a way of addressing the "absence of culture from the history of U.S. imperialism; the absence of empire from the study of American culture; and the absence of the United States from the postcolonial study of imperialism" (Kaplan 11). The importance of these geolocations to the study of imperialism in a U.S. context is that they mark

tale of a man falling in love with a solider in a foreign land, Prime-Stevenson's *Imre* evokes homosexual community as a band of hyper-masculine men storming the globe in ways that might suggest an imperialist tendency. However, that framework wobbles against the protagonist's desire to *join* the Hungarian nation by binding himself to its most celebrated military son. An imperialism that undoes itself by ostensibly committing itself to the other side is a strange imperialism indeed.

Cosmopolitanism might feel a more natural fit to the ball scene from *Geisha Man* described above; however it, too, is an insufficient framework. On the one hand, the ball's milieu does draw together a cosmopolitan body constellated by different people and cultures, a colorful tableau enabled by the cosmopolitan character of New York City, in general, and Harlem, in specific. Yet, the cosmopolitan ethos of an interconnected citizenry of difference[15]—a family in which each member maintains a coherent identity in dialog with the coherent identities of others—is confounded here by the multiply-identified Kondo, a protagonist who is less interested in forging himself as a citizen of the

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specific places of aggressive, militarist American expansionism. As Ngô herself notes, the U.S. did not have "a direct colonial relationship with North Africa or West Asian in the 1920s and 1930s," thus rendering the "imperial logic" of that relationship in Nugent's texts oblique and gossamer. While her claim that the queer imperial gaze that structures Nugent's work is related to that of Oscar Wilde and Huysmans is useful in this sense, it seems to lose its grip on imperialist politics as an imitation of the original. Moreover, it is unclear that what Nugent borrows from Wilde is as related to Orientalism as it is to aestheticism, the much clearer influence for both *Geisha Man* and "Smoke, Lilies, and Jade." See: Amy Kaplan, "'Left Alone with America': The Absence of Empire in the Study of American Culture," in *Cultures of United States Imperialism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 3–21.

[15] Kwame Anthony Appiah identifies the cosmopolitan ethos in two ways. The first is the "idea that we have obligations to others, obligations that stretch beyond those to whom we are related by the ties of kith and kind, or even the more formal ties of a shared citizenship" (4). The second is that cosmopolitan subjects "neither expect nor desire that every person or every society should converge on a single mode of life." The latter is pertinent to a discussion of the increasingly diversified modes of life in *Geisha Man*, yet the former is challenged by the centrality of the father/son romance. The Geisha Man is, after all, looking to recuperate the love of his lost father/lover/husband, Gale. See: Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2007).

world than folding himself back into the family he makes with his father/husband/lover, Gale.

Both Nugent and Prime-Stevenson address queer anxieties about origins, race and gender while working through and against the normative conventions of the Orientalist romance. However, the Orientalist sexual tableaus on offer in these works also differ from Said's, which renders them as the white Western male's domination of the Oriental female. In Nugent, the Geisha Man is not a singular Oriental female character but rather exists between genders, races and nations as a cross-dressing male who identifies as African American, white and Japanese. In Prime-Stevenson's *Imre*, a white British man gives himself over to the masculine supremacy of his Hungarian lover and, as he does so, aligns his own racial sympathies with that of his Orientalized idol. These re(con)figurations of the Orient mark queer Orientalism as a particular mode of on-going queer identity construction, the character of which can be seen in the messiness of a literary archive that often refuses closure. Nugent and Prime-Stevenson likewise distinguish themselves in their deployment of Orientalist fantasies that manipulate and reframe then-contemporary views of queerness that mark it as a gender identity crisis (inversion, e.g.). Nugent's queer Orientalism serves as a conduit for escaping the choking pressure of masculine identity, while Prime-Stevenson's affirms the virile manliness of his gay male characters as a critique of Western homophobia.

In such ways, work by these two writers challenges the totalizing system of Said's Orientalism. They illuminate, once again, that while Said identified a global cultural project, his framework did not anticipate the jagged ways in which subjects from a variety of perspectives would adopt and adapt the project of Orientalism. This has been

the counter-narrative told by many critics of Orientalism emerging across various fields[16] and, while it is not the explicit project of this chapter to evaluate their claims, my work contributes to our understanding of a more porous exchange between hegemonic expressions of Orientalism and the responses to it as a cultural and historical project from the margins of gender and sexuality. To be clear, this *does not* mean that Nugent and Prime-Stevenson manage to avoid the ethical and political pitfalls of Orientalist fantasy, or the imperialist and cosmopolitan cultures that sustain and circulate that fantasy. They do not, in other words, arrive at some sort of *good Orientalism* through queer adaptation. As they cross-identify themselves with the Orient, they often reduce the Oriental other to a sexual fetish. Their awareness of this problem is distinguished by racial difference. Nugent shows hesitation regarding this reductionism while Prime-Stevenson does not and that difference indexes how race complicates shared strategies of queer identification and orientation in the world.

Cruising Identity in "Smoke, Lilies and Jade," *Gentleman Jigger* and *Geisha Man*

"Smoke, Lilies and Jade" (1922), *Gentleman Jigger* (1930-1933) and *Geisha Man* (1933-1936) mark iterations in Richard Bruce Nugent's journey to articulate a queer

[16] For examples of such engagement, see: Aijaz Ahmad, "Orientalism and After: Ambivalence and Metropolitan Location in the Work of Edward Said," in *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (New York: Verso, 1992), 159–220; Homi Bhabha, "The Other Question: Stereotype, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism," in *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge Classics, 2004), 94–120.

For summaries of critical responses to Said's *Orientalism*, see: Fred Halliday, "'Orientalism' and Its Critics," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 20, no. 2 (1993): 145–63; Neil Lazarus, "The Battle over Edward Said," in *The Postcolonial Unconscious* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 183–203.

black identity beyond fixed notions of blackness and queerness. In A.B. Christa Schwarz's treatment of Nugent in *Gay Voices of the Harlem Renaissance*, she recognizes him as the Renaissance author who refused "perhaps more than any other author…to bear the black artist's 'burden of representation.'"[17] Scott Herring has elaborated that representational reticence as a politics of identitarian disavowal that rejects "communal mandates that incorporate sexual and racial calls for an identifiable group body" in favor of "being misunderstood."[18] At least one strategy that Nugent consistently deploys in this regard is queer Orientalism: his manner of attaching his characters (and himself) to Oriental objects, figures and cultural practices as a means of mystifying and complicating the notion of a true or singular identity for himself and his characters as queer mixed-race subjects.

As this strategy plays out across his literary work, Nugent's queer Orientalism becomes entrapped and ambivalent as it confronts the ways in which Orientalist fantasy may only be able to free a mixed-race American subject from identitarian claims by fetishizing and objectifying the Oriental other. In other words, the queer subject's freedom is purchased by imagining the Other as abject and subordinate. This is particularly notable in the transition between *Gentleman Jigger* and *Geisha Man*, as questions of Orientalist aestheticization, fetishization and objectification emerge from renderings of protagonists who are ambivalent, sometimes masochistic, victims of dominating white lovers. As a response to the interracial erotic entanglements by which Sharon Holland argues that our "matrix of desiring relations" can be simultaneously

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[17] A.B. Christa Schwarz, *Gay Voices of the Harlem Renaissance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 120.

[18] Herring, *Queering the Underworld*, 139.

racist, imperialist and "good,"[19] Nugent's fiction offers a view of both the possibilities of queer Orientalism and a conscious wrangling with its ethical pitfalls. Nugent's exploration of this crisis makes his fiction invaluable to thinking through the complex cultural exchanges and prerogatives bound up in queer Orientalism. It also enables us to track the increasing centrality of Orientalist representation across Nugent's writing, from the oblique invocations of objects (the jade cigarette holder, incense and Buddhas) in "Smoke, Lilies and Jade" (1926), to the *Kama Sutra* and Gurdjieff-derived yogic rituals that are so central to the "oriental mind" of Stuartt Brennan, Nugent's autobiographical character in *Gentleman Jigger* (c. 1933-1934, p. 2002) and the cross-dressing, mixed-race protagonist of *Geisha Man* (c. 1934-1936, p. 2002). The increasing complexity and intensity of these representations over the course of Nugent's early period speak not only to the persistence of the Orient in queer identification during the period, but also to the centrality of the Orient in Nugent's queer self-articulation.

"Smoke, Lilies and Jade" is, without doubt, Nugent's most popular and widely read work. An explicit account of gay cruising and sex, the short story has been a tremendous resource for recovering, reimagining and reclaiming the centrality of queer black experience to the Harlem Renaissance since its first publication in *FIRE!!!* While popular reception of the story has tended to focus on its articulation of black gay existence, the short story thwarts all such claims to racial representation *or* to the representation of any fixed sexual identity. Literary critics have tended to locate this identitarian fugitivity in the story's modernist stream-of-consciousness form (those infinitely suspended ellipses), the racial ambiguity of Beauty (the protagonist's "Spanish"

[19] Sharon Patricia Holland, *The Erotic Life of Racism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 4.

love interest), or to the protagonist's bisexuality.[20] More recently, critics including Fiona Ngô have taken a closer look at the imperialist and Orientalist aspects of the text, locating the queer connections between "the ontological and epistemological schemas of imperial logic" and the desire to "confound [imperial logic's] authoritative classifications" as the text articulates queer black identity.[21] According to Ngô, the repeated references to Alex's jade cigarette holder collapse the distinction between East and West such that they become signifiers for a culturally fluent, metropolitan queer black subject. In this sense, Ngô claims that Nugent's writing doubles on the figure of the Orient as both something "outside of the West as a fantasy of the exotic" yet also "inside the West as a badge of distinction for those who can know the Orient."[22]

What I wish to add to this consideration is the utility of Nugent's Orientalism as an alternative temporal register that corresponds to the dilated, languorous temporality that enables the narrator to voice his queer becoming-identity.[23] It's not that Alex doesn't know he's queer is some somatic or non-linguistic manner, but rather that he's beginning to be able to *articulate* what his difference, what his queerness, means as a mark of distinction from family norms and as an artist identity. What we might call the temporal lag of "Smoke, Lilies and Jade" — the slowness of the story's stream-of-consciousness narration which allows for gaps and incongruity in which Alex doesn't have to claim any

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[20] Cf. Schwarz, *Gay Voices of the Harlem Renaissance*; Herring, *Queering the Underworld*; Marlon Bryan Ross, *Manning the Race: Reforming Black Men in the Jim Crow Era*, Sexual Cultures (New York: New York University Press, 2004).

[21] Ngô, *Imperial Blues: Geographies of Race and Sex in Jazz Age New York*, 82.

[22] Ngô, 90–92.

[23] "Becoming-identity" is used here to signal the ways in which Alex's sense of his queer identity is a project under development throughout the story.

specific identity, but rather luxuriate in openness and indeterminacy — is achieved through the story's Orientalist representation of smoking. Imagined through a collage of precious stones, religious objects and the strong suggestion of opium intoxication, the Orient is channeled through the "ivory [cigarette] holder inlaid with red jade and green" on which Alex "puff[s] contentedly" while he reasons "why he was so different from other people."[24] To think of Alex's tale as a smoking story, or a story told while smoking, renders each of the phrases between ellipses an alternating pattern of inhaling and exhaling, the rhythm of smoking keeping time with the rhythm of Alex's self-interrogating and self-accounting thoughts.

Queer identity and Orientalist imagery are collapsed in Alex's invocation of Oscar Wilde, "who had said…a cigarette is the most perfect pleasure because it leaves one unsatisfied" (89). In this way, the Orientalist images in the text—the jade cigarette holder and the suggestion of opium use—deploy the Orient as exotic, intoxicating and *other* in ways that enable the narrator to address his own difference, to wonder if "all life" was like "blue smoke from an ivory holder" (85). In such ways, Orientalist fantasy both authorizes and enables the connections between Oscar Wilde, a jade cigarette holder and a young artist together as an account of queer becoming-identity. In this alignment, Orientalism becomes both the signifying practice of queer self-articulation—the narrator's queerness is identified in and through his interest in such things— and a resource for navigating the rest of the world *as* a queer. In his examination of the relationship between the discourse of decadence and addiction in Oscar Wilde's *The Portrait of Dorian Gray*, Curtis Marez finds that the protagonist's dependency on opium

[24] Richard Bruce Nugent, "Smoke, Lilies and Jade," in *Gay Rebel of the Harlem Renaissance: Selections from the Work of Richard Bruce Nugent* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 76. Subsequent references to this work will appear in-text as parenthetical citations.

both "Orientalizes him, threatening to dissolve his British identity" and marks him as a corrupted, abject queer.[25] However, the association with opium (and thus, the Orient) in "Smoke, Lilies and Jade" doesn't dissolve Alex's identity or mark him as abject, but rather provides him the space for observing and forming his identity in ways that give him increased autonomy from the bourgeois-aspiring society represented by his mother, who is anxious over her son's refusal to take on any gainful employment. These particular uses of the Orient as a signifier of the flight from bourgeois respectability are redoubled in Nugent's later works, *Gentleman Jigger* and *Geisha Man.*

The posthumously published *Gentleman Jigger* offers a rich opportunity to explore Nugent's use of Orientalism a strategy for queer self-articulation, anti-identification[26] and even literary production. The novel opens with the backstories of protagonist Stuart Brennan and Rusty Pelman (a thinly-veiled portrait of Wallace Thurman), his artistic collaborator, best friend and roommate at "Niggerati Manor" on 135th street in Harlem. The flat serves as the de facto headquarters for their new literary magazine, *Currents*, and frequently hosts their white gay friends Leslie Prentiss (Leland Petit) and Bum Borjolfsen (Harold Jan Steffanson).[27] Also passing through the apartment

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[25] See: Curtis Marez, "The Other Addict: Reflections on Colonialism and Oscar Wilde's Opium Smoke Screen," *English Literary History* 64, no. 1 (Spring 1997): 270, 274.
Marez's argument also focuses on the ways in which Orientalization effectively turned against Wilde's project of articulating himself beyond the colonial registers of Irish subjectivity in the British empire. Again, this particular engagement with the Orient has embedded within it the colonial project and history absent from Nugent and Prime-Stevenson's writing.

[26] By this term, I mean to indicate Nugent's resistance to being *fixed* within a particular identity. In other words, queer Orientalism is paradoxically a mode of identifying oneself as queer *and*, taken together with other strategic alignments and performances of the queer black body, part of a system that resists the fixity of any singular identity by which a queer black subject might be pinned down.

[27] Leland Petit was a white, gay musician well-connected in Harlem and Greenwich Village circles; he appears as a character in several important works of queer fiction from the early

are a host of New Negro celebrities: the society-conscious Molly Restag (Jessie Fauset), the well-connected Tony (Langston Hughes), and the "round, rubicund [and] ridiculous-seeming" Burton Barclay (Countee Cullen)—led about by the impresario Dr. Parke (Alain Locke).[28] Dr. Parke's support is contrasted with the misgivings of the "pompous" Dr. LaFrance (W.E.B. Du Bois), whose longing for respectability "had contributed to America some of the finest and driest prose of present-day literature" (19). The young writers gain local and international fame, though they soon break up and Stuartt starts cruising the Mafiosi hanging out around Cornelia Street in Greenwich Village, eventually falling into a love affair with a low-level boss before being taken up by the fearsome gangster Orini. Orini brings Stuartt to Chicago, where he and Orini's girlfriend develop a stage show that eventually brings them back to Broadway for a grand gala premier. In this last dizzying movement, Stuartt achieves fame as a rich and successful performer just as he is also publicly identified as mixed-race, which causes a scandal. Throughout the novel, Stuartt demonstrates an uncanny ability to get in and out of scrapes, to bend the world to his advantage through Orientalist performance. Further, the novel articulates the ways in which Orientalist fascination with Eastern ritual and philosophy offered both an aesthetic practice and performativity that enabled queers to identify and survive.

Like nearly every literary representation of Harlem during the 1920s, Stuartt's Harlem is dotted with various cabarets, "honky-tonks," assorted penniless friends and

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twentieth century, most notably as Billy in Thurman's *Infants of the Spring* and as protagonist Mark Thurman in Blair Niles' *Strange Brother*. Harold Jan Stefansson was Thurman's lover during the period in which he and Nugent lived together at 238 137th Street in Harlem, and likely for many years afterward. *Currents* is the thinly-disguised moniker for *FIRE!!!*, the single-issue magazine produced by Thurman, Nugent, Hughes, and their friends which was the veritable manifesto of the New Negro arts movement. See: Wirth, "Introduction."

[28] Richard Bruce Nugent, *Gentleman Jigger*, ed. Thomas H. Wirth (Philadelphia, PA: Da Capo, 2008), 121. Subsequent references to this work will appear in-text as parenthetical citations.

wealthy benefactors who share one another's "affection and sandwiches and drinks" (24). However, it is also home to the "Garterman classes […] [in] Occidentalized Oriental philosophy lessons, replete with incense and wonder and—strangely enough—good, sound yoga" (24). Stuartt's enthusiasm for these classes, an allusion to the Gurdjieff classes that attracted members of the avant-garde during the 1920s, indicates the uses to which such "Oriental philosophy" may be put.

> The effect of these classes on some of the others interested him. They believed so fully in the candlelight and incense and heard so little of the philosophy. They allowed it to bedeck all their superficial actions and to penetrate their thought only as sparkling and *worthless adornment*. But Stuartt had the *protective instinct* for garnering that which was real and helpful. He learned the *value* of incense and was forever afterwards able to use it when it impressed most. He had been born the cynical product of a cynical culture. He used the trappings to impress the uninitiated. (*Jigger* 24-25, emphasis added)

While the rituals are merely a series of actions to the other adherents, Stuartt understands them as a technique of power, as a way to navigate the world through illusion and performance. In this way, Stuartt recognizes the "value of incense" for projecting an image that enables one to get what one wants, while others merely see such "Oriental" tools as so much "sparkling and worthless adornment." Knowledge of how to use such ritual performance "when it impressed most" obliquely demonstrates both a strategy for queer self-presentation *and* for queer literary production.

Stuartt uses this knowledge of Oriental performance and its effect on others to facilitate his sexual encounters with the Italian men he cruises in Greenwich Village. He trains himself "in the oldest of all professions" by "purchasing and reading the erotic lessons in the practice of love as written by the Indian, Vatsyayana, in the lavishly illustrated *Kama Sutra*" (173). When he manages to attract one such man, a low-level gangster named Ray, Stuartt celebrates his ability to attract the heterosexual man, but

mourns the fact that it is only through such performative subterfuge that he can do so. The performance, like any relationship secured through it, is ephemeral: "He knew he couldn't expect a person [such as Ray] whose every contact and tradition had taught him the inferiority of persons who *performed* as Stuartt had ever to have more than a contemptuous appreciation for, or curiosity toward, him" (181, emphasis added). The discrepancy here isn't between people who *do* the things that Ray and Stuartt did on that first night together (anal and oral sex are implied) but rather about the differences in performance that determine power relations as butch and femme, top and bottom. Thus, Stuartt must confront the fact that while his Orientalist performance might purchase certain opportunities, such as sleeping with a straight man, it also traps him in a dialectic of white domination and Oriental submission that is the image-repertoire on which he draws.

The tactical Orientalist self-fashioning that defines *Gentleman Jigger* is considered much more carefully in *Geisha Man*, particularly in view of the violence that it does to the subject and the racial others who are the source of his sexual and romantic identity. The story is a simple, if surreal, one. Gay Japanese-American Gale Kondo navigates the kaleidoscopic queer nightlife of New York City in geisha drag, searching desperately for a white male lover who will replace the father who abandoned him as a boy in Osaka. One night, on a break from his physically and emotionally abusive relationship with his white lover, Don, Kondo meets his father at the Harlem drag ball described at the beginning of this chapter. Reunited amid the Orientalist tableau, father and son reconcile and move into a country house together, living as husband and wife. Their brief domestic bliss is shattered when Kondo discovers he has become a sexual

fetish for his father/lover/husband. In the abrupt conclusion, Kondo abandons his father, seeking out a life of devotion to himself and a purely spiritual, evanescent god.

While Nugent's earlier works exemplify the utility of queer Orientalism as a technique for fashioning a fugitive queer identity, *Geisha Man* confronts the objectification, abjection, and violence that that palpates at the heart of Orientalism and with which his identificatory fantasies are imbricated. Likewise, the strained relationship between fathers and sons present in Nugent's short-fiction – Alex's simultaneous attachment to and disconnection from his dead father in "Smoke, Lilies and Jade" or Mrabo's desire for his father's young bride and his friend Numbo's desire for Mrabo that leads him to kill Mrabo's father so that his friend might be happy in "Sahdji"[29] — here emerges as a simultaneous longing for the father as the site of an absent origin and a disavowal of the father as destructive and abusive to the loving son. Throughout *Geisha Man*, this ambivalent longing for filiation is resolved in a desire for queer freedom.

The opening of *Geisha Man* extends the anti-identitarian ethos of its predecessors with Kondo's simple plea to be able to "love bodies" rather than the identities and subject positions that get cathected to them.

> Is it wrong to love bodies? Just bodies? To cover myself with the sight of bodies, like I clothe myself in magnolia scent? Bodies call. Often, a body passing in night mystery will pierce my vision with the poignancy of a gull's cry. Of course, a gull's cry leaves a void even as it fills. But why not play a wonderful song on bodies, like one plucks the strings of a zither? Music is beauty in tones, and a body is one tone. Oh, to make a searing chord! A searing chord of bodies garnered from the night. A chord of the beautiful sight and feel and smell of bodies. [30]

[29] See note on "Sahdji," p. 36, n. 23

[30] Nugent, "Geisha Man," 91. Subsequent references to Nugent's novella will appear in-text as parenthetical citations.

The centrality of the body to Kondo's musical imaginary of harmonious community registers its homoerotics and its desire to transcend the labels that define and hierarchize bodily potential according to sex and race. These bodies are at once fleshy vessels of sexual desire "passing in [the] night mystery" of cosmopolitan cruising and something more sonorous and weightless: "a gull's cry," a "tone," "a wonderful song." The suggestion that Kondo might "cover [himself] with the sight of bodies" demonstrates both the way in which bodies can protect the vulnerable subject *and* the ways in which those bodies can manifest the ephemeral trace or suggestion of presence: as a "sight" to be seen or the smell of magnolia perfume. Nugent imagines the body as a performative apparatus, each having its own unique tone that, when combined, becomes "a searching chord."

It is only in the "chord" that joins bodies across time and space that Kondo can articulate himself, an identity that emerges only in relation to anonymous male bodies.

> I am a song; I would be sung on the tones of many bodies. On the graceful curve of that lad, his contours showing through his trousers as he sits on the bench, beauty rippling his sleeve as he moves his arm. On that man—on the calves of his leg and the warm movement of his thigh suggested beneath his clothing. Or on that man—on the flow of muscles and the play of light on his cheek and forehead. On the light powdering of gold that the sun and down paint on his wrists. On the silver of his veins. (91)

The "many bodies" indicates an amorphous and promiscuous collectivity in which Kondo is inseparable from the bodies of the men he cruises as a geisha man. These bodies are further divided into component parts: the sexually suggestive "graceful curve" of a man's form "showing through his trousers," "the calves of his leg and the warm movement of his thigh," or the way that the sunlight catches the face and arms of another man. The queer signatures of these component parts provide Kondo a diffuse and mobile

community of "bodies" into which he can enfold himself. It is the rapture of community that enables queer "youths […] in couples, arms around each other" to maintain their "oblivious[ness] to the snickers and innuendoes of passing couples of men and women" (91). In other words, the bodies that Kondo cruises offer the sense of "courage" and connection that he longs for. It is thus unsurprising that from this collection of cruising bodies emerges Kondo's first lover: Don.

Don is a profoundly bad love object, a status that is instructive with regard to the failed promises that Kondo's romantic imaginary attaches to the figure of the white male lover. Infatuated with Don's "soft, beautiful" name, Kondo exclaims: "I would like to weave a life around you, Don." That life, Kondo reasons, "would be beautiful," a "symphony of colors…all moving and merging like colors thrown on a screen by a color organ" (93). Again, the narrative's turn towards affective perception makes only more abstract the very sorts of romantic relations to which Don gives a crisp and brutal, but nonetheless alluring, retort: "You say strange things, [Kondo]. I don't understand them. But they sound nice. They make my muscles quiver. They make me want to kiss you. *And hurt you…and myself*" (93, emphasis added). Here, the "strange" inscrutability of the queer protagonist's aesthetic presentation as a geisha is both the source of arousal and violence for his white lover. Rather than dissuade Kondo, these violent tendencies only affirm Don's acceptability as a love object that he can worship. Much like the "bodies" Kondo cruises in the park, his idealized lover is quickly broken down into Orientalist *objet partiels* that make more alluring the otherwise unremarkable white lover, transforming him into an Orientalist spectacle.

> Don was perfection. His lips were firm and his muscles smooth. His eyes held perfumes and nights and silks from Lahore…black diamonds from

> Hindoostan…yellow cobras from India…obsidian masks from Malaya. His lips tasted slightly of tobacco and toothpaste...His breath crossed mine as I lay on the smooth firmness of his arm, against the hard whiteness of his chest. He had once admired my faint body odor of musk and damp orchids. (96)

Kondo produces Don as an Oriental collage in order to idealize him as a lover, though each instance of Orientalization shifts from the soft, feminine "perfumes and nights and silks" to the inscrutable and violent images of "obsidian masks" and "yellow cobras." This series of images culminates in a gendered differentiation that defines the dominating and masculine Don by the "hard whiteness of his chest" and the submissive, feminine Kondo by his delicate fragrance of "musk and damp orchids."

It is in that play between the vulnerable feminine and the brutish masculine that Kondo finds himself in love with Don. When Don strikes Kondo "full in the face" after he discovers him kissing another man at a gay house party, Kondo notes that he didn't feel "angry or belittled or really even insulted" (99). Rather, he admires his attacker from a guarded distance:

> I curled up, vaguely trembling, watching Don from the corners of my eyes. He was beautiful. His profile was white and hard and chiseled, set with cold against the warmth of the lights and darkness that filed past in quick succession in the square of the [taxi cab] window. (99)

The descriptors used to laud Don's physical form—"white and hard and chiseled"—mirror the brutality with which he treats Kondo. In these alignments, we can glimpse the masochistic attachment Kondo feels with regard to Don, a masochism in which abject submission affirms the subject's value to his lover/master. Though Kondo reassures the reader that "Don was very kind and gentle to me from then on," he also describes those "sometimes" when Don's jealous "emotions would assert themselves" and observes that he rather "enjoyed his tempers" (100). In the next and final movement of the novel, white

male violence and sexual aggression are also features of Kondo's relationship with his father/husband/lover, Gale.

The romantic family reunion between father and son inaugurates *Geisha Man*'s vision of a queer world sutured by incestuous desire and drives the novel to its horrified confrontation with the Orientalist appropriation through which Kondo acquires his identity and his relationships with white men. Gale offers apologies for having abandoned the then 17 year-old Kondo back in Osaka, pleading for mercy by claiming "I haven't been able to forget you…even through Marseilles. Paris. Budapest. Vienna…Monte Carlo…Cairo…and the rest" (102). Shuttling between memories that travel from Europe to the Orient, the intoxicated Gale promises to leave his current wife and to marry his lover/son. Kondo is only too ready to accept such promises, losing himself in a transnational reverie of "a night in Osaka … a night in Paris … a night in New York" and his father's "firm lips and narrow hips" (103-104). As the narrative moves across a dreamlike time and space, Gale and Kondo are married and make a happy home together "[f]illed with remembrance of tense muscles and hair with curls" (104). However, when Kondo discovers an errant copy of the *Kama Sutra* among his father/husband/lover's papers, it shatters their happy union:

> Gale reading The *Kama Sutra?* I don't know why that surprised me, but … I glanced at the marked place. "Of the Auparishtaka" was the head of the chapter. I glanced over the words and phrases, some of which forced themselves through the fog of poppies and moon and alcohol that whirled my head round and round. 'Eunuchs' … 'Some masquerade as women' … 'Under the pretense of shampooing' … 'Auparishtaka,' or 'converse by mouth.' The eight steps of the process, numbered and named. Suddenly the room ceased to revolve. Each board of the floor was horribly straight and correct, vanishing off in perfect and precise perspective. I noticed how mellow and silver the folds of my gown seemed against the floor and the chair. Gale must have been reading the *Kama Sutra* only just before he came to the ball. It made things all so clear and horrible and muddle.

> As clear and muddle as those straight and perfect boards vanishing off into perfect and precise perspective. (105)

I quote this passage at length because of the incredible density of its engagement with the problematics of queer Orientalist fantasy. The chapter of the *Kama Sutra* referenced here is a detailed primer on oral sex, beginning first with a short set of instructions for male eunuchs "disguised as men" performing oral sex on their mistresses and a much longer set of instructions for male eunuchs "disguised as females" who perform oral sex on their masters. In the latter set of instructions, the sort of sadomasochistic power relations already mapped onto Kondo's relationship with Don can be easily seen again. The eunuch in drag approaches the male client "under the pretense of shampooing" and begins an erotic dance in which his hands suggest the possibility of oral sex to the client; if the client demands oral sex, the eunuch must refuse and then be coerced into doing so by the client's verbal commands and begin the eight discrete steps of the fellatio ritual. As Kondo reads the eight-step instructions, he recognizes that this is precisely what Gale has been looking for: not Kondo, exactly, but rather the fantasy of a submissive, Oriental lover. Transformed from love object into fetish, Kondo's sudden fixity as a sexual type is reflected in his observation that the floorboards have suddenly become "horribly straight and precise." There is no more dissembling movement for Kondo, no more swinging in and out of the performances that structure the novel's ball scenes and its treatment of Kondo's identity. Rather, he must confront Gale's fetishization of his body *and* the ways in which his geisha cross-dressing participates in and reproduces that form of desire. To don the cross-racial drag of the "Geisha Man" is to engage in a sensorium of pain and abjection where the white heterosexual male object of desire dominates and objectifies the racialized other.

Unable to resolve this crisis, Kondo leaves Gale and closes the novel with a spiritual meditation on the gods that we build out of our love objects. His invocation to the reader to "[a]lways leave a dream unfinished" (110) recalls the inclusion of Wilde's aphorism about cigarettes in "Smoke, Lilies and Jade" *and* the urge to leave dreams unfinished precisely so that we do not have to recognize them as fantasies. "One only needs to dream well," Kondo says, encouraging the reader to remain suspended in dreams rather than haunted by their realities, before adding that "only dreams are true" (110). Kondo wanders the city, observing its queer denizens cruising the parks, yet they are now surveilled by several policemen who haunt the peripheries of desire (110-111). These figures of the law threaten the dream world Kondo attempts to weave around himself, reminding him that around every corner there is someone waiting to dominate him, to subjugate him, to undo the magic of dreams. His final words to the reader suggest that humans are oriented toward a "worship" that both makes life livable and renders it as suffering abjection in thrall to a dominant being: "Man must worship—the gods of this or that" (111). If desire must inevitably be forfeited and there is no attachment that is not also an inevitable source of pain, then Kondo (and Nugent) resolve to suspend themselves within the contradiction, to float ever above the great "secret of life" (111).

Geisha Man closes what I argue is a career-long development of Nugent's queer use of Orientalist representation, a development that moves from association to identification. As it appears in early works like "Smoke, Lilies and Jade," the Orient operates at the margins as a sign or symbol of the queer artist's disjointed relationship to filial and cultural norms. Alex's smoking is that which gives sanction to his unusual thoughts, as he observes early in the story that "maybe it was wrong to think thoughts

like these … but they were nice and pleasant and comfortable … when one was smoking a cigarette through an ivory holder inlaid with red jade and green" (94). In *Gentleman Jigger*, the Orient has moved from an association to a system of thought that Stuartt uses to negotiate his sexual relationships with men. These Orientalist engagements come to full flower in *Geisha Man*, where the queer black subject's cross-racial and cross-cultural identification with the Orient enables him to inhabit the non-binary gender identity of a male geisha. In that last work, Nugent's queer Orientalism no longer seems as easy or unproblematic as before. Rather, *Geisha Man* is modified by a deep suspicion about the queer strategy by which Nugent's protagonists affect or adopt the Orient in order to express and protect themselves. The *Kama Sutra*, for instance, becomes less an object of sexual knowledge and freedom than it does one of objectification, abuse and degradation. If this apparent disenchantment with queer Orientalist fantasy upends the happiness so long sought after by Gale Kondo in the final pages of *Geisha Man*, there is no such reservation on the other side of the color line. As we shall see in Edward Prime-Stevenson's *Imre: a memorandum,* the relationship between domination and submission that attends much of *Geisha Man* is replaced with a lust for romance and global domination—represented in a brief imaginary of a hyper-masculine, globetrotting military of men-loving-men—that marks and secures the queer subject's national, racial and gender identity.

Butch Queen!: Orientalism, Imperialism and the Masculine Gay Ideal in Edward Prime-Stevenson's *Imre: a memorandum*

Edward Prime-Stevenson's *Imre: a memorandum* (1906) was privately printed under the pseudonym Xavier Mayne while the author was living in Italy and traveling

extensively throughout Europe. *Imre*'s first print run consisted of only 500 copies, likely distributed to Prime-Stevenson's intimate transnational network of homosexual friends and acquaintances.[31] Despite that small print run, the book has remained important to studies of early-twentieth-century gay literature because of its frank treatment of homosexual desire, its incorporation of then-cutting-edge theories of homosexual identity as a medical condition and racial identity, and the happy if vague ending it gives to its two lovers. Beyond this wrangling with a medical-ethnic model of homosexuality, the novel is a densely braided tapestry of surface and depth signification. By this, I mean to underscore the ways in which the surface narrative of a gay romance between two men from different countries functions as a direct appeal for homosexual equality that relies on a joint appeal for Eastern primitivist superiority over the Western world's "civilized" ignorance and the "super-virile" (35) representation of the gay male as an ideal, normative masculine type.[32]

The plot of *Imre* is relatively straightforward. The novel opens with a meeting between Oswald, the novel's British expatriate narrator, and Imre von N., a strapping Hungarian military officer "of no ordinary beauty of physique and elegance of bearing" (36). The two strike up a close friendship, seeing each other nearly everyday and

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[31] Very little is known about Prime-Stevenson outside of the brief biographies written by critics and enthusiasts of early twentieth century gay literature. However, the enduring power of *Imre* to the audiences who must have both consumed it in its original published form and preserved it for future generations can be attested to in the fact that it was reprinted as part of Arno Press's *Series on Homosexuality* in 1975 and later, in adapted form, for the 1992 reprint by Masquerade Books. See: James Gifford, "Introduction," in *Imre: A Memorandum* (Orchard Park, NY: Broadview Press, 2002), 13–26; James Levin, *The Gay Novel in America* (New York: Garland, 1991), 12–15; James Gifford, *Dayneford's Library: American Homosexual Writing, 1900-1913* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), 105–17.

[32] Prime-Stevenson, *Imre: A Memorandum*, 35. Subsequent references to this novel will appear in-text as parenthetical citations.

allowing their discussions of literature, music and military life to extend long into the evenings. As Oswald begins to notice his attraction to Imre, he struggles to determine Imre's sexual identity as a man's man who seems to retreat from the company of women. After a heated debate that touches on the scandal of male homosexuality, Oswald launches into a long screed that both outs the protagonist and defines the modern male homosexual in historical, medical, ethnic and spiritual terms against an unjust and hostile world. Oswald describes homosexuality as an irremediable condition in which all of the heteronormative values of "manly" culture are achieved, with the exception of a sexual interest in women. Oswald makes a case for homosexuality as brotherly loyalty taken to a romantic extreme, an honorable love that can easily be assimilated into a society that recognizes it as masculine virtue rather than effeminate vice. Soon after Oswald's impassioned speech, Imre confesses his own homosexuality, claiming that it was Oswald's moving oratory that helped Imre acknowledge his sexual desires and to feel pride in doing so. The two write emotional letters to one another while Imre serves out a brief tour of duty at a nearby military training camp. Upon his return, Oswald and Imre declare their love for one another and close the novel anticipating an uncertain but happy future together.

This summary makes clear many of the discourses in LGBT literary history that have been used to frame critical reception of the novel. The idealization of Imre's uber-masculinity and its attachment to his identity as a military lieutenant speak to the so-called "athletic model" of homosexuality characteristic of gay literature from the period. Imre and Oswald's particular taste for and interest in music and other works of art corresponds to the "aesthetic model" of the homosexual as an adept in the arts, even if it

revises the connotations of effeminacy and Wildean decadence commonly associated with this type. Finally, the novel draws upon the "natural model" of homosexuality, which posited that same-sex desire was an inflated version of homosocial love, one explored in far-flung locales where Western culture's refusal to recognize or accept same-sex relationships were suspended, or at least were imagined as such.[33] What these models and similar studies fail to explore, however, is how homosexual identification was shaped by interracial and cross-racial fantasies. By looking at *Imre* from the standpoint of racial fantasy, we can make sense of Oswald's claim that it is the "Oriental quality" of Imre's speech, the speech of a "race in which sentimental eloquence is always lurking in the blood" (55), which draws out Oswald's homosexual desire so powerfully. Rejecting his own culture in favor of a Hungarian national mythology that celebrates same-sex love, Oswald eventually declares his own belonging to Hungary and the Magyar people. Focusing on these often ignored discursive gestures—gestures which I argue are *central* to the novel's romantic representation and sexual politics—we gain a better appreciation for how Western ideologies of Eastern "foreignness" operate within queer Orientalism, joining and resisting the forms of homonationalism that current critical debates suture to white gay male identity, particularly in a U.S. context. *Imre* also

[33] Each of these models of homosexual self-representation are discussed at some length in Gifford's *Dayneford's Library*, which identifies some six primary models: the athletic, the aesthetic, the natural, the unnatural (the homosexual as a clinical anomaly defined by biological science or psychology), the alien (homosexual as an evil, degraded pariah), and the domestic (the homosexual defined and contained within the normative family structure, ie. the bachelor uncle). It is important to note that Gifford's models, perhaps owing to their development in the 1990s, are distilled from a monoculture of white gay male literature. They do not take into account the work of queers of color and, as such, are not informed by the question of race that seems, from the vantage point of contemporary queer criticism, so urgent in the text's articulation of a "natural" homosexuality as well as the recourse to the Orientalist fetishization of Imre. See: Gifford, *Dayneford's Library: American Homosexual Writing, 1900-1913*, 1–20.

shows how these queer cross-racial fantasies reinvent the culture and body of the racial other as a haven for same-sex desire.

As I explore these threads, my main interest in turning to *Imre* is to see how queer appropriation of tropes in Orientalist fantasy offers a form through which white gay male identity was imagined and constructed at the beginning of the twentieth century. If Oswald's affection for the butch soldier Imre is the vehicle for the novel's articulation of an acceptable version of male homosexuality, why does it rely so heavily on the narrator's ability to figure his lover's difference through Orientalist fantasy? Hungary figured as the Orient is a rather strange premise, after all, one that I am following from the novel itself rather than any actual history. The representation of Hungary as part of the "Orient" in Prime-Stevenson's novel is informed both by the author's interest in the Magyars—the historical name for the people who came from the Ural Mountains to settle in present-day Hungary and who were linked, through periods of conquest and cultural contact, to the Ottoman Empire and Turkish culture—as well as the Western European tendency to "exoticize" Hungary as steeped in the traditions of Ottoman Turkey.[34] Further, how does that Orientalism frame the relationship between Western and non-Western men in ways that uphold and yet challenge Western visions of the East?

[34] In his introduction to the Broadview edition of *Imre: a memorandum*, James Gifford explains that the novel draws together both Prime-Stevenson's engagement in the then-popular "cult of Hellenism" reflected in contemporary popular culture as well as in gay fiction such as E.M. Forster's *Maurice* as well as his fascination with the "exotic" location of Hungary, a country he visited frequently (17). While Gifford does not discuss, in any detail, the centrality of the Imre's "Oriental" identity to protagonist Oswald's desire, he seems to accept a similarly exotic vision of Hungary: "Such an exotic location hearkens back to an earlier nineteenth century Romantic yearning and the melancholy, introverted quality of the Hungarian character seems utterly appropriate for a tale of repression and the crushing necessity of hiding behind a mask" (19). See: Gifford, "Introduction."

I argue that Prime-Stevenson's queer Orientalism inverts the traditional Western narrative of a virile, superior Occident and an effeminate, inferior Orient. This inversion, however, relies on Western fantasies of the Oriental other as the embodiment of the West's antithesis in order to make Hungary appear like a queer utopia in which Oswald can find a lover, life and national identity. The novel is strikingly inconsistent on this account, offering a brief admission of Imre's fears of being discovered as a homosexual, the shame it would bring upon his family and his military career as proof that perhaps a homophobia similar to that which Oswald fled in England (and Prime-Stevenson in the U.S.) also pertains in Hungary. Oswald pushes these realities into the background, as does the novel. The racialization of Imre and Hungary as "Oriental" is also an essential part of the rhetoric of cultural conquest and belonging that organize the text's figuration of homosexuality as a romantic, masculine brotherhood.

As a starting point for thinking through this queer analytic, let us begin, as the text does, with Oswald's description of Imre as he first sees him sitting in a "café-garden" in Budapest. While a "vehement military-band concert" plays in the background, Oswald gazes across the tables before pausing on "a young Hungarian officer in the pale blue-and-fawn [dress] of a lieutenant of a well-known A. Infantry Regiment" (35).

> I remember that I had a swift, general impression that my neighbor was of no ordinary beauty of physique and elegance of bearing, even in a land where such matters are normal details of personality. And somehow it was also borne in upon me that *his mood was rather like mine*. (36, emphasis added)

The scene's cruising erotics can be located in the fixation on Imre's butch military dress (an affirmation of his acceptable masculinity) and his extraordinary "beauty of physique and elegance of bearing" that make him especially desirable to Oswald. That beauty is racialized, offered as a superior example of the everyday beauty that Oswald sees in the

people of the "land" in which he finds himself an exile but longs to capture as a native son. More than mere physical attraction, Oswald also senses a communal likeness or affinity in Imre, something as intangible and extra-lingual as "his mood." Condensed in this exchange is an erotics and potential community, unities that are indexed by the racial difference that Oswald marks in Imre's voice:

> [I]t was a Magyar voice, *that characteristically seductive thing in the seductive race,* which answered my query; a voice slow and low, yet so distinct, and with just *that vibrant thrill lurking in it* which instantly says something to a listener's heart, merely as a sound, if he be susceptible to speaking-voices…As for myself, indifference to the world in general and to my surroundings in particular, dissipated and were forgot, my disgruntled and egotistical humor went to the limbo of all unwholesomenesses, under the charm of that musical accent, and in the frank sunlight of those manly, limpid eyes. (36, emphasis added)

Oswald's description of Imre's voice subsumes the protagonist's erotic desire into the ethnography of a "seductive race." The "vibrant thrill" that he feels upon seeing Imre thus becomes less the attribute of white British (or American) homosexual longing than it does a potentially dangerous thing "lurking" in the "musical accent" of the Magyar language. Oswald's susceptibility to the allure of that accent likewise broadens the scope of Imre's appeal to a community of all those "susceptible to speaking-voices." This account of Oswald's cruising masks the narrator's homosexuality by making his interest appear as the natural result of his encounter with Imre's "seductive race," whose beauty and grace banish his depressive and lonely thoughts to "the limbo of all unwholesomenesses."

While such language traffics in the pleasure of taboo which has long been a staple of Orientalist imagery, it is marshalled by Prime-Stevenson to represent homosexuality as a divine ideal "conscious of a superior knowledge of Love" (34). In a latter explication of Imre's inscrutably "seductive" character, Oswald describes the object of his affection as a

sort of noble savage stereotype, capable of an incredibly alluring eloquence ascribed to the effortless character of his "race."

> Imre was a Magyar, one of a race in which sentimental eloquence is always lurking in the blood, even to a poetic passion in verbal utterance that is often out of all measure with the mere formal education of a man or a woman. He was a Hungarian: which means, among other things that a cowherd who cannot write his name, and who does not know where London is, can be overheard making love to his sweetheart, or lamenting the loss of his mother, in language that is almost of Homeric beauty. It is the Oriental quality, ever in the Magyar, now to be admired by us, now disliked, according to the application. Imre had his full share of Magyarism of temperament, and of its impromptu eloquence, taking the place of much of a literal acquaintance with Dante, Shakespeare, Goethe, and all the rhetorical and literary Parnassus in general. (55)

In this description, Imre appears to be less an individual love object than he does an exemplar of the qualities natural to his "race": "sentimental eloquence," "poetic passion," in possession of a "language that is almost of Homeric beauty." Amid such superlatives, one cannot help but recoil at the appearance of a queer eugenics that explains the miracle by which an illiterate "cowherd," bereft of any modern understanding of metropolitan high-culture here signified by "London," can speak in such a disarmingly beautiful way. Such recuperations in the text appear to be only possible in so much as the Oriental(ized) object of affection can be rendered as desirable in explicitly racialized terms.

The "lurking" quality in Imre also suggests the ways in which Prime-Stevenson's novel aligns its homosexual embrace of the male form with a racialization and animalization that recalls at once the ugliest and most enduring facets of racist and Orientalist ideology. Oswald's eroticized descriptions often blur the line between human and animal along the axis of race, as when Oswald observes Imre performing exercises that accentuate his body and inflame the narrator's desiring gaze.

> [Imre] possessed a slender figure, faultless in proportions, a wonder of muscular development, of strength, lightness and elegance. His athletic powers were

> renowned in his regiment. He was among the crack gymnasts, vaulters and swimmers. I have seen him, often, make standing-leap over an ordinary library able, to land, *like a cat*, on the other side. I have seen him, half-a-dozen times, spring out of a common barrel into another one placed beside it, without touching his hands to either. He could hold out a heavy garden-chair perfectly straight, with one hand; break a stout penholder or leadpencil between his second and third fingers; and bend a thick, brass curtain-rod by his leg-muscles…He could jump on and off a running horse, like a *vaquero*…Not till he was nude, and one could trace the ripple of muscle and sinew under the fine, hairless skin, did one realized the machinery of such strength. I have never seen any other man—unless Magyar, Italian or Arab—walk with such elasticity and dignity. (51-52)

As Gifford argues, these physical descriptions might be a covert way of describing Imre as Oswald's sexual type given their likeness to early twentieth century muscle magazines, a prototype of gay male pornography between the wars and the cult of manhood associated with Theodore Roosevelt.[35] These physical descriptions also seem to simulate sex itself, as Imre's powerful limbs master phallic objects—a "stout penholder or leadpencil," a "thick, brass curtain-rod"—while he effortlessly launches his body in and out of the yawning mouths of two barrels. These sexually charged descriptions—an athletic demonstration as sexual résumé—also reduce Imre to a mere body, a body that is in turn reduced to its animal qualities and its racial affinity groups. Imre lands "like a cat," a creature that often symbolizes female seductiveness and temptation, but which here is aligned with masculine grace and athletic prowess. Likewise, the detailed description of Imre's "nude" physique follows his cross-racial identification as a *vaquero* and draws comparisons to similarly endowed racial others—"Magyar[s], Italian[s] or Arab[s]"—whose bodies exemplify the "elasticity and dignity" of Oswald's ideal masculine type. In this sense, too, the body is reduced to a machine—"ripple[s] of muscle and sinew" that power the "machinery" of Imre's prodigious strength—and the exchangeability of Imre's

[35] Gifford, *Dayneford's Library: American Homosexual Writing, 1900-1913*, 117; Gifford, "Introduction," 20.

body for that of a Hungarian, Italian, Arab or *vaquero* body further renders those bodies as objects that function for their master's pleasure. The grand irony here, of course, is that even if objectification informs an erotics in which Oswald dominates his lovers as bodies and identities for visual consumption, he often frames the encounter with them as if he were the one being dominated. He is "susceptible" to the "seductive" tongue spoken by Imre, just as Imre represents the "Man-Type which own[s] [Oswald] and ever must own [him], soul and body together" (94).

These moments point us to the function of race within *Imre* as an explanation of homosexual attraction and as an identitarian framework for the white homosexual. In other words, race simultaneously informs who gets selected as an erotic object and the cultural signs that become the resources for homosexual identity and sexual attraction. Consider, for example, Oswald's simultaneous declaration of his homosexuality and his racial affinity with Imre's Magyar heritage as the two men make their mutual declarations of love.

> "Yes, and a strange matter in my immediately passionate interest in you—another one of the coincidences in our interest for each other—is the racial blood that runs in your veins. You are a Magyar. You have not now to be told of the unexplainable, the *mysterious affinity between myself and your race and nation*; of my sensitiveness, ever since I was a child, to the chord which Magyarország and the Magyar *sound in my heart*. Years have only added to it, till *thy land, they people, Imre, are they not almost my land, my people?* That thou wast ordained to come into the world that I should love thee, no matter what thy race, that I believe! But, see! Fate also has willed that thou shouldst be Magyar, one of the Children of Emesa, one of the Folk of Arpád!*"* (102-103, emphasis added)

The identitarian acrobatics of white gay cross-racial identification are rendered here in particularly stark fashion. Similar to the white queer diasporic feeling of Cather's awkward boys from the plains, Oswald disavows the nation of origin, a disavowal that he can only register in the affective sphere of a "mysterious feeling." Recalling his

childhood response to the Hungarian national anthem as a "sound in my heart," Oswald renders such feelings of affinity as biological relation, a move that parallels the novel's investment in thinking homosexuality as racial belonging. In this way, Oswald queers ethnic identity such that Imre's land and people are "almost" his land and people by virtue of his same-sex desire. If "almost" seems to qualify this relation to the Hungarian people as homological rather than exact, and the proclamation that he would have loved Imre "no matter [his] race" seems to discount race as index and cause of homosexual desire, that relation is restored by recourse to a "Fate" that sutures Oswald to Hungarian national mythology as his queer destiny.

Oswald's linkage of Hungarian folk history with homosexuality is grounded in the primitivism that he ascribes to Imre's people, a primitivism celebrated as an alternative to a homophobic Western culture. If this tendency is marked in the above descriptions of Hungarians' noble ignorance, it is redoubled when Oswald provides his version of Imre's coming out story. Even if the young soldier's tale includes references to moments when he had been driven to "the point of suicide" (120) by fears of rejection from friends and family, Imre is saved in Oswald's view by having been born into a non-Western culture.

> Fortunately, Imre had not been born and brought up in an Anglo-Saxon civilization; where is still met, at every side, so dense a blending of popular ignorances; of century-old and century-blind religious and ethical misconceptions, of unscientific professional conservatism in psychiatric circles, and of juristic barbarisms; all, of course, accompanied with the full measure of British or Yankee social hypocrisy toward the daily actualities of homosexualism. By comparison, indeed, any other lands and races—even those yet hesitant in their social toleration or legal protection of the Uranian—seem educative and kindly; not to distinguish people whose attitude is distinctively one of national common-sense and humanity. (120)

Here, Oswald reveals the binary relationship between Western homophobia and what might be seen as Eastern homo-tolerance (if not homophilia) necessary not only for binding Oswald and Imre together as happy male lovers, but also for binding Oswald to the Hungarian "nation and race" as a space for homosexual flourishing. Here, too, the traditional Orientalist view of Western superiority and Eastern inferiority is inverted. "[B]arbarisms" are the property of American and British laws criminalizing homosexuality, laws informed by a "social hypocrisy" inherited from an "Anglo-Saxon civilization" characterized by its "dense […] blending of popular ignorances." On this score, "other lands and races," are rendered as "educative and kindly," in possession of a "national common-sense and humanity."

In order to maintain this binary relation, of course, Oswald must ignore or sidestep the reality that the Eastern cultures and peoples he lauds may also be "hesitant in their social toleration or legal protection" of homosexuals. In essence, Oswald's qualification indicates that a certain imaginative function must be present in order for the East to be seen as a queer alternative to the West. This tendency to (re)imagine homosexuality into the history of Hungary becomes especially pointed when Prime-Stevenson invents wholesale the legend of Z. Lorand and Z. Egon, two close soldiers who share a grave as a national monument to their relationship. The suggestion is that their martial relation was also a homosexual romance. As James Gifford has pointed out, both the identities of these allegedly historical characters and their queer relationship are entirely fictitious.[36] Such moments point to the ways in which Oswald and Prime-Stevenson must re-invent the Orient in order to establish it as a queer origin and homeland. To directly engage the homophobia of Hungarian culture evident in Imre's

[36] Gifford, "Introduction," 18.

fears of discovery and its impact on his social reputation would set fire to the idyll Oswald has constructed for himself as an ex-pat living abroad. It would also put in serious peril the happy ending that Prime-Stevenson penned for his male lovers. In this way, queer cross-racial identification must remake, rather than merely recover, the past.

This claiming of Hungarian culture through which Oswald secures both a homosexual identity, a new national identity and a lover is also bound to the hyper-masculine, military imaginary through which he envisions homosexuality more broadly. Related to the military aesthetic (and its legibility as unquestioned masculinity) that attracted him to Imre at the onset of the novel, Oswald's elaboration of the "Race-Homosexual" takes shape as a globe-storming band of male lovers forcing their will upon a world that misunderstands them.

> We plow the globe's roughest seas as men, we rule its States as men, we direct its finance and commerce as men, we forge its steel as men, we grapple with all its sciences, we triumph in all its arts as men, we fill its gravest professions as men, we fight in the bravest ranks of its armies as men, or we plan out its fiercest and most triumphant battles as men. In all this, in so much more, we are men! Why (in a bitter paradox), one can say that we always have been, we always are, always will be, too much *men!* So super-male, so utterly unreceptive of what is not manly, so aloof from any feminine essences, that we cannot tolerate woman at all as a sexual factor! Are we not the extreme of the male? Its supreme phase, its outermost phalanx?—its climax of the aristocratic, the All-Man? And yet, if love is to be only what the narrow, modern, Jewish-Christian ethics of today declare it, if what they insist be the only *natural* and pure expression of 'the will to possess, the wish to surrender,' oh, then is the flouting world quite right! (86)

The rugged masculine erotics that suture an acceptable, masculine identity to male homosexuality here—what we might call the novel's "masc4masc" aesthetics in the pre-digital age[37]—is intimately tied to a disturbingly militaristic vision of same-sex love.

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[37] As George Chauncey's work brilliantly demonstrates, homosexual identity in the early twentieth century was often appended to gender nonconforming persons rather than men who had sexual encounters with men. Those men-loving-men who were effeminate in appearance or affect were labeled "fairies" or homosexuals, while those who maintained a normatively masculine

While the military has historically been a space where homosexual contact could fly under the radar (especially in the first half of the twentieth century), Oswald blurs the line between homosexual identity and a globetrotting military campaign. In order to divorce homosexual identity from its association with effeminacy, Oswald imagines these "too much *men*" as equals precisely in their apparently natural vocation as elite, "aristocratic" conquerors. The inclusion of the term "phalanx," a military formation that has its origins in the battle strategy of Alexander the Great, suggests that Prime-Stevenson may be linking that elite warrior identity to historical examples of male-male desire *and* military superiority. Alexander's legendary love of Hephaestion and his desire to conquer the world thus both become axes of homosexual identification. This vision of the male warrior informs not only homosexual identity, but the experience of love itself, rendered here as "the will to possess, the wish to surrender" in order to critique the "Jewish-Christian ethics of today" that would label the homosexual as abject and emasculated. In such ways, Oswald's idealized homosexuality cannot be separated from a lust for conquest.

This idealized form of the masculine, "super-virile" (35) homosexual is contrasted with those members of the "Race-Homosexual" whom Oswald abhors as "ignoble, trivial, loathsome, feeble-souled and feeble-bodied" (86). His rejection of his disreputable brethren not only raises the spectre of misogyny, but also that of a eugenic drive for a pure homosexual race.

> [N]evertheless of this same Race, the Race-Homosexual, had been also and apparently ever would be, countless ignoble, trivial, loathsome, feeble-souled and

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appearance or affect were hardly thought of as "actually" homosexual. See: George Chauncey, "Christian Brotherhood or Religious Perversion?: Homosexual Identities and the Construction of Sexual Boundaries in the World War I Era," *Journal of Social History* 19, no. 2 (Winter 1985): 189–211.

> feeble-bodied creatures, the very weaklings and rubbish of humanity! Those, *those*, terrified me, Imre! To think of them shamed me; those types of man-loving-men who, by thousands, live incapable of any noble ideals or lives. Ah, those patently depraved, noxious, flaccid, gross, womanish beings, perverted and imperfect in moral nature and in even their bodily tissues! Those homosexual legions that are the straw-chaff of society; good for nothing except the fire that purges the world of garbage and rubbish! (86-87)

The angry and vicious debasement of "womanish" homosexuals pours forth from Oswald in a violent froth of adjectives: ignoble, trivial, loathsome, feeble, depraved, noxious, flaccid, gross, and perverted. A stain on the "Race-Homosexual," these effeminate men-loving-men are fallen from the butch ideal in mind, spirit and "even in their bodily tissues." The terror that such types inspire in Oswald drive him to the murderous desire to "purge" them from the world, to burn them up like so much "garbage and rubbish." A marked similarity to the rhetoric of ethnic cleansing that would take hold of Germany a few decades later can be seen in both the desire to "purge" this "straw-chaff of society" from the homosexual ranks and in Oswald's implicit condemnation of such men as the reason for the blighted reputation of homosexuals across the globe. By way of transition, he contrasts these degraded types to the "great Oriental princes and to the heroes and heroic intellects of Greece and Rome" (87) which connects proper gay masculine identity to a pre-modern Orient and Western antiquity.

The conjunction of that desire for a pure homosexual race and the elaboration of an ideal homosexual type in "great Oriental princes" returns us to the question of how Orientalism and homosexual identification are braided together in *Imre*. The fetishization of the Orient as a race and culture onto which a white American homosexual identity can be mapped thus meets the military fantasy that underlies both the text's queer Orientalism

and its theorization of homosexuality. This is especially clear when Oswald declares his commitment to Imre in language that blurs the line between submission and conquest:

> "Imre, I will never go away from thee. Thy people shall be mine. Thy King shall be mine. Thy country shall be mine, thy city mine! My feet are fixed! We belong together. We have found what we had despaired of finding, 'the friendship which is love, the love which is friendship.'" (126)

The last line is often the sole focus of the scant criticism written on *Imre*, invoked as a way of talking about Prime-Stevenson's theorization of homosexuality as a kind of loving friendship between men that, in extremity, becomes erotic and romantic. However, what I hope to have demonstrated is that this theory of homosexual identity is guided and structured by the Orientalist and militarist undercurrents of the novel's love story. Oswald's speech is drawn in part from the Old Testament's Book of Ruth, in which a woman joins a family of Israelites and, when circumstances compel she and her sister to leave the family, she refuses to do so, declaring herself a family member and an Israelite by choice if not by birth. Yet, if Oswald's "taking" of Imre's heart and culture here is in reference to that biblical conversion narrative, it also seems to ambiguously circle around who is doing the taking: Oswald is both taken by Imre's people and takes Imre's people as his own ("mine").

In this sense, conversion is almost indistinguishable from appropriation, a dynamic that the text confronts in its last paragraphs, as Oswald declares himself a Hungarian:

> All the warm Magyar night about us was dominated by those melting chromatics, poignant cadences—those harmonies eternally Oriental, minor-keyed, insidious, nerve-thrilling. The arabesques of the violins, the vehement rhythms of the clangorous *czimbalom!* Ah, this time on the Lánchíd, neither for Imre nor me was it the somber Bakony song, "*O jaj! Az álom nelkül,"* but instead the free,

> impassioned leap and acclaim, "*Huszár, legény vagyok!— Huszár, legény vagyok!"*[38]

The sudden eruption of Hungarian language here marks Oswald's linguistic conversion to the "eternally Oriental" culture of the Hungary he feels is his proper origin. It also marks the culmination of his mission in visiting Budapest: to learn "that difficult and exquisite tongue which was Imre's native one" (45). This queer national feeling is starkly different from the sort of homonationalism theorized by Jasbir Puar and historically expanded more recently by Hiram Perez.[39] Rather than shore up white American nationalism, as their accounts of homonationalism suggest, Oswald defects from his American origins and consecrates himself as the nationalist subject of his surrogate home in the Orient.

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[38]These lines, for which the text provides no translation, equate to the following rough translations in English: "Oh, my! Without the dream" and "I am a Hussar— I am a Hussar!" The Hussar referenced here is, of course, the cavalry order started in late medieval Hungary. Their distinctive style of dress became popular throughout European militaries in the 18th and 19th centuries. They are mentioned in Tennyson's "Charge of the Light Brigade" and their dress identified with some of the more iconic representations of the Crimean War. (Note: I am grateful to Endre Boksay for providing this translation, clarifying the murkiness of online translation engines.)

[39] In Puar's formulation, the gay subject reserves his right to citizenship and inclusion in the nation precisely by performing and inhabiting his queerness in ways supportive of national (American) norms of gender *and* its military projects at home and abroad. By performing a version of queerness that does not depart, but rather joins, fiscal, cultural, affective and political norms, the queer subject may purchase his inclusion in the nation as a homonationalist. Puar also demonstrates the two-sidedness of this strategy by showing the ways in which "pinkwashing" allows the West to represent itself as tolerant of homosexuals against the alleged intolerance of the East as a way of drawing LGBT identification with its military strategies and affirming its cultural and moral superiority over Eastern rivals (most frequently, in their appearance as Islamic and Middle Eastern enemies of the state and Western civilization). Hiram Perez's work demonstrates a longer durée of homonationalism, by showing that the twentieth century phenomenon identified by Puar stretches back into the 19th century as part of white gay male cosmopolitan appeals for inclusion into the national family. As should be clear to the reader by now, Prime-Stevenson's *Imre* thwarts these narratives on both accounts by giving up the "Western" nation and origin in America in order to repatriate himself as a subject of the "Eastern" kingdom in Hungary. See: Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 1–36; Hiram Pérez, *A Taste for Brown Bodies: Gay Modernity and Cosmopolitan Desire* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 1–28.

Yet Oswald's longing to be a Magyar, and the happiness that he experiences upon his self-declared conversion, are nonetheless part of a quasi-colonial project that informs the primary purpose of his writing the "memorandum." This purpose only slips into conscious utterance once, in an offhand comment to the reader, Oswald's friend "Mayne" back in the United States: "Let me rather say that it [this writing] is a memorandum and guidebook of Imre's emotional topography" (61). If *Imre: a memorandum* is a "guidebook," who does it guide? The prefatory letter to "My dear Mayne" provides little concrete intention, as Oswald only implores his reader to "use [the manuscript] as you will. Take it from Imre and from me" (33). This guidebook, of course, is not meant for the fictional Mayne, but rather for the community of same-sex interested men to whom Prime-Stevenson circulated those 500 first-run copies of *Imre*. For these readers, I'd like to argue in conclusion, Prime-Stevenson's "guidebook" is a sort of primer for young (white) homosexuals who might find in Oswald's cross-racial feeling a recognition of their own desire and homosexual identity. In this sense, the Orientalization and racialization of Imre throughout the novel offers a model of imaginative immigration and assimilation that Prime-Stevenson's fellow white homosexuals might follow in order to access a romance free of the persecution they find in the West. In essence, Oswald and Prime-Stevenson make an initial, exploratory foray into the Orient and invite their queer white compatriots to come along for the ride. The Orient offers, in all the adornment and pageantry that attends its appearance in the white, male Western field of vision, the possibility of a better life for homosexuals.

Both *Geisha Man* and *Imre* reflect a shared strategy of appropriation and adaptation by which the Orient is put to use for the queer subject as a route to origin and identity. In order to do so, *Geisha Man* and *Imre* reflect the Western vision of the Orient as sexually decadent and morally liberal, but recast it as a refuge from the "barbarism" of a backwards Western culture. If the work of both authors reveals the form of cross-racial identification I call queer Orientalism as indicative of a desire to make the world bigger and to find a non-alienating place within it, we cannot side-step the violence that is so often part and parcel of that desire. If queer Orientalism counters the standard Orientalist hierarchy of a superior West and an inferior East, upending the gender binaries implied therein, it cannot do so without replicating the positions of dominance and submission that are still a part of that binary relation. These positions are reworked in the queer erotics of both *Geisha Man* and *Imre*, yet both feature protagonists in thrall to their hypermasculine and often aggressive or violent male lovers.

In *The Erotic Life of Racism*, Sharon Holland identifies our investment in the erotic—the locus of our most heightened desire for pleasure and connection with the other—as a conduit to a better world. The trouble is, she argues, that the erotic rarely makes good on its promises. The scene of the erotic, she explains, "recalls the impossibility of community with another, mocking our ability to connect, and also highlights the reciprocal nature of subjectivity, or what it means to be a subject."[40] While for much modernist literature and art, the erotic encounter was the bearer of a sort of holy truth about the subject, the access point for some essential self that had been repressed or oppressed by the unnatural life of modern civilization and its ruling bourgeois values,

[40] Holland, *The Erotic Life of Racism*, 47.

Holland addresses the costs of the erotic-as-knowledge. As both the site of an "impossibility of community" and the "reciprocal" production of subjectivity, the erotic renders the other from whom we gather up our identity as a gestalt, a reflection of our desire rather than any disclosure of the Other. Such entanglements render the erotic a battlefield of the historical images through which the Other appears in the present and the relationship we desire with that other in the throes of sex. In such ways, Holland claims that the erotic is an affective structure of carnal and ideological desires unavailable to us as some form of "autonomous life" free of our embeddedness in a racist socius. Rather, the erotic is connected to a complex matrix of desiring relations that tend to obscure where racist practice begins and where our good desire ends."[41] In the very sex act where we see a potential for radical unity, we may get only the reinforcement of separation.

Holland's work points us to the problem confronted by Nugent and Prime-Stevenson's work, namely that their erotics cannot be divorced from the racialization that grounds their characters' imaginaries of identity and belonging. In *Geisha Man*, the gender expression of a young man who wishes to "dress in flowing silks and silver and colors always" (100) must be channeled through the ahistorical image repertoire of a Japanese geisha. It is the racist, Orientalist construction of the geisha as a delicate and submissive femme that enables Kondo's self-articulation as a mixed race, same-sex loving man and which binds him to his abusive white male lovers. In *Imre*, Oswald's fetishization of Imre's "Oriental quality" renders his Hungarian lover a noble savage onto whom the Western homosexual can project his fantasies of national belonging, romance and happiness. In much more distinct fashion than in Nugent's work, Prime-Stevenson's novel engages in a racist erotics that not only reduces Imre to a collage of attractive body

[41] Holland, 50.

parts but also reinvents Hungarian national history to make it a space for a queer-affirming fantasy of cross-racial kinship. In both cases, the longing for what Holland calls the "impossibility of community," here the impossibility of cross-racial *becoming other*, is ensnared by the racist image-repertoires through which the protagonists of *Geisha Man* and *Imre* access and inhabit the Orient.

The questions bound up with queer Orientalism, like those bound up with queer diaspora in the prior chapter, return us to the crisis of origin for gay and lesbian subjects during the early twentieth century. In Nugent and Prime-Stevenson's writing, we glimpse a desire to transform one's origin: the African-American who invents for himself a Japanese origin, the white American who invents for himself a Hungarian origin. The refashioning of origins is bound up, in both *Geisha Man* and *Imre,* with the desire to be claimed by a racial or national structure imagined as filiation. Kondo wants to be claimed by Gale, and Oswald wants to be claimed by Imre and Hungary in ways that fold him into the country's mythic national genealogy. While this desire to be claimed might suggest the orphan subjectivity that Christopher Nealon terms the "foundling" character of early twentieth century queer experience, neither Nugent nor Prime-Stevenson seem to adopt that character. They are not so much foundlings as they are defectors, subjects that wish to deterritorialize themselves from the West and reterritorialize themselves in the East. Imre's nation is Oswald's queer Orientalist fantasy of Hungary rather than an actual, historical place. For Nugent's characters, nation is less a defined geopolitical space than the closed yet mobile community of the eroticized family (especially the father/son relationship), the city (New York), or the neighborhood (Harlem, Greenwich Village). Yet where the nation manifests as family, neighborhood or city for these characters, that

space must be deterritorialized from its familiar registers and reterritorialized as a space for queer identification.

As this chapter has demonstrated, such reterritorialization can only be accomplished in the work of both authors by fixing the Other within racist and misogynistic taxonomies that enable queer cross-identification. Nugent's autobiographical protagonists in *Gentleman Jigger* and *Geisha Man* attach themselves to men and authorize their queer desire through drag performances of Orientalized abject femininity: the prostitute schooled in the *Kama Sutra* or the elegantly suffering Japanese geisha. In Nugent's writing, the marginalization of women affords the space for gender non-conforming gay males to articulate their identity. To have a "real" geisha appear in Kondo's tale would threaten the solidity of the geisha man as an authentic subject. Rather than question the apparent naturalness of female abjection; these novels use female abjection as a way to articulate frustrated queer longing. In similar fashion, Prime-Stevenson's *Imre* posits femininity as the impurity that must be stamped out in order to recover a masculine homosexual identity that may be easier to culturally assimilate than the effeminacy that the novel can only look at with horror and scorn. In both cases, the abjection of women and the fantasies that approach representations of racial others is the price to be paid for gay male self-articulation. These are the trade-offs that we must always be wary of in the imaginative expansiveness that we might otherwise value in queer identification. On the one hand, queer self-articulation in these texts seeks to bring the world closer, to bridge divides and imagine new kinships. On the other hand, its reach across the borders of race and nation is powered by the undercurrent of those very prejudices from which it flees.

This double-edged condition highlights the difficulties of identifying these desires, their expression and effects solidly along the axes of classical Orientalism, imperialism and cosmopolitanism. None of these conceptual frameworks can entirely grasp hold of the sweeping range of identifications and exchanges that suture the queer lives of Nugent and Prime-Stevenson's protagonists, and yet we can see each of them glimmer, sometimes brighter and sometimes dimmer, in the work of both authors. This indicates, I would like to argue in closing, the affective and political complexity of queer imagination and identity at the beginning of the twentieth century. It also suggests the porousness of Orientalism, imperialism and cosmopolitanism for queer subjects who gather together a world of considerable breadth and expansiveness by way of making their sexual identities across the borders of nation, race and gender.

CHAPTER THREE

A Queer Crisis: Nella Larsen, Djuna Barnes and the Impossibility of Queer Relation

There's a curious and comedic moment in the middle of Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood* (1936) — a novel not generally known for its laughs — in which Dr. Matthew O'Connor tells Nora Flood about an argument he had with his fellow bathroom cruisers about the best places to find gay sex on the go in Paris. As if to prove his epicurean knowledge of such things, O'Connor claims that while "your normal fellow will say that all are alike in the dark, negro and white, I can tell [their race], and where they come from, and what quarter they frequent, by the size and excellence" of their cocks. He adds that the Place de la Bastille is perhaps the best place to cruise, claiming that the men he meets there bless him with penises "as handsome as *mortadellas* slung on a table."[1] As perhaps is to be expected when it comes to matters of gay male taste, sexual or otherwise, O'Connor notes that everyone has his own opinion about "the particular merits of one district over another for such things, of one cottage over another for such things" and that the disagreement between members of the sexual interest group were so heated that a passerby might think "we [had] all been selecting a new order of government" (116). That last line, hyperbolic as it is, suggests O'Connor sees or intuits some potential, tenuous or explicit connection between the men gathered to trade tea-room talk. Arguing as if they were "selecting a new order of government," the men appear to be a nascent social formation, emerging out of the water closet with a set of organizing principles that bind them together at the site of a common cultural practice.

[1] Barnes, *Nightwood / Ladies Almanack*, 118. Subsequent references to the novel will appear in-text as parenthetical citations.

That social formation, whatever it might have been, is torn apart due to a lack of accord, a fault of the discrimination and distinction which are, ironically, the very capacities O'Connor claims for himself. If we set aside the racial stereotype of the black male endowment in O'Connor's field notes above, he claims that his ability to differentiate between cocks allows him to index not only racial difference, but also to determine where his anonymous partners live and where they travel in the city. If such differences would suggest an interracial cruising community drawn together from distinct parts of the city, O'Connor is hysterically furious at the differences of opinion that cleave group members from one another:

> I was torn apart by a hundred voices—each of them pitched in a different *arrondissement*, until I began clapping like the good woman in the shoe, and screaming for silence; and for witchery I banged the table with a *formidable* and yelled out loud: 'Do any of you know anything about atmosphere and sea level? Well,' I says, 'sea level and atmospheric pressure and topography make all the difference in the world!' My voice cracked on the word 'difference,' soaring up divinely, and I said: 'If you think that certain things do not show from what district they come, yea, even to an *arrondissement*, then you are not out gunning for particular game, but simply any catch, and I'll have nothing to do with you!" (116-117)

Rather than forming a community of shared experience, the clandestine community divides itself in a fractious debate, "torn apart by a hundred voices" before O'Connor's "cracked on the word 'difference.'" This cracking in O'Connor's voice signals the crisis—a difference in opinion and belief—that tears apart this queer formation. What follows is O'Connor's bitter rejection of that community on the grounds that his fellow travelers are not only less knowledgeable than he at the influence of environment on the size and shape of the male sex organ, but also that their difference of opinion and desire makes him reject out of hand the community to which he clearly wants to belong. As he confides, shortly after, to Nora: "I'm an angel on all fours, with a child's feet behind me,

seeking my people that have never been made, going down face foremost, drinking the waters of the night at the water hole of the damned" (120, emphasis added). Even in the tribe of outcasts, the episode suggests, one cannot expect shared interests or practices. In place of relation, *Nightwood* suggests in such moments that the ideal might be having no relation at all.

The optimistic vision of community that structures much of the gay male writing surveyed in the preceding chapters—either the open and wandering pleasures of cruising, or the utopian cloister of a transnational, interracial romance that transcends the borders of gender, kinship and origin—is notably absent in writing by queer modernist women across the color line. One might hardly imagine reading Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood* and Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929) together. Barnes' high modernist masterpiece challenges the reader to make sense of its expatriate life promiscuously moving from queer sites in Europe and North Africa to America. Larsen's novels, primarily set in Harlem but with excursions to Chicago, Tennessee, Alabama and Copenhagen, absorb and recast the conventions of the tragic mulatta trope in ways that engage a long history of black female writing with and against the politics of respectability.[2] Though divided by race and literary milieu, Larsen and Barnes' novels of

[2] Here, I am thinking primarily of figures such as Harriet Jacobs, Pauline Hopkins, Francis Harper, and Sojourner Truth. This is not to say that these women were not radical, but that they channeled their radical vision through a more traditionally Christian-inflected politics in ways that appear, to me, to be explicitly rejected by Larsen, particularly in the last act of *Quicksand.* It is also the case that Larsen upends much representation of the "tragic mulatta" by inverting the parental palette; both Clare Kendry and Helga Crane's mothers are white, rather than black. For treatment of the "tragic mulatta" narrative in Larsen, see: Hazel Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 163–75; Mark Madigan, "Miscegenation and 'The Dicta of Race and Class': The Rhinelander Case and Nella Larsen's Passing," *Modern Fiction Studies* 36, no. 4 (Winter 1990): 524–28; Claudia Tate, "Nella Larsen's Passing: A Problem of Intepretation," *Black American Literature Forum* 14, no. 1 (Winter 1980): 142–46; Cherene Sherrard-Johnson, "'A Plea for Color': Nella Larsen's Iconography of the Mulatta," *American Literature* 74, no. 4 (December 2004): 833–69;

more or less explicit lesbian romance and transnational mobility write back to the glamour of cosmopolitan community in the work of their gay male contemporaries. The protagonists of their novels not only fail to achieve harmonious union with the women they desire, but their experience forces the reader to question the viability of *any* bond with a person, race or nation. In doing so, they challenge the prevailing presumption that mobility (often from the country or suburb to the city) offers a route for redemptive access to community for queer people. Further, they challenge the idea that community might be the site of self-determination (living one's truth, in today's terms) and a respite from alienation. Taken together, the anti-social or anti-relational impulses in Barnes and Larsen's writing posits all attachments as a threat to the pleasures of or desire for the freedoms of an autonomous individuality. In such a way, the novels are saturated with what Sianne Ngai calls "ugly feelings," the negative affects that are generated by and directed at "a general state of obstructed agency." For Ngai, the "deeply equivocal status" and "ambivalence" of feelings like envy, anxiety, and irritation (the affect she ascribes to Larsen's *Quicksand*) are neither "mere expressions" of a singular *ressentiment* nor a salve that soothes those subject to the conditions from which the affects emerge.[3] By way of connection to the work of the prior chapters, these anti-social affects may also be these novels' way of encountering the mystery and confusion of queer desire, which these texts both treat (especially Larsen) as an indefinable force or essence that compels and repels the protagonists' movement toward others.

Werner Sollors, *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both: Explorations of Interracial Literature* (New York: NYU Press, 1997); Cheryl A. Wall, "Passing for What? Aspects of Identity in Nella Larsen's Novels," *Black American Literature Forum* 20, no. 1/2 (Summer 1986): 97–111.

[3] Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 2–4.

What these writers highlight, in other words, is a tension at the site of the slippage between the "I" and the "we" at the site of relation that emerges in their expression and interrogation of same-sex female desire.[4] If the utopian glossiness of gay male representations of queer community has been expressed earlier in this dissertation across narratives that race toward the discovery and promise of a "we" that might enfold the alienated "I," Larsen and Barnes find no such comfort in relation. The queer subject in their novels emerges as such precisely because she *is* different; her queerness marks her outside the communities that congeal around heterosexual culture, but also outside of relationships with women that seem to offer alternative communities. The proliferating difference that is the site of a pleasurable camaraderie in Claude McKay's novels, for example, appears in Larsen and Barnes' writing as a crisis. The lesbian love triangle at the center of *Nightwood* is torn apart by competing, and often ambivalent, desires for attachment and autonomy. In *Quicksand*, Helga's longing for community motivates her optimistic attachment to a number of women and female communities while her desire for individualist autonomy – being exactly who she is, as she wants to be, and to be loved

[4] This slippage is particularly noted in Jean Luc Nancy's essay, "On Being-Singluar-Plural." For Nancy, the "I" only emerges with the presumption of a "we" and that slippage enables us to imagine a permanent and fluid community *in relation* that exceeds the individuation of the subject. Reading the relationship between collectivity and difference through the work of Audre Lorde, Kara Keeling marks a "a transformation within a praxis of collectivity earned through struggle within and through the categories of black lesbian and women of color" that recognizes "different as an animating logic of belonging." Keeling connects this transformation to Brent Hayes Edwards' theorization of the "practice of diaspora" constituted by "a gap—a changing core of difference—[that is] an enabling, animating force of diaspora." That transformation produces an "I," in Keeling's estimation, fundamentally identified with "Another." While these transformations and slippages are moments of productive possibility for Keeling and Nancy, they are moments of tension and discord in the work of Barnes and Larsen. See: Kara Keeling, "I = Another: Digital Identity Politics," in *Strange Affinities: The Gender and Sexual Politics of Comparative Racialization* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 53–75; Jean Luc Nancy, "Of Being Singular Plural," in *Being Singular Plural* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 1–100.

and accepted for it – drives her flight from every relation that exchanges belonging for self-amputation.[5] In *Passing*, Irene Redfield feels the powerful, erotic pull of a different world in which she might be free from the burden of race as her gaze dilates on Clare Kendry's transgressive body, yet her jealousy and the fear that the institutions that guarantee her meager security might be snatched away ultimately destroys the possibility of that relationship.

This is not to say that Barnes and Larsen's characters don't want to belong—so much of their transnational movement is powered by the longing to find a place or a person to which they might be attached—but rather that belonging becomes a threat to individual freedom. In this sense, Larsen and Barnes' novels offer a *cris de couer* from characters caught between the romance of belonging and the void that howls back the violence of relation. Anxieties about belonging often manifest in the authors' queer figuration of biological family or racial kinship as a particular threat to the individual as an autonomous, queer subject. *Nightwood*'s Robin Vote simultaneously desires a home and desires to be free from the home, finding it a space of isolation, entrapment and sameness. In *Passing*, the family is Irene Redfield's guarantor of an unpleasant but tolerable security and Clare Kendry's terror of racial discovery. For *Quicksand*'s Helga Crane, family appears to offer the hope of salvation but resolves in further alienation and, ultimately, death. Haunted by absent mothers, Barnes and Larsen's writing fails to project the recuperative image of female community that is the expectation of the sentimental

[5] "Self-amputation" is borrowed from Lauren Berlant, who uses it in her catalog of effects and affects experienced by women's encounters with the love plot, a life narrative that promises happiness in return for forgetting the "self-amputation, vulnerability and coercion" that attend the "mature happiness" identified with a successful, hetero-normative romance. See: Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 169.

novel tradition out of which their modern narratives emerge. Where queer desire seems to offer access to another world, it can at the same time bind characters to painful, impossible relationships that threaten their flourishing and happiness. The ambivalence, resistance and anxiety with which these women approach the site of feeling and coupling are registered in the frequent failures of Barnes and Larsen's female protagonists to articulate their desires or to render them intelligible to others.

This inability to articulate the protagonists' organizing desires meets the novels' refusal of closure and upending of genre conventions that marks Larsen and Barnes' departure from the sentimental novel's iconography of the American woman and arrival at the articulation of a strikingly modern woman in her place.[6] In this way, I mark them as operating within and against what Lauren Berlant identifies as the "female complaint" structuring the intimate public of twentieth century American women's culture. In Berlant's account, the literature of the "female complaint" exposes and gives representation to lives often unsung in popular culture in ways that attest to the damage, adaptation and amnesia that attend scenes of femininity's construction around the love plot. If such cultural products attest to women's disappointment with the violence and coercion that shape normative love, they paper over that rupture by providing "an aesthetic structure of affective expectation" in which the love plot will turn round again, this time in an affirmative manner that enables audiences to "experience the pleasure of

[6] This modern character is marked in her ability to choose or refuse sexual freedom, her transnational mobility and its attendant sense of rootlessness, her quest for an identity that may be forged by the truth of her own subjective experience rather than the precepts and edicts of her surrounding culture, her cosmopolitan character and its attendant feelings of both alienation and a more global sense of belonging. In terms of literary form, Barnes and Larsen offer an entrée into their female characters' interiority without reducing them to mere stereotype or symbol, and in so doing, calling into question the very idea of access to interiority and the stability of any identity.

encountering what they expected."[7] Barnes and Larsen, as will become clear throughout the course of the present chapter, refute these generic conventions, suspending the conclusion of their novels either in an uncertain death or in the ambiguous return of a lover under impossibly compromised conditions. In such ways, we might think of the flouting of generic expectations as yet another way in which these writers refuse the easy rhythms of relation and in so doing voice an intimate queer female anti-public sentiment within the heart of American modernism and the Harlem Renaissance.[8]

The following chapter pays particular attention to crises of same-sex desire for belonging as they arise in *Nightwood*, *Quicksand* and *Passing*. Rather than propose another hermeneutic reading of these works as lesbian narratives, my aim is to attend to what is manifestly there as an open and irresolvable problem: the tension between the individuation that marks the queer subject and the conformist pressures of being in relation. Such a practice is particularly useful to the study of both Larsen and Barnes, given that their works actively resist so-called "suspicious readings"[9] that would attempt to interpret the novels against themselves and unearth some repressed desire. Barnes' work, as critics have noted, famously resists depth interpretation, resolving its milieu of

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[7] Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture*, 1–10.

[8] For a description of the intimate female public, see: Berlant, 1–31. The term "anti-public" draws from both Berlant and Michael Warner, the latter of whom uses the term "counterpublic" to identify a public that emerges in relation to a set of texts or practices that defy or elide the hegemonic and normative public. Anti-public seems a more apt term for the sort of relations described here, since "counterpublic" still carries the sense of a willed and often affirming or felicitous relation with others. It describes a relation, in other words, demonstrably absent in these texts. See: Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002), 1–40.

[9] This is how critics of so-called "surface reading" have understood the hermeneutic efforts of critical frameworks like psychoanalysis, Marxist critique, etc. See: Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, "Surface Reading: An Introduction," *Representations* 108 (Fall 2009): 10–12.

characters into a tableau of surfaces.[10] Larsen's writing, though the subject of queer and feminist recuperation since the 1980s, lays out the complicated exchanges of desire between her female characters for any reader to see. These novels are not, in other words, hiding their anxiety, confusion or deep pain; nor do those feelings have a singular addressee like race, sexuality or gender. By attending to the failure of mobility to secure the freedom of the queer subject and the failure of same-sex relationships to suture community, I illuminate an important counter-narrative within my archive that explores a crisis of relation as a challenge to more optimistic understandings of twentieth century queer history. By countering the prevailing narrative of a search for home and community as the romance of queer identity, these novels offer an opportunity to explore a queer orientation that embraces disconnection and anti-filiation as the site of an ongoing struggle for freedom in the past and present.

Alone Together: Race, Same-Sex Desire and Female Community in Nella Larsen's *Passing* and *Quicksand*

Recent criticism of Larsen has turned to the question of geographic movement in her novels and biography as part of an effort to better understand Larsen's relationship to trans-Atlantic narratives of race and to complicate the relationship between various American and European modernisms. Laura Tanner argues that *Quicksand*'s final retreat

[10]See, for example, Donna Gerstenberger's observation that *Nightwood* is a text oriented toward "freedom from the prison of meaning," as well as Herring's contention that the novel refuses to disclose anything of psychological or sociological value to the reader (qtd. in Herring 174; Herring 175). Even as critic Joseph Boone's reading – one of the most astute available on Barnes' difficult novel – identifies the characters as "symbols of the unconscious or as a psychodramatic projection of states of desire," he nonetheless must confront the fact that those same portraits correspond to the novels' message that "the performative play of surfaces is *all* we ever get" (Boone 234, 249). See: Boone, *Libidinal Currents: Sexuality and the Shaping of Modernism*; Herring, *Queering the Underworld*.

to the rural South marks the culmination of the novel's struggle to fit the protagonist's bi-racial, bi-national body "into textual, geographic and cultural spaces beyond [her] control." Helga's movement, thus, becomes an index of her "unanchored subjectivity," an unmoored position of "extreme embodiment" in which she is the site of a cultural anxiety about fixing racial and national character in the body.[11] Helga's retreat to the South at the end of the novel also marks *Quicksand* as what Robert Stepto defines as the modern African American "immersion narrative," one in which the black subject returns to the "symbolic South" in order to reclaim an authentic racial identity and consciousness felt to have been lost in the movement North.[12] Yet Larsen queers Stepto's traditional account of movement and African American narrative consciousness, shuttling between Tennessee, New York, Chicago, Denmark and Alabama as Helga's identity emerges, triangulated, between the North, the South and Scandinavia. In the end, all of that movement has not resolved in any claim to an authentic, felicitous identity, racial or otherwise. The distinction of Helga's Scandinavian interlude leads Arne Lunde and Anna Stenport to argue that *Quicksand*'s trans-Atlantic narrative offers a "pan-ethnic way of looking at Larsen's authorship, one that acknowledges her Scandinavian heritage as much as the artist did herself." Such a perspective, they argue, restores the novel's Scandinavian literary and historical influences, enabling us to glimpse it as at once a confrontation with Denmark's troubled relationship to its own colonial history in the West Indies and as "an early modernist prose text within not only an African-American context but also a

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[11] Laura E. Tanner, "Intimate Geography: The Body, Race, and Space in Larsen's Quicksand," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 51, no. 2 (Summer 2009): 179–202.

[12] Robert B. Stepto, *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979), 167.

Scandinavian-American one."[13] There is also, of course, George Hutchinson's contention that the novel is itself "as vivid as any documentary history could be" about Larsen's little known time spent living in Copenhagen. Mined from her writing in *Quicksand*, Hutchinson concludes that Larsen's experience in the Danish capital "advanced her education in the broad sense and developed a richly cosmopolitan perspective on the shifting contours of modern life."[14] In such readings, Larsen figures as a challenge to critical efforts to fix her to a specific iteration or canon of black female writing, opening her up to broader meridians of racial and national fluidity.

The trope of movement in Larsen's work is also invoked to think about the author's refutation of the linkage often drawn between mobility and freedom, one that breaks down for black females in a way that demonstrates the centrality of racial identity to such liberatory narratives. Jeanne Scheper posits Helga Crane as a "New Negro flaneuse," marking her as the "female subject of modernity" whose subjectivity and agency is fundamentally related to her "relocation and mobility." Since Crane's transatlantic movement is rendered as a reenactment of the Middle Passage, Scheper argues, that mobility "does not a priori represent liberation" but rather is "a staple of existence and survival," a necessity rather than the culmination of a search for autonomy and freedom. Nonetheless, Scheper does find some agency nascent in Helga's movement, the inauguration of female flaneurie—"some identity, some meaning, in being a woman-in-motion"—that makes Helga neither purely liberated nor "a purely tragic model" of

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[13] Arne Lunde and Anna Westerstahl Stenport, "Helga Crane's Copenhagen: Denmark, Colonialism, and Transnational Identity in Nella Larsen's Quicksand," *Comparative Literature* 60, no. 3 (Summer 2008): 228–43.

[14] George Hutchinson, *In Search of Nella Larsen: A Biography of the Color Line* (New York: Harvard University Belknap Press, 2006), 68, 73.

mulatta womanhood.[15] Laura Doyle's work on the production of queer racial subjectivity in Larsen and Virginia Woolf's transatlantic writing offers some of the strongest work to date critiquing what she calls the "freedom plot" of transnational mobility in modernist studies. Doyle argues that Helga's voyage to Copenhagen promises, in its reverse movement, "to undo the legacy of the middle passage," yet marks how her Danish relatives' fetishization of her race forestalls that transatlantic liberation and, in so doing, reveals the racial underpinnings of transatlantic narratives of liberationist mobility. For Doyle, Helga fails to find freedom "exactly because she lacks an embracing race community within which to pursue it" as a person with no stable connection to a people on account of her mixed-race status.[16] My reading of *Quicksand* and *Passing* joins Doyle's critique of the forms of transnational and transcultural mobility typically understood to be part of the modernist "freedom story," but shifts the focus to explore the novels' longing for a female community that is always foreclosed and impossible, as well as the moments in which the novel appears to imbue queerness or queer desire with the promise of an escape from race. In other words, I locate Larsen's longed-for community in the bodies of women and the sensorium of an eroticized female collectivity that fails to congeal into a stable or lasting formation because of the disjuncture between the

[15] Jeanne Scheper, "The New Negro Flaneuse in Nella Larsen's Quicksand," *African American Review* 42, no. 3–4 (Fall/Winter 2008): 679–95.

[16] Laura (Laura Anne) Doyle, "Transnational History at Our Backs: A Long View of Larsen, Woolf, and Queer Racial Subjectivity in Atlantic Modernism," *Modernism/Modernity* 13, no. 3 (2006): 531–59.

protagonists' desire for autonomous individuality and the relationships with women in which they invest their longing for a better world.[17]

Quicksand tracks the movement of Helga Crane across national and racial geographies in the search for a community in which she might not feel like an outsider. That possibility is both generated and articulated in her relationships with Mrs. Hayes-Rore, Anne Grey, and the community of black church women she first meets in New York and then follows to the rural South. These women are queered from the normative versions of femininity that Helga finds so alienating at Naxos and throughout the novel. In describing Helga's encounters with these women, the text often heats up, gaining rhythmic and syntactic speed as even and languorous sentences erupt into bursts of image and thought, separated by a plethora of commas that signal a quickening in Larsen's language. This syntactic and rhythmic signature contrasts the coolness and disinterest with which the novel treats the men who are supposed to be its primary, if failed, love objects: James Vayle, Axel Olson, Dr. Robert Andersen and Reverend Pleasant Green.[18] Helga's relationships with women, on the other hand, articulate a highly eroticized

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[17] In this vein, I have also been inspired by Judith Butler's argument that "trick of passing itself" is central to Larsen's lesbian erotics. The movement between races, and thus between spaces and classes, can be understood as a capacity for mobility aligned with what Butler identifies as passing's generation of a "dream of metamorphosis … [a] changeableness [that] signifies a certain freedom" powering Clare's capacity for seduction (170). See: Judith Butler, "Passing, Queering: Nella Larsen's Psychoanalytic Challenge," in *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 161–80.

[18] Helga's desires for "material security" and "gracious ways of living" are usually imagined to be the purview of her otherwise loveless relations with men, including most importantly James Vayle. Perhaps because romantic or sexual love is supplanted in her heterosexual imaginary with the acquisition of material goods, Helga never finds happiness with men. She breaks off her engagement to James Vayle, for whom she feels "a curious sensation of repugnance" when he makes sexual overtures (24). Years later, when Helga receives her second marriage proposal, from the Danish artist Axel Olson, she declines, experiencing again that "curious feeling of repugnance" (85) she'd first felt with Vayle. See: Nella Larsen, *Quicksand and Passing*, ed. Deborah E. McDowell (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1986).

longing for community that figures as the driving force of Helga's movement across borders and communities in search of a home. That these relationships consistently fall apart when they demand varieties of conformity and self-negation from which Helga consistently flees reflects *Quicksand*'s deep suspicion about the possibility of any relation or community in which Helga might find a happiness that does not compromise her autonomous sense of self.

As the following reading traces the oscillation between optimism and disappointment that inscribes Helga's movement across space and female relationships, I also explore the irresolvable tension between self and community that animates this oscillation. In my reading, this tension emerges as a conflict between the individuation that marks Helga as a queer subject and what she experiences as relation's erosion of that self-securing and self-avowing difference. In other words, Helga experiences moments of relation with other women that seem to proffer a new mode of being in which an unmediated and authentic Helga might flourish, but which resolve in threatening the articulation of the very difference that drew her to them in the first place. In like fashion, these relations defer that indefinable "something" after which Helga searches across women, across the Atlantic, and across racial community.[19] An interesting point of

[19] In exploring this terrain, I join and depart from Barbara Johnson and Johanna Wagner's work on the commodification of relation in Larsen's writing. According to Johnson, Helga Crane's search for a place to belong is a search for a self that emerges in the mirror of community, a mirror that "is not a person, but a race, a 'world." Such mirrors often slip between the promise of belonging and the pressure to conform, producing a "self that is structured like a commodity" (Johnson 263), an object homogenized in relation to the construction of black female sexuality (Johnson 254). The relationship between Helga's production of her self and the forces of commodification are taken up by Wagner in her claim that Helga replaces normative systems of kin relation with a relation to "a system of things which diminishes any (be)longing she might feel toward human kin" (Wagner 137). In surrounding herself with material objects as a mode of identification and worlding, Helga "queers" kinship, generating "an alternative kinship … one that is innate (as her gorgeousness is after all), yet not born within but sought without: shopped for" (Wagner 138). I agree that the question of distinction for Larsen's protagonists — their singularity or feelings of

departure here is Sianne Ngai's reading of irritation as the "organizing affect" that shapes the narrative's approach to racial identity and the possibilities of freedom it wants to articulate.[20] As a negative affect in "its weakest, mildest, and most politically effete form," irritation compels the reader to challenge Helga's emotionally insufficient response to various moments of racial animus in the novel, "call[ing] up our moral judgment of this affective deficit precisely in order to problematize it."[21] The effect of this multi-layered irritation, in Ngai's reading, is to "call attention to the ideological deadlock between primitivist and uplift aesthetics" that are the demands placed on African American art.[22] That aesthetic problem is also a social problem in which "the models of black identity and community that Helga must *either* identify *or* disidentify with […] are equally loaded with negative and positive meanings."[23] By slipping through the knot, as it were, with a protagonist we can neither identify with nor disavow, Larsen points us to at least one problem of belonging in the novel, and the burden of expressing belonging at all. Joining

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difference from the communities that surround them — does perhaps have its basis in the ambivalent cultural logic of capitalism that simultaneously hails difference and reduces it to homogenizable, commodifiable categories. However, it seems rather the case that Larsen's protagonists emerge as insuperably distinct from their longed-for female communities because of differences in desire and vision rather than in their adoption or rejection of material objects. Contact with female bodies inspires the attraction and repulsion of Helga Crane (and Irene Redfield), and their longing for and incompatibility with the communities constellated by those bodies that propel the character's movement away from community. This feature of Larsen's writing counters queer and modernist narratives that chart the movement away from origins to the chosen community of outcasts, artists, queers, etc. See: Barbara Johnson, "The Quicksands of the Self: Nella Larsen and Heinz Kohutz," in *Female Subjects in Black and White: Race, Psychoanalysis, Feminism* (University of California Press, 1997), 253–65; Johanna M. Wagner, "(Be)Longing in Quicksand: Framing Kinship and Desire More Queerly," *College Literature* 39, no. 3 (2012): 129–59.

[20] Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 175.

[21] Ngai, 181, 187.

[22] Ngai, 177.

[23] Ngai, 200.

this critical investment, I explore the sensorium of disappointment and, finally, rage that saturates the novel as an index of a similar stuckness in its desire for an affirmative, non-alienating relation between women.

After her flight from Naxos, Helga meets Mrs. Hayes-Rore, the touring "race problem" lecturer who hires Helga as a "traveling companion" and editorial consultant (33). The novel's first and only model of an independent woman, Hayes-Rore offers Helga a job that saves the floundering protagonist from falling into what is clearly connoted as prostitution: "[N]obody wanted her services. At least not the kind she offered. A few men, both white and black, offered her money, but the price of the money was too dear" (34). By contrast, Mrs. Hayes-Rore offers both employment and a model of self-supporting womanhood and mastery:

> She had a tart personality, and prying. […] Mrs. Hayes-Rore was to her, after the first short, awkward, period, interesting. Her dark eyes, bright and investigating had, Helga noted, a humorous gleam, and something in the way she held her untidy head gave the impression of a cat watching its prey so that when she struck, if she so decided, the blow would be unerringly effective. (35-36, 38)

This woman, "who by a few words was to have a part in the shaping of [Helga's] life" (37), represents a defiant and even aggressive womanhood contrary to the kind of femininity celebrated at Naxos. As described, Hayes-Rore's pugilistic nature nicely complements Helga's own striving for self-determination and her combativeness against those who wish to slot her into a narrow box. That aggressive form of womanhood is likewise suggested, perhaps a little ominously, by the revelation that the dead husband from whom Hayes-Rore gained her financial (and presumably, sexual) independence "depart[ed] this life hurriedly and unexpectedly and a little mysteriously" (37). That

death enables Hayes-Rore to live a self-determined life and offer assistance to girls like Helga in whose lives she is especially "interested" (38).

Despite these credentials as an important and mobile intellectual concerned with the development of similarly independent young women, Hayes-Rore fails to be a perfect object for Helga. She fails to be a woman in whom Helga can see an attractive version of herself.

> Mrs. Hayes-Rore proved to a be plump lemon-colored woman with badly straightened hair and dirty finger-nails. […] Evidently, she had little time or thought for the careful donning of the five-years-behind-the-mode garments which covered her, and which even in their youth could hardly have fitted or suited her. (35)

For Helga, Hayes-Rore might be an intellectual inspiration, but she's an aesthetic disappointment. While this might seem a superficial consideration, it bears relation to Helga's love of the "gorgeousness" (18) that she feels natural to herself, to her race, and to the type of woman that she longs to be. If liberated womanhood means freedom of travel and an entrepreneurial intellectual life of one's own but also a frumpy appearance, this is not the sort of liberation Helga wants. Thus, it is little surprise that the two soon part ways, though not before Hayes-Rore connects Helga to Anne Grey, a figure of romantic self-discovery and eventual disappointment.

Anne Grey opens up a new world for Helga, introducing her to Harlem's networks of artists and intellectuals among whom she finds not only a set of sympathetic urbanites, but also a place "to belong" (44). In this sense, Anne promises Helga membership in a community where her misfit character can find a home. It is a community of free-thinkers who appear so much more open and liberated on issues of race and respectability than the staidness Helga associates with Naxos. As Helga notes, it

is the Harlemites' "sophisticated talk, their elaborate parties, the unobtrusive correctness of their clothes and homes" that "appealed to her craving for smartness and enjoyment" (43). These friends among whom she has "found herself" enable Helga to feel rescued from the stifling norms under which she suffered at Naxos; their "scorn" for "Naxos and all its works…gave Helga a pleasant sense of avengement" (44). Having fled the suffocating uplift culture of Naxos, with its emphasis on conservative femininity and adherence to community norms, Helga has found herself among a potential people who share her disregard for middle class respectability politics and passion to live for pleasure.[24]

As the gatekeeper of this much longed for community, Anne becomes a particularly strong object of fixation for Helga. The protagonist's languorous consideration of her roommate's physical beauty blurs the line between friendship and romance.

> Thirty, maybe, brownly beautiful, she had the face of a golden Madonna, grave and calm and sweet, with shining black hair and eyes. She carried herself as queens are reputed to bear themselves, and probably do not. Her manners were as agreeably gentle as her own soft name […] And she was interesting, an odd confusion of wit and intense earnestness; a vivid and remarkable personality. […] Anne was almost too good to be true. She was almost perfect." (45)

The language here recalls the description of a beloved more than it does a friend, especially in view of the fact that Helga never lavishes such attention on the physique and character of her male counterparts. This suggests that Anne is at once an object of intellectual, cultural and aesthetic attraction (bordering on the erotic). Improving on her

[24] This narrative of movement to the city and away from the stifling norms of origin are starkly similar to the town-to-city tales that mark the search for queer identity and affirmation in the work of Willa Cather, Edward Prime-Stevenson and Blair Niles, among others in the early twentieth century, a trend that would continue with queer fiction after WWII in the work of writers including Edmund White, Andrew Holleran, Truman Capote and Rita Mae Brown, among others.

predecessor Hayes-Rore, Anne offers aesthetic excellence and extravagance alongside intelligence and passion. What Anne offers is at once an alluring model of distinction that approximates the kind of person Helga would like to be and who has access to the kind of community of distinction to which Helga would like to belong.

Helga's language anticipates the disappointment to come, and Anne soon proves "too good to be true" when she speaks disparagingly of interracial relationships at a Harlem party. Describing Audrey Denney as a gorgeous young woman who "gives parties for white and colored people together," Anne makes clear her disgust at interracial romance, which she considers "worse than disgusting […] positively obscene" (61). The rebuke at once marks Helga's own interracial identity as the result of "obscene" romance and betrays the cosmopolitan openness that Helga believed she had found in her new community. Reeling from her discomfort, Helga turns her gaze toward the woman whom Anne has marked out as different and obscene. The physical descriptions of Denney's body break into staccato syntactical rhythms and mirror closely the admiration of physical beauty previously lavished upon Anne:

> Her long, slender body swayed with an eager pulsing motion. She danced with grace and abandon, gravely, yet with obvious pleasure, her legs, her hips, her back, all swaying gently, swung by that wild music from the heart of the jungle. (62)

As the even syntax of Larsen's sentences becomes unhinged, transfixed by the vision of Denney's gorgeous female body, Helga glimpses, if only for a second, the union of a primitivist pleasure with a thoroughly modern body that might be an approximation of her own ideal. If Helga has just a few pages earlier convinced herself that "[s]he wasn't […] a jungle creature" (60), in Denney's body she finds the allure of "that wild music from the heart of the jungle" (62). Though their relationship never develops into more

than these sidelong glances would suggest, it remains an open question whether Audrey Denney might offer the kind of affirmative community where Helga could be happy, one that relishes the pleasure of connection to racial identity — in her "obvious pleasure" dancing to jazz — and who also enjoys the pleasures of interracial contact. Opposed to Anne Gray, Audrey Denney offers the promise of a different world.

Disappointed by Anne Grey and the arts community of Harlem, Helga flees to Denmark where she once again tries and fails to find a place of her own. When she returns, she discovers that Anne has married Dr. Anderson, Helga's one-time mentor at Naxos and her primary male object of romantic attachment. Helga's rejection of Anne now turns on her rejection of Anne's marriage as an insufficient mark of distinction: "As if anybody couldn't get married. Anybody. That is, if mere marriage is all one wants" (98). This last sentiment indicates that what breaks down in their relationship isn't so much the fact of Anne's having taken up with Dr. Anderson, but rather with Anne's inability to meet the promise of being a sort of bohemian comrade that Helga has been searching for at Naxos, in Harlem, and in Copenhagen. The breach here is one of bourgeois racial norms; Anne's marriage and her rejection of interracial mixing mark her acceptance of rather than "scorn for Naxos and all its works," and thus her complicity with the very attitudes from which Helga fled at the onset of the novel. Dejected by her disappointment with both Dr. Anderson and Anne Grey, Helga tearfully wanders the street searching for community. When she is drawn to the sounds of a church revival, it seems that community in the form of salvation may have finally arrived.

Here, the novel takes a jagged turn,[25] as Helga happens upon a church revival held at a local grocery store and is drawn to the powerful erotics of the female worshippers' ululations. I excerpt this scene at some length below because of its rich imagery and its erotic charge.

> Little by little the performance took on an almost Bacchic vehemence. Behind, before, beside her, frenzied women gesticulated, screamed, wept, and tottered to the praying of the preacher, which had gradually become a cadenced chant. […] She felt herself in the rescue of a nameless people, observing the rites of a remote obscure origin. […] She felt an echo of the weird orgy resound in her own heart; she felt herself possessed by the same madness; she too felt a brutal desire to fling herself about. […] From those about her came a thunder-clap of joy. Arms were stretched toward her with savage frenzy. The women dragged themselves upon their knees or crawled on the floor like reptiles, sobbing and pulling their hair and tearing off their clothing. Those who succeeded in getting near to her leaned forward to encourage their unfortunate sister, dropping hot tears and beads of sweat upon her bare arms and neck. The thing became real. A miraculous calm came upon her. Life seemed to expand, and to become very easy. Helga Crane felt within her a supreme aspiration toward the regaining of simple happiness, a happiness unburdened by the complexities of the lives she had known. (113-114)

The frenetic syntax here is a hallmark of Larsen's descriptions of women, descriptions in which each word becomes its own breath, beating its way forward with incredible and arresting energy. Helga experiences herself transformed amid the bodies of the women who surround her, taken up in the rapturous possession of "a miraculous calm" that promises "the regaining of simple happiness" by making the unnamable "thing […] suddenly real." That "thing," the same inchoate and indescribable "thing" that has consistently eluded Helga throughout *Quicksand*, feels accessible in a writhing mass of

[25] I am, of course, not the first to make this observation. As Hutchinson observes, the novel provides little in the way of "sufficient narrative preparation for Helga's sudden conversion to Christianity and marriage to a Southern preacher," the effect of which is that the representation of her personality "lacks unity and coherence—it lacks identity" (224). In my view, Helga's identity is not quite missing here, but rather emerges in a queer form, shaped by the errant erotics of the novel. See: Hutchinson, *In Search of Nella Larsen: A Biography of the Color Line*.

women in religious ecstasy.[26] This ecstasy gives Helga a glimpse of "the supreme secret of life," something beyond the material "things" that have circulated around the scenes of her aspirational imaginary and promises the "pore [sic] los' sinner" (112) salvation from a life of suffering and disappointment.

Yet even the promise of the thing become real cannot elide the familiar disgust that attends Helga's ambivalent dis/enchantment with women. The descriptions of the women mark their repulsiveness to Helga—they crawl on the church floor "like reptiles" and rend their clothing and hair like madwomen—and yet, it is the allure of their bodies and the community made by those bodies that draws her affective interest. Suddenly "unburdened by the complexities of the lives she had known," Helga seems to hold at bay the anxieties and conflicts that have heretofore attached themselves to her encounters with women. The difference, of course, is the powerful eroticism of this moment with the churchwomen, a realization of sexual expression that Helga only otherwise experiences with the Reverend Pleasant Green, and that only after this first taste of ecstasy binds her to his religious community and its women.

It is the promise of special status and membership in the community of women that seems to appeal to Helga more than her new husband. She doesn't desire Reverend Green, who is described as a "fattish yellow man" (115), but rather desires proximity to the woman-oriented ecstasy that she experienced among the churchwomen. As the preacher's wife, Helga is afforded a special place in her religious community, and the

[26] It is worth recalling that similar scenes in the work of Larsen's male contemporaries, including Claude McKay and George Schuyler, often find explicitly erotic energy palpating at the heart of such communal expression. McKay's grooving communities in the cabarets of Marseilles and Harlem, Schuyler's drug-induced ecstasy of black pagan devotion and here Larsen's rendering of black female spiritual ecstasy involve powerful erotic charges that lend a sexual character to such ecstasy. See: McKay, *Banjo*; McKay, *Home to Harlem*; George S Schuyler, *Black Empire*, ed. Robert A Hill and R. Kent Rasmussen (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1991).

novel resumes the syntactical rhythms of interest in describing her union with these "dark undecorated women unceasingly concerned with the actual business of life, its rounds of births and christenings, of loves and marriages, of deaths and funerals," women whom Helga finds "miraculously beautiful" (121). Though bound to the sort of conservative, striving community she'd fled at Naxos, this strange final turn in the novel suggests that she feels uplifted by the presence of women she finds so fascinating and among whom she feels, albeit only temporarily, a queer sense of belonging.

As in the past, this compromised life provides Helga neither the happiness nor the autonomy she desires. The local women find her an ill-suited match for someone of the Reverend's stature and lacking in general the common graces of their standards for domestic femininity. Helga refuses to become homogenized as a type within the community, refuses to surrender the lush gorgeousness that has marked her apart from community in the past. As Helga enters her first few pregnancies, the religious community that once inspired her with a belief in the "simple happiness" of life now inspires her hatred at its ill effects on the whole of her race:

> Helga decided [that religion] was what ailed the whole Negro race in America, this fatuous belief in the white man's God, this childlike trust in full compensation for all the woes and privations in 'kingdom come.' […] The thought of her husband roused in her a deep and contemptuous hatred. Marriage. This sacred thing of which parsons and other Christian folk ranted so sanctimoniously, how immoral—according to their own standards—it could be!(133-134)

The rejection of her newfound faith and community resolves in a resounding rejection of marriage and heterosexual romance itself. Rather than merely oppressive, marriage is "immoral." As the novel draws to a close, this particular bind — to a community and to a partner — drives Helga to a slow death. As she succumbs to another pregnancy after the prior pregnancy nearly kills her, *Quicksand* suggests that the norms of community are

toxic and deadly to women like Helga who want to live for something more. It is also a rejection of any community that demands the homogenization and conformity of its members. While rural Southern religion would seem the easiest target for such a critique, this rejection has been Helga's modus operandi across the cosmopolitan and intellectual communities of Naxos, Harlem and Copenhagen that seek to enfold her in an identity of their own making. It is the recognition of the impossibility of escape from the pressure to conform that is constitutive of community and the desire for belonging that marks the tragic course of Helga's path and which is taken up by her literary progeny: *Passing*'s Irene Redfield.

If Helga takes risks in order to realize the world and community she wanted, Irene Redfield is decidedly risk averse, managing her private feelings of frustration and alienation by constantly affirming her commitment to living within the black bourgeois norms that promise the good life. If movement in search of the good life is less evident in *Passing* than it was in *Quicksand*'s pond-jumping narrative, the novel reveals happiness itself as an orientation, a way of moving through the world and one's relationships toward an endlessly deferred, and therefore endlessly renewed, ideality. Movement away from scenes that threaten to put Irene on the wrong path nonetheless fail to liberate her from suffering, nor do they provide a life better than her own meager compromise. Likewise, her queer feelings of attraction to Claire Kendry, feelings that are also bound up with Clare's apparent escape from the burden of race in passing for white — offers new possibility and anger in equal measure. Somewhere between the longing for another life that draws her almost irresistibly to Clare and the fear that leads her to repel those

feelings of attraction, Irene oscillates wildly throughout *Passing* between the poles of attraction and repulsion.

The dynamic between suppressing feelings of discontent and moving towards an ideality is pointedly articulated in Irene's thoughts after a fight with her husband, Brian.

> The thing, this discontent which had exploded into words, would surely die, flicker out, at last. True, she had in the past often been tempted to believe that it had died, only to become conscious, in some instinctive, subtle way, that she had been merely deceiving herself for a while and that it still lived. But it *would* die. Of that she was certain. *She had only to direct and guide her man, to keep him going in the right direction*.[27]

For Irene, the good life is not a realized state of being, but rather an *orientation* toward an idealized future life in which suffering in the present will have been redeemed and judged a worthy sacrifice. To say that she must "direct and guide" Brian "to keep him going in the right direction" renders happiness as a direction one proceeds in, a dot on an ever-receding horizon. What stands in the way of movement towards the good life are the feelings of discontent that insistently bubble up as an indescribable "thing." This is, of course, the same "thing" against which her predecessor, Helga, struggled and which consistently points to another mode of life, another direction or orientation that one might take.

What Irene articulates in these moments is an affective impasse that Lauren Berlant identifies as the female complaint, specifically the belief that if one participates in normative social reproduction — heterosexual romance, heterosexual reproduction and the bourgeois values that undergird them both — one will achieve a happiness that eludes

[27] Larsen, *Quicksand and Passing*, 187–88. Emphasis added. Subsequent references to the novel will appear in-text as parenthetical citations.

the subject in the present.[28] The self-amputation and amnesia that attend this normative organization of life, and which bind the subject to such a life against the recognition that it simply isn't working, can be seen in Irene's efforts to suppress the feelings of isolation that attend her networks of social belonging:

> Later, when she examined her feeling of annoyance, Irene admitted, a shade reluctantly, that it arose from *a feeling of being outnumbered, a sense of aloneness, in her adherence to her own class and kind*; not merely in the great thing of marriage, but in the whole pattern of her life as well. (166, emphasis added)

This bizarre turn of phrase reveals the crisis in which Irene finds herself and articulates once again the counterintuitive alienation that can be experienced in belonging to a community. Even though Irene views "all other plans, all other ways…as menaces, more or less indirect, to that security of place and substance which she insisted upon" (190), her current orientation towards black bourgeois life renders her a simultaneous sense of belonging and "a sense of aloneness." Clare's ability to flout the gap between community and race by passing for white thus becomes a condition of fascinating appeal for Irene.

Yet, as is obvious to any reader, Irene finds these resistant figures as alluring in their offer of a new mode of life as she does threatening to her dogged devotion to security. This is especially true of Clare, toward whom Irene feels a powerful attraction as another woman who can "pass" in public and as an exemplar of a risk-taking life that might liberate Irene from her stuckness in the present. In its depiction of the relationship between these two women, *Passing* emerges as a tale of desire for impossible relation in which two women's longing for one another cannot bridge the difference that separates them. What Irene desires is the jouissance of proximity to Clare's dangerous character, to

[28] Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture*, 169–71.

the unapologetic ways in which Clare goes about getting whatever it is she wants.[29] Clare's capacity to hold "no allegiance beyond her own immediate desire" (144) threatens to explode the very orientation or direction Irene has invested with the promise of the good life. In Clare's "furtive" and "flaunting" (143) letters, Irene finds both the pleasure and titillation of proximity to another life met with the fear that such a life threatens any ultimate, stable happiness. Clare's willingness to risk relation, to violate "the petty restrictions and distinctions [of] what called itself Negro society," becomes for Irene the attractive and frightening possibility of rejecting the very forms of belonging that have made her feel secure in the world.

Despite the obstacles that stand in her path, Irene does manage to maintain a relationship with Clare at various moments in the novel. This relationship is often furtive, expressed in letters that maintain discretion and privacy while enabling connection and intimacy, but it consistently provides Irene with a troubling feeling of perverse attraction. From their first meeting at the Drayton Hotel, Irene marvels at the magnetic hold that Clare wields over her, an attraction that threatens the duties that bind her to community. Even as she knows that she will make herself late for a group dinner, a tardiness that will require inventive excuses, "she still lingered" to be with Clare who holds "for her a fascination, strange and compelling" and under whose smiling gaze Irene feels "the sense of being petted and caressed" (160, 161). In this manner, her proximity to Clare enables Irene to imagine a life different from the one she is living, a life that promises intimate pleasures in place of "petty restrictions and distinctions." Yet just as that proximity to

[29] Because *Passing* focalizes its narrative through Irene, the precise nature and architecture of Clare's desire is difficult to pin down, but what the text leaves us is the impression that Clare wants connection to Irene because bound up in her childhood friend is a connection to her race and the origin she was forced to leave behind when she "passed over" to white society.

Clare makes sensate, a life lived for one's own desires threatens to steal away "the sense of security, the feeling of permanence, from the life which [Irene] had so admirably arranged" (187). As soon as this recurring anxiety has passed, however, Irene finds herself once again drawn to Clare.

At least part of Clare's allure is that she appears to offer Irene the possibility of freedom from race, a freedom that is often fused with Irene's attraction to Clare's body. The juxtaposition of fascination with the danger and possibility that Clare's passing poses and the visual appeal of her body for Irene frequently appear throughout the novel. Indeed, we see that juxtaposition in the very same moment above at the Drayton.

> It was as if this woman sitting on the other side of the table, a girl that she had known, who had done this rather dangerous and, to Irene Redfield, abhorrent thing successfully and had announced herself well satisfied, had for her a fascination, strange and compelling. […]
>
> Just as she'd always had that pale gold hair, which, unsheared still, was drawn loosely back from a broad brow, partly hidden by the small close hat. Her lips, painted a brilliant geranium-red, were sweet and sensitive and a little obstinate. A tempting mouth. The face across the forehead and cheeks was a trifle too wide, but the ivory skin had a peculiar soft lustre. And the eyes were magnificent! dark, sometimes absolutely black, always luminous, and set in long, black lashes. Arresting eyes, slow and mesmeric, and with, for all their warmth, something withdrawn and secret about them.
>
> […] Into those eyes there came a smile and over Irene the sense of being petted and caressed. (161)

Here, just as Irene acknowledges the exciting danger of Clare's passing for white — thus being free of the burden and mystery of belonging to a race articulated later in the novel — she also lingers longingly over her childhood friend's body. As elsewhere in *Passing*, Irene struggles to name precisely the cluster of feelings that orbit around her encounters with Clare, the feelings that bind her to her childhood friend with "a fascination, strange

and compelling." Certainly part of that fascination lies in the fact that Clare has done a "dangerous thing successfully" and is "well satisfied," having achieved what, from Irene's vantage point, looks like success in moving out of her class and race. The desire for that kind of success and satisfaction, it seems reasonable to suggest, can be located in the erotic descriptions of Clare's body that follow: her "brilliant geranium-red" lips, "tempting mouth," and "slow and mersmeric" eyes. In such moments, the desire for Clare's body is interlocked with Irene's desire for Clare's daring and risk-taking, and thus Irene's desire for Clare's body is fixed into the freedoms that her often-sexualized body is presumed to have.

As Judith Butler describes it, the oscillation between Irene's attraction to and repulsion from Clare hinges on this capacity for sexual freedom that she imagines Clare to have. "Irene comes to hate Clare not only because Clare lies, passes, and betrays her race," Butler argues, "but because Clare's lying secures a tentative sexual freedom for Clare, and reflects back to Irene the passion that Irene denies herself."[30] This association of Clare's alluring freedom with her flouting of sexual and racial norms is articulated in the text all the way back to her young adulthood, when girls from her former neighborhood would gossip about seeing Clare out at dinner "in company with another woman and two men, all of them white" (152-153). Irene remembers these and other "tantalizing stories" that all "point[ed] in the same glamorous direction" (153). Clare's seeming freedom in these moments, moments that the adjectives used (tantalizing, glamorous, tempting, etc.) imbue with the danger and excitement of sex, is the object of both jealousy and attraction for Irene, who sees Clare seeming to have "succeeded in having a few of the things that she wanted" (153). Irene's desire for Clare's body and her

[30] Butler, "Passing, Queering: Nella Larsen's Psychoanalytic Challenge," 177.

escape from race is challenged by the shame and confusion that Irene feels in desiring those things, pulling her between attraction to and repulsion from the object of her fascination, an object that offers potential and peril all at the same time.

This oscillation between attraction and disavowal, possibility and impossibility becomes particularly pronounced in the final moments of the novel. When Irene refuses to answer Clare's letters begging for a meeting, she feels herself finally free of this alluring yet destructive friendship. The problem, according to Irene, is that the pair are just too different to ever *really* be the friends they never *really* were: "Since childhood their lives had never really touched. Actually they were strangers. Strangers in their ways and means of living. Strangers in their desires and ambitions" (192). Yet after attending a dance where Clare happens to show up, Irene feels suddenly that their reunion "was the beginning of a new friendship." As the narrator describes it, this new friendship "marked the beginning […] of something that left its trace on all the future years of [Irene's] existence" (208).

The centrality of Clare to Irene's life in this moment marks the worlding force of contact between the two women, a worlding that is highly appealing and also, as it soon turns out, impossible. Irene's paranoid fantasies of Brian and Clare's affair wreck this brief bliss of friendship.[31] Now terrified that Clare threatens to thoroughly destroy Irene's patched-together version of a copacetic life, she conspires to have her friend dispensed with by obliquely outing Clare to her white husband. When it appears that the husband won't do the work she's set about, Irene becomes "possessed" by a single fear: "She

[31] Deborah McDowell suggests that this paranoid fantasy has more to do with Irene's frustration at not being herself the object of Clare's supposed affections. Thus she is worried less about losing Brian than she is about losing Clare to her husband. See: Deborah E. McDowell, "Introduction," in *Quicksand and Passing* (News Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1986), x–xi.

couldn't have Clare Kendry cast aside by Bellew. She couldn't have her free" (239). In the novel's confusing conclusion, Irene pushes Clare from the window and she falls to her death. The final moment sees Irene, almost remorseful, crushed by the weight of a relation denied:

> [Irene's] quaking knees gave way under her. She moaned and sank down, moaned again. Through the great heaviness that submerged and drowned her she was dimly conscious of strong arms lifting her up. Then everything was dark. (242)

These last, remorseful lines witness a brief and awful recognition of the destruction Irene has caused, a mourning of the relationship that she has finally and permanently removed from her life. In killing Clare, the text suggests, Irene has also killed off the part of her that held out fugitive joy against the impossibility of the world as such. "Submerged and drowned," Irene falls into the same darkness that overtakes Clare. This is, of course, where mobility stops in the novel and bears an eerie symmetry to its rising opening, as Irene ascends to the rooftop of the Drayton Hotel where she first meets Clare. If the conclusion marks an end for Clare – whose body stops at impact with the street, whose life ends in a fall – it also marks an end for Irene. Clare's death marks the end of the alternative female public she sustained, and might have kept, in her oscillating attraction to and contempt for Clare.

If relationships with women, across *Quicksand* and *Passing*, hold powerful potential in Larsen's writing, they are also unsustainable. As they threaten the autonomy of the subject — for both Helga and Irene, the women they find themselves attracted to in some way threaten the realization of the ideal self they imagine — they mark an impossibility that can never be breached, even if that impossible relation is the source of a desperate longing for an alternative life. In that slippage between desire and

impossibility, Larsen's novels refuse any finite conclusion, leaving us suspended in dramatic scenes of death or near-death, a moment of crisis in which the central female character is arrested but not yet finished. There is, despite *Passing*'s hard stop in the death of Clare Kendry, a kind of openness and ongoingness to Larsen's novels that at once cast our gaze back onto earlier portions of the narrative to discover where movement might have gone otherwise (to happier places) while leaving us in anxious anticipation of the future (Will Helga die? What will happen to Irene?). In doing so, Larsen's writing maintains an open and wandering movement, a sense that her complaint and crisis moves forward from her time to ours.

Impossible Communities: Queer Differentiation and (Be)longing in *Nightwood*

The failure of movement to secure a happy, lasting relation in Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood* and the novel's general ambivalence about the possibility of a durable queer romance connects one of American modernism's most difficult texts to Larsen's *Quicksand* and *Passing.* As I will explore below, movement in *Nightwood* tends to crystallize in Robin Vote's transnational cruising across Europe, North Africa and the Atlantic as well the lines of flight she offers those in love with her: the freedom to imagine a relation that will rescue them from the incoherence and abjection of their lives within marginalized urban enclaves of the queer demimonde. This possibility is only a fantasy, as Robin's devotees soon discover that she offers no such rescue, wandering away from her lovers and finding "peace and happiness"[32] in being unbound. Robin's cruelty, in this sense, is at once that which binds lovers to her—they think they can keep

[32] Barnes, *Nightwood / Ladies Almanack*, 182. Subsequent references to the novel will appear in-text as parenthetical citations.

her—and that which renders the novel's vision of queer love as "always impossible" (174). If Robin's cruising movement across women, countries and oceans seems to provide her the freedom denied the lovers left in her wake, it doesn't. Robin remains, as far as readers can tell, caught between a longing to be kept and the desire to stray. That ambivalent affect, I argue, captures *Nightwood*'s hostility to relation, an affect it shares with Larsen's writing.

Recent debates about *Nightwood* have primarily oriented themselves around questions of the novel's anti-fascist or fascist politics,[33] its evocation of Barnes' literary influences[34] or her articulation of debates about queer identity politics still unresolved today.[35] However, several critics have pushed on movement and mobility as part of the

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[33] See: Robin Blyn, "Nightwood's Freak Dandies: Decadence in the 1930s," *Modernism/Modernity* 15, no. 3 (September 2008): 503–26; Erin G. Carlston, "'The Learned Corruption of Language': Nightwood's Failed Flirtation with Fascism," in *Thinking Fascism: Sapphic Modernism and Fascist Modernity* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2000), 42–85; Teresa de Lauretis, "Nightwood and the 'Terror of Uncertain Signs,'" *Critical Inquiry* 34, no. 5 (Spring 2008): 117–29; Mairead Hanrahan, "Djuna Barnes' Nightwood: The Cruci-Fiction of the Jew," *Paragraph* 24, no. 1 (2001): 32–49; Jane Marcus, *Hearts of Darkness: White Women Write Race* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004); Lara Trubowitz, "In Search of 'the Jew' in Djuna Barnes's Nightwood: Jewishness, Antisemitism, Structure and Style," *Modern Fiction Studies* 51, no. 2 (Summer 2005): 311–34.

[34] See: Monika Faltejskova, *Djuna Barnes, T.S. Eliot and the Gender Dynamics of Modernism: Tracing Nightwood* (New York: Routledge, 2015); Katherine A. Fama, "Melancholic Remedies: Djuna Barnes's Nightwood as Narrative Theory," *Journal of Modern Literature* 37, no. 2 (Winter 2014): 39–58; Georgette Fleischer, "Djuna Barnes and T.S. Eliot: The Politics and Poetics of Nightwood," *Studies in the Novel* 30, no. 3 (Fall 1998): 405–37; Brian Glavey, "Dazzling Estrangement: Modernism, Queer Ekphrasis and the Spatial Form of Nightwood," *PMLA* 124, no. 3 (May 2009): 749–63; Monika Kaup, "The Neobaroque in Djuna Barnes," *Modernism/Modernity* 12, no. 1 (January 2005): 85–110; Catherine Whitley, "Nations and the Night: Excremental History in James Joyce's Finnegans Wake and Djuna Barnes' Nightwood," *Journal of Modern Literature* 24, no. 1 (Autumn 2000): 81–98.

[35] See: Blyn, "Nightwood's Freak Dandies: Decadence in the 1930s"; Boone, *Libidinal Currents: Sexuality and the Shaping of Modernism*, 232–51; Jean Gallagher, "Vision and Inversion in Nightwood," *Modern Fiction Studies* 47, no. 2 (Summer 2001): 279–305; Donna Gerstenberger, "Modern (Post) Modern: Djuna Barnes Among the Others," *Review of Contemporary Literature* 13, no. 3 (1993): 33–40; Thomas Heise, "Degenerate Sex and the City: Djuna Barnes's Urban Underworld," *Twentieth Century Literature* 55, no. 3 (Fall 2009): 287–321; Herring, *Queering*

novel's anti-communitarian impulses and account of queer subjectivity. Joseph Boone, whose masterful reading is perhaps the most important in this regard, argues that movement across urban and national space in *Nightwood* registers the novel's larger understanding of queer experience as "simultaneity across rather than a progression through time."[36] In this way, queer movement and temporality mark the search for a pre-subjective experience, the emanation of Robin's "lost land within herself" that is a reflection of the primitive, primordial "quiescence [Robin] has lost in becoming a thinking subject." My interest in *Nightwood* departs from Boone's psychoanalytic claim by focusing instead on movement as an ambivalent form of queer freedom rather than a concern for queer history or subjectivity. In the novel, I argue, movement functions as both a route to queer knowledge *and* as an articulation of the difficulties of queer relation even as characters continue to seek out romance and attachment. The centrality of cruising in the novel suggests a connection to McKay's portrait of ephemeral male communities across the Atlantic, but *Nightwood* does not treat such ephemerality and non-fixity with the latter's sense of utopian return. Cruising may be the way that Nora Flood seeks to understand her itinerant, unfaithful lover and Robin's way of surviving the violence of relation, but it doesn't secure happiness or pleasure for either woman.

Other critics have taken up the question of movement by thinking through Barnes' novel as an example of queer slumming narratives that refuse the politics of identification

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the Underworld; Teresa de Lauretis, "Queer Texts, Bad Habits, and the Issue of a Future," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 17, no. 2–3 (2011): 243–63; Ery Shin, "Djuna Barnes, History's Elsewhere, and the Transgender," *Journal of Modern Literature* 37, no. 2 (Winter 2014): 20–38; Laura K. Wallace, "'My History, Finally Invented': Nightwood and Its Publics," *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking* 3, no. 3 (Fall 2016): 71–94.

[36] Boone, *Libidinal Currents: Sexuality and the Shaping of Modernism*, 240.

and surveillance. Scott Herring renders *Nightwood* a literary tour of queer subcultural spaces that resists the taxonomic and epistemological tendencies of early twentieth century slumming literature. Rejecting the novel's reception as an exemplar of "Sapphic modernism"—that is, as a work that uses recognizable forms of modernist literary representation to offer readers a recognizable "lesbian" subject—Herring underscores *Nightwood*'s resistance to any such reading.[37] The novel is thus best read as "a caveat against communitarianism," Herring explains, one that remains "suspicious of prescriptive identity categories and the communal compulsions that structure them."[38] In other words, the novel resists the tendency of slumming literature to divulge subcultural knowledge by making "homosexuality unutterable in an effort to thwart any sociological knowledge about any minority self or the minority community," a refusal manifest in the failure of Nora's "bohemian slumming to uncover a knowledge that will shed light on the mysteries and miseries of modern invert life."[39] In a related study, Thomas Heise observes that Barnes' coded representation of queer urban life declines to name or describe gay and lesbian enclaves in ways that might make them recognizable (and accessible) to her readership, in a stark departure from lesbian literature in the vein of Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*.[40] The novel traces intimacies and habitations that "never coalesce into a collectivist vision for sexual liberation or […] even for establishing the kind of

[37] Herring, *Queering the Underworld*, 151–55.

[38] Herring, 155.

[39] Herring, 177, 179.

[40] Heise, "Degenerate Sex and the City: Djuna Barnes's Urban Underworld," 289.

territorial enclave" that Barnes portrayed in her magazine writing on Greenwich Village.[41] Both Herring and Heise offer important points of contact for thinking about the anti-communitarian impulse in Barnes' writing. I extend them in the present analysis by shifting the focus from concerns about minoritarian identity and surveillance to a consideration of the characters' simultaneous longing to be bound to others and their inability to maintain those bonds or even, at several moments, to enjoy the bonds they seek.

In turning to *Nightwood*, I do not aim to recuperate an against-the-grain identity politics out of the fugitive text that is Barnes' novel, but rather to demonstrate the ways in which the novel longs for and disavows the possibility of any romance and community among its cast of outcasts. I argue that, rather than the glue that holds queer communities together as it has in prior chapters, difference and movement pulls them apart, revealing both the inescapability of our longing for others and the impossibility of knowing or being with them. That double-bind, the bind that does not bind, informs the tortured love triangle between Nora Flood, Robin Vote and Jenny Petherbridge. The women's distinct forms of longing produce an insuperable difference that defines the nature of relation for the text as a game of submission, domination, desperate hope and disappointment. This negation is not surprising given that *Nightwood* was Barnes' break-up novel, written in the wake of losing the love of her life, Thelma Wood, to the American heiress Henrietta Metcalf. The questions that *Nightwood* asks about the possibility of sustaining relation with others emerges out of that break. That Barnes' novel should speak so forcefully to the impossibility of queer relation at a time when such a thing was so desperately longed for by queers who searched in history, in racial others, in medical textbooks and in far

[41] Heise, 316.

flung regions of the globe for a family, culture and community to which they might belong marks the novel as an important piece of counter-representation to this study's archive of early twentieth century queer American literature.

The queer longing for relation is most acutely represented in the novel by Nora Flood, Barnes' autobiographical stand-in, whose desire for a domestic romance with the peregrinating Robin Vote is animated by the belief that coupling would make the world less of a mystery to her as a women-oriented woman. As the narrator describes her in the early pages of *Nightwood: "*The world and its history were to Nora like a ship in a bottle; she herself was outside and unidentified, endlessly embroiled in a preoccupation without a problem" (68). Marked out of the secret message that secures "the world and its history," Nora turns to us with the "face of all people who love the people," the visage of those who long for attachment but who, in giving themselves to others in order to secure those attachments, "[are] continually turning about to find [themselves] diminished" (66). Here, the narrator's description of Nora's desire coincides with what I have earlier identified as the queer longing for a people as a solution to the mystery of queer desire as a sudden thrownness in the world out of step with systems of relation such as the heterosexual family and nation. It is only "some derangement of her equilibrium" that suspends the recognition that Nora is falling "continuously and forever" away from the ideality she clings to (66). That derangement powers her movement in search of love, despite what she comes to recognize as its impossibility. It remains an open question whether, absent this derangement, Nora might not have such a tragic attachment to the fantasies of belonging and security she projects onto her love for Robin.

After Robin leaves her for Jenny, Nora visits Dr. O'Connor's home late in the evening to pour out her anguish to the novel's patron saint of the lonely, miserable and disappointed. Their exchange, which unfurls in a series of elliptical observations about the torment of love alongside a catalog of Robin's misdeeds, is one of the most profound statements of impossible love in all of modernist literature. "Once I was remorseless," Nora observes, "but this is another love—it goes everywhere there is no place for it to stop—it rots me away" (190). Love, in Nora's telling, becomes as peripatetic as her beloved Robin, a cruising without end because it depends on the other for the very thing they cannot give us: ourselves. The unending quality of this frustrated search for queer love is yoked to its impossibility, as Nora reasons that "[o]nly the impossible lasts forever; with time it is made accessible. Robin's love and mine was always impossible, and loving each other, we no longer love" (174). Nora's attachment to Robin articulates itself in what Lauren Berlant describes as a relation of cruel optimism[42], bound to the loved object in spite of and because it prevents one's flourishing in the present. The attachment is optimistic because Nora holds out hope for a time when love might be "made accessible," and cruel because "the impossible lasts forever," suggesting that there will never be a future moment in which love will have delivered on its promises. O'Connor's oft-cited speech about "our love for the invert" affirms this view, suggesting that the homosexual lover promises to heal the historical wound of an alienated experience that it nonetheless cannot heal. "[O]ur miscalculated longing has created

[42] Berlant argues that cruel optimism refers to a relation in which "something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing." The relation becomes cruel "when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially," an aim that is often articulated as the possibility of "an improved way of being." Cruel optimism sustains itself because the object's promise of proximity to the life one desires is enough to secure attachment from the subject. See: L. Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Duke University Press Books, 2011), 1–30.

them," O'Connor explains. "They are our answer to what our grandmothers were told love was, and what it never came to be; they, the living lie of our centuries" (171). This "miscalculated longing" for the suturing function that love is historically imagined to hold for the individual is at once a flaw in the desiring subject and in the object of desire. On the one hand, "we" have miscalculated the capacity of love to address our longing; on the other, "we" have also miscalculated in our belief that *any* object will be able to address our inchoate longing, an indecipherable desire the text usually aligns with the mystery of queerness. Our love for the invert offers, in other words, a relation that might sustain longing but not quench it, nor guarantee belonging in any durable fashion. In Nora and O'Connor's view, the gay or lesbian lover promises to fill an impossible gap, the space where "what we never had stands waiting" (171), an historical sleight of hand that speaks to a broader history of the misrecognition of love, the "miscalculated longing" that binds Nora to Robin and O'Connor to his tea room exploits.

Rather than drive her away, however, the impossibility of love only draws Nora more powerfully to Robin. In this way, Robin's promiscuity affirms Nora's loving commitment even if it cannot secure her wayward lover. Playing a submissive role in the relationship, Nora imagines that if she can meet Robin's chaotic demands, she might be able to secure her in a fantasy of domestic, contained romance that will provide the security and union that is the object of Nora's desire. When that fails, Nora follows Robin's cruising route through cities and countries to see if it will provide any insight that will help her either understand Robin or provide a clue as to how to get her wayward lover to stay. Yet after following Robin's amorous travel "in Marseilles, in Tangier, in Naples," Nora tells Dr. O'Connor that it is not merely becoming a "debauched" lesbian

that is the secret of Robin's appeal—the promise of rebelling against social prescriptions of female sexual desire and comportment—but rather her way of manifesting as the promise of relation for her various lovers. The "girls that [Robin] had loved" across this queer European and North African itinerary are "only little girls that she had forgotten," not idealized femmes who could keep Robin better than Nora. In this sense, Nora can understand herself in sympathetic relation to an anonymous community of Robin's lovers, women with whom she shares a desire for the errant lover and for a romance that transcends the pain of the present.

If Nora's relation to Robin is structured by submission, Jenny Petherbridge's is structured by domination. Where Nora seeks to bind Robin to her through acts of devotion, Jenny steals Robin away through acts of violence. While this is particularly clear in the carriage scene when Robin flirts with a young girl and Jenny "struck [her], scratching and tearing in hysteria, clutching and crying" and thereby secures Robin for a time as the two sail to America (97-98), the impulse to domination is part of Jenny's lesbian erotics and identity more generally throughout the novel's brief accounts of her. As O'Connor describes her to Nora later, Jenny assumes a self by consuming the selves of others. This domination of others as a means of getting purchase on the mystery of the self is at the core of what *Nightwood* offers as Jenny's animating desire.

> [Jenny] sets about collecting a destiny—and for her, the soul destiny is love, anyone's love and or her own. So only someone's love is her love…her present is always someone else's past, jerked out and dangling. (124)

Jenny's habit of "collecting a destiny" reveals both the longing for a secure identity—a self rooted by a past and future that secures it in the present—and the violence that attends the question of desire, its fulfillment, and an identity or purpose. Like Nora, Jenny

cannot identify the source or substance of her desire, but her response to this mystery is to adopt the desires ("someone's love") that she recognizes in others. In order to be secure in the present, Jenny sets about agglomerating her identity through transference with the histories of others. This approach avails her little in securing Robin in any permanent way, perhaps because Robin's desire is unknowable to Robin or anyone else. Towards the end of the novel, having taken Robin to New York, Jenny finds that she is unable to control the incessant wandering and absence of her lover. We might understand this as Jenny's inability to understand, and thus to dominate and extract, Robin's itinerant love. Like Nora before her, Jenny follows Robin on her travels trying to make sense of the lover's longing for "desperate anonymity" (208), but it fails to betray any deep secret of Robin's desire and therefore leaves Jenny broken. Finally confronting the fact that "she did not understand anything Robin felt or did," Jenny retreats to her "darkened hotel room, crying and stumbling" (208). If Nora cannot secure Robin in being mastered by her, neither can Jenny secure Robin by mastering her.

If Nora and Jenny represent two approaches to securing attachment—submission and domination—that fail to bind them to Robin, what capacity is it that Robin has to defer or refute these relations? What is it, to put the question a slightly different way, that Robin wants? This is, of course, an impossible question to answer, as the above explorations of Nora and Jenny's attempts to resolve that question make clear. Indeed, *Nightwood* reminds us, time and again, that Robin is inscrutable to all around her, unknowable as a set of consistent or coherent desires. Only one short observation, provided by the narrator, indicates that Robin's desire is structured, at least in part, by a "tragic longing to be kept, knowing herself astray" (74). This "tragic longing" explains

Robin's attachment to Nora and Jenny, women who long to keep her at any cost, and her persistent inclination to leave them for her cruising nightlife and anonymous lovers.

Though her unpredictable and morphing character makes Robin's desires unknowable, it may be nearest to the truth that she craves a glancing contact with others that affirms her ability to leave. In wanting to be kept but incapable of being kept, Robin circulates through the world cathecting to people before the inevitable moment in which she slips away, "taken by something not yet in history…some foray in the blood that had no known setting" (56). O'Connor reasons that Robin's movement through the nightworld and her various lovers is predicated on her will to deny relation; indeed, to enjoy the pleasures of escaping it:

> Robin is not in your life, you are in her dream, you'll never get out of it. And why does Robin feel innocent? Every bed she leaves, without caring, fills her heart with peace and happiness. She has made her 'escape' again" (182)

Robin's cruising relation to others, then, finds affirmation in betrayal and abandonment. As O'Connor describes it, Robin only achieves peace when she knows that she has abandoned love. "Escape," indeed, might be what Robin desires and her special aptitude for it thwarts her capture as a love object for either Nora or Jenny. Robin remains inscrutable, for the characters and for readers, because she has perfected the art of detachment, of being in estranged non-relation to others in ways that protect her from the hazard of belonging to them. In such ways, Robin's queerness is a powerful, anti-social rejoinder to the other forms of queer desire for belonging that circulate in the novel (Nora's, Jenny's and O'Connor's) in search of the relation that Robin refutes. In her "debauched" movement from body to body, Robin also resembles Dr. O'Connor, whose cruising is discussed in more explicit terms in the descriptions of cottaging with which I

started this chapter and who may be one more double of Robin. Yet O'Connor's cuirsing is animated by a desire for community. He cruises the toilets to find sex, but also to find a like-minded group, a sort of friend network, and it is his great disappointment that, often, neither is realized. Both O'Connor and Nora desire a permanence in relation to which Robin is actively hostile.

Robin's inchoate and mobile desire resounds in her attachment to the night, which Dr. O'Connor identifies as the moment of transition and transformation, the switch between being and being-something-else. The night, it is worth remembering, is the condition of homosexuality that renders it torture for Nora and O'Connor while it is an ambivalent terrain of ephemeral attachment for Robin. The night is duplicitous and murky in O'Connor's telling, associated with a desired, but "unknown land" that emerges and retreats with the consciousness of the subject, never entirely recallable and therefore always escaping the grasp of permanence and relation.

> We got to [the night] no better—and betray her with the very virtue of our days. We are continent a long time, but no sooner has our head touched the pillow, and our eyes left the day, than a host of merrymakers take and get. We wake from our doings in a deep sweat for that they happened in a house without an address, in a street in no town, *citizened with a people with no names with which to deny them*. Their very lack of identity makes them ourselves. For by a street number, by a house, by a name, we cease to accuse ourselves. Sleep demands of us a guilty immunity. (111, emphasis added)

The impossibility of romantic attachment and the unknowability of desire is reflected here in the metaphor of a place with no known address, populated by a nameless, unidentified people. It is also a space of betrayal, the place where we pursue pleasures outside the "virtue" that attends life in daylight hours. The locations of one's experiences among the joyous community of "merrymakers" cannot be reliably reproduced. As a somnabule and creature of the night, Robin thus inhabits the place in which joy emerges

and recedes in perpetual oscillation. Relation with her is impossible because it is always subject to the flux in which Barnes has thrown not only the waking life of the tormented, jilted lover, but all relation.

The final chapter of *Nightwood* is structured by a series of movements that culminate in the reunion of Nora and Robin, suggesting that if there is impossibility in relation, for these characters who are inevitably drawn toward others, that relation nonetheless always offers itself as a tantalizing promise. The chapter opens with Jenny and Robin's arrival in New York, followed by the swift dissolution of their relationship as Robin again goes wandering. Breaking off from Jenny, whom she leaves "crying and stumbling" toward their hotel, Robin heads further into the countryside where she orbits around Nora (208). Sensing her former lover out in the darkness, Nora rushes to an abandoned chapel where Robin stands before "a contrived altar." Entering hastily, Nora strikes her head on the door jamb and falls, unconscious, to the floor. The novel ends with Robin and Nora's dog playing together, which critics read either as a scene of bestiality or as the culmination of Robin's regression back to a primitive, pre-conscious existence, while Nora's body lies motionless a few feet away. The surreal imagery of this scene beggars interpretation and yet, if we read the surfaces, we have about as perfect reconciliation as *Nightwood* can offer. Robin has reunited with the one woman who accepts and understands her need to wound others, who accepts and understands the impossibility of being with her. In falling unconscious, Nora can be suspended in the knowledge that she has been reunited with Robin, unable to experience Robin's rejection or her inevitable wandering away, only her presence at one moment in time that remains frozen on the final page of the novel.

The conclusions of *Nightwood*, *Quicksand* and *Passing* seem to offer readers nothing but unmitigated pain and suffering. Having found one another again, Nora Flood and Robin Vote are in a sort of romantic stasis as one lies unconscious and the other appears hysterical, snarling and growling at her lover's dog. After barely surviving her last pregnancy, Helga Crane discovers that she is pregnant again. Clare Kendry's body lies lifeless on a cold, snowy Harlem street while Irene Redfield collapses in horror, swallowed up by the darkness that has also taken her erstwhile friend and enemy. Wrecked by their lovers, families and communities, these women haunt the last pages of Barnes and Larsen's novels, auguring the meager trousseau that life offers up for those from whom it demands everything. Despite their free movement through the queer modernist contact zones of Berlin, Harlem, Greenwich Village, Chicago and Copenhagen, in the end they haunt the isolated meridians of a transnational desire without end.

Larsen and Barnes' tales of female misery function within the testimonial history of queer abjection that Heather Love implores us to remember as a challenge to the "It Gets Better" narrative of LGBT history. Love's demand that we plumb these often uncomfortable depths comes from the urgency of confronting the terrors of the queer past and recognizing how those feelings are never entirely *past* for us, that they carry over into our time in ways that the imperative of "pride" and "progress" would have us ignore.[43] If Larsen and Barnes' novels might be repositories of memories we best not forget in an unprecedented era of queer visibility of acceptance, they also point us to some of the particular fault lines that determine who receives acceptance and who does not in their

[43] Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*, 1–33.

own time just as they do in ours. While McKay, Nugent, Prime-Stevenson and Cather's characters enjoy the cruising freedom of an irreverent gay male life loosed from the responsibilities of family, community and nation so often laid at the feet of women, Larsen and Barnes' characters struggle to access anything that feels like freedom, much less sustain it, even as they follow similar cruising patterns.

What counts as freedom for these characters may well be the refusal of all relation, a desire not to be bound by the desire for others. Robin sustains some sort of freedom in her cruising world and in her refusal to be bound by any woman or man who would seek to claim her. It remains more difficult to engage such speculation for the protagonists of *Passing* and *Quicksand*. Irene would have had to give up the security that binds her to the world and family in order to proffer the refusal of relation that might have given her freedom; but into what community of support might she have enfolded herself outside of her black bourgeois community? Clare Kendry might have passed into white society and refused attachment to a husband she despises, but how could she have forged a life for herself with no means of support? Likewise, Helga Crane might have defied the communities that trammel over her attempts at self-articulation beyond the bonds of race and nation, but the novel suggests no such opportunity. While they are compelled to bind themselves to other women—and even long for such attachment—these characters' recognition of the disappointments that attend the romance of coupling and community opens up a space for a different world to take place. This, too, may be their challenge to the sentimentalist tradition and their articulation of a startlingly modern, because ongoing and unfinished, account of queer female complaint. In these novels of incredible feeling that nonetheless refuse comfort and closure, Barnes and Larsen offer a rejoinder to the

queer desire for belonging, pointing us towards a complaint, persistent and unwavering, about the limitations bound to queer life.

As testimonials, these novels perform important work for queer and feminist histories. Records of damage and loss, they bequeath to their future and our present a sense of ongoing struggle that would be taken up by Audre Lorde, Ann Bannon and Rita Mae Brown, among others. Taken together, Barnes and Larsen offer us the benefit of a queer feminist critique that challenges the utopian imaginaries so easily generated by the white gay male experience emphasized in LGBTQ American life. Their testimony preserves life worlds both fading from view and rendered impossible in their own time, rendering their novels particularly potent time capsules of queer experience, a subject that I will take up in the following chapter. If Helga Crane, Irene Redfield, Clare Kendry, Nora Flood, Jenny Petherbridge or Robin Vote read to us as remarkably contemporary portraits of lesbian desire and the longing for female autonomy, that is because their time is still with us, their gaze still set on a horizon we have yet to reach.

CHAPTER FOUR

A Queer Memorial: Wallace Thurman, Charles Henri Ford, Parker Tyler and the Queer Historical Novel

In an otherwise unremarkable folder housed in the bowels of the Carl Van Vechten Collection at Yale's Beinecke library lies a series of queer photo collages by one of the Harlem Renaissance's queer, and most controversial midwives. Clippings from newspapers, photos, and assorted text are juxtaposed in camp style in order to tell a story, never entirely clear but playfully suggestive, about queer life and desire in the early- to mid-twentieth century.[1] While some clippings appear to be more or less standard acts of preservation – an article from the *New York Amsterdam News* which describes a drag ball in 1931 ("Gorgeous Finery of Other Sex to Vie for Beauty Prizes") and quotes one "Simpering Male" attendee's observation that the scene therein offered "a Veritable Glimpse of Fairyland" – there are many more that write history through camp collage. Perhaps most memorable, because most hilariously graphic, is a collage featuring two white males, one on all fours with his buttocks facing the camera while the other straddles his back, caught in mid-strike as he hammers a dildo into his partner's posterior. The image is framed by the words "Tom Punches Out" and "Can you use a man who knows how to get things done?" At the top of the page are two more clipped captions: "Push Work" and "Wise Use Can Stretch Build." At the bottom are a complimentary set of captions: "Cheer up!", "THE PLEASURE WAS ALL MINE" and "Happy Baby!" Without any context, the captions that circulate around the erotic image appear to suggest their origin in physique magazines, women's periodicals and advertisements. Drawn

[1] Van Vechten, Carl. Homoerotic Scrapbooks (undated), Box 205, Folder 2594, Carl Van Vechten Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

together, they are a campy send up of the culture of labor, female desire, the ideal male body and consumer culture's gospel of enjoyment. Other photos are clearly Van Vechten's own, such as that of a young black boy, nude, holding an African mask, or of the white ballet dancer Hugh Laing posing in that most recurrent image of divine gay suffering: the martyrdom of St. Sebastian.

What do these images tell us about gay life from the 1930s to the mid-1950s? How do they function for queers in the present? Why would Van Vechten have created them anyway? According to Jonathan Weinberg, whose reflection on the collection in *The Yale Journal of Criticism* is one of only serious treatments of these queer collages, they offer "those of us who want to know" a history of "how gay people expressed their forbidden desires and created spaces of freedom in the period before so-called gay liberation."[2] As Weinberg terms them, these "homemade sex books" are also remarkable for their documentation of the author's engagement with a "tradition of homoerotic imagery" that makes them at once contemporary creations and iterations of a longer history of gay art.[3] He also suggests that these collages are communal representations organized by Van Vechten's "encyclopedic and historical" eye with the help of friends who sent him materials.[4] Yet what Weinberg finds "most extraordinary" is that the collages "were intended to survive" and "have at last found their intended audience" in

[2] Jonathan Weinberg, "'Boy Crazy': Carl Van Vechten's Queer Collection," *Yale Journal of Criticism* 7, no. 2 (January 1994): 48.

[3] Weinberg, 36.

[4] Weinberg, 47.

contemporary gay readers, avoiding the "fate of so many markers of gay and lesbian lives […] destroyed by embarrassed relatives" or lost to the whirlwind of time.[5]

Not all critics have been so generous in their treatment of Van Vechten's scrapbooks and their potential for capturing queer life and, I would add, transmitting it to the present. Rather than provide access to a hidden history, Scott Herring claims that they offer us only the "ruination of U.S. sexual history," refusing any desire for a clear record of the queer past.

> Any teleological attempt at discovering or uncovering a visible gay community or grounding a stable sexual identity, is, once again, wrecked by the archive that Van Vechten cultivated and tossed away in one of the United States' more impressive archives for lesbian and gay letters. […] [T]he scrapbooks are a decades-long act of foolish voyeurism where there remains nothing – yet everything – to see.[6]

Rejecting Weinberg's claims, Herring also shames the "foolish voyeurism" that leads us to believe that these bits of ephemera, produced on paper that would not and could not last, offer anything in the way of a testimony from erstwhile gay life. Herring is right, of course; Van Vechten's scrapbooks don't offer us concrete details or biographies, no records of what clubs or speakeasies a given boy in a photograph frequented, no sense of what sort of sexual pleasures he preferred or how he organized his identity as he passed between friends and places and years. The scrapbooks don't give us a concise ethnographic history, in the mode of Esther Newton's *Mother Camp* (1973) or John H. Gagnon and William Simons' *Sexual Conduct: The Social Sources of Human Sexuality* (1973). Yet, Van Vechten's scrapbooks do show us history of a different sort, what we might call an *affective history* of queer life and identity in pre-Stonewall America. In this sense, they provide a history of queer sensibilities, feelings and anxieties. Their

[5] Weinberg, 47.

[6] Herring, *Queering the Underworld*, 148.

importance for communicating those aspects of queer life across the span of a century, and to do so despite their ephemeral quality, is also a record they bequeath to the queer present from the queer past.

As I have been arguing, implicitly, throughout the previous chapters, early-twentieth-century queer American writers shared a struggle to represent a community and culture emergent in the utopian scenes and feelings of belonging that circulate through their work as homological tropes and aesthetic forms. The deep connection between their lived experience of these utopian scenes and feelings — parties, encounters with law enforcement, cross-racial identification, the feeling of diasporic connection and disconnection, the oscillation of enchantment and disillusion — can be seen in the centrality of the *roman a clef* as the signature genre of queer American literature in the early twentieth century. Drawing on cultural practices, modes of relation, quotidian struggles and formative experiences, the autobiographical tendency of this queer archive does not consist in the first-novel commonplace of drawing on one's experience to inform bits of a character or scenes in a larger narrative; queer American modernists used their lives as a model for their art. The predominance of the *roman a clef* offers readers in the present at once the gossipy delight of tracking queer fiction's real-life correlates and, in the intimacy of its struggle to understand and account for the queer life this archive tries to record, an affective history of queer identity and desire. It is that affective history — a record of unresolved feelings about identity, community and what it feels like to be queer — which makes this fiction resonate with the contemporary moment in such powerful and sometimes bewildering ways. That is because the utopian exuberance of queer parties, the ambivalence about queerness as a biological or ethnic identity, the

sense of a simultaneous profundity and meaninglessness of sexual cultures an as alternative order of the social are unresolved in our contemporary moment just as they were more than a century ago. Even in matters that appear to have been resolved, such as the legal persecution faced by same-sex interested people, there is still a general anxiety about persecution in an ascendant age of LGBTQ civil rights, especially in this moment when rising powers within American government seem poised to return to a version of the criminalization and legal discrimination that attended queer lives in the past.

In this chapter, I will examine Wallace Thurman's *Infants of the Spring* (1932) and Charles Henri Ford and Parker Tyler's collaborative novel, *The Young and Evil* (1933), to identify two key tropes used by early-twentieth-century queer writers as sites for articulating their culture and politics as well as two key aesthetic modes they employed in order to translate their lived experience into literature. In the first section, I will look at these authors' shared investment in queer parties as sites in which racial, gendered and sexual norms are repeatedly (if never permanently) suspended, illuminating a new possibility of the social emergent therein. I will also look at scenes of encounter with the legal system in which we see a more nuanced picture of the surveillance and policing of queer lives at the beginning of the twentieth century than we might otherwise understand. In the second section, I will explore both novels' self-conscious struggle to locate a form that could capture their queer bohemian milieu, arguing that their camp realism and scrapbook aesthetic offer not only a way of capturing the sometimes hallucinatory and kaleidoscopic range of their queer world, but also a way of surviving a diminishing present and vouchsafing it for the future. Just as Carl Van Vechten's campy private scrapbooks work out a form of queer history for themselves, these novels self-

consciously struggle to draw together glimpses of the feeling and meaning of their authors' experiences.

Pairing these rather disparate novels by writers who circulated in very different avant garde milieux offers an opportunity to see how shared tropes, scenes and aesthetics function across the color line as a point of connection and disconnection between the segregated sites of cosmopolitan queerness in Harlem and Greenwich Village. *Infants of the Spring* and *The Young and Evil* capture a mobile queer bohemia as black queers travel to and live in Greenwich Village and white queers from downtown flock to Harlem for its wild parties and its relative freedom of queer expression outside the threat of legal exposure in other parts of the city.[7] As tales about artists and their communities, these novels are also acutely concerned with the production of a radical new queer art and their protagonists self-consciously struggle to find the form and tone through which they could capture the utopian vibrancy, existential misgivings and failure of the queer cultures that blossomed in the 1920s before ebbing in the 1930s.

This is not to say that there aren't telling differences in the use each novel makes of these tropes, and a comparative analysis reveals the difference that race makes within the shared aesthetic regime of queer American literature at the beginning of the twentieth century. The legal battles situated about midway through each novel, shared evidence of

[7] Most histories about queerness and interracial contact during this period in New York focus on the movement of white queers into Harlem, with no suggestion of any reverse movement of black queers into Greenwich Village. As George Chauncey argues, Harlem was the only place where black and white queers made contact, since segregation in New York meant that Harlem was "the *only* place where black gay men could congregate in commercial establishments" (228). Paul's decamping to Greenwich Village in the final movement of *Infants*, as well as Richard Bruce Nugent's account of his black male protagonist's adventures in Greenwich Village and Cornelia Street in *Gentleman Jigger* offer a different account of the racial flows of queer life between uptown and downtown. See: Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Makings of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940*.

the persecution faced by queers during the period, resolve in very different ways: the white defendant goes free in *The Young and Evil* while the black defendant is sentenced for his alleged sexual crime (an episode that perhaps reflects Thurman's 1925 arrest for cruising in the subway toilets, a moment of legal exposure that threatened his career and reputation[8]). In Thurman's *Infants of the Spring*, the utopian moment of the central party scene (and there are many!) hinges on the novel's investment in queerness and queer romance to overcome and destroy what Du Bois famously termed the "problem of the color line"[9] and what Langston Hughes termed the "racial mountain" faced by the black artist in America.[10] In Ford and Tyler's *The Young and Evil*, queer poetry and life animate themselves against the destructive force of time in view of preserving a world and people who are forever coming apart. In pointing to these differences, I continue the work of the prior chapters in which racial difference informs homological approaches to questions of belonging and cross-racial identification.

While each novel is concerned with posterity — often in the form of a literary fame or recognition they did not receive in their own day — both novels offer a bleak prognosis for the future, ending in a dramatic and tragic act of violence. While these endings may suggest that they fall in line with the tragic queer narrative that is understood as LGBTQ literature's pre-Stonewall heritage, I argue that their scrapbook aesthetic and camp realism combine to leaven that tragedy with a refusal to relinquish the

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[8] Eleonore van Notten, *Wallace Thurman's Harlem Renaissance* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1994), 96–97.

[9] W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Authoritative Text, Contexts, Criticism*, ed. Henry Louis Gates and Terri Hume Oliver (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999), 17.

[10] Langston Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," *The Nation*, no. 122 (June 23, 1926): 692–94.

utopian promise of their foreclosed moment. Open and wandering, *Infants of the Spring* and *The Young and Evil* record and refuse failure, committed to a nostalgia for the present vanishing before them and to preserving the communities and relationships that gave them hope.

Scenes of Life: Parties and the Police

Across their portraits of Harlem and Greenwich Village, *The Young and Evil* and *Infants of the Spring* share key investments in the depiction of queer parties and encounters with legal authorities. Taken together, these scenes of life animate each novel's account of queer experience and political imagination while significantly complicating our sense of the utopian possibilities of community and the uniformity of legal sanction under which queers lived nearly a century ago. Parties in these novels, as they take place in established public institutions such as Harlem's Hamilton Lodge Ball[11] or informal private house parties, function as flashpoints for sex, interracial mixing, community gossip and bringing together the unwieldy social and economic sweep of queer urban communities. In tandem with the frivolity and utopian possibilities bound up in such party scenes, their depiction in *The Young and Evil* and *Infants of the Spring* is leavened with the romantic failure, racial friction, social risk and anxious self-assessment that equally attended such sites of pleasure. Parties, in other words, are where *things happen* and where characters are able to wrangle with the substance and meaning of their

[11] The Hamilton Lodge Ball, more publicly known as the "Faggot's Ball" during the 1920s and 1930s, is among one of the oldest and most well-known drag balls in the United States, dating back to 1869. Hosted at the Rockland Palace Dance Hall on the corner of 155th Street and Frederick Douglass Avenue, the Hamilton Lodge Ball was among the most formative, important and public institution for the development of queer culture in the United States. See: Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Makings of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940*, 257–63.

queer experience. Likewise, the novels' representation of encounters with law enforcement, either in the vague yet omnipresent threat the police posed to queer gatherings and individuals or in the more institutional setting of the court room, complicates our sense of queer legal precarity. In placing them together, we see how racial difference may have impacted legal persecution as white gay men in *The Young and Evil* experience a lenient magistrate while a member of Raymond's black bohemian milieu rots away in prison on a false accusation of sexual assault in *Infants of the Spring*. The following section explores these shared scenes of life across the novels, beginning with *The Young and Evil* and concluding with *Infants of the Spring*, in order to excavate the complex record they keep of early twentieth century queer life.

In *The Young and Evil*, parties are promiscuous affairs in more ways than one. There is the opportunity for sex, of course, in the ambience of cruising that saturates descriptions of parties; but there is also the opportunity for encountering the wide social sweep of the drag ball or house party. Planning a party at his modest apartment in Greenwich Village, Julian expects both "people he knew and people he did not know."[12] Among these are the hard-camping and hard-drinking Frederick; Santiago, "a Mexican dancer" who "danced the native dances he had learned in Mexico" at a nearby bar only "to see them the following season in a Broadway show 'for the first time in America' (59); Osbert, "an English painter of American skyscrapers" (59) who is also Santiago's patron/traveling companion; and Harold Forte, an interior decorator who "illustrated books and bathrooms" (63). As they weave in and out of a crowd that includes boxers, poets and various others whose professional affiliations are either unknown or

[12] Charles Henri Ford and Parker Tyler, *The Young and Evil* (London: The Gay Men's Press, 1989), 55. Subsequent references to the novel will appear in-text as parenthetical citations.

nonexistent, the characters cling together over make-up tips and the queer art of the insult, as when Frederick observes that Karel's mascara-ed eyelashes "were long enough now to catch in the boughs (should he go for a walk in Washington Square)" (56). At the Hamilton Lodge Ball in Harlem, a similar métier takes shape amid a "scene whose celestial flavor and cerulean coloring no angelic painter or nectarish poet has ever conceived" (152). Moving from table to table amid the throng of costumed bodies, Julian and Karel encounter Tony, a "South American" fitted out in "a black satin […] fitted to the knee and then flaring, long pearls and pearl drops" (153); Vincent, the ball's master of ceremonies known as "the hardest boiled queen on Broadway" with "large eyes with a sex-life all their own" (153); "Italians with the lippink scarlet as heliotrope" (154), and a "lush annamaywong lavender-skinned negro" who cruises Julian so intensely that the character exclaims that his "eyes go through us and *button* in the back" (154). In the wild kaleidoscope of the ball, the novel attempts to capture all of the various types that flock to queer parties in Harlem and Greenwich Village, bonded by the performance of a queer identity channeled through humor, make-up, costume, cutting remarks and gay argot.

While parties are the site of contact for a diverse queer social body in *The Young and Evil*, they are equally important as sites for knowledge production and transmission. The gossip and banter that circulates at private and public parties throughout the novel provide a wealth of complex, if clipped, information about sex practices, queer history, cruising grounds and the playfulness of queer language. Amid the swirl of the Hamilton Lodge Ball, Julian captures the following snippets of conversation trading information about all manner of gay life in New York:

When are you going to remove your mask and reveal a row of chamber pots […]

> picked me up on Eighth Street and did me for trade in Christopher Street […]
>
> there's a new place called Belle's Jeans it must be horribly vulgar […]
>
> ninety-five percent of the world is just naturally queer […]
>
> I had petrified four or five males who walked into the tea-room two standing before the urinal dying to and yet so embarrassed waiting for my permission to pull their things out […]
>
> [he] adores me to stick it in his and flew into a temper last night when after the regular party my poor thing wouldn't get a hard on enough to go in and STAY in but I promised to do my husbandly duty next time […]
>
> noticing my excellent features and asking why I didn't have a screen test […]
>
> (153, 157, 157, 159, 160, 162, 162)

Here, a small sampling of party gossip records a surprising wealth of information about gay sex practices, the best places to go for sex, theories of the prevalence of same-sex attraction, professional ambitions and new shops (or possibly bars) where fellow revelers spend their time. Worthy of note is not only the explicit descriptions of sex, but also the particular attention that such gossip pays to the nuance of gay relationships, including impotence, doing one's "husbandly duty" and "tea room" power dynamics. The gossip at the drag ball also includes moments in which partiers share and debate their own accounts of queer history: "Someone shouted Bessie if you don't believe Heliogabalus died by having his head stuck in a toilet bowl you NEEDN'T COME AROUND any more" (154). This passing reference to a third century Roman emperor known for his extreme homosexual tastes, handled with the queer camp flourish of a particularly degrading death, all addressed to another man known as "Bessie" (a name used throughout the text at such moments), marks at once queer history and a camp relation to that history.

The party scenes that course throughout *The Young and Evil* also inspire, in their alternately depressing and comforting afterglow, an occasion for the characters to consider what precisely homosexuality, and homosexual identity, signify for them. The dizzying spectacle of the drag ball—which Julian leaves "with a hundred images clawing at him, some good, some almost good and some almost painful" (167)—inspires him to theorize the substance and meaning of homosexuality and homosexual love. "Am I a doll," Julian wonders, using an epithet for an effeminate homosexual, "or some kind of ghost believing in everything I have believed in / do I know what marriage is what new textures is in it" (168). If the "doll" indicates an available gay identity or type, "ghost" implies a gossamer non-identity or unknowability that consists only in attitudes or dispositions, a kind of conditioned queer subject. The question of "marriage" speaks to Julian's detachment from the norms and rhythms of heterosexual life, norms he cannot intuit as a feeling or "texture" beyond their status as mere cultural imperatives. These concerns soon home in on the notion of queerness as a sort of aesthetic performance. As Julian reasons, "the will to doll is a special way of willing to live my poetry may merely be a way of dolling up." This back and forth between performing a queer self ("the will to doll," "dolling up") and performing one's art ("willing to live my poetry") suggests that queerness is a creative practice or impulse just like poetry, and further that they may be interdependent as creative efforts. As Julian later reflects, "I would be practically nothing without my poetry unless a DOLL" (169). The special confusion with which Julian confronts his homosexuality – and, in relief, the homosexuality of the men at the party – resolves in the wish to be "a bright and unschooled lass" and his admission that "I know it and love it and know it and leave it and know it and hate it but never too much" (169).

While the dizzying complexity of queer life overwhelms the subject, it likewise fascinates him, inspiring the very forms of introspection, celebration and documentation that are the object of *The Young and Evil*. In such metafictional moments, parties in the novel are both the site of aesthetic experiments and a live theory of queer identity and desire.

While parties offer a similar site of diverse contact, uninhibited self-expression, confusion and ambivalence to the black artists of *Infants of the Spring*, their investment as sites of political liberation are markedly different. If in *The Young and Evil*, parties are conduits for explicit descriptions of gay sex acts. In *Infants of the Spring* they are invested – as is queer contact more generally – with the promise of ameliorating racial segregation. Yet the marvelousness of Thurman's *roman a clef* can be found in the manner in which interracial contact at queer parties simultaneously blurs the color line while nonetheless remaining structured by a racial tension between white and black queers. In other words, Thurman demonstrates that as much as the sorts of contact engendered by queer parties might promise to overcome centuries-long social prejudice, they can just as easily and often unwittingly reproduce that prejudice. This tension is foregrounded in the first pages of the novel, as Raymond orients Stephen, a new arrival to the U.S. from Canada, to the provocative sexual license of Niggeratti Manor and American race relations that Stephen struggles to understand as a white foreigner.

> "Nice diggings you have here," Stephen said.
> "Damn right," Raymond agreed. "I'm nuts about 'em. Sam doesn't like my studio, though. He thinks it's decadent."
> "I merely objected to some of the decorations, Ray."
> "Namely, the red and black draperies, the red and black bed cover, the crimson wicker chairs, the riotous hook rugs, and Paul's erotic drawings. You see, Steve, Sam thinks it's all rather flamboyant and vulgar. He can't forget that he's a

> Nordic and I'm a Negro, and according to all the sociology books, my taste is naturally crass and vulgar."[13]

While the description of the apartment gives readers a sense of its queer bordello aesthetic, speaking to the line between the erotic and the criminal, Samuel's disdain for the "decadent" and "flamboyant" decor betrays his conservative reaction to a too-forward queer self-presentation. Samuel's prudishness is racialized as Raymond observes that Samuel's reservations about Paul's "erotic drawings" lie in the distinction between "Nordic" and "Negro" taste, a prejudice adapted from contemporary sociology books that designated Blacks as "naturally crass and vulgar." White queers and black queers might socialize with one another, the passage suggests, but that contact does not free them from the possibility of racism and stereotype.

Samuel, whose real life counterpart was a frequenter of Harlem and a supporter of progressive black politics, offers an example of white gay men who embrace the vogue of Harlem while remaining wary about contact with the black community. While Samuel champions and organizes for African American civil rights, he is also opposed to interracial contact, horrified when Stephen decides to move in with Raymond and, near the end of the novel, berating Raymond for having "gotten a decent boy into a sordid mess" by encouraging him "to live with niggers" (115). These are the very politics that the "Niggeratti" fight against in their art, activism and social lives; and yet, it may be a longing for queer companionship that keeps Samuel and Raymond bound to one another despite these tensions. "We disagree about everything," Raymond explains to Stephen in that first scene. "And yet there are moments when we get great pleasure out of one

[13] Wallace Thurman, *Infants of the Spring*, Dover edition (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, Inc, 2013), 11. Subsequent references to the novel will appear in-text as parenthetical citations.

another's company. I need Sam's steadying influence and he is energized by what he calls my animalism" (7). It is this tension that animates the utopian possibilities and disappointments of queer parties throughout the novel, particularly as partying draws Raymond and Stephen at first closer together and then forces them apart.

If Raymond's relationship with Samuel marks a tension between black and white queers, his relationship with Stephen marks the possibility of overcoming that tension. As their friendship "had become something precious, inviolate, genuine," their "frankly acknowledged affection for one another" enables both men "like children" to be "totally unconscious of their racial difference" (17). That this affection infantilizes both men, making them "like children," at once foreshadows the naïve belief that such a relationship could remain unsullied by the pollution of American racism and indicates a queer utopian longing for romance as the route to social transformation.

> It made no difference between them that one was black and the other was white. There was something *deeper than mere surface color* which drew them together, *something more vital and lasting than the shallow attraction of racial opposites*. Their greatest joy came when they could be alone together and talk … talk about anything and everything. They seemed to have so much to say to one another, so much that had remained unsaid all of their respective lives because they had never met anyone else with whom they could converse unreservedly. (17, emphasis added)

The utopian undercurrent of the passage is plain, mapping the "frank affection" between two men of different races onto a promise of achieving racial harmony through contact that was one of the essential political ideas of the more rebellious, queer cadre of Harlem Renaissance artists and writers. In this description of Stephen and Raymond's "naïve and childlike" affection for one another, one feels the weight of doe-eyed romance in Thurman's writing. Yet racial anxieties intrude in the very scene where they appear to be banished, as Raymond lauds Stephen's white cultural heritage as the descendant of

"blond Norsemen […] steeped in the sagas" while denigrating his own heritage as one bereft of "cultural bonds." It is only in the rosy gloss of their affection for one another that Raymond, and perhaps by proxy, Thurman, can dispense with these negative feelings.

The utopian potential of queer interracial romance and its disappointment saturates the scene of the donation party, one that provides *Infants'* clearest account of the sexual and political possibilities envisioned by Thurman and his queer black bohemian milieu. Much as in *The Young and Evil*'s drag ball scene, Thurman moves through the rooms in kaleidoscopic fashion, pausing to illuminate various cliques and couplings. The party offers a mixture of *avant garde* artists, schoolteachers, social service workers, staid and respectable members of the New Negro bourgeoisie, dancers and other curiosities (111). That the donation party should bring together such a wide cross section of black and white society realizes the dream of the Renaissance as a site of what Scott Herring calls "racial admixture,"[14] a dream that is manifested and concretized as lubricated bodies come into contact. Yet Thurman's protagonist is quick to point out the ephemerality of such admixture – perhaps because his own relationship with Stephen has deteriorated by this point in the novel – acknowledging the fact that these bonds forged in the delirium of a party may soon be forgotten in the following day's "emotional hangover."

> The party reached new heights. The lights in the basement had been dimmed, and the reveling dancers cast grotesque shadows on the heavily tapestried walls. Color lines had been completely eradicated. Whites and blacks clung passionately together as if trying to effect a permanent merger. Liquor, jazz music, and close physical contact achieved what decades of propaganda had advocated with little success.
>
> Here, Raymond thought, as he continued his search for Stephen, is social equality. Tomorrow all of them will have an emotional hangover. They will fear for their

[14] Herring, *Queering the Underworld*, 111.

> sanity, for at last they have had a chance to do openly what they only dared to do clandestinely before. This, he kept repeating to himself, is the Negro renaissance and this is about all the whole damn thing is going to amount to. (115)

The language of the "merger" here is often understood as a brief but unsustainable triumph of "Niggeratti" political vision over Du Boisian propaganda or Lockean respectability politics, a belief in the power of sex to destroy the socio-political divisions of the color line. As Steve Pinkerton argues, the party marks the "ritual and symbolic function" of Niggeratti Manor as "a space where boundaries and limits become porous, where the sacred and profane, angelic and forbidden, are allowed to interpenetrate and meld."[15] The juxtaposition between the party's realization of racial admixture and Raymond's search for Stephen aligns the larger aesthetic and political goals of the Harlem Renaissance with a smaller, private longing for interracial romance that is the main throughline of the novel. The "emotional hangover" that Raymond imagines the revelers will feel is thus mapped onto his falling out with Stephen. That fight is, in fact, why Raymond searches Stephen out at the donation party; if revelry brought them together once, it may bring the romantic friends to a détente again.

That Stephen and Raymond's relationship fails in *Infants of the Spring* is at once the novel's crowning disappointment and the bridge it refuses to cross in any final way. Stephen claims that he has become a racist — "I automatically changed my seat in the subway last night when a Negro man sat down beside me" (119) — yet still desires to keep Ray separate from the black community in order to keep him as an object of peculiarly conditional affection. "You never have been and never will be a Negro to me," Stephen writes in an emotional letter, "You're just you" (119). This separation is also one

[15] Steve Pinkerton, "'New Negro' v. 'Niggeratti': Defining and Defiling the Black Messiah," *Modernism/Modernity* 20, no. 3 (September 2013): 551.

that Raymond wishes to keep for his erstwhile lover, denying that Stephen has become a racist, alleging instead that it is the way that Stephen is fawned over as a white man in Harlem that has turned him against the black race. What persists, according to Raymond, is the possibility of transformational change in interracial contact, the belief that their intimate affection for one another may still "be a catalytic agent conjoining two incompatible elements" (121).

If much of *Infants* treats parties as conduits of an only ever temporary suspension of the color line, the aftermath of Paul's suicide is one moment in which the novel, almost against itself, appears to yield to the possibility of a queer party that forms lasting bonds across racial divides. On the night of Paul's suicide, Ray learns that there had been a house party at what appears to be a predominantly white gay building where Paul had been living since moving to Greenwich Village. Guests had been imbibing "liquor and cocaine […] in order to experience a new thrill" and suddenly Paul had gone missing (174). Artie Fletcher, "a slender white youth" who is later revealed as Paul's roommate, immediately calls Raymond and implores him to come to the apartment building where others are grieving and in shock over Paul's suicide. Ray's experience at the Greenwich Village rooming house suggests that Paul may have found, if not happiness, friends who mourn him in death: "There were several people in the room, all strangely hushed and pale. A chair was vacated for [Ray] near the fireplace. No introductions were made. […] His guide, whom he presumed to be Artie Fletcher, told him the details" (174). When Raymond enters the bathroom where he faces "the gruesome yet fascinating spectacle" of Paul's death and discovers the soaked pages of Paul's manuscript, it is Artie Fletcher who "had salvaged as many of the sheets as possible," Artie Fletcher who has saved, for

Raymond and posterity, the title sheet and dedication page of *WU SING: THE GEISHA MAN*. In this final scene, we glimpse the ways in which the parties that circulate through both *Infants of the Spring* and *The Young and Evil* as ephemeral conduits for queer desire and community might also form unexpected and lasting bonds across the segregated geography of 1920s New York.

As they navigate parties across Greenwich Village and Harlem, the queer milieu of *Infants of the Spring* and *The Young and Evil* must also be wary of the legal authority and public scandal that policed queer sexual cultures in the early twentieth century. As ecstatic and explicit as they are, the aforementioned private house party and drag ball scenes from *The Young and Evil* are haunted from their very beginning by the threat of a police raid. As he hangs curtains over the window to ensure some measure of privacy and security, we learn that Julian has told some guests "to come by for a raid-party and they were prepared to taken to the station in the Black Maria" (55). Here, "a raid-party" implies less a decorative theme than it does an indication of the type of party — one in which homosexuals would be openly affectionate and dancing with one another — that might make its host and his revelers subject to criminal charges. As he enters the Hamilton Lodge Ball, Julian tells Frederick, "I hope we don't get arrested tonight" (151) and, though he doesn't get arrested, the image of "several policemen" charging into the ballroom are the last thing he sees before leaving (168). In *Infants*, the threat of public exposure and shame is not only a risk one runs with the police, but one hazarded by the notice of the local black press, whose coverage of the infamous donation party threatens to derail the careers of Raymond, Paul and the rest of their black bohemian cadre before

they've even launched. A report in the *New York Call* (likely a pseudonym for *The Amsterdam News*) charged that the young artists were "drinking and carousing with a low class of *whites from downtown*," alleging that the presence of types such as the "Greenwich Village Uranians" Paul brought to the party is merely "pandering to a current demand for the sensational, libeling *their own people, injuring them, insulting them* by being concerned only with Jezebels, pimps and *other underworld fauna*" (122, emphasis added). As they move through scenes of sexual criminalization on the street and in the courtroom — scenes common to much queer writing from the period, appearing in Blair Niles' *Strange Brother*, in Nugent's *Gentleman Jigger,* and hinted at in Fuller's *Bertram Cope's Year,* among others — the novels also testify to the unevenness (and sometimes sympathetic) treatment that queers received when faced with legal authority across the color line. In *The Young and Evil*, white queers are offered the possibility of leniency, while the courtroom drama at the center of *Infants* ultimately destroys its black victim and causes collateral damage for Raymond.

The court scene described near the end of *The Young and Evil* resolves via a twist, rather unique in the history of pre-Stonewall gay literature, by which queer defendants are exonerated of criminal charges by a sympathetic judge. After coming up short during a night of heavy drinking, Karel and Frederick decide to go cruising on Riverside Drive in an area well-known for clandestine encounters between same-sex interested men.[16] What happens next is confusing and vague but it is ultimately revealed that either Frederick or Karel – we never get a clear sense of which, or perhaps both – engaged in

[16] Chauncey claims that the area to which Karel and Frederick travel on Riverside Drive was one of the most well-known cruising spots in New York during the 1920s. The episode in the novel is based on Parker Tyler's experience of the same in 1930, when he was arrested after being "saved" by two policemen from sailors who were attacked he and a friend. See: Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Makings of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940*, 180, 187.

oral sex with a sailor who suddenly chases them with "his fly open with the white showing" (183). Frederick and Karel try to run away but are beaten by the sailor and one of his friends, after which all four are arrested by the police and booked on charges of disorderly conduct. As Frederick waits out a severe punishment (he's already gotten a "suspended sentence," likely for sexual solicitation), Karel, who seems somewhat adept and measured at handling such encounters with law enforcement shares a wink and a glance with the magistrate as the detective explains that Frederick and Karel had offered to pay the sailor for sex. After a few quick questions, the magistrate declares the charges dropped and, speaking to Karel, "leaned over and said sweetly but be more careful next time!" (191). While the scene records the legal and physical vulnerability of public sex practices common among gay men during the period, it uniquely does not conclude with punishment and suffering, beyond the earlier physical altercation. The shared glances, and especially the wink, between Karel and the magistrate suggest at once the possibility of a more lenient, humane judicial system as well as a queer presence in positions of authority that could mitigate the legal repercussions that often attended gay sex.

While this moment is regarded by Karel as proof that there is "at least one judge in the world […] with a sense of civilization" (191), it is not the only moment in which the novel identifies sympathetic authority figures. When Julian and Karel are out one night at a bar, they are recognized by a man who calls them over to his table to talk poetry. The man turns out to be a former chief of police and tells Karel to "come over to see me in New Jersey anytime" (53) after showing him his badge. When the former police chief invites Karel and Julian to join him in a game of strip poker with a single woman, Julian appears to be as much a potential sex partner as the girl. Such encounters

show the permeability of queerness in New York life, a permeability enabled and even permitted in some cases by the very authorities who were supposed to prevent it from happening. Taken together with moments throughout the novel in which characters fear or are aware of the potential threat law enforcement poses to their public reputations and physical bodies, these scenes function to paint a more nuanced and complicated portrait of queer legal persecution during the early twentieth century than we might expect.

That sort of nuance is entirely absent from the court room scene at the center of *Infants of the Spring* — one in which the black victim is charged with the rape of a minor and is given a three year jail sentence — and that lack of nuance may be attributed to the difference that race makes in queer encounters with the legal system. While the sexual crime with which the character Pelham is charged is heterosexual in nature, it can be read as a coded and layered teasing out of the threat that sexuality posed to the queer milieu of the Harlem Renaissance. The charges are supported with poetry Pelham had written to the young woman in Paul's signature style, borrowing an aesthetic already marked as homosexual. The charges and court scene that results may also be a coded reference to Thurman's previously mentioned arrest for soliciting gay sex in a public bathroom near at the 135th Street subway station.[17] As if to bring these two queer connections together, Raymond later reflects that the police should "lock Paul and me up, too" since they are "as guilty as [Pelham]," apparently of having illicit (and thus likely queer) sex given that neither of them is alleged to have had sex with a minor (155). Rather than a familiar and

[17] The incident scarred Thurman and briefly impacted his relationship with Arna Bontemps and the unidentified "minister" who Bontemps tapped to pay Thurman's legal fees. Thurman told a friend that this minster revealed that that "he too belonged," in Thurman's words, "to the male sisterhood" and demanded payment for his silence. According to Thurman's account, the author refused and told his blackmailer that "he could print it in the papers if he dared." See: Notten, *Wallace Thurman's Harlem Renaissance*, 96.

understanding face, Pelham and his gathered friends experience only the cold and bewildering chaos of the courtroom.

Though the trial concerns Pelham, the general scandal of the sexual accusations against him are linked to the queer notoriety developing around the denizens of Niggeratti Manor. This link has concrete repercussions for Raymond and the others in his queer black milieu. These repercussions mark a distinction from the relative ease with which Karel and Julian navigate encounters with law enforcement in *The Young and Evil*. Arguing that "this scandal" will "hurt all of you who lived here," Dr. Parkes and Samuel suggest that Raymond must leave the debauched rooming house to save himself and the fledging arts movement he leads from the "bad reputation" they are getting in the black and white press for their interracial parties (112, 122). After this encounter, Raymond pays Pelham a visit in "the Tombs," the moniker given to the municipal jail in lower Manhattan. The sight of his former friend, blubbering about being "ruined" and bringing shame upon his grandmother and the community for a consensual sexual relationship, works Ray into a rage and then a mental breakdown as he rushes from the jail into the subway and then aimlessly wanders the streets in one of *Infants*' more bizarre scenes.

> Raymond walked in confused circles. He had lost all sense of direction. Excruciating pains racked his head. […] Perspiration streamed down his face. Shrapnels of flame ricocheted from the pavement to sear his weakening body. He grew dizzy, distraught, and unexpectedly found himself leaning against a building. He felt an urge to bore into its surface and lose himself in its chilled immunity. […] He pressed harder and hard against the surface of the building. After what seemed hours of effort, it gave way, and his body began to penetrate into its stone. He became chilled. The buildings across the way toppled crazily downward. Let them fall. He was safe in his cranny. The protective stone entombed him. He had achieved Nirvana, had finally found a sanctuary, finally found escape from the malevolent world which sought to destroy him. (128)

Soon afterwards, Ray wakes up in the Bellevue mental ward, having been discovered unconscious and incoherent in the street. Ray's nervous breakdown and hallucination reveal his internalization of Pelham's unjust imprisonment, an event that becomes evidence of a world that "sought to destroy him" as well as his friend. The waves of embarrassed hallucination and fear here are markedly different from the more resigned and ultimately uneventful encounter in *The Young and Evil*. As both physical and mental violence, the legal system assaults not only Pelham, but Ray and the rest of his friends as a reminder of the public and private peril to which interracial sex put queer black artists.

Memorial Aesthetics: Camp Realism and the Scrapbook Novel

In addition to a shared investment in scenes of parties and encounters with law enforcement, *The Young and Evil* and *Infants of the Spring* also share a search for new aesthetic forms and positions through which the novels capture that life. As novels about artists and bound up with the question of literary production, they self-consciously address a persistent aesthetic and ideological struggle for representation that challenged the dominant modes and traditions of their day. Working through a dizzying array of forms — chiefly the *roman a clef*, but also stream of consciousness, realism, collage, camp, romance, fairytale, myth, and episodic rather than teleological narrative — both novels use genre hybridity to capture their ethnographic and memorial accounts of queer cultures slipping from view as a resurgent "revulsion against gay life" gripped the nation.[18] The unfinished and open nature of the authors' search for a form that could represent queer urban life in all of its complexity and ambivalence can be seen not only in

[18] Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Makings of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940*, 353.

these dazzling formal experiments, but also in the frequent scenes in which the protagonist-narrators struggle to write or imagine ways in which their community might be held together.[19] By turning our attention to the significance of form and the struggle for form that animates both novels, I want to identify their shared aesthetic strategies — camp realism and the scrapbook —and to understand how those strategies help articulate queer desire and community across the color line. By the term camp realism, I emphasize the usefulness of a particular gay male cultural practice[20] for the description, dialog and mode of relation to the world that binds affect to form in these novels and which thwarts

[19] While that struggle is central to these two novels, it is also a feature of many of the other novels surveyed in previous chapters: McKay's Ray struggles to write about the male cultures he encounters in the diaspora, Barnes and Cather's characters struggle to make sense of and record their communities, Larsen's characters wrangle with how to understand and articulate the views and desires that put them at odds with mainstream black community, Prime-Stevenson's protagonist invents counterfactual racial histories in order to insert his gay self into them, and Nugent's Alex struggles to make any sort of art.

[20] There has been so much written on camp as a gay male practice that reviewing it in full would be perhaps tedious here. The strains of thought that I would wish to highlight in this context, however, are those of Susan Sontag, Andrew Britton and Richard Dyer.

Sontag is, of course, foundational in this regard, particularly her observations that camp is "a vision of the world in terms of style," "the theatricalization of experience" and the "sensibility of failed seriousness" that is the province of gay men (56, 62). Writing against "the periodic insanities of Susan Sontag's essay" (140), Andrew Britton teases out the "anesthetic" function of camp as a cultural practice forged in the social limitations of the gay male subject position that enables the subject to exist in oppressive conditions while "enjoying the illusory confidence that one is flouting them" (138). In his essay on camp as a kind of survival strategy, Richard Dyer notes that camp often becomes a mode of suturing gay male community together. "[Camp] is a distinctive way of behaving and of relating to each other that we [gay men] have evolved," Dyer explains, noting that camp's political valence is ambivalent, moving between progressive and reactionary poles. "To have a good camp together gives you a tremendous sense of identification and belonging" (110-111). Yet, Dyer also worries that those who are uncomfortable with camp's particular mode of looking at the world, especially with regard to its flouting of gender norms by "screaming queens" (111), might mean that not all gay men can feel this sense of connecting in camping.

See: Andrew Britton, "'For Interpretation: Notes Against Camp,'" in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject*, ed. Fabio Cleto (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 136–42; Richard Dyer, "'It's Being So Camp as Keeps Us Going'," in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject*, ed. Fabio Cleto (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 110–16; Susan Sontag, "Notes on 'Camp,'" in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject*, ed. Fabio Cleto (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 53–65.

the grip of a tragic or sentimental strain that these authors regard with suspicion. These representational aims are organized by and adapted to the scrapbook aesthetic, by which I indicate not only the novels' episodic and loose narrative form but also their investment in capturing scenes and personalities through the artists' *romans a clef*. Since camp realism and the scrapbook aesthetic are most obvious in *The Young and Evil*, I will start with an exploration of how they function in that novel before mapping their homologous usage, if slightly different aesthetic function, in *Infants of the Spring*.

Studies of *The Young and Evil* that address the novel's aesthetics usually do so in view of recuperating something other than the anxiety about how to hold together and represent queer community that I am more expressly concerned with here. While critics have noted the novel's camp style as related to its somewhat nebulous "archival tendency" to capture the grand vision of "a map to the modern queer social world" from a "sexually ethnic perspective," such studies usually divert from the question of *The Young and Evil*'s representational and memorial aesthetics — how to identify and preserve the image and culture of a fleeting social formation —for contemporary queer life and culture.[21] Alexander Howard identifies *The Young and Evil* as the "seminal text of camp modernism," arguing that its focus on "making fun out of" rather than "merely making fun" of the foibles that attend early twentieth century gay life help it "give voice to hitherto marginalized 'others'" and articulate "polymorphous, queer desire in modernist

[21] Michael Schmidt, "The Materialism of the Encounter: Queer Sociality and Capital in Modern Literature" (Wayne State University, 2013), 137; Sam See, "Making Modernism New: Queer Mythology in The Young and Evil," *English Literary History* 76 (2009): 1075; Schmidt, "The Materialism of the Encounter: Queer Sociality and Capital in Modern Literature," 134.

literature and aesthetics" as a rejoinder to larger concerns about surrealism.[22] Sam See's profoundly considered work on the novel focuses on its adaptation of dominant cultural mythologies, a strategy that places it both within and demonstrably outside the bounds of a "representative modernist text," in order to "blur the line between the strange and the common, the queer and the mainstream, in American modernism."[23] Joseph Allen Boone's landmark reading of the novel identifies its primary purpose as demonstrating the fluidity of identifications bound up in the moniker "queer," prior to the crystallization of queer identity post-WWII. The novel's break with "organic models of plot development" provides a sense of queer synchronicity through which spaces across New York become sites of queer simultaneity and that the characters' "random movements" throughout the city enable them to shed, as characters and modernist queer archetypes, "all dominant conceptions of fidelity, relationship and even friendship" in forging its "queer vision of urban life."[24] Perhaps more generously, Michael Schmidt lauds the novel for making "a profound case for the encounter of experimental form and queer sociality for understanding capital."[25] These studies use the novel as an occasion to discuss something other than the problem that is seemingly its central concern: the search for a form that could capture the multivalent life of queer community that it records.

These claims run counter to much criticism that treats *The Young and Evil* as a novel that refuses the very concept of gay identity or community. This has been the claim

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[22] Alexander Howard, "Camp, Modernism, and Charles Henri Ford," *Modernism/Modernity* 23, no. 1 (January 2016): 11–13.

[23] See, "Making Modernism New: Queer Mythology in The Young and Evil," 1074, 1076.

[24] Boone, *Libidinal Currents: Sexuality and the Shaping of Modernism*, 251–65.

[25] Schmidt, "The Materialism of the Encounter: Queer Sociality and Capital in Modern Literature," 128.

of both Scott Herring and Joseph Boone, who use the text as an example of a radical "queer" politics that refuses the fixity of all identities, queer or otherwise. Such claims usually turn, so to speak, on Karel's observation that Louis, one of the ostensibly heterosexual men who becomes Karel's abusive and opportunistic lover, "turning queer" (124). While this moment certainly speaks to the fluidity of sexuality and sexual identification during the period, there is a fair bit of distance between "turning" queer and being queer in the way that Louis and Karel understand themselves. The other oft-cited refusal of identity is attributed to Louis, who proclaims that he is "waiting for the day […] when I can destroy all definitions" (112). Karel's reply — "[b]ut until then […] [definitions] are the most that matter" (112) — fixes the particular position in which both characters, and queers more generally, found themselves in an era of burgeoning visibility and identitarian uncertainty. Both characters, especially Julian, spend much of the novel thinking about what their same-sex preference *means* as an identity or as the basis for community they see taking shape around them and between each other. The struggle to define the community is reflected, in part, by the sense that there is no single thing that holds this community together, no constitutive "glue" as Julian will later lament at a drag ball. In *The Young and Evil*, Ford and Tyler set out to craft their own glue out of gay male cultural practices and a scrapbook aesthetic that makes the novel a repository for a kaleidoscopic representation of gay life in New York in the 1920s and 1930s.

The novel's opening scene combines camp realism and the scrapbook aesthetic with particular density, providing comic and hallucinatory snapshots of a queer community by turns bewildering and alluring. Adapting the language of the fairytale and

Greek myth to the depiction of lesbians and gay men, the narrator places Karel in a Greenwich Village gay bar, surrounded by "a fairy prince," "one of those mythological creatures knowns as Lesbians," a "nice fat old bullfrog" who offers him a "cup of tea" in exchange for reciting some poems, and a gang of "little girls and boys" joined by a train of "naiads and a satyr" (11-12). After Karel secures a date with the fairy prince for later that evening and, after a bit of bar hopping, the episode concludes with Karel being ejected from a cafeteria by a "Big Black Bear" and then escaping a "horrid ogre" as he "gathered his hips and fled with his companions to a haven—a private home—where they ate sandwiches and drank coffee instead of tea" (13). While the "fairy prince" and "Lesbians" clearly signify homosexuality to a broad audience, the remaining taxonomy of queer fauna relies on a camp codex that is familiar to queer readers past and present.[26] The laughter and frivolity of the "little girls and boys" who are in fact adult men and women, camps on the playful irreverence of gay cultures (usually from a gay male perspective) as well as the tendency toward infantilization in gay culture (where men in their thirties, for example, are still referred to as "boys" or, in the slang spelling, "bois") that serves community ideals of eternal youth and a commitment to avoiding the serious and somber. In this sense, the scene reads less as hallucinatory nonsense and more as camp realism, the use of a gay male cultural practice to capture what it *feels* like to be gay and how gay men make sense – and make fun of – their experience in the world.

This sort of affective transmission is particularly noted in the exchanges between Julian, Karel and their gay friends, exchanges in which the rhythm and texture of gay life

[26] The taxonomy Ford and Tyler use to describe queer phenotypes in *The Young and Evil* is still very much in practice today. The naiads, bears, ogres, fairies and bullfrogs that Karel confronts at The Round Table are the correlates to the taxonomy of twinks, bears, trolls, femmes, wolves and otters that identify a range of body types and sexual interests in contemporary gay bars.

is rendered through irreverent, campy banter and self-presentation. Examples of the manner in which camp affect saturates the text can be seen in the discussions of Karel's elaborate make-up routines, especially his ability to pencil male eyebrows into "almost any expression: Clara Bow, Joan Crawford, Norma Shearer, etc." (56). The reference to Joan Crawford — perhaps *the* single greatest, and most frequently cited, figure in the archive of gay male camp[27]— functions on multiple levels to suggest the character's delight in genderbending as well as his acute interest in the screen idols of his day, especially those whose on- and off-screen histrionics correspond to his embrace of excess. These idols are the models for the larger-than-life affect of the novel and its characters, characters who wish, as Karel promises to do for Julian, to be painted "up to the high gods" (55), finding in their performance a kind of power and command of respect elsewhere denied them elsewhere.

These shared aesthetic ideals of excess also inform the campy banter that is at once the gay community's own special code in *The Young and Evil* and the relational practice that binds them together. Camp, in other words, is a shared way of seeing the world and relating to it. A conversation at the Harlem Drag ball between Tony, Julian, Frederick and Vincent, the evening's emcee, illustrates this point particularly well. Tony, who is turned out in a black satin dress embellished with "long pearls and pearl drops" at its flared base, is confronted by Frederick and Julian, who are not in drag.

> Tony dear aren't you overdressed! asked Frederick.
> I suppose *you* would say overdressed Tony answered but I'm not Sheba surrounded by food and Mary what you look like in that outfit he said to Julian. Look at her!

[27] Crawford's centrality to camp culture can be marked not only in the ubiquity of drag performances drawn from scenes in *Mommie Dearest*, but also in David Halperin's frequent citation of Crawford as a foundational icon for gay identity. See: David M. Halperin, *How To Be Gay* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012), 149–86.

> Vincent had on a white satin blouse and black breeches. Dear I'm master of ceremonies tonight and you should have come in drag you'd have gotten a prize. He had large eyes with a sex-life all their own and claimed to be the hardest boiled queen on Broadway. Frederick he said you look like something Lindbergh dropped on the way across. Dry yourself Bella!
>
> When are you going to remove your mask and reveal a row of chamber pots Frederick replied in his resonant voice. (153)

Frederick's suggestion that Tony is "overdressed" is a flattering remark on the ostentatiousness of the black dress and a celebration of the very excess that Tony is trying to achieve (this is how one *wins* a drag ball, after all). Tony's rejoinder chastises Frederick for not dressing up and suggests that, in fact, Tony could have been even more excessive, doing himself up as the legendary Queen of Sheba. As he turns to Julian, Tony genders him female, "Mary […] Look at her!", as a way of camping on gender identity and compliment his friend's beauty. The seemingly caustic exchange that follows between Frederick and Vincent may recall for contemporary readers the queer art of the insult known as shade — a term made popular by the transgender performers and drag queens of Jenny Livingston's *Paris is Burning* (1988) following its thorough absorption in mainstream contemporary gay culture — but its excess and gender play are much more the domain of camp. Commenting on one another's appearance, the men are having fun, indeed *camping on*, the standards of beauty that define both their lives and that of the female icons and divas they adore and wish to model themselves after. In such ways, camp both identifies these men as members of the gay community and, in their exchanges with one another, holds them together in it.

While Ford and Tyler work alongside their queer and modernist counterparts — both Gertrude Stein and Djuna Barnes are mentioned in the novel, and both were essential to the promotion of Ford's career— they are also at pains to mark out an

aesthetic of their own. The premium the novel and its characters place on individuality is made clear in Karel's address to a symposium on political freedom:

> "On the face of it, I am not concerned one way or the other about political freedom, because I have been accustomed to think of myself as an individual and not as a member of the mass of society. […] To the ordinary person, then, political freedom may mean in pretty accurate substance an economic serenity which will give him a comfortable home, money to go to the movies every night, to go to Coney Island on Sunday, to buy a radio, and even a fur coat if such his heart desires. But to the slightly above average person, the means for the satisfaction of his desires are more complicated, because his desires are more complicated and potential. Political freedom for this person signifies his lonely braving of contrary spiritual elements, his gauntlet-down challenges to ideas, which may be friendly or inimical, life-giving or deadly." (118, 122-123)

The uniquely clear exposition (for this novel) of Karel's speech nails down a political vision of queer individualism that separates homosexuals such as Karel from "the mass of society" in view of their pursuit of "desires [that] are more complicated and potential" than those of the common lot. The suggestiveness of Karel's proposal, taken together with Julian's observation that his homosexuality is inseparable from his art and poetry, suggests an individualist aesthetic freedom that is also the experiment of the novel: to talk about gay cultures and experiences with all of the vibrancy and delirium with which they are experienced by the autobiographical subjects. What palpates at the heart of *The Young and Evil* is a desire for representation, and that desire is met with the longing for an aesthetic freedom and dexterity to pursue that representation in new forms specific to the culture in question. This desire for expressive and political freedom is likewise an animating concern for *Infants of the* Spring, which seeks out a queer black aesthetic of its own against the Du Boisian and Lockean prescriptions of its day.

While Wallace Thurman's *Infants of the Spring* may appear less formally innovative on its surface than *The Young and Evil*, its combination of a camp sensibility

and relatively frank discussion of homosexuality (Paul's, at least, if not Raymond's) mark it as a radical departure from the tradition of African American letters in the 19th and early 20th centuries. This supremely self-conscious novel records, in addition to the black bohemian milieu it documents, a search for a queer black aesthetic that could exist free from race, cultural traditions and the burdens that both place upon sexual and artistic expression. The mutual constitution of homosexuality and race in early-twentieth-century America, as Siobhan Somerville has argued,[28] only further informs the dual challenges faced by writers such as Thurman who set out to define an individual aesthetic all their own. In kind, scholars have tended to relate the narrator's struggle to produce art with his struggle to manage and avow his queer romance with Stephen, the fictional version of Thurman's bisexual lover, Harald Jan Stefansson.[29] The challenge of finding a form that could express this wish for racial and sexual liberation — the latter often related to the former in *Infants* — might be understood as *the* central tension animating the novel and the coterie of artists to which it gives representation.

The narrator's account of Raymond's struggle to produce a meaningful art that captures the ecstatic essence of the culture he sees blossoming (and later, decaying) around him is pointedly captured in a reverie from the middle of the novel:

> [Raymond's] was an adolescent brain. It had not matured sufficiently to exercise caution and restraint. It had seized upon attractive brilliants, fed upon predigested

[28] See: Somerville, *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture*.

[29] See: David Blackmore, "'That Unreasonable Restless Feeling': the Homosexual Subtexts of Nella Larsen's Passing," *African American Review* 26, no. 3 (Autumn 1992): 475–84; Michael L. Cobb, "Insolent Racing, Rough Narrative: The Harlem Renaissance's Impolite Queers," *Callaloo* 23, no. 1 (Winter 2000): 328–51; Granville Ganter, "Decadence, Sexuality and the Bohemian Vision of Wallace Thurman," *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the U.S.* 28, no. 2 (Summer 2003): 83–104; James Kelley, "Blossoming in Strange New Forms: Male Homosexuality and the Harlem Renaissance," *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 80, no. 4 (Winter 1997): 498–517.

> cereals, and made no use of cauterizing gastric fluids. Yet there was *something fundamental there striving for expression and relief*, something which protested against unprincipled inundation *and unprincipled expression* – something which cautioned him to take inventory and invite maturity.
>
> Despite his superiority complex he was different from most people he knew, *precociously different*. The difficulty being that he was wont to *pervert* rather than to train and cultivate this difference. It was something to be paraded rather than something to be carefully nurtured. It was something to release half-cocked in order to shock rather than something to utilize essentially.
>
> (90-91, emphasis added)

While Stephen and Raymond will often resolve this murky sense of "something fundamental" into racial difference, the text's ambiguity at moments such as the above and its pointed choice of words suggests a sexual undercurrent. The writer's "adolescent brain," temporally located in a moment of development especially marked by the arrival of sexual interest and erotic consciousness, strives for "expression and relief," terms that suggest pent up libidinal energy. The tension between the overwhelming force of that feeling the narrator longs to express with "maturity" rather than "unprincipled" action joins with his self-diagnosis as "precociously different" and his tendency to "pervert rather than to train and cultivate" is one resonant with feelings of thrownness and disorientation in pre-Stonewall queer experience. Here, the cultural tradition of infantilizing a queer desire that does not follow the norms of heterosexual life[30] – an infantilization that homosexual culture, and particularly gay male homosexual culture, ambivalently embraces — meets the pressures of producing something mature and

[30] On this point, Elizabeth Freeman's work on queerness' encounter with "chrononormativity" and Kathryn Bond Stockton's work on the "horizontal" development of the queer child as opposed to the "vertical" development of the heterosexual child are especially instructive for exploring both the vectors of queer development and their historical treatment within an American and Transatlantic cultural tradition. See: Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010); Kathryn Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child; Or, Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2009).

lasting in literature. The tendency toward camp that is seen in the novel's satirical send up of the "Niggeratti" and in how its black queer characters navigate their daily lives might here be associated with the embrace of "shock" and display ("something to be paraded") that do not live up to the standards of august Western literature that Raymond (and Thurman) has internalized. The problem, then, is to find a literary form that can capture "something fundamental" in an impactful, lasting way.

In this search for a marriage of form and content that could communicate Thurman's experience, the author and his milieu struggled against the rather limited range of aesthetic possibilities offered by contemporary black cultural leaders. While queer decadence might today be one of the quintessential aesthetic sympathies we remember from the Harlem Renaissance — an aesthetic Granville Ganter identifies with "taking pleasure in what one should ostensibly not"[31] — that strain emerged against the propagandistic and classical aesthetics championed by the literary lions of early twentieth century African American culture: W.E.B. Du Bois and Alain Locke. The "Ruskin and Pater of their age,"[32] Du Bois and Locke were often at odds in their aesthetic prescriptions for a new black art forged in the fires of modernity, though they found common cause in rebuking the "decadence" (often a code word for queer and sexually explicit material) they saw developing in the work of New Negro writers during an era of black visibility and progressive racial political movements. Du Bois, who famously declared that "all art is propaganda and ever shall be,"[33] remained notably suspicious of a black art that too

[31] Ganter, "Decadence, Sexuality and the Bohemian Vision of Wallace Thurman," 95.

[32] Kelley, "Blossoming in Strange New Forms: Male Homosexuality and the Harlem Renaissance," 507.

heavily emphasized the pursuit of aesthetic beauty rather than racial content.[34] Contra Du Bois, Locke advocated for a new black literature that would combine the primitivist aesthetics of African origin with a classical worship of beauty characteristic of ancient Greek art. Locke's position was adopted in the poetry of Countee Cullen, who James Kelley observes "sought to link [black Americans'] African heritage to ancient Greek traditions in order to create 'a cultural context for black homosexuality.'"[35]

The "Niggeratti," in life and as represented in *Infants*, rejected these prescriptions for their art, refusing to embrace a homogenized vision of black political identity and relation to African origins, but also rejecting the politics of respectability that dismissed homosexuality (and sexuality more generally) as a verboten topic for black art. In *Infants*, the tension between these aesthetic programs is portrayed in the arguments that break out during a salon hosted by Dr. A. L. Parkes (Locke). Parkes gathers the black bohemian artists together in order to reorient their aesthetic energies in more productive, less salacious and less overtly sexual directions. At the first (and last) meeting, Dr. Parkes offers his mission statement for "a new generation" of black art:

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[33] W. E. B. Du Bois, "Criteria of Negro Art," in *The Oxford W.E.B. Du Bois Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 328.

[34] Du Bois' views on literature's political potential wobbled throughout the 1920s, the decade during which he launched the *Crisis* literary contest before suspending it in 1927 over concerns that submissions weren't sufficiently political or of much artistic quality. During this period, Du Bois openly contradicted Locke's classicalist emphasis on the pursuit of the beautiful and derided the eroticism of New Negro writing. Yet, in 1928, he published *Dark Princess,* a story of global revolt against white supremacy anchored by the romance between a young black doctor and his lover Kautilya, a highly-eroticized fantasy of an Indian princess. For his part, Thurman dubbed the novel "heavy-handed […] with propaganda," evidence that whatever artistry Du Bois had was "stifled in order that the propagandist might thrive." See: Wallace Thurman, "High, Low, Past, and Present: Review of The Walls of Jericho, Quicksand, and Adventures of an African Slaver," in *The Collected Writings of Wallace Thurman: A Harlem Renaissance Reader* (New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 218–20.

[35] Kelley, "Blossoming in Strange New Forms: Male Homosexuality and the Harlem Renaissance," 505.

> "On you depends the future of your race. Because of your concerted storming up Parnassus, new vistas will be spread open to the entire race […] You are finding both an escape and a weapon in beauty, which beauty when created by you will cause the American white man to re-estimate the Negro's value to his civilization, cause him to realize that the American black man is too valuable, too potential of utilitarian accomplishment, to be kept downtrodden and segregated." […] "[T]o accomplish this, your pursuit of beauty must be vital and lasting. I am somewhat fearful of the decadent strain which seems to have filtered into most of your work. Oh, yes, I know you are children of the age and all that, but you must not, like your paleface contemporaries, wallow in the mire of post-Victorian license. You have too much at stake. You must have ideals. You should become … well, let me suggest your going back to your racial roots, and cultivating a healthy paganism based on African traditions." (145)

Parkes' manifesto combines Locke's aesthetic ideals with Du Bois' investment in the value of black art as political propaganda. The classical pursuit of beauty becomes at once an "escape" from and "weapon" for a war for racial equality as Locke charges black literature with exploring "new vistas" that are quickly limited to those that will "cause the American white man to re-estimate the Negro's value to *his* civilization." This invocation of an art that appeals to a white politics of respectability as a vehicle for black uplift is reemphasized in Parkes' demand that the black bohemians not lose themselves "in the mire of post-Victorian license" — an allusion, no doubt, to the explicit queerness of Wilde and the European Decadents, as well as their American counterparts in highly popular figures like Carl Van Vechten. Instead, he suggests, they should return to their "racial roots" to foment "a healthy paganism based on African traditions." The frequent references throughout the episode to ancient Greek culture ("Parnassus") indicates that the proposed "healthy paganism" might be channeled not through African aesthetic forms, but rather through Anglo-European forms. This program of simultaneously assimilating and homogenizing black art was repellent to figures like Thurman and Nugent, who

longed to create an art on their own terms, freed from the burden of race and thus liberated to describe the complexity of queer black life in Harlem.

This rejection is most pronounced in the narrator's satirical takedown of DeWitt Clinton (Countee Cullen) and Sweetie May (Zora Neale Hurston), guests who concretize the aesthetic approaches championed by Locke. The image of a union of Western art and pagan African traditions can be glimpsed in the coupling of "Negro poet laureate" DeWitt Clinton and "his *fidelis achates*" David Holloway (Cullen's intimate friend and possible lover, Harold Jackman), who is "acclaimed the most handsome Negro in Harlem by a certain group of whites" (143). The reference to the intimate friendship between Aeneas and Achates in Greco-Roman myth here not only playfully suggests a homosexual relationship between the two men, but suggests a connection between Clinton's cultural distinction as his race's poet laureate and his ability to assimilate black content with a white-identified Western tradition. Clinton proposes that the contemporary black artist "must go back to his pagan heritage for inspiration and to the old masters for form" (146), a union that the real-life Cullen worked to achieve in his poetry by joining representations of a mythological African heritage to the traditional Western verse forms, as he does in the landmark poem, "Heritage." Sweetie May offers another approach, and one treated far more caustically by the narrator. Her "turgid and unpolished" work attracts a "paleface audience" because it features "darkies [who] always smiled through their tears, sang spirituals on the slightest provocation, and performed buck dances when they should have been working" (142). The appeal of Sweetie May's work relies on what the narrator deems a caricature of black folk culture that "lived up to [whites'] conception of what a typical Negro should be" (142). Derided as an opportunistic hack, Sweetie May

is figured as a kind of aesthetic conman, "indifferent to literary creation" and "bored" by the "intricacies of writing," admitting that she doesn't "know a tinker's damn about art" and could "care less about it" (142). In this latter turn, she also hints at a black queer selling out that Raymond wants to avoid, claiming that she does a good business "find[ing] queer places for whites to go in Harlem" (142).

Raymond and Paul's response to Parkes' proposition offers us their pointed refusal to be shaped by African or European traditions incommensurate with the individualist ethos they wished to bring out in their work. Paul provocatively challenges Parkes' call for a "healthy paganism" by proclaiming that he knows no "old black pagan heritage," being a mix of German, English, Indian and African lineages. "How can I go back to African ancestors when their blood is so diluted and their country and times so far away?" he asks a stunned Dr. Parkes, "I have no conscious affinity for them at all" (146). While this statement is usually taken as evidence of Paul's race traitorism, a feature the novel suggests several times is linked to his homosexuality,[36] it more properly addresses a refusal to be reduced to a uniform black experience in which Paul maintains no aesthetic or political investment.[37] Along similar lines, Raymond offers that there is really no "reason why *all* Negro artists should consciously and deliberately dig into African soil

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[36] Michael Cobb points to the ways in which "the queer" is often rendered "as the lazy race traitor who laughs at inappropriate times" in then-contemporary readings of the Harlem Renaissance and ever since. Similarly, Elisa Glick notes the ways in which black dandyism was often understood as an "attempt to fulfill the wish of racial transcendence and as a mode of white aspiration/identification." See: Cobb, "Insolent Racing, Rough Narrative: The Harlem Renaissance's Impolite Queers," 345; Elisa Glick, "Harlem's Queer Dandy: African-American Modernism and the Artifice of Blackness," *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 49, no. 3 (Fall 2003): 423.

[37] It is interesting to note that, during this period, it is primarily queer black artists — Claude McKay, Richard Bruce Nugent, Wallace Thurman and even Countee Cullen — who call into question not only the notion of access to an African ancestral heritage, but the very fantasy of a unified "African" cultural tradition from which artists might draw.

for inspiration and material unless they actually wish to do so" (146), arguing for the black artist's freedom from the burden of representing blackness. Theirs, indeed, are uplift politics of an entirely different sort. When another guest voices Du Bois' yearning for a black art composed of "militant fighters" rather than those who "hide away in ivory towards and prate of beauty," enjoining the gathered artists to "fashion cudgels and bludgeons rather than sensitive plants" for the Communist fight against global capital (147), Raymond rejects this appeal for a propagandistic art in favor of a supreme individualism.

> "Individuality is what we should strive for. Let each seek his own salvation. To me, a wholesale flight back to Africa or a wholesale allegiance to Communism or a wholesale adherence to an antiquated and for the most part ridiculous propagandistic program are all equally futile and unintelligent." (148)

In this moment, Thurman reveals not only the aesthetic innovation of the program he proposes for black artists in the twentieth century but also demonstrates the incredible difficulty of locating that aesthetic outside of and beyond traditional political forms of art. Seeking a literature that can capture the complexity of the black queer life without turning it into a lurid spectacle for white consumption is the ideal toward which *Infants* reaches. Breaking from a number of traditions, the novel yearns for and wrestles with a form to express its new possibilities for black life and culture.

Like *The Young and Evil*, *Infants of the Spring* defers a narrative schema based on plot development in favor of an episodic format that delivers on the novel's documentarian and ethnographic concerns. While there are a few clear developmental arcs across the novel — the blossoming and decay of Raymond and Stephen's intimate friendship, the struggle and eventual ejection of the black bohemians from their home, and the interspersed scenes of Pelham's legal trial in the second half of the narrative —

the majority of the novel moves from one interior scene to the next with little apparent connection. Rather than move the plot along, those scenes function as moments for glossing a character's backstory in ways that flesh out the diverse portraits of black bohemian experience that are the focus of *Infants*, helping us to understand (along with the novel and its narrator) who these characters are, what motivates them and what ultimately leads to their downfall. In this sense, the novel is less interested in showing progress or development than it is in capturing a particular kind of stasis punctuated by oscillating moments of intense ecstasy and misery that eventually lead to the dissolution of Niggeratti Manor as both domicile and cultural institution. Just as the characters live entirely moment-to-moment with only fleeting glimpses at a bigger picture or grander narrative, so too does the episodic movement of Thurman's novel. The rather abrupt and melodramatic conclusion of the novel with Paul's elaborate suicide — a campy scene that will be discussed in greater detail below — forces an end to an open and wandering novel that moves from one character study to the next primarily in the everyday context of Raymond's apartment with occasional excursions to the outside world. The result is a novel that reads like the scrapbook Julian describes in *The Young and Evil*, a collection of memories and personalities that preserves a culture and coterie that had thoroughly dissipated by the time Thurman set them down on the page, a literary photo album that vouchsafes the life of the Harlem Renaissance for a future generation.

One way that *Infants* manages its anxiety over the life that is slipping away just as it is being recorded can be located in its camp sensibility or caricature that lends it a realist flavor and defangs moments of tragedy with (albeit dark) humor. Thurman's use of two distinct modes of camp can be most clearly seen in the characters of the diva

chanteuse, Eustace, and the dandyish dilettante, Paul. Eustace offers a form of what Susan Sontag terms "naïve camp" constituted by a subject's production of a "seriousness that fails,"[38] while Paul emblematizes a self-conscious, active camp style that inverts scenes of abjection and struggle into moments of superiority and delight. In these modes, we can see that the characterization of Eustace is a moment in which Thurman is *camping on* the figure of William Service Bell, while his characterization of Paul is an example of a character who *camps on* the world around him. In order to parse these bifurcating camp modes in the novel and to understand how they join together in their invocation of shock and the grotesque as a mode of resistance against the specter of damage that attends Thurman's tale, I will explore each character's camp portrait separately.

Thurman's descriptions of Eustace transform the singer into one of camp culture's most cherished icons — the melodramatic diva — as a way of demonstrating how a queeny black queer imaginatively stages himself beyond the limitations imposed by a racist world. It also demonstrates how camp's embrace of the grotesque operates as a strategy for softening scenes of trauma and tragedy. This staging and its effects can be seen in the opening description of Eustace:

> The word elegant described him perfectly. His every movement was ornate and graceful. He had acquired his physical bearing and mannerisms from mid-Victorian matinee idols. No one knew his correct age. His face was lined and drawn. An unidentified scalp disease had rendered him bald on the right side of his head. To cover this mistake of nature, he let the hair on the left side grow long, and combed it sidewise over the top of his head. The effect was both useful and bizarre. Eustace also had a passion for cloisonné bric-a-brac, misty etchings, antique silver pieces, caviar, and rococo jewelry. And his most treasured possession was an onyx ring, the size of a robin's egg, which he wore on his right index finger. (9-10)

[38] Sontag, "Notes on 'Camp,'" 59.

Something of a pre-Liberace Liberace, Eustace cuts a figure bedecked in ostentatious (and entirely fake) jewelry that pairs the high camp of drag gender-bending with the grotesque that is often also at the center of drag performance. The bizarre nature of Eustace's self-presentation, one forged in what the narrator sees as a humorous imitation of "matinee idols" who are often an object of camp's parodic energies, helps this particular black queer compensate for the physical and racial challenges he faces in mainstream society. This diva performance, elsewhere elaborated in descriptions of Eustace's habit of entering and exiting with the "soft swish of silk" from his "ubiquitous green dressing gown," helps the singer build a vision of himself unbound to race and dedicated simply to the Anglo-European music traditions he wishes to perform (106, 22). It is this performance that enables him to refuse to sing spirituals on the grounds that "I have no relationship with the people who originated them;" as an opera diva, Eustace is "a musician" who finds that "spirituals are most certainly not music" (64). Yet much as a comedic drag queen's grotesque femininity camps on gender and the culture of beauty, Thurman's descriptions delight in revealing Eustace as a grotesque source of humor and fascination for the novel.

The humorousness of Thurman's camp grotesques often serve, in classical camp fashion, to attenuate the brutality and tragedy that otherwise surrounds the black bohemians' lives as starving artists who want to provide their public something more than racial caricatures for either white gawkers' consumption or the smug satisfaction of progressive politics. In one of Eustace's final scenes, Thurman portrays the tragedy of the singer's failure to woo audiences even after agreeing to sing the spirituals he had earlier forsworn in a way that makes it almost too comedic to be read as the tragedy it is.

> As they reached the door leading to his room, the aimless banging ceased. They hesitated before knocking. Listening, they heard the sound of tearing paper. Eustace seemed to be in a frenzy. […] Attired in his green dressing gown, Eustace was frantically destroying every sheet of music atop his piano. […]
>
> He turned on them angrily. His seamed face was more drawn than ever. Tears streamed down the wrinkles, forming little rivulets. Hi hair was awry, exposing his usually hidden bald spot.
>
> "Get out. Get out and take your spirituals with you. Get out, I say." There was a flurry of torn paper. […]
>
> "I hope you're all happy. You urged me to sing spirituals. It was the only way I could gain a hearing. Well, I sang them and they…" his voice broke into a sob, "they said I wasn't good enough. That competition was too great … and … I didn't get a chance to sing Schubert."
>
> He dropped to the piano bench. His head and arms slumped to the keys. A jumbled mélange of discords drowned out his sobs. (159)

The scene is tragic, to be sure, the final failure in a long parade of failures Eustace has experienced trying to be taken seriously as a singer of classical music. However, there is something about the melodrama of the scene that renders it almost comical, an object for camp akin to Joan Crawford's over-the-top performance in *Mommie Dearest* (1981) or Elizabeth Berkeley's mad exhortations in *Showgirls* (1995). In place of Crawford's wire hangers or Berkeley's bouncy curls and fists, Eustace cuts a similarly frightening yet hysterical figure as he shouts at Raymond. The final image of Eustace's hands crashing down on the piano keys in "a jumbled mélange of discords" similarly recalls a camp sensibility in the diva's dramatic collapse. In such moments, Thurman's camping on the character of Eustace leavens scenes of abjection with biting humor.

If Eustace's character is an example of naïve camp, Paul's is a self-conscious camp that enables the subject to move through the world and to face challenges without seriousness, making fun of and making fun out of life's struggles. The novel's first

description of Paul — "It was his habit never to wear a necktie because he knew that his neck was too well modeled to be hidden from public gaze. He wore no sox either, nor underwear, and those few clothes he did deign to affect were musty and disheveled" (9) — captures his combination of aristocratic performance and downmarket behavior that mirrors camp's embrace of high and low culture. His embrace of Oscar Wilde as "the greatest man that ever lived" (11) signals at once his queerness, his adoption of Wilde's signature inversion of the world's values as a sort of queer politics avant la lettre, and a celebration of excess that is essential to camp style. Paul's later reference to Wilde's aphorism "Nature imitates art" (151) during a particularly heated moment at Dr. Parkes' ill-fated salon also evokes the character's sense that performance creates reality, another tenet of camp cultural practice. In this sense, Paul embraces a worldview in which camp, as one of many styles one may choose to perform, might transform the extant world into one more accommodating to his persona, dreams and everyday needs. That capacity of Paul's self-conscious camp performance to transform the ugliness of the world can be seen in his response to the threat of being tried for sexual crimes — never exactly noted as homosexual in nature, but this point is clear enough given that Paul is the novel's resolutely uncloseted character.

> "First of all, I haven't raped anyone, and, secondly, I wouldn't be so commonplace. When *I* go on trial …" […] "It will be in the grand manner of Wilde or Villon or Dostoevsky's near execution. You see, I'm a genius." (101)

The statement at once dismisses any criminality that might otherwise be associated with Paul's consensual homosexual encounters[39] and, with the help of the italicized "*I*,"

[39] Consensual homosexual encounters were, indeed, illegal in New York during the period and (almost exclusively) gay men were at risk of being arrested, fined and/or imprisoned if caught by the authorities. Consexual gay sex would remain technically illegal, though seldom enforced, until the *New York v. Onofre* case in 1980.

defiantly claims that were he to get arrested, Paul would be sure to make the proceedings a "grand" affair in the tradition of his favorite, scandalized artists. The reference to Wilde here is a pointed one, since it was only Wilde who stood trial for sexual crimes[40] and his hysterical and witty send up of his cross-examination to the delight of the entire courtroom is likely what Paul has in mind for himself.[41]

By tying the above camp elements of *Infants* together — naïve camp as a way of delighting in and diminishing tragedy, self-conscious camp as a way of facing life's injustices — we may begin to recognize the campy register of Paul Arbian's suicide at the end of the novel. I will quote that scene at some length in order to explore it as an hysterical spectacle that nearly subverts the novel's otherwise extremely tragic ending:

> Paul had evidently come home before the end of the party. On arriving, he had locked himself in the bathroom, donned a crimson mandarin robe, wrapped his head in a batik scarf of his own designing, hung a group of his spirit portraits on the dingy calcimined wall, and carpeted the floor with sheets of paper detached from the notebook in which he had been writing his novel. He had then, it seemed, placed scented joss-sticks in the four corners of the room, lit them, climbed into the bathtub, turned on the water, then slashed his wrists with a highly ornamented Chinese dirk. When they found him, the bathtub had overflowed, and Paul lay crumpled at the bottom, a colorful, inanimate corpse in a crimson streaked tub.
>
> What delightful publicity to precede the posthumous publication of his novel, which novel, however, had been rendered illegible when the overflow of water had inundated the floor, and soaked the sheets strewn over its surface. Paul had not foreseen the possible inundation, nor had he taken into consideration the impermanency of penciled transcriptions. (174-175)

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[40] François Villon and Fyodor Dostoyevski were imprisoned for burglary and promoting anti-Tsarist literature, respectively.

[41] For more on Wilde's camp style during his 1895 trial, see: Neil Bartlett, *Who Was That Man?: A Present for Mr. Oscar Wilde* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1988); Ed Cohen, "Typing Wilde," in *Talk on the Wilde Side: Toward a Genealogy of a Discourse on Male Sexualities* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 126–72.

A death scene, yes, but a rather ridiculous one, the portrait of Paul's suicide reaches levels of absurdity that appear to diffuse the very tragedy of this final moment. The image of Paul lying dead in the tub is rendered by Thurman with details — the "crimson mandarin robe," the ritualistic joss sticks, the "highly ornamented" instrument of self-execution and the "colorful inanimate corpse" — that read more as visual spectacle than tragic scene, a sort of macabre tableau vivant too surreal to be taken seriously. This lack of seriousness in the face of tragedy is reflected in the narrator's reasoning that the scene offers "delightful publicity to precede the posthumous publication" of Paul's novel, as if to say that this is not a tragic suicide but rather a brilliant act of self-promotion. Thurman can't help but chip away at the seriousness with which Paul has constructed and ultimately ruined the grand scene he had in mind. Despite the careful attention to aesthetic detail, the very thing that might carry Paul into literary immortality has been ruined by the writer's lack of attention to the physics of his bathtub suicide. As it has throughout *Infants*, Thurman's strategic use of camp subverts the tendency towards abjection, depression and sentimentalism that might otherwise subsume the novel and the life he has tried to record in it.

Facing Failure: Memorial Aesthetics and Nostalgia for the Present

The question of failure is central to any consideration of *The Young and Evil* and *Infants of the Spring*. In both novels, the utopian investment in queer romance as a route to a better life collapses in view of romantic fallouts, suicide and violence. Both novels were also failures in their own time, neither selling sufficiently nor catapulting their authors to the fame they desired. Thurman explicitly thought of *Infants* as a failure,

describing it as a deeply "unsatisfactory novel" and even "horrible trash" in a letter to Langston Hughes.[42] In an unpublished review, Thurman writes that the author was "impelled" to capture portraits of characters whose "lives and problems cried out for release." The result, he bemoans, "lacked the earnestness and spontaneity necessary for vivid presentation," a fault owed to his coming both "too late" and "too early" to Bohemianism and to the pressures of writing for a "semi-literature [black] bourgeoisie" and "literate whites […] who have peculiar ideas concerning the materials Negro authors should utilize." Defeated by a novel that will not "impress a critical public," Thurman nonetheless maintains that the writing of it "undoubtedly has contributed much to the author's individual growth."[43] If Thurman considers the work a failure in view of its project to accurately and dutifully portray the "Niggeratti" — a class of artist emerging in contradistinction to nearly all available institutions and traditions — he nonetheless succeeded in using the novel as a perfect platform for exploring and giving voice to that difficulty and refusing to relinquish the hope he saw there.

Raymond and Stephen's romantic failure is at once *Infants of the Spring*'s central affective investment and the ultimate disappointment of the utopian aspirations of its queer black bohemian political vision of sexual and racial liberation. The utopian aspect

[42] Other critics, including Amritjit Singh, have noted that this feeling of failure may largely be explained by the "nearly unachievable standards" he set for himself and others 'derived from his unflinching devotion to Western, mostly European, classics" a comparison Singh alleges is akin to "judging every contemporary playwright by a Shakespearean yardstick" (xvii). References to Hughes' correspondence is drawn from their reproduction in Van Notten's biography. See: Notten, *Wallace Thurman's Harlem Renaissance*, 286.

[43] Wallace Thurman, "Review of Infants of the Spring by Wallace Thurman (Unpublished, C. 1932)," in *The Collected Writings of Wallace Thurman: A Harlem Renaissance Reader* (New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 226–27.

is revealed in the way that the novel opens with the powerful and immediate chemistry that binds together a black man and a white man who have a chance meeting over drinks.

> "It's funny," Raymond mused. "how things happen. Three hours ago we were total strangers. Twenty-four hours ago we were not even aware of one another's existence. And now, Steve, I feel as if I had known you all my life." (13)

This quick and powerful intimacy mirrors the sort of ephemeral connections I have ascribed in previous chapters to the gay male practice of cruising. Yet, as quickly as they come can come together, these men can equally quickly be torn apart. Their relationship begins to fray roughly halfway through the novel as Stephen gets involved in a sexual relationship with two black women — perhaps a way of staging both the reality and difficulty of managing Harald Jan Stefansson's primary heterosexuality and Thurman's primary homosexuality.[44] This fallout crescendos in a vicious argument before the donation party. A tortured Raymond struggles to understand the "something else" that has come between him and Stephen, a "something else which kept insinuating itself into [his] mind [and which] seemed too preposterous or complex to be recognized or considered" (105). According to David Blackmore, this line is a coded revelation of Stephen and Ray's homosexual bond,[45] but it also seems to be a layered response to the barriers that prevent the permanence of an interracial queer union that is the novel's closest held desire.

It is this utopian commitment to the belief that queer interracial contact can undo the binds that pitch black and white in antagonistic relation that *Infants* refuses to give up. As the realization of that utopian possibility is thwarted in the novel, it gets projected

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[44] Notten, *Wallace Thurman's Harlem Renaissance*, 262.

[45] David Blackmore, "'Something...Too Presposterous and Complex to Be Recognized or Considered': Same-Sex Desire and Race in 'Infants of the Spring.,'" *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 80, no. 4 (Winter 1997): 526.

onto some other future space in which Ray and Stephen might come back together again. Stephen's question, "What's going to become of you and me, Ray?" (133) haunts the second half of *Infants,* openly questioning what will become of two intimates who, though "totally unconscious of their racial difference," nonetheless succumb to the cultural forces that pull them apart. If queer interracial romance is a failure in *Infants* on this account, the novel is never ready to relinquish it as a possibility and therefore closes the relationship with a nebulous détente. In their final meeting, Raymond acknowledges that the struggles attending their affection for one another are not personal, but rather the result of larger socio-cultural forces that he nonetheless believes will one day be overcome.

> That party affected me, too, the other night. But now I can see it in a different perspective, a clearer one, I believe. Anything that will make white people and colored people come to the conclusion that after all they are all human, all committed to the serious business of living, and all with the same faults and virtues, the sooner amalgamation can take place and the Negro problem will cease to be a blot on American civilization. There'll be other blots just as bad of course, but there won't be this mass of alien people, retarding the progress of the country because they are being inculcated with complexes which can only wrack [sic] havoc. […] Eventually only the Babbitt and the artist will be able to break the chains. The rest must wait until the inevitable day of complete assimilation." (134-135)

What I want to hold on to in this brief moment of future-projecting optimism in an otherwise bleak novel is the sense that Raymond continues to long for interracial romance and amalgamation. Interracial contact still appears here as the greatest chance for overcoming the burdens of the color line. Thus, even though the parties that foment interracial contact fail to suture white and black lovers permanently in the present, there is still something productive about the "emotional hangover" Raymond imagines the revelers experience after the ecstasy of contact. Longing for that day of "complete

assimilation to come," Raymond hopes for a future in which he and Stephen might be able to be together, in which they do not have to fall apart as they do at the end of the book; a future in which queer interracial romance won't fail. If the novel ends in destruction and death, it still holds out hope for a future in which its dreams might be realized.

Romantic failure is also a central concern of *The Young and Evil*, as the violent relationship between Karel and Louis challenges the utopian vision of a world where everyone is "naturally queer." Karel values his romantic relationship with Louis not only as a triumph of turning a beloved straight man queer, but also because he understands it as a route to an integrated being that has heretofore been beyond his grasp, seeing "his own strength and weakness juxtaposed on that of Louis and what he saw made a whole" (71). Yet this possibility of integration in relation with Louis is always threatened by outside forces and, after Louis, Karel and Julian share a bed together, he sees in his friends chatting with one another "a segment of the whole, at the existence of which he was annoyed" (71). That friction breaks the Julian and Karel apart, albeit briefly, and also sutures Louis and Karel together in a relation of desperate need and, ultimately, violence as can be seen in these final lines, as Louis physically assaults Karel in an act of vengeful sex:

> Louis stepped up closely to him and clutched one of [Karel's] lapels. Who do you think you are?
> Karel's lips pouted and quivered. He did not resist having his topcoat taken off, then his jacket, then his vest and, lastly, falling over on the bed, his trousers. Louise leaned over and Karel saw him kissing him before he felt the bite. Then Karel screamed. (215)

Louis has come to Karel asking for money and, when it doesn't materialize, demands that Karel give him his clothes. While this relationship of dependence in which Karel

provides for a dissolute Louis in tacit exchange for otherwise willingly offered sex has characterized their relationship before, the violence with which this scene concludes has never quite been part of that romantic equation. If a queer utopia in which one might imagine being able to have any man one comes across is a central desire in *The Young and Evil,* the fear and violence with which Karel faces this last scene is a stark challenge to that wish.

There may be a remedy to this impasse, however, by which the text suggests one can hold on to the possibilities glimpsed in the queer life the novel records even as it witnesses its failure and destruction. When Karel tells Julian that he is moving into an uptown apartment with Louis — this occurs in the wake of his unexpressed concerns that Julian and Louis may form "a segment of the whole" that he wishes to keep for himself — Julian feels both a rupture and the possibility of return:

> Julian felt an absence of something he had held dear a few minutes before. He looks around the room to see what was missing. He could find a wrong space nowhere and was sad. Then he thought he saw what he had lost. Since he saw it it must have been returned so he hadn't lost it for good.
>
> His temporary illusion had disclosed a softness in him. A softness is a weakness and that submitted to always leaves some sort of something if only a small fear. This was a something that could be concealed by something else. He would think by what, by what it could be concealed.
>
> Good-bye now. He looked at Karel with hard eyes and hoped the tears wouldn't come through until Karel left and when Karel left the tears didn't come through. He was learning to assume hardness. (72)

The oscillation between loss and redemption in the above passage speak to a queer endurance that is at the center of both *The Young and Evil* and *Infants of the Spring*. In both novels, the thing that these characters want, the "it" that "had been lost," is as gossamer and evanescent as it is powerful and binding. While Julian imagines that he still

possesses the feeling of kinship and a romantic love he associates with Karel, a feeling that exceeds the merely sexual, he also recognizes that he can confront this loss with the pursuit of something else. As he struggles to cope in the aftermath of Karel's exit, Julian visits bars and cruises the street where he finds new fantasies of romance to distract him from the pain of this loss. If that which has been lost might always be found again, it might also be replaced with temporary objects to satisfy the hole left in its absence, a relational logic that attends the scenes of cruising described in the first chapter's treatment of ephemerality as a useful condition in McKay's queer diasporic novels.

I want to close here, not where the *The Young and Evil* ends, but at a later moment when Julian and Karel reconnect, because that brief scene encapsulates both the sense of queer relation's unintelligibility, pleasure and function as a bulwark against a world of loss and damage. Awakening in his studio to find Julian after he has been abandoned by Louis, Karel's revelation of their unique love for one another is a moment of tremendous hope in a novel racing towards its violent conclusion.

> His lips were seen first and then the sunlight and then Julian. […] He still could not understand Julian's love for him as he did not know from what it derived, where it was or when it would come, as it did comes sometimes, from nearer the sky than the earth. Where was its home, its house, its all-around heart—no door nor walls? Did he lie in it now or were they in it together? Karel asked God if the world floated or wheeled, or if they were in the grave, but looking at Julian from the side he know they were not in the grave but that Louis and Gabriel were outside and perhaps not forever. Karel had always to be doing something either with his face or his brain so he would write a poem but he could not grasp the pencil tightly enough. (194)

Emerging from a depressive episode in which the very relationship that was supposed to make Karel feel that he was becoming "whole" has been destroyed, Karel's vision of Julian restores his sense that the world will continue and that it will continue precisely because of this unintelligible love they share. Julian's love comes to Karel without

conditions, a utopian love beyond sexual or economic exchange, one that doesn't demand anything but which is there as a resource for the subject to draw upon in moments of need. While such relationships break apart, this scene suggests that this particular queer affection promises the permanence of return.

That romance, I suggest by way of conclusion, is the romance of queer community, one to which both *The Young and Evil* and *Infants of the Spring* hold tight. If these novels mourn the loss of their communities — of lovers, of artists, of fellow queers — their memorial aesthetics function to preserve them against that loss. Though they close on violence and suicide, they transmit the power and possibility of their worlds to us in the present as an affective queer history that resonates in the present because their challenges remain still unresolved in our time. Wallace Thurman, Charles Henri Ford and Parker Tyler might have been disenchanted looking back on the 1920s from the vantage point of the 1930s, but they channeled the utopian possibilities of that moment into fiction as an inheritance for a future time. They face failure and loss with the ecstasies, quiet and loud, of ephemeral scenes and experiences that provide an enduring and lasting hope.

Coda: Desiring Queer Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance

What are the uses of queer modernist studies today? In *Feeling Backward*, Heather Love argues that our desire to forget pre-Stonewall literature that traffics in the representation of queer abjection is part of our wish to deny the ways in which their struggles persist in our ostensibly liberated present.[1] Her return to the "image repertoire of queer modernist melancholia" is invested in the purpose of "mak[ing] visible the damage that we live with in the [post-Stonewall] present."[2] We return to the queer past, following Love, as a means of recognizing the residues of that past that cling, in distorted and often disavowed form, to a present in which pride offers itself as a curative to the "shame" of the past. By doing so, we look at the past not as an experience divorced from our own time but as a sensorium of affects and impasses that echo in the present. While I agree with Love's assertion that restoring the presence of the past in our contemporary world makes visible those enduring crises that we wish to forget, I also think that queer American literature from this period provides us with a startlingly ambivalent catalog that captures the sweep of utopian longing and disappointment across an unprecedented era of visibility for what we now call the LGBT population.

One way of looking at the preceding chapters is the movement from the promise of a utopian queerness as a refuge from a variety of wounded attachments to origin, race, family and nation that resolves in the failures of queer formations to make good on those promises. Claude McKay and Willa Cather find pleasure, community and identity in the proliferating differences their characters encounter moving across space and race in ways that liberate them from the confines of origin narratives and the heterosexual family. In a

[1] Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*, 27–29.

[2] Love, 5, 29.

similar register, Richard Bruce Nugent and Edward Prime-Stevenson's desire to be free of the family — as either kin or country — powers their queer identification with fantasies of the Orient that frees them of the burdens that attend their extant categories of belonging and allows them to fashion new identities and attachments for their characters. As we move into the second half of the dissertation, the persistent desire for the same freedoms is attenuated by deep disappointment in their failure to be realized. Characters in Larsen and Barnes' fiction yearn for a like-minded partner or community in which they won't feel like such abject outsiders, yet being with others puts limits on the autonomy and self-articulation they seek. Wallace Thurman, Parker Tyler and Charles Henri Ford face the 1930s dejected at the prospect that the kaleidoscopic explosion of queer life in the 1920s is fading from view. Like Barnes and Larsen, their characters also express a deep pessimism about the liberation of the individual associated with queerness in the early chapters, chafing at failed loves and crushed dreams.

As a challenge to both a view of early-twentieth-century queer literature as entirely negative or neatly divided between wholly positive and negative accounts of queer experience limned above, I want to emphasize that utopian longing and disappointment often oscillating within these texts. That oscillation points to a more fundamentally ambivalent and, I think, more accurate portrait of queer experience. McKay and Cather's characters experience pain, loss and self-doubt as they move toward scenes that promise them freedom and pleasure. Likewise, Nugent and Prime-Stevenson's work often confronts feelings of dread and disappointment as they chart a path for self-fashioned queer identity beyond the strictures of race and nation. While it is hard to locate joy, exactly, in Barnes' *Nightwood*, it is evident that Nora Flood and Jenny

Petherbridge experience at least momentary pleasure when they feel they have secured Robin Vote for themselves. Larsen's protagonists swing between pleasure and disappointment as they move from one promising attachment to the next. The memorial works of Thurman, Tyler and Ford balance mourning the impending loss of queer cultures with the scenes of frivolity and ecstasy that made that culture so compelling in the first place. As it searches out a place for itself in early-twentieth-century American literature, queer desire straddles pleasure and pain, connection and alienation to provide a fuller portrait of an identity still coming into being.

The relative freedom of this literature to explore and give shape to a still malleable concept of same-sex desire, and to use that freedom to think about the modes of sociality that it enables, is the gift that this archive bequeaths to the present. One of the predominant political imperatives of the post-Stonewall era has been to see the emergence into queer identity and community as the beginning of liberation or the sign of its achievement. The colloquialisms used to describe this process, such as finding one's "queer family," registers the modes of alternative filiation explored at various moments throughout this dissertation in contemporary LGBT cultural practice. However, that phrase also posits queer filiation as the site of an almost universally utopian becoming, the beginning of the subject's "It Gets Better" journey, to use another popular phrase, and also the name of an LGBT anti-suicide campaign. Queer relation thus is understood as an unalloyed good, the relation that fixes the woundedness of the past by providing new, better attachments that allow the subject to flourish. The writers surveyed in *Queer Orientations* see that process differently and, while they don't entirely embrace the shame that Heather Love recuperates from the period, they turn a critical eye towards

queerness as a sexual and social phenomenon. That critical perspective asks us, as queers reading their work in the present, to identify what we desire in, as Dr. O'Connor puts it in *Nightwood*, our "love for the invert." It asks us to account for the promises of freedom and a better life that emerge in relationships and social formations structured by forces outside of and resistant to the cultural logic of heterosexuality. That critical perspective also asks us to examine how and even if, especially in the latter half of this dissertation, queerness *can* make good on those promises. By putting them in front of us, queer modernist writing across the color line forces us to interrogate the affective givens of our desires.

In addition to their critical reflection on queerness' utopian glamour, the authors in this study also demonstrate how central race is to queer self-articulation in this period. Throughout each chapter, race emerges as the site of fantasmatic identification for white queers looking for new spheres of belonging and as the possibility of racial decoupling for black queers struggling under the burden of race. In both cases, queerness offers a labile relation to race as constructed social identity while at the same time marking race as *the* preeminent axis of belonging in the American imagination. In such ways, these texts offer a pre-history of how race became attached to sexual identity in the present, allowing us to see how queerness came into form via its adaptability to narratives of race and racial fantasy. This contribution is complementary to Siobhan Somerville's work on the hegemonic construction of homosexuality through the discourse of race, differentiated by the way that it emerges from the minds of the queer subjects that this historical phenomenon shaped.

Although yoked to the cultural moment in which they emerged, the works surveyed in *Queer Orientations* echo many of the tensions in later-twentieth-century queer American literature, especially with regard to the question of race. The dewy sense of queerness as a radical state of being that in and of itself transcends old conceptual stalemates with regard to race, gender and class that defines a particular strain of white post-Stonewall gay literature is at once reflected and challenged in my archive. From one perspective, the queer identifications that various authors make across the color line — especially the malleability of race and queer identity in Nugent's work, or the function of the racial other as a site of queer identification and affective expression in the work of Cather and Prime-Stevenson — evinces the notion of queerness as that which cuts across all social categories in ways that destabilize their hierarchal structure and make possible new coalitional formations. However, as my readings and the convivial-yet-acerbic spats between black and white members of the "Niggerati's" queer milieu that critique white queers' primitivist stereotypes of African Americans in *Infants of the Spring* and *Gentleman Jigger* demonstrate, racial divisions persist in queer community. Further, the instrumentality of racial others to white queer identification in work from this period — especially as seen in my analysis of Prime-Stevenson's *Imre* but also in Charles Stoddard's writing about men from the Asian and Pacific Islands not included in this study — demonstrates how interracial queer contact might both challenge and reinforce racial divisions as a condition of identification. In his study of the Violet Quill – a short-lived but massively influential collective of white gay writers who defined much of post-Gay Liberation fiction — David Bergman observes that people of color, especially African Americans, often appear in their fiction as fetishes, highly aestheticized tokens of

"authentic […] physical beauty" that attend political and sexual fantasies of gay contact that "breaks down barriers of race and class."[3] That tendency can be seen in *The Advocate*'s cover story for the week following the 2008 presidential campaign: "Gay Is the New Black: The Last Great Civil Rights Struggle."[4] The cover story, which crudely uses the language of fashion trend forecasting, simultaneously links blackness and queerness as homological experiences of oppression, suggesting that the struggle against anti-blackness is over (or merely passé) and positing "gay" rights as the last front of injustice in American culture. *Queer Orientations* demonstrates the long historical appeal of white queer comparisons of homophobia with anti-blackness, and white queer feelings of alienation as homologous to the suffering of African Americans, as an unresolved tension within LGBT culture in the United States across the twentieth century.

For black queer writers, the issue of race has been even more paramount and fraught as the twentieth century lurched forward. Beyond the continuing throughline of white queer racism that marginalized them within the gay liberation movement, black queers also had to contend with the ways in which their same-sex desire marginalized them within the Black Power movement. This marginalization sometimes took the form of violent exile from racial community, one in which black gay men were seen as race traitors whose same-sex attraction was received as a symptom of either their perversion by whites or their desire to be white. Perhaps the most chilling and well-known example of such thought is Eldridge Cleaver's vicious excoriation of James Baldwin in *Soul on Ice* (1968), in which he claimed that Baldwin's homosexuality was an index of the writer's

[3] David Bergman, *The Violet Hour: The Violet Quill and the Making of Gay Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 123.
[4] Michael Joseph Gross, "Gay Is the New Black: The Last Great Civil Rights Struggle," *The Advocate*, November 16, 2008, https://www.advocate.com/news/2008/11/16/gay-new-black.

"grueling, agonizing, total hatred of *the blacks*, particularly of himself, and the most shameful, fanatical, fawning, sycophantic love of the whites."[5] Cleaver appears here to exile Baldwin to a no-man's-land in which he is neither one of "the blacks" nor one of "the whites," a degraded man with no claims to belonging anywhere.

What remained, then, was to find a community in history that would repair the exile one experienced in the present. In his exploration of the emergence of a concerted black gay literary movement in the 1980s — one that incidentally came to be called the "second" Harlem Renaissance — Simon Dickel describes how the queer writers of the Harlem Renaissance were taken up as resources for black gay cultural affirmation and prestige in the latter half of the twentieth century. To talk about Langston Hughes, Wallace Thurman and Richard Bruce Nugent as *black gay men* from a broadly celebrated African American literary tradition promised to "legitimize the existence of the black gay community in the eyes of the black community as a whole."[6] This turn to the past, to a buried history that can be recovered by queers in the present, thus is the subject of some of the most important black queer films of the 1980s and 1990s. This is true of Isaac Julien's iconic *Looking for Langston* (1989), a short film that layers the prose of Nugent's "Smoke, Lilies and Jade" (as well as work by James Baldwin and Essex Hemphill) over scenes of an imagined Langston Hughes' relationship with black and white men. That turn is also the substance and method of Cheryl Dunye's *The Watermelon Woman* (1996), in which a black lesbian filmmaker and video store clerk

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[5] Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice* (New York: Delta Trade Paperbacks, 1999), 122–37. Emphasis added.

[6] Simon Dickel, *Black/Gay: The Harlem Renaissan ce, the Protest Era, and Constructions of Black Gay Identity in the 1980s and 1990s* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2012), 7.

begins documenting the life of an uncredited black actress who appeared in a number of films from the 1930s and 1940s. As the eponymous Cheryl searches for information about Faye Richards, the titular actress known in end credits only as "The Watermelon Woman," she discovers that Richards was a lesbian who performed at nightclubs frequented by other butch lesbians. At the conclusion of the film, Cheryl is charged with both keeping and telling this story of an unknown lesbian ancestor as a way of preserving what is always at risk of being lost and disavowed. Sought out in history, these historical presences shore up and affirm a dislocated black queer identity at the twilight of the twentieth century, providing a history and a people that gives the subject a sense of belonging in the present.

What strikes me as urgent in the work of Dunye and Julien — in addition to much other post-Stonewall queer art — is that the very thing they search for in the past was what those writers and artists in whom they find antecedents were searching for: an origin, a genealogy, a sense of relation. They desire, in other words, what their subjects desired, an answer to the riddle of self posed in the questions: Who am I? Who are my people? How do I relate to others? Their relation to these people and history, however, is also a work of queer (re)creation. Dunye's Faye Richards is not a real person; the Langston Hughes who appears in Julien's film and the world in which he circulates are creative visions of a queer Harlem Renaissance interspersed with archival footage that gives it the feeling of a history we can almost touch. The process through which Dunye and Julien's films answer those questions is what has been called "queer anti-historicism," a relation to the past that is neither verifiable nor false, but attentive to the gaps and alternative movement of queer history. This relation undoes the teleology of historicism, its sense of

a linear movement or chronology that binds queer past to present in anticipation of a future.[7] The queer relation to history of Dunye, Julien and the writers surveyed in *Queer Orientations* recognizes the past as looped and ambiguous, making and remaking us in the present just as we make and remake our past. That these early-twentieth-century writers engage in a creative historical practice so strikingly similar to their later-twentieth-century interlocutors allows us to see a particular queer relation to the past across time not as utopian or failed, but as an ambivalent mode of navigating queer experience and responding to queer desire. *This* is the desire that *Queer Orientations* brings to the fore and the challenge is lays down: to recognize how we shape and are shaped by the past not as disavowed or damaged relation, but as the ongoing site of our yearning for a world not yet arrived.

[7] Valerie Traub, "The New Unhistoricism in Queer Studies," *PMLA* 128, no. 1 (January 2013): 21–39.

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