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Black Face, Queer Space: The Influence of Black Lesbian & Transgender Blues Women of the Harlem Renaissance on Emerging Queer Communities

Emma Chen

The Harlem Renaissance was “surely as gay as it was black.”¹ This assertion by African American historian Henry Louis Gates Jr. encompasses a largely overlooked aspect of the 1920s, and the Harlem Renaissance in particular. When exploring the history of gay liberation and LGBTQ+ history in general, the Stonewall Inn Riots of 1969 commonly demarcate the starting point. In early May 2016, President Obama planned to declare the Stonewall Inn a national monument, symbolically securing the bar’s place as the epicenter of gay and lesbian history.²

However, to begin LGBTQ+ history in 1969 is a disservice to the often-disregarded development of gay and lesbian enclaves during the Harlem Renaissance. Even more marginalized are the contributions of black women – specifically lesbian and transgender women – to this explosion of black culture. Not only did their work aid the development of the movement itself, but it also began to carve out a space for LGBTQ+ individuals in the United States. During the Harlem Renaissance, not only did black culture and arts flourish, but lesbian/transgender black women were also able to create opportunities for freedom of expression and visibility which established the framework for an emerging black LGBTQ+ community and constituted an opening for recognition by some members within the straight community. In the ongoing effort to create a more inclusive and representative national history, it is critical that the roles of lesbian and transgender women in history receive more close and critical inquiry. Recognition of the intersectionality of race, gender, and sexuality, and its effects on larger societal perceptions of identity, establishes the greater and fuller historical context of this period.

¹ James F. Wilson, *Bulldaggers, Pansies, and Chocolate Babies: Performance, Race, and Sexuality in the Harlem Renaissance* (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan, 2011), 8.

² Juliet Eilperin, “Obama Set to Declare Stonewall Inn as a National Monument,” *Washington Post*, May 4, 2016.

In *Bulldaggers, Pansies, and Chocolate Babies: Performance, Race, and Sexuality in the Harlem Renaissance* historian James F. Wilson explores the topic of queer communities in Jazz Age Harlem, particularly the contributions of female performers and their important role in the development of the Harlem Renaissance and lesbian community. Alternatively, Chad Heap's *Slumming: Sexual and Racial Encounters in American Nightlife, 1885-1940* summarizes the various ways in which white, upper/middle class slumming presented itself in American urban spaces during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and reveals its impact on social dynamics. By looking beyond isolated black urban communities and analyzing the impact of emerging black lesbian and blues communities on a larger straight society, a more nuanced understanding of the appearance of distinct LGBTQ+ communities following the end of World War II is possible.

The Harlem Renaissance is often described primarily as a literary movement largely involving black men, such as Langston Hughes, Marcus Garvey, and Claude McKay. But limiting black culture of the 1920s solely to men would be a disservice to the movement and to the many talented black women who contributed meaningfully to this cultural outpouring of literature, music, dancing, and black identity.³ Specifically, the rise of blues music is a noteworthy development, as early blues music has historically served as a queer space. Scholar Terry Rowden argues that this is because the sexually freewheeling blues lyrics were one of the few spaces in which same-sex desires and queer identities could be freely expressed, though only to a certain extent given the conservative culture of the time.⁴

Blues singers saw success because their music stemmed from the musical heritage of their own black community. The genre's great success among the African American population and its eventual appropriation by whites is not an uncommon pattern in US history. However, whites could not appropriate this music without blues singers attaining some level of visibility. From this platform and thanks to the flamboyance of the entertainment industry and the newness of the genre, black blues women were able to create showy stage personae that reflected

³ Trudier Harris, "Foreword," in *The Harlem Renaissance: A Gale Critical Comparison 3*, ed. Janet Witalec (Detroit: Gale, 2003).

⁴ Terry Rowden, "Harlem Undercover: Difference and Desire in African American Popular Music, 1920-1940," *English Language Notes* 45, no. 2 (October 2007): 23.

their sexual desires.⁵ Additionally, New York, like many major cities, fostered a clandestine gay and lesbian culture that created the opportunity for some women to express their same-sex desires.

Many leading literary, musical, and theatrical figures of the Harlem Renaissance are believed to have, at some point, engaged in lesbian, gay, or bisexual relations; but that did not mean there was a widespread tolerance.⁶ Instead, these female performers juggled maintaining intimate relationships with other women in their private lives, while also establishing a professional stage image.⁷ The theater served as a rare professional sanctuary in which individuals could be slightly freer about expressing their homosexuality. Director Robert Philipson's documentary, *T'Ain't Nobody's Bizness: Queer Blues Divas of the 1920s*, notes that unlike their white counterparts, black blues women were able to portray themselves as "explicitly sexual beings." The caveat was that the object of their desire must be, according to social norms, of the opposite sex.⁸ Therefore, despite the connection between female blues singers and lesbianism, many of the songs and performers who reflected "queerness" were relegated to the "musical underground," fostering a clandestine gay culture that was active but private and nocturnal.⁹

Few songs held explicit homosexual themes, most likely due to fear of an intense backlash from white mainstream society. Nevertheless, a number of homosexual-themed songs and their lyrics shed light on the experiences of the lesbian blues women of the 1920s. For instance, Ma Rainey's "Prove it on me Blues" contains explicit references of Rainey's sexual preference: "I went out last night with a crowd of my friends, It must've been women, 'cause I don't like no men... Talk to the gals just like any old man."¹⁰ Flirting with women like "any old man," Rainey reveals her sexuality without hedging. The lyrics, "It's true I wear a collar and tie" even divulges how she unapologetically takes on the "butch" role in

⁵ Ibid., 24.

⁶ Wilson, *Bulldaggers, Pansies, and Chocolate Babies*, 29-30.

⁷ Rowden, "Harlem Undercover," 24.

⁸ Robert Philipson, *T'Ain't Nobody's Bizness: Queer Blues Divas of the 1920s*, directed by Robert Philipson (2011: Shoga Films), Short Film/Historical Documentary, 12:58.

⁹ *T'Ain't Nobody's Bizness*, 21:25.

¹⁰ Ma Rainey, "Prove It On Me Blues," Paramount, 1923.

<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nllEDSZqDjk>> (10 Apr. 2016)> (10 Apr. 2016).

her relationships with women.¹¹ However, Rainey sings that, “Don’t you say I do it, ain’t nobody caught me. You sure got to prove it on me.”¹² The song’s lyrics suggest a state of defiant paranoia rather than a rebellious self-affirmation of her sexuality. This reveals that even those singers who adopted “queer personae” in their work were still cognizant of the leniency that being in entertainment granted them and the limited degree to which society would accept their identity.¹³ In fact, while both Ma Rainey and her protégé Bessie Smith occasionally referenced masculine women and “sissy” men, these lyrics rarely strayed from the prevailing stereotypes and were used mainly for the purpose of humor.¹⁴ Even so, scholar Angela Davis argues in *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* that, “[t]he blues woman openly challenged the gender politics implicit in traditional cultural representations of marriage and heterosexual love.”¹⁵ Though the blues women’s references to queerness were limited, their mere presence in a music genre that was soon appropriated and popularized in white communities meant that language surrounding queerness, however coded, was spreading. Non-heterosexuals were beginning to see the presence of others with similar thoughts and feelings, a realization critical to the development of queer enclaves.

A multitude of popular blues women were lesbian or bisexual: from Bessie Smith to Ma Rainey, Gladys Bentley, Ethel Waters, and many others. These women struggled as oppression of their race, gender, and sexuality intersected. Bessie Smith was one such lesbian blues woman, an identity termed bulldagger in the 1920s, who found great success. After being recruited by fellow singer and lesbian Ma Rainey in 1915, Smith signed on to Columbia records in 1923 and eventually became the highest paid black performer of her day.¹⁶ Smith’s influence went well beyond the black community. Her music saw popularity among white audiences, particularly after her appearances at the whites-only Cotton Club. According to cultural historian Brian Keizer, “Her sides [records] didn’t just sell in the African American community, they were classics of race

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Rowden, “Harlem Undercover,” 26-27.

¹⁴ *T’Ain’t Nobody’s Bizness*, 21:35.

¹⁵ Angela Y. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (New York, NY: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2011), quoted in Rowden, “Harlem Undercover,” 27.

¹⁶ *T’Ain’t Nobody’s Bizness*, 9:40.

music. If you were having a party in the '20s, you had some Bessie Smith 78s.”¹⁷ Smith was married to Jack Gee from 1923-1937. Her marriage was riddled by his abuse and infidelity, though she did find solace in her affair with Lillian Simpson. She was open about her sexuality in her private life, even saying to Simpson during a lover’s quarrel, “I got 12 women on this [blues] show. And I can have one every night if I want it.”¹⁸ Smith, like her many lesbian/transgender female colleagues, is overlooked in accounts of influential Harlem Renaissance artists. Yet they had a great impact on the cultural development and contributions of the Harlem Renaissance.

In *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940*, George Chauncey describes Harlem’s role in black lives during the 1920s as akin to “what Greenwich Village became to bohemian white America: a symbolic – and in many respects, practical – center of a vast cultural experiment.”¹⁹ This experiment included the tentative establishment of new queer communities and spaces in Harlem. One way in which LGBTQ+ individuals met and mingled was through private rent and house parties. In the safety of someone’s home, the interactions between queer partygoers bred the culture of this newfound community.

A’lelia Walker’s parties were particularly famous for their sexual experimentation. Walker was the only child of self-made millionaire and entrepreneur Madam C.J. Walker. Catering to those high of socioeconomic status, she would invite dozens of people over to her residence, the Dark Tower. Mabel Hampton, a famous lesbian dancer who moved to Harlem in the early 1920s, was often a guest at these parties. She recalls that upon entering the Dark Tower, “There were some fourteen or fifteen men and women, black and white, none of whom were wearing any clothes, lounging about on oversized pillows....”²⁰ She noted that the men had paired with men and the women with women. Not all of Walker’s parties were so explicitly sexual, but they nevertheless served as a safe space in which those experiencing same-sex desire could experiment with their sexuality and meet other like-minded people.

¹⁷ Ibid., 8:15.

¹⁸ Ibid., 11:01.

¹⁹ George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994).

²⁰ Wilson, *Bulldaggers, Pansies, and Chocolate Babies*, 13.

Even in more modest dwellings like Harlem rooming houses and apartment buildings, same-sex coupling was not uncommon.²¹ House parties played an important role in establishing a working-class black community, as well as the beginnings of a lesbian and gay subculture.²² Private parties in Harlem became the safest way for lesbians and gay men to meet and relax, particularly as the lesbian community established a social network from these private spaces.²³ Looking back on her socialization in queer communities during the Harlem Renaissance, Mabel Hampton said, “New York is a good place to be a lesbian. You learn so much and you see so much.”²⁴ Whether it was through friendships or intimate relationships, women were able to establish close supportive networks of lesbians through house parties. While secrecy made these parties possible, their clandestine nature meant that little was written about them, making it difficult to determine how common they were.

Another way that gays and lesbians were able to meet was through Harlem’s many cabarets and clubs such as Harry Hansberry’s Clam House. Part of “Jungle Alley,” Harlem’s 133rd street, peppered with jazz clubs and cabarets, the Clam House was best known for Gladys Bentley’s performances. Even on a map of the many Harlem clubs, the Clam House is labeled “Gladys’ Clam House” (see Appendix A).²⁵ Jungle Alley, and Harlem in general, was one of the few places in the US that drew in slumming whites or “tourists” who were curious about “race music” like the blues. The Clam House, getting its notoriety from Bentley’s performances and her image as a “bulldiker” (another term used for lesbians at the time), drew in lesbian, gay, and white audiences from downtown.²⁶ By featuring an openly lesbian singer in drag and serving as a gathering place for more uninhibited gays and lesbians, the club paved the way for the openly gay Ubangi Club in the 1930s. Places like the Clam House and the Ubangi Club established safe places for gay and lesbian community development. As both queer audiences,

²¹ Ibid., 14.

²² Ibid., 28.

²³ Ibid., 40.

²⁴ Joan Nestle, “Excerpts from the Oral History of Mabel Hampton,” *Theorizing Lesbian Experience* 18, no. 4 (Summer 1993): 935.

²⁵ Elmer Simms Campbell, “A Night-Club Map of Harlem,” *Manhattan: A Weekly for Wakeful New Yorkers*, 18 Jan. 1933.

²⁶ Chad Heap, *Slumming: Sexual and Racial Encounters in American Nightlife, 1885-1940* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 92.

and those intrigued by “deviant” sexualities, were drawn to see the lesbian/transgender performers, these clubs acted as a central location for queer blacks and some whites to meet and discover the existence of others like themselves.

Beyond their influence on queer audiences, Harlem clubs served as a prolific place for the development of blues music, as well as a space of relative freedom for singers to express their more “queer” personae. The blues afforded its entertainers some level of flexibility to push against sexual norms without as much opposition as would be encountered in everyday life. Because they were associated with the bohemian lifestyle, entertainers were often granted greater leniency to challenge sexual norms.²⁷ Nevertheless, there were still limitations as to how much even these women could express themselves. Homosexuality was still criminalized and police raids on the various emerging gay enclaves occurred regularly. Any meeting was done covertly, and very few would live as openly gay or lesbian.

Like the Harlem Renaissance movement itself, by no means was the “queer renaissance” limited to the confines of Harlem. The intersection of race, class, gender, and sexuality meant that the movement was far from ghettoized. In fact, as Harlem grew more sexualized and racialized during the 1920s, it began attracting the attention of mainstream society and others who questioned their sexuality.²⁸ Soon more non-heterosexual people were coming to Harlem clubs, cabarets, and dance halls. Academician Kevin J. Mumford describes how slumming gays and lesbians connected with the African Americans of Harlem; he argues that similar oppressions (racism and sexual repression) helped to establish cultural bonds between the two subordinated groups.²⁹

While a distinct LGBTQ+ culture and community developed surreptitiously, this growth still significantly impacted white, straight, mainstream culture in several ways. The visibility and popularity of blues music served as a powerful tool to expose heteronormative society to the black, lesbian, and transgender experience. For example, whites-only clubs like the Cotton Club hired black entertainers to sing jazz and blues. Ethel Waters, Gladys Bentley, Ma Rainey, and other lesbian or bisexual singers performed there, spreading the blues culture

²⁷ Lisa Hix, “Singing the Lesbian Blues in 1920s Harlem,” *Collector’s Weekly*, 9 July 2013.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Wilson, *Bulldaggers, Pansies, and Chocolate Babies*, 29.

beyond the African American community.³⁰ Director Robert Philipson emphasizes the unique influence of Harlem cabarets and clubs on white communities, identifying the power of Harlem clubs to draw in white “tourists,” curious about “race music,” that is, the blues.³¹ Those who slummed in the Harlem clubs were exposed to the emotion and storytelling present in blues music, giving white audiences a peek at the LGBTQ+ enclave that accompanied it.

White sightseers who attended Harlem drag balls got more than just a peek at the black LGBTQ+ enclave. This “Pansy and Lesbian Craze” helped shape mainstream culture.³² To white pleasure seekers, the homosexual culture of some of Harlem’s gay cabarets allowed them to indulge their fascinations with sexual and racial difference. Experiencing sexuality within the context of the racialized urban pastime of drag led to the reexamination of notions of hetero- and homosexuality.³³ White audiences identified individuals who fell outside of gender and sexual norms: effeminate men were labeled as “pansies” and masculine women as lesbians.³⁴ Participation in the pansy and lesbian craze was becoming the ultimate mark of cosmopolitan sophistication for white, mainstream culture, by the early 1930s.³⁵ For some upper-class whites that participated in the craze, drag shows became a way to engage in same-sex experiences. Slummers’ fascination with “perversity” and their desire to utilize these new social and sexual opportunities resulted in the growth of a new, underground, white LGBTQ+ enclave.

There is also evidence of the influence of blues women on the flappers of the 1920s. Scholar Lisa Hix argues that blues women likely contributed to the fad’s overt sexuality and flouting of proper, feminine conventions.³⁶ It was a manifestation of the same infatuation with sexuality and sexual deviancy that brought whites to the Harlem cabarets. Perhaps initially drawn by the presence of alcohol, white slummers became intrigued by the sexual thrills they could find in Harlem.³⁷ Ethel Waters’ hit “Shake That Thing,” rife with sexual connotations,

³⁰ Hix, “Singing the Lesbian Blues.”

³¹ *T’Ain’t Nobody’s Bizness*, 18:20.

³² Hix, “Singing the Lesbian Blues.”

³³ Heap, *Slumming*, 233.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 232.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 231.

³⁶ Hix, “Singing the Lesbian Blues.”

³⁷ *T’Ain’t Nobody’s Bizness*, 18:20.

brought some criticism by black conservatives to the overt sexuality of the black blues women and closeted lesbians. *The Chicago Bee* asserted in 1926 that, “The American people crave filth and dirt...they relish artistic carrion. They are prurient for songs suggestive of the vulgar. They itch for sex.”³⁸ While critical of Waters for pandering to the white and black public’s desire for sexual content, it also demonstrates white society’s preoccupation with sexuality and the act of pandering to an audience reflects the appropriation of blues and jazz music by white culture. By adopting blues music, white/mainstream society exposed itself to the messages and culture behind the music in an indirect way. Witnessing the performances within a black community context, absorbing the themes behind the music, and adapting the music to fit white performers and audiences requires a kind of immersion and internalization that necessitated some involvement or exposure to the lesbian communities vital to much of blues music. Some classic blues women’s songs were popular with white buyers.³⁹ Although they usually sold as “race records,” in 1922 Paramount Records released black blues singer Lucille Hegamin’s recordings as part of the label’s “popular” series instead.⁴⁰ Marketing the songs in the popular series as opposed to the race series meant that the songs were marketed to white audiences. Paramount likely decided to label Hegamin’s record as such due to the growing popularity of blues music, particularly as it was becoming more mainstream, primarily due to singers like Marion Harris, who was the first white singer to credibly record the blues.⁴¹ This influence of black lesbian blues women over the 1920s music scene set the stage for the formation of similar enclaves in white communities.

Given this wealth of lesbian/gay subtext and subculture in the Harlem Renaissance, it’s tempting to dismiss the larger sociocultural reality of that period. Tolerance, though more flexible in the entertainment industry, was still widely absent. People largely hid their sexuality if it deviated from the heterosexual norm, and thus few were brave enough to visit known gay clubs or bars which suffered frequent police raids and criticism from the mainstream public. In short, the

³⁸ Wilson, *Bulldaggers*, 137.

³⁹ Meghan Winsby, “Lady Sings the Blues: A Woman’s Perspective on Authenticity,” in *Blues—Philosophy for Everyone: Thinking Deep About Feeling Low* 2012, eds. Jesse R. Steinberg and Abrol Fairweather (West Sussex, UK: John Wiley & Sons, 2012), 159.

⁴⁰ Chris Smith, *Lucille Hegamin: Complete Recorded Works in Chronological Order Vol. 2: 1922-1923*, Document Records (1995), CD Liner Notes.

⁴¹ Winsby, “Lady Sings the Blues,” 155-191.

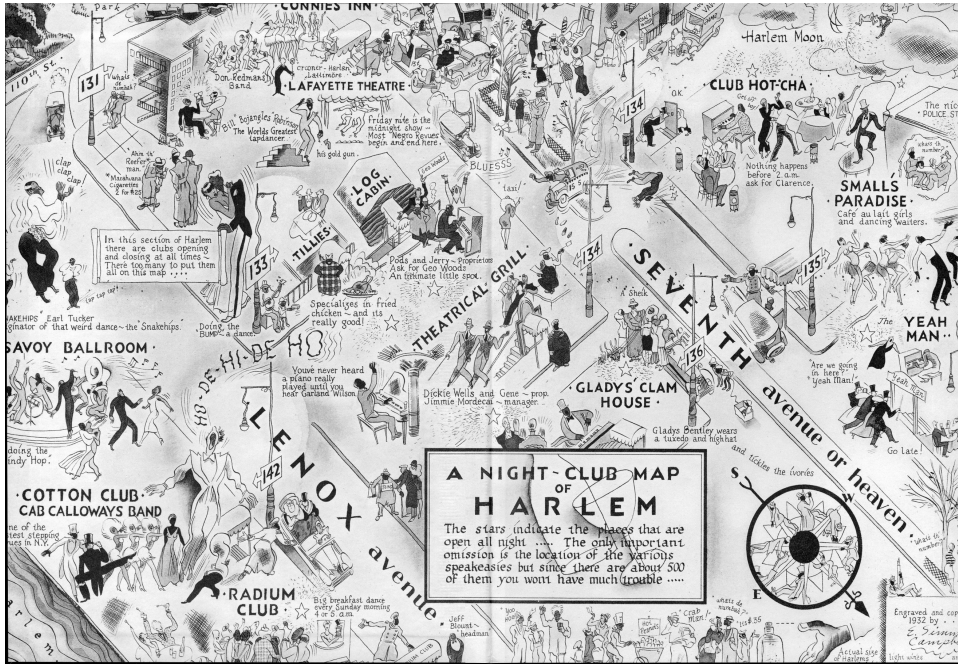
nascent progress and developments made towards establishing a LGBTQ+ community were negatively received, and actively opposed, by the heteronormative society. Furthermore, beyond the select information about the small, known lesbian/transgender female community, much of the information regarding the growth and development of a queer community must be gleaned from subtext. Any racial mixing was done surreptitiously due to the harsh social stigma surrounding the practice. As such, it is difficult to find much evidence of white slumming and its full impact on emerging communities.

It is critical to go beyond the surface level of the culture boom that was the Harlem Renaissance. Behind the popularized works of straight black men lies the deeply influential creative works of queer black women. From their blues songs, laden with personal struggles, to literary works and more, their contributions to the Harlem Renaissance helped drive it forward and establish spaces of exploration for themselves which ultimately helped to expose mainstream society to their lifestyles and experiences. Queer black women impacted and shaped the larger movement of the Harlem Renaissance, the emergence of LGBTQ+ enclaves, and those who slummed in Harlem.

The Harlem Renaissance was about more than jazz and poetry concerning racial oppression. It was an underappreciated catalyst for a new community and movement that would be the starting point for a much greater development in the decades to come. San Francisco's Mona's Club 440 advertised Gladys Bentley's performance there in December 1942 (see Appendix B) as "the same type of gay entertainment that has made the 440 Club famous," demonstrating how the appeal, popularity, and reach of lesbian and transgender performers only grew as more audiences were exposed to gay life.⁴² The blues women of the Harlem Renaissance had a far-reaching impact on the emergence of queer communities. Queer history does not begin with the Stonewall Riots, nor is it limited to the scope of white or gay male accomplishments. In fact, marginalized women of color are important players in the development of queer enclaves and the culture that defines them.

⁴² "Advertisement for Mona's Club 220 in 1942," *The Virtual Museum of the City of San Francisco*, <<http://www.sfmuseum.net/hist10/mona.html>> (21 May 2016).

Appendix



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Advertisement in San Francisco Life — December 1942