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Refusing Erasure: Nugent, *Fire!!*, and the Legacies of Queer Harlem

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Abstract: This study examines the work of two queer Black artists, Richard Bruce Nugent and Marlon Riggs, within the historical and sociopolitical contexts of the Harlem Renaissance and cultural backlash of the late 1980s. Through comparative textual analyses, the author explores fluctuations of Black queer cultural production during the twentieth century and considers how each artist subverts dominant racist and heteronormative ideologies in mainstream society and Black communities. Engaging tools from the fields of critical race theory, queer theory, critical legal studies, and cultural representations of race and sexuality, the author analyzes “Smoke, Lilies and Jade” and *Tongues Untied* structurally and historically, suggesting that both offer valuable strategies for survival in and resistance against an anti-Black and homophobic society. The works of Nugent and Riggs constitute queer interventions in the larger movement toward racial equality, making visible racial and sexual oppression and positing connections between racial justice and queer liberation. Moreover, positioning Riggs within the legacy of Nugent and the Harlem Renaissance points to the generative potential of radical and transgressive queer Black art.

Keywords: “Smoke, Lilies and Jade” (short story); Nugent, Bruce, 1906–1987; *Tongues Untied* (film); Riggs, Marlon, 1957–1994; Washington State University (WA)—Honors College

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INTRODUCTION

The history of Black cultural production in the U.S. is one of struggle for self-representation and self-definition. Black artists and writers from Phillis Wheatley to Langston Hughes to Staceyann Chin have engaged in this

struggle and demonstrated the potential of art and literature to subvert the dominant ideologies that uphold and enable racial oppression and violence. Richard Bruce Nugent and Marlon Riggs were two queer Black artists who worked in different time periods, the Harlem Renaissance and the cultural backlash of the late 1980s. These two movements in a long history of Black cultural production are separated by distinct historical and cultural specificities but united by the ongoing struggles toward racial equality. The work of Nugent and Riggs constituted queer interventions in each of these larger movements, making visible racial and sexual oppression and suggesting connections between racial justice and queer liberation. Nugent's "Smoke, Lilies and Jade" is regarded as the first explicitly homoerotic work written by a Black man while Riggs's documentary-style film *Tongues Untied* illuminated the experiences of gay Black men in 1980s America. Each of these works subverted dominant racist and heteronormative ideologies in mainstream society and Black communities, demonstrating the radical potential of transgressive representations of Black queer identities and experiences.

The Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s represented a moment of hope as well as an explosion of cultural production from Black artists and writers. Because negative representations of Black people in previous centuries had been designed to justify slavery and other forms of racial subjugation, prominent Black elites and intellectuals hoped to reconstruct and rehabilitate the race's image as the nation moved into the twentieth century. The representative figure of the "New Negro" would challenge the racist caricatures and stereotypes that continued to oppress Black communities, but this new definition of Black identity relied heavily on notions of race respectability and progress. A small group of young Black artists rejected these essentialist constructions of Black identity and created *Fire!!*, a quarterly for radical young Black artists. Among them was Richard Bruce Nugent, who, in 1926, published his "Smoke, Lilies and Jade" in the first issue. The artists of *Fire!!* complicated essentialist definitions of Black identity by highlighting aspects of Black lives and identities that were often dismissed and ignored by dominant Black publications because they did not align with racial uplift politics. The topics of sex and sexuality "had been completely left out of other representations of the New Negro" (Carroll 205), and Nugent's queer writing subverted race respectability through transgressive representations of Black experiences and identities.

Six decades after the Harlem Renaissance, writer and activist Joseph Beam, in his 1986 editorial for *Black/Out* magazine, declared that "Black men loving Black men is the revolutionary act of the 80s" (9). That same year, the iconic

symbol of the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power—the equation SILENCE = DEATH underneath a pink triangle—first appeared on posters. The revolutionary potential of Black men’s love and the equivalence of silence and death are two themes that powerfully shaped Marlon Riggs’s *Tongues Untied*. His most widely known—and most controversial—work, the film focuses on the lives of gay Black men in 1980s America, illustrating their experiences of homophobia and racism within both Black communities and predominately white gay spaces. Using storytelling, spoken poetry, and performance, as well as drawing on personal experiences, Riggs disrupted the anti-Black and heteronormative discourses that erased and silenced queer Black communities. Though Riggs’s goal was not to shock the public but rather to affirm Black queer identities and experiences, the transgressive elements of *Tongues Untied* drew harsh public criticism and censorship.

Though they worked in different historical time periods, both Nugent and Riggs carved out creative spaces that affirmed and celebrated queer Black identities and communities that were often silenced and rendered invisible. Addressing subjects and issues that were taboo, these artists complicated understandings of race, sexuality, and identity, and they received public criticism and attack for their efforts. Responding to their specific sociopolitical realities, Nugent and Riggs made unique and vital contributions to Black queer cultural production. The influence of these artists reached beyond the queer community, highlighting strategies of survival in and resistance against a homophobic and anti-Black society. Considering these artists and their work alongside each other demonstrates how representations of Black queer subjects in transgressive art function simultaneously to affirm one’s identity and to critique one’s community from a place of love.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Harlem Renaissance remains an era of intense study, as the abundance of works concerning both the time and the geographic region attest. While some early studies, such as Huggins’s *Harlem Renaissance* (1971) and Lewis’s *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (1981), trace the history of the Black culture in Harlem and the pivotal events that led to the creative explosion of the Harlem Renaissance, others, like Gates’s “The Trope of a New Negro” (1988), emphasize the artistic and political facets of the period and the contemporaneous “New Negro” movement. These earlier works highlighted the impact of the Harlem Renaissance on Black communities and the U.S. culture at large, yet the influence of queer sexuality on the artists and the work they

produced was generally absent from the analysis. However, the excavation of this period in Black cultural history made possible the later “queering” of the Renaissance. While this study directly builds on the later work, the earlier foundational work made the queering of the Harlem Renaissance possible and makes legible the queer flourishing that followed. The flourishing can be broken into three (often overlapping) categories: works that consider the queer significance of *Fire!!*; works that incorporate the queer writers of the Harlem Renaissance into the existing Black literary canon; and works that articulate the importance and impact of specific queer artists and writers.

To(o) Queer Harlem¹

In his *When Harlem Was in Vogue*, Lewis explores the historical and cultural significance of Harlem, New York, during the first third of the twentieth century. Beginning in 1905, “the beginning of the end of white Harlem,” (25) and ending in 1935 with the Harlem Race Riot, Lewis examines various events, figures, and movements that contributed to Harlem’s becoming a symbol of a Black cultural “Renaissance.” Lewis delves into the effects of World War I on racial consciousness in America, the emergence of “New Negro” rhetoric, and conflicting ideas among Black intellectuals and leaders about how racial equality could and should be achieved. Conversely, Huggins claims that his *Harlem Renaissance* is not about the Harlem Renaissance specifically but rather uses 1920s Harlem as “a lens through which one might see . . . white men and black men unknowingly dependent in their work to shape American character and culture” (12). Huggins critically analyzes some of the art produced during this period but also explores “the Negro self-concept” “beyond the limits of Harlem in the 1920s” (11).

Prominent in these early works was an acknowledgment that the goal of improving race relations was a major impetus behind the representative art and literature produced by Black artists and writers. As Gates asserted, Black intellectuals aimed to “‘turn’ the new century’s image of the black away from the stereotypes scattered throughout the plantation fictions, blackface minstrelsy, vaudeville, racist pseudoscience, and vulgar Social Darwinism” (“Trope” 136–37). Similarly, Huggins mapped how Black leaders wanted to “stress black achievement rather than black problems, [because a] positive self-image . . . was considered the best starting point for a better chance” (5). While Gates later articulated that the Harlem Renaissance was “as gay as it was black” (qtd. in Christian 25), “The Trope of a New Negro” was more

¹After Gloria Anzaldúa’s “To(o) Queer the Writer—Loca, Escritora y Chicana” (1991).

concerned with class than sexuality. Likewise, while Lewis did briefly address Nugent within the context of *Fire!!*, the scope of the project was so vast that only a few pages were spared for his discussion of the magazine.

While publications such as Booker T. Washington's *A New Negro for a New Century* (1900) and William H. Croghan's *The Progress of a Race* (1920) emphasized progress and respectability in the name of racial uplift, *Fire!!*, a literary magazine produced by younger Black artists, had other, more transgressive aims. Carroll's *Word, Image, and the New Negro* (2005) clearly articulates the tension that existed between the young Black artists of *Fire!!* and the older generation of "New Negro" artists and writers. Carroll also argues that, in contrast to the focus of "New Negro" texts on the representation of the racial self, "the contents of the creative texts in *Fire!!* reflect an ambiguity about the significance of race" (192). While the subtitle of the magazine, "Devoted to Younger Negro Artists," illustrates that these artists did consider their racial identity significant, works included in *Fire!!* consider gender, nationality, sexuality, and ideology alongside race. The queer significance of *Fire!!* stems from its openness to the exploration of identity beyond race, particularly non-normative sexuality. Indeed, Hannah's "Desires Made Manifest" (2015) argues that because of the inclusion of "texts that depict various complexities of racial and sexual identity," *Fire!!* functioned as a "queer modernist manifesto" (163). Hannah identifies Nugent's "Smoke, Lilies and Jade" as "the most obvious instantiation of . . . sensual queer desire" present in *Fire!!* (173). These works establish the transgressive implications of *Fire!!* and of "Smoke, Lilies and Jade" in particular, but they also note that the short-lived magazine was quickly smothered.

Works that incorporate queer Harlem Renaissance writers into the existing Black literary canon form a necessary baseline from which in-depth analysis on specific queer writers and works can be conducted. Carbado et al.'s *Black Like Us* (2005), an anthology of twentieth-century lesbian, gay, and bisexual Black writers, is an example of incorporation focusing specifically on the queer element of the Harlem Renaissance. Resisting the dominant literary traditions that focus exclusively on either race or sexual orientation, Carbado and colleagues affirm the connections between sexuality, gender, and race. Frustration regarding the separation of race and sexuality in the literary canon is also forcefully present in Cobb's "Insolent Racing, Rough Narrative" (2000). Cobb analyzes the rhetorical strategy of rudeness employed by several queer writers of the Harlem Renaissance. By challenging "race criticism's sexuality amnesia," as well as the lack of "anthologized space devoted to race" within the queer literary tradition, Cobb attempts to "sketch the

formal possibilities for a black *and* queer literary aesthetic” (328–29). Nugent emerges as a noteworthy figure in both *Black Like Us* and “Insolent Racing, Rough Narrative,” and Cobb marks Nugent’s absence from the Black literary canon as significant.

Though scholars have largely neglected Nugent in comparison to some of his Harlem Renaissance peers, a small body of scholarship devoted to Nugent does exist. Wirth’s (2002) *Gay Rebel of the Harlem Renaissance* contains a selection of Nugent’s work. Through transcribed interviews and biographical information, Wirth closely examines Nugent’s life and work. Bauer’s “On the Transgressiveness of Ambiguity” (2015) and Christian’s “Enacting ‘Smoke, Lilies and Jade’ as Black Gay Print Culture” (2013) build from Wirth’s *Gay Rebel of the Harlem Renaissance*. Designating Nugent as “arguably America’s foremost Black aesthete” and situating his work within Western philosophy and twentieth-century sexology, Bauer analyzes the “deconstructive” nature of Nugent’s writing (1021). Bauer argues that Nugent’s strategically ambiguous approach to sexuality and race served to complicate the binaries of Black/White and man/woman that were prominent at the time. On the other hand, Christian turns to late twentieth and early twenty-first century film to evaluate Nugent, his artistic work, and its significance to both the Black community and the Black literary canon. Christian argues that the past existence of Black gay print culture, such as “Smoke, Lilies and Jade,” was essential to the later production of Black gay films. Christian briefly addresses Marlon Riggs and *Tongues Untied* as a necessary steppingstone between “Smoke, Lilies and Jade” and the films *Looking for Langston* (1989) and *Brother to Brother* (2004).

Harlem’s Queer Legacies

In contrast to the moment of hope represented by the Harlem Renaissance, art in 1980s America was created in the context of cultural backlash and the ongoing HIV/AIDS epidemic. Helen Molesworth has argued that these contextual specificities had a significant impact on the art of the 1980s, causing artists to work “in relation to the emergence of queer visibility brought on by the AIDS crisis” (19). Her *This Will Have Been: Art, Love and Politics in the 1980s* (2012) functions as a retrospective of the decade and challenges the dominant regard for 1980s art as “an embarrassment” (15). Weinberg’s *Art After Stonewall* (2019) is broader in scope, investigating two decades (1969–1989) to examine “the impact of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) movement on the art world” (10). Bost’s *Evidence*

of *Being* (2019) explores “the renaissance of black gay cultural production in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s” (4). Focusing attention on cultural formations in New York City and Washington, D.C., Bost identifies the factors that influenced the emergence of this renaissance and articulates the necessity of Black gay cultural production in resisting the erasure of Black queer lives from history.

A growing body of work examines the films and creative projects of Marlon Riggs, one of the most productive queer Black artists of the late twentieth century. Moon’s *Reel Black Talk* (1997) locates the artist within a larger anthology of Black filmmakers, highlighting the critical acclaim received by Riggs’s work alongside biographical information. Harper’s “Marlon Riggs: The Subjective Position of Documentary Video” (1995) constitutes a more in-depth examination of Riggs’s filmography than exists in the works mentioned above, with a particular focus on his “engagement with issues of critical subjectivity” (71). Examining the evolution of Riggs’s approach to filmmaking and the development of his work over his career, Harper argues that Riggs challenged the conventions of broadcasting and documentary as a medium. Both Moon and Harper emphasize Riggs’s contributions to the Black queer cultural production of this era.

Together, the growing body of secondary literature that places the work of queer Black artists at the heart of the Harlem Renaissance and the emerging criticism addressing the work of late twentieth-century queer Black artists map the relationship between the two and envision possibilities for building upon these legacies into the next century.

METHODS

In examining Nugent’s and Riggs’s multidimensional experiences as queer Black artists working in the U.S. in the twentieth century, I engage tools from a variety of fields to create a framework for the analysis of “Smoke, Lilies and Jade” and *Tongues Untied*, allowing me to map the rich and generative relationship between these two texts. Concepts and arguments from the fields of critical race theory, queer theory, critical legal studies, and cultural representations of race and sexuality allow me to mark the century as Black and queer by analyzing the texts structurally and within their historical contexts. The study of texts within texts is central to accomplishing this task: I analyze the representations of “Smoke, Lilies and Jade” and *Tongues Untied* within the Black press, in publications such as: *Fire!!*, *A New Negro for a New Century*, and articles from *Crisis*, *The Nation*, and *Ebony* magazines.

Delgado and Stefancic's *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction* (2017) provides some of the frames through which I analyze the work of Nugent and Riggs. In their deconstruction of stereotypes and racist images, Delgado and Stefancic introduce the concept of "empathic fallacy" (33) and demonstrate how narrative theory and counterstorytelling within the context of critical race theorization can disrupt racial projects (Omi and Winant 129). I apply the concept of the empathic fallacy to my analysis of the "New Negro" texts such as *A New Negro for a New Century* (Washington et al.) and "The Talented Tenth" (DuBois). The empathic fallacy, or "the belief that one can change a narrative merely by offering another, better one" (Delgado and Stefancic 34), illuminates the limitations of "New Negro" rhetorical strategies that appealed to notions of race respectability in the effort to "rehabilitate" the image of Black people in the U.S. This illumination informs my contrast of *Fire!!* with mainstream publications in order to consider the different goals and strategies of these texts.

Engaging narrative theory, Delgado and Stefancic note that beyond raising awareness about minority experiences within dominant groups, "stories also serve a powerful additional function for minority communities" (50), specifically the "valid destructive function" of counterstorytelling. I apply Delgado and Stefancic's theory that "attacking embedded preconceptions that marginalize others or conceal their humanity is a legitimate function of all fiction" (50) to "Smoke, Lilies and Jade" and *Tongues Untied* to map how both Nugent and Riggs engaged in this kind of attack through their transgressive works. I incorporate material in articles from *Ebony* magazine to illustrate some of the "embedded preconceptions" that Riggs successfully disrupted with *Tongues Untied*.

Arguments from Matsuda et al.'s *Words That Wound* (1993) map how Riggs addressed themes of racial and homophobic violence through his use of personal stories in *Tongues Untied*. *Words That Wound* addresses the issue of assaultive speech and the First Amendment through the lens of critical race theory. The project's clear articulation of critical race theorists' "embrace [of] the subjectivity of perspective" mirrors Riggs's subjective approach to the medium of documentary film (3). Matsuda's chapter, "Public Responses to Racist Speech: Considering the Victim's Story," argues in favor of "the authority of personal experience" (9), which I apply to *Tongues Untied* to map how the impact of the film is derived from its use of personal stories throughout. Additionally, because some scenes of the film employ racial and homophobic epithets and slurs, I incorporate Matsuda's reflections on the impact of assaultive speech on victims into my discussion of the film.

Hutchinson's "Ignoring the Sexualization of Race" (1999) and Valdes's "Queer Margins, Queer Ethics" (1997) provide critical tools for my examination of Riggs's critiques of anti-racist and LGBTQ+ activism. In "Ignoring the Sexualization of Race," Hutchinson expanded the "race-sexuality critiques of anti-racism and gay and lesbian discourses" (4), analyzing the sexual component of racial violence. Hutchinson argued that when anti-racist activism ignores homophobic racial violence and responds only to heterosexual racial violence, a "discriminatory and heteronormative model of racial justice" is created (5). Similarly, in "Queer Margins, Queer Ethics," Valdes claimed that it was urgent for critical legal scholars "to interrogate the racialized and ethnicized dynamics of sexual orientation identities and issues" (1297). Valdes argued that, if queer legal studies continued to neglect people of color from its inquiry, "the substantive insight and efficacy of our theorizing" might be diminished and that "such neglect may undermine the transformative potential of our work" (1298). Riggs refers to homophobic racial violence in *Tongues Untied* and addresses homophobia in anti-racist activism and Black spaces as well as racism in queer spaces, more broadly. I apply both Hutchinson's and Valdes's critiques of anti-racist and LGBTQ+ activism to *Tongues Untied* to map how Riggs poignantly illustrates the necessity of intersectional and multidimensional approaches to activism.

C. Riley Snorton's "glass closet" allows seeing and mapping queerness in primary sources even when they might remain hidden from a heteronormative lens. He introduced this concept in *Nobody is Supposed to Know* (2014), where he addressed Black sexual representation in popular cultural production, with the central analysis addressing the "down low" figure, a term that "typically refers to black men who have sex with men and women and who do not identify as gay, bisexual, or queer" (6). While this term was "concretized" in the early 2000s, years after *Tongues Untied* and decades after "Smoke, Lilies and Jade," Snorton's innovative frames and his broader analysis of the representation of Black sexuality are critical tools for analyzing these earlier texts. Working with the idea of the "glass closet," which Snorton defines as a space "marked by hypervisibility and confinement, spectacle and speculation" (4), I consider how the issue of the hypervisibility of Black sexuality was challenged, used strategically, and/or illustrated differently by the "New Negro" movement, the artists of *Fire!!*, and Marlon Riggs.

Because *Fire!!*, due to its short run, is sometimes seen as a failure, I also engage theory of "failure" and "low theory" to expose yet another layer of queerness within these texts. Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011)

engages “low theory”—“the theorization of alternatives within an undisciplined zone of knowledge production” (18)—to consider the “rewards” that may be gained from failure. Although the archive to which Halberstam applies low theory consists mainly of animated films, the concept of “productive failure” is a critical lens through which I examine *Fire!!*, a magazine that “failed” after its first issue due to financial complications. Engaging Halberstam’s recognition of “failure as a way of refusing to acquiesce to dominant logics of power and discipline” (88), I consider how the artists of *Fire!!*, including Nugent, held values different from more mainstream Black publications at the time and ask whether, if viewed apart from dominant conceptions of success, the achievements of the magazine were valuable or significant. I incorporate an analysis of Langston Hughes’s “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” (1926), published in *The Nation*, to supplement this discussion of *Fire!!* because this article functioned as Hughes’s manifesto, declaring the purpose of the magazine and the ambitions of its young artists.

Finally, I attempt to map the complex relationship between the work of Richard Bruce Nugent and Marlon Riggs. Although Riggs is identified as part of the “legacy” of the queer Harlem Renaissance, I draw from Jagose’s “Feminism’s Queer Theory” (2009) and Geller’s “Is Film Theory Queer Theory?” (2013) to complicate this urge to rely on “linear historical time with its implicit prioritization of the present and its reliance on heteronormative tropes of lineage, succession, and generation” (Jagose 160). Jagose examines the relationship between feminist theory and queer theory, mapping the succession narrative that casts feminism as “past” and queer as “now.” Geller identifies Eve Sedgwick as the “mother of queer studies” and Robin Wood as the “father of gay film studies,” and she then proceeds to trouble those very designations as heteronormative “in the[ir] evocation of foremothers and forefathers” (160). In order “to outline an altogether different image of the present” and trace a future path (Geller 160), Geller and Jagose strive to balance reflections on the past with a rejection of reproductive futurity. I attempt to emulate this balance as I consider the connections between Nugent and Riggs while avoiding a simple trope of lineage.

DISRUPTING SILENCES AND REFUSING ERASURE

The period known as the “Harlem Renaissance” witnessed an explosion of cultural production from Black artists and writers. The return of Black soldiers to the U.S. after the first World War is heralded as the start of the Harlem Renaissance, which continued until the mid-1930s and the Great

Depression (Carbado et al. 2). As a literary and artistic movement, the Harlem Renaissance is but one chapter in a much longer history of the Black struggle for self-representation and self-definition in America. The struggle represents a long-held belief that the negative and racist portrayals of Black people that have dominated American popular culture can be refuted with positive counter-representation. If the “novels, essays, and visual images” that portrayed Black people as inferior and subhuman could be used to “justify or even encourage racism and violence,” as well as slavery, then perhaps alternative representations of Black Americans “might have an ameliorating effect on racism and its manifestations” (Carroll 5–7). These hopes were illustrated in various “New Negro” texts published at the beginning of the twentieth century, such as *A New Negro for a New Century* and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People’s (NAACP) *The Crisis*. These texts aimed to present Black Americans in a favorable light that would significantly aid the struggle for racial equality. These texts would also be challenged by the work of Nugent and his contemporaries.

Lifting as We Climb: Art as Racial Uplift Propaganda²

Prominent Black leaders and publications in the early decades of the twentieth century were committed to racial uplift and to representations and narratives of Black progress and development. Booker T. Washington et al.’s (1900) *A New Negro for a New Century* presented “an accurate and up-to-date record of the upward struggles of the Negro Race” designed to showcase the social and intellectual advancement achieved by Black people in the thirty years since Emancipation. Fannie Barrier Williams’s discussion of the work of Black women’s clubs, which she posited as evidence of racial progress, emphasized the value that Black elites placed on race respectability and narratives of progress; she lauded the efforts of Black women who worked to achieve the “domestic virtues, moral impulses and standards of family and social life that are the badges of race respectability” (379). Williams also noted the belief that positive and respectable presentation of the race was an important strategy for the eradication of racism: “There is certainly more power to demand respect and righteous treatment since it has become possible to organize the best forces of all the race for such demands” (405). W. E. B. DuBois’s approach to racial issues, articulated in his 1903 essay “The Talented Tenth,”

²“Lifting as We Climb” was the motto of the National Association of Colored Women, founded in 1986.

was similarly focused on the “best forces of the race.” DuBois claimed that “the Negro Race, like all races, [was] going to be saved by exceptional men” (33). He argued, therefore, that it was imperative that educational efforts be focused first on the best and brightest Black youth, citing the progress already achieved by the advancements made with the education of Black people in the U.S. (45). DuBois’s insistence on centering the “best” that Black communities had to offer illustrates the elitist dimensions of racial uplift strategies. The elitist and respectable values that dominated the New Negro movement had implications for Black artists and writers at the time: if a credible appeal for racial equity and justice was to be predicated on showcasing the most progressive and respectable face of the Black community, then positive representation in Black cultural production—art and literature—was essential.

In addition to volumes like *A New Negro for a New Century*, many Black newspapers were also invested in racial uplift and respectable, progressive representations of the Black community. The NAACP’s *Crisis* devoted space in each issue to “The Horizon,” a column that announced Black advancements and accomplishments in music and art, education, industry, politics, and social progress. Additionally, the “Men of the Month” column in each issue of *Crisis* showcased successful Black men (and occasionally Black women), once again emphasizing the progress and respectability achieved by Black people in the U.S.

Art and literature also played a role in racial uplift propaganda. The Urban League’s *Opportunity* and the NAACP’s *Crisis* often published the works of Black artists and writers “as part of a strategy to advance the cause of social and political equality by trying to gain the attention and respect of the white elite and the empathy of white readers” (Wirth 2). DuBois “had made the case for ‘conscious, normative, intelligent action’ as an antidote to the violence of racism” (Hannah 165). Black cultural production was a component of this anti-racist antidote. Indeed, DuBois made his stance on art and racial uplift clear in his “Criteria of Negro Art” in volume 32 of *The Crisis*:

Thus all art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists. I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy. I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda. But I do care when propaganda is confined to one side while the other is stripped and silent. (Oct. 1926)

The strong beliefs among New Negro intellectuals regarding “appropriate” goals and accomplishments for Black artists and writers led to censorship of more radical and transgressive art (Wirth 13-14).

The belief in the transformative potential of Black art has deep roots.³ Henry Louis Gates addresses the “direct relationship between the race’s creation of ‘art’ and its realization of its political desires” as central to Black intellectual history (Gates, “Trope” 133). Addressing white Americans, DuBois claimed “[y]ou misjudge us because you do not know us” (“The Talented Tenth” 34). For DuBois, the racism and violence experienced by Black people in America resulted from the false and racist negative portrayals of Black people in art and cultural production; therefore, manipulating the representations of Black people in U.S. cultural materials would change the material experiences of Black people in U.S. society. The persistence of racism past the Harlem Renaissance, however, indicates that these strategies were ineffective at erasing racism and its various manifestations, evidence of the empathic fallacy described by Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic (34). Volumes such as *A New Negro for a New Century* exemplify the hope that illustrating “the progressive life of the Afro-American people” would prove that the Black community had a credible claim to its political and social rights (Washington 3). The strong connection between art and political and social movements seemed rational at the time, and therefore Black art was expected to fit a particular agenda and support certain norms, values, and ideas. As a result, the category of “acceptable” racial art was narrow.

While the older generation of Black elites and intellectuals sought to use “literature as a source of liberation [by] employing ennobled representations” of Black people, a small group of younger Black artists, led by Wallace Thurman, rejected these strategies of racial uplift. In 1926, this group, which included Richard Bruce Nugent, published the first issue of *Fire!!*, a magazine that Thurman intended “to be a repudiation of . . . the stodgy political sociology of the Negro press,” particularly *Crisis* and *Opportunity* (Hannah 164). *Fire!!* was an independent, avant-garde magazine “Devoted to Younger Negro Artists” and was a space in which the contributors could create expansive artwork that represented the great diversity of Black identities and lives, regardless of whether these representations were deemed respectable, progressive, or normative. The diverse and radical work included in *Fire!!* redefined Black art outside of the racial uplift politics that confined Blackness to a narrow ideal.

The artists of *Fire!!* refused to be beholden to a political agenda that limited the subject matter with which they were permitted to engage. The

³Phillis Wheatley’s (1773) *Poems on Various Subjects* and Frederick Douglass’s (1845) *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* are examples of this broader legacy.

contents of the magazine critiqued dominant “ideas about African American identity” and sought to distance these young artists from the Black “intelligentsia” whom they considered “too insistent on the idea of using art as a political and social tool, and too obsessed with the idea of race” (Carroll 190). The contributors to *Fire!!* were able to explore and address controversial topics and include transgressive work because of the magazine’s status “as an independent publication, free from the controlling interests of an organization like the NAACP or the NUL” (Carroll 191). Such freedom allowed the young artists to create authentic and expressive “representations of life as it really [was], regardless of the ‘moral’ considerations of uplift ideology” (Hannah 166). Langston Hughes, another artist of *Fire!!*, boldly articulated the intentions of the magazine and its contributors in his “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain”:

We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn’t matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too. . . . If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn’t matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves. (76)

The magazine included an array of shocking and bold works, such as Wallace Thurman’s “Cordelia the Crude,” a story about sex work; Gwendolyn Bennett’s depiction of an interracial relationship in “Wedding Day”; and Zora Neale Hurston’s “Sweat,” which was about an abusive relationship. But the most transgressive inclusion in *Fire!!* was Richard Bruce Nugent’s “Smoke, Lilies and Jade.”

On *Fire!!*

Richard Bruce Nugent was born in Washington, D.C., on July 2, 1902, to Richard Henry Nugent, Jr., and Pauline Minerva Bruce Nugent. Nugent described his parents as bohemian, and they exposed him to art at a young age, often taking him and his younger brother to the theater (Smith 209). Books were also a significant part of Nugent’s early life, including Richard von Kraft-Ebing’s work on sexology, which left Nugent with “no doubt as to the nature of his own budding sexuality” (Wirth 8). Nugent recalled that his parents were considered “pillars of society” due to their middle-class status, fair complexions, and what Nugent described as “all the other bullsh*t” (Smith

210). Because of their social standing, “Nugent’s mother was concerned that his homosexuality might bring disgrace to the family name,” leading Nugent to use the pseudonym “Richard Bruce” for his artwork (Smith 210). Following his father’s death, the family moved to New York City, but Nugent’s mother “sent [him] back to Washington” in 1924 “to punish [him] because [he] wouldn’t get a job” (Smith 211). The conflict between Nugent and his mother would later be reflected in the tension between mother and son in “Smoke, Lilies and Jade.”

Nugent’s time in Washington, D.C., would eventually bring him back to New York City and the Harlem Renaissance. He became acquainted with the young poet Langston Hughes at a social gathering hosted by Georgia Douglass Johnson, whose “home was *the* place to meet . . . fascinating people” (Smith 211). Nugent’s first published work was the short story “Sahdji,” which was included in Alain Locke’s *The New Negro*, but Thomas Wirth identifies “Smoke, Lilies and Jade” as Nugent’s most important work (75). In addition to being “the most openly homosexual of the Harlem Renaissance writers,” Nugent was also the first Black writer to work from a “self-described homosexual perspective,” exploring the connections between sexuality and race (Gates, Foreword xii). The story’s exploration of sexual desire through an interracial relationship between two men “was a direct affront to the conservative notions of propriety that governed ideas about socially and culturally responsible portrayals of African Americans” (Carroll 208). “Smoke, Lilies and Jade” aligned with the larger goals of *Fire!!*, depicting multiple aspects of identity, creating art for its own sake rather than for racial uplift propaganda, and resisting and challenging normative ideas of respectability espoused by the more conservative, older generation of Black writers.

Nugent’s “Smoke, Lilies and Jade,” regarded as the first piece of explicitly homoerotic literature from a Black male writer, celebrated queer Black love and broke the silence around nonnormative sexuality. The story follows Alex, the protagonist, as he meets and falls in love with a man named Adrian. Alex subsequently grapples with his sexuality and his simultaneous love for Adrian and a woman named Melva. With a stream-of-consciousness narrative characterized by the use of ellipses throughout, Alex moves between dreaming and waking, between internal dialogue and external experiences. Nugent’s exploration of themes of shame, identity, and nonnormative sexuality remain relevant to Black queer communities today, and similar celebrations of queer Black love would be taken up by artists in subsequent decades.

Through Alex’s rejection of shame, Nugent challenges normative ideologies that equate an individual’s value with productivity in the workforce

and that privilege respectability and politeness. Although Alex's mother is a peripheral character in the story, Nugent uses fragments of Alex's memories and thoughts about his mother to demonstrate their conflicting ideologies and her attempts to shame Alex into a more conservative and normative lifestyle, resembling Nugent's conflicts with his own mother. While lounging about and smoking a cigarette, Alex "wondered why he couldn't find a job," thinking that "he should be ashamed that he didn't work . . . he should be . . . his mother and all his relatives said so . . ." (Nugent 77). Alex is so aware of his mother's negative attitude toward his lifestyle that he intentionally avoids her: "if he went to see mother she would ask . . . how do you feel Alex with nothing in your pockets . . . I don't see how you can be satisfied . . ." (77). Alex instead finds himself content to fill his time with other activities, pursuing alternative forms of satisfaction and fulfillment. In fact, rather than internalize and agree with his mother's negative feelings, "he vaguely pit[ied] her instead of being ashamed . . ." (77). Alex's rejection of shame is emblematic of Nugent's approach to disapproval throughout his life: "If you can't take me the way I am, it's your problem. It's certainly not mine" (qtd. in Smith 209). Alex follows his passion to be an artist rather than to pursue traditional work as his mother would deem more appropriate; thus, Nugent challenges New Negro racial uplift propaganda, using art to depict real life rather than a display of propriety and respectability. Alex's desire to create art also mirrors *Fire!!*'s emphasis on creating art for its own sake while simultaneously it is constitutive of that same value.

Nugent's establishment of Alex as an artist connects to the exploration of identity in "Smoke, Lilies and Jade." In keeping with *Fire!!*'s commitment to illustrating the multiplicity of Black identities and experiences, Nugent focuses on elements of identity other than race. Beyond the exploration of queer sexuality that is a central aspect of the story on its own, Nugent also takes care to specify other elements of Alex's identity, including his age and ideology. Alex's community of friends is closely connected to his self-identity as an artist, indicating the bidirectional relationship between identity and community and the vital role played by the latter to help sustain the former: "but was he an artist . . . was one an artist until one became known . . . of course he was an artist . . . and strangely enough so were all his friends" (77). Alex's identity as a nineteen-year-old artist imitates *Fire!!*'s devotion to "Younger Negro Artists." Nugent pays homage to his fellow *Fire!!* contributors, whose names appear in Alex's thoughts: "he liked many people . . . Wallie . . . Zora . . . Clement . . . Gloria . . . Langston . . . John . . . Gwenny . . ." (82). "Smoke,

Lilies and Jade” is also aligned with the other artwork in *Fire!!* because of its ambiguity about racial identity. Although all the contributors to *Fire!!* were Black, “their racial identity is only sometimes reflected in the content of their work or in the characters they portray” (Carroll 217). Nugent “was relatively vague about the racial identity of his characters [and] . . . never identified Alex as black or white” (Carroll 217), but the autobiographical elements of the story suggest that Alex, like Nugent, is Black.

Alex’s appreciation and enthusiasm for beautiful things—which, over the course of the story, morphs into a celebration of the beauty of queer Black love—is established early in the story. Alex wonders why people “never cried for beautiful sunsets . . . or music” (Nugent 75) and feels sad that the woman he passes on the street “did not weep that she would never be beautiful” (78). Nugent portrays Alex and Adrian’s first meeting with artistic metaphors and intimate language, emphasizing Alex’s appreciation of that which is beautiful: describing Adrian’s face as “a perfect complement to his voice . . . Alex knew that he had never seen a more perfect being . . . his body was all symmetry and music . . . and Alex called him Beauty” (80–81). Alex’s established identity as an artist lends itself to a deep adoration of Adrian even before he recognizes the sexual component of his desire for Adrian. The nickname “Beauty,” along with Nugent’s physical descriptions of Adrian, demonstrate the contemporaneous transgressive nature of “Smoke, Lilies and Jade.” As Devon W. Carbado points out, “merely calling another man ‘beautiful,’ as Nugent had done . . . was a bold act” (11), positioning “Smoke, Lilies and Jade” as a challenge to heteronormative notions of propriety and respectability. Nugent’s expressions of homoeroticism through his intentional use of beautiful and artistic language make “Smoke, Lilies and Jade” not merely an acknowledgment of homosexuality but a celebration of queer Black love.

Initially, Alex conflates his desire for Adrian with his more general appreciation of beauty, and the eventual decoupling of these two feelings enables Alex to claim his love for Adrian authentically. Alex wonders if he likes Adrian so much “because he was so susceptible to beauty,” and he works through this queer confusion by examining his feelings for Adrian within a framework that is already familiar: his love for Melva.

he knew other people who were beautiful . . . but he was never confused before them . . . while Beauty . . . Beauty could make him believe in Buddha . . . or imps . . . and no one else could do that . . . that is no one but Melva . . . but then he was in love with Melva . . . and that explained that . . . he would like Beauty to know Melva . . . they were

both so perfect . . . such compliments . . . yes he would like Beauty to know Melva because he loved them both . . . there . . . he had thought it . . . actually dared to think it. . . (82)

The realization and acknowledgement of love and desire quickly gives way to a new internal conflict, Alex's simultaneous desires for Adrian and Melva: "Alex couldn't understand . . . and it pained him . . . almost physically . . . and tired his mind . . ." (82). Ultimately, Nugent's resolution of this conflict affirms and celebrates Alex's queer identity.

Shortly after his realization, Alex experiences a dream that illustrates his bisexual conflict as well as the depth of his feelings for both Melva and Adrian. Alex wades through a field of red calla lilies and black poppies. Pushing aside flowers, he discovers Adrian and Melva, in turn, before waking up increasingly confused and torn between these two warring desires. In the dream, Adrian and Melva are both described intimately. Alex notes Adrian's "dancer's legs," "lithe narrow waist," and "Grecian nose," as well as Melva's "graceful slender throat," "slightly parting lips," and "black eyes with lights in them" (82–83). The careful and sensual portrayals of Adrian and Melva in Alex's dream convey the beauty and depth of the love he feels for each of them. At the end of the story, Alex comes to terms with his desires, rejoicing in the realization that "one *can* love two at the same time . . . one *can* . . . one *can* . . . one *can* love" (87). Rather than concede to a heteronormative society that would deny the validity and expression of his identity, Alex imagines a different path, affirming his own desires by boldly claiming his simultaneous loves for a man and a woman.

Although crucial to providing the contributors with the artistic freedom they sought, *Fire!!*'s independent status proved to be a significant disadvantage. The lack of financial assistance from a sponsoring organization caused problems almost immediately, and the reception of the first issue of *Fire!!* ensured its failure. Some critics praised the artistic individuality and originality of the magazine, but these positive reviews were far outnumbered by negative ones, "which were much more damning than the positive ones were laudatory" (Carroll 194–95). David Levering Lewis noted that "senior Afro-American notables and their allies found the quarterly distinctly not to their liking" (197), and many of the negative reviews took issue with the sexual content in *Fire!!* Benjamin Brawley of the *Southern Workman* "found *Fire!!* offensive because of . . . its vulgarity" while the headline of another Black weekly newspaper branded the quarterly as "Effeminate Tommyrot" (qtd. in Carroll 195). Alain Locke, a prominent New Negro intellectual known for

the value he placed on “authenticity of expression,” also disapproved of *Fire!!* (Wirth 48). Locke took issue with the “strong sex radicalism of many of the contributions [which would] shock many well-wishers and elate some of our adversaries” (qtd. in Wirth 48). The negative reviews of *Fire!!* emphasize that the younger artists had transgressed conventions of propriety, artistic style, and heteronormativity.

The worst fate was not the negative reviews, but rather *Fire!!*'s fading into obscurity. As Nugent recalled in a 1980s interview with Charles Michael Smith, “Wally [Thurman] and I thought that the magazine would get bigger sales if it was banned in Boston. So we flipped a coin. . . . The only two things we could think of that was bannable were a story about prostitution or about homosexuality” (qtd. in Smith 214). Nugent’s “Smoke, Lilies and Jade” and Thurman’s “Cordelia the Crude” were the result of this plan, but these stories were not enough for the magazine to be banned in Boston, nor were they able to rescue the magazine from financial failure. However, the intentional discussion of sexual themes in *Fire!!* stood in stark contrast to the content permitted in the more prominent Black publications.

The different attitudes toward the topic of Black sexuality indicate the different goals and strategies of the dominant Black publications in contrast to the aspirations of the artists of *Fire!!* Each publication had to navigate the hypervisibility and spectacle that C. Riley Snorton contends is linked to representations of Black sexuality (4) in accordance with these different goals. The organizations—and their affiliated magazines—that promoted racial uplift through Black art and literature avoided sexual topics altogether; such topics were at odds with the notions of propriety and respectability that were intertwined with racial uplift. “Issues of sexuality appear nowhere in *The Crisis* [or] *Opportunity* . . . and homosexuality is unmentioned” (Carroll 205) as these publications navigated the hypervisibility linked to Black sexuality with their drive toward invisibility. On the other hand, the artists of *Fire!!* rejected respectability politics, racial uplift, and progressive art, expressing what Locke described as “sex radicalism” in the contents of the magazine. The contributors of *Fire!!* strategically harnessed the hypervisibility of Black sexual representation to increase the visibility of their magazine.

Fire!!'s failure after its first issue illustrated the difficulty of forming and sustaining a space in which artists could create work independent from racial uplift politics and essentialist notions of Black identity. But as Jack Halberstam argues in *The Queer Art of Failure*, unique and significant rewards can result from failure. According to Halberstam, “failure allows us to escape the

punishing norms that discipline behavior” (3), which, in the case of *Fire!*, were the restrictions and censoring of art that depicted Black life, identity, and experience in ways that were not respectable, proper, or normative. Indeed, Hughes’s essay in *The Nation* articulated the desire of younger artists to create outside of those “norms that discipline behavior” as “an artist must be free to choose what he does” (76). *Fire!!* may have been smothered by the external forces of economic hardship and public disapproval, but the magazine gestured toward alternative expressions in which the complex multiplicity of Black lives and identities could be fully acknowledged and represented. Lewis claimed that “to succeed, [*Fire!!*] would have had to . . . gain loyal readers among curious whites . . . and attract a critical mass from the ‘Talented Tenth’” (197), choices that would have compromised the mission of *Fire!!*’s artists. The younger artists’ rebellion against dominant racial uplift ideology allowed for “a more complicated definition of African American identity than was offered elsewhere” (Carroll 221), including the first homoerotic literary work from a Black writer. *Fire!!*’s failure ignited a spark that would be taken up by later queer Black artists responding to the Black community and expressing their own sociopolitical realities and the struggle for freedom.

Your Silence Will Not Protect You: Raising Queer Black Voices⁴

Decades after *Fire!!*’s failure and the end of the Harlem Renaissance, Nugent became an important source of knowledge about twentieth-century Black and queer histories. As serious academic study of the Harlem Renaissance began in the 1970s, followed by “a wave of post-Stonewall interest in gay history” in the 1980s, Nugent—one of the last surviving figures of the Harlem Renaissance—was an invaluable resource (Wirth 39). He was interviewed for many biographies and historical studies of the era and appeared in anthologies such as Joseph Beam’s (1986) *In the Life: A Black Gay Anthology* as well as Greta Schiller and Robert Rosenberg’s (1984) documentary *Before Stonewall: The Making of a Gay and Lesbian Community*. Despite his slender corpus of published work, Nugent’s art and life were crucial to bridging the gap between the queer Harlem Renaissance and the Black gay movement of the eighties. In 1982, Thomas Wirth and Richard Bruce Nugent published a “facsimile edition” of *Fire!!*, giving the magazine “a renaissance of its own” (Wirth 40). As “the first writer who directly raised the issue of what being black and being gay might have to do with each other” (Gates, Foreword

⁴After Audre Lorde’s “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action” (1977).

xii), Nugent opened the door for later Black queer cultural production. The “renaissance” of *Fire!!* and “Smoke, Lilies and Jade” in the early 1980s generated expansive discourse about queer Black history, and Marlon Riggs’s *Tongues Untied* was a critical part of that discourse and queer legacy.

Born in 1957 and raised in the South, Marlon Riggs was one of the most significant Black queer artists of the 1980s, and the power and love that resonated through his work made him the “most well-known independent filmmaker” in the San Francisco Bay Area (Moon 287).⁵ Riggs studied history at Harvard University, and after deciding that filmmaking would be the best way to communicate his ideas about race and identity to the world, he attended the Graduate School of Journalism at the University of California, Berkeley. As a journalist, Riggs was trained to convey the stories of others objectively. Riggs, however, “felt that this objectivity and its lack of passion prevented journalists from using their subjective passion to better tell their stories” (Moon 288). This subjective and passionate approach to filmmaking became Riggs’s *modus operandi* for the rest of his career.

Though Riggs won over “two dozen awards and commendations for his art and humanity,” including an Emmy Award for his second film, *Ethnic Notions*, it was with his 1989 *Tongues Untied* that he achieved national attention (Moon 292). The film, “a video-poem about the African American gay experience” (Moon 288), had been partially funded by the National Endowment for the Arts, prompting outcry from political conservatives for its “inappropriate” content. Riggs claimed that he had not intended to shock audiences with “obscene” images in *Tongues Untied* but rather aimed to affirm the identities of gay Black men in the U.S. and to give voice to their experiences (Moon 289). Using a combination of spoken poetry, interpretive dance, and personal testimonies, Riggs explored themes of silence, violence, homophobia, racism, and the revolutionary potential of Black men’s love through a subjective documentary film.

Silence runs as a common thread through Riggs’s efforts to address the HIV/AIDS crisis, homophobic and racist violence, and the destruction of queer Black bodies. From the first scenes of the film, a connection between silence and death—physical, social, and emotional—is clearly established. An

⁵Some critics, such as Spencer Moon, claim that Riggs’s status as a well-known artist of his time was mainly a result of the controversial nature of his work. While the controversy generated by *Tongues Untied* did increase the national attention directed at Riggs, he was not the only artist creating controversial work during the 1980s and 1990s. Thus, I hold that it was the creative power of his work, grounded in love for his community, that caused so many to embrace and celebrate his work.

interpretive dance shows a Black man moving to the rhythm of a beating drum as a disembodied voice speaks: “Silence is my shield / it crushes. / Silence is my cloak / it smothers. / Silence is my sword / it cuts both ways” (*Tongues Untied* 2:24–3:13). In addition to introducing a metaphor that the film will return to repeatedly, the scene draws attention to the ways men are socialized not to speak up about their trauma, pain, and emotions, as inappropriate topics for men to engage. The repression of such feelings has a particularly toxic effect on gay Black men, who experience specific violence and oppression within an anti-Black and heteronormative society. Throughout the film, Riggs showed that while silence may be a weapon and a tool for survival, it results in emotional and physical death. Both Riggs and Nugent broke the silence surrounding Black queer identities with their work, but the sociopolitical specificities that Riggs experienced lent a particular urgency to his efforts to break this silence.

Riggs’s art was influenced by the sociopolitical climate in which he worked as well as by his own experiences as an activist. The calls to “break the silence” throughout the film reference the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT-UP), the AIDS activist group whose slogan, SILENCE = DEATH, emphasized that the silence and deliberate ignorance around HIV/AIDS killed thousands of LGBTQ+ people. The topic of the AIDS crisis is particularly salient in a film directed by a gay Black man as HIV/AIDS has disproportionately impacted Black communities.⁶ Riggs exemplified the courageous breaking of silence that the film encourages, as he described the discovery of “a time bomb ticking in [his] blood” (48:51–48:54). In an interview with *The Creative Mind*, Riggs expressed that “he felt it was important to affirm that he was a Black gay man with HIV” (Moon 289). In addition to calling for increased dialogue in the future, the film depicts the profound loss that had already been experienced in the queer community at this stage of the epidemic. Moments after Riggs reveals his own diagnosis, the screen flashes obituaries of Black men who have already been killed by AIDS. Accompanied by the sound of a beating heart, the obituaries and pictures flash by at an increasing pace, building a sense of grief, loss, and desperation. Silence was killing gay Black men.

Not only was silence physically killing Black gay men in the form of the AIDS crisis, its perpetuation of homophobia and racism in Black and gay spaces contributed to the social death of Black queers who were exiled from their communities. During a scene that cuts back and forth between a raging

⁶According to the Population Reference Bureau, “40 percent of Americans who have been diagnosed with HIV since 1981 have been African American” (Andriote).

Black preacher and a Black activist, the film depicts a version of anti-racism that “is constructed around a heteronormative vision of justice” (Hutchinson 5–6). The preacher roars that queer sexual practices are “abominations” and that there is no place “in God’s church for perversion” (23:15–23:29; 23:47), powerfully portraying how queer Black people are excluded from spaces that are central cultural components of the Black community. The tirade of the activist, on the other hand, exemplifies how “anti-oppression . . . activists . . . replicate social hierarchy in their . . . activism because they render invisible and subordinate already marginalized individuals” (Hutchinson 3). Ignoring the “relationship between racial oppression and . . . heterosexism” (Hutchinson 4), the activist is invested in the notion that various elements of an individual’s identity are discrete and separable from each other. Referring to the argument that all Black people, including those who are gay, “should be brothers” because of their political common ground, he asks, “before I accept his kinship, political or otherwise, this is what I want to know: Where does his loyalty lie? Priorities? . . . Come the final throwdown, what is he first? Black or gay?” (23:29–23:39; 23:50–23:55).

The disembodied voice that reacts to the activist’s homophobia articulates the need to center intersectionality within activist work and discourse. Speaking over the sound of a heartbeat, the voice eloquently connects Black homophobia and silence:

You know the answer. The absurdity of that question. How can you sit in silence? How do you choose one eye over the other, this half of the brain or that, or in words this brother might understand: Which does he value most, his left nut or his right? . . . *Silence is my shield / It crushes.* (23:57–24:21)

By invoking the metaphor of silence as a shield, the film captures the dual nature of silence as protection and destruction. While silence may protect a gay man from homophobic backlash in the moment, the inability to respond to the diatribe of the activist, a fellow Black man, results in an emotional and social death. To repeatedly hear that gay Black men must choose one element of identity over the other erodes one’s dignity and sense of self, denying the experiences of violence and oppression that stem from intersections of racism and homophobia.

Just as Riggs addresses homophobia in the Black community, he critiques the racism present in mainstream gay spaces, focusing specifically on the Castro, which he describes as a “great, gay Mecca” (18:39). In doing so, Riggs critically investigates “the ways in which white and straight supremacy

interlock” and interrogates “the racialized . . . dynamics of sexual orientation identities and issues” (Valdes 1296–97). Drawing from personal experiences, Riggs describes the “lack of Black images in this gay life, in bookstores, poster shops, film festivals, even my own fantasies” (17:34–17:48). His disembodied voice is accompanied by examples of the representations of Black men that are available in this gay culture: derogatory and pornographic images that play into offensive and harmful histories and stereotypes, such as a “slaves for sale” advertisement and drawings of hypersexualized Black men with enormous penises. As Riggs reflects on being rendered “an invisible man . . . an alien, unseen and seen, unwanted” (18:39–18:55), he makes visible the white supremacy within LGBT spaces and discourse.⁷

Riggs employs the power of personal testimony, telling stories from both childhood and adulthood about his experiences of racism and homophobia, which are often invoked concurrently to emphasize the intersectional nature of his experiences. Assaultive speech, particularly racist and homophobic slurs, feature prominently in many of these stories, mirroring Matsuda et al.’s work with assaultive speech in *Words That Wound*, which they wrote “is influenced by the use of narrative and the authority of personal experience” (9). Matsuda argues that a victim’s response to assaultive speech can be to “reject one’s identity as a victim-group member” and that “the price of disassociating from one’s own race is often sanity itself” (25). *Tongues Untied* effectively illustrates Matsuda’s point through a scene that weaves together various experiences from his childhood and adolescence. As Riggs describes how he realized his queer sexuality “by age six” and “practiced kissing” with a friend at age eleven, the viewer is bombarded by close-up shots of various mouths hurling slurs: “punk,” “homo,” “f*ggot,” “freak,” “Uncle Tom,” “motherf*cking coon,” “n*gger” (11:29–13:36). This chorus of verbal abuse demonstrates how assaultive speech and labels are used to police identities and behaviors. Riggs articulates how this homophobia and racism made him feel “cornered by identities that [he] never wanted to claim,” driving him to run “deep inside [him]self, where it was still, silent, safe. Deception” (13:36–14:00). The closing of this scene yet again invokes the dangers of silence as a protection against violence.

Riggs uses writer Joseph Beam’s proclamation that “Black Men Loving Black Men is a Revolutionary Act” to express and affirm the identities and experiences of gay Black men and to call for revolutionary change. Such a

⁷Decades later, Francisco Valdes would be among the generation of scholars who would bring a structural critique to the narrative introduced by Riggs, mapping issues of white supremacy and racial oppression onto critical queer theory and legal studies.

claim about love between Black men is made more powerful because it is a conclusion that the film reaches only after Riggs shares his experiences with white men and in white gay spaces. After explaining how racism and homophobia drove him into a silence that denied his identities, the screen displays a picture of a young white man. Riggs continues his story, in which “a white boy came to my rescue . . . seduced me out of my adolescent silence” (15:14–15:37). Riggs describes this “immaculate seduction” as a blessing and a joy but identifies as a “curse” the fact “that it should come from a white boy with gray-green eyes” (15:51–16:08). The consequences of this “curse” were Riggs’s experiences in the white gay spaces of the Castro.

Internalized racism and a rejection from the Black community caused Riggs to search for validation, acceptance, and approval from white gay men. When Riggs moved to the Castro, he described his sexual explorations as being “immersed in vanilla” (17:24) as he deliberately avoided relations with other Black men. As noted above in the discussion of racism in the white gay spaces of the Castro, Black men were largely absent from this community. Instead, Riggs searched for love, affirmation, and a reflection of himself “in eyes of blue gray green” (18:18–18:24). The sense of invisibility and exclusion from the gay “Mecca” brought Riggs closer to his recognition of the beauty and revolutionary potential of Black queer love. Upon realizing and acknowledging that he was viewed as inferior in these spaces, Riggs left the Castro in search of a community.

Riggs seemed to find this community among other gay Black men. The first appearance of the proclamation “Black Men Loving Black Men is a Revolutionary Act” is in footage of the organization Gay Men of African Descent (GMAD) at a gay pride parade (40:24). The affirmatory stance of the proclamation is paired with the celebratory and positive energy of the parade as men chant “we’re Black . . . gay . . . and we don’t have no other way!” and “homophobia has got to go!” (43:12–43:27). The chants and the assertion of Black men’s revolutionary love combine to powerfully affirm and celebrate queer Black identities and experiences. As Essex Hemphill describes in an earlier scene, it is difficult and daunting for Black men “to take on the threatening universe of whiteness by admitting that we are worth wanting each other” (27:47–27:55). To face that threat is an act of revolution: for Black men to see their reflections in each other’s eyes and intentionally love each other is to defy a homophobic and anti-Black society that constructs queer Black bodies as disposable. By calling for Black men to love each other, Riggs encourages radical self-love as well. The film ends with a final call for revolutionary love, solidarity, action, and responsibility: “Black men loving Black men. A call to

action. A call to action. An acknowledgement of responsibility. We take care of our own kind when the nights grow cold and silent. These days, the nights are cold blooded, and the silence echoes with complicity” (53:55–54:12). The calls to action and for solidarity in the face of state inaction, neglect, and violence ring as urgent in the twenty-first century as they did in 1989.

At the beginning of the film, Riggs draws an explicit connection between silence, history, and future, connecting *Tongues United* to larger histories of Black resistance and making clear the need to create more livable futures for queer Black people and communities. After the introduction of the metaphor that constructs silence as a shield that crushes, a cloak that smothers, and a sword that “cuts both ways,” the disembodied voice continues: “Silence is the deadliest weapon. What legacy is to be found in silence? How many lives lost? What future lies in our silence? How much history lost? . . . Let’s end the silence, baby. Together. Now” (3:17–3:38). Considering the destruction wrought on queer and Black bodies by the HIV/AIDS epidemic, the question of how many lives have been lost to silence has a clear and literal meaning. As Riggs digs deeper into the equation of silence and death, the film conveys the urgent need to end the silence to save present and future queer Black lives.

Storytelling and Legacies of Resistance

The question of “how much history lost?” takes on a deeper meaning when considered in terms of Black stories that have been lost, erased, and suppressed throughout U.S. history. In the wake of revealing his HIV-positive status, Riggs looks to the remaining legacies of Black ancestors for strength: “I watch, I wait . . . I listen for my own quiet implosion. But while I wait, older, stronger rhythms resonate within me, sustaining my spirit” (49:04–49:54). The screen displays photos of historic symbols of Black resistance: Harriet Tubman, Bayard Rustin, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Sojourner Truth. Footage from the 1965 Selma to Montgomery march is interspersed with clips of GMAD marching with a “Black Men Loving Black Men is a Revolutionary Act” banner. The appearance in this scene of Bayard Rustin, a lesser-known Civil Rights activist who was boldly Black and queer, complicates the connection between ancestry and modern activism, indicating that queer liberation and Black liberation have always been intricately connected. The film establishes a long history of resistance in the Black community and gives hope for the kind of futures that can be created when silence is broken.

The power of storytelling has long been employed to influence how Americans see race. In publications such as the New Negro texts from the

beginning of the twentieth century, stories functioned to bridge the gaps between the Black community and the dominant white world. Because the dominant racial group in the U.S. cannot easily understand what it is like to be a person of color, “the hope is that well-told stories describing the reality of black and brown lives can help bridge the gap between their world and others” (Delgado and Stefancic 46). Early twentieth-century Black elites and intellectuals attempted to bridge that gap with the most “favorable” portrayals of Black experiences and accomplishments, directing these stories at the dominant group and precluding certain “unfavorable” representations of Black lives and identities.

Storytelling also serves a powerful function for those within marginalized communities, as seen in *Tongues Untied* as well as in “Smoke, Lilies and Jade.” Critical race scholars have argued that storytelling allows discrimination to be named, combated, and deconstructed, thus giving minoritized communities “a voice” (Delgado and Stefancic 51). In addition to the constructive function of bridging the knowledge and experiential gaps between communities, counterstorytelling also has a “valid destructive function” (Delgado and Stefancic 49). Riggs’s *Tongues Untied* focuses on the functions of storytelling that serve marginalized communities, as indicated in the subtitle of the film: “Giving a Voice to Black Gay Men.” Riggs did not think that the film “contained shocking images” because “his original audience, Black gay men, would not be shocked by his images or ideas” (Moon 289). Riggs sought to express, name, and represent the experiences of gay Black men *for* gay Black men. This emphasis on affirmation of Black queer identity can be contrasted with Nugent’s “Smoke, Lilies and Jade,” which, while also affirming and celebratory, intentionally aimed to shock mainstream audiences.

Riggs used *Tongues Untied* to challenge the homophobic ideologies that exist in the Black community, displaying the destructive function of marginalized storytelling. Although the film received no attention from popular Black magazines, articles from *Ebony* magazine substantiate Riggs’s charges of homophobia within the Black community. For example, June Dobbs Butts’s article “Is Homosexuality a Threat to the Black Family?” from the April 1981 issue of *Ebony* addresses the “concern” and “great controversy” of “homosexuality . . . and its impact on the future of the Black family” (138). While Butts argues that homosexuality is not a threat to the future of the Black family, she concedes that “there are many sincere Black people who will . . . profoundly disagree . . . with this conclusion,” noting the “organized groups, including religious groups, that are condemnatory of homosexuality” (144). Riggs

speaks back to these attitudes, showing the emotional damage wrought upon gay Black men:

I am angry because of the treatment I am afforded as a Black man. That fiery anger is stoked additionally with the fuse of contempt and despidal shown me by my community because I am gay. I cannot go home as who I am. When I speak of home, I mean not only the familial constellation from which I grew, but the entire Black community. The Black press, the Black church, Black academicians, the Black literati, and the Black left. Where is my reflection? I am most often rendered invisible, perceived as a threat to the family, or I am tolerated if I am silent and inconspicuous. I cannot go home as who I am and that hurts me deeply. (28:18–28:59)

The film captures the pain and anger that homophobia and exclusion from the Black community produce, aiming to break the silence and shed the shroud of invisibility. Riggs does not ask for sympathy but rather attacks the preconceptions that “conceal the humanity” of gay Black men.

Because of its depictions of queer Black sexuality, *Tongues Untied* received the most national attention and generated the most controversy of all the films Riggs created during his short career. While mainstream magazines—such as the *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *Washington Post*—gave the film positive reviews, around “a third of the biggest public stations” around the country refused to air the program due to its “offensive” content (Goodman). The strong reactions to depictions of sex scenes between Black men illustrates the hypervisibility and spectacle that mark Black sexual representations (Snorton). The film was also the target of backlash from political conservatives because it had been partially funded by the federal government: “the political right wing cited the film as an example of the need to censor, control, and monitor the funding of art that related to unpopular ideas” (Moon 288). Particularly outspoken in denouncing the film was Rev. Donald Wildmon of the American Family Association, who expressed having “a problem with the government promoting homosexuality” (Mills). Although Riggs did not believe that *Tongues Untied* contained obscene content, he “*did* see as obscene the exploitation, degradation, deliberate distortion and falsification of people’s humanity” (Moon 289).

Space, Time, and Generativity: Queer(ing) Genealogy

Riggs and Nugent both disrupted silence with their work, yet they emerged from very different spaces. A queer Harlem was available to Nugent in the 1920s, but no such sanctuary was available to artists like Riggs in the 1980s. The “great, gay Mecca” of the Castro seemed to offer the possibility of a queer center, but the racism that rendered Riggs an invisible man pushed him to search for other queer spaces. A brief scene in *Tongues Untied* explores the Black and queer subculture of voguing, ballrooms and “houses” that function as the chosen families of queer Black youth. The film maps the existence and diversity of these communities as “each state, each gay community does different things” (33:48–34:32). The men interviewed in this scene explain how queer youth identify themselves with their houses through dress and performance, reflecting the bidirectional relationship between community and identity that Nugent addressed with the character of Alex. The exploration of Black ballroom house culture, which began in New York City in the 1960s, evokes a spatial connection that specifically ties Riggs’s search for a Black queer space to the legacy of queer Harlem, where Nugent and *Fire!!* lit a spark from which a queer Black legacy could emerge.

The path from Nugent’s “Smoke, Lilies and Jade” to Riggs’s *Tongues Untied* is not one of linear and straightforward genealogy. The spark that Nugent lit positioned him as the author most “closely associated with the queer spirit of the Harlem Renaissance” (Carbado 11) and would become generative of later Black queer cultural production. Arguing that “black gay print culture [is] indispensable to black gay film,” Shawn Anthony Christian positions “Smoke, Lilies and Jade” as relevant and necessary for the creation of contemporary Black films such as Issac Julien’s 1989 *Looking for Langston* and Rodney Evan’s 2004 *Brother to Brother* (21). Both films draw explicitly from the queer Harlem Renaissance, *Fire!!*, “Smoke, Lilies and Jade,” and Nugent’s life. While Nugent and “Smoke, Lilies and Jade” are identified as “a point of origin in black, queer, literary history” (22), Riggs and *Tongues Untied* are also vital components of the emergence of Black gay films. Christian posits that “both films [*Looking for Langston* and *Brother to Brother*] are indebted” to *Tongues Untied* and Riggs’s work with queer Black subjectivity (28). The path from “Smoke, Lilies and Jade” to contemporary Black gay film illustrates not only the generative capacity of Nugent’s work but also the integral role that Riggs played in making possible contemporary Black queer cultural production.

Despite producing their groundbreaking works nearly six decades apart, the temporal and artistic connections between the two artists are close, once again disrupting a neat and heteronormative narrative of genealogy. Before Nugent's passing in 1987, two years before Riggs would release *Tongues Untied*, he was interviewed by Charles Michael Smith for the 1986 anthology *In the Life*. The anthology was edited by Joseph Beam, the writer who coined "Black Men Loving Black Men is a Revolutionary Act" and whose obituary appears in *Tongues Untied*. Riggs also expressed the significance of the past on his work as an artist, speaking in an interview with *The Creative Mind* about "connecting with the past and history of other life-affirming artists such as Langston Hughes" (Moon 289), the poet who sparked Nugent's arrival in Harlem. The few degrees of separation between Nugent and Riggs serve as a reminder that the past is never very distant and encourage us to ask how the work of queer Black ancestors can guide us in the creation of the liberatory future that we need.

TAKING UP THE TORCH: IMAGINING QUEER BLACK FUTURES

Richard Bruce Nugent and Marlon Riggs created art that subverted oppressive ideologies within both dominant society and the Black community. Their work transgressed conventional boundaries of propriety, respectability, and heteronormativity, shocking mainstream audiences and receiving harsh criticism. Their artistic engagements with queer Black sexuality drew a great deal of public attention, demonstrating the power of radical and transgressive art to break silences and spark conversations. As queer Black men working in an anti-Black and homophobic society that often renders queer Black communities and struggles invisible, the ability of their works to generate attention remains a vital component of the power of both "Smoke, Lilies and Jade" and *Tongues Untied*. The work produced by Nugent and Riggs constituted queer interventions in conversations and movements that excluded queer Black voices; by shocking wide audiences, these artists made it difficult for queer Black identities and experiences to be ignored.

Riggs and Nugent did not, however, shock their *intended* audiences: fellow Black queers whose identities and experiences were affirmed and celebrated by "Smoke, Lilies and Jade" and *Tongues Untied*. These transgressive queer interventions should be read as expressions of the artists' love for their communities. Guided by love for queer Black people like themselves, these artists engaged in critique of the larger Black and gay communities from which they

had been excluded. Nugent's "Smoke, Lilies and Jade" rejected racial uplift politics that excluded representations of queer identity from Black cultural production. The first Black writer to produce an explicitly homoerotic piece of literature, Nugent carved out a creative space to rejoice in the beauty of queer Black identity and experience. The deeply moving and beautifully crafted depictions of Alex and Adrian's relationship attest to Nugent's love for his community and his refusal to concede to heteronormative expectations. Created decades later in a different artistic medium, *Tongues Untied* depicts Riggs's journey to achieve a love for himself and a love for his community, shedding light on Black gay men's experiences with racism and homophobia, breaking the silence and giving his community voice. Echoing Nugent's celebration of Black queer identities, Riggs disrupted the dominant discourses that invalidate, erase, and kill queer Black communities.

Defying normative conventions of expression and representation, Nugent and Riggs both offer strategies for survival in and resistance against an anti-Black and heteronormative society. Darius Bost suggests that "black gay cultural production offers a way of asserting black gay personhood amid" the "forces of antiblackness and antiq ueerness [that] doubly mark the black gay body for social and corporeal death" (3). "Smoke, Lilies and Jade" and *Tongues Untied* resist these forces, demanding an end to the silence that kills Black queers. Riggs's declaration of Black men's love as revolutionary suggests the need for a revolution. *Tongues Untied's* invocation of the history of Black resistance demands that we move beyond survival and toward resistance to fight for livable, liberatory futures for queer Black communities.

With their transgressive and celebratory representations of queer Blackness, Nugent and Riggs rejected the dominant ideologies that constricted Black cultural production and dared to imagine and create alternative forms of expression that affirmed queer Black identities. In doing so, Nugent and Riggs, as well as the later discourses and art that their work spawned, encourage us to imagine and create alternative, liberated futures in which queer Black communities can thrive. The complex thematic, spatial, and temporal connections between "Smoke, Lilies and Jade" and *Tongues Untied* gesture toward the immense generative potential of radical Black queer cultural production and issue a challenge to present and future generations. Guided by an awareness of the past, how will the queer Black artists and activists of the present and future honor these legacies? How will we complicate them and build upon them? How will we draw on these traditions of revolutionary love, affirmation, and joy to imagine the future that we need, and then fight to create it?

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