

Queer Modernism and Misfit Identity

OCTAVIO R. GONZÁLEZ

Modernism and queerness are historical coconspirators, to the extent that one might wonder whether all modernism is queer. By the same logic, is all queerness modernist? Such broad questions are beyond the scope of this chapter. But there is one rubric that can help to narrow the field of vision of a queer presence within the domain of modernist American literature. And that rubric is that of the misfit. As I argue in *Misfit Modernism*, “misfit” as a term and concept captures an early to mid-twentieth-century epistemology of identity.¹ However, the rubric of misfitness, and its associated notions of nonconformity, sidestep official epistemologies and their discourses, such as psychoanalysis or sociologies of deviance. The latter propagate clinical taxonomies or heuristic terminology within a pathologizing framework. And my interest in *misfit* as a shadow discourse within modernism honors that sidestep away from social and psychological sciences, toward an alternative way of formulating minoritized identity. Misfit modernists, to be more precise, are authors who sought to explore and articulate feelings and conditions of modern alienation, as all good modernists do. But *misfit* modernists situate the modern theme of alienation – and queerness as a site of nonconformity, outsiderdom, and exile – within a lived cultural, as opposed to existential, dimension and milieu. Indeed, homosexuality in a pre-gay liberation context – which is the context of literary modernism – isn’t very queer; it’s #ohsowhite. But those intersectionally inflected queer modernists, whose cultural identities were often a struggle – existentially as well as on the page, as literary constructs – were those that, I argue, turned to a rhetoric beyond homosexuality. This sidestep allowed Black and brown queer writers in particular to elevate queerness to the legitimate status afforded to more respectable cultural identities – including that of

¹ Octavio R. González, *Misfit Modernism: Queer Forms of Double Exile in the Twentieth-Century Novel* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2020).

American and African American. And, because the discourse of *identity* itself evinces a postmodernist episteme, older terms for nonbelonging circulated instead. One of these is *misfit*; another, as Heather Love argues, is *underdog*. In *Underdogs*, Love claims the centrality of sociological deviance theory in the development of what became queer theory.² My claim, in this context outside sociological disciplinarity, is the importance of the *misfit* rubric for queer modernists' own, nonscientific, understandings and articulations of the experience of nonbelonging, alienation, outsiderdom, exile, or being outcast. *Misfit* means all these things, refers to all of these states of being in the world, and its elasticity and imprecision is a key part of its strength in a world before the discursive hegemony of *identity*.

But, as we say about intersectionality, not everyone is equally intersectional. And so, not all queer modernists articulated this worldview. Indeed, some, like Gertrude Stein, distanced themselves from the minoritizing position their social identities afforded them. As Janet Malcolm shows in her dual biography of Stein and Alice B. Toklas, Stein's Jewishness – and her queerness – were *not* a decisive factor in the couple's ability to survive (and even thrive) in Vichy France.³ To continue with Stein, one of her early stories, "Melanctha" (1909), allegorizes the title character's Blackness and femininity as possessing an aspirational, quasi-liberated sexuality.⁴ The racist "negrophilia" inherent in such a construct is an artifact of the time and the author; Stein perpetuates, if not also problematizes, the essentialist pseudoscience about different "races" at the time.⁵ Such a notion of race included national identity as an ethnicity: one of Stein's major novels is called *The Making of Americans* (1925).⁶ Indeed, the expatriate cosmopolitanism of Stein's Parisian salon and coterie was predicated on distinctions based on national character. Therein lies the paradox of a queer modernism that is not one: it isn't very queer; or not queer in the ways we seek out today. Misfits like Stein deflected onto other racialized or otherwise minoritized standpoints. Those who embraced their prickly nonconformism or, more substantively, the tragedy of their

² Heather K. Love, *Underdogs: Social Deviance and Queer Theory* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2021).

³ Janet Malcolm, *Two Lives: Gertrude and Alice* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008).

⁴ Gertrude Stein, "Melanctha," in *Three Lives and Q.E.D.*, ed. Marianne DeKoven (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), 53–147.

⁵ I borrow the term from Petrine Archer Straw's excellent *Negrophilia: Avant-Garde Paris and Black Culture in the 1920s* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2000).

⁶ Gertrude Stein, *The Making of Americans* (1925; Dallas, TX: Dalkey Archive Press, 2024).

double exile, were queerer than queer. Or, simply put, they were misfits among other modernists.

By double exile I mean to signal a dualism in certain American writers' self-conception, as both modernists and misfits. To cite an example drawing on "Melanctha": in a 1928 letter, Nella Larsen compliments Stein for "how [she] came to write it." Larsen admits to a sense of "wonder" as to "just why" Stein "and *not some of us* should so *accurately* have caught the spirit of this race of mine."⁷ Of course, Larsen is a misfit in any literary genealogy of queer modernism, including Black queer modernism. And her brief correspondence with Stein intimates why. Larsen's compliment is double-edged. In writing "just why [Stein] and not some of us," Larsen intimates Stein's cultural appropriation for her own (queer) modernist purposes: "should so accurately *have caught* the spirit of this race of mine." The verb "to catch" signifies (on) Larsen's seeming praise of Stein and the "accuracy" of "Melanctha's" characterization, her ability to represent "the spirit of this race" of Larsen's. But what is the "race" to which Larsen refers? For Larsen's own negotiations of Blackness – her mixed race, mixed class, and mixed nationality – were complex. She navigated the upscale cosmopolitan context of the Harlem Renaissance and, before that, a very different, working-class milieu. Larsen's identity, in other words, and her relationship to Blackness and to American racial discourse more broadly, was complicated by her mixed-race, Danish and West Indian, immigrant parentage. Indeed, Larsen explores similar territory to Stein in her celebrated novels, *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929). Larsen missed visiting Stein a few times, as subsequent letters attest; but I suspect it was no accident. In this letter to the grande dame of American queer modernism, Larsen pays obeisance to Stein while subtly reminding her that it was not Stein's story to tell, regardless of how accurate the representation might be (and it isn't).

In thinking through the notion of misfit identity in the American literary context, I'm drawing on a framework for modernism that extends past the usual temporal – not only racial and ethnic – boundaries. Consistent with the turn to "the new modernist studies," a focus on modernist literature contends with the afterlife of the tradition. Many modernists continued to write after 1945, of course; the contention that they wrote modernist texts seems self-evident to us today. But the periodization of literary history has focused on national coordinates for so long as to erase the transatlantic crossings of

⁷ Nella Larsen Imes to Gertrude Stein, Feb. 1, 1928, Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas Papers, Yale Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library. Emphasis added.

American and other expatriate modernists, or to deny their claim to a modernist lineage after World War II. Even though the world changed with the advent of the American century, it seems overly nationalistic to rewrite the formations of modernism in the image of US postmodernity.

Christopher Isherwood strikingly represents this aesthetic continuity and, more importantly, the self-alterity of “American” modernism. Isherwood’s Americanization is amply documented; but not his misfitness within either a British or American canon of literary history.⁸ Isherwood evolved from a quintessential English novelist to Americanized Vedanta disciple of Swami Prabhavananda and the Ramakrishna Order of Southern California. His queerness, however, remained constant. And his exploration of modernist narrative form – in autofiction like *Berlin Stories*, fiction like *A Single Man*, and memoir like *Christopher and His Kind* – indicate the queer continuities of his life and work.⁹ Indeed, *Berlin Stories* evolved from the 1950s to the present day. It was first adapted into the play *I Am a Camera* (1951) by John Van Druten, which inspired a tepid cinematic adaptation in its own right in 1952, and was reimagined again for the stage as *Cabaret* (1966) by Harold Prince. The original musical was a rich collaboration by playwright Joe Masteroff and songwriting duo John Kander and Fred Ebb. Adapted for the screen in 1972 by Bob Fosse, *Cabaret* made Hollywood history with Liza Minnelli’s (and Joel Grey’s) star turn. Such transmutations of the source material underscore modernism’s continued aesthetic influence. And these contemporary intertextual resonances also indicate the queerness of modernist texts like Isherwood’s, which crossed boundaries of reality and fiction, genre (and gender), and the epistemology of the closet (is he or isn’t he?). Indeed, Isherwood published *Christopher and His Kind* to answer this final question and cement his legacy as a gay liberationist *avant la lettre*.

Richard Bruce Nugent

But we must go further back to find evidence of out and proud queer American modernism inflected by the vicissitudes of nonconformity and misfitness. Richard Bruce Nugent’s “Smoke, Lilies and Jade” (1926) originally

⁸ See *The American Isherwood*, ed. James Berg and Chris Freeman (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

⁹ Christopher Isherwood, *The Berlin Stories* (1954; New York: New Directions Press, 2008); Christopher Isherwood, *A Single Man* (1964; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001); Christopher Isherwood, *Christopher and His Kind* (1976; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

appeared in the first and only volume of the landmark New Negro literary-arts journal *FIRE!!*. The first Black “little magazine,” and the first such publication not sponsored by a civil-rights organization (unlike *The Crisis* or *Opportunity*, say), *Fire!!* was intended to burn brightly. And so it did. But, in one of the great ironies of modernist literary history, the remaining unsold issues of the journal perished in a fire. A few extant copies and a recently published facsimile have kept the flame burning all these years. And “Smoke, Lilies and Jade” is perhaps the most well-known work of fiction in the collection. The apocryphal story is that the journal’s editor – Renaissance provocateur Wallace Thurman – and Nugent tossed a coin as to which of them would write a piece about sex work or about homosexuality. Thurman’s “Cordelia the Crude,” the story about sex work, would evolve into his hit Broadway play *Harlem* (cowritten with William Jourdan Rapp); it is the naturalist chronicle of a fierce young woman who comes with her family to the gritty Black Mecca during the early Great Migration. Nugent’s “Smoke, Lilies and Jade,” by contrast, focuses on Alex, a 19-year-old Black artist and dandy, whose *cri de coeur* is “one *can* love two at the same time” (39). The “two” refers to Alex’s Melva, his girlfriend, and Beauty (or Adrian), his recent paramour of Spanish extraction. “Smoke,” like “Cordelia the Crude,” was meant to be scandalous; it’s no coincidence that Thurman and Nugent aimed to *épater le bourgeois* and, apocryphally, have *Fire!!* banned in Boston in order to draw publicity. But it wasn’t banned; it was, instead, excoriated by the older Black intelligentsia (including W. E. B. Du Bois). Instead of outrage, the journal met its grim fate through neglect: not unlike many queer children, I might add.

But the outsize influence and historical significance of *Fire!!* and, in particular, Nugent’s “Smoke, Lilies and Jade,” is without question. Not only does the story have the first depiction of a nocturnal cruising scene between two men, but it also follows them to Alex’s bed. Nugent’s sheer audacity in writing what amounts to the first explicitly, unapologetically, queer narrative (two years before the publication of Radclyffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness*) is only recently being understood as a landmark in queer literature. Indeed, the story is a masterpiece of modernist stream of consciousness as well, indicating the centrality of misfit queer modernists like Nugent to the development of that star-crossed lineage. (Thurman, too, deserves mention, to whom I return below.)

The following is an extended excerpt from “Smoke.” The hallmark of Nugent’s style in the story is stream of consciousness in the free-indirect style, punctuated with ellipses. The excerpt below is unexpurgated, to showcase the fluidity and intimacy of Nugent’s narrative lyricism:

Alex walked music . . . the click of his heels kept time with a tune in his mind . . . he glanced into a lighted café window . . . inside were people sipping coffee . . . men . . . why did they sit there in the loud light . . . didn't they know that outside the street . . . the narrow blue street met the stars . . . that if they walked long enough . . . far enough . . . Alex walked and the click of his heels sounded . . . and had an echo . . . sound being tossed back and forth . . . back and forth . . . some one was approaching . . . and their echoes mingled . . . and gave the sound of castenets . . . Alex liked the sound of the approaching man's footsteps . . . he walked music also . . .¹⁰

The selection begins and “ends” (though not in the story, which continues the encounter) with the synesthetic idea of “walk[ing] music.” (Synesthesia registers repeatedly in the story as a whole, and is here contrasted and foreshadowed by the people in the café sitting in the “loud light.”) In contrast to the men behind the glass in the “loud light,” Alex and the stranger, known only by the sound of his footsteps, “walked music,” indicating a shared spiritual-cum-aesthetic sensibility, due to their suddenly synchronized rhythms. The lyricism Nugent imbues into this scene is formal, including the ellipses that modulate the rhythm of the lines the way verse form utilizes line breaks. As with other high-modernist novels – the story is originally titled “Smoke, Lilies and Jade, A Novel, Part I,” in the table of contents – Nugent’s prose employs many forms of narrative repetition and is governed by syntactic parataxis, in addition to its sustained free-indirect style, imagistic density (oftentimes synesthetic), all in the service of character-driven narrative portraiture. “Smoke” is an intoxicating, disorienting, and lyrical text conveyed in a liquid (as opposed to spatial) narrative “flow,” a prose poem focalized through Alex’s subconscious as an oceanic feeling, a highly subjective, *yet impersonal*, Black queer phenomenology.

Like Molly Bloom’s soliloquy in James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, Alex’s is a super-fluid stream, frictionless and vaporous, scented and aural, imagery cascading through the free-indirect lyric mind-meld of narrator and protagonist. Alex’s “he” refers to himself, but is as intimate as Molly’s, and Nugent’s story similarly eschews punctuation or syntax that would organize and hierarchize the narrative flow. Indeed, the visual dimension of the story as printed on the page is in aesthetic tension with the focus on other senses, other modes of

¹⁰ Richard Bruce Nugent, “Smoke, Lilies and Jade” in *Fire!! Devoted to Younger Negro Artists*, ed. Wallace Thurman in association with Langston Hughes, Gwendolyn Bennett, Richard Bruce, Zora Neale Hurston, Aaron Douglas, and John Davis (Eastwood, CT: Martino Fine Books, 1926, rpt. 2022), 36.

imagery (the sound of footsteps like castanets, walking music, echoes).¹¹ When I teach the story, I use the facsimile from *Fire!!* because it represents the visualization I think Nugent had in mind: if one looks closely while blurring one's vision, the negative space formed by the ellipses undulating up and down the page looks like wavy columns of smoke. I can't think this effect was unintentional, given the story's motif of blue smoke that Alex exhales from his cigarettes, held in a jade-green holder. Indeed, in another moment of kinesthetic, auditory, spiritual, and aesthetic sync, later in the scene Alex realizes that "the stranger knew the magic of blue smoke also . . ."¹²

Turning what, at the time, would be depicted as a sordid homosexual encounter (if it were presented at all) into a lyrical, nearly silent, yet inter-subjective cruising scene, in breathless spiritual and aesthetic communion, is a queer narrative triumph. The scene continues to depict Alex and Adrian, once they introduce themselves to each other, but before that, this insight emerges in Alex's interior monologue:

[Alex] wished he would speak . . . but strangers don't speak at four o'clock in the morning . . . at least if they did he couldn't imagine what would be said . . . maybe . . . pardon me but are you walking toward the stars . . . yes, sir, and if you walk long enough . . . then may I walk with you I want to reach the stars too . . . perdone me senior tiene vd. fosforo . . . Alex was glad he had been addressed in Spanish . . . to have been asked for a match in English . . . or to have been addressed in English at all . . . would have been blasphemy just then . . .¹³

Other elements of Nugent's modernist style are marshaled to present the scene in its immediacy, its impersonal intimacy (they don't even know each other's names yet). The lack of capitalization aids in the superfluency of the stream of narration, and the omission of quotation marks blurs the boundary between Alex and the stranger, whom the reader "hears" only as an echo in Alex's mind, through narrated dialogue. Nugent builds anticipation and suspense, appropriate for a cruising scene reaching its point of no return (will we or won't we?), by worrying about language killing the moonlit mood: "he couldn't imagine what would be said . . . maybe . . . pardon me but are you walking toward the stars" The pleasant surprise is that the

¹¹ For more on Nugent's synesthetic style and his deployment of writing as a visual medium, see Miriam Thaggert, "Black Writing's Visuals: African American Modernism in Nugent, Ligon, and Rankine" in *The New Modernist Studies*, ed. Douglas Mao (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 167–80.

¹² Nugent, 36. ¹³ Nugent, 36.

stranger asks for a match in Spanish, thus maintaining the dreamlike atmosphere of the anonymous encounter. Why does Alex think that “to have been asked for a match in English . . . or to have been addressed in English at all . . . would have been blasphemy just then”? Why is Alex “glad he had been addressed in Spanish”? Indeed, if the stranger *had* asked, as Alex imagines dreamily, “pardon me but are you walking toward the stars,” in English, the spell would have been broken. Ironically, to vocalize such musings would brutalize them, bring them into the realm of real spoken discourse. And what’s so wrong about real spoken discourse? Anyone familiar with the social ritual of cruising knows that speaking is, indeed, what often breaks the erotic spell, the fantasy of the stranger you meet by happenstance and project your desires and dreams onto. That would be the “blasphemy,” literal speaking against the sacred; thus Nugent spiritualizes a sexual encounter, elevating it from the gutter, to the street, and finally to the stars. Magically, the spell is unbroken; the two men remain spellbound. For, by asking in Spanish (“perdone me señor tiene vd. fosforo”), the stranger weaves his own spell. Both Alex and he “walked music,” “knew the beauty of the blue” – “blue smoke,” “blue thoughts . . . and stars.” Their sonic echoes were already in sync, surely not by accident, as the stranger follows Alex, before they stop.

Wallace Thurman

Nugent’s “Smoke, Lilies and Jade” is an exemplary formal experiment in modernist narration and queering queerness itself. The protagonist’s polyamory is as radical now, in the age of sanctioned homonormative coupledom, as it was in the Jazz Age. His roommate and associate, Wallace Thurman, was perhaps more radical still. Thurman’s debut novel, *The Blacker the Berry* (1929), explores themes of misfitness through the lens of Black female subjectivity. An exploration of being “a total misfit,” *The Blacker the Berry* coalesces the idiom of nonconformity and social subordination due to racial and gender oppression. Emma Lou Morgan’s peregrinations across the country mirror those of her creator, from Idaho to Los Angeles to Harlem. As with “Smoke,” Thurman’s novel explores intersections or modalities of identity that are not easily categorized under one rubric. Emma Lou Morgan is middle class culturally, but socially working class; she is liberated in her sexuality, but not in her internalized anti-Blackness. The novel explores those intersections and the “adjustment proceedings” she undergoes to emerge relatively free from internal oppression at the end of the novel.

Moreover, the novel positions Emma Lou's former lover, Alva, as her antagonist. His betrayal of her with another (lighter-complected) woman is doubled at the end of the novel, with "an effeminate boy," whom Alva defiantly embraces as Emma Lou stands "by the door."¹⁴ At this climactic moment, Emma Lou faces a choice that will determine her future beyond that room: "Every one else in the room watched her. For the moment she did not know what to say or what to do. Obviously she couldn't continue standing there by the door nor could she leave and let them feel that she had been completely put to rout."¹⁵ In this confrontation between male "drunkenness," "obscene witticism," and jeering queerness, on the one hand, and Emma Lou Morgan's "shudder[ing]," "calm," upright, and dignified silence, Thurman stages a conflict between intersecting yet polarized identities. The gender barrier seems as salient as that of homosexual sociality, signified by Alva's "vile embrace" of his paramour, Bobbie.¹⁶ What is the resolution? Emma Lou's free-indirect monologue documents her process of self-liberation:

[F]or a moment it seemed as if all her rationalization would go for naught. Then once more she saw Alva, not as he had been, but as he was now, a drunken, drooling libertine, struggling to keep the embarrassed Bobbie in a vile embrace. Something snapped within her. The tears in her eyes receded, her features grew set, and she felt herself hardening inside. Then, without saying a word, she resolutely turned away, went into the alcove, pulled her suitcases down from the shelf in the clothes-closet, and, to the blasphemous accompaniment of Alva berating Bobbie for wishing to leave, finished packing her clothes, not stopping even when Alva Junior's cries deafened her, and caused the people in the next room to stir uneasily.¹⁷

This last sentence ends the novel. And it represents what one critic claims is the sole Harlem Renaissance novel centered on a woman protagonist not to end with her marriage or death. Choosing sides, here, Thurman "resolutely" backs Emma Lou Morgan's escape from the self-negating position of maternal servility to her ex and his disabled son, Alva Junior. At one point, Emma Lou overhears Alva calling her Junior's "mammy," a sentiment she had hitherto internalized before making this climactic turn away from that oppressive role: "It served her right that Alva had used her once for the money she could give him and again as a black mammy for his child."¹⁸ But

¹⁴ Wallace Thurman, *The Blacker the Berry: A Novel of Negro Life* (New York: The Macaulay Company, 1929), 260.

¹⁵ Thurman, 260–1. ¹⁶ Thurman, 262. ¹⁷ Thurman, 262.

¹⁸ Thurman, 254, 259.

this deep self-flagellating discourse foreshadows her escape: “That was the price she had had to pay for getting what she thought she wanted. But now she intended to balance things. Life after all was a give and take affair. Why should she give important things and receive nothing in return?”¹⁹ But the course from self-abnegation to self-liberation is a tortuous one. And the length of the novel’s final sentence mirrors the proceedings of its protagonist, as she calmly collects her belongings and prepares to leave that servile life in exchange for freedom. That Alva’s admonishment of his lover is “blasphemous” emphasizes the morality play inherent in this scene. Some would justly claim that Thurman’s narrative confrontation of biracial male queerness as the oppressor of Black female subjectivity is heavy-handed, and homophobic paints male homosexuality as “libertinism,” as indeed oppressive and parasitic of a woman’s devotion to her “sweetback” man. But perhaps that is Thurman’s point: that the freedom of male-to-male sexual experimentation came at the cost of a more ethical arrangement with female companions and paramours, echoing the “down low” moral panic of the early twenty-first century.

Of course, in so doing, Thurman’s ending forecloses Emma Lou Morgan’s own experiments with sexual liberation. As Daniel Scott observes, in “the course of her Harlem adventures, Emma Lou Morgan negotiates her way through a series of sexualized encounters that shape the narrative. A lesbian landlady proposes that Emma ‘join the fun’ by moving into her house; Emma has furtive meetings in movie theaters for casual sex; and she discovers boyfriend Alva’s bisexuality at the end of the book – a discovery that hastens her putative change of consciousness at the end of the novel.”²⁰ The cost of Emma Lou Morgan’s newfound self-respect, in other words, comes with a moralizing cost – the homophobic price of the ticket.

As Granville Ganter writes about Thurman’s paradoxical approach to his own nonconformist sexuality, “Thurman refuses to have his sexuality defined by someone else. Thurman confesses to engaging in an act of homosexual prostitution but denies that it is ‘evidence therein’ of his homosexuality.”²¹ Ganter adds, “Like James Baldwin, [Thurman] admits to homosexual practices but not necessarily to being identified as a homosexual.”²²

¹⁹ Thurman, 259.

²⁰ Daniel M. Scott III, “Harlem Shadows: Re-evaluating Wallace Thurman’s *The Blacker the Berry*,” *MELUS* 29.3–4 (2004): 329.

²¹ Granville Ganter, “Decadence, Sexuality, and the Bohemian Vision of Wallace Thurman,” *MELUS* 28.2 (2003): 86.

²² Ganter, 86–7.

Unlike the openly flamboyant Nugent, Thurman refused to be solely identified by his sexuality; he never became a “gay poster child” of the era, despite depicting overt homosexual characters in his *roman à clef* of the Renaissance and New Negro movement, *Infants of the Spring* (1932).²³

Finally, perhaps Thurman paints Emma Lou Morgan’s intersectional portrait in *The Blacker the Berry* in too-broad strokes. But the novel makes a convincing case for the necessity of woman-centered Black representation, whether queer or not. As Scott argues, “The key to reevaluating *Blacker* may in fact be found in Thurman’s treatment not of color prejudice but in his portrayals of Harlem’s sexual and moral ambiguity, in his questioning of the parameters by which most Americans conceptualize and/or discuss race and its relationship to gender, class, and sexuality.”²⁴ By elevating the concerns of gender and race – *misogynoir* – over those of sexuality, Thurman’s fiction foreshadows the uneven assimilation of homosexuality in the twenty-first century. While rainbow flags fly on capitol buildings across the United States, anti-Black police violence and the carceral state remain definitive of the Black experience, whether male or female.

Nella Larsen

If Thurman and Nugent represent the Harlem Renaissance’s queer vanguard, to varying degrees, Larsen represents its fuzzier form. As a matronly Black woman author, Larsen was not part of the “Younger Negro Artists” coterie that Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston spearheaded (though Hurston did so by shaving ten years off her age, reportedly). By contrast, Larsen’s admittance to the Harlem scene was at first purely social, as the wife of an established academician, Elmer Imes, and later as a librarian. Her close friendship with the most infamous white patron of the movement, Carl Van Vechten, led to her first novel’s publication with Knopf (*Quicksand*) in 1928. But it’s her second novel, *Passing* (1929), that exemplifies Larsen’s queer modernism. While *Quicksand*, like Thurman’s *Blacker the Berry*, centers on the intersectional vicissitudes of modern Black femininity, *Passing* is a queer *pas de deux*. Featuring coprotagonists Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry, *Passing* bubbles with the frictions of homoeroticism between two biracial women. One lives her life as an upright New Negro “race” woman, the other passes as white, even to her own husband. Skirting danger by living a double

²³ Wallace Thurman, *Infants of the Spring* (1932; New York: Dover, 2013).

²⁴ Scott, 329.

life – an element of queerness itself, as a mode of living in the closet – Clare yearns to return to the Black community despite her white lifestyle. This yearning centers on her childhood friend, whom she recognizes while passing in a chic Chicago hotel. Irene, despite her moralistic viewpoint, is enchanted by Clare’s charm and beauty, and the two develop a rapport built on their furtive reconnection. A story about passing for white that, in Deborah McDowell’s influential queer reading, is a novel *passing* as a novel about (racial) “passing,” Larsen’s narrative of intersubjective desire and friendship is anything but straight (-forward). Instead, McDowell writes, “*Passing* is about subtextual queer desire and racial dis-identification between Clare and Irene.”²⁵

In a sense, both Irene and Clare are misfits within their respective self-identifications. Although not as overtly as Clare, Irene chafes against the strictures of New Negro womanhood, and takes liberties – such as passing for convenience, which is how she and Clare reconnect years after they lost touch – that her own moral code frowns upon. Indeed, Irene frowns upon Clare for doing what she did – passing as white – without a hint of hypocrisy. Larsen’s external narrator is hyperfocalized on Irene, leaving the reader to decipher clues as to the author’s true moral perspective on her subject.

It is that structural irony and its narratorial ambiguity that distinguishes Larsen’s novel, as much as its queer subtext between women. In the literary sphere, Black women authors during the Renaissance were constrained by the conservative moral and aesthetic expectations of the New Negro movement, as Cheryl Wall wrote.²⁶ By contrast, male authors – as we have seen with Nugent and Thurman – were free to experiment stylistically (especially with the use of vernacular idioms) and thematically, with overt antibourgeois content. By contrast, women writers were held to a higher moral standard. As McDowell argues in the case of Larsen, “Larsen wanted to tell the story of the black woman with sexual desires, but was constrained by a competing desire to establish black women as respectable in black middle-class terms. The latter desire committed her to exploring black female sexuality obliquely and, inevitably, to permitting it only within the context of marriage.”²⁷ That this sexuality included Larsen’s “oblique” exploration of same-sex eros between Clare and Irene is now a critical commonplace: Larsen’s narrative

²⁵ Deborah McDowell, “Introduction” in Nella Larsen, “*Quicksand*” and “*Passing*,” ed. Deborah McDowell (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1986), xxviii.

²⁶ Cheryl Wall, *Women of the Harlem Renaissance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 19.

²⁷ McDowell, xvi.

of racial liminality as a figure for closeted queer desire, thanks to McDowell and other critics, is legible now. But such treatment remains controversial in the context of respectability politics, both during the Negro Renaissance and today. For instance, in the realm of cinema, Isaac Julien's *Looking for Langston* (1989) struggled with the Langston Hughes estate due to the director's focus on Hughes as a queer Black poet.²⁸ Despite the zealotry of his estate's defense, Hughes's writings on homoeroticism are few and far between, and overly studied in contrast to Larsen, Thurman, and Nugent.

Rebecca Hall's cinematic adaptation of *Passing* (2021), perhaps like Julien's *Looking for Langston*, uses cinematic language to make manifest homoerotic tensions in the original novel. Hall's journey in making the film illustrates a similar path as Julien's exploration of a "useable past" in Black queer modernism. Hall's exploration of racial liminality was sparked by her own familial history of passing, which she learned late in life. And Larsen's novel struck a chord, helping to make sense of the transitivity of racial identification that "passing" signifies. Writing the screenplay and bringing the project to the big screen, with the help of the dazzling coleads, Tessa Thompson and Ruth Negga, Hall developed a sophisticated treatment of Larsen's original text. The film version amplifies the novel's queer subtext. More importantly, though, the film demonstrates the uncanny legacy of the 1920s Jim Crow color line in the 2020s: to take one example, the controversy over the casting choices illustrates the enduring stereotypes of racial thinking based on phenotype. The fact is that Thompson and/or Negga were seen, by many contemporary audiences – Black and white and in-between – as not "light" enough to pass as white. Hall's film, as I argue elsewhere, anticipates this normative racializing gaze.²⁹ The film's black-and-white photography transforms color into grays, draining the visual register of absolute certainty regarding racial codes. And of course that's the point of *Passing* (both novel and film). But contemporary spectators' adherence to a binary logic enforcing the paper-bag test should be more shocking than it was. Such logic is exactly what Larsen (and Hall) are exploring, while placing it under aesthetic or narrative erasure.

²⁸ Essex Hemphill, "Looking for Langston: An Interview with Isaac Julien" in *Brother to Brother: New Writing by Black Gay Men*, ed. Essex Hemphill (New Orleans: Redbone Press, [1993] rpt. 2007), 174–80.

²⁹ See Octavio R. González and Lisa Mendelman, "Notes on Passing," *Avidly / L. A. Review of Books*, January 9, 2022, <https://avidly.lareviewofbooks.org/2022/01/09/notes-on-passing/>.

Matthew López

Another trans-historical connection between the modernisms of queer authors and that of contemporary queer creators is the subject of *The Inheritance* (2018), the Tony Award-winning play by Matthew López. The inheritance in the title is not only that of gay literary history – the ghost of E. M. Forster is a character in the play – but also another queer legacy: that of HIV/AIDS. The end of Part I is a blockbuster spectacle, which draws the uncanny and the sentimental together with a traumatic counterfactual wish-fulfillment. And López's use of the supernatural in the ending and in other aspects of the drama (including Forster), along with the focus on gay men's lives as mediated by AIDS, echoes the drama to which most audiences compare *The Inheritance*: Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* (1992–2003). Both Kushner and López draw on spectral queer male genealogies to anchor their dramatic interventions in contemporary gay life: Prior Walter, the protagonist of *Angels*, is visited by prior Priors. These deceased predecessors aid Prior in his involvement with the eponymous Angel. In *The Inheritance*, the plot derives from Forster's *Howards End* (1910), and the author of *Maurice* (1913–14) is taken to task for not doing enough for his gay inheritors – by stipulating that *Maurice* be published only posthumously (1971).³⁰ It's as if queer modernism's legacy is interrogated while it serves both plot and theme of López's drama. Queer literary modernity, in other words, matters as much to the contemporary life of queers as the generational traumas of AIDS and HIV.

I've argued elsewhere that queer formalism – in the realm of literary art – is an historically persistent feature of queer self-making.³¹ López's play actualizes this idea of the centrality of literary representation in the making and remaking of queer community. As critic Louisa Hahn writes, "*The Inheritance* explicitly centers around the notion of queer genealogies, exploring why gay men's lives are (or at least appear to be) intrinsically tied to gay men of the past and, indeed, the future."³² Hahn adds that Forster's ghost functions as a "structuring device" that "helps a group of contemporary gay men of different ages narrate the stories of their lives" (*ibid.*). But the

³⁰ E. M. Forster, *Howards End* (1910; New York: Dover, 2002) and E. M. Forster, *Maurice* (1971; New York: W. W. Norton, 2005).

³¹ See Octavio R. González, "Queer Formalism as 'Queer Form,'" *ASAP/Journal* 2.2 (2017): 274–5.

³² Louisa Hahn, "If We Can't Have a Conversation with Our Past, Then What Will Be Our Future? HIV/AIDS, Queer Generationalism, and Utopian Performatives in Matthew López's *The Inheritance*," *English* 69.265 (2020): 104.

importance of literary representation in this cross-generational dialogue is not to be taken for granted: it's not the ghost of Harvey Milk, for example, that structures *The Inheritance* at the level of plot and character system – it's Forster's. This indicates the centrality of aesthetic representation and its intertextual interpolation – as in *Howards End* for *The Inheritance* – in the mediation of cross-temporal queer “generationalism,” to cite Hahn's term. *The Inheritance* stages an *intergenerational* conversation via *intertextual* communion with Forster – and in a low-key way, with Kushner as well. Think of *Angels'* enduring aesthetic legacy as a broadly ambitious, flamboyantly gay, and generation-defining epic of American queer political theatre. Indeed, as Hahn writes, “the play's swift consecration as ‘perhaps the most important American play of the century so far’” recapitulates the outsize cultural significance of Kushner's masterpiece.³³ Other “devices” Hahn sees as central to the dramatic structure of *The Inheritance* are analepsis and prolepsis, which she argues “are used to allow gay men of different generations to understand each other's formative experiences.”³⁴ But the mediation of these formative experiences – or “stories of their lives,” as Hahn writes – is ineluctably literary and aesthetic, rather than social and political. Or, rather, the social and political are mediated through the aesthetic and literary legacies of queer modernism and its afterlives after Stonewall.

Conclusion

In this brief journey through a handful of literary narratives, I've demonstrated the persistence of queer modernism into contemporary modernity. Such persistence indicates the rigidity of “before” and “after” periodizations – both of queer representation as divided by the discourse of Stonewall, and of literary modernism as divided by the national temporalities of geopolitics. After extending the reach of queer self-representations further into the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries, this chapter argues for a subtle differentiation among queer modernists. This subtlety invokes the notion of being or feeling like a misfit even among one's kind – as in the eponymous *Christopher and His Kind*, Isherwood's revisionist memoir. Just as Matthew López draws inspiration from Forster's queer tutelage – invoking him as a tutelary spirit in *The Inheritance*, John Van Druten, followed by a who's who of musical coconspirators, drew inspiration from Isherwood's *Berlin Stories*. This

³³ Hahn, 105. ³⁴ Hahn, 105.

intertextual web – and its transatlantic crossings of genre, gender, nationality, and ethnicity – merely recapitulates earlier queer modernist crossings, such as the one we began with: Larsen and Stein, vis-à-vis “Melanctha.” In this queer modernist light, Larsen’s novels rewrite the queer subtext of Stein’s “Black” story, centering the subjectivity – and intersubjective eroticism – that Stein sublimated into a primitivist notion of Black feminine erotic freedom. Only recently, of course, is a respectable Renaissance novelist like Larsen claimed as a legitimately queer modernist. But, as with Nugent and Thurman, their negotiations of sexual nonconformity was less legible in their time, for at least two reasons. One is the conspiracy of silence surrounding queerness in a refined literary context – such as that of the Renaissance canon, and the price of respectability that its authors had to pay in order to make it. Beyond the politics of respectability in the context of Black uplift ideology, however, queer misfits in the modernist lineage struggled insofar as they *were* racially or ethnically marked. The unbearable whiteness of queerness is the truth of epistemologies of the closet that eschew intersectional parameters for any story of homosexuality and its vectors of desire. Being doubly marginalized, from a New Negro respectability regime on the one hand and a white modernist establishment on the other, queer misfits like Larsen and Nugent had to write themselves into their own discourse, beyond the comforts of single identities – in their case, beyond the hegemony of queer whiteness.