



PROJECT MUSE®

The Poetics of Conjecture: Countee Cullen's Subversive
Exemplarity

Jeremy Braddock

Callaloo, Volume 25, Number 4, Fall 2002, pp. 1250-1271 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/cal.2002.0147>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/6844>

THE POETICS OF CONJECTURE Countee Cullen's Subversive Exemplarity

by Jeremy Braddock

1.

Countee Cullen's "For a Lovely Lady" appeared in his debut volume *Color* in 1925. It appears to be minor, but this appearance should not prevent a thorough analysis of such a key poem. Such an analysis will demonstrate its significance as a means of appreciating the subversive quality of Cullen's poetics. Like the often anthologized "For a Poet," which has been the subject of an extended reading by Amitai Avi-Ram, "For a Lovely Lady" appears in a section of *Color* entitled "Epitaphs." As is true for all of the short poems in this section, death is a primary theme. In contrast to the way in which Cullen's treatment of death has often been seen as effete, affected pessimism,¹ this article will demonstrate that Cullen's figurative associations of death with sexuality and sexual identities prove to be significant and complex metaphors. Invoking the overdetermined association of sex with death and at the same time forging within that conceit a markedly more exacting elaboration of queer politics, Cullen's poetics performs a brilliant folding of straight and queer readings within each other. This poetics acutely addresses the socialization of same-sex desire, specifically located in early 1920s Harlem.

With the exception of Jean Wagner's remarkable analysis of Cullen in his 1962 *Black Poets of the United States* (though the argument regrettably construes homosexuality as a pathology), Avi-Ram's essay was the first work to discuss the ways in which same-sex desire substantially informs Cullen's poetics. In the later essay, "The Unreadable Black Body: 'Conventional' Poetic Form in the Harlem Renaissance," Avi-Ram argues that the "box of gold" in "For a Poet" is a figure both for an actual coffin, and, more obliquely, for "that closet into which the poet's gay sexual identity, both in the public eye and in so many poems is placed" (42). The "box of gold" also stands for the poetic form itself (in this case a sonnet), which is at the same time self-evidently conventional and implicitly sensuous. As Avi-Ram points out, Cullen's manipulation of form and use of verse repetition "threatens to obscure the sense" (40) so as to obfuscate the representation of the poet's body within the poem, employing form both as a decoy and the site where the speaker's body experiences and is experienced.² This keen attention to form enables Avi-Ram's Derridean reading in which "the poem's attempt at translation of the untranslatable [is] itself an experience in the failure of all codes to read the meanings and values of their own bodies" (34). In this way, "For a Poet" both implies a body for homoerotic experience, and makes the meanings of that

CALLALOO

body indeterminate. "For a Lovely Lady," on the other hand, does not, finally, manipulate formal closings to prevent the body's being read; nor does it involve the problem of an absent body, as might be strictly said of "For a Poet." Instead, it is the presence of the body, presented within the conventions of the ballad form, that creates tension in the poem. Here is the poem in its entirety:

For a Lovely Lady

A creature slender as a reed,
And sad-eyed as a doe
Lies here (but take my word for it,
And do not pry below).

The first movement of the poem involves a substitution of the first verse for the poem's title, whereby the gendered "lovely lady" of the title is refigured as a "creature slender as a reed." A familiar technique of amatory verse, this slippage seems to be a recognizable and conventional strategy: as the apostrophe to the woman negotiates the female body, it substitutes for that body abstracted figures of the poet's invention.³

But an historicization of Cullen's poem demonstrates that this mystificatory anamorphosis may merely be the effect of a particular (though culturally dominant) mode of reading. Rather than abstracting the apostrophized object, a properly historicized reading of the poem can, on the contrary, lend further specificity to it. As George Chauncey has shown, 1920s Harlem was home to a thriving transvestite and drag culture, which was not only large, but remarkably visible, most notably in the form of the annual Hamilton Lodge Ball, which "drew *hundreds* of drag queens and *thousands* of spectators" (245).⁴ Audiences were to expand from an estimated eight hundred in 1925—the year *Color* was published—to seven thousand by the early 1930s. The possibility, then, cannot be ignored that the "lovely lady" may in fact be a man, and what had been thought to be poetic obfuscation may actually begin to approach the subject of the poem more closely. Taken in this way, the entitling of the poem "For a Lovely Lady" serves to distract the reader by projecting a heterosexual audience that is assumed to affirm the poem's erotic conventionality.⁵ As such, the poem rehearses the paranoid social disavowal of same-sex desire, in which the poetic woman is underwritten by the unspeakable actual desire for a man, and the living male drag queen is repressed and substituted for by a stable (because dead) female body.

The Hamilton Lodge was a site that uniquely allowed the performance of drag queens to be recognized as such by homosexual and heterosexual spectators alike. However, although participants and spectators included whites, a sharp class division separated the contestants from the audience. Despite the fact that the audience was, in the words of the singer Taylor Gordon, often "packed with people from bootblacks to New York's rarest bluebloods" (258), Chauncey concludes:

The organization of the Hamilton Lodge ball codified the differences between the public styles of middle-class and working-class gay men. Middle-class men passing as straight sat in the

CALLALOO

balcony with other members of Harlem's social elite looking down on the spectacle of workingmen in drag. Although the newspapers regularly noted the appearance of [...] middle-class gay men at the balls, they simply included them in the lists of other celebrities and society people in attendance, all presumed to be straight. (266)

David Bergman perceptively discovers a similar piece of reportage in Langston Hughes' autobiography, *The Big Sea*, where "the Hamilton Club Lodge Ball segues into Countee Cullen's lavish wedding to Yolande Du Bois, W.E.B. Du Bois's only child, as if the 'male masqueraders' from one drag ball had merely waltzed over to another" (183). A prominent Harlem intellectual like Cullen might attend the ball, as Hughes suggests, but his class position would tacitly confirm (with the knowing or unknowing complicity of the press) the presumption of his normative sexuality. In Hughes' text, the proximity of the ball to Cullen's 1928 wedding could seem to be merely an effort to catalog the period's spectacles, though we may suspect that the association was more pointed to contemporary readers, particularly in light of the rapid failure of the marriage (Reimonenq 155–56). Cullen's poem is a quite different kind of site from the Hamilton Lodge, open certainly to any literate person who might also have attended a ball, but appearing first under the banner of respectability and normative sexuality that attended Cullen's growing prestige as a poet. By the end of 1925, Cullen had already published poems not only in *The Crisis* and *Opportunity* but in white magazines like Harriet Monroe's *Poetry* and *Harper's*. His decision to publish *Color* through the conservative Harper and Brothers press further indicates his interest in establishing a respectable context for his work, and goes some way to explain the class assumptions that underwrite David Levering Lewis's description of Cullen as "Harlem's poet prodigy" (75). Even in a time when, as Richard Bruce Nugent notably recalled, "gender was becoming more and more conjectural" (Chauncey 252), the question remains open as to which readers might make such a conjecture publicly, particularly when the ability to conceive gender as being "conjectural" might imply a dangerous overfamiliarity with non-normative sexual practices.

Above all, "For a Lovely Lady" seems to dramatize this open question, and the fact that it has until now entirely escaped critical comment corroborates its success in a certain respect. Reading the poem in a conventional way obliges the poem's addressee first to accept a testimony for a body it could not see (it lies "here," but underground), and then to promise not to require proof of its material existence ("take my word for it"). Such a willing obedience to accept the title as a literal representation of the poem's subject is very like assuming that Cullen's use of conventional form necessarily indicates a conservative content. Yet such obedience has dominated most readings of Cullen. To present just one example, Nathan Irvin Huggins's reading of Cullen's epitaph for John Keats certainly indicates that he would read "For a Lovely Lady" in the same way:

One could hardly find a more perfect example of a twentieth-century poet marching to a nineteenth-century drummer: the subject, the title, the diction, the stiff period of the first two lines,

CALLALOO

the conceit of the poet [. . .]. Like most of Cullen's poetry, this epitaph leaves the reader with little doubt about what it is. It looks like a poem, it sounds like a poem, and it is about what poems are supposed to be about. (208)

From Huggins's perspective, the parenthetical phrase with which "For a Lovely Lady" closes ("but take my word for it, / And do not pry below") could only remain an anomalous, and potentially dangerous, afterthought that must be simultaneously obeyed and ignored. Already convinced of Cullen's tedious conventionality, such a reading unwittingly reifies the conditions of the poem's reception in which the author is taken for a creator of beautiful objects.

Avi-Ram's suggestion that the black body is "unreadable" in Cullen's poetics has been an important first step in working against this tendency; expanding this range of inquiry across a series of Cullen's poems, though, shows how that indeterminate or generic significance produces startlingly legible illustrations of specific social relationships. To re-read "For a Lovely Lady," for example (to "pry below" its prescribed interpretation), gives a crucial equivocation to the word "lying." In the initial sense, it acts as a euphemistic term for death, distanced from that term in the same way that "creature" is distanced from "lady." But in order to give meaning to the parenthetical statement that closes the poem, lying may also acquire an active connotation, in which the body is in some sense not "telling the truth" about its gender or sexuality. The speaker, in turn, pretends to be complicit by asking the reader to "take [his] word for it." In fact, the lying lovely lady—and by now the overdetermined quality of that phrase suggests that it may have had another connotation as slang—may not even be dead.⁶

Cullen's gesture here, and in a great many other poems in *Color*, is not nearly as explicit in its depiction of gay culture as is the work of slightly later Harlem writers designated as "impolite queers" in Michael L. Cobb's recent article. What I wish to claim, however, is that of all the Harlem Renaissance writers, Cullen's work represents the most thorough elaboration of a homosexual poetics. His diffidence on the question of being entirely open about the question of sexuality is constitutive of the argument of this poetics. But his choice may also speak to the felt obligations of a poet who was (not unwillingly) claimed as the Harlem movement's most visible exemplar. As a poet pre-eminently emblematic of Du Bois's "Talented Tenth," one whom Alain Locke proclaimed "a genius!" in his review of *Color*,⁷ and one who would later co-edit and write a regular column for *Opportunity*, Cullen can be seen as having taken a considerable risk in writing poems like "For a Lovely Lady," particularly for his first volume. Although it is important to recognize that the foregoing reading of that poem may have been more apparent to many readers in 1925 than it has been more recently, it is equally important to understand the larger implications, looking beyond the specific milieu of Harlem, that are indicated by Du Bois's firing of Augustus Granville Dill, the business manager of *The Crisis*, following Dill's arrest for soliciting gay sex in a subway washroom (Chauncey 198, 264). As both Arnold Rampersad and Alden Reimonenq have shown, many African-American intellectuals of the 1920s used a kind of code, even in private letters, that was meant to prevent definitive identifica-

tions of the correspondents' sexual preference. In a letter dated March 3, 1923, for example, Cullen wrote to Locke of his strongly affinitive reaction to Edward Carpenter's *Ioläus*, a collection of homoerotic writings (subtitled "An Anthology of Friendship") that Locke had recommended to Cullen. Cullen added as a postscript a request that the letter be "destroyed," since "[s]entiments expressed here would be misconstrued by others."⁸ Cullen's choice of phrase is particularly pointed here, since one could argue that his fear is not that it will be "misconstrued," but rather interpreted "correctly" in the service of affixing a scandalous private identity to his respectable public identity.

Ironically, Cullen's comparatively marginal critical legacy owes much to the failure to make similar identifications that would allow for the recognition of the multivalent, and potentially scandalous, qualities of his poetics. Assessments of Cullen's work have instead evacuated the possibility of homosexual desire as a context of the poems, or have even attempted to claim him from the supposed ignominy of having preferred having sex with men. Exemplary of both tendencies is Gerald Early's introduction to the most recent edition of Cullen's poems, in which the subject is tersely treated in a footnote: "[t]here is [. . .] no evidence that Cullen and [Harold] Jackman were lovers. [. . .] no evidence that Cullen engaged in any homosexual relations with any other figures of the Renaissance" (19).⁹ Significantly, even as Early makes a case for the importance of Cullen's work, his disingenuous plea for "evidence" shares a structural similarity with the claims of critics who have decried Cullen's use of anachronistic forms. Those critics assume that form is itself evidence of content, necessarily mimetic and approximating an authentic object (hence Huggins's "It looks like a poem, it sounds like a poem").

Richard Bruce Nugent's reminder that "gender was becoming more and more conjectural" can serve as ample admonition of such critical conceits, since Cullen's poetics are themselves generated out of the necessarily conjectural statuses of identity, form, and representative language, instabilities that hegemonic culture would wish to stabilize. Cullen's poetics thus agrees with Amy Robinson's essay on racial and sexual passing, "It Takes One to Know One," which has suggested that "[t]o imagine identity politics as a skill of reading is to replace the inadequate dichotomy of visibility and invisibility with an acknowledgment of multiple codes of *intelligibility* [thereby] broach[ing] an archaic notion of identity" (716). The point of the foregoing discussion of "For a Lovely Lady" is, after all, not to invalidate the conventional, heteronormative reading of the poem, but to show how its contextualization shows a queer reading to have been folded within it. Indeed, the queer reading depends on the hegemonic context in order for it to be intelligible. It is important, then, to realize that Cullen allies what Robinson calls "politics of substance" with dominant, straight (often white) cultures. Tellingly, there is hardly anything substantive in "For a Lovely Lady," and the poem could well be conceived as a kind of joke in this respect. The dedication of the poem's title is by far the most definite thing about the poem, yet it can hardly be said to represent the poem except insofar as it affixes upon it only the most respectable interpretation.

This thesis can go a long way toward accounting for what has often been perceived to be a penchant in Cullen for vagueness or empty universalisms. Once the ability of

the poem's title to determine the poem's meaning is thrown into doubt, so too does the significance of poetic form (and the poet himself) emerge as multivalent or conjectural. Cullen presents his universalisms precisely as overdetermined, and therefore empty, fictions to be invested by his reader along differing "codes of intelligibility." For this reason, Cullen was shrewd to present the section of poems containing "For a Lovely Lady" as "epitaphs," since, as Debra Fried notes in her study of epitaphs, "[w]hat death does to men the style of the epitaph does to language: makes it repetitive, incantatory, static, self-righteous, but stunned, unable to untie the strands of cause and effect, literal and figurative" (618). Whereas Cullen's language is not static, as Fried's epitaphs are, the entitling of the poems and apparent significance of his form *are* static, insofar as they prescribe and enable a safe, unscandalous reading. Yet even after they enable a queer reading, the "strands of cause and effect" remain tangled. It is not simply the case that a hegemonic reading enables a subversive reading, but also that supposedly straight, white poetic traditions have all along been constituted from alternating repressions and representations of both black cultures and cultures of non-normative sexuality.¹⁰ Crucially, this is a point Cullen must have appreciated very early on, since *Ioläus*, the anthology recommended to the young poet by Alain Locke, is not an anthology of rare and suppressed homoerotic writings, but rather a collection of verse and prose by canonical authors including Plato, Shakespeare, Byron, and Tennyson. It is not simply sexual identities that are conjectural, then, but so too is the heritage of the entire provenance of Western culture out of and against which Cullen chose to work.

2.

In the context of the foregoing discussion, and laying particular weight, as seems appropriate, to Carpenter's *Ioläus*, it is all the more striking to read Cullen's poem "A Song of Praise," also from *Color*. Nowhere is Cullen's interest in tangling "strands of cause and effect" more apparent than in this poem, which engages so aggressively with the canonical image of Shakespeare, and responds specifically to the dark lady sonnets.¹¹ Cullen's reading of Shakespeare, however, appears at first to be a willful *misreading*, insofar as Cullen presumes Shakespeare to apostrophize a woman who is paradigmatically white, thereby indicating that the "Shakespeare" whom Cullen addresses appears in an important sense to be an iconic Shakespeare, Bowdlerized and appropriated by nationalistic discourses. The poem's subtitle indicates this adventitious "misreading": "For one who praised his lady's being fair."

According to Houston Baker's well-known suggestion, such a strategy constitutes a "mastery of form and a deformation of mastery" that is characteristic of Cullen's work (Baker, *Modernism* 37). That deformed mastery is of a special kind here. The poet of the Sonnets as presented in Cullen's poem is one, we could say, imagined by the implied audience of "For a Lovely Lady": a poet of masterful accomplishment whose poems ought not to be violated by conjectural readings that pry below the text's prescribed meanings. At the same time, Cullen's engagement with the Sonnets is

CALLALOO

particularly cunning at the level of form. Although “A Song of Praise” clearly employs conceits and subjects lifted directly from the dark lady sonnets (pride, pity, the sun, a dark lover, and so on), the poem is not a sonnet, but instead consists of five stanzas written in ballad form. Like a sonnet, however, “A Song of Praise” contains seventy iambic feet, thereby maintaining a connection to Shakespeare, while insisting on an imposed difference. Indeed, the poem combines traditions of song and sonnet, capitalizing on the historical tension between sung and discursive modes of address (the present poem, like a song, does not contain a turn).

Since *Ioläus* would already have alerted Cullen to the homoeroticism of the Sonnets, it is surprising to discover that Cullen’s poem is largely unconcerned with same-sex desire. Cullen instead implies that the formal disruption of the Sonnets consists in those poems’ depictions of racial difference, and in so doing anticipates Margreta de Grazia’s thesis that the scandal of the Sonnets is not that of “Shakespeare’s love for a boy; [. . .] [i]t is Shakespeare’s gynerastic longings for a black mistress that are perverse and menacing, precisely because they threaten to raze the very distinctions his poems to the fair boy strain to preserve” (48). Cullen’s poem adumbrates a metaphysical critique along with a social one, implicating the Sonnets within European epistemologies of blackness rather than forming an allegiance with a queer Shakespeare.

You have not heard my love’s dark throat,
 Slow-fluting like a reed,
Release the perfect golden note
 She caged there for my need.

Her walk is like the replica
 Of some barbaric dance
Wherein the soul of Africa
 Is winged with arrogance.

And yet so light she steps across
 The ways her sure feet pass,
She does not dent the smoothest moss
 Or bend the smoothest grass.

My love is dark as yours is fair,
 Yet lovelier I hold her
Than listless maids with pallid hair,
 And blood that’s thin and colder.

You-proud-and-to-be-pitied one,
 Gaze on her and despair;
Then seal your lips until the sun
 Discovers one as fair.

CALLALOO

"A Song of Praise" opens with a rejoinder to Shakespeare's unfavorable comparisons of his dark mistress's voice (for example, "Nor are mine ears with thy tongue's tune delighted," Sonnet 141). In arguing that the poet of the Sonnets has not "heard my love's dark throat," Cullen indicates that the dark lady sonnets are the object of his criticism from the very first lines of the poem. The rest of the poem, pointedly, is involved with visible estimations of the loved one's value, particularly with respect to the concept of "fairness." In Sonnet 130, Shakespeare famously compares the dark lady unfavorably to traditional paradigms of beauty (which in Cullen's reading are unavoidably coded white):

If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.
I have seen roses damask'd, red and white,
But no such roses see I in her cheeks,

As the word "fair" is associated both with paleness of skin, with high birth, and with beauty generally, Sonnet 137 assumes that love is a blinding force, in both a literal and moral sense:

Or mine eyes seeing this, say this is not,
To put fair truth upon so foul a face?
In things right true my heart and eyes have erred,
And to this false plague are they now transferred.

Giving an alternative to this position, Sonnet 148 asks that if his eyes do *not* deceive him, "If that be fair whereon my false eyes dote, / What means the world to say it is not so?" In asking "What means the world," the poem comes close to what might be called an ideological critique, but this potentially radical suggestion is then contained within the sonnet's final turn:

No marvel then though I mistake my view,
The sun itself sees not till heaven clears
O cunning Love, with tears thou keep'st me blind,
Lest eyes well seeing thy foul faults should find.

It is "Love" (rather than "the world") that appears to dissimulate the perceived object, thus betraying the heart's humanistic desire to see the world in ideal terms.

It is important to note the paradigmatic mode of comparison that Shakespeare uses in order to understand why Cullen's critique is as metaphysical as it is racial and relativistic. The dark lady sonnets are often considered—as a whole, and particularly in certain poems, such as Sonnet 130—to be working against the blazon tradition inherited from the Italian Renaissance poets. Demonstrating the failure of figurative language to account for an adequate experience of the described subject, anti-blazon poems are seen to refuse or frustrate the metonymic mode of praise, as employed by Petrarch. Yet as in the blazon tradition, the dark lady sonnets repeatedly anatomize

CALLALOO

their subject. Although the point is to express skepticism about the paradigms nevertheless employed, the contiguity of the word *praise* to notions of *appraisal* of the woman's body remains very much of moment.

In sharp contrast, Cullen at no point presents any of his subject's body; the "dark throat" of the first stanza is, for example, neither heard nor seen, and is given almost hypothetically. Instead of presenting her body, Cullen apostrophizes his love's "walk" (describing a witnessed action that substitutes for the active specular body) which is itself "like the replica / Of some barbaric dance" that in turn houses the "soul of Africa." Being "like the replica [o]f [a] dance" puts the subject in a position that anticipates the refrain of "Heritage," to be discussed below: "*One three centuries removed / From the scenes his fathers loved.*" Even if the dance were the thing described, the walk, being a replica of the dance, has no claim to its own authenticity. However, unlike Shakespeare, Cullen does not present the dance as a paradigm against which he compares her walk unfavorably ("My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun"). Instead, it is her being "like the replica" that is made into a virtue, as it forestalls her body from coming into being. In this evanescent form, it is as if she consists only of airy words, stepping so surely and lightly that "she does not dent the smoothest moss / Or bend the thinnest grass."¹² As in Claude McKay's "Harlem Dancer," the language of the dance is substituted for the subjectivity of the dancer. But unlike McKay's dancer, whose "self was not in that strange place," Cullen's lover claims no authentic subjectivity. If it is true, as James Snead argues in his pivotal essay, that "[w]here material is absent, dialectics is groundless" (68), Cullen absents the material body in order to frustrate what he presents as Shakespeare's dialectical comparison of a real historical female body with a paradigmatic ideal.

Most important in Cullen's understanding of Shakespeare is that, in addition to paradigms of beauty, Shakespeare has recourse to a transcendental paradigm of truth, which is signified by his heart:

In faith, I do not love thee with mine eyes,
For they in thee a thousand errors note,
But 'tis my heart that loves what they despise. (Sonnet 141)

It is Shakespeare's "heart" here that possesses the power to mediate between the particular (the "thousand errors" "note[d]" by his "eyes") and the ideal, whereby those errors are transfigured by the transcendent power of love. For Cullen, this very transcendentalism is also coded white, and this is the reason that he ironically dedicates this poem "To one who praised his lady's being fair." Transcendence, Cullen suggests, is a fiction enabled by a privileged position to language, which is both raced, as in this poem, and sexually oriented, as in "For a Lovely Lady." The corresponding sense of immediacy and entrapment occurs everywhere in Cullen's poetry, but nowhere more strikingly than in the tangled syntax of "Brown Boy to Brown Girl," the poem (significantly, a Shakespearean sonnet) that faces "A Song of Praise" in the 1925 edition of *Color*:

CALLALOO

As surely as I break the slender line
That spider linked us with, in no least wise
Am I uncertain that these alien skies
Do not our whole life measure and confine.

Put somewhat more clearly, this passage argues that the speaker strongly suspects that the “alien skies” may indeed “measure and confine” him and his lover in the social present. When Cullen states in the fourth stanza of “A Song of Praise,” “My love is dark as yours is fair,” the reference obtains not simply to race, but to all the social connotations that accompany the words dark and fair, insofar as those connotations serve to support the values with which the poet of the Sonnets is at odds and which Cullen seeks to evade.

To Cullen, the iconic Shakespeare, having been made to represent white culture and normative sexuality, is allowed to enjoy a myth of authentic subjectivity that is made possible only because of its privileged position within language. Moreover, this language communicates by means of a comparative binarism that posits darkness as the denigrated condition that enables the “fair” to be invested with value. Hence, it could be claimed that the woman of Cullen’s poem is *indeed identical to Shakespeare’s dark lady*, distinguished only from differing modes of reading. The secret of Cullen’s dedication is that the verb “praised” is meant performatively: Shakespeare has praised his woman (if not her body, certainly her “being”) into being fair. Cullen’s poem thereby retangles the “strands of cause and effect,” showing that what the Sonnets read as the root of the speaker’s dilemma, is instead the effect of his language.

Cullen’s decision to engage with Shakespeare’s Sonnets on the topic of race, rather than sexuality, is especially remarkable given those poems’ long-held association with homosexual desire. Indeed, the revised and expanded manuscript of Oscar Wilde’s “Portrait of Mr. W.H.”—only one of many readings of the Sonnets that emphasize same-sex desire—had been recently rediscovered and published for the first time in New York in 1921 by Mitchell Kennerley, who had also been the American publisher of *Ioläus*.¹³ Although Cullen would in fact cite Wilde’s piece a few years later in an essay written at Harvard, “A Song of Praise” pointedly shows an early decision not to be allied with this tradition. As in “For a Lovely Lady,” in which the full range of reference and implication requires the poem to be situated in a contemporary and specifically African-American context, Cullen is here interested in exploring what legacy Western poetic form can have, specifically, for a black writer of the 1920s. Cullen’s poem, therefore, argues that the paradigms through which Shakespeare’s black mistress is comprehended produce the effect of rendering her as “fair” as is the boy to whom other sonnets are addressed. This is true, one could make the point more stridently, even taking into account the Sonnets’ anti-blazonic positioning. Shakespeare’s skepticism is justified by an appeal to the “heart,” which carries with it implications of a Christian metaphysics, a metaphysics Cullen interrogates repeatedly in his most anthologized poems, “Yet Do I Marvel” and “Heritage.”

3.

Remarkably, “Heritage” is one of only a very few long poems of the Harlem Renaissance period. Since its publication, it has remained one of Cullen’s most frequently cited and quoted poems; Nella Larsen used its refrain as an epigraph to *Passing* in 1929, and in 2002 Meshell Ndegeocello sampled Cullen’s voice recording of the poem on her album *Cookie: The Anthropological Mixtape*. What may be equally interesting is the extent to which Cullen understood “Heritage” as a career-making poem even during the course of its composition. Correspondence from Cullen in the Alain Locke Papers at Howard University shows how together Locke and Cullen managed the conditions of the poem’s publication, deciding not to enter it in the first annual *Opportunity* literary contest (which was consequently won by Hughes), in favor of giving it a central position both in the Harlem number of the *Survey Graphic* and in the *New Negro* anthology, each of which were of course edited by Locke. Yet even in these exceedingly public contexts, Cullen was not interested simply in fulfilling the obligations of a major poem on race (which is how the poem has almost exclusively been understood). Substantially revised for its publication in *Color*, “Heritage” in each of its published versions synthesizes in an extraordinary way Cullen’s interest in representing the socialization of homosexual desire with a more obviously legible statement about the relationship of urban African America to its African roots.

Departing from the sonnets and ballads that make up the rest of *Color*, the unusual meter of “Heritage”—in trochaic tetrameter—indicates its privileged role in the book. At the same time, this form produces an effect of equivocation that recalls the shorter poems in the volume. Its insistent rhythm is clearly meant to resemble African drums on the one hand, but it also invokes a tradition of English verse (Blake’s “The Tyger,” for example). Correspondingly, “Heritage” has been read both as a dubious attempt to make the poet’s ancestry signify within his poetry, and also as a grand evocation of an authentic African experience. Nathan Huggins argues for the former position, saying, “Africa comes through as romantic and exotic [in “Heritage”], no more or no less real for him as a black poet than it would have been for a white one” (81). David Levering Lewis is surprisingly more approving, and says that although the initial refrain is “trite,” “it is redeemed by other lines of lushness and mystery as true as the jungle canvases of the Douanier Rousseau” (117). Lewis’s peculiar (and, one suspects, ironic) comparison here recalls what Houston Baker had already named as the “thoroughly ironical” quality of Cullen’s poem (Baker, *Many-Colored* 34), an irony that Walter Benn Michaels has usefully begun to explicate in *Our America*.

In contrast to the other poems discussed so far, the expressed subject of the poem is withheld from, rather than by, the speaker:

What is Africa to me:
 Copper sun or scarlet sea,
 Jungle star or jungle track,
 Strong bronzed men, or regal black
 Women from whose loins I sprang

CALLALOO

When the birds of Eden sang?
One three centuries removed
From the scenes his fathers loved,
Spicy grove, cinnamon tree,
What is Africa to me?

Michaels argues that “although the scenes the father loved are initially presented as ‘unremembered’ by the son, the tendency to *forget* (as if Africa were too distant to matter) is immediately reinterpreted as a requirement to *repress* (as if Africa were too near to be forgotten)” (124). Michaels rightly focuses on Cullen’s employment of these two modes by which memory temporarily fails to preserve experience, and his identification of the necessity of repression makes it all the more surprising that he neglects noting the homoerotic theme in the poem.

But in order to understand the way in which “Heritage” imbricates poetics of memory with poetics of sexuality, a brief discussion of a shorter poem in *Color* will be helpful. “Advice to Youth” presents itself as a minor poem in ballad form that blithely advises a young man to live for today:

Since little time is granted here
For pride in pain or play
Since blood soon cools before that Fear
That makes our prowess clay,
If lips to kiss are freely met,
Lad, be not proud nor shy;
There are no lips where men forget,
And undesiring lie.

Like other poems in the volume, “Advice to Youth” enables a queer reading by employing vague language that appears, in a traditional reading, to refer blandly to universal categories of life and death. But when the poem’s language is read with specificity, the subjunctive third pair of verses creates a space in which same-sex desire can be expressed. In this reading, the “lips to kiss” are gendered male by the “men” of the seventh line. However, this subjunctive couplet, which identifies a space of tentative queer privacy, is contained within three declarative couplets, two of which are allied affirmatively with the heterosexual public sphere. The bodies of the “men” exist only provisionally in the queer space (where “little time is granted”), and, because they are allowed only the immediacy of their own forgetting, are not allowed any redemptive power of memory. As in “For a Lovely Lady,” the pun on the word “lie” is central to the enactment of these two interpretations. In the more obvious reading, the last two lines are an effete reference to death, which kills both memory and desire. But in the second reading, where lying is an act of renunciation, or repression, the space described is public space, where it is imperative that homosexual desire be forgotten. Once again, the second reading does not invalidate the first, but rather implicates each within the other. Cullen equates public life with actual death: public personae become the walking dead.

CALLALOO

The place “where men forget, / And undesiring lie” may be seen also to describe the public space in which “Heritage” begins to be spoken. The initial phrase, “What is Africa to me?” acts as if it is a question asked by all African Americans (or, as Larsen’s citation suggests, more properly as a question often asked by middle-class Harlemites). In this introductory stanza, it is the italicized refrain that appears as the answer to the initial question. But the question produces a series of potential answers that are hardly differentiated, before becoming closed off by a reiteration of its initial question. The stanza seems to present the question as unanswerable, or at least unanswered. Within this enclosure, the nominative clause, “*One three centuries removed / From the scenes his fathers loved*” refers both to the exoticized Africa while also emerging as a third person reference to the poem’s first person “me.” As such, the speaker’s idea of himself as a subject with a coherent history (a history that is both exoticized and three hundred years past) is itself three times removed from the immediacy of the speaker’s utterance.

The next stanza begins, as Michaels notes, with an act of repression (“So I lie”) that becomes a second refrain in the poem. But since this act of repression is presented as a series of consequences to the conclusion that has not been reached (“What is Africa to me? [. . .] So I lie”), the speaking voice appears deeply unstable. It first “lies” because it wants “no sound except the song / Sung by wild barbaric birds” and this is followed by another “lie” relating to the more viscerally Africanized image of “Great drums throbbing through the air.” The third “lie” of the stanza, notably, dispenses with the African imagery altogether, indicating perhaps the successful repression of the significance of Africa:

So I lie, whose fount of pride,
Dear distress, and joy allied
Is my somber flesh and skin,
With the dark blood dammed within
Like great pulsing tides of wine
That, I fear, must burst the fine
Channels of the chafing net
Where they surge and foam and fret.

This movement suggests the possibility that the clearly exoticized African imagery has itself been a “lie”—a simulacrum aligned with the speaker’s desire (or obligation) to account for a lost or indeterminate heritage.

The momentary disappearance of exotic imagery further supports Michaels’s reading of the speaker’s wish to repress the significance of his African heritage. When Africa returns, it is objectified as “A book one thumbs / Listlessly, till slumber comes.” The image of the book wishes to stabilize the speaker’s desire by preventing it from performing upon his body and re-presenting within the pages of a book. But refiguring Africa from the “Great drums throbbing” of the second stanza to a bedside book is also to transpose the repressive lying in that same stanza (“So I lie”) to simply lying in the privacy of one’s bed. As such, the third stanza of “Heritage” reverses the final repressive movement of “Advice to Youth,” and then goes on to show that the

CALLALOO

sense of historical alienation previously experienced by the speaker in his body is itself fundamentally underscored by erotic desire:

Unremembered are her bats
Circling through the night, her cats
Crouching in the river reeds,
Stalking gentle flesh that feeds
By the river brink; no more
Does the bugle-throated roar
Cry that monarch claws have leapt
From the scabbards where they slept.
Silver snakes that once a year
Doff the lovely coats you wear,
Seek no covert in your fear
Lest a mortal eye should see;
What's your nakedness to me?

Without understanding how thoroughly Cullen implicates the public and private realms—the obligation both to speak authoritatively about historical alienation and to speak candidly about same-sex desire—the sudden emergence of a second person figure (“you”) to whom this section of the poem is spoken will appear, to say the least, anomalous. But a close reading reveals “you” to be a materialized object of desire, closely associated with the exotic animal imagery that precedes it while also available in the immediate present, who lies next to the poet as he speaks. What is a prohibitive negation in “no more / Does the bugle-throated roar / Cry that monarch claws have leapt” is given in the last instance to engender the desired body, as occurred in the subjunctive phrase of “Advice to Youth”: “Silver snakes [. . .] / Seek no covert in your fear / Lest a mortal eye should see.” Desire is thus allowed to be staged, so long as it cannot be remembered.

More than this, it is the very act of obsessive repression that brings the desired object into being. Michaels reads this same technique as one that succeeds in “remembering” Africa, and thereby explains why Locke situated the poem among the anthropological texts in *The New Negro* anthology:

Trying not to hear the drums outside involves hearing instead the drums inside, the circulation of one's own “dark blood.” Thus Africa is, in the end, triumphantly, not only “remembered” but repeated; in *The New Negro*, “Heritage” appears in a section entitled “The Negro Digs Up His Past.” (124)

Michaels is right to note the sense of “triumph” that marks the speaker's success at discovering an object of desire through the very mechanism of repression that would seek to eliminate it. Repression, of course, does not do away with, but rather interiorizes its object, and Cullen's insight is to demonstrate that the enduring psychic effect of the slave trade shares an eerily homologous status to that of repressing same-

CALLALOO

sex desire in public space. Cullen insists on a further complication, however, because his use of meter must also be identified as consistent with Western poetics: it is the trochees that ensure that the repressed historical and erotic referents will symptomatically return and be available to consciousness, but this recovery is only available by means that are appropriated from an oppressive culture.

On the other hand, a brief reference to James Snead's theorization of what he calls the "cut" provides a way of explaining the emergence of the repressed through terms he deems specific to black culture. In the present stanza, the possibility of a desired body twice flickers into being, first with the emergence of the addressed "you," and then in the following lines in which a tree's leaves give way to the body's "hair":

What is last year's snow to me,
Last year's anything? The tree
Budding yearly must forget
How its past arose or set—
Bough and blossom, flower, fruit,
Even what shy bird with mute
Wonder at her travail there,
Meekly labored in its hair.

These slight references to a desired male body appear at first reading to be accidental, but from Snead's perspective, the "accidents" must be seen as carefully and deliberately staged:

Black culture, in the "cut," builds "accidents" into its *coverage*, almost as if to control their unpredictability. Itself a kind of cultural *coverage*, this magic of the "cut" attempts to confront accident and rupture not by covering them over but by making room for them inside the system itself. (67)

The speaker's attempts to deny both Africa and same-sex desire have produced for a moment the object of desire itself as an accidental rupture (the appearance of "you" seems especially careless, almost the work of a poet who is not in control of his language). Referring to Snead's essay, which seeks to forge theoretical connections between African and African-American culture, may seem a way of forcing a claim of authenticity upon Cullen, which is not my intention, although Cullen is so generally dismissed on this score that the point merits consideration. It is worth staying with this point for a moment, if only to note how Cullen uses an identifiable trope of black culture to voice same-sex desire (and here we may remember Snead's situating the notion of culture both as a mode of "coverage" and of "process" [59–60]). It could be pointed out that Ishmael Reed also makes a point of commenting on Cullen's supposed inauthenticity by placing a scene late in *Mumbo Jumbo* in which Nathan Brown (Reed's figure for Cullen) asks Benoit Battraville how he can "catch" Jes Grew. Benoit responds by telling him he cannot give him an answer, but advises him both to observe the improvisatory aspects of his culture, and also to write from his own

CALLALOO

experience. The scene closes: "Nathan waves goodbye to his friend and walks out the door. He's got that strange sensation at the nape of his neck. He has finally Caught-On" (153).¹⁴

However we decide to accept this proposition, the larger point of the poem is that the "triumph" that Michaels identifies—or the enduring effect of "catching-on"—can only be tentative and contingent, as the following stanza closes off the rupture by returning to the more pessimistic repetitions of the refrain:

So I lie, who find no peace
Night or day, no slight release
From the unremittant beat
Made by cruel padded feet
Walking through my body's street.

Here, the body is returned to the public space that is itself attendant upon the public status of the poem, and the initial connotation of "lying" dominates once again, just as the "unremittant beat / Made by cruel padded feet" courses "through my body's street." In fact, the body does not simply exist *in* public space, but also, as a "street" the body *is itself* public space, subject to and determined by the public desires projected upon it, and made available for public use by means of seemingly democratic gestures. The speaker's body, in other words, becomes very like the traditional forms of the poems previously discussed in this essay, appearing as it does to manifest in advance an example of its apparent normativity. Importantly, it is this passage that so deeply affects Mark Thornton, a white homosexual character in Blair Niles's 1931 novel *Strange Brother*. As Gregory Woods points out, Mark's reading of this passage (he is reading from *The New Negro* anthology) suggests the "sympathetic identification [of a white homosexual] with oppressed African-Americans," but it much more immediately indicates that the poem may already have reached a homosexual audience who read it not only as a race poem, but as one that also addressed the social problematics of expressing same-sex desire (132–33).¹⁵

To think of Snead's concept of repetition with respect to the ways both race and sexualities can be represented is extremely complicated and of great importance. For Snead, the virtue of repetition consists in the way in which it enables a return or a restaging of an unavailable or repressed history.¹⁶ Cullen clearly agrees with this assessment; however, the place of return may just as often be the realm of the public, in which prescribed meanings are always alienated from the subjects for whom his poems speak. This alienation, as "Heritage" seems to demonstrate rather directly, is for Cullen the very condition of blackness itself: "*One three centuries removed / From the scenes his fathers loved.*" It is also the condition of queerness: "There are no lips where men forget / And undesiring lie." Paradoxically, it is only an acceptance of this radical contingency that can give rise to the real of desire; it is a central insight of Cullen's poetics that so far has only been recognized by Jean Wagner.¹⁷

In certain readings, "Heritage" appears to resolve this contradiction through the speaker's "high-priced" conversion to Christianity, and Cullen may originally have wished for this to suffice, as the earlier versions of the poem concluded with its most

CALLALOO

overtly religious section. According to the Christian myth, the sorrows of the flesh (as embodied by "One") will be redeemed by the ascendance of the soul (the speaking "me"). But the speaker's doubt that all suffering flesh signifies equally, "Wishing He I served were black," leads him not to embrace Christianity whole-heartedly, but rather to "fashion dark gods, too." And, as is true throughout *Color*, no images of transcendence occur in the poem, leaving the speaker in the immediacy of the present. This immediacy, combined with Cullen's giving Jesus "Dark despairing features," arises not as an alternative to what he calls,

Quaint, outlandish heathen gods
Black men fashion out of rods,
Clay, and brittle bits of stone,
In a likeness like their own,

but rather as an uncanny repetition of the same gesture. Indeed, it is a repetition of a tendency of white European culture. Unlike Snead's "thing itself," which is "always there for you to pick up when you come back to get it" (67), the "likeness like their own," like the woman's walk in "A Song of Praise" (which is "like the replica / Of some barbaric dance"), is again three times removed from the speaking subject.

4.

There is another way in which Snead's conceptualizing of repetition, "making room for [rupture] inside the system," is indispensable to these concerns. Cullen himself spoke to a repeated gesture in a 1925 letter to Alain Locke (and here Alden Reimonenq's essay has been helpful in identifying the figures Cullen discusses, and in showing how the letter describes his fear of being tempted by an old lover as he is beginning a new relationship):

I am beginning even now to school myself to a casual interest—but
do you recall the closing lines of my poem "The Spark?"—
I knew a man
Thought a spark was dead,
That flamed and ran
A brighter red,
And burned the roof
Above his head.
Being so wise, whom shall I blame if I am burned?¹⁸

In this letter, Cullen reminds Locke of the special significance with which he had invested the word "spark," an image (appearing in "Heritage" as "a hidden ember") that would not necessarily seem to indicate same-sex desire, even in the context of the foregoing lengthy reading. However, in the context of its eponymous poem, as well

CALLALOO

as in the letter that cites it, “spark” clearly does carry a specific sexual connotation. Its repetition at the end of “Heritage” invites the familiar reader to bring that homoerotic connotation to the longer poem. It is much less likely that a reading of any single poem from *Color* would affirm anything like a queer reading, so strong has been the significance of poetic form even to Cullen’s contemporary readers. It is only when the volume is read as a whole that the repetition of words, phrases, images, and rhetorical strategies can become available to the reader, and provide grounds (though they remain necessarily conjectural) for such productive readings.

Of the three published versions of “Heritage” (in the *Survey Graphic*, *The New Negro*, and finally in *Color*), it is only the later version of “Heritage” that concludes with the following stanza, and Cullen’s letter to Locke can help in assessing the differences among the versions. In the version that appeared in the *Survey Graphic* and *The New Negro*, “Heritage” concludes with the speaker’s “high-priced” Christian conversion, which ends with the supplication, “Lord, forgive me if my need / Sometimes shapes a human creed.” In its final revised version, the poem closes with a stanza that appears much earlier in the preceding versions of the poem:

All day long and all night through,
One thing only must I do:
Quench my pride and cool my blood,
Lest I perish in the flood.
Lest a hidden ember set
Timber that I thought was wet
Burning like the driest flax,
Melting like the merest wax,
Lest the grave restore its dead.
Not yet has my heart or head
In the least way realized
They and I are civilized.

Since Cullen’s letter to Locke suggests that this passage may be given a homoerotic interpretation, the placement of this stanza at the end of the poem shifts the rhetorical emphasis of the poem from one in which the speaker seeks a reconciliation with an Africanized Christian figure, to one that reinforces the poem’s presentation of repressed or unavailable memory (both sexual and historical) as something that is eroticized by the very act of repression.

In its first two textual manifestations, “Heritage” appeared alongside photographic reproductions of African sculpture from the collection of Albert C. Barnes. In *The New Negro*, as Walter Benn Michaels notes, “Heritage” does not appear with Cullen’s other poems, but in a section entitled “The Negro Digs Up His Past.” Although Cullen’s correspondence with Locke suggests that his mentor urged him to revise the poem, it may be speculated that the revision also bears witness to Cullen’s resistance to its original appearance alongside ancient African sculpture—both sculpture and poem appearing to be self-evident (and stabilizing) versions of the other. A similar equivalence is suggested in Barnes’s own essay, “Negro Art and America,” which also appeared in the two early publications.

In that essay, Barnes argued that “[t]he most important element to be considered is the psychological complexion of the Negro as he inherited it from his primitive ancestors and which he maintains to this day,” and added, “[t]he Negro is a poet by birth” (19). It is important to note that Barnes’s essay was part of a developing body of work that attacked racist appropriations of African art, which were rife in the 1920s, and inaugurated in their place a study of those sculptures that would be of a piece with his study of Western art. Cullen, though, is far less sanguine about the possibility of this “inheritance,” at least in the unmediated sense Barnes’s early essay implies is possible. On the contrary, the implications of Cullen’s project (if not stated explicitly) may call into question even that impulse for serious historical study of the work. What is so crucial to understanding Cullen’s poetry is acknowledging its grounding in the absolute present. This is why, for example, the Shakespeare of “A Song of Praise” is the received image of Shakespeare proper to his cultural moment. It is also why the only African experience available to the poet is one made manifest by an expression of his own alienation—not achieved through the act of identifying with an object already carefully prepared for the occasion.

Perhaps the central paradox of Countee Cullen’s poetry is that what has often been seen to be a misguided nostalgia for a bygone notion of poetic virtuosity is really the means whereby he was able at once to satisfy the popular desire to be exemplary of the Talented Tenth, and at the same time to speak with surprising precision both to the exigencies of that exemplarity, and, more pointedly, to the politics of sexuality in the context of Harlem in the early 1920s. In discussing the centrality of “gay desires, people, discourses, prohibitions and energies” to the Harlem, New England, English and Italian Renaissances, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick remarked dryly, “[n]o doubt that’s how we will learn to recognize a renaissance when we see one” (58–59). Cullen, however, was compelled not only to write in such a way that might allow for Sedgwick’s (and our own) retrospective recognition of the period’s homoerotic determination, but was from the start already involved in the project of his period’s being recognized as a “renaissance” (as indicated by Alain Locke and James Weldon Johnson’s invocations of the “Irish Renaissance” [Locke 1925, 7; Johnson 41]). The object of his poems’ acerbity is very often this original audience (both black and white), as imagined and projected deliberately from within those same poems. His readership’s continued blindness to the poems’ queer content—often much more readily available than are their “ethereal” themes—may confirm Cullen’s implication that such blindness is symptomatically in league with the period’s more immediately visible forms of oppression.

NOTES

I am grateful to the Moorland Spingarn Research Center at Howard University for permission to quote from the Alain Locke Papers.

1. Michael L. Lomax’s assessment is typical of a generation of Cullen critics: “With his rejection of race, Cullen concentrated on the essentially fatuous literary artificialities which were, according to him, the poet’s true concern” (220). See also Shucard (16) and Huggins (207).
2. Avi-Ram describes Cullen’s coffin-like use of form this way: “The form is a silken shroud that causes us to *feel*, to touch, the beauty of this exquisite corpse of dreams, the poet’s corpus” (40).

3. In Slavoj Žižek's explication of Lacan's reading of "courtly love as anamorphosis," the transformation (anamorphosis) of the female body is the effect of the exceedingly formal gestures of courtly love which present a narcissistic idealization of the woman in order to avoid the horrifying reality of her body. In the case of Cullen's poem, the formality of courtly love is recalled within the employment of the ballad form and the announcement of the poem's dedication to the "lovely lady" (Žižek 89–112).
4. As Chauncey notes, some have argued that the Hamilton Lodge Ball, which had been established since 1869 and was held at the local Odd Fellows hall, had always been a drag ball. But it seems more likely that it was in the 1920s that the "gay element became prominent" (257). See also Garber (318–31).
5. In Lacanian terms, the projected reader is thus given as identifying with the "lovely lady" as *sinthome*: glossed by Slavoj Žižek as the "synthetic formation of the nonexistent woman," thereby insisting that the real, avoided body may be *both* the dead, unattainable, and undesiring female body as well as a living, desirous, and all-too-present male body (107).
6. Just as the conclusion of this poem acts an invitation to reread it, so too does the closing line of Nella Larsen's *Passing* (a novel that takes its epigraph from Cullen's poem "Heritage"). Following the "death by misadventure" of another "lovely lady" (Clare Kendry), Irene Redfield hears "the strange man" suggest, "Let's go up and have another look at that window," an invitation that also solicits a re-examination of the novel itself (114).
7. "Ladies and gentlemen! A genius! Posterity will laugh at us if we do not proclaim him now" (Locke, "Color" 14).
8. Countee Cullen letter to Alain Locke 3 March 1923, Alain Leroy Locke Papers, box 164–22 folder 36, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.
9. Early usefully delineates the way in which Cullen was made to be representative of the refined, bourgeois version of the New Negro associated with Alain Locke's introductory essay to the *New Negro* anthology: it was a Negro that was less "explicitly nationalistic" and confrontational, though it remained implicitly masculine. Early here echoes the argument made by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., in his 1988 essay, "The Trope of a New Negro and the Reconstruction of the Image of the Black," which shows how, by the 1920s, an earlier and more confrontational connotation of the term New Negro had been evacuated of its aggressively political potential. However, Early's method of showing this point is also telling. Instead of grounding the original politicized version of the New Negro in literary examples, as Gates does, Early argues that the exemplary New Negro of 1908 had been the boxer Jack Johnson, who was important not only for beating white opponents "with glee and disdain," but also for his sexual relations with white women, which involved "flaunting [his] sexuality and sexual prowess." These two achievements amounted to "the basic idea of the New Negro—the black who asserted his rights and his manhood." Although Early criticizes the Harlem Renaissance movement for having been overseen predominantly by men (Locke, Du Bois, James Weldon Johnson, Charles S. Johnson, et al.), what is implicit in his tracing of the New Negro from Jack Johnson to "the complete reification of the New Negro [. . .] completely estranged from the idea of a militant black nationalism" is a perceived abandonment both of its confrontational politics and of its unequivocally heterosexual masculinity. Johnson's undeniable significance notwithstanding, such a conclusion seems especially overcompensatory in light of the above-quoted passage in which the possibility of Cullen's homosexuality, which "[i]t is appropriate to address *here*" (i.e. as a footnote, emphasis mine), is quite evidently separated from the possible importance of Cullen's poetry. If Cullen's poetry were *also* to address the politics of same-sex desire, Early seems to imply, it would further vitiate an already compromised racial politics (Early 19, 24–40; Gates 129–55). In *Are We Not Men?*, Phillip Brian Harper presents a thorough and wide-ranging analysis of the tendency exemplified by Early's argument, which Harper describes as "the primacy of conventional masculinity to received conceptions of blackness" as well as the "conformist demands" attendant upon "black 'authenticity'" (ix).
10. Cullen's bringing together of these issues anticipates the theoretical work of James A. Snead and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in the 1980s (here formulated, respectively, in strikingly similar terms): "The outstanding fact of twentieth-century European culture is its ongoing reconciliation with black culture. The mystery may be that it took so long to discern the elements of black culture already there in latent form, and to realize that the separation between the cultures was perhaps all along not one of nature, but one of force" (75). "*Epistemology of the Closet* proposes that many of the major nodes of thought and knowledge in twentieth-century Western culture as a whole are structured—indeed, fractured—by a chronic, now endemic crisis of homo/heterosexual definition, indicatively male, dating from the end of the nineteenth century" (1).

11. Jean Wagner has read the poem as being addressed to the black bourgeoisie, "where there is a tendency to choose a spouse lighter than oneself" (316), thereby presenting a second, contemporary context for the poem.
12. Cullen here makes reference to one of Petrarch's blazoned descriptions of Laura in the *Rime Sparse* poems, where he substitutes her body for the imprint of her foot in the grass (Vickers 96). Cullen here imposes a difference similar to the one he imposes upon Shakespeare's sonnets.
13. Wallace Thurman's *Infants of the Spring* also may speak to the importance of "The Portrait of Mr. W.H." for some writers of the Harlem Renaissance. Thurman's novel, which self-consciously takes its title from *Hamlet*, mirrors Wilde's piece by arresting the story's action with an apparent suicide. In *Infants of the Spring*, the dead character is Paul Arbian (a figure for Richard Bruce Nugent) who has been throughout the book obsessed with Wilde.
14. Earlier in the book, Reed has posited Nathan Brown as the character who sees most clearly the exploitative designs Hinckle Von Vampton (Carl Van Vechten) has for the New Negro movement: "I think that when people like you, Mr. Von Vampton, say 'The Negro Experience' you are saying that all Negroes experience the world the same way. In that way you can isolate the misfits who would propel them into penetrating the ceiling of this bind you and your assistants have established in this country" (117).
15. The question of *Strange Brother* merits more extensive consideration than can be offered here. Its author, Blair Niles, was a white writer whose previous books were forms of travel writing, and were not concerned with Harlem or New York culture. *Strange Brother* does demonstrate familiarity with important homosexual texts such as Edward Carpenter's *Love's Coming of Age*, and also situates an important sequence of the text at a drag ball that is clearly based on the Hamilton Lodge events. Though doubtless the mark of a good travel writer, this kind of self-education does not necessarily presuppose her knowledge that Cullen was read as a queer writer by a gay subculture, and if she had known it, the point could have been made more explicit by quoting a poem that presented an erotically-charged encounter between men, such as "Tableau" or even "Incident." However unintentional her citation of "Heritage" was, its presence in *Strange Brother* is a powerful testimonial to the social currency of Cullen's poetics.
16. Snead finds the concept of repetition ironically inaugurated in Hegel: "According to Hegel, the African, radical in his effect upon the European, is a 'strange form of self-consciousness' unfixed in orientation toward transcendent goals and terrifyingly close to the cycles and rhythms of nature" (63).
17. It is remarkable to note that Jean Wagner is the only critic of Cullen who has recognized the uncanny relationship between African heritage and same-sex desire in "Heritage," and he predates considerably theoretical developments that would have facilitated such a reading. Though he treats homosexuality in a reactionary fashion, his interpretation of 1962 seems otherwise years ahead of much contemporary Cullen criticism: "One need but recall the special difficulties that beset Cullen's sex life in order to realize what curious parallels his sensibility was able to establish between the glorification of the senses that was taking place in Harlem [i.e. Garveyism] and the tyrannical sway that his own bodily inclinations exercised over his destiny [. . .]. Indeed, a poem like 'Heritage' has almost more merit as a mirror of the poet's inner struggle than as a paean of praise to an imprecise atavism of race [. . .]. And so the dream of Africa becomes, in a way, transformed into the antithesis of any authentic inner life, for the individual is dispensed thereby from the struggle to transcend self [. . .] and provided with an instantaneous gratification of the urges of a tormented psyche" (326, 329).
18. Countee Cullen letter to Alain Locke, 30 March 1925, Alain Leroy Locke Papers, box 164-22 folder 38, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University. See also Reimonenq (154-55).

WORKS CITED

- Avi-Ram, Amitai F. "The Unreadable Black Body: 'Conventional' Poetic Form in the Harlem Renaissance." *Genders* 7 (1990): 32-46.
- Baker, Houston A. Jr. *A Many-Colored Coat of Dreams: The Poetry of Countee Cullen*. Detroit: Broadside Press, 1974.
- . *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987.
- Barnes, Albert C. "Negro Art and America." *The New Negro*. Ed. Alain Locke. 1925. New York: Atheneum, 1992. 19-25.

CALLALOO

- Bergman, David. *Gaiety Transfigured: Gay Self-Representation in American Literature*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991.
- Chauncey, George. *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture and the Making of the Gay Male World 1890–1940*. New York: Basic Books, 1994.
- Cobb, Michael L. "Insolent Racing, Rough Narrative: The Harlem Renaissance's Impolite Queers." *Callaloo* 23.1 (2000): 328–51.
- Cullen, Countee. *Color*. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1925.
- de Grazia, Margreta. "The Scandal of Shakespeare's Sonnets." *Shakespeare Survey* 47. Ed. Stanley Wells. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994. 35–49.
- Early, Gerald. "Introduction." *My Soul's High Song: The Collected Writings of Countee Cullen, Voice of the Harlem Renaissance*. Ed. Gerald Early. New York: Anchor Books, 1991. 3–73.
- Fried, Debra. "Repetition, Refrain, and Epitaph." *ELH* 53.3 (1986): 615–32.
- Garber, Eric. "A Spectacle in Color: The Lesbian and Gay Subculture of Jazz Age Harlem." *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*. Ed. Martin Baum Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey, Jr. New York: New American Library, 1989. 318–31.
- Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. "The Trope of the New Negro and the Reconstruction of the Image of the Black." *Representations* 24 (1988): 129–55.
- Harper, Phillip Brian. *Are We Not Men?: Masculine Anxiety and the Problem of African-American Identity*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996.
- Huggins, Nathan Irvin. *Harlem Renaissance*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1971.
- Johnson, James Weldon. "Preface." *The Book of American Negro Poetry*. 2nd ed. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1931. 3–48.
- Larsen, Nella. *Passing*. 1929. New York: Penguin, 1997.
- Lewis, David Levering. *When Harlem Was in Vogue*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1979.
- Locke, Alain. "Color: A Review." *Opportunity*. Jan. 1926: 14.
- . "The New Negro." *The New Negro*. Ed. Alain Locke. 1925. New York: Atheneum, 1992. 3–16.
- Lomax, Michael L. "Countee Cullen: A Key to the Puzzle." *The Harlem Renaissance Re-examined*. Ed. Victor A. Kramer. New York: AMS Press, 1987. 213–22.
- Michaels, Walter Benn. *Our America: Nativism, Modernism, and Pluralism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995.
- Reed, Ishmael. *Mumbo Jumbo*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972.
- Reimonenq, Alden. "Countee Cullen's Uranian 'Soul Windows.'" *Journal of Homosexuality* 26.2–3 (1993): 143–65.
- Robinson, Amy. "It Takes One to Know One." *Critical Inquiry* 20.4 (1994): 715–736.
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Epistemology of the Closet*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990.
- Shucard, Alan R. *Countee Cullen*. Boston: Wayne Publishers, 1984.
- Snead, James A. "Repetition as a Figure of Black Culture." *Black Literature and Literary Theory*. Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. New York: Routledge, 1990. 59–79.
- Thurman, Wallace. *Infants of the Spring*. 1932. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1992.
- Vickers, Nancy J. "Diana Described: Scattered Woman and Scattered Rhyme." *Writing and Sexual Difference*. Ed. Elizabeth Abel. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982. 95–109.
- Wagner, Jean. *Black Poets of the United States from Paul Laurence Dunbar to Langston Hughes*. Trans. Kenneth Douglas. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1973. 283–347.
- Woods, Gregory. "Gay Re-Readings of the Harlem Renaissance Poets." *Critical Essays: Gay and Lesbian Writers of Color*. Ed. Emmanuel S. Nelson. Spec. issue of *Journal of Homosexuality* 26.2–3 (1993): 127–42.
- Žižek, Slavoj. *The Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Woman and Causality*. London: Verso, 1994.