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INTRODUCTION



# Against Uplift

*Performance, Literature, and the  
Queer Harlem Renaissance*

*It's the way people look at things, not what they look at, that needs to be changed.*

LANGSTON HUGHES, 1926

DUKE ELLINGTON premiered at the Cotton Club on December 4, 1927. Only a few months later, he and his orchestra began live national radio broadcasts from the nightclub's bandstand. Billed as "From the Cotton Club," these shows eventually aired nightly, beginning at 11:00, 11:30, or midnight, with occasional dinner-hour broadcasts.<sup>1</sup> The producers capitalized on the champagne-soaked associations of Harlem's nightclubs, with midnight broadcasts invoking an aura of cosmopolitan sophistication and illicit thrills. "By April 1933," writes John Edward Hasse, "forty-five radio stations were broadcasting Ellington around the country, reportedly a record for a dance program beginning at midnight."<sup>2</sup> Even though the Cotton Club did not open its doors until much later in the evening, dinner-hour transmissions allowed families across the country to imagine themselves dining there. According to drummer Sonny Greer, listeners were so eager to hear the Cotton Club broadcast that they put off their eating until it was over. Greer recalled, "We used to broadcast . . . from 6:00 to 7:00. The world was waiting for that. Everybody was waiting for that from New York to California and coast to coast, was waiting for that. Of course, you know, that's suppertime. All the people didn't anybody get anything to eat until we come off. Cats working all day, starved to death until we got off."<sup>3</sup> Ellington varied his set lists for the different audiences, but always managed to communicate the sexual and criminal associations of the Cotton Club. *Variety*

observed that the dinner hour broadcasts were "not as 'dirty' as they are of midnights. . . They lean more to the 'sweet' type of syncopation, but can't refrain from slipping in a real wicked ditty off and on."<sup>4</sup> "From the Cotton Club" carried over the airwaves not just the sound but the space of the Cotton Club as well.

These broadcasts can be understood as a kind of publicity. Though they were not the first live radio presentations of black music, nor even Ellington's first—he was broadcast locally from the Hollywood Club (later renamed Club Kentucky) as early as 1923—they helped make Ellington and the Cotton Club well known throughout the country. But the broadcasts were also publicity in another sense: they constituted a public audience that extended beyond the linen-draped tables and crowded dance floor of the Cotton Club. In doing so, the Cotton Club broadcasts suggested an architecture and atmosphere. The intimacy promised by midnight shows, Prohibition-era intoxication, and a crowded dance floor reorganized other spaces as the music of the Cotton Club filled living rooms of middle-class homes, drifted through urban tenement stairwells, and echoed down small-town streets; "the cathedral leaves its locale," writes Walter Benjamin about the effects of such technological reproduction, "to be received in the studio of a lover of art."<sup>5</sup> The broadcasts of Ellington's orchestrations carried with them across the nation the intimacy of the cabaret and a particular idea of black performance and Harlem nightlife.

Ellington's engagement at the Cotton Club was both part of and exceeded the "Negro vogue" of the 1920s. Growing white and corporate interest in and engagement with black music and culture, postwar economic expansion, and the relocation of vice, along with the advance of the speakeasy during National Prohibition converged to make Harlem an entertainment district rivaling those of downtown New York, Paris, and Berlin. By the end of the 1920s, *Variety* boasted, Harlem offered "II class white trade night-clubs" and over five hundred "colored cabarets, of lower ranks."<sup>6</sup> At the large, extravagant nightspots like the Cotton Club or Connie's Inn, visitors to Harlem could take in spectacular Broadway-quality black revues designed to appeal to white audiences. Others sought out the smaller, less permanent clubs that featured small bands and room for social dancing, which were primarily spaces of recreation for black patrons. With their intimate interaction between performer and spectators, illicit alcohol consumption, social dancing, potential for interracial contact, public displays of sexuality, and underworld connotations, Harlem's cabarets provided a powerful symbol of the pleasure and dangers of urban life. Underneath the

"sweet syncopation" of Ellington's broadcasts, the "real wicked" ditties of the cabaret always lurked, ready to corrupt the families gathered around the radio.

This commodification of black performance and recreation coincided with the literary program of racial publicity and civil rights known as the Harlem (or New Negro) Renaissance. Though shaped by a multiplicity of motives, beliefs, and objectives, the Harlem Renaissance sought on the whole to redefine the meaning of blackness and racial identity in American popular consciousness and to forcefully assert the role of African Americans in the shaping of American culture. The original architects of the Harlem Renaissance envisioned a movement that would counter images and representations of black inferiority with more "truthful" representations and evidence of serious black cultural accomplishment. Black writers would represent themselves, rather than continue being represented by the distortions of white authors, and also work across the color line with white publishers, patrons, and other supporters to reshape notions of American ethnicity and democracy. Many therefore saw the Negro vogue, with its tendency toward black sensuousness, exhibitionism, primitivism, and sensationalism, as a distraction from or, worse, an impediment to their vision of the Renaissance, one that conceded too much to "white" expectations and desires and reproduced well-entrenched stereotypes and social relations between the races. As George Hutchinson notes, "A critique of the 'Vogue' was an essential aspect of the renaissance itself . . . and infused much of its literature as well as popular performance."<sup>7</sup> Cabarets, and the music and performances they fostered, occupied a key place in Harlem Renaissance debates about the value of "high" and "low" cultural forms and the proper subject matter for black arts and letters. Even while black intellectuals and community leaders like W. E. B. Du Bois, Alain Locke, Charles Johnson, and Jessie Fauset capitalized in various ways on white attention, support, patronage, and curiosity to advance the Harlem Renaissance, many worried that the "Negro vogue"—and in particular its celebration of cabaret and nightlife performance—was at odds with a project of racial self-definition.

But not everyone approached the cabaret with such reticence. Like Ellington, a number of authors, artists, and performers of the Harlem Renaissance expanded the scene of the cabaret and made it available to audiences beyond Harlem's nightlife. In this book, I argue that these cultural workers used the cabaret to critique the racial and sexual normativity of uplift ideology and to imagine alternative narratives of sexual and racial selfhood. Promoted through a number of institutions, discourses, and practices, nor-

mative uplift ideology of the early twentieth century sought to ground the struggle for racial equality and the struggle against white supremacy in the material and moral achievements and possibilities of the black middle class. Structured by middle-class values and “an ethic of socially responsible individualism,” uplift ideology advanced a principle of racial respectability that yoked together normative ideals of gender, sexuality, and class.<sup>8</sup> By the 1920s, historian Kevin Gaines writes, “uplift came to mean an emphasis on self-help, racial solidarity, temperance, thrift, chastity, social purity, patriarchal authority, and the accumulation of wealth.”<sup>9</sup> Defining itself against an idea of the socially disorganized black masses—and especially against the urban pathologies defined by sociology in response to urbanization and African American migration—uplift ideology “devised a *moral economy* of class privilege, distinction, and even domination within the race, often drawing on patriarchal gender conventions as a sign of elite status and ‘race progress.’”<sup>10</sup> This logic of uplift underlies the original impulse of the Harlem Renaissance and its politics of representation. By depicting educated and sophisticated black characters and settings and demonstrating the aesthetic integrity of the black folk, New Negro artists might differentiate themselves from the image of the uneducated masses and demonstrate, in James Weldon Johnson’s words, “intellectual parity by the Negro through the production of literature and art.”<sup>11</sup>

The writers and performers I examine in the pages that follow, however, rejected the narratives and logics of normative racial uplift and sexual respectability that initially guided the Harlem Renaissance. This “other Harlem Renaissance” turned instead to the contested space of the cabaret as material to compose alternative narratives of race and sex. The refusal to validate and valorize the values of the black middle class and the patriarchal order of family in their prose and poetry—not to mention their personal lives—led authors such as Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Carl Van Vechten, Zora Neale Hurston, Rudolph Fisher, and Wallace Thurman, and their works, to be grouped together disparagingly as the “Cabaret School” of the Harlem Renaissance (the white Van Vechten was typically included as both origin and culmination of these tendencies). The term “Cabaret School” was used as dismissive shorthand by critics as ideologically disparate as African American educator and anthropologist Allison Davis and radical socialist Hubert Harrison. Both condemned writers whom they saw as negatively influenced by the unfortunate and distasteful sensationalism of Harlem’s nightlife. “For nearly ten years,” lamented Davis in 1928, “our Negro writers have been ‘confessing’ the distinctive sordidness and trivial-

ity of Negro life, and making an exhibition of their own unhealthy imagination, in the name of frankness and sincerity.”<sup>12</sup> He denounced the impact of Harlem’s nightlife and cabarets on African American literature, which he saw as exploiting and substantiating stereotypical images of American blackness and upturning the values of racial respectability. Harrison similarly saw the Negro vogue and cabaret craze as an effect of false consciousness, of black writers internalizing white views and subsequently creating art that had no relationship to their actual lives or lived experience. He reached the same conclusion as Davis: “On the whole, then, the influence of the cabaret, whether direct or indirect, has not been quite wholesome for Negro ‘literature.’”<sup>13</sup>

In *The Scene of Harlem Cabaret*, I maintain that critics like Davis and Harrison described far more than they intended in their attempts to discipline and contain the cultural work of the cabaret. Such criticisms were voiced, in the context of the Negro vogue, as an attempt to diminish and trivialize this literature by linking it to notions of shallow consumption, corrupting white influence, and faddish bohemianism. However, I argue in this book that what critics dubbed Harlem’s “Cabaret School” was in fact a subterranean literary tradition within the Harlem Renaissance that provided new ways of performing, witnessing, and writing the racial and sexual self. More than just an act of *épater le bourgeois*, a turn to the aesthetics of the decadents, or a devotion to the 1920s “cult of primitivism,” the authors and performers denigrated as Harlem’s Cabaret School consciously marked and enacted a radical break from and rebellion against the politics of normative racial uplift.

This book aims to recover the critique function of Harlem’s nightlife. By “Cabaret School,” then, I refer to writings and performances of the Harlem Renaissance that took up Harlem’s nightlife in a critique of normalizing narratives of racial and sexual identity. This critique sometimes took the form of an explicit objection to the strictures of uplift ideology or a challenge to its dictates. But more often, the Cabaret School articulated a positive critique and affirmation that expanded the literary and performative possibilities of blackness and sexuality through the enunciation of alternative modes of thought, feeling, and existence. While the writers and performers I look at were familiar with each other’s work and were in constant dialogue and debate about aesthetic matters, they did not consider themselves as belonging to a unified school of thought. Nonetheless, we can identify in their works formal and thematic affinities and a shared sensibility against the technologies, discourses, and institutions of racial and sexual normalization. *The*

*Scene of Harlem Cabaret* reframes the Cabaret School as a queer literary tradition that is deeply embedded within performance practices and culture. Thus my redeployment of the phrase "Cabaret School" is less an empirical or descriptive claim than it is a performative act that realigns writing and performance in the Harlem Renaissance within a queer-of-color hermeneutic.<sup>14</sup> While I use this phrase throughout this book, I have not attempted to write the history of all those who might fall under its rubric. Instead, I concentrate on specific instances that help us better think about the relationship between the Harlem Renaissance and black nightlife performance, and the relationship between literature and performance more generally. In the remainder of this introduction, I introduce the contexts and contours that define what I am calling the Cabaret School and the strategies that allow for the materialization of a queer Harlem Renaissance. By putting the Cabaret School in conversation with the specific performances that inspired it, we can see that these authors performed their own set of critiques—of normative uplift ideology, of racial representation, of social organization—which, though elaborated in the literary, were based primarily in the nondiscursive: the embodied practices of black performance and spectatorship that are taken up in writing but always enacted in excess of it.

#### OPERAS AND CABARETS: THE MORAL CALCULUS OF UPLIFT AND THE SPECTACLE OF VICE

"A race that hums operas will stay ahead of a race that simply hums the 'blues.'" So concluded a 1924 editorial in the black journal *Messenger* that compared the differences between opera houses and cabarets in order to make a larger point about cultural production and consumption. The editorial deplored the fact that while Italian, German, and Jewish immigrants could be witnessed packing the galleries of working-class opera houses, urban black youths preferred instead to listen to the blues in smoke-filled dives and basement speakeasies.<sup>15</sup> In the view of the *Messenger*, the opera house and the cabaret offered competing measures of the city's cultural horizon. In the first, one would find "music, light, colorful life, culture, poetry, art—all those warm and finer influences which throw a beautiful, irresistible charm over human life," and spectators would be "elevated by the drama, music, and scenery." In the other, one would be "plunged deep beneath the ground, free from ventilation, where one's clothes become thoroughly saturated with tobacco smoke and where no complaints can be made against this generally recognized impossible music." Significantly, the

perceived disparity between immigrant culture and black culture was not seen here as one of economic class or working-class aesthetics. After conceding that "white people have more money than Negroes, generally speaking," the editorial observed dryly that after paying the cover charge, buying many overpriced drinks, and tipping the waiter, the average night at a cabaret is much costlier than a gallery seat at the Metropolitan Opera. In this assessment, the editorial suggests that patterns of popular black cultural production and consumption put the race at a distinct disadvantage. One way to advance the race, it concludes, would be to repudiate the deleterious effects of the nightclub and the blues and produce more enlightening and edifying musical expression. In the cabaret, the editorial exhaled, "there is little that is uplifting."<sup>16</sup>

There are many things to observe about this editorial. We could note, for example, the valuation of European cultural forms at the expense of black American forms and the reliance on firmly established highbrow/lowlbrow cultural hierarchies. We could similarly note its attention to the spatial practices and architecture of performance and their perceived effects on the character and mind of the spectator, as well as the metaphors of firmament and underworld that underlie its moral judgments. And we could point out the editorial's distancing of cabaret attendance from economic explanations, proposing patronage of the cabaret not as an effect of class constraints but as a distinctly moral inclination that must be overcome. We could further observe the editorial's use of Progressive Era sociological notions of nightclubs and saloons as locations of community deterioration, moral misinstruction, cultural miseducation, and unproductive expenditure, in contrast with the elevating effects of the opera house. We could also note its distrust of claims for a uniquely racial art and its call for an interracial cultural consumption not at the expense of racial identity but in service of advancing an "American" cultural identity. Not least of all, we could note the editorial's explicit connection of racial advancement to cultural production and consumption rather than, say, political mobilization.

The rhetorical devices and aesthetic assumptions that shape this editorial illustrate the cultural dimensions of normative uplift ideology. Progressive Era racial uplift emerged as a response to popular cultural discourses of black inferiority and criminality, on the one hand, and social scientific discourses of black social disorganization and deviance, on the other. It interpreted the call for the collective advancement of the race as a call to increase the ranks of a visible and respectable middle class and to combat the perceived threat to the race of urban pathology. As Kevin Gaines notes,

however, twentieth-century racial uplift was a philosophy and practice shaped by conflicting logics and conceptualizations: “On the one hand, a broader vision of uplift signifying collective social aspiration, advancement, and struggle had been the legacy of the emancipation era. On the other hand, black elites made uplift the basis for a racialized elite identity claiming Negro improvement through class stratification as race progress, which entailed an attenuated conception of bourgeois qualifications for rights and citizenship.”<sup>17</sup> The tension between these overlapping yet contradictory notions of uplift produced a number of competing institutions, practices, and conceptions of black politics and culture in the early twentieth century.<sup>18</sup> Elite uplift ideology sought to demonstrate the black middle class’s eligibility for citizenship and equality by differentiating it from those of the race who did not approximate the social and cultural norms on which such enfranchisement was premised. Cultural institutions like black newspapers, churches, and universities undertook efforts to make visible the most successful and to address the poverty and social conditions of the least successful. This version of uplift advanced a *politics of respectability* that, as Farah Jasmine Griffin puts it, “seeks to reform the behavior of individuals, and as such takes the emphasis away from the structural forms of oppression such as racism, sexism, and poverty.”<sup>19</sup> The cultural logic of this respectability maintained that nothing less than the cultivation of a “stylized elegance” in literature, music, elocution, and photography would loosen the representational knot that tied together images of social pathology, pseudoscientific inferiority, and the minstrel stage.<sup>20</sup> Normative uplift was premised on the example and the exception: positive representations of the best educated and most successful of the race would counteract racist stereotypes and provide a standard to which the working class could aspire in the constant struggle to keep from sinking further down into poverty and immorality.

To redress the corrupting and community-weakening influences of low culture, elite cultural uplift promoted an educated cultural vanguard that would set an example for the black majority, produce morally and racially validating art, and lead the race into modernity. In an early sociological formulation that would shape the history of racial uplift as well as the cultural project of the Harlem Renaissance, W. E. B. Du Bois famously proposed a moral and economic distribution that set the top fraction of the race—the “Talented Tenth”—against the bottom fraction of the race—the “submerged tenth,” the “lowest class of criminals, prostitutes, and loafers.”<sup>21</sup> Through education of the mind, character, and spirit, Du Bois advocated “developing the Best of this race that they may guide the Mass away from the contamina-

tion and death of the Worst, in their own and other races.”<sup>22</sup> Such discursive formulations defined proper racial behavior as that which conformed to the standards of modesty, decency, propriety, and conventional bourgeois morality, including, above all, proper gender and sexual comportment. Accordingly, many black intellectuals and artists who advocated the “elevation” of the race viewed nightclubs and the music performed within them as the apotheosis of “low” culture and approached them with ambivalence, embarrassment, or disapprobation. For this elite, the culture of the cabaret represented a regression and negation of the achievements of the race, one that could be opposed, it was hoped, by counternarratives of “respectful self-representation.”<sup>23</sup>

The figure of the cabaret in the discourse of uplift was shaped by the more general Progressive Era knowledge production of social, sexual, and racial deviance. In response to the demographic shifts of migration and the late-industrial organization of the city, various movements sought to reform economic and governmental institutions, provide basic services to the urban poor, and establish a normalizing link between moral education and social organization. Such reform movements found their justification in narratives of deviance and social pathology that circulated in sensational journalism, social scientific studies, and dime-store novels in the early twentieth century. These “overlapping genres of storytelling,” as Lisa Duggan describes them, helped to produce “official” knowledge of criminal, sexually deviant, and racialized subjects.<sup>24</sup> The late-nineteenth-century rise of sexology and criminology as scientific fields helped to medicalize and codify individuals as “deviant” or “degenerate,” as well as define important distinctions between “vice” and “crime.” These social scientific discourses complemented the pseudoscience of eugenics and theories of racial atavism to provide the authoritative foundation for various moral reform groups, vice squads, and sociologists in the service of managing urban spaces and bodies.<sup>25</sup> Whether in the service of God or greater civic order, phalanxes of antivice organizations and sociologists canvassed urban centers to catalogue and police the sexual and social threat fostered in cabarets, dance halls, and pool halls.<sup>26</sup>

American sociology had a central role in producing knowledge of the cabaret and urban nightlife spaces as it identified, studied, and mapped the patterns of behavior among culturally heterogeneous regions of the modern city. Sociology approached questions of standardization and deviance as aggregate trends and social configurations, undertaking studies not of individuals, but of groups, social establishments, and neighborhoods. It not only interpreted but also helped manage the local effects of successive

waves of European immigration and rural African American migration to urban neighborhoods, movements that incited moral panics and inflamed nativist sentiments. In sociological terms, this urban growth and social mix pose the threat of social disorganization—the moral chaos that occurs when social bonds and normative values are not cohesively maintained within a community. Urban nightlife districts, with their transient populations, gender and racial mixing, and underworld economies, were seen as a primary location and cause of urban social disorganization.

Scholars such as Roderick Ferguson, Marlon Ross, Kevin Mumford, and Hazel Carby have shown that American sociology, particularly as it advanced under the positivist methods of the Chicago School, racialized and sexualized this social disorganization.<sup>27</sup> The Chicago School of sociology refers to the social scientific program developed in the early twentieth century at the University of Chicago, an inaugural site of American sociological practice. Blending quantitative methods of statistics and numerical distribution with qualitative methods of field research and ethnography, the Chicago School mapped out the moral geographies of the urban environment and, with regard to American racial relations, undertook to “measure in material terms . . . the extent to which the Negro mass has adjusted to moral, social, and economic habits of the dominant culture.”<sup>28</sup> These methods thus advanced findings that confirmed the assumptions of uplift ideology and shaped black social reform programs like the NAACP and the Urban League.<sup>29</sup>

Urban nightlife spaces such as the cabaret were understood in Progressive Era moral and social epistemologies as fostering a number of deviant sexual practices, particularly women’s prostitution, homosexuality, and black/white sexual relations. Policing spaces and performances that encouraged such relations was not only a way to regulate such sexualities and reinforce the color line, but also a way to compose taxonomies and classifications of deviance that could be deployed elsewhere in the management of racially and sexually non-normative spaces and practices. In the words of one black sociologist in the 1920s, cabarets and other nightlife institutions provided sociologists and journalists with a “museum of types” for the study of antisocial behavior.<sup>30</sup> Peter Stallybrass contends that representations of the underclass and scenes of urban social disorder like these functioned as a “spectacle of exotic heterogeneity” by which a coherent, normalized, and homogenous bourgeois subject could be constituted.<sup>31</sup> During the Negro vogue of the 1920s, the multiplicity and heterogeneity of Harlem’s nightlife helped to constitute both a normative white middle-class gaze and a norma-

tive black middle-class gaze. At the same time that these spectacles helped to materialize a homogenous middle-class subject, they also defined and classified the heterogeneity of the underworld to identify, categorize, and contain it more easily. This “official knowledge” of underworld practices and deviant subjectivities helped to shape the scene of Harlem’s cabaret in the popular imagination as a location of sexual, criminal, and racial deviance.

Is it any wonder, then, given this framework of interpretation, that black political and cultural leaders in the 1910s and 1920s were alarmed by the popularity of nightclubs, social dancing, and jazz and blues among white and black youth cultures in the 1910s and 1920s? By the measure of uplift’s moral calculus, the lures and snares of disreputable entertainments and red-light districts were seen as a problem that threatened racial advancement. To combat this social disorganization, black political and social organizations, often working across the color line with white reform organizations, generated an extensive taxonomy of proper and improper amusements, debated the value of recreation and leisure, dissected the souls of those who populate city streets, and mapped out the spaces and bodies of urban nightlife. Uplift’s reliance on a moral differentiation and hierarchization as the necessary precondition to the advancement of the race produced both an economic norm—the black middle class—and a moral norm that figured the black “underworld” as a morally deficient sphere. Institutions of uplift, from black universities, community service organizations, and churches to professional clubs, newspapers, and the heteropatriarchal family, worked in concert to establish and enforce what Michel Foucault called a “normalizing judgment.” A normalizing judgment “refers individual actions to a whole that is at once a field of comparison, a space of differentiation and the principle of a rule to be followed.” This normalizing rule worked as a “minimal threshold, an average to be respected, and an optimum towards which one must move.”<sup>32</sup> In early-twentieth-century America, a normalizing judgment of racial respectability established norms of familial organization, urban recreation, sexual and gender comportment, and capitalist productivity. This principle of normalization provided the basis for evaluating the advancement of the race and managing social disorganization; it produced a moral norm that “compares, differentiates, hierarchizes, homogenizes, and excludes.”<sup>33</sup> With this process in mind, we can understand the *Messenger* editorial’s appeal to opera—like the appellation “Cabaret School”—and similar denunciations—less as an assimilationist appeal to European cultural norms than as an attempt to police the social spaces and expressive forms of urban black culture. It was a prescriptive address as well as a

descriptive assessment, seeking to define and enforce the boundary between proper and improper racial expression.<sup>36</sup>

As the editorial's call for operas over cabarets suggests, the anticabaret sentiment of normative racial uplift and Progressive Era reform was shaped by a broader and more long-standing tradition of antitheatrical prejudice that was suspicious of performance's potential to influence and corrupt the moral character of its audience and apprehensive of the potential unruliness of certain forms of public congregation. At the same time, theater and performance in their higher cultural forms were seen as a potential means to improve the race spiritually and morally. Progressive Era reformers and advocates of racial uplift did not denounce performance outright but sought instead to manage it by promoting some forms of performance over others. Indeed, "respectable" performance and theater had a privileged role in the cultural movement to advance the race. The national and international popularity of many black performers could demonstrate artistic success, mark an economic advancement of the race, and counter the representational degradation of minstrelsy. Leaders of the Harlem Renaissance promoted visual arts, dramatic theater, concert dance, symphonic music, pageantry, and vaudeville as vehicles of moral education and avenues of racial representation.<sup>37</sup> These modes of performance were often used to ideologically manage the nightlife performances of cabarets and dance halls by enforcing hierarchies of proper and improper amusements (an idea I elaborate further in chapter 4). In contrast to the comparatively wholesome diversion of vaudeville or the racial self-determination articulated through black musical theater and drama, cabarets and dance halls represented a sexually and criminally permeated space that posed a challenge to the disciplinary goals of racial uplift.

This is a good place to stress that, although higher education was a central tenet and the primary symbol of racial uplift, to be against uplift was not necessarily to be against education, financial success, ambition, operas, individuality, or nice houses. Nor was it to be against racial affirmation, or to fetishize or romanticize poverty, criminality, or the "low." On the contrary, the Cabaret School, as we will see in chapter 2, was highly skeptical, if not critical, of the Negro vogue that spectacularized black performance and sexuality. The Cabaret School's critique should be seen alongside other postwar intraracial critiques of uplift made from the directions of black nationalism, diasporic pan-Africanism, and black Marxism, each of which reframed or eroded the terms of racial equality and self-determination as they were articulated by the elitist logics of uplift.<sup>38</sup> It is important here, fol-

lowing Gaines, to distinguish between "elite" and "popular" manifestations of uplift: that which emerges as a normative ideology in nineteenth- and twentieth-century black political and cultural discourse, and that which emerges through the local practices of "countless parents, teachers, ministers, musicians, and librarians."<sup>39</sup> The writers and performers of the Cabaret School—most of whom were themselves middle class and beneficiaries of uplift's institutional resources and claims to fulfillment—sought to challenge the disciplinary technologies and ways of thinking that made racial uplift into a coherent ideology. The Cabaret School undertook to recognize and enact the bodies, practices, and alternatives that were excluded from normative uplift's ideological sweep—indeed, upon which it depended. *The Scene of Harlem Cabaret* thus seeks to reframe specific works and general tendencies in Harlem Renaissance literature whose political and aesthetic effects are too often oversimplified. The cultural workers of the Cabaret School were acutely aware of the logics of racial, sexual, and gender normativity that were aligned under the banner of uplift. They not only resisted such normalizing pressures, but also made new racial, sexual, and gendered narratives and meanings out of the narratives already existing.<sup>40</sup>

To put it another way, unlike the Chicago School of sociology, the Cabaret School of the Harlem Renaissance took the collectivities of sexual, racial, gender, and economic heterogeneity of the underworld not as a spectacle to define or discipline but as a location of social and subjective expansion. Throughout *The Scene of Harlem Cabaret*, I show how this cabaret literature contested sociologically informed uplift narratives of black social disorganization and sexual pathology, offering instead a site for the heterogeneity of African American culture to emerge. The artists I consider offered critiques of uplift ideology, not because they were opposed to uplift's antiracist struggle or were unaware of the dominant cultural contexts and discourses in which respectability made sense as a political strategy, but because they saw antiracist struggle as inseparable from struggles against class, sexual, and gender normativity. Writers and performers like Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Wallace Thurman, Nella Larsen, Ethel Waters, and Lena Horne untangle the normative ties of race, gender, and sexuality and imagine other models of social organization, relationality, and ethics than those deployed by the institutions of black middle-class respectability and representation. Into this field of "official" racial, sexual, and criminal knowledge, the Cabaret School propelled their own visions and revisions based on the performances and sociality of nightlife. Literature and performance were places where claims to totalizing knowledge could be undermined and spectacles

of heterogeneity could be enacted in ways other than as deviance, perversion, or disorganization.<sup>39</sup>

Consider, as one brief example, evidence of the exchange between Langston Hughes and Havelock Ellis, the great British social scientist of deviance. Ellis was recognized as a leading figure in the production of official knowledge of sexual and social perversion, though by the mid-1920s his methods were already being superseded by the more sociocultural investigations begun by the Chicago School. In texts like *The Criminal* (1890), *Sexual Invasion* (1896), and *The Task of Social Hygiene* (1912)—all repeatedly revised and expanded throughout the early twentieth century—Ellis advanced the “incitement to discourse” of sexuality traced by Foucault.<sup>40</sup> The figures that populate Hughes’s Harlem Renaissance poetry are the very ones taken up as case studies of deviance and pathology in sexological and criminological texts. Hughes took black nightlife and blues culture as one of his primary lyrical topics, writing poems that, as bell hooks describes them, “explore transgressive desire.”<sup>41</sup> An early edition of *Fine Clothes to the Jew*—Hughes’s second volume of verse and the one that earned him such esteemed designations as “Sewer Dweller” from Harlem’s *Amsterdam News* and “poet ‘low-rate’” from the *Chicago Whip*—held at the New York Public Library, is inscribed: “For Havelock Ellis, with deep admiration, these songs and poems of a simple people; Sincerely, Langston Hughes, Lincoln University, March 10, 1927” (see fig. 1).<sup>42</sup> This inscription demonstrates Hughes’s penchant for the direction of indirection that would later find its culmination in his Simple stories—a way of defamiliarizing, undermining, and signifying on Ellis’s social scientific discourse and claims to authority. Hughes’s poetic inscription to Ellis reorients the location of criminal and deviant knowledge production from the objectifying gaze and scientific discourse of the investigator to the lived sounds and subjectivities of Harlem’s nightlife.

It is worth noting, too, that in addition to shaping modern discourses of criminality and sexuality, Ellis also served as editor of Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatic literature for the nineteenth-century Mermaid Series and wrote extensively on modern dance. In offering *Fine Clothes to the Jew* to Ellis, Hughes interrupts and disrupts sociological discourse, enunciating a counterdiscourse to Ellis’s social scientific approach and perhaps even appealing to Ellis’s love of performance with his “songs . . . of a simple people.” Hughes’s poetry, like the other writings and performances I explore in this book, lyrically fragments the totalizing and taxonomizing drive of social science’s investigations into deviant subjectivity and proudly presents nonexpert and unofficial knowledge of racial and sexual dissidence.

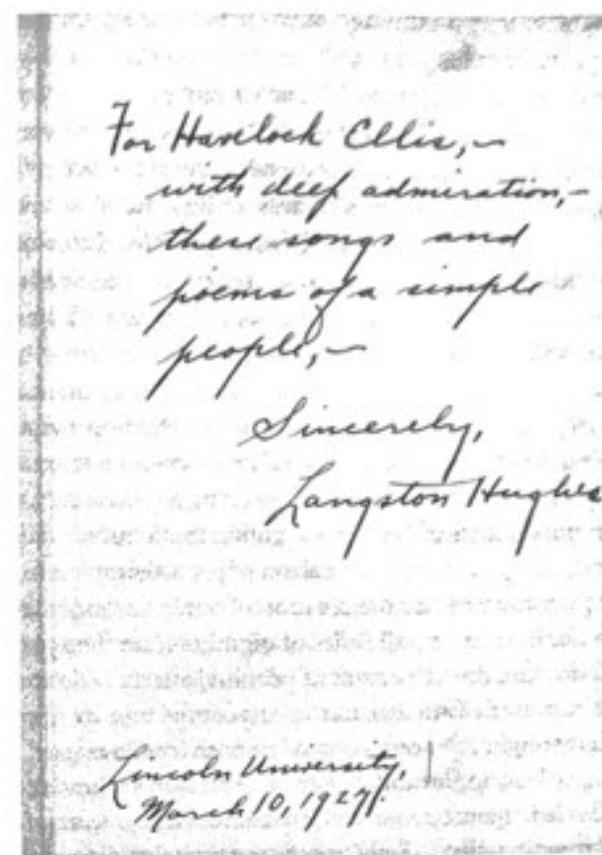


FIGURE 1 Langston Hughes’s inscription to Havelock Ellis. From *Fine Clothes to the Jew*. Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

#### DESPECTACULARIZATION AND EVERYNIGHT LIFE

As I described above, Progressive Era narratives of moral corruption and social disorder spectacularized vice and provided epistemological frameworks within which to situate racial and sexual underworlds in the early twentieth century. The social, historical, and theatrical events that turned Harlem into a spectacle of African American heterogeneity continue to shape interpretations of the Harlem Renaissance and especially the Cabaret School, which has often been read—at the time and since—as pandering to the Negro vogue and offering sensational, exotic, and exploitative representations of

**A** blackness.<sup>43</sup> Yet we will see throughout these pages that, despite its frequent recourse to primitivist language and imagery, the Cabaret School was opposed to the modernist project of spectacularizing the black body. Hughes, to take one example, was skeptical of the Negro vogue and the representational quicksand that it created—his literary use of the people, intimacies, and performances of the cabaret notwithstanding. He observed as early as 1926 that the vogue “may do as much harm as good for the colored budding artist,” and ultimately looked back disillusioned, remembering Harlem’s cabarets as spaces co-opted into venues where “strangers were given the best ringside tables to sit and stare at the Negro customers—like amusing animals in a zoo.”<sup>44</sup> It was not only the performances on the stage—the syncopated steps of befeathered chorus girls or the improvisations of the jazz band—but also black patrons themselves who found themselves turned into a display for curious and adventure-seeking sightseers.<sup>45</sup>

The queer possibilities of Harlem’s nightlife that I trace in this book were not rooted in the regenerative essentialism of primitivism but in the productive force of performance and the creation of public intimacy. Yet how does one separate the libidinal possibilities of nightlife from the 1920s’ spectacularization of vice and the discourses of primitivism? How do we distinguish between the rhythms of the cabaret as stereotype and its rhythms as critique? And how might the accusation of primitivism have used race to normalize sexuality? Or, to put this question another way, how did charges of primitivism levied against some African American literature of the Harlem Renaissance function discursively to collapse sexual and gender nonconformity into racial difference? How, for example, are racial and sexual deviance mutually imagined when Allison Davis writes in his screed against the Cabaret School, “Primitivism has carried the imagination of our poets and storytellers into the unhealthy and the abnormal”?<sup>46</sup>

To begin to answer these questions, I detour through another spectacular event and layman’s sociological venue of Harlem’s nightlife: the Hamilton Club Lodge’s annual drag ball, which Langston Hughes famously described as a “spectacle in color.” Known in the 1920s as the Faggot’s Ball, it was the “largest annual gathering of lesbian and gay men in Harlem—and the city.”<sup>47</sup> Though not trafficking in the overt primitivism of some nightclubs, the drag ball offered another spectacularization of blackness during the Negro vogue that helped make Harlem an important tourist attraction for sightseeing slummers. “During the height of the New Negro era and the tourist invasion of Harlem,” Hughes remembered in one of the balls’ most enduring descriptions, “it was fashionable for the intelligentsia and social

leaders of both Harlem and the downtown area to occupy boxes at this ball and look down from above at the queerly assorted throng on the dancing floor, males in flowing gowns and feathered headdresses and females in tuxedos and box-back suits.”<sup>48</sup> These scenes of gender insubordination drew both black and white spectators of the middle and upper classes to the Hamilton Lodge’s box seats. According to historian George Chauncey, though “respectable” audiences were entertained and amused, they were careful to “distinguish themselves from the queers who organized and participated in the affairs.”<sup>49</sup> **These spectacles**, like the many spectacles of primitivism, helped to define the limits of proper and normal racial and sexual behavior.

But Hughes’s description of the drag balls takes an unexpected turn: “From the boxes these men look for all the world like very pretty chorus girls parading across the raised platform in the center of the floor. But close up, most of them look as if they need a shave, and some of their evening gowns, cut too low, show hair on the chest.”<sup>50</sup> In dismantling the illusion of gender transformation, Hughes may be less concerned here with calling out the bad drag of the Lodge’s less-skilled queens than he is in undermining the spectatorial privilege of the audience (a project that shapes much of his autobiography). From a distance, we may think we see coherent and spectacular images of idealized race or gender—material for phantasmatic projections. But coming down from our seats and approaching the stage, we find something much more mundane and incongruous under the costumes and makeup. In this rhetorical close-up, Hughes takes us past the footlights to see the labor that goes into the performance. He **despectacularizes** the Hamilton Lodge’s drag queens, momentarily making visible what spectacle obscures.

We will see that this same strategy of despectacularization informs the aesthetics and politics of the Cabaret School. The Cabaret School responded to the trend toward the spectacular and ahistorical simplifications of 1920s primitivism by turning instead to the historically located pleasures and labors of Harlem’s everynight life. I borrow the phrase “everynight life” from Celeste Fraser Delgado and José Esteban Muñoz, who coin this neologism to link the quotidian realm of the everyday to the performances of nightlife.<sup>51</sup> The everyday refers to the mundane routines, habits, gestures, practices, procedures, relationships, speech acts, and performances by which unremarkable subjects negotiate the modern disciplinary organization of society through lived time and space. Everynight life, then, extends this quotidian sphere of the everyday into the nighttime, delimiting a domain

where minoritarian subjects enact theories and practices of resistance and social transformation. It is in the sphere of the mundane, rather than that of spectacle, that theorists such as Henri Lefebvre, Michel de Certeau, and Robin D. G. Kelley locate the resistances and revolutionary practices that are a precondition for happiness and that offer material for imagining a better world.<sup>52</sup> The Cabaret School is part of such a critical tradition. Rather than offering slumming narratives or spectacular displays that would approach Harlem's nightlife as terrain to be discovered and explored—which is how most critics understood it—the Cabaret School takes up the many ways that nightlife subjects produce worlds through their everynight practices, spaces, and relationships.

Not only is the everynight life of the Harlem Renaissance opposed to the phantasmatic body constructed by primitivism, it is also at odds with the bodily abstraction longed for by the bourgeois individualism of the black middle class. What we find in Harlem's cabaret is not the uplift body—the body of proper sexual expenditure, middle-class comportment, and unviolated surfaces—nor the primitive body—the body that exists within the gaze of white spectatorial privilege and violence, the body of sexual excess, racial parody, and appropriable identity. We find instead bodies and subjects that undertake the complex negotiations and contradictions of sexual and racial self-definition in American modernity. Whether in the form of bodies on a dance floor, individuals traversing the racial boundaries of neighborhoods, fingers over piano keys, or a voice up and down the scale, the movements of everynight life and the tenor of mundaneness challenges the reification of social relations, the positivism of social scientific knowledge, and the standardization of racial and sexual norms.

#### CRIMINAL INTIMACIES AND FUGITIVE SOCIALITY: A QUEER HARLEM RENAISSANCE

The Harlem Renaissance was, as Henry Louis Gates Jr. famously wrote, “surely as gay as it was black, not that it was exclusively either of these.”<sup>53</sup> Because of the same-sex object choices of many of its principal participants, its highly visible sexual subcultures, and its legibility in historical archives and records, the Harlem Renaissance has attracted considerable scholarly attention since the tenuous recognition of gay and lesbian studies in the academy.<sup>54</sup> Historians have excavated 1920s Harlem as a space of gay and lesbian subcultural formation, tracing the extensive social networks of drag balls, “pansy parades,” buffet flats, and rent parties that provided,

as I discussed above, spectacles of racialized sexual deviance and knowledge production. Furthermore, many of Harlem's most prominent writers had same-sex relationships and explored same-sex desire in their literature. Wallace Thurman's *Infants of the Spring* (1932) and his collectively edited journal *Fire!!* (1926), Richard Bruce Nugent's “Smoke, Lilies and Jade” (1926) and other writings, Angelina Weld Grimké's “The Closing Door” (1919) and posthumously published poems, Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929), Countee Cullen's sonnets, and James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912; reprinted 1927) can all be seen to provide insights into the formation of non-normative sexual subjectivity. These sexually non-normative social and literary practices of the Renaissance typically have been understood within narratives of sexual recognition, visibility, and struggle. Historians and literary scholars have identified writers and performers who had homosexual contacts, deciphered gay and lesbian subcultural and subtextual codes, and established canons of black gay and lesbian literature. Cultural and performative spaces of sexual dissidence have been placed within easily identifiable and identitarian spaces and located within a developmental narrative of sexual history.

Just as the Cabaret School used performance to critique uplift's normalizing logics, I seek throughout *The Scene of Harlem Cabaret* to broaden what has become an increasingly narrow, increasingly normative understanding of the gay and lesbian Harlem Renaissance. While the cataloging of same-sex object choices, the deciphering of hidden codes of homosexuality, and the recovery of gay and lesbian social spaces has been valuable in establishing the existence of gay and lesbian lifeworlds and literary traditions, it has also minimized or obscured the social and literary efforts undertaken by many Harlem Renaissance cultural workers to resist the ossification of sexual and racial identity and to oppose the representational politics that organized the Harlem Renaissance. Worse, the “gay and lesbian Harlem Renaissance” can end up reducing the complexities of queer associational life while stabilizing and normalizing the terms and concepts against which uplift ideology defined itself. Suffice it to say, to be gay did not necessarily make you against uplift. Countee Cullen and Alain Locke, for example, were not ideologically aligned with the work of the Cabaret School and had little difficulty adopting the privileges and double standards of middle-class gay male identities in the early twentieth century. The Cabaret School—as we will see in discussions of Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, and Lena Horne—was less interested in presenting a fixed or transparent sexual identity than it was in challenging the calcification of racial and sexual identities and the

use of those identities in strategies of social order and control by dominant white society as well as by the ideologies of normative uplift. In this fashion, the writers and performers I discuss “queer the color line” by refocusing our attention on the many ways that racial and sexual non-normativity mutually shaped each other at this specific historical moment.<sup>55</sup>

To be sure, the queer and fugitive scenes I explore here are readily available to readers who are looking for histories of gay and lesbian subcultural spaces. Harlem’s cabarets counted among their racialized and working-class audiences those who exclusively desired people of the same sex as themselves. Nightclubs, afterhours spaces, and illicit speakeasies provided places of public sociality for sexually deviant figures such as the “fairies,” “pansies,” “sheiks,” “bull dikes,” and “wolves” who populated New York’s nightlife. Daphne Duval Harrison, Angela Davis, Eric Garber, and Hazel Carby, for example, have each identified references to gay, lesbian, and bisexual identities in many urban blues songs.<sup>56</sup> Such sonic inscriptions of sexual deviance and criminality shaped the intimate profile of the nightclub and turned cabarets and basement dives into provisional queer counter-publics. The examples are numerous. Take one, from the autobiography of Harlem pianist Willie “the Lion” Smith, that suggests how blues music and popular performance could elaborate a sexually non-normative world. Smith describes John Wilson’s performance of an instrumental piano rag called “The Bull Diker’s Dream” (“a tune dedicated to lesbians,” he helpfully explains). The tune was well received by patrons in the cabaret, though its performance necessitated some circumspection. It was only performed after hours, when the nightclub operated in violation of the city’s laws and the boundaries between licit and illicit sexuality were less clearly drawn. Smith describes it as “one of those ‘put out the lights and call the law’ things and went over big just before dawn.”<sup>57</sup>

In characterizing it as a “put out the lights and call the law thing,” Smith describes a performance that is less an invitation toward visibility and community than it is one that inaugurates a moment that, in its criminality, would attempt to **elude the laws intended literally and metaphorically to police boundaries, borders, and identities.** Such performances may have been sites of an emergent gay and lesbian public visibility, articulation, and longing, but the possibilities of intimacy, sexuality, and libidinal exchange were not limited to the teleological direction of same-sex object choice. One of the many important contributions of George Chauncey’s *Gay New York* (1994) has been the recognition that sexual subcultures of the early twentieth century did not strictly distinguish between “heterosexual” and “ho-

mosexual” identities marked by (the gender of one’s) sexual object choice, but instead allowed for a range of sexual subjectivities, arrangements of masculinity and femininity, libidinal possibilities, and identificatory relationships. In Chauncey’s finding, the epistemologies of (male) sexual practice were highly localized and contingent upon the class, racial, and ethnic demographics and traditions of Manhattan’s neighborhoods. Accordingly, it is important to note that in Willie “the Lion” Smith’s account, as in Bessie Smith’s or Gladys Bentley’s or Ma Rainey’s performances of songs about homosexuality, the audiences were not always—nor even often—recognizable as a “gay and lesbian” audience. It is, furthermore, a mistake to think of a homosexual underworld, especially in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as segregated and isolated from an extensive heterosexual underworld. Rather, as Jonathan Ned Katz suggests, the homosexual underworld overlapped with the heterosexual underworld, “both mirroring and exaggerating its details.”<sup>58</sup>

So how do we understand the performative address of a number such as “The Bull Diker’s Dream”? In answering this question, we would not want to foreclose the range of possible effects and enactments such a performance might occasion. Such performances index the possibility of residual and emergent identifications, cross-identifications, disidentifications, and transient and provisional identifications that might exceed official—and even vernacular—taxonomies of sexual identity. In expanding the “boundaries of normalcy,” in Chauncey’s phrase, such performances not only shaped the emergence of a modern gay and lesbian community, but also more broadly created a space where the possibilities of momentarily close contact, psychic and physical intimacy, and affective exchange could occur.<sup>59</sup>

A queer Harlem Renaissance is not opposed to a gay and lesbian Harlem Renaissance, but exists in a productive relationship to it. While I am interested in Harlem nightlife’s role in an emergent gay and lesbian subculture and its connection to the history and geography of gay and lesbian worlds, I am also interested in those subjectivities and experiences that do not neatly align with easy sexual identifications. Not to assume in advance whether a space or a crowd or a spectator is “gay or lesbian” or “straight” is to avoid what Eve Sedgwick warns is the risk of “reinforcing a dangerous consensus of knowingness about the genuinely unknown.”<sup>60</sup> It is to look at how these terms, while increasingly fixed by social scientific and popular discourse, failed to work as stable or exhaustive descriptors of the lived experiences in Harlem’s everynight life. As Sedgwick suggests, such a project as the one I undertake here is less a matter of choosing between minoritizing or

universalizing approaches to sexual subjectivity than it is one of investigating the “performative effects of the self-contradictory discursive field of force created by their overlap.”<sup>61</sup> It is, in other words, to follow through on the logic of the second half of Gates’s well-known assessment: the Harlem Renaissance “was surely as gay as it was black, not that it was exclusively either of these.” In offering a Harlem Renaissance not containable by finite identity categories or exclusive characterizations, Gates invites us to consider the range of racial and sexual subjectivities that are at play in Harlem’s cabarets. To queer the Harlem Renaissance, then, is to recognize the social and literary places where lines of sexual and racial identifications might be frustrated or undone and new social and psychic alignments made possible; spaces and practices that exceed and expand identity, rather than contract it. To queer the Harlem Renaissance, in other words, is to put out the lights and call the law.

Thus this book privileges a notion of public intimacy, rather than the related notions of sexual orientation or sexual identity, as it traces discursive and nondiscursive practices that shaped sexual subjectivity in early-twentieth-century America. The intimacy I privilege does not refer to feelings of belonging or intersubjectivity based on teleology, commitment, permanence, longevity, functionalism, or family. Rather, I refer to the contingent, provisional, and public contacts that Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner call “criminal intimacies.” Criminal intimacies are relations and relational narratives that are not legible or recognized as valid by dominant discourses and social institutions. Such relations “bear no necessary relation to domestic space, to kinship, to the couple form, to property, or to the nation.”<sup>62</sup> The cabaret is one place where these criminal, public intimacies were invented and elaborated as a collaboration between spectators and performers. They offer a horizon of possibility for social and sexual contacts that were transient, contingent, non-normative, and emergent. This is a public intimacy not defined by two coherent selves coming together or the sharing of discrete subjectivities, but an intimacy that forms subjectivity in its articulation. Such intimacies may be one precondition for a gay and lesbian subculture, but they are not coterminous with it. Criminal intimacies momentarily—and sometimes more enduringly—exceed or elude sexual categorization. This is, to be clear, not an intimacy won on the cheap, but one labored into existence against often daunting and defeating forces: they are difficult to sustain or document under the weight of normative sexual hegemony, and the institutions and practices that foster them are themselves often very fragile and susceptible to repressive acts.

The queer work of the Cabaret School compels us to ground our analysis not in the bedrooms or private lives of prominent Harlem Renaissance figures but in the *public enactments of intimacy as an alternative to the emergence of a privatized sexual identity informed by white-racialized middle-class norms*. The historical cabaret was a form and content that—in ways not always predictable; often in spite of itself—brought bodies, sounds, and histories together in ways that disorganized and reorganized desires, selves, time, and space. Cabaret performers, cabaret historians, and cabaret goers uniformly employ a vocabulary of intimacy to describe the style and structure of the cabaret. While a number of prominent and well-funded nightclubs manufactured a commercialized intimacy through carefully choreographed performances and the maintenance of prescribed social codes, hundreds of less remarkable nightlife spaces produced opportunities for public contact and intimacy that expanded social possibilities (and even in the most sanitized and staged cabarets, such opportunities often flourished in the gaps between prescribed and actual social practices). As I examine more closely in chapter 1, this intimacy was produced through spatial, social, historical, and performance practices. The *elimination of the fourth wall and close proximity of the performers to the audience; the social interaction among the patrons before, after, and even during the show; the informality of the performance and the social codes governing the spectators (which, though informal, may still be highly choreographed); the spatial arrangements and architecture; the redirection of spectatorial sightlines; the late-night hours and consumption of food and alcohol—all work to create an effect of physical and psychic closeness and shared inwardness*.

This intimacy, as Berlant and Warner’s turn of the phrase suggests, is closely related to practices of literal and metaphorical criminality. The phrase “criminal intimacies” evokes the long history of the criminalization of homosexuality, the policing of minoritarian space, and the discursive maintenance of social pathology. Given these histories, we might also understand these criminal intimacies and their relationship to black nightlife performance within an oppositional rubric of fugitivity. Looking at historical studies of slavery, slave crime, and slave self-determination, for example, Fred Moten has argued that freedom was a fundamentally criminal concept. To be fully human, to be free, made the slave a criminal. (And, as Angela Davis and others have reminded us, such freedom included the liberty to choose which and how many sexual partners, if any, one might have.) This criminality is inextricably linked to ideas of *publicness, intimacy, and sociality*. Antebellum laws that prohibited and monitored the right of slaves to congregate

and assemble criminalized black sociality for its potential for rebellion or to otherwise ameliorate the social death of slavery. Moten writes, “The definitional impossibility of a black public, on the one hand, and the fear of this impossible or unreadable black publicity, on the other, is at the heart not only of notions of black criminality but founds or constructs blackness—black social life—as criminality. To be black, to engage the ensemble—necessarily social—performance of blackness, is to be criminal.” It is this logic that made elite uplift ideology an inherently contradictory and self-deconstructing undertaking. Accordingly, Moten argues that black sociality and performance can only ever be understood in some sense as criminal precisely because it is always deeply and irrevocably tied to the notion of self-determination and freedom. Identifying the relationship between crime, rebellion, and self-determination, Moten suggests a new way of thinking about the relationship between “criminality and blackness, taking care to think criminality as, first and foremost, black sociality, social life, social organization.”<sup>63</sup> Thus the criminal intimacy of Harlem’s cabarets indexes histories of racial and sexual self-determination and self-fashioning.

“Intimacy,” writes Lauren Berlant, “builds worlds.”<sup>64</sup> But it can also tear down worlds and occasion violence. Cabaret performances were easily commodified and deployed in any number of disciplinary schemas—racial, gendered, and classed, to name only three. A primary concern of this book is to qualify the celebratory and utopic potential of the cabaret’s public intimacy and intimate relations (a celebration and utopic impulse I believe in) with the ways in which this intimacy allowed for a multiplicity of psychic and physical violences. The history and dynamics of cabaret performance suggest that intimacy is also a precondition for many varieties of hostility, alienation, violation, and surveillance. Spaces like the Cotton Club, the segregated institution of black performance, remind us that intimacy, like sexuality, can be an effect of power relations, and that these relations are, as Foucault states, “matrices of transformations . . . subjected to constant modifications, continual shifts.”<sup>65</sup> The carefully tread dialectic of hostility/intimacy that shaped the racial and gender dynamics of segregated spectatorship is, moreover, intensified by the spectatorial relationship to live performance itself. One promise of live performance is that it might fail: the actor might forget her lines, a lighting cue might fail to execute, the performance might flop, the audience could turn. This is, in part, why people go. The relationship between the audience and the performer is structured not only by a sense of *communitas*, but also by antagonism; hostility is always present in its potentiality.

Many of the black artists and intellectuals who publicly advocated uplift were privately sympathetic to the Cabaret School’s literary use of night-life performance and scenes of intimacy. As Bruce Kellner notes, however, many feared the danger “that white America might hear the wrong rhythm.”<sup>66</sup> The rhythms of the Cabaret School and the performances and intimacies of everynight life were especially susceptible to being heard, seen, and read wrongly. The intimacy in the cabaret was not the ludic and carnivalesque free-for-all that slumming bohemians and primitivists may have seen—or, rather, invented—in their trips to the cabaret. We concede too much when such a gaze becomes the only way of understanding the complexities and contradictions of these scenes; their hasty dismissal or censure often threatens to throw out the baby with the bathtub gin. This is not to say that the writers and performers of the Cabaret School were above the temptation to exoticize or shock, or that they never romanticized the underworld or invested in metaphysical notions of racial, sexual, or social transcendence. These are critiques of Cabaret School writers that can be—and have been—made. Moreover, male writers were too frequently complicit in circumscribing and policing black women’s sexual subjectivity, just as the historical cabaret, as Lewis Erenberg and Hazel Carby point out, was too often employed as a technology of gender control and a place for the refinement, rather than the disruption, of established social roles and hierarchies.<sup>67</sup> In acknowledging the relationship between intimacy and hostility—and the often indistinguishable line between them—we are better able to see how the Cabaret School negotiated the sexual and racial possibilities of the cabaret with its racial, gendered, and classed violences. As we will see throughout this book, the negotiation of the leisure industry does not only include the manufacture of pleasure for thrill seekers, but also, and more importantly, includes the creation of everynight networks of support and social nourishment that function outside the purview of normative social structures; in other words, the laboring into existence of queer worlds and worlds of racial amelioration through performance.

#### THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE AND THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION

To recognize the rhetorical and cultural critique of the Cabaret School, it is necessary to distinguish between two Harlem Renaissances: the historical Harlem Renaissance, the creative, political, cultural production and mode of feeling that took Harlem as its symbolic if not literal home, and the “Harlem

Renaissance," the literary institution, ideological signifier, and technology of normalization that, as a self-conscious project of racial publicity, sought to counter the overwhelming saturation of stereotypical images of African Americans in popular consciousness with positive and "proper" representations in art and literature.<sup>68</sup> The former was the more broad manifestation of what Houston Baker Jr. calls black renaissanceism: "a resonantly and continuously productive set of tactics, strategies, and syllables that takes form at the turn of the century and extends to our own day."<sup>69</sup> The latter was a more focused application of one specific strategy—that of racial uplift and the politics of representation—to respond to the institutions and ideologies of white supremacy. As a literary formation, the "Harlem Renaissance" sought to channel the energies of this black renaissanceism to influence and alter the image of blackness in the public sphere by demonstrating the high cultural attainments of black art. The relationship between these two senses of the Harlem Renaissance, and the way they come together and move apart from each other, produced a number of contradictions and contests over the meaning of black cultural production in the 1920s, particularly as Talented Tenth uplift elites were concerned with how a general black expressive culture was represented.

In taking up the queer intimacies of the cabaret's everynight life, the Cabaret School necessarily contested the Harlem Renaissance's politics of representation. Against the cultural logic of white supremacy and the specular legacy of the minstrel stage, the architects of the Harlem Renaissance sought to alter the way blackness and black life were presented in the public sphere through more "truthful" depictions in art, literature, and culture. Such cultural work undertook to counter stereotypical or derogatory images with more positive and accurate ones—a cultural strategy David Levering Lewis dubbed "civil rights by copyright."<sup>70</sup> This cultural politics informed many of the questions and debates that shaped the Harlem Renaissance: What are the obligations of literary and artistic depiction? What images are representative of blackness and black life? How would blackness be reproduced? Who is authorized to speak for black experience? The response of Renaissance leaders to such questions was a vigilant cultivation of verisimilitude, proportion, and positive and affirmative narratives: a cultural politics of representation.<sup>71</sup>

From the perspective of the politics of representation, the various works of the Cabaret School were a setback that impeded cultural uplift and sensationalized the lowest of the race. Literary critics during and immediately after the Harlem Renaissance sought to incorporate the Cabaret School

into the parameters of the Harlem Renaissance by interpreting and managing them through the frame of literary realism. Suggesting that artists like McKay, Hughes, Fisher, and Hurston were simply depicting what they saw, literary scholars like Benjamin Brawley and Sterling Brown referred to them collectively as the "new realists" or "urban realists." This hermeneutic worked to neutralize and discipline these insurgent writers. After positing that the Cabaret School is attempting realistically to depict the experiences of the "submerged tenth," it is easy to conclude that these representations fail to represent the race adequately. Thus, Brawley decided by 1940 that the Cabaret School's realism exhibited "a preference for the sordid, unpleasant, or forbidden themes," and betrayed "a certain blatant quality, an obvious striving for effect, that frequently gave an impression of artificiality."<sup>72</sup> Brown similarly judged in 1937 that, as realists, they ultimately failed. Looking "for the true life of a Negro community in cabarets, most often run by white managers for white thrill-seekers," he weighed, "is like looking for the truth of slavery in the off-time banjo-plunking and capers before the big house."<sup>73</sup> Once framed as realist—as offering, in other words, access to what the unruly and disruptive scenes of the submerged tenth and working-class life are "really like"—such scenes work like sociological narratives to make Harlem's everynight life knowable, containable, and controllable.<sup>74</sup> These critical assessments helped pave the way for the narrative of literary history that finds the **Harlem Renaissance superseded by the social realism of the late 1930s and 1940s as a more accurate and effective political intervention in African American literature.**<sup>75</sup> Such assessments also shape subsequent appraisals that conclude that the Harlem Renaissance capitulated too much to the cabaret craze of the 1920s and the cult of primitivism.

In the pages that follow, however, I show that the Cabaret School should be seen within an entirely different framework of cultural politics than the politics of representation. By and large, the Cabaret School was not all that interested in literary realism. It instead actively worked to undermine the politics of representation that governed the Harlem Renaissance. Indeed, the Cabaret School substantiates literary critic Robert Bone's later assessment that "realism, however useful as a corrective to the white man's stereotypes, cannot finally cope with the ambiguities of Negro life."<sup>76</sup> As we will see in chapter 2, even in otherwise realist works like Larsen's *Quicksand*, Hurston's autobiographical "How It Feels to Be Colored Me," and Thurman's *The Blacker the Berry*, the scene of the cabaret is used to critique the very politics of representation that the Harlem Renaissance demanded.

Rather than engaging with the politics of representation, the Cabaret School should be seen as enacting a politics of transfiguration that operates beyond the terms of representational politics, seeking the expression of something like "truth" in an altogether different mode of inscription. Paul Gilroy defines the politics of transfiguration as

the emergence of qualitatively new desires, social relations, and modes of association within the racial community of interpretation and between that group and its erstwhile oppressors. . . . This politics exists on a lower frequency, where it is played, danced, and acted as well as sung and sung about, because words, even words stretched by melisma and supplemented or mutated by the screams which still index the conspicuous power of the slave sublime, will never be enough to communicate its unsayable claims to truth.<sup>77</sup>

For Gilroy, such a transfigurative politics of black music and performance is often obscured, flattened, or displaced by acts of writing and textuality that cannot account for the total dramaturgy of blackness and black performance.<sup>78</sup> Organized by black musical production, Harlem's cabaret and its role as a potential space for a politics of transfiguration "provides a model of performance which can supplement and partially displace concern with textuality."<sup>79</sup> As writers and performers attuned to the criminal intimacies, fugitive sociality, and transfigural performances of Harlem's nightclubs, the Cabaret School challenged the simple referentiality of mimetic realism by highlighting the failure of mimetic representation to fix the ineffable intimacies, gestures, and performances of the cabaret and everynight life. The performative transgressions of the Cabaret School, in other words, sought to expand performance possibilities through the printed page and enact a transfigurative politics by way of and in excess of the forms and conventions of the literary. Endeavoring "to repeat the unrepeatable, to present the unrepresentable," this politics brings into being new vocabularies and vantage points from which to undo and reimagine dominant models of sexuality and racial difference and provisionally to materialize and symbolize new times and places.<sup>80</sup> These new ways of seeing, feeling, and being were produced in and through nightlife's intimate enactments and literatures. Said Langston Hughes: "It's the way people look at things, not what they look at, that needs to be changed."<sup>81</sup>

Seen within the politics of transfiguration, the symbolic, social, and—yes—political interest of so many writers in Harlem's cabaret becomes a much richer subject than has been previously explored. Cabaret performance is uniquely qualified to bring such queer times and places into be-

ing. Not ordered by the logics of realism or the codes of bourgeois theater, cabaret is a nonrepresentational, nonmatrixed performance. By nonmatrixed performance, I refer to Michael Kirby's distinction between traditional theater, "where the performer always functions within (and creates) a matrix of time, place, and character," and performances where these time-place-character matrices "are neither acted nor imposed by the context," but are continuous with the performance situation. That is, the musician or performer, representing nothing other than him or herself, occupies the same time and place as the audience.<sup>82</sup> Kirby notes that this distinction "between matrixed and nonmatrixed performance becomes blurred in nightclubs," on those occasions when the performer might temporarily take on a fictional character in a sketch while still remaining within the time and space of the cabaret.<sup>83</sup> In these cases, such a matrix is "weak": unlike most dramatic theater, the impermanence and transience of a weak performance matrix prohibits the audience from fully, if at all, suspending disbelief and entering into a fictional narrative. Whether the weakly matrixed revues of *Hot Chocolates* at Connie's Inn and the Cotton Club *Parades*, or the nonmatrixed performances of Willie "the Lion" Smith playing at Pod's and Jerry's at dawn and Gladys Bentley wickedly corrupting popular songs at the Clam House, cabaret performance does not represent the world but addresses it in its local environment, incorporates the audience into its fold, and organizes social arrangements. The intimacy of such an address, as we will see, could be used as a technology of racism and sexism, but also (and sometimes at the same time) as a technology of racial and sexual self-invention. By seeing the project of the Cabaret School within the cultural politics of transfiguration, rather than in the claims to verisimilitude or authenticity of realist representation, we will see how these cultural workers responded to the contradictions of representational politics by imagining an alternative to African American literature and performance as a narrowly delimited site of either positive or negative images.

#### A QUEER KIND OF FORMALISM

Another way of posing the question this book asks is: Where does nightlife go when the sun comes up? Memory, of course, both individual and collective, is one key place. Nightlife performances, moreover, are not only remembered but also documented and continued beyond themselves. The rise of recording technologies like the gramophone, the nickelodeon, photographic technologies, and early motion pictures propelled nightlife

sounds and sights into new media. Just as an emergent race record industry multiplied the possibilities of black sonic performance, we can find traces of nightlife in literary recordings—in autobiographies, novels, poems, stories, and song lyrics. The texts I have in mind offer not a simple or “realistic” representation of the cabaret, but another mode of performing the cabaret, an inking of the cabaret into the pages of journals, little magazines, and published volumes.<sup>84</sup>

Historically, the cabaret has always produced a print culture that existed in a supplemental relationship to its performances. Paris's Chat Noir, widely held to be the first avant-garde *cabaret artistique*, began publishing its own weekly magazine, *Le Chat Noir*, shortly after it opened. It contained literary compositions by contemporary writers, articles about the activities of Montmartre, stories about the cabaret itself, poems, drawings, and political caricatures. *Le Chat Noir* structurally and thematically echoed the political program that made up an evening of performance at the Chat Noir.<sup>85</sup> The sound poem performances and general aesthetic disruptions of dada and the Cabaret Voltaire similarly circulated in print form and in journals. (In an inversion of this tradition of the literary cabaret, the satirical Berlin magazine *Simplicissimus* inspired a cabaret after it.) The work of the Cabaret School, as we will see, is in the tradition of Montmartre's *Le Chat Noir* and Berlin's *Simplicissimus*: publications that seek to continue and expand the structure and style of Harlem cabaret culture in tone, subject matter, and style. As bound volumes and as stories and poems circulated in periodicals and journals, the work of the Cabaret School—like Ellington's Cotton Club broadcasts—created a public, an imagined community of the cabaret that produced what Benedict Anderson characterizes as a “deep, horizontal comradeship.”<sup>86</sup>

By looking to the referential excess of this literature—to its performance—*The Scene of Harlem Cabaret* approaches Harlem cabaret and its literature both historically and formally. That is, it looks to both theatrical and literary form as well as historical context to demonstrate the queer possibilities of Harlem's nightlife. Just as the cabaret offers a formal arrangement and mode of address that places the spectators and the performer in an intimate relationship with each other, the Cabaret School uses queer manipulations of form that rupture the smooth surface of the text and think outside the confines of normative social relations and normative literary form. To put this another way, the affinities that organize the Cabaret School are legible not only by a thematic resistance to the normalizing logics of uplift in the content of their work, but also by a formal experimentation with recording and enacting the intimacy of the cabaret in the literary public sphere.

Thus, critics found not only the content of the Cabaret School disagreeable, but the formal construction of the work as well, condemning “alleged poems in which many lines consisted of one word each, and rhythm, charged in 1927. Or, as Benjamin Brawley lamented more succinctly in 1940, the Cabaret School “attacked the very foundations of grammar.” And, as even Countee Cullen said of one of Langston Hughes's more experimental verses, “it ought never to have been done.”<sup>87</sup> These formal insurrections are part and parcel of the queer social interventions the Cabaret School undertook. Thus, in approaching the literary aspects of Cabaret School, I attend to what literature can do, what its internal logics provide for, how those logics can be queered and racialized, and how they can in turn reflect and expand black and queer life. Attending to form in this way can help, as Hortense Spillers suggests, to explore properly “the relationship between dynamic social movement and the narratives that locate it.”<sup>88</sup> The queer lington's radio audiences, to the sounds and sociality that African American modernism indexes.<sup>89</sup> They also call for us not only to recognize but also to take seriously the social, sexual, and racial possibilities that the aesthetic can enact and materialize. Such a conceptualization of the aesthetic, it is important to remember, was ultimately the project of the Harlem Renaissance itself.

Accordingly, I read the work of the Cabaret School not only as historical documents that can tell us about the mediation of criminal intimacies and fugitive sociality, but also and primarily as aesthetic performances and enactments of those intimacies and sociality. When we consider not only literary form but also theatrical form—specifically, the formal structure and style of the cabaret—form necessarily becomes a social concern. A far cry from the formalism of the New Critics, who approached the text as a unified and autotelic work of art with an autonomous meaning outside of history or politics, the queer kind of formalism I advocate in these pages looks to the ways that literary and theatrical form, questions of genre, syntactical manipulations, and modes of address might contribute to the deformation of literary structures of respectability and structures of literary respectability, confound narratives of racial and sexual uplift, disrupt the fixed and coherent subject of bourgeois realism, and materialize intimate feelings; in other words, ways the Cabaret School queers form itself. In the following chapters, for example, we will see how Langston Hughes manipulates poetic closure in order to counteract the legislative closure of cabarets, cafés, and nightclubs; how Claude McKay deformed the structure of the novel

in order to unmap the sociological constructions of the underworld and syntactically effect the dynamic practices of everynight life; and how Lena Horne makes use of the theatrical form of the cabaret in order to turn away from dominant sexual narratives and withhold her sexual subjectivity from her audience in the fraught scene of segregated nightlife performance.

#### "WHEN THE LITTLE DAWN WAS GREY"

The snippet of verse from which I take the title of this section has a rich citational history, one that helps illustrate the multiple iterations and reinscriptions of cabaret performance in the Harlem Renaissance, its role in the enforcement of uplift ideologies, and its location as a space of non-normative sexual ethics and social critique. The line concludes Langston Hughes's poem, "Cabaret," first published in 1923 in the *Crisis*, under the editorship of W. E. B. Du Bois.

Does a jazz-band ever sob?  
They say a jazz-band's gay.  
Yet as the vulgar dancers whirled  
And the wan night wore away.  
One said she heard the jazz-band sob  
When the little dawn was grey.<sup>30</sup>

The poem was subsequently reprinted in 1925 in *Vanity Fair*, encouraged by the sponsorship of Carl Van Vechten, the white novelist, patron, homosexual, and friend of Hughes. Between the *Crisis* and *Vanity Fair*, the poem, like much of Hughes's writing in the twenties, reached a wide audience throughout both black urban America and fashionable white society. The poem was then included in Hughes's first collection of verse, *The Weary Blues*, published in 1926. Many of the poems in *The Weary Blues* were inspired by Harlem's nightlife and black performance (I consider these poems in detail in chapter 3), and provoked from critics qualified praise and deep ambivalence over his emphasis on performance, dancing, jazz, and nightlife.

Hughes's "Cabaret" made a second appearance in the *Crisis* in 1926, but this time it was cited by Du Bois in a review of Carl Van Vechten's novel, *Nigger Heaven* (1926). Together with his articles on the blues and black theater in *Vanity Fair*, Van Vechten's novel helped to structure the image of Harlem's cabarets in the 1920s and strengthen the connection between sexuality, criminality, and black performance. Du Bois denounced it, not

ing the ways that the novel used the cabaret metonymically to represent all of Harlem as fundamental otherness. He wrote that for Van Vechten, "the stage of action." Du Bois invoked Hughes's poem as a marker against which to measure Van Vechten's primitivist and fetishistic depictions of black performance and sociality:

Both Langston Hughes and Carl Van Vechten know Harlem cabarets; but it is Hughes who whispers:

One said he heard the jazz band sob  
When the little dawn was grey.

Van Vechten never heard a sob in a cabaret. All he hears is noise and brawling.<sup>31</sup>

Du Bois uses Hughes's subtle representation of the psychic complexity of the cabaret to reject what he saw as the vulgarity, stereotyping, and spectacle pervading Van Vechten's cabarets. Inexplicably, in Du Bois's citation, the pronoun of the one who hears the jazz band sob is switched from feminine to masculine. It is a revealing error. As we will see, even while the urban cabaret was often a location for women blues singers to perform a narrative of sexual self-determination, the scene of Harlem cabaret was also often used to circumscribe women's social agency; for many women of color, it was also a scene of violence and limitation.

Within the citational history of this verse, we see the iteration, reinvention, and misquotation that marks the Cabaret School's textual performances. The concerns of the chapters that follow lie in the movements suggested by Hughes's "Cabaret"—between black and white media, between authenticity and stereotype, between evidence and rumor, between insider and outsider, between whisper and brawl, between sorrow and possibility. Chapter 1 undertakes to describe the cabaret and its relations of performance, a task not as simple as it might sound at first. In doing so, I map the historical relationship between black performance and the cabaret tradition to show how black cabaret in the United States emerges at the intersection of European and American traditions of cabaret performance. I then supplement this performance history with an account of how the theatrical form of cabaret—including its mode of address, architecture and spatial practices, manipulation of sightlines, and choreographic rearrangements—is productive of public intimacy and intimate formations that provide the affective framework for the Cabaret School's critique of normative uplift and possibilities for queer-of-color world making.

In the second chapter, I look more specifically at the repetition and circulation of the scene of the cabaret in the Harlem Renaissance. After 1926, at the height of the Negro vogue, two competing models of Harlem cabaret emerged in the popular landscape of Harlem's nightlife: segregated cabarets that staged scenes of blackness for the pleasure and consumption of white audiences, and "black cabarets" that were locations of performance, recreation, and sociality for primarily black patrons. This binary taxonomy, I argue, while necessary to the negotiation of Harlem's nightlife for black performers, ultimately substantiated the racial ideologies of the 1920s primitivist vogue, on the one hand, and the class-based politics of respectability of the Harlem Renaissance elite, on the other. Aware of such traps, the constellation of Cabaret School performers and writers I look at in this chapter—Duke Ellington, Ethel Waters, Lena Horne, Zora Neale Hurston, Nella Larsen, and Wallace Thurman—deconstructed such a framework and despectacularized the scene of Harlem cabaret, deploying it as a location for racial, sexual, and class critique.

The next three chapters look closely at specific texts and performances of the Cabaret School: Langston Hughes's poetry in *The Weary Blues* (1926) and *Fine Clothes to the Jew* (1927), Claude McKay's novel *Home to Harlem* (1928), and Lena Horne's performances on the segregated cabaret stage in the 1930s and 1940s. Chapter 3 examines a particular temporal moment that organizes nightlife performance: closing time. Closing time refers to the legislated hour by which nightclubs and bars must stop serving and close their doors. The enforcement of closing time produces the afterhours club, a space that unfolds in defiance of municipal and moral law, as nightlife subjects seek to continue the night beyond its regulation by the city. To elaborate this understanding of nightlife temporality, I turn to Hughes's Harlem Renaissance poetry collections. These volumes earned him both recognition and disapprobation for his depictions of Harlem's nightlife performances and made him the most prominent member of the Cabaret School. Locating his poetry in the legal and subcultural context of closing time, I show how Hughes uses this fugitive interruption into the normative temporal order to critique the clocks of bourgeois life narrative, capitalist productivity, and historical teleology. I further argue that Hughes developed formal and thematic strategies to record this elusive queer time. His lyric archive of afterhours provides counterevidence to official repositories of knowledge and gestures toward Hughes's larger relationship to the rhythms and temporalities of African American and sexual modernity.

While the previous discussion of Hughes allows us to consider the tempo-

ral profile of the cabaret and its reorganization of respectable time, chapter 4 looks to the spatial mapping and unmapping of Harlem's everynight life. Revisiting the infamous public dispute between Du Bois and McKay over contested the spatial logic of uplift and the imposition of realist hermeneutics on black modernist texts. McKay's depictions of Harlem's underworld provoked many impassioned denunciations from uplift advocates, including Du Bois's assessment that the novel "for the most part nauseates me, and after the dirtier parts of its filth I feel distinctly like taking a bath."<sup>92</sup> Against common interpretations of the novel that see it as providing a spectacle of black exoticism and sexual excess, I argue that the novel incorporates the practices of Harlem's everynight life—specifically the practices of strolling and social dance—to undermine sociological assumptions and practices that construct Harlem nightlife as a space of social disorder. Reading *Home to Harlem* against uplift sociology, I show that McKay strategically stages the failure of realist representation to depict Harlem's everynight life, offering instead an anticartography that works not by accurate representation but by affective resonance. In the end, we also find that *Home to Harlem* exposes some of Du Bois's own contradictions and paradoxes; unlikely as it would seem, Du Bois affirmatively points to the aspects of *Home to Harlem* that most incisively shape its contribution to both a black and queer literature.

Lena Horne might seem at first to be an unlikely figure to link to the Cabaret School. Born to one of Brooklyn's most respected families, she came from a lineage firmly ensconced in traditions of racial uplift. Yet as I argue in chapter 5, the middle-class nightclub singer used the intimacy of the cabaret to highlight her alienation from both her white audience and the black majority during her career on the segregated cabaret circuit in the 1930s and 1940s, and reminds us that the Cabaret School was most often a middle-class autocritique. Some criticized Horne as a distant and cold performer who, against the expectations of black women performers at the time, resisted an affective connection with her audiences. Approaching her performance of aloofness—communicated and enacted both on film and in live cabaret performance—as an acute response to the interracial intimacy produced by performance across the color line, I argue that Horne's withholding exploited the conventions of the cabaret to resist the circumscribed roles available to black women performers on the Jim Crow stage and elaborate a gendered subjectivity that stood outside the expectations of white spectatorship and the norms of uplift respectability. In her descriptions of early nightclub performances, she embraces what I term an "unper-

forming of the self" through the cultivation of an impersonal intimacy that deferred a fixed subjectivity and frustrated the racial expectations of her audiences. Horne's aloofness illuminates a historically vexed connection between public intimacy and hostility to suggest that as much as intimacy could be a resource for individual and collective transformation, it was also often the precondition for varieties of hostility, alienation, violation, and surveillance.

In conclusion, I examine how the legacy of Harlem cabaret is taken up in avant-garde gay and lesbian performance, film, and literature of today. Tracing the historical and theoretical implications of the previous chapters, I consider a number of cultural enactments that continue the project of Harlem's Cabaret School in contemporary critiques of racial and sexual normativity. Building on Jean-Paul Sartre's theory of art and imagination, I suggest that these contemporary works in fact *irrealize* a queer Harlem Renaissance. That is, rather than seeking to historically locate writers and performers who had homosexual contacts, decipher gay and lesbian subcultural and subtextual codes, or establish canons of black gay and lesbian literature, these cultural works draw from a historical referent to imagine a queer Harlem Renaissance that is made anew through cultural and critical work, extending the Cabaret School into the present and the future.

As these chapters show, writers and performers of the Harlem Renaissance used the cabaret to imagine and enact alternative possibilities for racial, sexual, and socioeconomic subjectivities that resisted the normalizing imperatives of uplift ideology. The centrality of performance and its expansive possibilities to the Harlem Renaissance was something that Langston Hughes always recognized.<sup>53</sup> In "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" (1926)—which could be read as a manifesto for the Cabaret School—he wrote:

Let the blare of Negro jazz bands and the bellowing voice of Bessie Smith singing Blues penetrate the closed ears of the colored near-intellectual until they listen and perhaps understand. Let Paul Robeson singing "Water Boy" and Rudolph Fisher writing about the streets of Harlem, and Jean Toomer holding the heart of Georgia in his hands, and Aaron Douglas drawing strange black fantasies cause the smug Negro middle class to turn from their white, respectable, ordinary books and papers and **catch a glimmer of their own beauty.**<sup>54</sup>

Hughes's famous polemic foregrounds black performance as the site of the Harlem Renaissance. Calling for recognition of performers like Smith and Robeson, as well as for recognition of the performative lyricism of Toomer's

novel *Cane*, Fisher's valuation of the practices of everyday life, and the dynamic movement of Douglas's shimmering spheres and lines, Hughes effects his own transfiguration of the Harlem Renaissance, which he insists is more expansive than what the "smug Negro middle class" guardians of uplift envisioned in "white, respectable, ordinary books and papers." Like Duke Ellington's sound, black performance in the Harlem Renaissance disorganizes—or, better, anorganizes—the exclusionary logics and spaces of racial and sexual respectability. By turning to the culture and performances of the cabaret and their deployment in literature, we can hear what Houston Baker Jr., employing a theatrical metaphor, called the "sotto voce urgings of the Harlem 1920s," which, it turns out, were not so sotto after all.<sup>55</sup>