

## ENACTING “SMOKE, LILIES, AND JADE” AS BLACK GAY PRINT CULTURE

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“funny how characters in books said the things one wanted to say.”

—“Smoke, Lilies and Jade” (1926)

As one of several musings that the character Alex utters in Richard Bruce Nugent’s landmark short story “Smoke, Lilies, and Jade,” this idea about the role of characters in books resonates in how two contemporary films—Isaac Julien’s *Looking for Langston* (1989) and Rodney Evans’ *Brother to Brother* (2004)—position “Smoke” as relevant for their, and by implication, other narrative representations of “transgressive black sexuality” (Carbado et al 2002, 11). In visualizing the past that is the Harlem Renaissance through depictions of “Smoke,” both films affirm a black gay print culture as indispensable to black gay film.

First published in the short-lived but infamous journal *FIRE!!*, “Smoke, Lilies, and Jade” was contemporaneously critiqued and subsequently marginalized because of its content.<sup>1</sup> Evocative of the New Negro era’s dynamic identity (re)formations, “Smoke” casts Alex as a young man who contemplates his desires while he negotiates social and familial expectations. The story’s narrator characterizes Alex as a wanderer and introduces him to readers in terms of his unfocused desire: “*He wanted to do something . . . to write or draw . . . or something . . .*” “All he wanted to do was . . . lay there comfortably smoking . . . think . . . wishing he were writing . . . or drawing . . . or something . . . something about the things he felt and thought” (Nugent 1926, 33). Notwithstanding the art that Alex encounters in Harlem, “Smoke, Lilies, and Jade” comprises neither scenes of *him* actually writing or drawing nor referencing a past artistic work, except for his mother’s derisive statement, “just because you’ve tried to write one or two little poems that no one understands” (34). What the short story does detail is, however, Alex’s appreciation of the male body and connection—emotional and

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<sup>1</sup> David Levering Lewis’s editorial note in *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader* provides a useful example of subsequent interpretations of the contemporaneous response to Nugent’s short story. Lewis describes “Smoke, Lilies, and Jade” as, “the scandal of the Harlem Renaissance, an impressionistic celebration of androgyny, homosexuality, and drugs” (569).

physical—with another artist. In the midst of their first encounter, Alex locates one of his desires in “Beauty”:

. . . the echo of their steps mingled . . . they walked in silence . . . the castanets of their heels clicking in accompaniment . . . the stranger inhaled deeply and with a nod of content and a smile . . . blew a cloud of smoke . . . Alex felt like singing . . . the stranger knew the magic of blue smoke also . . . they continued in silence . . . the castanets of their heels clicking rhythmically . . . Alex turned in his doorway . . . up the stairs and the stranger waited for him to light the room . . . no need for words . . . they had always known each other . . . as they undressed by the blue dawn . . . Alex knew he had never seen a more perfect being . . . his body was all symmetry and music . . . and Alex called him Beauty . . . long they lay . . . blowing smoke and exchanging thoughts . . . and Alex swallowed with difficulty . . . he felt a glow of tremor . . . and they talked and . . . slept. (36)

Alex internalizes his relationship with Beauty, or his white male lover Adrian, as an uncontrollable and confusing complement to his love for Melva. Michael Cobb describes this dynamic as “Smoke” as “two loves—man and woman, race and sexuality—that exist not only at the same time, but also in the same aesthetic articulation, the same literary phrase” (2000, 346). The extended focus on Alex’s multi-form desires pointedly mark “Smoke, Lilies, and Jade” as a narrative of black queer desire and artistry for which the short story is most known (Dickel 2012, 91).

“Smoke” now benefits from a celebratory discourse that several histories forge including the inaugural issue of *Other Countries* (1987), Joseph Allen Boone’s *Libidinal Currents* (1998), Thomas Wirth’s *Gay Rebel of the Harlem Renaissance* (2002), and the anthology *Black Like Us* (2002). Though the earliest of the texts that I note in this regard, *Other Countries* provides a useful illustration of this important historicizing. Editor Colin Robinson constructs a “family tree” through which he announces the volume’s conception in 1988 and notes that “Smoke, Lilies, and Jade” is an early relative of this “new manchild in a family whose” works function as a “small but growing canon of Black Gay Male literature” (1987, 1). Whether in terms of the short story’s primacy, content, or relationship to the Harlem Renaissance, the historiography of “Smoke, Lilies, and Jade” often positions it as a point of origin in black queer, literary history. As I demonstrate below, *Looking for Langston* and *Brother to Brother* echo and recreate Alex’s experience in

ways that position both films as efforts to further projects that detail black gay identities in print.

An early example of this cultural work is Robert Reid Pharr's bibliography "Books, journals, and periodicals by black gay authors and publishers." A contribution to the landmark anthology *Brother to Brother: New Writing by Black Gay Men*, "books, journals, and periodicals . . ." brought together titles of published works, periodicals, and anthologies that served, according to Reid-Pharr, as a "beginning for assessing the development of a black gay literary sensibility" (1991, 263). Gershun Avilez has also argued that "in constructing the history of US black writing on and about sexuality, it is crucial to consider marginal and unpublished works as well, specifically letters, diaries, and creative work that was drafted but never circulated for publication. These marginal documents often express nonconventional sexual desires and feelings that were not deemed appropriate or suitable for published work" (2014, 313). Both of these categories of print comprise institutional efforts that collect, preserve, and make this material accessible such as the African American Lesbian and Gay Print Culture Collection (as part of the Atlanta-Fulton Public Library) and the Schomburg Center's In the Life Archive (as part of the New York Public Library). Along with these and other registers of black gay print culture, *Looking for Langston* and *Brother to Brother* underscore the idea that "African Americans in every walk of life used the printed word to inform and enrich their lives and to determine their destinies in new ways" (Danky 2009, 358).

While sixteen years separate Julien's *Looking* and Evans's *Brother*, both films feature the public and private life of a black male artist during and beyond the period: Julien's "meditation" contemplates Langston Hughes, and Evans offers *Brother* as homage to Nugent. *Looking*'s visual depiction of the sojourn that Nugent's Alex has with Beauty reifies Nugent's aesthetic and ultimately positions "Smoke" as one among several cultural texts that articulate black gay desire. Julien renders that aesthetic through montage in *Looking* and argues the viability of film for recovering black gay history to (re)affirm black gay identity, especially its operations in literary and print archives. In Evans's *Brother*, "Smoke" serves as a conduit for an intergenerational collaboration that honors Nugent (portrayed by Roger Robinson) as a black gay male artist.<sup>2</sup> To reimage and reimagine "Smoke" in *Brother to Brother*, Evans contemplates Nugent's desire for the collaborations of his earlier life and, thereby, privileges homosocial rather than homoerotic bonds. Similar to how they employ other Harlem Renaissance era writing, film footage, music, and photographs, Julien and Evans also feature "Smoke, Lilies,

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<sup>2</sup> I discuss this bond in more detail in "Between Black Gay Men: Artistic Collaboration and the Harlem Renaissance in *Brother to Brother*."

and Jade,” the material story itself, as a central diegetic element. Their approaches to filmmaking—locating in print the resources for stories that demand (re)telling—follows that of one of the Harlem Renaissance’s most prolific and influential filmmakers, Oscar Micheaux.

In 1915 Micheaux’s contemporary W. E. B. Du Bois helped forge a public discourse that captured many African Americans’ responses to Thomas Dixon’s *The Clansman*. Du Bois not only argued against Dixon’s vision of the “Negro represented either as an ignorant fool, a vicious rapist, a venal and unscrupulous politician or a faithful but doddering idiot,” but he also urged readers of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People’s (NAACP) *Crisis* to understand the power that Dixon’s story gained as it extended, through adaptations, to theater and growing film audiences (1915, 33). Du Bois’s campaign called attention to such mass appeal and conveyed that countering this appeal was a major motivation for the production of creative arts among African Americans in the first decades of the twentieth century. His insights echoed many African Americans’ understanding that a challenge over the image of African America constituted the relationship between early American cinema and their wealth of broadsides, pamphlets, newspapers, journals, and anthologies—a catalogue David Levering Lewis clearly had in mind when he described the period as forging the practice of “civil rights by copyright” (1995, xxxii).

Du Bois and a host of his contemporaries became a formidable contingent a short time later when, first, they castigated and protested the film adaptation of Dixon’s *The Clansman*, the infamous *Birth of a Nation*, and then called for, produced, and celebrated as a renaissance numerous works representing several artistic genres including Micheaux’s *Within Our Gates* (1919), Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake’s *Shuffle Along* (1921), Jean Toomer’s *Cane* (1923), Bessie Smith’s “Backwater Blues” (1927), and Augusta Savage’s *Gamin* (1929). Micheaux mounted his response through film. He underscored the value of African American writers’ work including his own early foray into fiction because, as he argued, “before we expect to see ourselves featured on the silver screen as we live, hope, act, and think today, men and women must write original stories of Negro life” (Micheaux 1919, 9). While African Americans’ responses to (mis)representations of their experiences in early American cinema were not the first instance of this critical interplay (Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, for example, spawned a great deal of antebellum black writing), African Americans’ burgeoning literature and visual culture in the first decades of the twentieth century coalesced as sites of redress and complex image (re)making. As a result, the New Negro era and its Harlem Renaissance offer instructive contexts for examining representations of African American identity at and as the nexus

of African Americans' print and visual cultures. Micheaux's pioneering work made use of the era's print culture to harness the potential of film as a visual technology for racial representation. A similar relationship to and understanding of African Americans' print culture operates in how Julien and Evan align their films with Nugent's "Smoke."

Along with other queer narratives from the period, "Smoke, Lilies, and Jade" forms part of the foundation for Henry Louis Gates's seminal contention that the Harlem Renaissance "was surely as gay as it was Black, not that it was exclusively either of these things" (1993, 202).<sup>3</sup> Nugent's aim to have "Smoke, Lilies, and Jade" "shock" its contemporaneous readers turns on such clear yet complex recognition (Wirth 2002, 6). As a component of New Negro consciousness, its textual representation of fluid sexuality, specifically its intimate yet elliptical articulation of Alex's desires, amplified the approaches of similar narratives. Together, these texts troubled the heteronormative premises of the era's racial uplift discourse and practices often through strategic valences.

In their readings of Nella Larsen's *Passing* for example, several scholars make similar observations. Judith Butler writes that "in a sense, the conflict of lesbian desire in the story can be read in what is almost spoken, in what is withheld from speech, but which always threatens to stop or disrupt speech. And in this sense the muteness of homosexuality converges in the story with illegibility of Clare's blackness" (1993, 175). As Charles Scruggs similarly notes, "sexual desire in *Passing* then cannot be reduced to a simple theme" (2007, 161). To extend Scruggs' point, it is necessary to underscore that representations of sexual desire during the Harlem Renaissance, which often replicated uplift-sanctioned, middle-class, procreative, and heterosexual relations, belied the actual although difficult to document range of sexual desires that African Americans possessed and exhibited. "Smoke, Lilies and Jade" suggested the reality of this range and claimed space, literarily, for representations of black queer desires in the Harlem Renaissance's dynamic print culture.

Given Nugent's modernist influences and engagements, David Gerstner notes that "Smoke" is "not unlike the work of avant-garde filmmakers who manipulate time and space to express a wide range of erotic experiences" (2011, 45). With its brief sequence of events rendering time elusive, "Smoke" moves between the two to three days or weeks of Alex's present, the memories of his past, and his recurring dreams. Just as works such as *Passing* do, "Smoke" forges a similar relationship to Harlem, New York's physical and cultural landscape and constructs it as

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<sup>3</sup> In his treatment of the period, Simon Dickel notes that, "In addition to representations of black homosexual characters in texts by white writers [ . . . ] there are homosexual characters in texts by black writers, too" (88). To illustrate his point, Dickel lists novels *Home to Harlem*, *Infants of the Spring*, and *The Blacker the Berry* and "Poem [2]" by Langston Hughes.

a backdrop and catalyst for an articulation and exploration of Alex's desires—for artistry, for emotional connection, for intellectual stimulation, and as a sexual being. For the individual African American in the early twentieth century, “desire,” sexual or otherwise, was caught up in and influenced, in part, by a range of external dynamics—for example, migration, war, poverty—that shaped individual and collective experiences. Equally as determining were the changes to African Americans' social position in terms of literacy, citizenship, and the ascendance of Jim Crow America, which uses of the phrase “New Negro” sought to redress. This different “status” influenced not only what it meant to have desire but also, given fewer constraints than the individual subject had under slavery, how one expressed it. Since, as Siobhan Somerville demonstrates, “the colorline was fundamentally eroticized in the early twentieth century,” it not surprising that (greater) expressions of racial affinity and sexual desire occur simultaneously in the era of the New Negro (2000, 35). As a moniker, “New Negro” reflected more individual expressions of self- and racial pride and operated in what Alain Locke noted was a “vibrant . . . new psychology” and a “new spirit . . . [that was] awake in the masses” (1925, 3). As a result, formulations and celebrations of the New Negro were important expressions of desire.

Through Alex's own, New Negro projection, Harlem is not only New York, the city that he comes to at age fourteen, but it is also an artist enclave where Zora Neal Hurston and Wallace Thurman's *Niggerati* live, play, and create; the story makes references, in almost A-list fashion, to Alex's social circle, which includes several Harlem Renaissance luminaries such as [George Washington] “Carver,” “Mr. [Paul] Robeson,” “Zora” [Neale Hurston], and “Wallie” [Wallace Thurman] (Nugent 1926, 36, 38). Harlem is a (fictional) cultural arts landscape wherein Alex attends a performance of Langston Hughes and Hall Johnson's *Fy-ah Lawd*, a post-performance party at Augusta's, and then ends up at Forno's restaurant because “every one came to Forno's once maybe only once” (36). Through “Smoke, Lilies, and Jade,” Harlem is also the place where Alex walks “narrow blue street[s that meet] the stars” and then experiences Beauty.

Though *Looking* and *Brother* revise Alex's encounter with Beauty as I discuss below, this rendering is only one way in which they “look back” to “Smoke.” A compelling, shared element in Julien and Evans's films is death—whereas a funeral opens *Looking*, one of Nugent's final hours closes *Brother*. Such contemplations of physical loss help achieve the nostalgia that each film produces. They also function as evidence for Cobb's assertion that the Harlem Renaissance is important for: a queer literary tradition” because “it gives us a possible explanation for why so much of contemporary queer visibility is reliant and thrives on death and

unconventional forms" (2000, 347). For example, Julien extends his use of montage to juxtapose a staged funeral (his own) with footage of and voice-overs from Hughes to compel viewers to consider Hughes's life, work, and death as viable resources for imagining him as a black queer subject.

Importantly, *Looking for Langston* and *Brother to Brother* also borrow and reformulate Nugent's celebratory account of Harlem, especially as the ground upon which black artists come of age. In addition to footage of Harlem's infamous 125th Street and its black residents moving about this and other streets on foot or via the subway, both films incorporate photograph stills of portraits of Harlem Renaissance artists.<sup>4</sup> Similar to the first names of Alex's coterie that "Smoke, Lilies, and Jade" notes, one scene in *Looking* catalogues members of the older and younger generations of African American artists. Timed with narration from Stuart Hall, the scene centers on the photographs of men that constitute an important network. An extension of scenes that link Hughes's voice, visage, and art to that of James Baldwin and Richard Bruce Nugent, Hall reads from Hilton Als's "Introduction to Negro Faggotry in the Harlem Renaissance:"

Langston Hughes. Friend of Countee Cullen. Friend of Bruce Nugent. Friend of Alain Locke. Friend of Wallace Thurman. Admired for their intelligence and their art, were they seeking the approval of their race or the black middle class and the white literary establishment? Langston Hughes wrote that, "the ordinary Negro never heard of the Harlem Renaissance, or, if he did, it hadn't raised his wages any." Baraka said Harlem was vicious modernism, bang clash vicious the way it was made. They could not understand such beauty so violent and transforming. But could he understand the beauty of the people with freakish ways? Homosexuality was sin against the race, so it had to be kept secret, even if it was a widely shared one. (Julien 2007)

Julien revises the interrelations of Harlem Renaissance artists that Nugent images in "Smoke" and renders more explicit the cultural politics circumscribing such social relations and, through reference to Amiri Baraka's earlier reading, subsequent efforts to historicize the period.

Similarly, through a cast of actors whose physical features remind informed viewers of the real Nugent, especially Duane Boutte as Young

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<sup>4</sup> As Paula J. Masood argues of recurring symbols in African American urban cinema, the "train references the related tropes of mobility and entrapment, two of the most recurrent themes in African American cultural production in the twentieth century" (200).

Bruce, and the other artists that help define the Harlem Renaissance's younger generation, Evans's *Brother* creates a montage of their coming-of-age and through Bruce's eyes. Because *Brother to Brother* depicts an older Nugent reflecting upon his youth, perhaps the most poignant moment of its reflection on Harlem as a fertile ground for black arts and artists is Bruce's contemplative reflection on Wallace Thurman's death and the loss of Niggerati Manor's vibrancy. In answer to Perry's, "Where did Langston go? And Zora, and Aaron, and the rest of them?" Bruce declaratively yet despondently replies "slowly, we all moved out" (Evans 2004). Through its nostalgia for the Harlem Renaissance, this scene functions as a viable rejoinder to "*To Be Continued*," which concludes "Smoke, Lilies, and Jade" (Nugent 1926, 39).

The foregrounding of "Smoke" that *Looking* and *Brother* do is possible, of course, because of the recovery work that precedes both films and to which they contribute. Julien notes that "obviously, trying to talk about black gay history in any way becomes problematic because of the different sequences and hidden nuances in black American history. I had to look to America because that seemed to be where most of the history was located" (Hemphill 1991, 175). Though its signal functioning as part of this history was more readily accessible for Julien when he made *Looking* because Nugent and his biographer Thomas Wirth reissued *FIRE!!* just a few years prior to Nugent's death in 1987, "Smoke" is also characteristic of the ways that the "history of African American lesbians and gays currently exists in fragments, in scattered documents, in fiction, poetry, and blues lyrics, in hearsay, and in innuendo" (Smith 1998, 83). In related ways, *Looking* and *Brother* gather these artifacts into and through film and strive, as Evans argues about *Brother to Brother*, to "acknowledge the diversity and complexity within the African American and gay and lesbian communities and to give voice to experiences that have been vastly underrepresented in cinema for far too long" (Evans 2013).

What Jacquie Jones argues about Marlon Riggs' *Tongues Untied* (1989)—to which both films are indebted—has utility for clarifying the intertextual work that *Looking* and *Brother* produce. According to Jones, "the film [*Tongues Untied*] integrates on all levels, structurally and thematically, and ultimately delineates the immediacy of situating the sexual at the core of self-definition by equalizing it with the political and social imperatives of Blackness" (Jones 1993, 256). Deployed through cinematic strategies similar to those that Riggs employs for enunciating black gay subjectivity, *Looking*'s and *Brother*'s uses of "Smoke" and other *print* artifacts fuse black literary and film histories as reciprocal and constitutive of black gay history. Both films achieve this effect through their figurative depictions of Nugent's Alex.

In *Looking*, Alex's recreation honors Nugent and "Smoke" but also serves to position both within the projections of black British and American queer subjectivities that is *Looking for Langston*. As its title suggests, these projections begin with the film's focus on Langston Hughes. An echo of David Jarraway's assertion that "the poetry of Langston Hughes repeatedly rises to the challenge of producing a discourse of the critical Other—a discourse of a differing, hence, deferred subjectivity," *Looking* is a complement to Hughes's own reflection on his identity formation such as his 1940 autobiography *The Big Sea* (829, 1995). Through *Looking*, Julien furthers the suggestion that Hughes's life and development as a writer are part of a changing but not fully changed time that could only allow an emerging artist's cautious self-representation. The editors of *Black Like Us* remind us that "notwithstanding the fact that the Harlem Renaissance enjoys a popular reputation as a period of extreme sexual permissiveness and gay-themed artistic expression, homosexuality retained an outlaw status that few blacks embraced at the time and, given the extreme racial subordination of the period, that still fewer would have championed alongside matters of race and class" (Carbado et al 2002, 3). *Looking's* depiction of Hughes in relation to the film's explorations of black gay males' desires and actions during the Harlem Renaissance through extant letters, photographs, commentaries, and fiction such as Nugent's "Smoke, Lilies and Jade" signifies on both Hughes's self-representations and historical projections of representative blackness onto his life and work. In doing so, *Looking for Langston* counters narratives that attempt to render Hughes' homosexuality or bisexuality an historical impossibility.<sup>5</sup>

In an early and influential reading of *Looking*, Gates argues that "visually . . . there's a circulation of images between the filmic present and the archival past. Textually, something of the same interplay is enacted, with poetry and prose from Bruce Nugent ('Smoke, Lilies and Jade,' which receives perhaps the most elaborate and affecting *tableau vivant* in the film), Langston Hughes (including selections from "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," *The Big Sea*, *Montage of a Dream Deferred*, and other works), James Baldwin (from *The Price of the Ticket*), an essay by the critic and journalist Hilton Als, and six poems by Essex Hemphill. We hear an interchange of different voices, different inflections, different accents: including Stuart Hall reading expository prose of Hilton Als, Langston Hughes reading his own work, Toni Morrison reading Baldwin, and Erick Ray Evans reading Bruce Nugent" (1993, 202). Gates's attention to the powerful effects of Julien's layered representation is instructive, especially in framing Julien's repre-

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<sup>5</sup> Charles Nero's "Re/membering Langston: Homophobic Textuality and Arnold Rampersad's *Life of Langston Hughes* (1997).

sentation as one that builds from what Caroline Goeser describes elsewhere as double-voiced narration (2007, ix). What interests me, too, are the ways that *Looking* employs either extant copies or artistic reproductions of the words of many of these figures, especially Hughes.

*Looking* achieves its first literary depiction through a voice-over from Riverside Radio's "In Memoriam: Langston Hughes" and television footage of Hughes reading from a book of poetry and reciting the lines "the sun's a settin' . . ." before he turns to the poem "Too Blue." What precedes and follows this scene are parts of the interplay that Gates describes and serves as conduit to the metaphorical journey that coheres the film. Julien's *Looking* posits that to "look for" Langston Hughes is to also uncover "Smoke." Just before *Looking*'s recreation of Nugent's short story, Julien provides one of the scenes that produce the film's montage. This staged array of articles, photographs, books and voice-over narration is equally as provocative as the suggestion that the scene makes about Harlem Renaissance print culture. As the camera pans from left to right, as though perusing this assemblage, it films contemporaneous and later responses to Harlem Renaissance print culture, which carry titles such as *FIRE!!*, "Taint Nobody Business," and "Black Gays: What can history books tell us?" (Julien 2007). This assemblage paired with Hall's voice-over also serves as useful answer to the question that comprises the subtitle of "Black Gays." In this moment, *Looking* contends that despite the initial visibility that "Smoke" experiences "history books tell" very little because they perpetuate the secrecy that Hall names. *Looking* returns to, but reimagines the Harlem Renaissance, to counter such secrecy and aligns the period with the film's contemporaneous context.

Reinterpreted in *Looking* as a signal instance of the Harlem Renaissance's tapestry, "Smoke" is decidedly about same-sex desire. Julien excerpts and fuses Alex's dream, which occurs just after Alex decides that "he would like Beauty to know Melva because he loved them both" (Nugent 1926, 37). In *Looking*, Alex's conflict is not about how to reconcile and live out his bisexuality but, rather, is over the circumscriptions that white male gaze and his internalized shame level at Alex's efforts to realize his desires and love for Beauty.

*Looking*'s subsequent depictions of Essex Hemphill's poetry and voice further its efforts at reformulating "Smoke" into a continuum of pointed narratives of racially-inflected, same-sex desire. With a sequence of scenes visualizing Hemphill's "Where the Seed Falls," "If His Name Were Mandingo," and "Under Certain Circumstances" following *Looking*'s "Smoke," Julien positions Nugent's "Smoke" as ancestor and Hemphill's poems as descendants; thematically Hemphill's poems offer reflections on same-sex desire in the contemporary moment, especially in

the context of the late 1980s AIDS crisis and the racialized objectification that black gay men experience. In his pivotal reading of the film, Kobena Mercer has argued more specifically that Julien’s “desire to unravel the hidden histories of the Harlem Renaissance serves as an emblem for an inventory of the diverse textual resources which have informed the renaissance and renewal of black artistic and cultural practices in [then] contemporary Britain” (1993, 250). Julien’s recreation of “Smoke” establishes, then, the tone for the remaining print to film enactments that structure *Looking* as montage.

Evans’s *Brother to Brother* similarly portrays “Smoke” through revision. Sam Park notes that “as in Julien’s film, Nugent’s story ‘Smoke, Lilies, and Jade’ serves as both narrative through-line and running motif. In *Brother to Brother*, the story binds Nugent and Perry, as each takes turns reciting or reading portions of it to the other. When Perry discovers it in the library, his epiphany resonates at multiple levels—a sense of pride at uncovering a long-lost black queer literature, the constitutive experience of having the representation create a public space for him as a black queer man, and, perhaps most importantly, a hoped-for expression of same-race, same-sex desire” (2011, 73). Though different in time (an interplay of *Brother*’s present and the Harlem Renaissance) and place (in Brooklyn rather than Harlem), Perry in *Brother* and Alex in “Smoke” have related experiences as young artists. To demonstrate these connections, *Brother* reformulates Alex’s desires through a fictional, intergenerational bond between Perry and Richard Bruce Nugent and, importantly, the diegetic moments that forge it.

“Smoke, Lilies, and Jade” appears frequently in *Brother* as Perry immerses himself in the short story after meeting Nugent. At school and at work, Perry not only reads from the version of it that Lewis includes in *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader* (1995), but he also finds an extant issue of *FIRE!* (a copy of the Nugent and Wirth reissue) among Nugent’s belongings at his death. After confronting Nugent with a facsimile of “Smoke” in hand, Perry sits down with Nugent to learn more about his life and the Harlem Renaissance. Perry presses Nugent for information and explanation:

Perry: I really love [“Smoke, Lillies, and Jade.”] The phrasing, the mood, everything. It’s like someone of a different time and place. But it is exactly how I feel.

Bruce: Well, I hate to break it you, but I’m here and now, flesh and blood right here before your very own eyes. (Evans 2004)

As he shares his physical and emotional memories of it, Bruce conveys the idea that the Harlem Renaissance is alive and embraces Perry’s curiosity about it. Perry’s reaction here illustrates one component of the short

story's cultural significance as print culture, which Stephanie Foote similarly argues about lesbian pulp fiction. Across the works that she studies, Foote points out that "the characters react not only to the text, to what the books are saying to them and to others about them, they also respond to the book itself, to the artifact whose presence in the world as an embodied fact allegorizes and solidifies their own desires" (2005, 169). This is precisely what happens for Perry but also, and more importantly, *Brother's* viewers, especially those unfamiliar with "Smoke" and Nugent. Through depicting Perry's experience of reading (a literal version of) "Smoke" and befriending Nugent, Evans underscores its and Nugent's legacies both now preserved in film.<sup>6</sup>

Evans's choice to tell a story about a young, black gay man's personal and artistic development through his relationship with Nugent responds to Cobb's earlier assertion that "the surprisingly small mass of archival research, scholarly work, and sustained interest on Nugent also implies that racial excavations of this queer author are not a priority" (2000, 39); Nugent lives longer than most of his counterparts, including Hughes, but dies in a relative degree of obscurity despite having new found celebrity in the last decades of his life because of gay and lesbian pride movements, especially as reflected in the documentary *Before Stonewall*. If Hughes is Julien's "perfect subject" for working out the complexities of a black artist's relationships with his communities, then Nugent's experiences as a black gay artist who produces images of same-sex desire makes him the ideal subject for Evans's consideration of the isolation that such artistry incurs (Hemphill 1991, 175). In *Brother*, Perry and Nugent bond over and through such isolation. By witnessing Nugent's memories (as depicted in "Smoke" and through what the fictional Nugent relates) and the pride that this "younger generation" exudes, Perry gains a stronger sense of identity. For both characters, this relationship helps them articulate and satisfy their desires as black gay male artists.

In comparing *Looking for Langston's* and *Brother to Brother's* depictions of "Smoke, Lilies, and Jade," it is necessary to underscore the related identities that Julien and Evans share. First, Julien and Evans clearly read "Smoke" and, as black gay men, likely identified with it, especially how it visualized black gay male artistry and the fact that it did so, somewhat radically, during the Harlem Renaissance (Reid-Pharr 571). Since Julien images "Smoke" to visualize it anew and demonstrate

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<sup>6</sup> I read both *Looking* and *Brother* as invested in exploring and preserving "Smoke" materially and position their cultural work in this regard as a response to Leon Jackson when he reminds "book historians and scholars of African American cultures of print" that "we need to read both the outsides as well as the insides of texts and theorize the mediating connections between the two" (292 – 293).

how it links to black gay print and film cultures during the 1980s and 1990s, and Evans portrays "Smoke" to show how a similar continuity, albeit fictional, operates between Nugent and Perry, their identifications prompt reactions to "Smoke" as a usable past. Beyond sharing "Smoke" in these ways, the films are linked through *Brother's* indebtedness to *Looking*. Given the paucity of such filmmaking prior to his own, Evans is likely aware of *Looking's* primacy. Even more, the parallels between them position *Brother's* intertextual functioning as a particular instance of double-voiced narration. As Evans' *Brother* speaks back to "Smoke" (and, in some ways, for Nugent), it necessarily speaks back to *Looking* as well. Together, they share and reproduce what Foote describes as "revelatory identification," especially in provoking consideration of the ways that black gay experiences and the Harlem Renaissance share history, while celebrating a larger, black LGBTQ history as predicated on a print and visual interplay. In pointing out this dialogue and its signifying qualities, I do not mean to suggest that such excavations of print culture require examinations of film. Rather, I do so to illuminate the influence of print culture, in this case a black gay print culture, and the potential of film to document and make use of that influence. Following the history that this print culture enables, *Looking for Langston* and *Brother to Brother* (re)position "Smoke" as part of, even essential to, the configuring of African American identity that occurs throughout the twentieth century. In doing so, they convey and further an impetus to "validate versions of black identity in print" but also in film (Smith 2004, xxi).

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