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## Harlem's Queer Dandy: African-American Modernism and the Artifice of Blackness

Elisa F. Glick

MFS Modern Fiction Studies

Johns Hopkins University Press

Volume 49, Number 3, Fall 2003

pp. 414-442

10.1353/mfs.2003.0049

ARTICLE

[View Citation](#)

### Abstract

Investigating the figure of the queer black dandy in the art and literature of the Harlem Renaissance, this article argues that African American modernists such as Wallace Thurman and Richard Bruce Nugent revise nineteenth-century, European models of dandyism and decadence in order to critique the cult of authenticity surrounding the cultural construction of blackness. Their rebellion against the commodification of black identity gives birth to a new aesthetic that combines the naturalized simplicity and vigor of primitivism with the artifice of decadence, making legible a distinctly African American incarnation of the new forms of desire, identity, and community emerging in modern, urban culture.



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There is perhaps no greater refutation to the bifurcating logic that opposes racial and queer identification than Harlem's black dandy of the 1920s and 30s. A figure of urbanity, decadence, and polished elegance, the black aesthete makes dandyism a badge of openly queer desire and anti-bourgeois politics. When acknowledged in cultural criticism, however, the figure of the black dandy is often deracialized, following the masculinist logic that sees the bisexual or gay African American as a threat to racial unity and the notion of "authentic"—that is, masculine—blackness it is implicitly founded upon. Even when such ideologies are critiqued, as in Michael L. Cobb's essay "Insolent Racing, Rough Narrative," there seems to be no way to get around the reading of queer identity as a "racial death-sentence" (332). Nevertheless, it should be noted that (as the work of Cobb and others indicate) the ambivalent and/or hostile reaction to the black dandy has its roots in the contradictions of the Renaissance itself, as well as in the increasing association of dandyism with homosexual "vice" in the early part of the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> As a wide range of critics and historians have demonstrated, the established black bourgeoisie and representatives of the Talented Tenth such as Du Bois came to see the dandy—and his queerness in particular—as

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NWS Modern Period Studies, Volume 49, number 3, Fall 2003. Copyright © for the Purdue Research Foundation by the Johns Hopkins University Press. All rights to reproduction in any form reserved.



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+1 (410) 516-6989



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