Harlem Renaissance’s gay side

FAU exhibit shows the obstacles of the times.

By Rod Stafford Hagwood

There is a lot of gay revolution on the walls of the Wimberly Library at Florida Atlantic University.

Until recently, it was a revolution that

did not speak its name.

“The Harlem Renaissance: As Gay As It Was Black” exhibit will be up from Tuesday through June 30.

The title comes from black scholar Henry Louis Gates, who once said that the Harlem Renaissance was “merely as gay as it was black, not that it was exclu-
sively either of these.”

The exhibit chronicles the leading gay

participants in what we now call the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and 1930s, which back in the day was known as the New Negro Movement and was one of the launching points of the Jazz Age.

The photo panels highlight writers such as Langston Hughes and Zora Neale

Hurstwicke. Among others are Ethel Waters, Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith; dancer Josephine

Baker; comedian Jackie “Mama” 

Macabry and many others who populated the

north Manhattan neighborhood during an era “when the Negro was in vogue,” as Hughes once said.

But gays — regardless of race — were not as fashionable, even as they surrepti-
tiously caught the zeitgeist and ran with it, emerging influential artists in the mid-1920s in Vanity Fair magazine and The New York Times by Carl Van Ven-
ten, who announced the New Negro Movement with whites with “now is the psychological moment when everything is the Negro.”

It is only in the past 10 years that scholar-

ship has investigated how many gays, 

lesbians and bisexuals (many of whom

maintained in same-sex affairs were

married, some several times) contributed to the movement.

“The Harlem Renaissance is known as an important theme in literature and mu-

sic, but it never occurred to me there was a gay slant,” said Dr. William Miller, the dean of libraries at FAU. “I have a Ph.D. in literature and I’ve never thought about that. But when you stop and think about it for two seconds, you go ‘Oh, yeah.”

Scholarship into the subject is a recent

phenomenon, with a handful of books on the topic. “The Scene of Harlem: Cabaret, Race, Sexuality, Performance” was published last year. “Gay Voices of the Harlem Renaissance” came out in 2003.

“Gay Belief of the Harlem Renaissance: Selections from the Work of Richard Bruce Nugent” was published in 2002.

“We’re coming into its own,” Miller said. “It used to be a risky thing to do in one’s career, but not now.”

Pop culture hasn’t caught on yet, al-

though in 2004 the movie “Broker to Broker” swept the indie festival circuit, winning six major awards, including best fiction feature, at the Miami Gay and Lesbian Film Festival. The film resurrects Richard Bruce Nugent, Zora Neale Hurst-

ton, Langston Hughes and Wally Thur-

ton.

“How we gays and lesbians identify ourselves today matters,” said Jack Rut-

land, executive director of the Stonewall

Library & Archives. “To them it mattered less.”

Then how do we know they were homosexuals?

“They must have known,” Rutland told. “Some of their works reveal it and it

with others you have to read between the lines. Of course that makes me a little nervous.

We are not saying all of the artists in the HRR were gay. And those who were did not think of themselves as gay as we do today.”

Butland said the Jazz Age period broke

down social barriers (at least until the Depression and World War II) — established them and paved the way for an appreciation of diversity.

“Walls were coming down, class, gender, race,” Rutland said. “They all seemed less important. The Harlem Renaissance is what happens when they were freed of all those things. They went on to influence fiction, art, photography, poetry. They would gather in these saloons and read their work and collaborate with each other. The music at the center of American art — blaring the lines of joy, fuel, blues. But the movement is a huge part of the core of American art that came out of the Harlem Renaissance.”

Richard Bruce Nugent, the author of “Smoke, Lilies, and Jade,” which many consider the first published black gay story, summed it up with: “You just did what you wanted to do. Nobody was in the closet. There wasn’t any closet.”

And yet there was enough fear at the time for lesbian references in the works of Nella Larsen, Jeanne, Faust or Angelina Weld Grimké to be deeply shaded.

Although Harlem at the time was a black gay counterpart to Greenwich Village (whites were lesbians or homosexual-

ual while blacks were “faggots” or “bull dagoers”) and its populations of whites, gays, intellectuals and artists, the Ameri-

can apartheid of that era gave gays of color an additional hurdle to clear.

“Imagine if you had that triple threat: black, a woman and a lesbian,” said Bur-

land. “You are deeply oppressed. But there is a place like Harlem and you could be there with your own kind. So they did and this had an effect on the point of view of feminists and the art that came from there.”

In the vernacular of the time, black

gays and lesbians were said to be in “The Life,” which described a colorful array of rent parties (money-raising events with live entertainment), buffet bas (private erotic “nightclubs” set up in theaters) and cabarets (Prohibition made selling alcohol illegal from 1920 to 1933) and drag balls.

Even white high society members were

spotted at the large homosexual costume

balls hosted by the Hamilton Lodge of Oddfellows. Hollywood and Broadway stars coveted invitations to the salon.

hosted by At-Lita “Joy Goddess” Walker, the only daughter of hair-straightening multimillionaire Madame C.J. Walker.

But all the Jazz Age glamour couldn’t mask the marginalization of gays and

lesbians.

“Stories told of suppressed groups are basically stories of conflict,” said Butland. “It follows that much of the history of gays and lesbians is about being re-

pressed and resistance. This is the one of the few stories about gay artists coming together to create.”

He went on to say that the exhibit takes

pains to put the Harlem movement into historical context.

“We really started shaping the exhibit late in the summer of last year. I wanted to realize that there were about 9 million permutations. This was the history of Harlem, but it was more than that. This was the history of the world. You can see it visually in the exhibit. You have the panels... and then on the margins you’ll see vignettes of Harlem and other events going on around the world.”

If you go

“The Harlem Renaissance: As Gay As It Was Black” is free and runs Tues-

day-June 30 in Florida Atlantic University’s Wimberly Library. The collection’s photo panels highlight writers such as Langston Hughes.