

# Queering the Harlem Renaissance through Nordic Networks and Gay Archives

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The Harlem Renaissance – to its participants better known as the Black Renaissance or the (New) Negro Renaissance – was a major flourishing of African American arts and letters with the political goal of bettering the position of Black people in Jim Crow America. The movement covered both arts and sciences as its participants produced everything from fiction and non-fiction writing to music, visual arts, plays, anthropological fieldwork, and sociological studies. During this time period of the early twentieth century, Black culture found new audiences across the segregationist color line. The movement peaked in the 1920s when Harlem “was in vogue” and white people flocked to the new cultural center of Black life to experience its famed nightlife, cabarets, and jazz clubs. The Renaissance fundamentally affected the development of American modernism at large, as white authors began to imitate, copy, and borrow from Black culture and discourse to produce avantgarde and modernist art of their own (Baker 1987, North 1994, Smethurst 2011).

As much twenty-first-century scholarship on the movement has shown, the Black Renaissance was also queer at its core. Many of its most important artists, essayists, and theorists belonged to sexual and gender minorities. Though many such identities and relations were hidden from the public,

the movement also included openly queer figures such as blues singer and performer Gladys Bentley, a lesbian drag king pioneer of her times. Additionally, queer themes emerged in Black Renaissance writing more openly than in other American modernist texts of the early twentieth century. As Benjamin Kahan has recently explored, African American authors were able to evade the Comstock censorship laws of the times more successfully than their white counterparts.<sup>1</sup> This meant that the Black Renaissance is one of the few places of American modernism where queerness was able to flourish already prior to the 1930s (Kahan 2023, 51).

In this essay, I consider the queerness of the Black Renaissance through an underexplored angle: the interracial relations and connections the movement had to Northern Europe. For the past two years, I have been

<sup>1</sup> “The 1873 federal Comstock Act, named for America’s most zealous anti-vice crusader, Anthony Comstock, prohibited the transport by mail of ‘every obscene, lewd, or lascivious, and every filthy book, pamphlet, picture, paper, letter, writing, print, or other publication of an indecent character’ [–] Comstock’s mercilessness inspired fear and a long shadow of self-censorship that successfully blocked much of the American modernist representation of same-sex sexuality and desire” (Kahan 2023, 49).

tracking Black modernists' various connections to the Nordic countries – a region of the world that is seldom associated with US modernisms, let alone with African American culture.<sup>2</sup> Initially, my research project was framed with a textual focus; I wanted to explore intertextual connections between Black modernisms and Nordic literatures, as well as representations of Nordic characters and settings in Black Renaissance writing. As my project progressed and I dug deeper into Renaissance materials and archives, I came across and became interested in the various types of intimate relations the movement's participants had with Northern Europeans. Actress Dorothy Randolph Peterson allegedly had a Norwegian companion at one point in her life, while author Wallace Thurman's queer relationship with a Danish man also functioned as the source for the Danish-Canadian character of Stephen Jorgenson in Wallace's novel *Infants of the Spring* (1932). Some Renaissance figures were the offspring of such interracial relations – the most famous case being Nella Larsen, the daughter of a white Danish woman and a Black Caribbean man from the former Danish West Indies. Larsen spent part of her childhood and early adulthood in Denmark and was open about her familial background during her short-lived career as a Black Renaissance author. She was the first African American woman to receive a Guggenheim fellowship in creative writing and has become one of the most read and researched Black Renaissance authors of the twenty-first century.

Not only were some of these relationships between African Americans and Nordic people queer – in the sense of belonging to the umbrella of LGBTQIA+ relations – but in a broader way such relations had the potential of queering and questioning other normative categories of

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2 There is room for much more research on African American history and culture in the Nordic context, as evidenced by Ethelene Whitmire's exciting work, where she studies the histories and experiences of African Americans in Denmark in the twentieth century (see Whitmire 2019 & 2022).

the time, particularly that of race. It is my hypothesis that relations with Northern Europeans – both real and imaginary ones – allowed Black Renaissance participants to question the strict black-and-white color line of Jim Crow America and consider both alternative understandings of race and alternative possibilities for interracial relations with white people.

As a consequence of these findings, I began to study not just the Nordic intertextual connections found in pieces of African American writing, but also other types of Nordic affiliations that emerge in the personal lives and archives of people intimately involved in the Black Renaissance. These relations – though personal and private – are at the same time key to how textual connections were able to emerge between the US and Nordic countries. It was often through intimate, private relations that Black Renaissance participants decided to travel to the Nordic countries, meet Nordic people, and become acquainted with Nordic literature and art. Such relations also helped spread information about African American authors and texts to the Nordic countries early on, despite the geographical and political distance of the regions.

Here, I will illuminate this question of queer relations between the Black Renaissance and Nordic countries by considering one Black Renaissance archive that can be described as both queer and transnational – the archive of C. Glenn Carrington. Carrington (1904–1975) was a gay African American man who personally knew many of the key artists and essayists of the Renaissance, including figures like Alain Locke, Georgia Douglas Johnson, and Langston Hughes. Carrington's interest in Black culture and writing was probably sparked by his time as a student at Howard University, where he was taught by Alain Locke, one of the leading intellectuals of the Black Renaissance (New York Public Library, n.d.). Though Carrington did not become a major artist or theorist of the movement – he worked as a reporter, social worker, and parole officer for much of his life – his

archives show that he was intimately connected to the Black Renaissance and wrote essays for African American newspapers of the time. Moreover, he managed to acquire one of the most comprehensive private collections of Black Renaissance literature and music. His collection, bequeathed to Howard University, includes “more than 2,200 books in fifteen languages, approximately 500 recordings, 18 storage boxes of manuscript materials, photographs, broadsides, prints, periodicals, sheet music, newspapers and a variety of other items” (Moorland-Spingarn Research Center 1977, 6).

What makes Carrington’s archives particularly intriguing for my project is that his interest in the Black Renaissance was connected to his passion for world traveling and the Nordic countries. A significant part of Carrington’s collection consists of early Black Renaissance translations, including long-forgotten translations into the Nordic languages. Additionally, his archives reveal a decades long history of letter writing with Nordic men, as well as multiple travels to the Nordic countries. Despite Carrington’s many ties to the Black Renaissance, his life and writings have not received scholarly interest in research concerning the movement. In this essay, I consider what kinds of aspects of the Black Renaissance come to light when studying the queer, Nordic networks of people like Carrington.

### Queer, Nordic surprises: the joys and sorrows of archival work

I began my research in late 2021 with preliminary examples of the Black Renaissance’s Nordic connections that I had come across years earlier during my doctoral studies, but equally important at the start of my postdoctoral project was a strong conviction that I would find more cases as my research progressed. Explaining my project to other scholars in the field typically raises eyebrows and curiosity – *did early twentieth-century African American literature really have connections to Northern Europe?* The reaction is understandable since the topic remains largely underexplored

(especially beyond the case of Nella Larsen), and even I have had doubts regarding the scope and extent of what I might be able to find. In 2023, my search led me to Glenn Carrington’s archives, some of which are located in Harlem, in the Schomburg Center of The New York Public Library (NYPL).<sup>3</sup> Carrington was a new figure to me and I began my journey through his papers in the numerical order of the boxes, starting with biographical materials such as documents related to his family members. As I went through the folders, I was anticipating the upcoming boxes that I thought might be more relevant for my research – namely, Carrington’s travel documents from later on in his life, as well as his decades long letter correspondence, some of it with men whose names sounded Nordic to me as I browsed through the archive catalogue.

Eventually I dug my way to box 2, Folder 6, titled “Travel 1935–1970.” As I opened the folder, the very first document on top of a large pile of old papers was a Finnish postal office customs notice. In December 1965, a Finnish man had sent a book to Glenn Carrington.

In a way, the Finnish customs notice demonstrates the joys and sorrows of archival research. Even as the notice functions as a tiny piece of evidence that Black Renaissance participants did indeed have connections to the Nordic countries, the notice in itself raises more questions than it answers. What was the Finnish man’s relation to Carrington? Had Carrington traveled to Finland and met the man, or had he simply ordered a book from him? What was the book that was sent all the way from Finland to the US

3 The Glenn Carrington Papers are located in The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in the Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division at The New York Public Library. Additional archives related to Carrington, including his book collection and more of his personal correspondence, can be found at Emory University (C. Glenn Carrington papers, Manuscript, Archives and Rare Book Library, Emory University) and Howard University (C. Glenn Carrington Papers, Moorland-Spingarn Collection, Howard University).

– was it related to the Renaissance or perhaps to larger issues concerning Black culture and rights? And why did Carrington hold onto the customs notice, what made it significant to him?

The Finnish postal office notice turned out to be the beginning of a vast amount of Carrington’s documents related to the Nordic countries. What emerges from the archives is Carrington’s extensive travel history in Northern Europe. Thanks to the numerous train tickets, hotel and café receipts, postcards, and other memorabilia, it is possible to construct at least some of his travels in Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Iceland, and Finland with quite fair accuracy. At times, he was traveling alone and visiting his many Nordic friends. At other times, another man accompanied his travels and they sent postcards together back to the US. Though much can be pieced together from Carrington’s papers, there is also a lot about his fascination with the Nordic region that remains unanswered.

In her study of the Soviet Union’s influence on African American authors, Kate Baldwin describes how her research is against “[e]asy readability and transparent immediacy – and our own desire to seek out these qualities as readers of the past” (Baldwin 2002, 13). During my research process, I have at times felt lost, not knowing exactly what kinds of Nordic connections I am or should be looking for, or whether I will be able to locate materials relevant to my project. Working on such an underexplored topic easily leads one to hope precisely for the type of easy readability and immediacy Baldwin warns against. Going through Carrington’s papers has been part of my attempt at piecing together a previously untold history, but the process requires critical self-scrutiny. I need to be careful about desiring to find or create coherent narratives on materials that have not been much discussed before, especially when such materials concern people who belong to multiple societally oppressed groups. Instead of creating easily readable narrative histories, my project needs to embrace the fragmented nature of

the Black Renaissance’s Nordic connections, including all the unanswered questions, gaps, and silences the archives bring forth.

### Queer relations as networks of knowledge

In addition to the materials connected to Carrington’s Nordic travels, his archives also include decades long letter correspondence he maintained with Nordic men. As the NYPL’s description of his letters states, the “majority of Carrington’s correspondents were gay,” but “[n]o attempt was made to separate the letters from gay men from the rest of the correspondence” (New York Public Library, n.d.). The nature of the men’s relationships has to be interpreted based on the letters. References to sexuality range from implicit allusions to more explicit ones and, further, to letters discussing no such topics.

What emerges from the archives and his correspondence is a network of Nordic men who in turn connected Carrington with other men they knew across the Nordic countries. In my research, I am less interested in the types of (intimate or not) relations Carrington had with these men and more in the political, societal, and cultural labor such networks construct and maintain. In *The Fury Archives: Female Citizenship, Human Rights, and the International Avant-Gardes* (2020), Juno Jill Richards studies feminist resistance by shifting focus from the public sphere of politics to the domestic, day-to-day action of feminist activists. In Richards’ work,

emphasis shifts from articulated demands to forms of world making, through people working together in the streets, the factories, and at home. This shift allows us to reconsider what might be asked for and who gets to ask; what kinds of spaces and labors are political (Richards 2020, 16).

What interests me is how Carrington's correspondence creates a type of "social world of action" (Richards 2020, 16), where the supposedly personal and mundane space of letter writing turns into a transnational exchange of political, societal, and cultural knowledge and action between African American culture and the Nordic countries. This is evident in the contents of the letters, where discussions of everyday life are entwined with references to major political and societal events, at times accompanied with photographs, newspaper clippings, books, records, and other items. In one letter Carrington mailed to a Nordic correspondent in 1963, he covers matters from his future European travel plans to the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the opening performance of a musical based on Langston Hughes' "Tambourines to Glory," and his trip to the Yale University Library (where he gave a copy of a Danish newspaper to the library's collection).

The archives showcase how people like Carrington were able to promote Black Renaissance culture across a vast geographical distance, spreading information on US Black politics to the Nordic countries. He often sent books and other materials to his Nordic friends, including texts by key Renaissance figures such as Langston Hughes and W. E. B. Du Bois. In one letter, Carrington describes Du Bois as one of the most scholarly African Americans and explains the importance of *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), which he mailed separately to that same correspondent. Meanwhile, Carrington spread information about the Nordic countries to his US networks; showing slides from his Nordic travels to American friends and colleagues, referencing Nordic adult education in a book review he wrote for *Opportunity* (a major African American magazine associated with the Black Renaissance), and acquiring books published in the Nordic countries to be added to his vast collection.

It is worth highlighting how this movement and discussion – for example on Black rights – worked both ways across the Atlantic. Carrington's Nordic

correspondents sent him newspaper clippings from local newspapers discussing US politics and Black rights, giving information on how race and racism were framed and understood in the Nordic context. References to major events in Black culture show up in the Nordic men's letters too, for example when one correspondent comments how *Porgy and Bess* has reached Sweden but tickets are difficult to acquire. The Nordic men also sent Carrington jazz records and books, including the second volume of *Love's Picture Book*, presumably referring to Ove Brusendorff's multivolume history of eroticism, as well as texts on Nordic arts and culture. The letters demonstrate reciprocal world-building; building images of Black culture in the Nordic countries, and building images of the Nordics in the US context.

Carrington's correspondence showcases the way in which the personal and the political become entwined: not only did the letters function as a way of sharing details of the writers' lives, but they also served as a means to exchange information and texts on Black rights and culture across the Atlantic Ocean throughout the twentieth century. I would argue that Carrington's personal connections to Nordic men and his interest in Nordic societies are the reason why he was also promoting the spread of Black culture and news to that part of the world. The queer history of his life is thus not separate from the work he did in discussing and helping canonize Black culture outside the US; such personal matters provide the necessary "background" space and action to the more public side of the Black Renaissance.

### Queer participants canonizing the Black Renaissance

Male networks across race and class lines have long been seen as a central element to the making and canonizing of the Black Renaissance, but scholars working within gender and sexuality studies have emphasized

how queer male sexualities need to be seen as a formative context for those networks (e.g. Harris 2008, 77). An illuminating example is the role Alain Locke played as one of the most important theorists and promoters of the movement. Locke's work – mentoring Renaissance authors and artists, writing and editing publications, collecting and curating Black art – helped create and canonize the movement, and much of that work was based on the networks of support he created with other gay and queer men (see Stewart 2018). As Genny Beemyn has noted, “[o]n a professional level, [Locke] encouraged and often promoted their work, paving the way for the beginning of a black gay literary canon; on a personal level, he listened to their troubles and triumphs with male partners, dispensed relationship advice, and occasionally discussed his own sexual desires” (2015, 62). Glenn Carrington, too, became a part of Locke's circle, where he both sought and gave assistance on matters concerning relationships and sexuality (Beemyn 2015, 64; see also Stevenson 2011).

I would like to consider Carrington as a similar – though much less visible – figure to Locke, working as a close acquaintance to the more public side of the Black Renaissance. In addition to promoting Black culture to his networks across the globe, Carrington also maintained a significant collection of books and music related to the Renaissance and twentieth-century Black culture. His collection, which hosts books from various geographical and linguistic origins, includes fourteen Danish, one Norwegian, and nine Swedish books.<sup>4</sup> Among these are Swedish- and Danish-language works on jazz, Harlem, African literature, and the Black civil rights movement.

4 For a full list of Glenn Carrington's literature and music collection, see Moorland-Spingarn Research Center's *The Glenn Carrington Collection: A Guide to the Books, Manuscripts, Music, and Recordings* (1977).

For the study of the Black Renaissance and its Nordic connections, perhaps the most significant aspect of Carrington's collection is the fact that he had found and acquired some of the first Nordic translations of major Renaissance texts. This is particularly interesting since there continues to be a dearth of translations of Black Renaissance literature into any of the Nordic languages. Due to her extensive Danish ties, Nella Larsen's two novels and three short stories were finally translated into Danish in 2015. It is curious, however, that Larsen's debut novel *Quicksand* (1928) – perhaps the most obviously “Nordic” text of the entire Black Renaissance – continues to have no translations into any of the other Nordic languages. Recent years have seen some new translation interest in the movement, perhaps in the wake of the worldwide Black Lives Matter protests of 2020. Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929) was translated into Swedish in 2022 (*Passera*), while Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) was published in Danish last year (*Deres øjne så mod Gud*, 2023). But major authors and works – including texts by Claude McKay, Georgia Douglas Johnson, James Weldon Johnson, Jean Toomer, and Wallace Thurman – remain untranslated and largely unavailable to Nordic audiences. The Finnish case is particularly bleak; apart from a few translations of individual poems by authors like Claude McKay and Langston Hughes, Black Renaissance literature is virtually missing in the Finnish language.

Meanwhile, Carrington had found and collected Nordic translations already from the 1930s, 40s, and 50s. These include a Danish translation of Carl Van Vechten's infamous novel *Nigger Heaven* (1926), published in both Copenhagen and Oslo already in 1933. The novel, with its pejorative title and “scandalous” descriptions of Harlem nightlife, caused much controversy upon its publication and added to debates concerning the role that white people played in the Renaissance. Also included in Carrington's collection is a Swedish translation of Langston Hughes' debut novel *Not Without Laughter* (1930), published as *Tant Hagers barn* in 1948 and signed

by Hughes himself. Hughes' debut poetry collection, *The Weary Blues* (1926), was published in Danish as *Blues* in 1964, and *Simple Speaks His Mind* (1950) came out four years later in Danish as *Simple Siger Sin Mening* (1954). Carrington's collection has no Nordic translations of African American women authors, though it does include the Danish translation of singer Marian Anderson's biography *My Lord, What a Morning* (1956; *Mit Livs Turné*, 1957).

Carrington's collection thus functions as an important archive of translation history, showing which Black Renaissance authors were first translated and made available to foreign audiences, in which languages, and with what kinds of temporal delays. I find it intriguing that the first authors associated with the Black Renaissance who received official Nordic translations (and who can be found in Carrington's collection) were Carl Van Vechten and Langston Hughes, both of whom are nowadays seen as part of the queer community of the Black Renaissance. Both were (in)famous authors of their time and thus it makes sense they were translated early on into Swedish and Danish. And yet, their case highlights what queer scholarship on the movement has long emphasized; the question of what role gender and sexuality played in the formation of Black Renaissance networks, especially when such networks helped create platforms for certain authors to gain wider (and more transnational) audiences than others.

In 1993, Henry Louis Gates Jr. described the Black Renaissance as "a handful of people. The usual roll call would invoke figures like Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Alain Locke, Countee Cullen, Wallace Thurman, and Bruce Nugent; which is to say that it was surely as gay as it was black, not that it was exclusively either of these" (Gates, Jr. 1993, 233). Gates' thesis that the Renaissance "was surely as gay as it was black" is well known, but it is worth highlighting the context of that argument. For Gates' list of the "usual roll call" is exclusively male. Missing are obvious figures such as Nella Larsen, Jessie Fauset (a central editor, author, and promoter of

the movement), and Zora Neale Hurston (pioneering anthropologist and author of the Black South), not to mention many other Black women who wrote and published fiction or curated and promoted Black art for example through exhibitions and library work. Not only were these women central to the movement, but many of them could be listed under the queer canon of the Renaissance. For example, Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929) has been discussed through a homoerotic and queer lens since early Black feminist scholarship on the novel (McDowell 1986).

My point is not to be critical of Gates' list, which serves to highlight a central focus of his essay – Black gay culture and homophobia – but to use his argument to consider how the canon of the movement has at certain times been formed and understood. And how, in the context of this essay, it is worth thinking how queer male relations have come to affect canon-formation. The Black Renaissance came into being not just because of the artistic production of authors, musicians, and visual artists, but also because of the work done by others who promoted, curated, and collected the products of the movement. Much of this work was done by queer people, like Locke and Carrington, who created networks and wrote about the movement to audiences far from Harlem.

In addition to being an archive of translation history, Carrington's collection is a reminder of how the collecting and preserving of art is a central aspect of historicizing and canonizing it. In Carrington's case, his queer and Nordic networks allowed him to historicize an international yet peripheral aspect of the Black Renaissance – its early reception history in the Nordic countries. Because of his fascination with the Nordic region and his networks with Nordic men, Carrington was aware of the early reception and translation of Black Renaissance writing while he could simultaneously further promote the movement across the Nordics through his travels and the letters and books he mailed there.

## Conclusion: queer Renaissance, queering the Renaissance

Though C. Glenn Carrington's life and writings represent only a small part of my larger research project, his case illuminates some of the central questions that guide my work. By studying published and unpublished texts from various Black Renaissance participants with ties to the Nordic region, I want to ask what happens when we queer the traditional focus of Black Renaissance scholarship along multiple lines. What happens when we turn to study African Americans who were intimately related to the Black Renaissance, not as authors and artists, but as letter writers, travelers, and art collectors? What happens when we shift focus from published texts to personal archives? Moreover, what happens when we connect the Black Renaissance to a region that seems so peripheral to African American rights and culture?

In asking and answering these questions, I draw inspiration from Juno Jill Richards' claim that, to them, the archive is "not only a matter of recovery but also a more polemical intervention" (12). A study of the various personal archives of people like Carrington is indeed not only a matter of recovery – of recovering the queer and transnational history of the Black Renaissance – but also an intervention into how the Renaissance is understood in scholarship. Perhaps most importantly, these types of materials highlight the various intersecting categories at play in the formation of the movement. Through Carrington's case, we can consider what role queer male sexualities played in the development of the Renaissance. But his papers raise important questions related to race and class, as well. By studying Carrington's correspondence and fascination with the Nordic region, we can analyze how black-and-white race relations were negotiated beyond the Jim Crow color line between Black Americans and white non-Americans. Further, his life shows how class affected the networks and products of the Black Renaissance. At various points in

his life, Carrington was interested in the Soviet Union, Marxism, union organizing, social democratic politics, and world peace, and one of my tentative arguments is that these types of working-class related movements played an important role in connecting the Black Renaissance to the Nordic region. By bringing to the spotlight multiply oppressed societal groups and intersecting forms of power, these types of archival materials have the potential to queer the mainstream narratives of how the history of the Black Renaissance is both understood and told.<sup>5</sup>

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