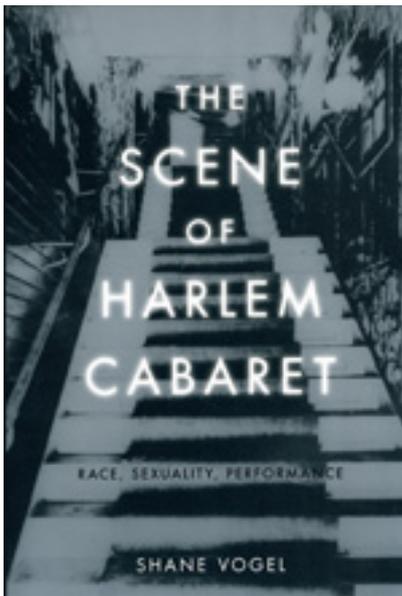


## ***The Scene of Harlem Cabaret: Race, Sexuality, Performance* by Shane Vogel**

Micol Seigel | Indiana University, Bloomington

Vogel, Shane. *The Scene of Harlem Cabaret: Race, Sexuality, Performance*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009. 257 pages; 14 illustrations. \$60.00 cloth, \$22.00 paper.



“To queer the Harlem Renaissance,” Shane Vogel’s hope in this agile book, “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” (22). Such places, in this register, include Langston Hughes’s perversely open poetic space-times, the “anticartography” of Claude McKay’s novels, and Lena Horne’s aloof subject position, connected by a gentle belonging to the Cabaret School, a “loose and fissured” subset of the Harlem Renaissance. Vogel highlights and celebrates the Cabaret School’s refusals of empirical models of history, its transcendence of the politics of representation, and its despectacularization (dissent lies in the mundane). Turning sharply away from gay and lesbian studies’ historical project of cataloging a canon of same-sex desiring figures, *The Scene of Harlem Cabaret* offers instead a queer-of-color critique that can discern affective resonance echoing outside the lines, over and around time, into still-present possibility.

In the spaces and practices of possibility carved out by Cabaret School projections, Vogel explores the “critique function” of Harlem’s “everynight life.” In concert with other postwar radicalisms (black nationalism, pan-Africanism, black Marxism), Cabaret School art performed its radical break from normative ideologies of racial uplift and middle-class respectability, the “elitist logics of uplift” (12). These were spaces—and times—that eluded the conventional

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historical archive just as they slipped into stolen moments after hours, the period after “closing time” that is closer to a comma or a question mark. What Vogel nimbly terms the “nowheres” and “nowhens” of the cabaret are radically open sites of public intimacy, rather than gay and lesbian sexual identi(cali)ty, grounds for the “criminal intimacies” that form subjectivities recognized by no state and bearing no relation to domestic spaces of family or nation. Many scholars today strive to convey the ways racial and sexual normativities mutually shape each other; few manage to craft as thorough and compelling an account.

It is a daunting labor to document practices that have been subject to multiple repressions, for they are shaped precisely to elude conventional notions of time and the official documentary record. To mine memory as it survives in less tangible locations, Vogel moves from fine-grained historical research on the development of cabaret and of laws in New York to contain it, to close readings of poetic form, genre and syntax, literary passages, and performance style. He contextualizes cultural forms through archival research and also grants them the status of archive unto themselves; a poem or a performance is itself “a repository of historical counterknowledge” (110). His take on space is equally sophisticated. In the long meditation on mapping that is the chapter on McKay, he applies the cutting-edge insights of critical geography and applies them to sociology, critiquing the travelogues of uplift social science. Methodologically virtuosic, this work would fit and push graduate seminars across a range of topics in African-American studies, performance studies, gender and sexuality studies, literature, urban or American studies, and cultural history.

Vogel’s prose is often delectable, particularly in more interpretive passages (“exhale,” “ossify,” “throw out the baby with the bathtub gin”), yet clear. This is a particular accomplishment given the book’s substantial engagement with recent innovators in the fields of queer theory and poststructuralist cultural studies including José Muñoz, Lisa Duggan, Lauren Berlant, Michael Warner, Fred Moten, bell hooks, Robin Kelley, Toni Morrison, and Hortense Spillers. Vogel shares with these theorists their debts to older standbys Foucault, Lefebvre, de Certeau, Brecht, and Sartre, whose notion of the “irreal” as the animator of a productive imagination supplies tools for the “afterward” (rather than “afterword”), a non-concluding chapter.

In this portion of the book, Vogel points to queer performances that extend the Cabaret School’s expansive impulse. Avant-garde queer-of-color artists, such as Vaginal Davis, Isaac Julien, Cheryl Dunye, and others use the archive, the strands of Harlem’s everynight life woven through their memory and practice, to confront another moment, ours, in which racism and sexism constrain and immiserate. They do not so much draw on documented history as work from an object they conjure, “not a thing but an act,” that draws memory and history together. Their disruptions, inspired by the irreal, dare to imagine past, present, and a future still full of possible, radical, social worlds.

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