



# Issa Radhi Zaidawi, Muhd Zulkifli Ismail, & Rohimmi Bin Noor

Pavlenko Anatolii

1. Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia, 43400, Selangor, Malaysia

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**Abstract:** This study examines Langston Hughes's gay narratives as deliberate acts of social subversion against the Harlem Renaissance's cultural politics of racial uplift and respectability in four selected poems: "Poem" (1925), "Port Town" (1926), "Desire" (1927), and "Boy" (1928). Grounded in Stephen Greenblatt's New Historicist concept of social energy circulation integrated with George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's Conceptual Metaphor Theory; this study situates Hughes' queer poetics within the institutional circuits and gatekeeping structures that shaped Harlem Renaissance cultural production. Through systematic close textual analysis and rigorous historicist contextualization, the study demonstrates how Hughes circumvents the restrictive ideological apparatus of the Harlem Renaissance by crafting representations of gayness through sophisticated metaphorical encoding that subtly critiques marginalization while preserving transgressive meanings for perceptive readers. The problems this study addresses are threefold. Scholarship on Hughes often relies on biographical speculation rather than rigorous textual analysis, which leaves the relationship between his poetic techniques and subversive intentions undertheorized. In addition, studies of queer presence in the Harlem Renaissance have not sufficiently connected textual strategies to the specific institutional conditions that shaped them, treating encoding as a general phenomenon instead of a historically situated practice. Finally, the theoretical frameworks applied to Hughes' work remain fragmented, failing to synthesize macrolevel institutional constraints with the microlevel cognitive mechanisms through which his metaphors enact their subversive power. The study contributes to Harlem Renaissance scholarship, African American literary criticism, and Black queer studies by revealing how marginalized voices operated within and against dominant cultural formations through strategic literary practices.

**Keywords:** Langston Hughes, gay narratives, social subversion, Harlem Renaissance, New Historicism, Conceptual Metaphor Theory, respectability politics, queer poetics.

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## INTRODUCTION

The Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and 1930s stands as a watershed moment in African American cultural history, celebrated for its unprecedented flourishing of artistic, literary, and intellectual production that fundamentally reshaped representations of Black identity in the American cultural imaginary. This movement, emerging from the Great Migration that brought hundreds of thousands of African Americans to northern urban centers, generated a remarkable body of creative work across multiple artistic domains including literature, music, visual arts, and theatre. Central to the Renaissance's cultural politics was the ideology of racial uplift and respectability, which sought to counter racist stereotypes by projecting carefully curated images of refinement, morality, and cultural achievement that would demonstrate African American fitness for full citizenship and social equality. Yet this celebratory narrative of cultural flowering obscures significant internal contradictions within the movement, particularly its complex and often suppressive relationship with queerness. The emphasis on respectability imposed restrictive boundaries that silenced or

marginalized voices failing to conform to bourgeois heteronormative ideals. Among those constrained voices were queer narratives, which challenged the movement's dominant cultural politics by articulating alternative visions of Black identity, desire, and social belonging that exceeded the parameters deemed acceptable by the Renaissance's elite arbiters. As Cobb [1] has argued, pervasive homophobia within Black literary criticism during this period contributed to systematic exclusion of discussions about Black queer identity from the emerging African American literary canon. The institutional mechanisms of the Renaissance, including publishing houses, literary magazines, and patronage networks, functioned as gatekeeping structures that determined which voices could circulate and which would be silenced.

Langston Hughes (1901-1967), one of the most influential and prolific figures of the Harlem Renaissance, has long been recognized for his commitment to social justice, his championing of Black common experience, and his documented tensions with elite cultural gatekeepers who sought to police the boundaries of acceptable Black artistic expression. Hughes' poetry consistently amplified marginalized voices, documenting lived realities that the movement's leaders preferred to obscure in favour of more respectable representations. Naik [2] observed that Hughes "crafted poetry that went beyond literary excellence to function as a compelling vehicle of social subversion" (p. 19019). However, the queer dimensions of his work remain significantly underexplored in terms of how they actively subvert the ideology of respectability that dominated Harlem Renaissance cultural politics. While scholars have debated Hughes' sexuality and acknowledged homoerotic undertones in certain works, the field has not adequately specified the mechanisms through which his gay narratives achieve their subversive effects.

### **CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

This study employs an integrated conceptual framework synthesizing Greenblatt [3] New Historicist concept of social energy circulation with Johnson and Lakoff [4]'s Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT). This synthesis addresses limitations inherent in each framework while producing analytical capabilities that neither possesses independently. New Historicism provides tools for understanding how literary texts participate in broader systems of cultural production and ideological contestation, situating Hughes' poems within the specific institutional circuits of the Harlem Renaissance. Conceptual Metaphor Theory provides rigorous methods for analyzing the cognitive mechanisms through which figurative language structures meaning, revealing how Hughes' metaphors encode queer content within ostensibly innocuous forms. Integration enables analysis that moves systematically between macrolevel institutional dynamics and microlevel textual mechanisms.

#### **Greenblatt's New Historicism and Social Energy Circulation**

Greenblatt [3] New Historicism, articulated most fully in *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy* (1988), provides a framework for understanding literary texts as active participants in cultural and ideological struggle rather than passive reflections of their historical contexts or autonomous aesthetic objects existing outside social determination. Greenblatt's approach emerges from what he described as an intellectual and emotional desire "to speak with the dead" (p. 1), to recover not merely the content of

historical texts but the social energies that animated them and that continue to resonate in the present. This orientation distinguishes New Historicism from both the formalist approaches that dominated mid-twentieth-century criticism and from earlier historicist methods that treated literature as straightforward reflection of social conditions without attending to its active participation in ideological processes. Central to Greenblatt's framework are several interconnected concepts essential for analyzing Hughes' gay poetics. The first is the historicity of texts and the textuality of history, a dialectical understanding that recognizes literary works as historically embedded while acknowledging that history itself is accessible only through textual mediation. Montrose [5] elaborated this concept, explaining that "all forms of writing are culturally situated and socially embedded, encompassing not only the literary works examined by critics but also the critical discourses themselves" (p. 20). The past cannot be apprehended in its unmediated reality; access to it comes through textual remnants whose survival is "not accidental but shaped by intricate social processes of preservation and erasure" [5]. This understanding proves crucial for analyzing how Hughes' gay content has been preserved, interpreted, and at times effaced by subsequent critical traditions. The second key concept is the process of self-fashioning shaped by structural constraints, understanding identity and expression as constructed through negotiation with available cultural materials and institutional pressures rather than as autonomous expression of interior essence. Greenblatt [3] argued that cultural production emerges from the dynamic interaction between individual artistic agency and the encompassing forces of society, conceptualized through the relationship between the "total artist" and the "totalizing society" (p. 2). The total artist possesses mastery, creativity, and disciplined training that enable creation with apparent independence; the totalizing society envisions a network uniting all dimensions of life while granting access through regulated institutional structures. When an artist confronts such a society, the result is a body of work marked by both accommodation and resistance, a negotiated space where dominant ideologies are simultaneously reinforced and subverted. Greenblatt [6] elaborated in "Towards a Poetics of Culture" that artistic creation is never autonomous but emerges as "a reflection of societal norms, institutional frameworks, and cultural practices" (p. 12). This understanding has crucial implications for reading Hughes: his poems cannot be understood apart from the Harlem Renaissance's institutional circuits, including the publishing houses, literary magazines, patronage networks, and critical establishments that determined what could and could not circulate. The third key concept is the ideological tensions produced where dominant paradigms confront oppositional forces, revealing how cultural formations contain internal contradictions that enable resistance even within hegemonic structures. In "Resonance and Wonder," Greenblatt [7] articulated that New Historicist criticism has been "more interested in unresolved conflict and contradiction than in integration" and "as concerned with the margins as with the center" (p. 2036). Greenblatt [7] further observed that "actions that appear to be single are disclosed as multiple; the apparently isolated power of the individual genius turns out to be bound up with collective, social energy; a gesture of dissent may be an element in a larger legitimation process, while an attempt to stabilize the order of things may turn out to subvert it" (p. 2033). This insight illuminates how Hughes' poems, while circulating through the institutional channels that legitimated the Renaissance's respectability politics, simultaneously worked to destabilize that very order through their encoded gay content. The fourth key concept is the critical role of marginal voices in challenging and destabilizing cultural centers, positioning texts by

marginalized subjects not as peripheral curiosities but as revealing sites where dominant ideologies become visible through the resistance they provoke.

### **Lakoff and Johnson's Conceptual Metaphor Theory**

If Greenblatt's framework illuminates the institutional conditions shaping Hughes' writing, Lakoff and Johnson's Conceptual Metaphor Theory provides rigorous tools for analyzing the specific textual mechanisms through which his poems achieve their effects. First articulated in *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), CMT fundamentally reconceived metaphor from a merely ornamental linguistic device employed for rhetorical effect to a cognitive tool that actively shapes, modifies, and constructs human understanding of reality. Johnson and Lakoff [4] demonstrated that "our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature" (p. 3). This insight transformed the study of metaphor across disciplines, revealing figurative language as central to cognition rather than peripheral to it. A conceptual metaphor involves systematic mapping of one domain of experience, typically a more abstract "target" domain, through a more concrete "source" domain. This mapping is not arbitrary but preserves inferential structures from source to target, enabling understanding of abstract concepts through embodied experience. Lakoff [8] elaborated that metaphor is "conceptual rather than merely linguistic" (p. 40), meaning that metaphorical expressions in language are surface manifestations of deeper cognitive mappings that structure thought itself. These mappings determine not only how we speak but how we think and act. Johnson and Lakoff [4] observed that humans systematically "structure the less clearly delineated in terms of the more clearly delineated" (p. 59), deploying metaphor as a cognitive tool for organizing and interpreting complex and abstract ideas through more familiar concrete experiences. CMT distinguishes several types of conceptual metaphor relevant to literary analysis. Structural metaphors organize one concept in terms of another, as when ARGUMENT IS WAR structures understanding of intellectual disagreement through the domain of physical combat. Orientational metaphors organize concepts through spatial orientations derived from embodied experience, as when HAPPY IS UP reflects the physical posture associated with positive emotional states. Ontological metaphors allow abstract experiences to be treated as entities or substances, enabling quantification and reference. These metaphor types operate within poetic language not as decorative additions but as constitutive structures that shape how readers conceptualize the experiences poems represent. As Ziadi [9] observed, within contemporary cognitive literary studies metaphor "holds significant relevance as a stylistic tool for interpreting literary works and enhancing comprehension of their deeper meanings" (p. 1). For poetic language specifically, CMT reveals that creative metaphors typically extend, elaborate, or combine conventional metaphorical systems rather than creating entirely novel mappings. Lakoff [8] argued that poetic metaphor represents "an extension of conventional metaphorical thought, reinforcing the notion that metaphor is not merely rhetorical but a core mode of cognition, systematically linking source domains to target domains in structured conceptual mappings" (p. 9). This insight proves crucial for understanding Hughes' gay poetics: his poems do not invent new cognitive structures but strategically deploy and combine existing metaphorical systems to encode meanings that could not be directly stated within the institutional constraints of the Harlem Renaissance. The metaphor FRIENDSHIP IS LOVE, for instance, draws on conventional understandings of

both domains while enabling articulation of same-sex desire through a socially acceptable frame that could pass through editorial gatekeeping.

### **Framework Integration and Methodological Approach**

The synthesis of New Historicism and Conceptual Metaphor Theory produces analytical capabilities that neither framework possesses independently while addressing limitations inherent in each. New Historicism excels at situating texts within systems of cultural production and ideological contestation, revealing the institutional forces that shape literary expression. However, it sometimes lacks tools for fine-grained textual analysis, tending toward general claims about cultural dynamics without specifying how individual texts achieve their effects. Conceptual Metaphor Theory provides rigorous methods for analyzing how figurative language structures meaning at the cognitive level, revealing the mechanisms through which metaphors shape understanding. However, it risks treating historically specific patterns as universal cognitive structures, abstracting texts from the particular conditions that shaped their production and reception. Brought together, these frameworks offer a dual vantage point capable of moving between the macrolevel of institutional dynamics and the microlevel of textual mechanisms. New Historicism reveals why Hughes needed to encode his queer content, identifying the specific pressures and gatekeeping mechanisms that made direct expression impossible or dangerous. Conceptual Metaphor Theory reveals how he achieved that encoding, specifying the cognitive mappings that structure his figurative language and enable it to carry transgressive meaning within acceptable forms. The integration demonstrates that Hughes' poetic techniques operate simultaneously as aesthetic choices and cultural instruments, participating in the circulation of social energy through specific cognitive structures that shape readers' understanding of desire, identity, and belonging.

### **HISTORICAL CONTEXT: THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE AND ITS IDEOLOGICAL FORMATION**

Understanding Hughes' gay narratives as social subversion requires detailed examination of the historical formation they sought to subvert. The Harlem Renaissance emerged from the Great Migration, which between 1910 and 1930 brought approximately 1.5 million African Americans from the rural South to northern urban centers in search of economic opportunity, political rights, and escape from the violence of Jim Crow. This demographic transformation concentrated unprecedented numbers of Black artists, intellectuals, and cultural workers in urban neighbourhoods, particularly Harlem, creating conditions for the emergence of a self-conscious cultural movement. Hutchinson [10] observed that the Harlem Renaissance represented a "cultural awakening" often compared to the European Renaissance in its transformative ambitions, expressing "black cultural pride" through artistic production across multiple domains (p. 1).

Harlem's emergence as the movement's epicenter resulted from specific material and institutional conditions. Hudlin [11] explained that Harlem became "the epicenter of Black culture largely because New York City was a hub for white cultural institutions" (p. 5). The concentration of major publishing houses, Broadway theatres, art galleries, and the artistic communities of Greenwich Village drew Black writers and artists seeking both creative

opportunity and access to the institutional mechanisms of cultural legitimation. This proximity to white cultural institutions proved consequential: it enabled Black cultural production to reach broader audiences and gain mainstream recognition, but it also subjected that production to the tastes, expectations, and ideological constraints of white patrons and gatekeepers who exercised significant influence over what could be published, performed, and celebrated.

### **Racial Uplift and Respectability Politics**

The Harlem Renaissance was shaped decisively by the ideology of racial uplift and respectability, which sought to advance the position of African Americans by demonstrating their capacity for refinement, achievement, and cultural production equal to that of whites. Locke [12], widely regarded as the movement's principal theorist, formally articulated this ideology in his landmark anthology *The New Negro* (1925), which announced the emergence of a "new negro" who was "intelligent and determined, striving to maintain parity, neither inflated by emotional accommodations nor undervalued by current social accounts" [12]. Holmes [13] identified Locke as "the principal visionary behind the New Negro Movement," crediting him with inspiring Black artists "to engage in artistic expression across literature, music, and visual arts" (p. 61). Locke conceived the Renaissance as a collective endeavour by gifted intellectuals to craft an authentic and dynamic representation of Black cultural identity while confronting and correcting distorted societal perceptions, as in [14].

W.E.B. Du Bois reinforced and extended this ideology through his influential concept of the "Talented Tenth," which held that "the most educated and capable Black individuals" should "guide and uplift the Black community," providing leadership "essential for achieving success and progress" [15]. Du Bois promoted this vision through his editorship of *The Crisis*, the NAACP's magazine, which featured literary works by emerging Black writers and provided them "a platform for broader recognition and influence" [11]. The movement's intellectual elites worked systematically to construct a positive self-image through what Gallego [16] described as deployment of "good Negroes, clean and cultured and not-funny Negroes, beautiful and nice and upper class" as representative figures of Black achievement (p. 162). Huggins [17] explained that the emergence of the New Negro offered African Americans "a renewed sense of dignity, encouraging them to redefine themselves by rejecting the stereotypes" that had constrained earlier generations (p. 57).

This politics of respectability, while strategically motivated by the genuine desire to combat racist stereotypes and advance Black social position, carried significant costs for those whose identities or experiences did not conform to bourgeois norms. [18] documented that the Renaissance's elites believed they had "a realistic opportunity to transform public perceptions and reframe the warped narratives that influenced dominant racial attitudes" (p. xxi), but this opportunity was pursued through careful curation of which aspects of Black life would be publicly represented. The movement consciously distanced itself from stereotypical representations while simultaneously refraining from engaging with personal predicaments and concerns of many African Americans whose lived experiences did not fit the respectable image being projected. Wintz [19] observed that the Renaissance was "a period of exceptional African-American creativity" that "deeply influenced nearly every dimension of African American culture and intellect," but this creativity operated within

ideological constraints that shaped what forms of expression were encouraged and which were suppressed.

### **The Suppression of Queer Voices**

Gay narratives occupied a particularly precarious position within this ideological formation. While the Renaissance celebrated African American artistic achievement and cultural identity, it operated within a framework of respectability politics that deemed queer expression incompatible with the project of racial advancement. Within this context, queer identities and expressions were not only subject to the broader American society's criminalization and pathologization of homosexuality but also faced specific pressures from a movement invested in projecting images of Black moral uprightness. Garcia [20] documented those queer individuals faced "widespread homophobic persecution, which forced them to suppress their identities and conceal their authentic selves to avoid legal repercussions, and protect themselves from persecution" (p. 2). This suppression operated not only through explicit prohibition but through more subtle mechanisms determining what could be published, celebrated, and included in the emerging canon of African American literature.

Cobb [1] argued that "pervasive homophobia within Black literary criticism during this period contributed to the exclusion of discussions about Black queer identity from the emerging African American literary canon" (p. 329). The prominent literary figures of the Harlem Renaissance who were queer or whose work contained queer content, including Richard Bruce Nugent, Countee Cullen, Claude McKay, and Langston Hughes, "were unable to openly express their gayness in their published works and in Alain Locke's *The New Negro* anthology lest their standing might not be acknowledged within Black literary and social circles" [20]. Stewart observed that the "homophobia of Black progressive circles further pressured black writers to suppress their queer identities" (as cited in [20]). This institutional suppression created a situation in which queer artists had to develop sophisticated strategies for encoding their experiences within forms that could pass through the movement's gatekeeping mechanisms while preserving transgressive meanings for initiated readers. Yet queerness did not simply disappear under this suppression; it persisted in marginalized spaces and encoded forms. Chauncey and Strange [21] documented those certain spaces emerged as sanctuaries for Black queer expression, including A'Lelia Walker's "Dark Tower" salon and the Hamilton Lodge Ball, which by the 1920s and 1930s "had gained considerable recognition and became popularly known as the 'Faggot's Ball'" (pp. 257-259). These spaces highlight the ongoing tension between public conformity and private authenticity, demonstrating that while dominant discourse sought to efface queer identities, underground communities actively cultivated them. The failure of the Harlem Renaissance's official culture to acknowledge queer narratives reveals the limitations of liberation movements constrained by prevailing societal taboos, and the necessity for artists to develop sophisticated strategies for expressing what could not be openly stated.

### **Hughes' Position Within the Renaissance**

Langston Hughes occupied a distinctive and often contentious position within the Harlem Renaissance, aligning himself with forces that challenged the movement's respectability

politics while achieving recognition that enabled his work to circulate through its institutional channels. Hughes' commitment to representing the full spectrum of Black life, including its less respectable dimensions, brought him into conflict with the movement's elite gatekeepers. Hughes acknowledged that his identity as a Black man and the challenges he faced in society strongly influenced his poetry (as cited in Royster [22]). In his essay "My Adventures as a Social Poet" (1947), Hughes articulated his understanding of poetry's social function, demonstrating that he could not limit his writing to abstract or traditional themes but felt a moral and artistic obligation to reflect the marginalized realities of Harlem's streets, tenements, and common individuals.

Hughes positioned himself as what he termed a "documentary-style poet," explaining: "I tend to capture and reflect the events of our era, especially as they relate to my own experiences, my community, and the broader context of our democracy" [23]. This documentary orientation placed Hughes in tension with those who wanted Black art to serve primarily as positive propaganda for racial advancement. Kutzinski and Reed [24] noted that Hughes "documented the world he lived in and played a vital role in shaping its cultural and social narratives" (p. 1), a role that inevitably brought him into conflict with those seeking to control which narratives would represent Black America. Hughes' social commitment found institutional expression through his involvement with the radical collective known as the Niggerati, a self-styled group of emerging Black writers and artists who explicitly challenged the Renaissance's respectability politics. Hughes was instrumental in establishing literary magazines like *Fire!!* (1926), which became an essential venue for new writers to showcase work that would not have been accepted by more established publications. Patel [25] observed that Hughes' "dedication to guiding and working alongside younger authors significantly contributed to the creation of a lasting tradition of outstanding literature and creative progress" (p. 895). Alongside figures such as Zora Neale Hurston and Wallace Thurman, Hughes helped produce *Fire!!* as a publication designed to disrupt the idealized portrayals of Black life that were prevalent at the time, boldly tackling taboo subjects including homosexuality [26]. Sall [27] noted that Black elites "were critical of black young writers, particularly those who founded a magazine called *Fire!* because they resisted their literary perspective through adopting audaciously the marginalized lived realities of Black individuals and offering a more inclusive picture of Black life" (p. 6).

Rampersad [28] documented that Hughes' work "not only illuminated the realities of Black life but also challenged dominant social ideologies through metaphor, a literary device that allowed him to encode resistance while evading censorship" (p. 112). Gates Jr [29] situated Hughes within "the broader tradition of African American literary subversion, where coded expressions serve as a means of cultural and political defiance" (p. 56). This encoding was not merely a defensive strategy but an active engagement with the Renaissance's social energy circuits, deploying available cultural resources to subvert dominant formations from within. Hughes' gay narratives must be understood within this broader context of strategic resistance to respectability politics, as sophisticated textual interventions designed to circulate transgressive content through restrictive institutional channels.

### **TEXTUAL ANALYSIS: METAPHORICAL ENCODING AND SOCIAL SUBVERSION**

This section presents systematic close readings of four Hughes poems, demonstrating how each deploys conceptual metaphor to encode gay narratives within forms that could

circulate through the institutional channels of the Harlem Renaissance while challenging its respectability ideology. The analysis proceeds by identifying specific metaphorical mappings, explicating their cognitive structures according to Johnson and Lakoff [4] framework, and demonstrating their subversive functions within the historical context documented above. Each reading integrates New Historicist attention to institutional conditions with CMT analysis of cognitive mechanisms, fulfilling the study's objective of linking textual mechanisms to historical conditions of circulation.

### **Analysis of 'Poem' (1925): The Poetics of Strategic Silence**

Hughes' "Poem" (1925) exemplifies the strategic deployment of metaphor to encode gay desire within a form that could circulate through the institutional channels of Harlem Renaissance publishing while preserving transgressive meaning for initiated readers. The poem's spare six lines achieve their subversive effects through a complex interplay of what is said and what cannot be said, constituting what this analysis terms the poetics of strategic silence: I loved my friend./ He went away from me./ There's nothing more to say./ The poem ends,/ Soft as it began—-/ I loved my friend. The speaker's opening declaration, "I loved my friend," activates a conceptual metaphor designated FRIENDSHIP IS LOVE. This mapping enables Hughes to name same-sex desire through a socially permissible mask, converting gay intimacy into a frame that could pass through editorial gatekeeping while signaling its true nature to perceptive readers. The choice of "friend" rather than "lover" or "man" is strategically calculated: under the Harlem Renaissance's respectability politics, gay desire could not be openly named without risk to the author's standing and the work's publishability. "Friend" becomes a metaphorical container, a term capacious enough to hold romantic love while presenting an innocuous surface to unsympathetic readers. Within Johnson and Lakoff [4] framework, this represents a structural metaphor in which the target domain of romantic love is understood through the source domain of friendship, preserving the inferential structure of intimacy and emotional attachment while obscuring its homoerotic specificity.

The second line, "He went away from me," activates the conventional conceptual metaphor LOVE IS A JOURNEY. Within this mapping, the beloved's departure becomes a natural feature of love's landscape, an inherent possibility of intimate relationship rather than social expulsion caused by homophobic persecution. This framing is strategically significant: it enables Hughes to represent the dissolution of a same-sex relationship without attributing causation to the hostile social environment that separated gay lovers. The departure is rendered as something that simply happens in love relationships, shielding the poem's gay content from direct scrutiny while encoding for informed readers the social forces that actually drove such separations. The journey metaphor carries with it inferences about movement, destination, and the possibility of return, all of which structure the emotional landscape of the poem in ways that resonate with gay experience of precarious intimacy subject to disruption by forces beyond the lovers' control.

The third line performs a more complex metaphorical operation: "There's nothing more to say." This statement transforms silence from absence into argument, inverting the conventional metaphor LANGUAGE IS POWER into what this analysis terms LANGUAGE IS IMPOSSIBILITY. Under the Harlem Renaissance's respectability politics and the filtering influence of white patronage, certain emotions and relationships could not be openly

discussed without jeopardizing the speaker's social position and the movement's broader project of racial advancement. The line performs the erasure it describes: it mutes speech while simultaneously indicting the system that forces that silence. Hughes' silence is not resignation to fate but critique of the conditions that make full expression impossible. The statement demonstrates how language fails under cultural repression, how the social circuits that enable expression simultaneously constrain it by determining what can and cannot be said within legitimate discourse.

The fourth line, "The poem ends," represents an unusual metapoetic gesture that carries significant metaphorical weight. Poems rarely announce their own endings; by doing so, Hughes blurs the boundary between art and lived experience, suggesting that cultural scripts, the rules governing acceptable expression, terminate utterance before it can fully articulate itself. This analysis conceptualizes this through the metaphor FORM IS FATE: the poem's formal structure mirrors the structure of repression under which it was produced. The cultural demand for silence on queer matters becomes the formal constraint that shapes the poem, rendering aesthetic choice indistinguishable from ideological constraint. The poem must stop because the culture demands silence; its brevity is not aesthetic minimalism but enforced truncation. This metapoetic moment makes visible the institutional pressures that shaped the poem's production, revealing how the circulation of social energy through publishing institutions determined what forms expression could take.

The qualification "Soft as it began" introduces another metaphorical layer through the mapping AFFECT IS VOLUME. In this conceptualization, emotional intensity is understood through the auditory domain: desire must remain low, tender, almost inaudible to escape detection by hostile audiences. This metaphor captures the phenomenology of closeted love, the necessity of keeping one's voice down, of ensuring that transgressive feelings do not announce themselves too loudly in spaces where they might be overheard by those who would condemn or punish them. The softness is simultaneously tender intimacy and enforced quietude, pleasure and constraint inseparably intertwined. The poem's circular return to "I loved my friend" enacts what this analysis terms mnemonic resistance: repetition preserving truth even as dominant discourse denies it. The envelope structure, beginning and ending with the same declaration, insists on the persistence of queer love within a cultural formation that demanded its erasure.

### **Analysis of 'Port Town' (1926): Desire in Liminal Spaces**

"Port Town" (1926) stages a fleeting encounter between a sailor and a speaker, deploying the port as a liminal space where the rigid boundaries of respectable society become temporarily permeable. The poem employs a more expansive canvas than "Poem" to explore the dynamics of gay encounter in spaces marked by transience, anonymity, and the suspension of ordinary social rules. The speaker's repeated imperatives, "Hello, sailor boy," "Come with me," "Come on," "Come," initiate a series of invitations that transform the sailor's literal journey into a metaphor for erotic possibility and gay intimacy. The poem activates the conceptual metaphor LOVE IS A JOURNEY while extending it in ways specific to gay experience under conditions of surveillance and prohibition. The sailor's movement "In from the sea" and "Out o' the sea" becomes metaphorical docking and disembarkation, with intimacy itself mapped as travel across thresholds between duty (the sea, discipline, heteronormative order) and pleasure (the land, nightlife, gay intimacy). The port functions

as what anthropologists term a liminal space, a threshold where ordinary social rules are suspended and alternative forms of relation become possible. Within such spaces, identities and relationships that are prohibited in mainstream society can temporarily flourish. Hughes' choice of setting is not incidental but strategically significant: the port provides a plausible location for the encounter he describes while metaphorically representing the liminal status of queer existence itself, always positioned at thresholds, never fully belonging to the respectable social order. The offer of alcohol, "Drink cognac. / Rather have wine?", deploys the conceptual metaphor DESIRE IS APPETITE, coding seduction through consumption and reframing hospitality as a ritual of consent and care. The speaker's solicitousness, offering options rather than imposing, establishes an ethics of gay encounter that respects the sailor's agency and preferences. The choice of refined European drinks, cognac and wine rather than beer or whiskey, carries additional significance: it signals cosmopolitan sophistication that marks queer spaces as modern and urbane rather than primitive or degraded. This characterization implicitly counters both racist stereotypes of Black culture and homophobic stereotypes of queer spaces as sordid, positioning the encounter within a framework of refinement that appropriates the Renaissance's own values of cultural achievement while subverting its heteronormative assumptions. The imagery of "Solid land, kid" invokes the conceptual metaphor STABILITY IS SOLIDITY, promising safety and grounding after the instability of maritime life. Land represents refuge, a place where the sailor can rest and where intimacy can feel secure after the precariousness of the sea. Yet the immediate shift to "wild, white nights" destabilizes that security, binding refuge to risk and revealing the paradoxical status of queer spaces as simultaneously safe havens and sites of danger. The adjective "white" in "white nights" carries double meaning operating on multiple levels simultaneously. On a literal level, it describes the electric illumination of port-town nightlife. On a symbolic level, it invokes the Harlem Renaissance's economy of white patronage, the dependence of Black cultural production on white audiences, publishers, and patrons who exercised significant control over what could be expressed and circulated. This analysis designates this metaphorical structure WHITE LIGHT IS SURVEILLANCE. The lights that make queer desire visible, that enable encounters like the one the poem describes, are simultaneously tied to oversight by those who would regulate and constrain such expression. During the Harlem Renaissance, Black art flourished, but much of its visibility depended on white sponsorship. White audiences consumed Black creativity but often demanded it conform to their expectations of respectability or exotic spectacle. The same lights that welcome also expose; the illumination that enables expression also subjects it to regulatory scrutiny. Hughes' diction captures this paradox: the warmth of "warm, white lights" suggests invitation and safety, but the whiteness marks that safety as conditional, dependent on the forbearance of those who control the conditions of visibility. The poem's linguistic features, including pet names like "kid" and "sweetie," the sudden escalation to "I love you" and "Be mine," mirror what Chauncey and Strange [21] documented as the compressed temporality of cruising, where anonymity and urgency are conditioned by surveillance and the sailor's imminent departure. Commands create urgency and directness, reflecting the accelerated pace of encounters where there is no time for gradual intimacy. Pet names soften these commands, adding intimacy in otherwise anonymous exchanges, simulating closeness in fleeting moments. The rapid progression from casual address to declarations of love and possession mirrors the compressed timeline of cruising, where relationships must be condensed into minutes or hours. The claim of possession, "Be mine," becomes

compensatory: a verbal substitute for the public recognition of bonds that mainstream society denies to queer relationships.

### Analysis of 'Desire' (1927): The Phenomenology of Forbidden Intimacy

"Desire" (1927) deploys what this analysis terms phenomenological metaphor, mapping that structures not external social relations but the internal experience of queer intimacy under conditions of prohibition. Where "Poem" and "Port Town" focus on relationships and encounters, "Desire" turns inward to explore how forbidden love is experienced subjectively, how it feels to desire under conditions of danger and denial. The poem's opening lines establish its governing conceit through a striking structural metaphor: Desire to us / Was like a double death. The structural metaphor GAY PASSION IS DEATH operates on multiple levels simultaneously, generating a complex of meanings that capture the paradoxical nature of queer experience under prohibition. On one level, the metaphor invokes the literary convention of erotic love as "little death", the ecstatic dissolution of self in intimacy, the momentary extinction of ego in union with another. This association positions queer desire within a tradition of representing intense erotic experience as a kind of self-transcendence, a temporary death of the bounded individual self in the merger with a beloved other. On another level, the metaphor captures the "social death" imposed by homophobia: the exclusion from community, the erasure of one's existence from public acknowledgment, the constant threat of violence and persecution that hung-over queer lives during this period.

The modifier "double" holds both meanings in suspension, refusing to reduce queer experience to either pleasure or punishment, ecstasy or annihilation. Gay passion is death because it offers the ecstatic self-dissolution of intense intimacy, and it is death because the social order threatens destruction to those who experience it. The word "double" prevents any simple reading: the death is not singular but dual, not unambiguous but layered with contradictory implications. This doubling itself becomes a figure for the dual consciousness of queer existence under prohibition, always experiencing desire through the overlay of social danger, never able to separate pleasure from the threat of punishment. The subsequent lines extend and elaborate this metaphorical system: Swift dying / Of our mingled breath, / Evaporation / Of an unknown strange perfume. "Mingled breath" activates the conventional metaphor BREATH IS LIFE while encoding physical intimacy through a universally accessible image. The image of two people breathing together, sharing breath in closeness, conveys intimacy without explicit sexuality, protecting the poem from censorship while signaling its erotic content to readers attuned to such signals. But because that breath "swiftly" dies, it becomes a metaphor for the vulnerability of queer relationships: though deeply vital in the moment, they remain subject to sudden dissolution, denial of legitimacy, and enforced erasure. The "swift dying" captures how queer intimacy, however intense, could be terminated at any moment by exposure, persecution, or the simple impossibility of sustaining forbidden relationships in a hostile environment. The metaphor QUEER DESIRE IS EPHEMERAL SUBSTANCE emerges in the image of perfume: a substance that is real yet intangible, powerfully present to the senses yet quick to disappear, impossible to hold or contain. Perfume is something one can smell but not see or grasp; it is undeniably real in its effects yet leaves no permanent trace. By comparing desire to perfume, Hughes captures how gay intimacy could feel powerful in the moment while remaining vulnerable

to disappearance, leaving only faint traces in memory. The qualification of the perfume as "unknown" and "strange" marks queer desire as falling outside dominant social narratives: experienced intensely but not openly named or socially acknowledged, familiar to those who experience it but unrecognized by official discourse. The poem's concluding image of the "naked room" deploys spatial metaphor to figure vulnerability: gay intimacy exists in stripped, precarious spaces, unprotected by the coverings of respectability that shelter heterosexual relationships from scrutiny and attack.

### **Analysis of 'Boy' (1928): Classical Camouflage and Erotic Iconography**

"Boy" (1928) represents Hughes' most elaborate deployment of what this analysis terms classical camouflage: the encoding of queer content through references to mythological and literary figures whose ambiguous sexuality provides cover for homoerotic expression. This strategy exploits the cultural capital of classical education, deploying references that signal sophistication and learning while simultaneously creating space for queer meaning that would be censored in more direct forms. The poem opens by comparing its subject to Shakespearean archetypes: Somewhat like Ariel / And somewhat like Puck. The comparison invokes queerness without direct declaration through figures whose gender and sexuality have been objects of scholarly debate and artistic interpretation. Ariel, the ethereal spirit of *The Tempest*, is often portrayed as genderless or ambiguously gendered, a being of air and magic rather than flesh, signifying fluid identity and invisible labor. Ariel's bondage to Prospero and longing for freedom resonates with queer subtexts of hidden existence and constrained freedom, of service performed under compulsion while yearning for release into authentic expression. Puck, the mischievous trickster of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, destabilizes romantic boundaries and embodies sexual ambiguity, manipulating lovers and confusing desires in ways that align with queer disruption of heteronormative order. These figures function as ontological metaphors within Johnson and Lakoff [4] framework, containers for queer traits that cannot be openly named, enabling Hughes to gesture toward liminality and gender-sexual fluidity while maintaining plausible deniability within classical literary reference. The poem's subsequent imagery grounds desire in corporeal, taboo pleasure through the figure of the "gutter boy / Who loves to play in muck." Here Hughes subverts bourgeois morality by reframing "muck," conventionally associated with degradation, filth, and moral corruption, as the site of joyful transgression. The conceptual blend IMPURITY IS EROTIC VITALITY reclaims the abject, positioning queer pleasure not as shameful deviation from a pure norm but as life-affirming play that embraces what respectable society rejects. This revaluation directly challenges the Harlem Renaissance's politics of respectability, which sought to distance Black culture from associations with the low, the dirty, and the morally suspect. Hughes insists that vitality and joy can be found precisely in what the respectable middle class sought to disavow.

The comparison to classical deities extends this revaluation: He has something of Bacchus / And something of Pan. Bacchus, the god of wine, stands for intoxication, celebration, and ecstatic excess that transcends ordinary consciousness and social constraint. Pan, the god of nature and lust, represents raw desire and freedom, sexuality as natural force rather than civilized restraint. By linking the boy to these divine figures, Hughes frames queer sexuality as both natural (aligned with Pan's connection to the earth and bodily drives) and divine (partaking of Bacchus's power to inspire ecstasy and transcendence). This framing directly counters pathologizing discourses that represented

homosexuality as unnatural perversion or civilizational degeneration. The classical reference provides cultural authority for a reevaluation of queer desire as powerful, natural, and life-affirming rather than as shameful deviance requiring suppression. The sailor figure, "And a way with women / Like a sailor man," operates as a double metaphor exploiting the gap between surface and initiated meanings. On the surface, the comparison affirms heterosexual masculinity, attributing to the boy a seductive charm directed at women. Within queer cultures of the early twentieth century, however, sailors were iconic symbols of erotic fantasy and coded desire. As Chauncey and Strange [21] documented, the sailor's hypermasculine image, mobility, and anonymity made sailors emblems of gay cruising and sexual freedom in port cities. Their uniform became a fetish object, their transient presence an occasion for encounters beyond the surveillance of settled communities. Hughes thus employs heteronormative camouflage, deflecting suspicion by explicitly mentioning attraction to women while simultaneously signaling queer possibility to readers familiar with the sailor's erotic iconography in gay culture. The boy's physical description extends this metaphorical system: "Straight and slender / And solid with strength / And lovely as a tree / All his virile length." The tree metaphor naturalizes male beauty, framing the boy's attractiveness through an image of organic growth, rootedness, and vitality. "Virile length" encodes phallic imagery within acceptable poetic convention, celebrating the male body's erotic appeal while disguising that celebration within the language of nature appreciation. The adjective "straight," ostensibly describing posture, carries ironic resonance for readers attuned to its sexual connotations, creating a double meaning that both affirms and undermines heteronormative assumptions. The poem's conclusion brings its subversive content closest to explicit statement with the boy's declaration that he would "rather be a sinner... and go to hell." This embrace of sin explicitly rejects the Harlem Renaissance's politics of racial uplift and respectability, which demanded moral conformity as the price of racial advancement.

## DISCUSSION

The foregoing analysis demonstrates that Hughes' gay narratives in the selected poems constitute deliberate acts of ideological subversion operating through specific textual mechanisms that can be systematically identified and analyzed. This section synthesizes the findings of the close readings, discusses their implications for understanding Hughes' poetic practice and the Harlem Renaissance more broadly, and reflects on the methodological contributions of the integrated framework. The discussion addresses each of the study's objectives in turn, demonstrating how the analysis has fulfilled them.

### **Patterns of Metaphorical Encoding**

Across the four poems analyzed, several consistent patterns of metaphorical encoding emerge that demonstrate the systematic nature of Hughes' subversive strategies. First, Hughes deploys what this analysis has termed container metaphors: figures that can hold queer content within socially acceptable exteriors. "Friend" in "Poem" contains romantic love within the frame of platonic relationship. The port in "Port Town" contains queer encounter within a space marked by transience and anonymity. "Death" in "Desire" contains both erotic ecstasy and social persecution within a single figure. Classical references in "Boy" contain homoerotic admiration within the culturally authorized frame of literary allusion.

These containers share a common structure: they are capacious enough to hold transgressive content while presenting innocuous surfaces to hostile readers, enabling the poems to circulate through institutional channels that would have rejected explicit queer expression.

Second, Hughes exploits conventional conceptual metaphors (LOVE IS A JOURNEY, DESIRE IS APPETITE, LIFE IS BREATH) in ways that encode specifically queer meanings through extension and combination. The JOURNEY metaphor, for instance, takes on particular resonance in "Port Town" where the sailor's literal journey from sea to land becomes a figure for crossing the threshold into queer intimacy. The APPETITE metaphor gains specific force from the refined drinks offered, cosmopolitan choices that counter stereotypes of queer spaces as degraded. By working with conventional metaphorical systems rather than inventing entirely novel mappings, Hughes ensured that his poems would be cognitively accessible while reserving their queer specificity for readers capable of recognizing the extensions and combinations that encoded it. This strategy aligns with Lakoff [8] observation that poetic metaphor typically extends rather than abandons conventional conceptual structures.

Third, Hughes develops several original metaphorical structures that specifically address the conditions of queer existence under prohibition. LANGUAGE IS IMPOSSIBILITY in "Poem" captures how speech is constrained by social censorship, transforming silence from absence into critique. WHITE LIGHT IS SURVEILLANCE in "Port Town" figures the paradox of visibility that simultaneously enables and endangers queer expression. QUEER DESIRE IS EPHEMERAL SUBSTANCE in "Desire" represents the phenomenology of intimacy that is intensely present yet vulnerable to dissolution. IMPURITY IS EROTIC VITALITY in "Boy" reclaims what respectability politics rejected, revaluing transgression as life-affirming rather than shameful. These original metaphors demonstrate Hughes's creative engagement with the cognitive resources available to him, developing new conceptual structures to represent experiences that existing metaphors could not adequately capture.

### **Subversion through Circulation**

Greenblatt [3] concept of social energy circulation illuminates how Hughes' encoded poems function as instruments of ideological subversion rather than merely as private expressions smuggled past inattentive gatekeepers. By crafting works that could circulate through the institutional channels of the Harlem Renaissance, including publication in literary magazines, inclusion in anthologies, and critical recognition, Hughes ensured that his queer content reached audiences it could never have reached through more explicit expression that would have been excluded from those channels. The encoding was not merely defensive, a way of protecting himself and his work from censorship and persecution, but strategic, a way of infiltrating transgressive content into the very cultural formation that sought to suppress it. The poems participate in the Renaissance's circulation of social energy while redirecting some of that energy toward subversive ends. This analysis reveals the Harlem Renaissance as a more internally contested formation than celebratory accounts acknowledge. The movement was not a unified project of racial advancement but a terrain of struggle where competing visions of Black identity, desire, and cultural politics contended for dominance. Figures like Du Bois [15] and Locke [12] sought to enforce respectability as the movement's governing ideology, but younger artists like Hughes insisted on freedom to represent Black experience in all its complexity, including its gay dimensions. The encoding

strategies Hughes developed were responses to this ideological struggle, ways of pursuing artistic and political goals within constraints imposed by those who controlled the movement's institutional apparatus. As Greenblatt [7] observed, "a gesture of dissent may be an element in a larger legitimation process, while an attempt to stabilize the order of things may turn out to subvert it" (p. 2033). Hughes's poems demonstrate this dynamic, appearing to participate in legitimate cultural production while working to destabilize its ideological foundations. The poems' dual address, their capacity to signify differently to different readers, represents a sophisticated negotiation with the conditions of cultural circulation. To readers invested in respectability ideology, the poems could appear as brief lyrics of friendship, urban encounter, erotic passion, and youthful vitality, all acceptable subjects for poetic treatment within the Renaissance's framework. To readers attuned to queer experience and its cultural encodings, the same poems revealed same-sex desire, the dynamics of cruising, the phenomenology of forbidden intimacy, and defiant affirmation of queer pleasure. This dual address enabled the poems to circulate widely while preserving their transgressive meanings for those capable of receiving them. It also created a kind of queer counter public within the broader circulation of Renaissance literature, a community of readers who recognized and shared the encoded meanings that passed unnoticed by others.

### **Methodological Contributions and Limitations**

The synthesis of New Historicism and Conceptual Metaphor Theory developed in this study offers a replicable methodological framework for analyzing how literary texts negotiate ideological constraints through specific textual mechanisms. New Historicism provides essential tools for situating texts within their conditions of production and reception, revealing the institutional pressures and ideological formations that shape what can be expressed. Without this historical contextualization, analysis of encoding strategies risks becoming formalist exercise divorced from the material conditions that made encoding necessary. Conceptual Metaphor Theory provides rigorous methods for identifying and explicating the cognitive structures through which figurative language organizes meaning. Without this textual specificity, historicist analysis risks remaining at the level of general claims about cultural dynamics without demonstrating how individual texts achieve their effects. The methodology proceeds by first establishing the historical conditions that constrained expression (the Harlem Renaissance's respectability politics, the suppression of queer voices, the institutional gatekeeping that determined what could circulate), then identifying the metaphorical structures through which texts encode constrained content (container metaphors, extended conventional metaphors, original metaphorical structures), and finally demonstrating how these encodings function as subversion (enabling transgressive content to circulate through restrictive channels while preserving meaning for initiated readers). This three-step methodology is applicable to other instances of marginalized voices operating within constraining cultural formations, representing a contribution to literary methodology that extends beyond the specific case analyzed here. Several limitations of this study suggest directions for future research. First, the analysis has concentrated on a small corpus of four poems; extending the methodology to Hughes' broader body of work could reveal how his encoding strategies developed over time, whether they became more or less explicit as his cultural authority grew, and how they intersected with his treatments of other marginalized experiences. Second, the study has

focused on the production side of the circulation circuit; reception studies examining how different audiences actually read these poems, what meanings they extracted, and how those readings shaped the poems' cultural effects would complement the present analysis. Third, comparative analysis with other queer Harlem Renaissance writers, particularly Richard Bruce Nugent whose "Smoke, Lilies and Jade" (1926) represents the period's most explicit queer narrative, could illuminate different strategies available and the different choices writers made in navigating the same ideological constraints.

### **CONCLUSION**

This study examines Langston Hughes's gay narratives in selected poems from 1925 to 1928, arguing that they serve as deliberate sites of ideological subversion within the Harlem Renaissance's cultural politics. Utilizing Greenblatt's New Historicist concept of social energy circulation and Johnson and Lakoff [4] Conceptual Metaphor Theory, the analysis reveals how these works actively engage in ideological struggles rather than merely reflecting their historical context. The study meets four objectives: contextualizing Hughes's gay narratives within the Harlem Renaissance, demonstrating his use of conceptual metaphors to encode gay desire, revealing the subversive function of these encoded narratives, and providing a methodological framework that connects textual mechanisms to historical conditions. Historically, the Harlem Renaissance is depicted as a hegemonic culture that prioritized bourgeois, heteronormative values, suppressing queer expression and presenting a contested arena for visions of Black identity. While figures like Du Bois [15] and Locke [12] enforced respectability politics, Hughes and the younger generation advocated for artistic freedom that included queer dimensions. The metaphorical analysis highlights Hughes's strategic use of container metaphors and extended conventional metaphors to encode queer meanings and navigate restrictive channels of expression. The synthesis of New Historicism and Conceptual Metaphor Theory proved beneficial, allowing for deeper insights into how Hughes's poetic techniques operate as both aesthetic choices and cultural instruments within Harlem Renaissance politics. This study repositions Hughes as a significant practitioner of encoded resistance rather than just a chronicler of folk experiences. It also posits that queer narratives can function as sites of theoretical intervention, providing an analytical framework applicable to other marginalized voices. Ultimately, Hughes's narratives are presented as active participants in ideological struggle, transforming constraints into subversive resources, and enriching our understanding of marginalized voices in history.

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