

WHAT ECHOES TELL US: THE UNDERLYING QUEER AND RACIAL ELEMENTS IN GWENDOLYN BROOKS' MAUD MARTHA AND SELECTED POEMS

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Abstract:

*Gwendolyn Brooks embeds latent strains of Queer Theory in her works in order to parallel the struggles of the black community. Growing up in Chicago, a city known for two historical districts—Boystown and Bronzeville—Brooks uses these two dynamic districts to create a powerful political statement. Primarily focusing on Brooks' "Gay Chaps at the Bar" series, "The Sundays of Satin-Legs Smith," and Maud Martha, this paper delves into the emasculation black and gay male soldiers experienced in World War II, the hypersexuality of the zoot suit and drag costumes, and the negative effects of homosocial relationships on heterosocial relationships. Drawing heavily on contemporary theories and scientific research such as Alfred Kinsey's *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* in conjunction with modern Queer Theory ideologies and concepts like Graham Thompson's *Male Sexuality under Surveillance: The Office in American Literature*, this paper explores the possible link between Gwendolyn Brooks and the gay community living in a McCarthy-embracing, Post-World War II America. Such Queer Theory elements analyzed in this paper consist of: the covert homosexual nature of the soldier in "Gay Chaps at the Bar," the homosocial relationships the soldier cultivated and the farce exploitations of heterosexual performance, the emasculation of black males in a white-dominated society, the hypersexuality of the zoot suit and its paralleled structure of the drag costume, and the collapse of the marriage between a couple due to homosocial relationships, surveillance of male masculinity, and the Drag Balls of Harlem during the 1920's.*

Gwendolyn Brooks, one of the most talented, yet under-recognized American poets of the 20th century, received critical recognition for her poetic works of art. Her craftsmanship shined brightly in her many vignettes and novels during the course of her life. Early in her career, Brooks received the Pulitzer Prize—a good omen for fame and fortune. However, the overt fame and fortune experienced by many other poets and writers during the 20th century never came to Brooks. Being a Pulitzer Prize winner, one must wonder why the riches and fame awarded to other writers and poets never befell upon Brooks.

Raised in the great "Windy City" itself, Brooks was able to transform elements of every day black life into poetic voice. However, there seems to be more going on within her works than just voicing the racial injustices the black community were encountering frequently during Brooks' poetic career. I wish to suggest that Gwendolyn Brooks pays homage to the gay community with the use of underlying queer elements residing within her politically-influenced poetry due to her deep relationship with poetic Icon, Langston Hughes. Brooks and Hughes shared not only a poetic relationship, but a friendship which would defined the two. This affinity between Hughes and Brooks would continue to grow throughout each poet's lifetime, especially early on in Brooks' career when Hughes would endorse Brooks' *A Street in Bronzeville*—which sparked Brooks' poetic career. Hughes would continue to act as a mentor to Brooks by suggesting novels and poems for Brooks to read in order to strengthen her writing.

The relationship between Hughes and Brooks is striking since Hughes was believed, and even accused, to be a homosexual. Being both black and gay, Hughes represents two very distinct different communities experiencing adversity in 20th century America—a representation I think Brooks noted and drew on most heavily when writing her contemporary works. Being very good friends with Hughes, Brooks may have been enlightened about both black male *and* gay male adversities during the mid-1900's, resulting in a hybridization of the two communities and an even more powerful message to her intended readers.

Other black poets like Countee Cullen and Claude McKay may have also impacted Brooks and her poetry since these poetic icons were attached to the gay community as well. Cullen and McKay, like Hughes, also had a literary relationship with Brooks. This dynamic relationships between Brooks and these three influential black male writers was fostered through letters and interpersonal meetings.

Mentored by Langston Hughes and establishing a relationship with other black gay writers, Brooks may have been exposed to or felt a connection with the black gay community—a connection she may not have been deeply exposed to during the course of her upbringing due to the negative stigmas Americans possessed regarding homosexuality. Hughes, McKay, and Cullen may have exposed Brooks to unique queer elements such as diverse meanings of masculinity, homosexual relationships, drag, and homosocial relationships. The use of underlying queer elements may be Brooks' way of paying homage to Hughes and the gay citizens—specifically living in Chicago—in the 1950's, who, like the black community, were also facing political injustices and adversities in a McCarthy-embracing, post-WWII America. In this way, Brooks seems to be taking up the poetic gauntlet for these two very diverse yet distinctly similar communities by implementing a form of double-consciousness, stealthily into her works.

We could justify this inter-connection between the gay community and the black community that Brooks seems to establish in underlying ways by using the city of Chicago—the city in which

Brooks lived for a great portion of her life—as a foundation. Chicago, which was a metropolis for blacks in America before and after the Great Migration, also served as a metropolis for the gay community for reasons later expressed in this paper. These metropolises would continue to grow into they became intricate parts of Chicago itself—respectively known as Bronzeville and Boystown. Bronzeville, which became and continues to be a district within Chicago continues to be a beacon of strength and pride for black Americans. Likewise, Boystown was and remains to be a center of pride for gay identified Americans. Since both Bronzeville and Boystown existed within the same city—and the reporter-like poetry Brooks was noted to write, it could be assumed that Brooks was knowledgeable about gay affairs and sufferings, and thus, included some of these sufferings and queer elements within her work to mirror the pains and struggles black Americans faced in a predominantly white America. In this manner, Brooks gives voice to the disenfranchised citizens living in America—the blacks, women, and the marginalized gay citizens.

I propose the idea that Gwendolyn Brooks embeds in her earlier works latent strains of queer elements as a form of agency to voice the struggles of the gay community in the early 20th century by paralleling the struggles of the gay community with the struggles of the black community. Brooks accomplishes this intertwining connection that the black community and the gay community shared by queering her black male characters in subtle ways—particularly the returned soldiers from the “Gay Chaps at the Bar” poems, Satin-Legs Smith, and Paul from *Maud Martha*. By queering her black male characters in a subtle fashion, I propose that Brooks is making a statement about the racial

inequalities of her time in conjunction with the gay community since both communities faced unjust laws which targeted them explicitly.

Using the homosexual nature and poetic elements resounding within the “Gay Chaps at the Bar” series, the emasculation and hypersexuality of Satin-Legs Smith from “The Sundays of Satin-Legs Smith,” and the deterioration of Paul's marriage with Maud in *Maud Martha*, it is the goal of this paper to propose the possibility that Brooks incorporated latent queer elements in her earlier works in order to parallel the struggles of the black and gay communities.

Boys Will Be Boys

“Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth.” -Oscar Wilde

Though Eve Sedgwick and Jean Lipman-Blumen discuss homosocial relationships much later than *A Street in Bronzeville*'s publish date, homosocial relationships exist within Brooks' works. Despite Sedgwick and Lipman-Blumen believing in two different interpretations—Sedgwick's homosocial included a sexual desire and Lipman-Blumen's homosociality was platonic in nature—Brooks' use of the homosocial seems to be a hybrid of the two. This hybridization could be based on Alfred Kinsey's *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* report, which proved to be a startling topic in America during Brooks' young professional career due to its implications and findings regarding homosexuality, inter-racial marriage/intercourse, and pre/post martial intercourse. Drawing on Kinsey's work, we can propose the idea that Brooks created her own distinct form of homosocial relationships based on Kinsey's idea that “[a]n individual who engages in a sexual relation with another male without, however, coming to climax, or an individual who is erotically aroused by a homosexual stimulus without ever having overt relations, has certainly had a homosexual experience” (623) since her characters do not overtly engage in homosexual activity (such as intercourse) within her works. However, using this idea presented by Kinsey, her male characters do not need to necessarily engage in homosexual intercourse in order to be considered or identified as gay. Focusing on the homosexual experience Kinsey describes, I suggest that Brooks is actually using the idea of the homosocial to subtly queer her black male characters to the point where we may consider them homosexual—covertly or not. Graham Thompson, in his book *Male Sexuality under Surveillance*, gives further evidence for generalizing homosocial relationships and the homosexual experiences because “[...]male-male relationships stand implicated in the continuum of male homosocial desire[...].” (9). Therefore, Brooks' use of the homosocial relationship in her texts may be inferred as an indirect link to homosocial and homosexual desire that her black male characters seem to possess.

Brooks' embeds the use of latent queer elements in her black male characters within her poem “Gay Chaps at the Bar” in order to expose the struggles both gay soldiers and black soldiers experienced in the armed forces in the 1940's. First, Brooks uses the word “gay” deliberately in the title of her poem. Encompassing two definitions, the reader is then able to choose which definition of the word “gay” they wish to focus on. However, it is interesting that Brooks chooses this word explicitly instead of some other synonym like “happy” or “cheerful” to describe her soldiers. Due to the nature of the word “gay,” Brooks allows the freedom of a reader to read into her poem with a queer lens. Those who desire to read the poem in a non-queer fashion are able to, but those who fixate on the word gay and desire to read the poem with a queer interpretation are also able. It is this indirect nature of the word gay and the deliberate use of the word that illustrates Brooks' attempt to covertly queer her male characters, while also establishing an underlying queer tone to her “Gay Chaps at the Bar” series.

Interestingly, the quote by Lieutenant William Couch—“...and guys I knew in the States, young officers, return from the front crying and trembling. Gay chaps at the bar in Los Angeles, Chicago, New York...” (Brooks 64)—at the start of the poem provides evidence that Brooks is trying to establish a queer tone to the poem since Brooks uses a quote that mentions large, American cities where an exorbitant amount of homosexuals lived. Brooks’ deliberate use of Couch’s quote bears significant weight since such cities like Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York were and continue to remain crucial metropolises for gay identified males. Fred Fejes, in his book *Gay Rights and Moral Panic*, provides even more evidence to suggest Brooks’ covert expression of the homosexual with the use of Couch’s quote because

“For many young men and women, service in the military and war industries gave them [homosexual/bisexuals] their first opportunity to move away from home and out of the routine and rules of daily life, allowing them to explore previously secret same-sex desires. After the war many of them chose to remain in the larger cities, such as New York, Philadelphia, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Miami....Here they could continue to live as homosexuals” (13).

As someone who wrote to soldiers quite frequently—especially her brother, Staff Sergeant Raymond Brooks—and as someone who viewed herself as a reporter-esque poet, Brooks may have known this information regarding the homosexual livelihood during and after times of war; especially the homosexual livelihood and black community stemming from Chicago. Knowing the life of a soldier intimately, Brooks would have known too well the suggestion Couch makes in his quote, but she chose to use the quote deliberately anyway. Residing much of her life in a large city herself, Brooks would have understood the significance of these large American cities on gay men due to the large homosexual population that lived in Chicago alone during the mid-20th century. With this in mind, it could be assumed that Brooks chose Lieutenant William Couch’s quote explicitly for the opening of her poem in order to express the homosocial bonds and homosexual experiences these men underwent during WWII.

Brooks continues to covertly express the homosocial and the homosexual desire her soldiers have later in her “Gay Chaps at the Bar” poems by “masking” the homosocial and homosexual desire with imagery and figurative language. In the poem “my dreams, my works, must wait till after hell,” Brooks uses imagery and figurative language to suggest the poem is about issues soldiers may experience in war. For example, securing one’s individuality and innocence—“I hold my honey and I store my bread/In little jars and cabinets of my will/...Be firm till I return from hell (Brooks 66). However, we could also read these figures of language as expressions of Brooks’ underlying queer tone and elements of racial inequality. The lines “I hold my honey and I store my bread/In little jars and cabinets of my will” (Brooks 66) expresses the soldier’s way of “storing” his homosexuality until after the war since homosexuals were sought out and persecuted within the military ranks within the US Armed Forces. “Honey” suggests the soldier’s sexuality since the word “honey” is often thought to be recognized as a sexual metaphor. The word “bread” could be inferred as the soldier’s true life (the life of his true, non-war time life), much like how the waffers at one’s church may serve as a symbol for life in certain sects of Christianity. The soldier must store his sexuality, his desire for sex, and his true life until after the end of the war, which is why he “stores” all the parts of himself in jars and cabinets.

Brooks provides further evidence for a queer interpretation with the following lines—“I am very hungry. I am incomplete” (Brooks 66) since the soldier is “incomplete” at war. He is unable to be his true self to the very extent that he is “very hungry” for the honey and the bread he was begrudgingly forced to store.

Kinsey unveils the possibility for the queerization of the gay chaps since “[...]about 40 percent [of people in the high school educational level, which included the armed forces] have at least incidental homosexual relations[...] (357). However, it must be noted that “An individual who

engages in a sexual relation with another male without, however, coming to climax, or an individual who is erotically aroused by a homosexual stimulus without ever having overt relations, has certainly had a homosexual experience” (Kinsey 623), so this figure could have been much higher due to the level of secrecy one had to be in the military ranks regarding their homosexuality (we must keep in mind that “Don't Ask, Don't Tell” would not be in effect for another fifty years). Brooks seems to be playing off of this belief that soldiers undergo queer experiences in war with the homosocial relationships soldiers create. This homosocial relationship men form during war is not a new concept since this particular relationship has been explored by a plethora of scholars ranging from the Spartan warriors to the American soldiers fighting currently in the Middle East. Since she corresponded intermittently with a copious amount of soldiers during WWII, and being familiar with the “unspeakable truths” regarding the closeted lifestyle of a homosexual male in the mid-1900's from the black gay writers she knew— like Hughes—Brooks would have candidly understood the homosocial relationships men generated under war-time measures and the labor soldiers were compelled to undergo in order to keep their clandestine homosexual natures a secret.

We also see the way Brooks queers her soldiers in the “Gay Chaps at the Bar” poems by the she changes pronouns from the start of the poem to the end. The poem series first starts with the pronoun “we” and then gradually shifts into the personal pronoun “I” as the series progresses. This shift in pronoun usage is Brooks' way of queering her male soldiers due to the gradual progression of details—the series becomes more personal, more explicit, and more detailed. In this manner, the soldier's inner dilemmas and personal elements are exposed to the reader.

The heterosexual imagery—“And we knew beautifully how to give women/The summer spread, the tropics, of our love” (Brooks 64)— found in the first poem of the series is surrounded with the concept of “we,” as in the group of soldiers engaging in activities of the heterosexual livelihood, but the series seems to end with a homosexual focus—“I am very hungry. I am incomplete./And none can tell me when I may dine again” (Brooks 64) due to the shift in pronoun usage. Also, the sexual imagery shifts from sexual imagery of summer to food at the close of the series providing further evidence that Brooks is attempting to make the series more personal as the series progresses.

Brooks seems to be playing with Kinsey's idea that “Some males may be involved in both heterosexual and homosexual activities within the same period of time (Kinsey 639) by the way she shifts the use of pronouns within the series of poems. Using Kinsey's idea, Brooks shapes her soldier to remain queer despite the heterosexual experiences he performed during the war. We still see the angst against homosexuality in the US Armed Forces with the implementation of “Don't Ask, Don't Tell” and prior legislation regarding the sexual preference of a soldier and the armed forces. With this in mind, it is not unreasonable to propose the idea that the “we” who engage in the heterosexual intercourse activities at the start of the poem series is a matter of necessity for the soldier instead of a definite truth. In this case, the heterosexual activities he engaged in with his fellow soldiers were outliers; a farce exploitation of heterosexuality. To protect himself, the gay soldier had to “hold [his] honey” and “store [his] bread” internally in order to persevere and stay true to himself throughout the war.

On the other hand, we do not have accurate data that depicts the true percentage of males within the US Armed Forces during WWII since the idea of homosexuality was such a hot topic it was kept on the down-low. With the active persecution and surveillance of queer men, soldiers that may have identified as homosexual (or even bisexual) would have not stated their true sexuality under most circumstances, resulting in inconclusive data. Unlike the Kinsey report, the very down-low attitude regarding homosexuality in the Armed Forces would have skewed data results.

Brooks also covertly queerizes her males by paralleling the experiences homosexuals had in war with the experiences of the black male soldiers through the use of emasculation. Both the black soldiers and the covert gay soldiers during WWII struggled with emasculation crises that ran rampant

in the US Armed Forces. As Bryan Duncan suggests in his article "And I Doubt All": Allegiance and Ambivalence in Gwendolyn Brooks's "Gay Chaps at the Bar," emasculation was found in the Armed Forces since "[...]the soldiers struggle to be loyal and 'follow orders' from their superiors" while performing menial jobs that were indirectly effeminate such as chefs, cleaners, and laundrymen." Duncan continues to show how the emasculation of black soldiers paralleled the emasculation of gay soldiers by stating "[...]the persistence of segregation according to rank—which often corresponded with lower status of duty—sharply diminished the morale of African American troops, and led to frustration, inefficiency and violence." We can see the frustration exhibited in Brooks' "Gay Chaps at the Bar" series by focusing on the turmoil the soldiers experience throughout the poem.

We first see the segregation element in the lines "But nothing ever taught us to be islands. /And smart, athletic, language for this hour/Was not in the curriculum. No stout/Lesson showed how to chat with death" (Brooks 64) since black soldiers were not even active in fighting throughout the war, let alone ranked officers who would delineate commands. Instead, most—if not almost all—black soldiers held servant jobs that required them not to have the opportunity to "chat with death." The segregation these men experienced ultimately led to a feeling of emasculation since these men were forced to occupy menial jobs while their white comrades, who wore the same uniform as them, fought on the front lines. It is this feeling of emasculation the black soldiers experienced in the Armed Forces that seems to mirror the emasculation issues gay men also felt in the Armed Forces during WWII. As evidence for this, we could focus on the word choice Brooks uses in the poem "my dreams, my works, must wait till after hell." Again, focusing on the word "honey" and "bread," we could argue that Brooks is using these words as symbols for masculinity—that these soldiers, both the blacks soldiers and the gay soldiers, were forced to suppress their masculinity in order to survive the emasculation they experienced in war as well as their attempt to remain true to themselves. While this poem as a whole may indicate Brooks is speaking on the topics of segregation and racial inequality, it could, however, also be viewed an attempt to parallel the gay soldiers who were experiencing similar predicaments as their fellow black male comrade.

In this case, both the black soldiers and the gay soldiers, in order to persevere and survive the war, repelled the racist and homophobic experiences they experienced by storing parts of their true selves inside a sacred place and by performing activities they otherwise would not do—sleeping with women, doing menial chores compliantly, etc.. These common struggles shows evidence that Brooks is paralleling the plights of the gay soldiers with those of the plights of the black soldiers.

It's Not the Man Who Defines the Suit, It's the Suit That Defines the Man

"Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth." -Oscar Wilde

Brooks illustrates the paralleled experiences the black and gay community shared during the 1940's and 50's with her longest poem from *A Street in Bronzeville*, "The Sundays of Satin-Legs Smith". Within the poem, there appears to be latent queer elements mixed with the overall racial inequality tone of the poem. The first example of this paralleled voice stems from the hypersexuality Satin-Legs Smith exhibits throughout the poem through the use of his zoot suit. The zoot suit, a symbol of heightened sexuality due to its obscure structure, serves as Satin-Legs Smith's exemplified hypersexuality since the zoot suit is so overt in terms of fashionable dress—constructed in satin, broad, masculine shoulder look, etc.. The lines "shoulder padding that is wide/And cocky" (Brooks 43) further exemplifies the hypersexuality associated with the zoot suit and masculinity. However, it could be proposed that Brooks is establishing a latent queer tone to her poem by using the zoot suit itself as a symbol for gay resistance to the sexual paradigms that were prevalent in America during the 40's and 50's. In fact, I propose that Brooks is using the zoot suit as an underlying queer

element since the zoot suit parallels the costumes drag queens wore during the Drag Balls in Harlem during the early 20th century. Harlem, where Langston Hughes, Brooks' mentor, lived and wrote would have been something Brooks considerably knew. In this case, the zoot suit and the drag costume are one in the same due to their overtness in terms of hypersexuality—in this case the zoot suit serves as a symbol of masculine hyperbolization and the drag costume as a hyperbolized symbol of the feminine. Though Satin-Legs Smith uses the zoot suit as a symbol of his masculinity, he does so in a way that seems so overt, that it has the opposite effect in the end.

Brooks may have intended Satin-Legs Smith to serve as a symbol for black inequality and its emasculation effect on black men who were struggling to form their own version of masculinity, but underneath that message, there seems to lie another voice. In her *A Street in Bronzeville* vignette, Brooks purposefully uses elements of Bronzeville to represent black Americans as a whole, but it appears she does the same for the gay citizens who may inhabit Bronzeville and other locations within Chicago—particularly Boystown—aswell. As Thompson states, “It was also during just this period of attempted reinvigoration (sic) that the relationship between male effeminacy and homosexuality, at least in the large American cities, came to be such a focus of attention” (53). It is this center of attention that Americans had regarding the gay community that Brooks may have used Satin-Legs Smith and his zoot suit to give voice to the gay community, while also voicing the concerns of black male effeminacy and struggles with racial inequalities. Since she lived in Chicago for most of her life, it would be reasonable to assume that Brooks used the zoot suit to symbolize homosexuality (while also using Satin-Legs Smith as a motor to highlight the racial inequality of the time) since zoot suits were popular in Bronzeville (and other inner-cities around America), and thus, something Brooks was familiar with and could observe, reflect, and write.

Satin-Legs Smith's zoot suit also acts as a symbol for sexuality since the zoot suit allows one to have agency in the form of exhibition and expression. Much like the drag costume allows a male to take on the role of the female (and thus femininity by providing agency), the zoot suit allows a male to hyperbolize his masculinity to such an extent that the zoot suit becomes a costume itself. The zoot suit, in turn, allows an effeminate male to become more masculine—much like the drag costume allows a masculine male to become effeminate—or, if one wanted it to, the zoot suit could become a costume that allows an effeminate male to have agency to exhibit his flamboyant behavior in a way that was deemed appropriate. Brooks allows us to justify this argument since the imagery surrounding the zoot suit resembles elements of war—“Here are hats/Like bright umbrellas; and hysterical ties/Like narrow banners for some gathering war” (Brooks 44). In this manner, the zoot suit becomes a type of armor. The drag costume, also, could be viewed in this manner since both costumes allow agency to be granted to the individual wearing the costume. This war-like imagery surrounding the zoot suit may display Brooks' intention to depict the “war” homosexuals (either effeminate or masculine) have with the perceived constructs of sexuality that resounds in American ideologies. As such, the zoot suit not only acts as a costume in term of displaying sexuality, but it also serves as an armor against the non-homosexual expectations that exists in American society.

Again, Brooks could be referring to Kinsey's work with the expression of the zoot suit since “[...]the most important external force is the social environment in which it [the human male] lives” (Kinsey 327). In this case, Brooks may have used the zoot suit to describe the social environment of the black male while also, latently, describing the social environment of the gay male. Brooks accomplished this description of the black community and the gay community by the use of exhibition—in particular the exhibition of the zoot suit. This exhibition, though it also voices the black community's beliefs of masculinity and sexuality, also exhibits homosexual behavior and homosocial elements since “Exhibition is much the most common form of homosexual play” (Kinsey 169). Brooks, in turn, may have used the zoot suit to establish the connection between the gay community with the black community since both communities share a common history with

exhibition. In this case, black readers could identify with Satin-Legs Smith's zoot suit in terms of exhibiting black masculinity in a white-dominated society, while gay readers could identify with Satin-Legs Smith's zoot suit as a form of exhibition of masculinity and femininity in a heterosexual-dominated society since there already was a familiarity with the drag costume in the gay culture.

On a deeper level, the zoot suit becomes a form of expression for Satin-Legs Smith since he feels mundane and not true to himself when he does not wear the zoot suit—much like the homosexual experience of being “in the closet”. Brooks uses the following lines “The pasts of his ancestors lean against/Him. Crowd him. Fog out his identity” (Brooks 46) to suggest this incomplete feeling Satin-Legs Smith feels when he is not wearing the zoot suit. In fact, these lines could provide even more evidence that Satin-Legs Smith feels less like himself when he is not wearing the zoot suit because, when he is not wearing it, he feels less like his flamboyant (either masculine or feminine) self. He seems to lose his sense of power he feels while wearing the zoot suit when it hangs solemnly in his closet. The fact that Brooks uses the word “closet” explicitly in her poem shines more light on this matter since the word “closet” is a word quite frequently associated with the homosexual community. Interestingly, Brooks expands on this idea of the closet by saying Smith's closet is not filled with earthly riches, but rather “wonder-suits in yellow and in wine,/Sarcastic green and zebra-striped cobalt./With shoulder padding that is wide/And cocky and determined as his pride”. The fact that Smith's pride is in these “wonder-suits” provides proof that the zoot suit's agency in terms of hypersexuality mean more to him than diamonds, pearls, and other gems.

Brooks enlightens the reader with the power of the zoot suit and its effect on Satin-Legs Smith by stating

These kneaded limbs receive the kiss of silk.
Then they receive the brave and beautiful
Embrace of some equivocal wool.
He looks into his mirror, loves himself—
The neat curve here; the angularity
That is appropriate at just its place;
The technique of variegated grace. (Brooks 44)

The zoot suit allows Satin-Legs Smith to love himself, and with its silk and wool fabrics, he feels powerful and complete. This feeling of incompleteness that Satin-Legs Smith feels when not wearing his zoot suit relates the the gay community's incompleteness when one has to create a farce impression of his sexuality in given situations or else they risk social, economic, or even political consequences.

However, since the zoot suit is so outlandish, it falls victim to stereotypes. The zoot suit, with its overt expression of masculinity was viewed as a mockery of masculinity, which became problematic for the American population who valued these traditional sex roles. As Alan Taylor states in his article “Concepts of Masculinity and Femininity as a Basis for Stereotypes of Male and Female Homosexuals,” “[...]agreement with traditional sex role prescriptions is an important predictor of negative attitudes towards homosexuals” (Ross 43) since “[...]the process of surveillance means that male sexual behavior is constantly being monitored” (Thompson XV). Therefore, the zoot suit started to actually take on negative stigmas—especially stigmas relating to the homosexual community—due to its very nature. Since the zoot suit is trying to make a fashionable statement by “[...] the attempt to define oneself by clothing and behavior” (Stanford), social implications and stereotypes were bound to surface—much like most changes in fashion over the course of history. Kinsey provides insight on the social ramifications the zoot suit brought in terms of negative stereotypes regarding the gay community by stating “[...]homosexual and solitary sources of outlet, since they are completely without reproductive possibilities, are penalized or frowned upon by public opinion and by the processes of the law (263). Consequently, the zoot suit fell victim to stereotypes (especially black and homosexual

stereotypes) since the zoot suit, with its overt exhibition of masculinity (or femininity depending on the individual wearing the zoot suit).

Brooks may have also used the zoot suit in this same way to parallel the black community since “[...]black men's struggles for gendered agency are inextricably bound up with their complicated love-hate relation to [white] normative masculinity” (Henry 4). Ultimately, we can propose the idea that Brooks is using the zoot suit to display the paralleled experiences that the black community and the gay community were undergoing during the 1940's and 50's.

The King of Hearts

“Be yourself; everyone else is already taken.” -Oscar Wilde

Before discussing the link between the gay and black communities within *Maud Martha*, one must explore the latent strains of gay elements within Paul's character within the novel. Paul seems to depict the struggles the gay and black communities were facing early on in Brooks' career since Paul shows elements of emasculation and signs indicating he prefers homosocial relationships over heterosocial relationships within the entire novel.

First, it is quite interesting that Brooks discusses Paul's emasculation through the use of Maud Martha. When Maud Martha decides to take on a job, she experiences for the first time what it meant to be a black woman in the workforce—an experience Maud Martha receives with the most displeasure. After vivid details regarding the servitude lifestyle (which many black women undertook in the 1950's), Maud Martha starts to feel the negative demeanor Paul endures every day while he is at work since he is a black man in a predominantly white American workforce. Brooks enlightens this idea with the following quote—“But for the first time, she [Maud Martha] understood what Paul endured daily” (Brooks 304). What is shocking here is the fact that Brooks is not only paralleling the emasculation of black men in a white-dominated society (especially in the work sphere) but also the belittling effect servitude (in this case, black women serving white families) has on femininity as well. However, the emasculation Paul experiences daily at work and the efemination (the loss of power and femininity) Maud Martha experienced when she worked for Mrs. Burns-Cooper emulates the emasculation homosexuals face within the workplace also. Whereas Paul's emasculation may stem from his race, homosexuals occur emasculation at work based on their sexual identity, flamboyant personality (depending on the flamboyant level of the individual), or other elements that may mark them as “homosexual” by other co-workers or colleagues.

The homosexual elements surrounding Paul stem from the emasculation he experiences daily at his work. Brooks is definitely playing with the possibility that emasculation *does* in fact leave some questionable homosexual residue surrounding a character since he undergoes effeminate experiences. Brooks is playing off the idea that “While effeminacy was no means typical of all homosexual men, it clearly marked a man as homosexual” (Fejes 11). In this case, black men who were emasculated (at work, etc.) may be perceived or even marked as being a homosexual by those who are performing the emasculation or by those who are also being emasculated. Therefore, I extend the possibility that Brooks is using Paul as a symbol, which allows Brooks to voice the effects of emasculation on both the black men of her time who experienced this in real life *and* the effeminate males within the gay community.

This emasculation experience may be a by-product of the power the white population wielded in the 1940's and 50's—particularly the power over black male workers. The power I am alluding to is the power of surveillance white men had over black males in the work realm. Thompson provides greater insight on this topic when he stated “[...]surveillance, with all its associated effects and mechanisms for instituting and reproducing power relations, becomes the dominate mode for organizing power [...]” (11). In this manner, the power of surveillance the white male bosses held in terms of dictating masculinity resulted in the emasculation of their black male workers. Brooks

illustrates this point by having Maud Martha experience this phenomenon herself and feeling the emasculation and loss of pride Paul experiences at his work.

For most of the novel, Paul seems to favor homosocial relationships instead of heterosocial relationships. Throughout the text, Paul desires to be included in homosocial settings despite Maud Martha's apprehensions and uneasiness. For example, Paul desperately attempts to join the Foxy Cats Club, which appears to be an exclusive high-end club since one requires an invitation in order to get into the club. While at the Dawn Ball, Paul engages in festive activities with the other males in order to make a good impression and to receive initiation into the Foxy Cats Club. After observing Paul, however, Maud Martha notices a change in him. A change that prompts Maud Martha to state "[...]to carry across to me the news that he is not to be held permanently by my type, and that he can go on with this marriage only if I put no ropes or questions around him" (Brooks 223). This quote is interesting because it may provide evidence that Paul's true nature is that of a homosexual, since again Brooks leaves out pronouns to indicate Paul's preference in gender. The words "my type" may suggest women, since Maud Martha is a woman, which would suggest even more that Paul is a homosexual.

However, while at the Dawn Ball, Paul is seen to be dancing with a woman named Maella, with whom he dances and escorts around around the club while Maud Martha dances with another man. This may suggest the opposite—that Paul is in fact a heterosexual—from what I stated before, but the Dawn Ball parallels once again the Drag Balls on the early 20th century in Harlem where Brooks was quite knowledgeable on since her mentor was Langston Hughes. The fact that "Dawn" and "Drag" are both four letter words that start with a "D" suggest this proposition may be valid. With this in mind, one may propose that Paul is not dancing with a female, but rather that he is dancing with a man in drag. Either way, Paul desires to be a part of this homosocial community— whether Brooks is indicating the Foxy Cats Club is a club for homosexuals or for heterosexual black men, one may never know for certain.

Paul once again desires to be a member of a homosocial community when he attempts to join the 011 Club later on in the novel. The 011 Club differs from the Foxy Cats Club due to its different structure and expectations. Brooks enlightens her readers that the 011 Club is more elegant; one of stature and everything fancy. However, the 011 club is where Paul displays the most latent elements of homosexuality in the novel since he wants to join this club since it contains "the real people" (Brooks 290). These "real people" discuss homosexuality "[...] without eagerness, distaste, curiosity—with anything but ennui" (Brooks 290), which greatly peaks Paul's interest in joining the club even more. With all this evidence, it could be proposed that Brooks is using Paul as a symbol of the homosexual male who longs to be a part of a community and to establish homosocial relationships. In this way, Paul not only serves as a homosexual male who longs for homosocial relationships but also as a heterosexual black male who longs for a community of heterosexual male brothers—depending how one wishes to view Paul and his sexual identity.

Brooks may be paralleling the gay community's use of homosocial relationships with that of the homosocial relationships within the black community such as gangs, black brotherhood (like the Black Panthers), etc.. Paul's desire to join the Foxy Cats Club or the 011 Club may be Brooks' way of informing her readers that her black male characters are also longing for a community of their own like the gay community desired a community of their own. This desire of community may be the reason why areas of Chicago developed such as Boystown and Bronzeville. Each community, both gay and black, may have desired a place of their own, where each community could find refuge from the dominate white, heterosexual population. In this way, Brooks is paralleling the gay community's desire for homosocial relationships with the black community's desire for homosocial relationships by linking the communities' desire for brotherhood.

Either way, it appears that Brooks is using Paul to serve as a representation of the paralleled experiences the black community and the gay community shared in terms of the emasculation

heterosexual black males and homosexual males experienced in the 1940's and 50's and the homosocial relationships both communities shared.

The Main Question

“The only difference between the saint and the sinner is that every saint has a past, and every sinner has a future.”- Oscar Wilde

Despite knowing most of her readers would be white, educated readers, Brooks still took up the poetic gauntlet and was determined to write about the blatant racism within the American society. With this said, why did Brooks tackle the struggles of the LGBT community in such an underlying fashion? If she wrote on such a hot topic within America such as racism, surely she could have wrote about homophobia and the homosexual. Despite this, it seems Brooks only creates an undercurrent for the homosexual messages she tries to convey instead of staking them like she did with the racial injustices experienced by the black American citizens.

Several factors may be attributed to this circumstance however. The conventionally named “Black Church” may have forced Brooks to remain more latent on topics regarding homosexuality since the Black Church emphasizes a dislike of homosexuals and their lifestyle (Stanford). We can see this even today with rap songs disfavoring the homosexual lifestyle or making homophobic slurs and remarks. Black male rappers such as Kanye West, 50 Cent, T.I., and Tyga have all been targeted for making homophobic remarks within their music. The Black Church's predominantly Christian faith and disregard of homosexuality may have been a key factor why Brooks may have kept the queer elements latent.

Perhaps Brooks takes on this latent use of queer elements purposefully since homosexuality was latent within American society. In this sense, Brooks queers her black male characters in an underlying fashion since homosexuality was an underlying lifestyle during her lifetime. This way, she is able to queer her characters in such a way that not even the Black Church would be able to decipher the hidden clues embedded within her works. Drawing on a pirate metaphor, perhaps Brooks wrote her poetry in a way that only those who wished to see the treasure she meant to leave behind are able to find its location because they can read the map. Since the Black Church would not have condoned homosexual elements explicitly, Brooks had to find a way to say what she needed and wanted to say in an implicit manner.

Brooks may have also instilled the queer elements in a subtle fashion because her poetry and novels were so centered on creating an impact on Americans regarding race that discussing homosexuality would have been too much of a risk for her poetic career. Also, as an active member in the Black Arts Movement later on in her career, Brooks may have kept sexuality on the back-burner since the subject of race may have been her key interest. This certainly shows in her later poetry such as “In The Mecca” since it is definitely a politically-focused work centered on black Civil Rights. Despite this, I propose Gwendolyn Brooks embeds latent strains of queer elements within her works in order to mimic the plights experienced by black Americans throughout the United States during the 20th century. Whether Brooks was impacted by the Beats Generation, a generation known for voicing and exposing unconventional values and beliefs, or not, Brooks makes it a point to voice the homosexual-related concerns homosexuals in the United States were facing by queering her black male characters within her works. The “Gay Chaps at the Bar” enables Brooks to discuss the emasculation of black males within the Armed Forces while also mirroring the emasculation of homosexuals within the Armed Forces, “Satin-Legs Smith” serves as a platform to flaunt the emasculation experienced within the civilian sector—especially within large American cities—that black males suffered due to racism and stereotyping (and the hypersexualization by-product of emasculation brought on by the zoot suit), and Paul from *Maud Martha* depicts the closeted experience homosexuals had to endure in the mid-20th century due to anti-gay laws and social angst. Despite the different messages each work conveyed, each work together as symbols of Brooks' latent

exposure of the homosexual lifestyle in a time where such topics were met with active distaste and even violence. Risking not only her career but her prospects of fame and fortune, I believe Brooks not only should serve as a poetic symbol of the Civil rights Movement, but also as a symbol of the Gay Rights Movement that continues their struggle for social acceptance and equal-rights.

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