



Walker, A'Lelia (1885-1931)

by Brett Genny Beemyn

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.

Entry Copyright © 2004, glbtq, inc.

Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>

During the period of the Harlem Renaissance, an era known for the cultural space it afforded glbtq African Americans, A'Lelia Walker provided some of the most upscale social opportunities for those "in the life." Her parties and "at homes" were places where black glbtq writers and artists could gather for food, drink, and conversation and be introduced to white high society. Although there is no direct evidence that Walker pursued same-sex sexual relationships, she highly valued the company and creativity of members of the glbtq community.

Born in Vicksburg, Mississippi on June 6, 1885, Walker was named Leila by her parents, Sarah Breedlove and Moses McWilliams (she adopted the name "A'Lelia" as an adult). After Moses's death in 1887, the Walkers moved to St. Louis and then to Denver, where her mother married Charles J. Walker and began to develop and sell products to straighten and soften African-American women's hair.

Assisted by A'Lelia and motivated by a desire to give her only child a better life than the poverty and hardship she had known, Madam C. J. Walker, as she called herself, created a vast hair-care empire that made her the first self-made woman millionaire in the United States. The Walkers eventually settled in New York City. They bought property on Harlem's Striver's Row and had a thirty-four room mansion built along the Hudson River that became known as Villa Lewaro (short for Leila Walker Robinson).

A'Lelia managed the Walker College of Hair Culture in New York and, after her mother's death in 1919, assumed control of the Walker Company. She inherited an estate worth about one million dollars. But less interested in business matters than her mother, A'Lelia increasingly spent her time and money on entertaining, becoming what Langston Hughes described as "the joy-goddess of Harlem's 1920's."

According to Hughes, the hundreds of lavish parties she threw in Harlem and at Villa Lewaro during the decade "were as crowded as the New York subway at the rush hour," attracting everyone from European royalty and white New York socialites to black celebrities and notorious Harlem number runners and bootleggers. She especially sought the company of black glbtq writers and artists, which gave her gatherings a distinctly gay character.

Although Walker never provided direct financial support to glbtq writers and artists as did some white patrons, she frequently invited many of the more free-wheeling members of the black literati over for drinks, dinner, and poker games in which she provided the stakes. Out of these gatherings came a plan in 1927 to convert a floor of her Harlem townhouse into a club where Renaissance writers and artists could meet, share ideas, and obtain a cheap meal. At the suggestion of writer Richard Bruce Nugent, the group agreed to call it the "Dark Tower" after the title of Countee Cullen's column in *Opportunity*.

But when those assembled made little progress on the club beyond the name, Walker undertook the planning herself. The result was that rather than being an informal, inexpensive salon for the creative minds of the Harlem Renaissance, the Dark Tower became an upscale gathering place for white café society, complete with a hired host and a hat checker. With few African Americans comfortable with the

prices or the climate, the club lasted less than a year. While the Dark Tower succeeded in drawing greater white attention to black art and literature, it largely failed to serve the needs of the black glbtq artists and writers it had originally been intended to support.

Little is known for certain about Walker's sexual identity. She wed three times, but each marriage quickly disintegrated. The last was a long-distance relationship in which she rarely saw her husband. By all accounts, she preferred to surround herself with attractive, light-skinned women like actress Edna Thomas and Walker's constant companion and social secretary Mayme White.

Among her friends were also a number of gay and bisexual men, including Nugent, writer Countee Cullen, teacher Harold Jackman, white novelist Carl Van Vechten, and the organizers of her parties: voice teacher Caska Bonds and newspaper columnist Edward Perry. Members of Harlem society who did not approve of her choice of company either learned to keep quiet or found themselves left off future guest lists.

Because of her fondness for glbtq people, her family's working-class background, and her dark skin color, Walker was not accepted into the social circles of the black elite. She also met with disdain because of her independence and non-conformity to the gender expectations for respectable African-American women. Walker frequently wore jeweled turbans and carried a riding crop, which, coupled with a frame nearly six feet tall, gave her a striking presence.

Walker died suddenly of a heart attack on August 17, 1931, while on a trip to New Jersey with Mayme White to visit another close female friend. She was only 46, but had not listened to her doctors' warnings to lower her blood pressure and lose weight. Like her parties, her funeral was an extravagant, invitation-only affair, with many more people in attendance than could fit into the Harlem mortuary.

By the time of Walker's death, the Depression had had a devastating impact on the Harlem Renaissance, as white pleasure-seekers no longer had money to spend in Harlem, and most African Americans, who did not have much to begin with, were affected even more severely.

Walker herself was not immune to great financial difficulties. With hair-care products an unnecessary and unaffordable expense for most African Americans, her company suffered. She was forced to mortgage Villa Lewaro and sell most of its contents to maintain a modicum of her lavish lifestyle. Her parties became less opulent, if not less popular with black glbtq people.

Walker's passing marked the passing of an era. Perhaps playing on words, Langston Hughes remarked that her death "was really the end of the gay times of the New Negro era in Harlem."

Bibliography

Ahmed, Siraj. "Walker, A'Lelia." *Encyclopedia of African American Culture and History*. Jack Salzman, David Lionel Smith, and Cornel West, eds. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996. 2759-60.

Bundles, A'Lelia. *On Her Own Ground: The Life and Times of Madam C.J. Walker*. New York: Scribner, 2001.

Garber, Eric. "A Spectacle in Color: The Lesbian and Gay Subculture of Jazz Age Harlem." *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*. Martin Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey, eds. New York: New American Library, 1989. 318-31.

Hughes, Langston. *The Big Sea: An Autobiography*. New York: Knopf, 1940.

Lewis, David Levering. *When Harlem Was in Vogue*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1981.

Nugent, Richard Bruce. "On the Dark Tower." *Gay Rebel of the Harlem Renaissance: Selections from the*

Work of Richard Bruce Nugent. Thomas H. Wirth, ed. Durham, N. C.: Duke University Press, 2002. 217-20.

Wintz, Cary D. *Black Culture and the Harlem Renaissance*. College Station: Texas A&M Press, 1996.

About the Author

Brett Genny Beemyn has written or edited five books in glbtq studies, including *Queer Studies: A Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual Community Anthology* (1996) and *Creating a Place for Ourselves: Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Community Histories* (1997). *The Lives of Transgender People* is in progress. A frequent speaker and writer on transgender campus issues, Beemyn is the director of the Stonewall Center at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst.