

ARTICLE

Unpacking Reed Peggram's Library

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Reed Peggram, a queer African American doctoral student in comparative literature at Harvard University, became a member of the Shakespeare and Company lending library in 1938, when studying decadence in nineteenth-century French literature at the Sorbonne. The essay examines the items he borrowed to provide insights into his life.

In September 1938, Reed Edwin Peggram, a Black American doctoral student at Harvard, moved to Paris to study decadence in nineteenth-century French literature at the Sorbonne. Soon after his arrival, he went to Shakespeare and Company and subscribed to the lending library, joining a long list of American expatriates in Paris who had made the pilgrimage to the famous bookshop on the Left Bank. In this article, I analyze the books he borrowed.

Looking at other people's bookshelves is quite an intimate thing to do. During the Covid pandemic, celebrities and talking heads appeared on television and viewers became obsessed with what was on their bookshelves. Lots of people suspected that the book placement was performative—designed to lend an air of authority or advertise their own books. In 2020, *The New York Times* published a series of articles with headlines such as: "The 'Credibility Bookcase' Is the Quarantine's Hottest Accessory," "What do Famous People's Bookshelves Reveal?" and "The Celebrity Bookshelf Detective Is Back."

Related to this voyeurism are the *Unpacking My Library* books with images of bookshelves of famous writers, artists, and architects and a list of their top ten favorite books. In the foreword of *Unpacking My Library: Artists and Their Books* (2017), Jo Steffens states that there is an "underlying assumption that a private collection could reveal something about the nature of its owner" (vii). Later, Steffens asks, "Can books serve as a medium through which to understand more about an artist's life and work" (xi)? I wondered if I could understand Peggram—the subject of my biography-in-progress, *The Remarkable Life of Reed Peggram*—by analyzing the books he read.

I admit that I felt uncomfortable looking at Peggram's borrowing history as a former Librarian-in-Residence at Yale University with a master's degree in library service from Rutgers University. I was also a professor in the School of Library and Information Studies (now the Information School) at my current institution, the University of Wisconsin–Madison. I taught the reference

services course for many years and the American Library Association has a Code of Ethics that requires professional librarians to respect the privacy of their patrons. The Code of Ethics #3 states: "We protect each library user's right to privacy and confidentiality with respect to information sought or received and resources consulted, borrowed, acquired or transmitted." Post-9/11, librarians began destroying borrowing records so that they could not be subpoenaed by the government (Starr, "Libraries"). As a result, future generations won't know the reading habits of people in a given time and place.

Specific questions I explore in this article include: How much can we learn about a person by knowing what that person read? Are the lending library cards a key to biography, only a partial clue, or worse, a red herring? What are the connections between Peggram's reading habits and his identities as a queer, Black American man?

Other scholars have examined the personal libraries of individuals to gain insight into their lives. For example, Amanda Golden analyzed the almost 800 books in Anne Sexton's personal library, arguing that the books "allow us to revisit her engagement with mid-century literary culture" (66). Golden suggests that Sexton's marginalia offer insight into her personality: "Sexton's character emerges in her annotations. She captures her laughter in the margins in ways that she had not yet found a voice for in her poetry" (68). In "'Horseshit!' Yes, Marlon Brando, Eclectic Bibliophile, Wrote in His Books" (2021), Rebecca Rego Barry dissects Brando's personal library of over 3,000 items, categorizing the books by subject: philosophy, religion, racism—Brando owned many books by James Baldwin—acting, and even Tahiti. "What Brando's books ultimately demonstrate," Barry concludes, "is the man's thirst for knowledge and his prolific mind."

My exploration of Peggram's lending library selections comes with several caveats. First, I cannot ask Peggram about his selections. Second, his selections represent less than one year (1938–1939) in his life that spanned sixty-seven (1914–1982). Third, Peggram's selections are limited to the items held by Shakespeare and Company. Fourth, we all check out books that we never read. And, finally, I am not analyzing the actual books that Peggram read. If these books were in Peggram's private library, he might have underlined passages, annotated or written notes—maybe he would have folded down pages to mark his place or inserted ephemera such as tram tickets, opera tickets, or restaurant receipts. All of these features have been analyzed in studies of the reading habits of other writers and intellectuals, including Flannery O'Connor and Richard Wright.¹

¹ See, for example, Kinney; Fabre.

In lieu of having access to Peggram's personal collection and in the absence of marginalia and other markings, I devised an alternative method of analyzing his books. I created a table of the books Peggram checked out. I then looked up the Library of Congress call numbers and subject headings, and collected information about each book's themes, genre, and date of publication, as well as its author's race, gender, nationality, and sexuality. I checked out the books from my university's library, selecting the same editions whenever possible. I also analyzed letters Peggram wrote during his time in France to his mother, grandmother, and friend Dorothy Norman for information about his movements and activities.

Before analyzing Peggram's reading habits, I will describe his life before he went to Paris. Peggram was born in Boston on July 26, 1914 to two blue-collar workers, Mary and Harvey Peggram. When Peggram was five, his father returned from World War I mentally disabled and spent the rest of his life in various mental institutions. Peggram was subsequently raised by his mother and maternal grandmother Laura Reed who became his primary caretaker after his mother remarried and moved to New Jersey and had two more sons. Reed, a cleaning woman, pushed her first-born grandchild to pursue higher education and Peggram attended Boston Public Latin School and graduated in 1931. As a member of Harvard University's Class of 1935, Peggram completed a thesis for honors in French literature titled, "A Comparison of the Personal Element in *Madame Bovary* and *L'Éducation Sentimentale*." *Madame Bovary* (1856) probably appealed to Peggram who also dreamed of a more exciting life than the one he was born into. In 1936, Peggram received a master's degree from Harvard in comparative literature. That fall, he reluctantly enrolled in Columbia's doctoral program in English and Comparative Literature. Nothing compared to Harvard! Trying to make the best of it, he threw himself into extracurricular activities, writing essays and book reviews for the student magazine, *Chimère*, a French publication. The following year, he was accepted into Harvard's doctoral program in comparative literature. During the 1937–1938 academic year, he received a John Harvard Fellowship and a Rosenwald Fellowship to study at the Sorbonne.

Peggram was one of many Black Americans who became expatriates in Paris. There was something magical about Paris—the city's reputation for racial equality acted as a charm that drew Black Americans. But if Peggram anticipated a lack of racial stereotypes, he did not mention it in his letters. The one nod to his race was his surprise at the ease of booking a hotel room, his first, as a Black American in New York City before he set sail.

In August 1938, Peggram took the *S. S. Veendam* from the Holland–America Line to Europe from Hoboken, New Jersey. He was thrilled to finally go to France after years of studying the language, listening to Debussy, and reading Flaubert. At last, he had the opportunity to test his language

skills—when he was elected to Phi Beta Kappa, a professor said he spoke like a native speaker. This was his first trip abroad. The transatlantic crossing took about ten days. He disembarked in Boulogne, France and made his way to Paris. Peggram checked into the first of a series of hotels on the Left Bank. He did not stay in the Montmartre section of Paris, where many Black American expatriates resided, and makes no mention of attending jazz clubs—the legendary Chez Bricktop, managed by Ada “Bricktop” Smith, was still operating when Peggram arrived in Paris. In fact, he would later laugh that his Danish friends in Copenhagen were surprised at his lack of interest in jazz. His first residence was at the Hôtel de Seine, located at 52 rue de Seine in the sixth arrondissement in Saint-Germain-des-Prés. As he noted in a postcard to his grandmother, the hotel was not, despite the name, on the Seine. After dropping off his steamer trunks, he left for a week-long trip to London.

Peggram had arrived in Paris during a tumultuous time. Europe was on the brink of World War II and most foreigners were leaving. As Tyler Stovall notes in *Paris Noir* (1996), “Virtually all of these exiles finally did leave Paris at the beginning of World War II, as the possibility of a German invasion became daily more menacing. Yet a very few, most notably Josephine Baker, chose to stay with the people of France” (84). The United States State Department strongly encouraged Americans to leave Europe. But Peggram was determined to remain as long as he could; after all, he had been waiting for this opportunity to study and live abroad for years.

Upon his return to Paris, he received permission to use the Bibliothèque nationale de France for his academic reading ([fig. 1](#)). He then addressed the problem of his leisure reading by becoming a member of the lending library at Shakespeare and Company.

Peggram borrowed twenty-two books and magazines during his year in Paris. An analysis of his lending card reveals that he signed up in September 1938 for a six-month membership with which he could borrow one item at a time for the student rate of seventy francs with a fifty francs deposit ([fig. 2](#)). He checked out his first book on September 26. This book was an anomaly since it was not a novel but the biography of Hart Crane, a queer poet who died by suicide in 1932. Peggram originally noted he was residing at the Hotel de Seine but later added that he moved to the Hotel des Deux Continents at 25 rue Jacob.

I originally planned to read all the items he borrowed but quickly realized that was an untenable proposition given the timeline for this cluster of articles. But I did read two books by Christopher Isherwood—*Mr Norris Changes Trains* (1935) and *Sally Bowles* (1937)—the first two works of fiction that Peggram checked out. A review of his lending card reveals that he checked out *Mr Norris Changes Trains* on October 10, and returned it the next day. An indication that he read it and liked it is the fact that he checked out

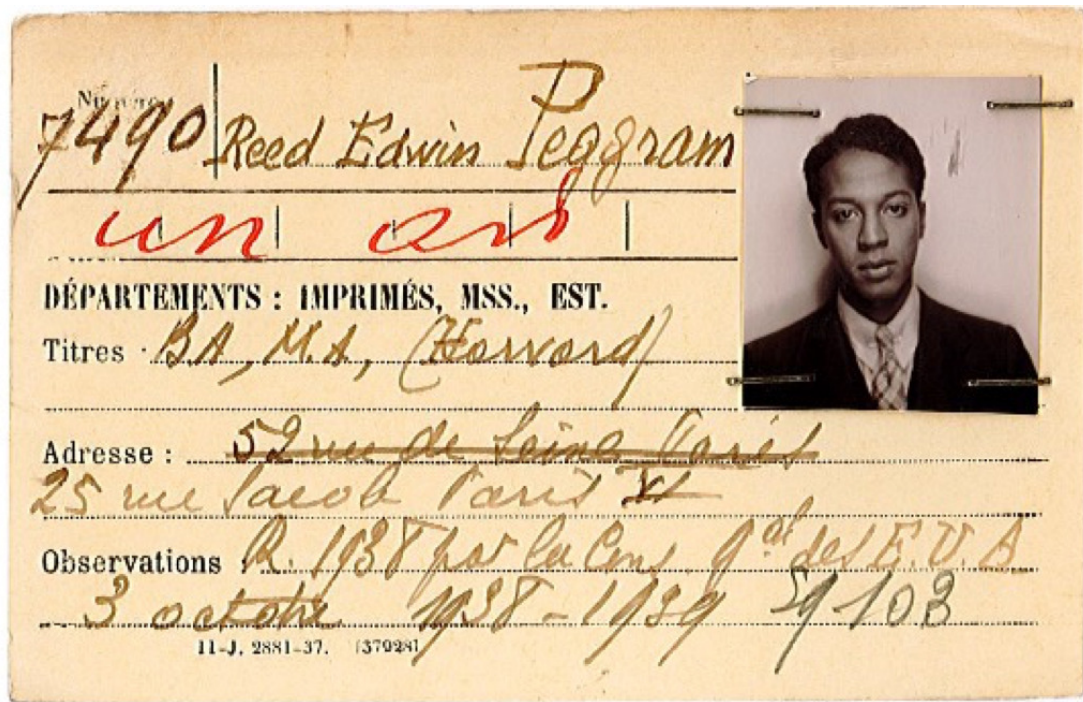


Figure 1. Reed Peggram's membership card for Bibliothèque nationale de France.

a second book by Isherwood that day, October 11, returning it the next day. He devoured the books. Peggram likely enjoyed the sense of adventure experienced by the young narrator who encountered a mysterious Mr. Norris and an equally mysterious Sally Bowles during his adventures in Berlin.

Some patterns emerge upon the examination of Peggram's borrowing practices. The majority of the books were in the Library of Congress call number category of "P" for language and literature. A rare exception was *Journey to a War* (1939) by W. H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood, a travel narrative set in China. Most of the books were classified as English literature followed by American literature. Outliers include a French novel, Marcel Proust's *The Guermantes Way* (1920, translation 1925), and plays strangely classified as German by August Strindberg, a Swede. The settings of the books are England, the United States, Germany, and in one instance Tahiti—in Somerset Maugham's *The Moon and the Sixpence* (1919)—and the Black Sea region, Sparta, and Greece in Naomi Mitchison's *The Corn King and the Spring Queen* (1931), the only publication by a woman. Topics of the novels include adultery, prisoners of war during World War I, and a fictionalized account of the life of Paul Gauguin. But a common focus was a man on an adventure—a topic that encompasses the campus novels, *Of Time and the River: A Legend of Man's Hunger in His Youth* (1935) by Thomas Wolfe and *Starting Point* (1937) by C. Day Lewis. Peggram also checked out two short story collections, *Stories of Three Decades* (1936) by Thomas Mann and *The Gay and Melancholy Flux* (1937) by William Saroyan; a magazine, *New Writing*; and a poetry collection, *The Still Centre* (1939) by Stephen Spender. Besides the three volumes of Strindberg plays, Peggram borrowed

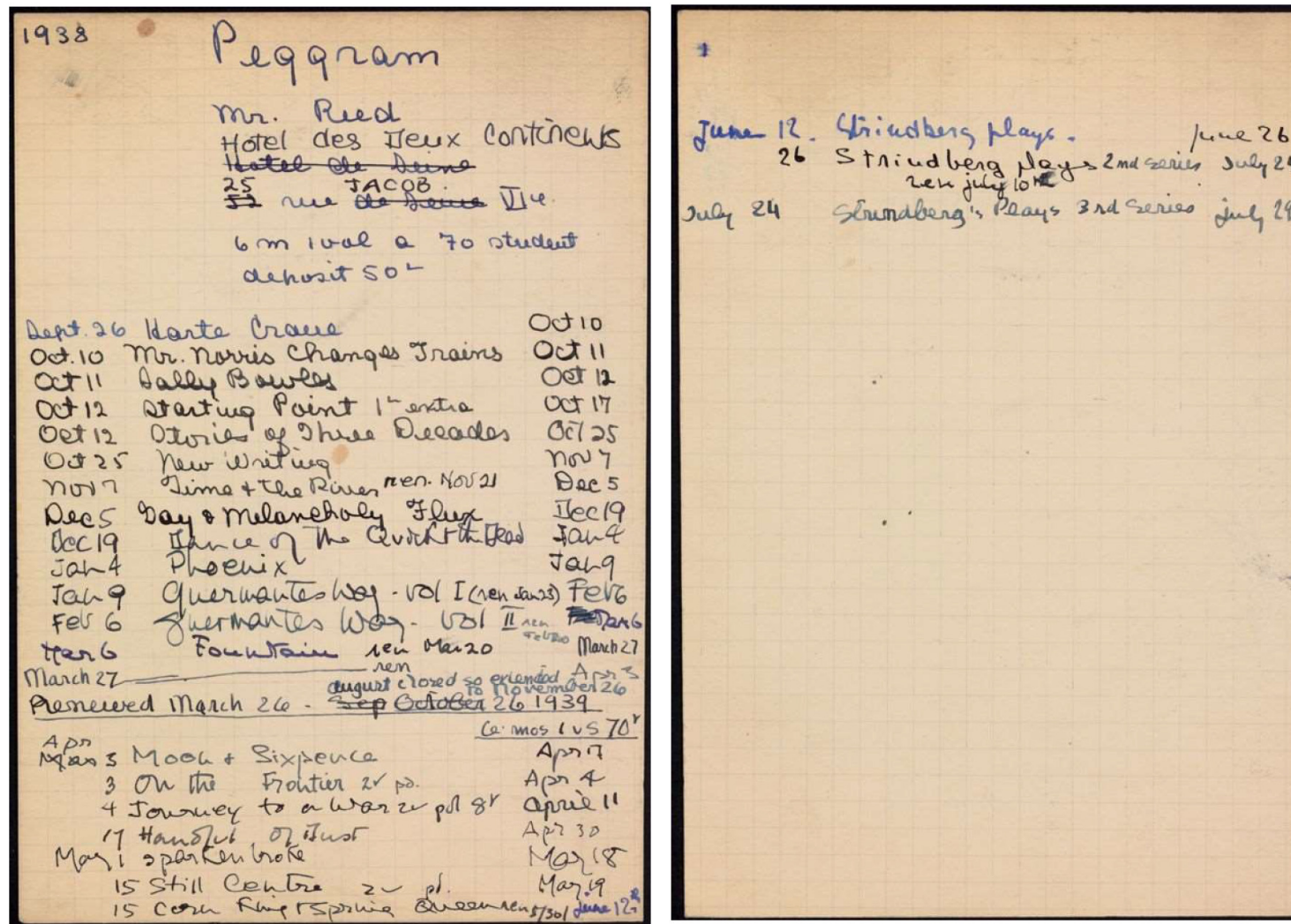


Figure 2. Reed Peggram's Shakespeare and Company lending library cards. *Shakespeare and Company Project*, Center for Digital Humanities, Princeton University (2023), <https://shakespeareandco.princeton.edu/members/peggram/cards/>.

one other play, *On the Frontier: A Melodrama in Three Acts* (1938) by two of his favorite authors, Auden and Isherwood. Charles Morgan was the only other author that Peggram checked out more than once, borrowing *The Fountain* (1932) in March 1939 and *Sparkenbroke* (1936) in May 1939.

The preponderance of the authors were British, then American, and two who became citizens of both countries: Auden and Isherwood. The remaining authors include one from Sweden (Strindberg); one from Ireland (Day Lewis); one from France (Proust); one from Scotland (Mitchison); and one from Germany (Thomas Mann).

Sexuality was the most difficult category to analyze. I used the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* and *American National Biography* to examine biographies of authors. Many of the writers never officially declared their sexual orientation and had relationships with both men and women. Many are now known to have been queer or bisexual. Did Peggram know the sexual orientation of authors? Or was he simply drawn to stories about the adventures of other men? Or did Shakespeare and Company happen to have a significant number of books by queer writers because the owner, Sylvia Beach, was a lesbian? Thomas Mann's biographical entry reads, "Mann's sexual identity has been the subject of much speculation. Although married and the father of six children, Mann was preoccupied with homoeroticism" (Frisch). Auden and Isherwood had a relationship during their long friendship. Stephen Spender, although married, had affairs with men, including Auden. And Hart Crane, the subject of the first book that Peggram borrowed, was queer. Why was Peggram drawn to their writing? None of the publications had overtly queer storylines but, perhaps, they contained subtexts that attracted Peggram.

Peggram was primarily interested in reading the latest books. Most of the items he borrowed were published in the 1930s.

Peggram could have borrowed books by Black American authors, but did not. In [her contribution to this cluster](#), Caitlin O'Keefe describes how Black lending library members such as Aimé Césaire and Gwendolyn Bennett borrowed books by Black American authors. On March 17, 1937, Beach wrote a letter to the Friendship Press stating, "The French Negro students in Paris rely on my lending library to keep them in touch, as much as possible, with American Negro Literature" (Beach, *Letters* 178). Beach requested specific titles and the latest issues of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) journal *The Crisis* and the National Urban League's *Opportunity*.

Bennett arrived in Paris thirteen years before Peggram during the heyday of Shakespeare and Company. She was associated with the Harlem Renaissance as both an illustrator and writer. When she received a scholarship to study in Paris in 1924, she was teaching fine arts at Howard University, a Black

institution. In 1925, during her time in Paris, she wrote to Harlem Renaissance writers Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes about her experiences and often mentioned Beach and Shakespeare and Company. She kept abreast of what was happening in Harlem's literary circles and submitted her own work to an *Opportunity* contest. In a letter to Hughes, she writes: "I begin to meet some new people and know some new things. Chief among them Sylvia Beach... You know 'Shakespeare and Co.' in the Rue de l'Odeon, don't you? If not, the next time you are here you must go there tout de suite" (Bennett 198–199). Bennett met James Joyce and Ernest Hemingway at tea in Beach's home. Beach also invited her for Thanksgiving. In another letter to Hughes, she asks him to send a copy of his book *The Weary Blues* (1926) and remarked that Cullen already sent her a copy of his most recent unnamed work—most likely *Color* (1925) (Bennett 204). So even with the bookshop and lending library in Paris she still craved immediate engagement with books published back home.

The lending library held a range of books by Black American authors: W. E. B. Du Bois's *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil* (1920); Jean Toomer's *Cane* (1923); Jessie Fauset's *Comedy, American Style* (1933); Zora Neale Hurston's *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934) and *Mules and Men* (1935); among others. Although Peggram did not check out Hughes's work, he was aware of the poet. Rudolph Dunbar, the London correspondent for the Associated Negro Press, had a column, "European Comments," in the *New York Amsterdam News*. In the column, he lamented that he was not in town in September 1938 "to be of service" to Peggram and another Black American on his way to London: Hughes. Dunbar mused, "If they make the right contacts," Peggram and Hughes "will serve a useful purpose in breaking down some of the prejudice against our race" (B7). Peggram's white friend Newton Arnold sent him a clipping of the column from the Kansas City Black newspaper *The Call*. Peggram crowed to his grandmother, "You see that your little brown boy is becoming quite famous, getting mentioned beside Langston Hughes" (Letter to Reed).

A review of Peggram's life revealed he had very little contact with Black Americans outside of his own family. He attended predominantly white educational institutions. His lack of interest in stories about and by Black Americans may have reflected his educational upbringing, which most likely did not include studying Black authors.

His studies at the Sorbonne did not start until around mid-November 1938. Peggram had time to get familiar with Paris, to read, to go to museums, the symphony and the opera, and to travel around Europe. Besides England, Peggram went to Belgium, Poland, and Germany. He had hardly seen the United States. He had only been in Massachusetts, New York, New Jersey, Connecticut, and New Hampshire. Peggram did not say which city or cities he visited in Germany, only that he fared better than his friend Newton who

was beaten when he did not show the proper respect to the Nazis. In Poland, he saw his friend Toni, whom he referred to as the Count. It is unknown how they met but Peggram seemed quite adept at making interesting friends—like the narrator in Isherwood's fiction. The Count was Antoni Sobański, a queer writer, who was part of Poland's bohemian, artistic community. His parents really were a count and countess, and Toni lived luxuriously in a palace.

Peggram checked out *New Writing*, a hybrid literary monthly book-magazine edited by John Lehmann, on October 25. Peggram looked at the other literary journals available and suggested to Beach that she order a specific journal. He was self-interested. While Peggram was a doctoral student at Harvard, he began corresponding with Dorothy Norman about a new journal she began editing and publishing in 1938, *Twice a Year: A Book of Literature, The Arts, and Civil Liberties*. Norman was a writer, photographer, and supporter of Planned Parenthood, the National Urban League, and the American Civil Liberties Union. Peggram wanted to publish an article he wrote about André Gide. In a letter to Norman, he writes, "Incidentally, I have spoken to the ladies of Shakespeare and Company (12, rue de l'Odéon, Paris VIe), and it has been suggested by them that they would be glad to receive a sample copy of TWICE A YEAR, which, upon examination, they would probably consider for their bookstore" (Letter, 19 Mar. 1939). Later, Peggram reported to Norman that he saw issues of *Twice a Year* in the bookshop (Letter, 23 June 1939). Peggram would have been thrilled to see the issue with his contribution for sale at Shakespeare and Company. Unfortunately, *Twice a Year* did not publish "André Gide—Novelist" until after Peggram relocated to Florence, Italy the following year. It appeared in a double issue in 1941 after an article by Henry Miller.

Peggram wanted to be part of a literary group like Auden and Isherwood. In Denmark, after World War II began, he wrote to his mother about his goal of making a living as a writer: "Well, Mother, I must say, my trip to Europe has been one of the most unusual. If I ever get out of all this alive, I won't have to write novels. I can simply write books about myself and my adventures" (Letter to Farrar). Perhaps he was considering writing something similar to *Journey to a War*. Ultimately, Peggram was more comfortable as a scholar: he published two academic articles while in Europe, both in *The Modern Language Review* (Peggram, "Utopia"; "Amphitryon").

At the end of November 1938, Peggram briefly moved to the Hotel Saint-André-des-Arts at 66 rue Saint-André-des-Arts, a bohemian hotel populated by artists, singers, and actors. Importantly, the hotel did not have a 10pm curfew for visitors—something that vexed Peggram about his last hotel. He did not note this change of address on his lending card at Shakespeare and Company. At this hotel, he entertained Thomas Handforth, a queer American artist and children's book illustrator who was awarded a Guggenheim in 1933. Handforth captured an image of Peggram in Conté



Figure 3. Portrait of Reed Peggram by Thomas Handforth, courtesy of the Tacoma Public Library.

crayon ([fig. 3](#)). Peggram met Handforth through his friends Count Toni and Jan Gay from New York. Gay was a pseudonym for Helen Reitman, a children's book author who studied homosexuality, establishing the Committee for the Study of Sex Variants in 1935.

That same month, November 1938, Peggram checked out *Of Time and River* about a Harvard graduate from a small town in North Carolina who moved to New York City and ended up traveling overseas—elements of Peggram's own life story. It's a mammoth novel. The edition that Peggram borrowed clocks in at 912 pages! Not surprisingly, he doesn't check out another book for almost an entire month. His next borrow is a collection of short stories—*The Gay and Melancholy Flux*. School had started and he did not have time to read another massive novel.

Peggram relocated to the Hotel des Deux Continents where he remained for the rest of the academic year and the summer ([fig. 4](#)). He paid 330 francs or \$10 a month for his room, which was on the fourth floor overlooking the street with two large windows as big as doors that opened in two halves across the middle. It was ideal for reading. Perhaps he created a little reading nook. The room contained three chairs including a large armchair. At first, he piled his books on the mantelpiece above a beautiful, fake fireplace. But one day when he returned to his room, he discovered that the two female proprietors had given him bookcases.

In January 1939, Peggram planned to translate poetry and publish an article in a French magazine with his friend Claude, identified as a Baroness' son, about Spender. Peggram met the poet when he was in London. Peggram



Figure 4. Map of Reed Peggram's addresses in Paris.

claimed he introduced the French to Spender—perhaps he meant the French-speaking public. In May 1937, Spender had participated in a reading at Shakespeare and Company. As Sylvia Beach recalls, “Ernest Hemingway for once made an exception to his rule against reading in public and consented to appear if Stephen Spender could be persuaded to join him. So we had a double reading, and a great sensation it made!” (Beach, *Shakespeare and Company* 211).

That January, Peggram borrowed *Phoenix: The Posthumous Papers of D. H. Lawrence* (1936). *The New York Times* described it as an 852-page book divided into seven sections, including reviews, short essays, and long essays on a variety of topics and places including flowers, women’s suffrage, Thomas Hardy, and Florence. The reviewer called *Phoenix* “an appealing and a provocative book, disappointing and disturbing, exciting and exhausting” (Jack BR29). Later in January, Peggram borrowed *The Guermantes Way*.

Peggram returned his copy of *The Fountain* by Charles Morgan and renewed his Shakespeare and Company subscription on March 27, 1939. He checked out several more items before ending his membership; he returned the last item he borrowed from the lending library—a volume of Strindberg plays—on July 29.

In mid-August 1939, Peggram and his boyfriend Gerdh Hauptmann, a Danish student at the Sorbonne, went on vacation to Copenhagen. World War II began approximately two weeks later. They remained in Denmark for seven months before briefly returning to Paris in March 1940 to retrieve their belongings and make their way to Italy. A few weeks after they left Copenhagen, Denmark was invaded and occupied by the Nazis. Once in Italy, Hauptmann was denied passage to the United States. They remained in Florence for several years before they were captured and placed in a series of detention camps in Northern Italy. Eventually Peggram escaped, returning to the United States in 1945. His life in the US took a downward trajectory. He spent the next four years in a mental institution before returning to the care of his mother. Unable to work, he sang in a choir at his local church and frequented the main branch of the Boston Public Library where he primarily checked out classical music albums. Peggram died on April 20, 1982.

The purpose of this article was to analyze the leisure reading of Reed Edwin Peggram. I wondered if a biographer could learn anything about a subject by examining the books they read. Peggram's reading list was consistent with his queer identity. It is not clear how or if he knew that the authors were queer but perhaps there were signals or coded language within the descriptions of the books. Maybe, his network of queer friends exchanged reading recommendations. Peggram's reading list confirmed one aspect of his biography—his estrangement from his cultural background as a Black American. None of the books that Peggram borrowed were by a Black American author.

Peggram traveled around Europe but ended up dying in the city where he was born. But, for less than a year, he realized his dream to live in Paris, becoming part of the literary community at Shakespeare and Company.

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