

INTRODUCTION

Despite the modest size of his published oeuvre, Richard Bruce Nugent is a significant figure of the Harlem Renaissance. He was a key member of the group of younger African American writers and artists who created the legendary publication *FIRE!!* in November 1926—a group that included Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Aaron Douglas, and Wallace Thurman. Nugent was the first African American to write from a self-declared homosexual perspective; his work therefore occupies an honored place in the now-burgeoning literature of the gay black male. An openly gay black youth who moved in circles—white and black—where same-sex erotic interest was pervasive but rarely acknowledged publicly, Nugent illuminated, through his life and work, conundrums of race, sex, and class that are of considerable current interest.

Although Nugent's work draws heavily on autobiographical specifics, facts concerning his life are not widely known. Therefore, the first part of this introduction consists of an extended biographical sketch. Since Nugent was obviously influenced by both the crosscurrents of the Harlem Renaissance and the evolving gay male literary tradition, the second part of the introduction discusses the literary and artistic context in which he lived and worked.

My perspective is not that of an academic professional but of a close friend who knew Nugent well. Based on his manuscripts and papers, taped interviews, and archival research, my narrative is also informed by countless hours of conversation with Nugent during the last five-and-a-half years of his life. I offer this book not as a definitive analysis but as an invitation to wider appreciation and further study of his life and work.

I

When nineteen-year-old Richard Bruce Nugent returned with Langston Hughes to New York City from his native Washington, D.C., in August 1925, the Harlem Renaissance was in full swing. Three years earlier, after a decade in which major commercial publishers had issued almost no books by African Americans, Harcourt Brace had published both James Weldon Johnson's seminal anthology, *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, and Claude McKay's *Harlem*

Shadows. In 1923 Jean Toomer's avant-garde *Cane* had astounded readers both black and white. NAACP staff members Walter White and Jessie Fauset had each published a first novel shortly thereafter. Howard University professor Alain Locke had edited the groundbreaking March 1925 issue of *Survey Graphic* entitled "Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro"—an issue so spectacularly successful that it was being expanded into a book-length anthology, *The New Negro*. Countee Cullen's first book of poems, *Color*, was in press. Four of Hughes's own poems appeared in the September issue of America's most stylish magazine—*Vanity Fair*—which had just hit the newsstands.

The house organs of two major civil-rights organizations—the NAACP's *Crisis* and the Urban League's *Opportunity*—regularly featured the work of African American writers and artists as part of a strategy to advance the cause of social and political equality by trying to gain the attention and respect of the white elite and the empathy of white readers. Both organizations sponsored contests and awards banquets as a means of stimulating new talent and bringing it to the attention of those eminent white literati who could be persuaded to serve as judges. Hughes and Nugent were going to New York to attend one of these events—the NAACP-sponsored Krigwa Awards ceremony.

Nugent was not the only talent drawn to Harlem in the second half of 1925. Aaron Douglas, a young artist, left his job teaching school in Kansas and came to Harlem hoping to end his intellectual isolation. Wallace Thurman, having edited a small literary publication in Los Angeles, moved to New York to try his hand at bigger things. Both would soon be involved with Nugent and Hughes in the creation of the premiere issue of a "Negro art quarterly"—*FIRE!!*

Nugent had spent the previous year in Washington living with his grandmother. In the early 1920s, he had lived in New York but had not encountered the Harlem Renaissance luminaries. In Washington, however, he had begun to attend the cultural gatherings hosted by Georgia Douglas Johnson. A mildly eccentric African American poet, she was married to Henry Lincoln Johnson, the distinguished Washington lawyer and politician who had been appointed Recorder of Deeds under President Taft. Mrs. Johnson's salons attracted African American Washingtonians with intellectual and literary interests, as well as visiting luminaries. Mixing with such personages as Jean Toomer, Waldo Frank, and Alain Locke, Nugent found his element. Encountering Alain Locke here was especially important to Nugent's future. As he recalled in a later interview,

I have kind of known Locke all my life. . . . My grandmother and his mother were friends, but kids don't pay any attention to the son or daughter of a

friend of your grandmother's. So I didn't pay any attention to Locke. He didn't become important until I became an adult.

During [my] "exile" [in Washington] Locke asked me if I would contribute to his book [*The New Negro*]. I did. . . . I contributed a picture—a wash drawing of an African girl standing in a hut, the doorway of a hut, apparently jangling her bracelets—which Locke liked very much. . . . He thought it was beautiful and said, "It looks like it has a story. Can you write something about it?" And I wrote something called "Sahdji." And, it appeared in the book with an illustration by Aaron Douglas.

I didn't draw again for a year. Because I couldn't draw, if Locke did that. He'd wanted the drawing, but then, when I wrote the story, the story was good, but the drawing wasn't, so he got Aaron to do the drawing. It was just very traumatic.¹

"Sahdji" was Nugent's first published story (this volume, 63). He later reworked it into a ballet, which was published in Alain Locke and Montgomery Gregory's *Plays of Negro Life* (1927). With music by William Grant Still, "Sahdji" was mounted at the Eastman School of Music in 1931 to considerable acclaim.

To Georgia Douglas Johnson, Nugent was more than just another habitu  of her salon. She saw in him a kindred spirit—a young, eccentric genius struggling for recognition—and took him under her wing. They collaborated on a short play, *Paupaulekejo*, which was apparently performed in Washington in late 1926, after Nugent's relocation to New York. Nugent remained close to "Georgia Douglas," as he called her, even after leaving Washington. In later years, she continued to encourage him in their intermittent correspondence.

It was at Georgia Douglas Johnson's home that Nugent met Langston Hughes, who had returned to Washington to live with his mother after a voyage to Africa and a sojourn in Paris. As Nugent later wrote: "I met Langston Hughes. . . . He was a made-to-order Hero for me. At twenty three he was only a scant four years older than I, and he had done everything—all the things young men dream of but never quite get done—worked on ships, gone to exotic places, known known people, written poetry that had appeared in print—everything. I suppose his looks contributed to the glamorous ideal . . . as did his voice and gentle manner."² Hughes and Nugent saw a lot of each other—attending plays, films, vaudeville—sometimes pretending to be foreigners to get into the segregated theaters. Perhaps Nugent's cavalier attitude toward money rubbed off a little on Hughes, for Hughes quit his job, and his mother threatened to throw him out because he (most uncharacteristically) was not helping to pay the rent.



Langston Hughes in 1934.

In New York at the Krigwa event, where he received two prizes, Hughes introduced Nugent to Harlem Renaissance luminaries W. E. B. Du Bois, Eric Walrond, Rudolph Fisher, and Countee Cullen, as well as to the remarkable Carl Van Vechten. A cosmopolitan white novelist and music critic, Van Vechten made it his business to know and promote talented African Americans. The previous year, Van Vechten had met Walter White—a fellow novelist and an official of the NAACP—through Knopf, their common publisher. White, in turn, had introduced him to Harlem’s elite. Within a few months Van Vechten had turned his own life upside down, spending enormous amounts of time with his new Harlem friends; inviting them to his midtown apartment for cocktails, dinners, and parties; introducing them to the elegant and powerful members of his circle. It was Van Vechten who arranged for the publication of Hughes’s poems in *Vanity Fair*, for which he wrote an introduction. He also convinced Alfred Knopf to publish Hughes’s first book, *The Weary Blues*.

On the very day of the Krigwa awards, Van Vechten hit upon *Nigger Heaven* as the title for the novel he was writing about Harlem—a title that would assure huge sales and explosive controversy when it appeared a year later. Joined by most of the African American press, W. E. B. Du Bois, then editor of the NAACP magazine, *Crisis*, excoriated Van Vechten; Countee Cullen was deeply pained. However, James Weldon Johnson, secretary of the NAACP and, with the possible exception of Du Bois, the most distinguished African American of his generation, defended Van Vechten. So did Langston Hughes. When the furor sub-

LANGSTON HUGHES: A MEMORY

At the time I first knew Langston, Alain Locke was generally considered to be the person who had his hand on the Black artistic pulse. A small group of us irreverents called him “the mother hen” of the Negro Movement. Even back then, one or two of us — Wallie Thurman, Gwendolyn Bennett and I, to name a few — thought of him only as a convenient titular head. To us, Locke was a pompous, dictatorial (though learned and knowledgeable) little man directing *how* things should go and *who* should be publicized as *important* members of this (his) select group. Some seven of us indicated our respect by calling ourselves “The Niggeratti.” We thought that it was Langston who had his “hand on the pulse,” and I thought it was a much kinder, more unselfish and more inclusive hand.

I had met Langston one Friday night in the summer of 1925 after one of the usual evening soirees at the home of Georgia Douglas Johnson — that unusual and beautiful poet living in Washington D.C. at the time. To me Langston was a beautiful revelation. He was about my own age; yet he had had adventures all over the world. That evening there was an instant rapport between us, and when we decided to leave at about the same time, he walked me down S Street to Thirteenth (where I was living with my grandmother), where we turned around, and I walked him back up S Street to near Seventeenth (where he was staying at his mother’s), only to realize that we were in the middle of a thought and exchange which was still not finished, so we walked back to my house, then to his, and so on through the night. It was a preview of how our relationship was to be. — Richard Bruce Nugent, undated manuscript

sided, Van Vechten continued to visit Harlem, and his many African American friends continued to enjoy his hospitality. Nevertheless, his association with the Harlem Renaissance remained controversial.

In the thirties Van Vechten turned to photography, documenting through his portraits virtually all the leading modernist cultural figures of his time. He pointedly included African Americans; between 1930 and 1960, he photographed every African American of any note in the worlds of literature, music, theater, and entertainment. His friendships with Langston Hughes, James Weldon Johnson, and many others lasted for the rest of their lives (for Nugent on Van Vechten, see 226).

The day after the Krigwa award ceremony, Hughes dined at Van Vechten's apartment, with Nugent joining them after dinner. When he returned to New York a few months later, Nugent quickly followed up on Hughes's introductions. Within a year he met and moved in with Wallace Thurman, joined Jean Toomer's Harlem Gurdjieff group, saw one of his drawings published on the cover of *Opportunity*, and joined Thurman, Hughes, Aaron Douglas, Zora Neale Hurston, Gwendolyn Bennett, and John P. Davis to work on the premiere issue of *FIRE!!*, which they hoped would become the first African American art quarterly.

A crucial element in Bruce Nugent's social success was his striking persona. He was a brilliant conversationalist, specializing in charm and shock. A true bohemian, he often had no place to sleep. Although his demeanor was not at all effeminate, in conversation he expressed a flagrantly ambiguous sexuality and made no secret of his erotic interest in men. Wallace Thurman described him vividly in *Infants of the Spring*, a roman à clef published in 1932. Nugent appears in the person of Paul Arbian (note that the surname is derived from Nugent's initials, R.B.N.):

Paul was very tall. His face was the color of a bleached saffron leaf. His hair was wiry and untrained. It was his habit not to wear a necktie because he knew that his neck was too well modeled to be hidden from public gaze. He wore no sox either, nor underwear, and those few clothes he did deign to affect were musty and disheveled. . . .

[Paul was] sitting tailor fashion on the floor, his six foot body, graceful and magnetic, his dirty yellow face aglow with some inner incandescence, his short hair defiantly disarrayed, his open shirt collar forming a dirty and inadequate frame for his classically curved neck. He was telling about his latest vagabond adventure. His voice was soft toned and melodious. His slender hands and long fingers described graceful curves in the air.

As usual when he spoke, everyone remained silent and listened intently as if hypnotized.³

One character in *Infants* describes Arbian's artwork as "nothing but highly colored phalli." Nugent's own drawings, if somewhat more varied in their subject matter, were equally unconventional.

Who was this exotic young man?

Richard Bruce Nugent was born in Washington, D.C., on 2 July 1906. His mother, Pauline Minerva Bruce Nugent, was one of the light-skinned Washington Bruces. The family was descended from Daniel Bruce (1779–1853), son of Robert Bruce, a loyalist Scottish entrepreneur, and Frances, a Native American. The Bruces had been free since the early eighteenth century. Pauline Bruce's marriage to the handsome Richard Henry Nugent Jr. had caused her family some distress because of his slightly darker complexion and lack of an equivalent pedigree.

As children in the South, Bruce Nugent's paternal grandparents, Narcissus George and Richard Henry Nugent, had been separated by slave sales from their own parents. They were adopted and educated by Germantown and Philadelphia Quakers. The senior Mr. Nugent was employed as a doorman at the Supreme Court; he was a protégé of Chief Justice Edward Douglass White. Bruce's father worked as a Pullman porter until Justice White arranged for his employment as an elevator man in the Capitol.

In violation of the prim and proper mores of Washington's "blue-veined" elite, Bruce's parents welcomed accomplished people from the arts into their home. Composer Will Marion Cook and his wife, the renowned singer and actress Abbie Mitchell, were visitors. The Nugents also took their sons regularly to performances of the Lafayette Players, an African American theater group resident in Washington that performed for audiences excluded from the white theaters.

Books, too, were part of young Bruce's early life.

My father had a very esoteric library. There was *everything* in his library, and I read everything. From the time I was five, I was reading everything. . . .

One of those books . . . told you all of the cures for things . . . and about babies and being born . . . and there were beautiful, wonderful pictures in it [that] told you all about diseases with wonderful names like "syphilis" and "gonorrhea. . . ."

Nugent in 1929. Photograph from his English Certificate of Registration, required of aliens. He was in England touring with *Porgy*.

Nugent's father, Richard Henry Nugent Jr. (far right), sang in Washington, D. C.'s Clef Club Quartet.



I remember once, when I was in high school, about eleven years old, and I wrote a story, because Miss Grimké—that's Angelina Grimké—had asked us each to write a story. And so I wrote this love story. . . . The girl was named "Hymen" and, you know, all of the . . . technical names that struck my fancy. I gave these names to people and to places and to flowers, and Angelina Grimké asked me to read it in front of the class. I did, so proud of my story. *And she never turned a hair.* I became great friends with Angelina Grimké later, and we had many a laugh about that story.⁴

Nugent discovered in his father's copy of Krafft-Ebing numerous case studies that left him in no doubt as to the nature of his own budding sexuality.

He attended Dunbar High School, the pride of Washington's African American community, staffed with the best and the brightest college graduates of their generation. As a matter of course, they included African American history in their lessons and worked to instill race pride in their students.

When Bruce was thirteen, his father died of galloping consumption—a combination of tuberculosis and asthma. Bruce's mother, perhaps because of the tensions resulting from her marriage, refused to throw herself onto the charity



of her family. She moved to New York, where she could pass for white, to work as a domestic and waitress for wages much higher than she could earn in Washington. She left Bruce and his younger brother, Gary Lambert (Pete) Nugent, in the care of her sister, Mabel English. Bruce and Pete later joined their mother in New York.

Pete became a renowned tap dancer. He learned to dance on the street, winning a dance contest at age eleven. At sixteen he left home to perform in the chorus on the Theatrical Owners Booking Association (TOBA) circuit, doing tap shows for thirty dollars a week. A year later he landed on Broadway in *Honey-moon Lane*, which starred Kate Smith. In the thirties his troupe, "Pete, Peaches, and Duke," was a leading "class act." During World War II Pete Nugent spent his military service touring in Irving Berlin's production, *This Is the Army*, entertaining American troops around the world. He stopped dancing in 1952, as the market for tap declined. A dance school he co-founded with Honi Coles failed, but by the 1960s he was road manager for the Temptations. When Pete Nugent died in 1973, he was only sixty-three.

Bruce Nugent loved New York. When he first arrived, his mother lived on West Eighteenth Street near Eighth Avenue. Soon, however, the presence of



Bruce's brother, Gary Lambert "Pete" Nugent (right), was a highly regarded "tapper." He is shown here with Irving "Peaches" Beaman (left) and Duke Miller in their very successful "class act," "Pete, Peaches, and Duke," in the 1932–33 season.

the two Negro boys in her room became difficult to explain. Moreover, Bruce had decided he wanted to move to Harlem because of the trees that lined the streets. So, Mrs. Nugent boarded her sons there.

Meanwhile Bruce had discovered Greenwich Village. Young, bright, exotic, and sexually available, he had no difficulty insinuating himself into the most outré circles of the avant-garde.

As his mother's earnings were insufficient to support two boys and herself, Bruce went to work in a series of mundane jobs. Even in such jobs, however, Bruce manifested a talent for meeting the famous and fabulous. As a delivery boy for Youmans Hats on Fifth Avenue, he delivered hats to the abodes of many stylish customers, including Buster Keaton. As errand boy and art apprentice at the catalog house of Stone, Van Dresser and Company, he had occasion to deliver photographic proofs to and become acquainted with Rudolph Valentino. At the then-fashionable Martha Washington Hotel, he became the favorite bellhop of the silent film star, Jemma Goudal.

It was while working at the Martha Washington that Bruce fell in love with kitchen employee Juan José Viana, the model for Nugent's character Beauty in "Smoke, Lilies and Jade." Viana was the scion of a prominent Panamanian family. He had been sent to New York to learn "American ways." Later in life, Bruce told stories of following Juan José back to Panama, of impregnating a singer who was also enamored of Viana, of being shot in the elbow by Viana's brother, who was disgusted by Juan José's relationship with Bruce, of living with Viana in Panama City after Viana's family forced them to leave their house in Colon, of running away from Viana several times, of being rescued from a pimp by Viana, of running away again and working his way to Cuba, and of being found there by Viana and sent back to New York. He repeated these stories in at least one formal interview, and there is reference to a trip to Panama in the short autobiographical sketch published in Cullen's anthology, *Caroling Dusk*, in 1927. Improbable as these stories are, it is also true that Nugent has been acknowledged as a reliable source of information by the many historians of the Harlem Renaissance who interviewed him. Time after time, his version of events has been corroborated by documentation discovered later.

In any event, Nugent began taking art classes, first at the New York Evening School of Industrial Arts, then at Traphagen School of Fashion. Late in 1924 he informed his mother that he was now an artist and would no longer work for a living. In response, Mrs. Nugent informed her son that she could not and would not support him. She sent him back to Washington to live with his paternal grandmother.

When he returned to Washington, Bruce decided to experiment with "passing":

I passed . . . in Washington because it was convenient to do it. Why bother to bear the stigma [of being a Negro] when I could say . . . or, since I was a little cleverer than having to say it, adopt a name, adopt an address, have cards printed, and use it and be Ricardo Nugenti de Dosceta instead of Richard Bruce Nugent, with an address . . . that was the address of the Spanish legation, instead of 1231 T Street. . . . Why not? Why not go to Wardman Park . . . into the hotel where nobody would ask what you were *if* you got in. And I *did* that. And it was fun . . . I went into the Wardman Park Hotel when I got off the train in Washington when my mother had sent me home . . . to discipline me. . . .

With my cardboard suitcase tied up with a rope, I knew that I shouldn't walk to the Wardman Park and Hotel . . . that's the only name of a hotel

I knew that was [a] quote “classy” hotel—a white folks’ hotel. So I took a cab. I walked for blocks and blocks and blocks until I was about . . . maybe a mile away from the hotel and then I got a cab and then to the Wardman Park and Hotel. It had a flight of stairs that went way up. I got out, and these colored bellboys came down, took one look at me, and one look at my rope-wrapped thing, and I thought, “Oh, Lord, here it comes.” So I went upstairs quick and just left them to pick up the bag or leave it there, whichever . . . but I was fairly certain that they’d pick it up, and it happened, when I got to the head of the stairs, I ran into a woman whom I’d met in New York . . . Princess Matchabelli, whom I’d met at Joe Lauren’s in the Village. And she greeted me. The bellhops saw Princess Matchabelli greeting me. They hastened up the steps with my bag, and Matchabelli was with a gentleman—I might say a very haaaandsome gentleman—who was attached to the Spanish legation. And Matchabelli asked me the usual questions: “Where are you staying . . . ?”

I said I was going to stay here, and she said, “Oh, don’t!” And I said, “Well, I have to. I don’t have any place else right now.” And so this gentleman who was with her said, “Well, you can stay out at the legation until you get a place to stay. I’ll help you find a place.” And why wouldn’t he? After all, I was Matchabelli’s *friend*! She kissed me. . . .

So that’s how I got to be Ricardo Nugenti de Dosceta, with the address of the Spanish legation on my card at the time I passed in Washington. . . . I stayed at the legation four days, and then I went to my grandmother’s. . . . Why did I go there . . . ? Because it was stupid to pass. It was a nuisance to pass. Besides, I couldn’t get a job, and I had to have a job. So I went to my grandmother’s. And I got a job at a men’s club.⁵

Langston Hughes describes “Ricardo” in a June 1925 letter to Carl Van Vechten:

I’ve met a couple of interesting fellows about my own age,—one a pianist and the other an artist, and we have been amusing ourselves going downtown to the white theatres “passing” for South Americans, and walking up Fourteenth Street barefooted on warm evenings for the express purpose of shocking the natives. The artist boy has had some of his sketches taken by Harper’s Bazaar. They are not at all Negro but very good for one who has had so little training. I’d like you to meet him. He has some amusing ideas for a Negro ballet and some clever ideas for short stories if he weren’t too lazy to write them. . . .



Aaron Douglas's cover drawing for *FIRE!!* (1926).

I hope to see you again by August anyway. Perhaps Ricardo will come up then, too.⁶

“Ricardo” Nugent did indeed make the trip.

The high point in Nugent's Harlem Renaissance experience was his participation in the creation of *FIRE!!* During their late-night walks in Washington, he and Hughes had developed the idea of an “art quarterly” devoted to younger African American artists. The editor was Wallace Thurman, with whom Nugent shared accommodations for nearly two years. Aaron Douglas and Zora Neale Hurston were enlisted as contributors. Gwendolyn Bennett, a young writer and artist with several *Opportunity* covers to her credit, joined the group, as did John P. Davis, a graduate of Bates College who had already published several short stories and who would soon enter Harvard Law School. They called themselves “the Niggeratti”—an irreverent take-off on the pretentiously literate white audience for whose enlightenment the older impresarios (Du Bois, James Weldon Johnson, Charles S. Johnson, and Alain Locke) were showcasing African American talent.⁷

The Niggeratti figured among the more independent and rebellious of the

younger talents, who by 1926 had begun to chafe at the subtle and not-so-subtle censorship involved in always putting their best feet forward for the sake of racial uplift. Like their white contemporaries of “the lost generation,” they were convinced that great art must be based on “truth,” however disagreeable that truth might be to some. In an article in the 23 June 1926 issue of *The Nation*, Langston Hughes proclaimed their manifesto: “We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn’t matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly, too. The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs. If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn’t matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves.”⁸

During the summer of 1926 the Niggeratti labored to bring their vision to fruition. *FIRE!!* burst into print in November. Little that appeared in *FIRE!!* would have been permitted on the pages of *Crisis*. *Opportunity* gave creative writers a freer forum, but it, too, was the house organ of a civil-rights organization. The readers of these magazines were decidedly middle-class, and, because they were members of the sponsoring organizations, they could communicate any displeasure quite forcefully to the editors. There were ample opportunities for such readers to take offense in the pages of *FIRE!!*

Thurman’s story, “Cordelia the Crude,” deals with promiscuity and prostitution. The “Elevator Boy” of Hughes’s poem quits his job, displaying none of the heroic initiative associated with racial uplift. Gwendolyn Bennett’s “Wedding Day” depicts an interracial relationship filled with deception and pain. Hurston’s short play, “Color Struck,” explores the “dirty secret of black America”—skin-color prejudice within the African American community. Threatening the prevailing patriarchal norm, her masterful story “Sweat” relentlessly dissects an abusive relationship. All these works can be interpreted as reinforcing racial stereotypes.

Most transgressive of all was Nugent’s stream-of-consciousness prose composition, “Smoke, Lilies and Jade” (75). Written from an explicitly homoerotic perspective, complete with bedroom scenes, it attracted more criticism than any other piece in *FIRE!!* Not quite enough criticism, however, to get the publication banned in Boston (which might have generated enough publicity to rescue the fledgling quarterly from the financial difficulties that ended its run with the first issue).

Shortly after the publication of *FIRE!!*, Nugent and Thurman moved to 267 West 136th Street—an address that soon became known as “Niggeratti Manor.”

The building had been purchased by Iolanthe Sydney, a Harlem businesswoman who had previously turned another building, quite profitably, into a rooming house for Pullman porters. At 267 West 136th Street she created a miniature artist's colony; here, the rent was minimal and seldom collected. Thurman and Nugent, whose mother was a client of Sydney's employment agency, found this arrangement irresistible. Other residents "of the artistic persuasion" included actor/singer Service Bell and aspiring artist Rex Gorleigh. Before long, Thurman's blonde lover, Harold Stefansson, nephew of the explorer Vilhjalmur Stefansson, moved in, too.

"Niggeratti Manor" soon gained renown as a continuous party scene. Thurman faithfully recorded the happenings in *Infants of the Spring*. Often characterized as satirical, *Infants* might more usefully be thought of as a collection of campy brunch conversations about the escapades of Niggeratti Manor's residents, with Thurman and Nugent as the reigning divas. In later interviews, Nugent would vouch for the accuracy of Thurman's narrative in *Infants*, with the important exception of Paul Arbian's (Nugent's) death, which, Nugent explained, was "the only way Wallie could think of to end the book." Nugent himself wrote a parallel novel, *Gentleman Jigger*, excerpts of which are included in this volume (163–210).

Nugent's Harlem Renaissance didn't end here. In the fall of 1927 a "cattle call" went out for African American actors to try out for parts in DuBose and Dorothy Heyward's play, *Porgy*. On a lark, some of the Niggeratti and their friends answered the call. Nugent, Thurman, and young Dorothy West were hired. Although Thurman left the company in December 1927, Nugent continued not only in the extended Broadway run but with the subsequent tour of dozens of cities, culminating in a trip to England in the spring of 1929. *Porgy* closed late in January 1930, after a run of more than two years.

Based on DuBose Heyward's novel of the same name, *Porgy* was a departure for its producer, The Theatre Guild, which had never done anything even remotely "Negro" before. The director was Rouben Mamoulian, a young Armenian who went on to direct *Oklahoma!*, *Carousel*, and such noteworthy films as *Queen Christina* with Greta Garbo and *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* with Fredric March. A resounding success, *Porgy* became the basis for George Gershwin's now-classic opera, *Porgy and Bess*, the first production of which was also directed by Mamoulian.

Langston Hughes characterized the *Porgy* cast as "composed of the finest Negro actors ever assembled in one production up to that time."⁹ Nugent's colleagues included Frank Wilson (*Porgy*), Evelyn Ellis (*Bess*), Jack Carter



Nugent and Philander Thomas (back row) sailing to England in April 1929 with the *Porgy* principals (left to right): Rouben Mamoulian, director; Rose McClendon; John Yorke, company manager (?); and Frank Wilson, who played the title role.

(Crown), Percy Verwayne (*Sportin' Life*), Edna Thomas, Richard Huey, Jules Bledsoe, Georgette Harvey (who had spent several years in imperial Russia and barely escaped from the revolution through Siberia; this volume, 211), and the superb character actor Leigh Whipper, whose career spanned much of the century. Paul Robeson played Crown for six weeks in the spring of 1928.

Rose McClendon was Serena. With the possible exception of Robeson, she was the most distinguished performer of them all. McClendon's Broadway career began with *Deep River*. Then she starred in *In Abraham's Bosom*. After

Porgy, she led the cast of *Never No More*, a harrowing drama about a lynching. Illness forced her to leave the cast of the Broadway production of Langston Hughes's *Mulatto* in 1935, and she died in 1936, tragically young but widely respected by theatergoers and critics of all races as an artist of the first rank (214).

Another important theatrical figure associated with *Porgy* was Cheryl Crawford, the assistant stage manager. Ms. Crawford went on to found the Group Theatre, the first production of which was Paul Green's *The House of Connelly*, which opened in 1931 with Rose McClendon in the cast.

Listed on the *Porgy* program among the "Fishermen, Stevedores, etc.," Nugent did not have a speaking role. In his plaid shirt, he decorated the stage when the curtain rose on the dice game in Catfish Row. As Alain Locke wrote to a friend, "*Porgy* will be with you soon, and you will have a delightful experience ahead of you, both with the play and some of the players. Richard Bruce, one of the minor players, but not a minor personality is a great friend of mine. He is ex-Bruce Nugent, if you remember."¹⁰

During *Porgy*'s road-tour Nugent and Rose McClendon became close friends. Since McClendon's husband, a chiropractor, did not tour with the company, Nugent often served as her escort at the social events to which the stars of the show were invited by those few members of the local elites who were prepared to entertain black people. Nugent, as a gay man, was a "safe" companion. Their friendship continued after *Porgy* closed; Nugent attended McClendon in her final illness.

On tour Nugent added to his retinue of admirers. Richmond Barthé, soon to achieve renown as a sculptor, fell in love with him the moment the curtain rose in Chicago. In St. Louis Nugent met E. Simms Campbell, a talented artist who created many covers for *Crisis*, illustrated Sterling Brown's volume of poetry, *Southern Road*, and later became the lead cartoonist for *Esquire*. (Few readers of that stylish magazine had the slightest idea that Campbell was black.) Barthé and Campbell were soon on their way to New York. In Buffalo, Nugent became involved with the local mafia don. While in England, Nugent spent a weekend at the country home of E. M. Forster and flew in private airplanes to parties in the south of France.

Nugent's openly expressed sexual interest in men, which he resolutely refused to hide, surely affected the group dynamics of the artists and writers around him and contributed significantly to the freewheeling exuberance so characteristic of the Niggeratti. Some were comfortable in this bohemian environment; others were not. Arna Bontemps, an important African American writer and

close friend of Langston Hughes, for example, was never part of the group, despite the fact that he had known Thurman in Los Angeles and helped him find lodging when he first came to New York. Resolutely heterosexual, Bontemps was a married Seventh Day Adventist. However, Aaron Douglas—also married, serious minded, and not at all a “party person”—definitely *was* one of the Niggeratti: Nugent often slept on the Douglasses’ floor when he had no place else to stay.

Like Bontemps, Countee Cullen was not one of the Niggeratti. He lived with his foster father in the parsonage of Salem Methodist Episcopal Church, his homoerotic interests hidden from the public. Reverend Cullen strongly objected to Nugent’s presence when Countee invited him to visit: Nugent was beyond the pale. Countee occasionally invited Nugent over anyway.

As a gay man in ’20s Harlem, Nugent had plenty of company.¹¹ Many of the major Harlem Renaissance figures were also sexually attracted to and, to varying degrees, sexually involved with, other men—Wallace Thurman, Countee Cullen, Claude McKay, Richmond Barthé, Carl Van Vechten, Alain Locke, and, probably, Langston Hughes among them. So were many of their less-eminent friends, who included Harold Jackman, Cullen’s best friend; L. S. Alexander Gumby, who was supported by a stockbroker and who collected books, which he exhibited in his “studio” on upper Fifth Avenue; Edward Perry, an artist and actor in *Porgy* who also wrote for the *Inter-State Tattler*; and Philander Thomas, another “Porgyite.” Nugent also associated with the circle of svelte gay men who surrounded A’lelia Walker, heiress to the cosmetics fortune built by her mother, Madame C. J. Walker—a circle which included Edward Perry; Caska Bonds, a voice coach who, with his mother’s permission, had been adopted at the age of seven by a wealthy Englishman and educated in England; Eddie Manchester, who became notorious as an intermediary who could procure the sexual services of young African American males for wealthy whites; and Clinton Moore, the proprietor of a succession of “buffet flats” where liquor and sex were freely available if one could afford the price.

Edouard Roditi, a gay writer who visited Harlem in the 1930s, recalled in a 1983 interview that “there was a whole small crowd of rather nice gay blacks around Countee Cullen. They used to meet practically every evening at Caska Bonds’s and sit by the hour playing cards.”¹² Born in Paris of American parents and educated in France and England, Roditi belonged to the European avant-garde; in 1929 he published the first surrealist manifesto in English. He met Cullen and Jackman in Paris.¹³ He was sexually involved with Jackman and, on visiting the United States, also became sexually involved with Nugent.¹⁴

RICHARD BRUCE NUGENT

Richard Bruce Nugent—who comes from one of Washington’s “first” families; because he has been to South America and can tell many tales of thrilling experiences there; because he came to New York when the New Negro Renaissance was beginning; because he was the most colorful and sensational member of the younger group of Negro artists; because he was an associate of Wallace Thurman’s, inhabiting with him the notorious 267 house; because he used to write letters to great men, telling them how wonderful he was and how well they could get along together spiritually; because he can tell the most vivid and imaginative tales about famous people and places, and you will believe they are true; because he has written in a beautiful style a novel of homosexual love called, “Smoke, Lilies and Jade”; because he has written a fine [story], “Sahdji,” which is published in *The New Negro*; because he was a member of the *Porgy* cast; because he was asked to leave a dance in Boston when one of the hosts saw his collar was open and he was not wearing a tie; because he was admiringly daring about going places in his vagabond’s garb; because of his escapades and associates in London; because he is a fascinating conversationalist; because he is a brilliantly talented artist; because the figures and lines in his drawings are weirdly fascinating; because he is a good companion; because he enjoys life with no care for tomorrow; because he has just drawn a strikingly beautiful set of illustrations from the Bible; because he is writing a novel about his experiences at 267; because he is collaborating on a book with this columnist; and finally because he won’t mind being the thirteenth member of this gallery.—Edward Perry, *The Interstate Tattler*, 18 July 1930



Self-portrait of Carl Van Vechten (1934).

During the twenties Harlem became one of the centers of night life in New York. In addition to alcohol and jazz, relatively easy access to sex partners—both male and female—drew the more bohemian elements of the white elite uptown to Harlem. Virgil Thomson, the composer and, later, powerful music critic for the *New York Herald Tribune*; Chick Austin, Director of the Hartford Atheneum; and Philip Johnson, the renowned modern architect, were among those who took advantage of these opportunities.¹⁵

Carl Van Vechten led the way.¹⁶ One memorable evening is described in Carl Van Vechten's handwritten diary entry for 15 February 1929:

Home for dinner — Ettie Stettheimer & Virgil Thompson who after dinner played his remarkable opera to words of Gertrude Stein! "Four Saints in Three Acts." Alma and Ma[urice] Wertheim were here, Carrie Stettheimer, Max Ewing, Mabel Luhan who brought Martie Ma . . . , Dorothy Harvey, Hal [Witter] Bynner, Arthur F . . . , Harry Block, Muriel Draper, Emily Clark & Zena Naylor—I went to a drag in Harlem with Harry, Hal, Emily, Virgil, & Martie. We picked up Eddie Manchester & went to the Lenox Ave Club where I danced with Louis Cole in drag & then to Pod's & Jerry's. Home at 7:30 A.M.¹⁷

Despite a high concentration of men who were sexually interested in other men, this was not a “gay community” as we currently understand the term. In a later interview, Nugent explained, “Harlem was very much like the Village. People did what they wanted to do with whom they wanted to do it. You didn’t get on the rooftops and shout, ‘I fucked my wife last night.’ So why would you get on the roof and say ‘I loved prick.’ You didn’t. You just did what you wanted to do. Nobody was in the closet. There wasn’t any closet.”¹⁸

In another interview, Nugent elaborated: “Homosexuality has always been a dirty word. I cannot remember, in my seventy-some years, the time when it wasn’t a dirty word. But, on the other hand, homosexuality, the practice of it, was not a dirty thing. The dirtiness about any of it was the flaunting of it. And I use ‘flaunting’ advisedly. Because there’s a difference between flaunting it and just not trying to keep it hidden. So, if one met with the amenities of polite society, who’s going to question what your impolitenesses were?”¹⁹

In comparison with his contemporaries, Nugent often did go over the line and “flaunt it,” although he apparently maintained a studied ambiguity as to whether he was attracted to women as well as men. Nonetheless, his brilliant conversation, charm, and, in the African American community, the cachet of the Bruce family name sustained his social respectability.

Nugent moved in a social matrix in which the existence of extramarital sexual relationships of all kinds—homosexual and heterosexual—was taken for granted. The matrix was defined by sophisticated, “modern” attitudes and a general rejection of conventional sexual mores, not by sexual orientation. Both extramarital dalliances and same-sex interests were effectively “open secrets”—acceptable in private, gossiped about, but not publicly acknowledged. Embedded *within* the matrix, and inseparable from it, was a network of friendships among men who were sexually drawn to other men.

The activities of Nugent and his friends, along with those of other Harlem notables, were duly reported in the columns of *Amsterdam News* (many of which were written by Edward Perry) and the *Inter-State Tattler*. There were even sly references to sexual preferences: “What is this thing anyhow . . . *Richard Bruce* and *Mary Faire*, both equally well-known in Harlem and the Village, waiting up nights for each . . . can it be that the thing is getting fashionable . . . first *Countee Cullen* and *Yolande Dubois* [sic] . . . with *R. Schlick* and *Pamela* . . . following closely . . . now *Bruce* and *Faire* . . . it shouldn’t be long now before *Clint Moore* allies himself with some charming femme of the collar and tie specia.”²⁰

This tolerance of semiprivate homosexuality among the worldly Harlem elite

did not extend to all segments of the African American community's leadership. In 1929, for example, Adam Clayton Powell Sr., pastor of the Abyssinian Baptist Church, initiated a vigorous crusade against homosexuality.²¹ In the same vein, W. E. B. Du Bois dismissed Augustus Granville Dill as business manager of *Crisis* after Dill was arrested for homosexual activity in 1928. Du Bois was perhaps motivated as much by the potential negative reaction of his readership as by his own personal disapproval, and he later expressed regret at the injustice he had done Dill.²² His reaction is understandable; most elite African Americans were intent on maintaining a hyper-respectable public image as a means of personal and racial advancement.

Indeed, distaste for the homosexual undercurrents in the Harlem scene may have contributed to the negative response of some African American critics to the Harlem group. For example, Sterling Brown, a Howard University professor and poet whose stature many consider equal to that of Langston Hughes, said in an interview,

I have no relationship to any Harlem Renaissance. When they [the writers and artists of that era] were down there flirting with Carl Van Vechten, I was down south talking to Big Boy [a principal informant in Brown's life-long study of folklore]. One of the most conceited things I can say is I am proud that I have never shaken that rascal's hand. . . . He corrupted the Harlem Renaissance and was a terrible influence on them. He was a voyeur. He was looking at these Negroes and they were acting the fools for him. And the foolisher they acted, the more he recorded them.²³

The sexual innuendo in Brown's remark is clear.

Nugent's relationships with certain Harlem Renaissance figures who shared his sexual interests—Alain Locke, Richmond Barthé, Wallace Thurman, L. S. Alexander Gumby, and Harold Jackman—illustrate the complexity of the Harlem social environment.

Dr. Alain Locke (junior year Phi Beta Kappa, Harvard Ph.D., the first African American Rhodes Scholar, and professor of philosophy at Howard University) was one of the six "midwives" of the Harlem Renaissance—the men and women whose proselytizing and connections with publishers and patrons made the Harlem Renaissance possible.²⁴ He was also a self-identified gay man: his erotic interests were exclusively directed toward other men, those interests were central to his sense of self, and he perceived himself as different from the majority on that account.²⁵ He gathered about him a coterie of brilliant and



Alain Locke. The inscription reads, "For Bruce. Sincerely, Alain Locke 1929."
Photograph by James L. Allen.

good-looking young men of color that evolved into a kind of secret society.²⁶ Moreover, his sexual interests were often a factor in his choice of protégés, even when they were not members of this group.

Langston Hughes was among the protégés in whom Locke had a sexual interest. His campaign to seduce Hughes in 1923 and 1924 is detailed in Arnold Rampersad's biography of Hughes.²⁷ It began when Countee Cullen, extolling Hughes's virtues, wrote to Locke suggesting that Locke write Hughes. Cullen himself was sexually attracted to Hughes, but he had been unsuccessful in arousing any reciprocal interest. Locke initiated a correspondence with Hughes early in 1923. Hughes responded warmly. As the correspondence continued, Locke eventually made his sexual interests quite clear; Hughes, on the other hand, maintained a studied ambiguity, evading Locke's attempts to arrange a meeting. In an extraordinary correspondence with Countee Cullen, Locke gave a blow-by-blow description of his efforts.²⁸ Finally, in the summer of 1924, he succeeded in catching up with Hughes in Paris. Later that summer, they met again in Italy and spent several days in Venice together. Did Locke's

passion remain unrequited? There is no way of knowing. What is known is that Hughes's passport was stolen, and Locke left him in Genoa to make his own way back to America.

A cryptic entry in Carl Van Vechten's daybook from 31 October 1925 provides an interesting postscript to this affair: "Alain Locke comes in (at 3:00 P.M.). He stays till six—talking about the collection of African sculpture in Brussels & then he discusses the character of Langston Hughes at some length. Telling me extraordinary things about Countee Cullen (adopted by the Rev. Cullen at the age of 12) about Claude McKay etc. I liked him much better than I ever have before."²⁹

Alain Locke was also sexually attracted to Nugent. In a taped interview, Nugent reported that on one occasion he was visiting Locke at his home in Washington, and "Locke offered me his body. A professor of philosophy and a person old enough to be your father doesn't lie on a bed in their shorts and say, 'Do anything you want.' What can you do except be embarrassed? And be a little disappointed in the person who did it. I was a lot disappointed. I was traumatized by it."³⁰

Despite this event, Nugent accepted Locke as a friend/mentor in whom he could confide his intimate thoughts, as he did in this November 1928 letter.

I feel the need of someone to lean on *so* bad. What I think would be a cure seems to be such an impossibility. Am I so impossible that I can not get a friend of the sort I want. Everyone else seems to have one close friend who thinks of all the small niceties and petty things except me. With me they all either use me without reciprocation or depend on me until I feel it incumbent upon me to create something in me for them to lean on. And it's sapping all of me away that's all. I know I *should* feel it makes me stronger and I do but I want some—*need* something still. After all I'm not full grown. Don't they ever realize that a prop (of nothing more than honest affection) might help me too?

Please write me soon.

Love,

Bruce³¹

Angst such as Nugent expresses here stands in sharp contrast to the unflappable persona he presented to the world at large.

In February 1929 Locke, playing the role of matchmaker, wrote Nugent about Richmond Barthé, another handsome young artist:

Fate ordained that I should receive it [your last letter] just as Barthé and I got back from dinner. . . . Now you have the friend whom you needed—and if there is further need, my own friendship in the background standing in understanding guardianship and benediction.

Out of my own sorrow I am quite sure I know what you have suffered, and I am glad to say that it is without jealousy or envy that I can be happy in your joy—for I love you both—and look forward to warming my own soul a bit at the fire of your youth and at least realizing by proxy some of my own unfulfilled ambitions. For I too wish to create—only as I told Richmond, I only too often do it by proxy. . . .

Barthé I always liked—& I instantly sensed his genius. But after 10 days of quiet intimacy here/ he has just left—I am more sure than ever—and satisfied and happy that he is my friend and yours. . . .

Good night, Bruce. Be happier.

Love,

Alain³²

On April 25 Locke wrote again to Nugent, who was on tour with *Porgy* in London at the time: “Intermittently since, I have had vivid recalls of the last night we spent together, and send you, along with the usual cordial thoughts, my warm thanks for your part in it.”³³

Richmond Barthé was the most talented and prolific African American sculptor of his generation. A native of Bay St. Louis, Mississippi, he became the houseboy of a wealthy New Orleans family who summered there. In New Orleans Barthé attracted the attention of the family’s neighbor Lyle Saxon, a member of the New Orleans cultural elite. Impressed with Barthé’s talent, both Saxon and Barthé’s pastor sponsored his education at the Art Institute of Chicago. In 1928 Barthé attended a performance of *Porgy* in which Nugent appeared. Fifty years later he wrote to Nugent:

Dear David:

I’ve learned that David means beloved. How right. You have been my beloved friend since 1927 [*sic*] when the curtain went up on you in the center of that stage in Chicago. I love you with the kind of love that will last forever . . .

As ever, with love,

Your

Jonathan³⁴

Despite Barthé's passion and Locke's matchmaking, Nugent and Barthé either did not become lovers or, if they did, did not remain lovers for long. A few reasons suggest themselves. For one thing, Nugent was promiscuous, and Barthé would likely have demanded fidelity. For another, the ambitious Barthé was exceedingly circumspect about his sexual orientation, never revealing his attraction to men to anyone who wasn't also "in the life." Nugent, on the other hand, loved to make known in a wide variety of social circumstances the fact that he found men sexually attractive. For Barthé, an extended liaison with Nugent would have amounted to a public declaration of his sexual interest in men—a declaration he never made in his lifetime.

There were also differences in temperament. In later correspondence with Nugent, Barthé described at great length the accolades he had received, such as an award given by the Governor of Mississippi and the fact that the city of Pasadena had renamed his street "Barthé Drive." Barthé's need for public recognition of this sort exasperated Nugent; he found pursuit of it distasteful.³⁵

Wallace Thurman, another of Nugent's closest friends, shared with Nugent both his rented rooms and a taste for "rough trade."³⁶ But they were not lovers. A brilliant editor, Thurman wrote two of the major Harlem Renaissance novels, *The Blacker the Berry* and *Infants of the Spring*. The latter was a thinly disguised portrayal of real life in Niggeratti Manor in which the characters Paul Arbian (Nugent) and Raymond (Thurman) trade witty barbs for the benefit of, and sometimes at the expense of, their compatriots. Nugent's parallel roman à clef presents them in the same kind of relationship—a shared recognition of superior intelligence combined with underlying strains of competitiveness.

Like Barthé, Thurman hid his erotic interest in men from others—even from some of his confidants. Indeed, despite the fact that he was arrested for illicit sexual activity in a public restroom shortly after he first arrived in New York in fall 1925, Thurman may not have thought of himself as gay. He described the harrowing incident four years later in a letter to William Jourdan Rapp, a white playwright who collaborated with him on *Harlem*, their hit Broadway play. Thurman claimed that the other man had made advances, which he accepted only for the money that was offered. He steadfastly denied being a homosexual.³⁷ In the same letter Thurman described the break-up of his marriage, denying rumors that it had been due to homosexuality on his part and blaming his wife's sexual inadequacies. (Thurman had married Louise Thompson, a beautiful and brilliant graduate of the University of California at Berkeley. For all intents and purposes the marriage ended after a few months, al-



Sculptor Richmond Barthé with his bust of Toussaint L'Overture. The inscription reads, "To Richard, with best wishes for success. Barthé, 1929."



Wallace Thurman (circa 1929)—Nugent's roommate, editor of *FIRE!!*, and author of *The Blacker the Berry* and *Infants of the Spring*.

though they never divorced.) Nugent, however, stated on many occasions that Thurman did in fact engage in sexual activities with other men.³⁸

Yet another member of Nugent's network of gay friends was L. S. Alexander Gumby. An autodidact and a truly memorable personality, Gumby was notorious for his hilarious, sexually explicit sonnets and his atrocious spelling. Born in 1886 in Maryland, he arrived in New York around 1906. A man of studied elegance, he supported himself as a bellhop, waiter, and, during WWI, as a postal worker. Throughout the 1920s, his income was supplemented by the support of Charles W. Newman, a wealthy white stockbroker with whom he had become friends in 1910.³⁹

Gumby collected books. When they crowded him out of his apartment, he installed himself "Village style" in a "studio" at 2144 Fifth Avenue in Harlem—a converted commercial space on the second floor with large windows overlooking the street. A grand piano and Persian carpets provided the setting in which he could impress young men with his erudition, silver, and Spode. He held receptions and teas, sometimes renting out the space for recitals, exhibitions, or parties. At one time or another, almost every luminary of the Harlem Renaissance crossed his threshold. His gatherings were reported in the columns of *The Amsterdam News* and *The Inter-State Tattler*. An especially noteworthy stag party was held in 1930 on the occasion of Countee Cullen's return from two years in Paris. Eminences like Heywood Brown, Walter White, and Arthur Schomburg attended that affair.⁴⁰

Inspired, perhaps, by the examples of *FIRE!!* and *Harlem* (Thurman's second effort at literary publication in New York), Gumby set out in 1930 to produce a literary journal entitled *The Gumby Book Studio Quarterly*. It was to have included one of Nugent's "Bible Stories"—"The Tunic with a Thousand Pleats." Unfortunately, the project did not get past the page-proof stage, as Gumby's patron, Newman, had lost millions in the stock market, and Gumby contracted tuberculosis. He was hospitalized for four years, which forced him to give up his studio. In 1931, mindful of the significance of Gumby's collections, his many friends organized a benefit Arts Ball at the Renaissance Casino. The event was sponsored by an amazing roster of Harlem social leaders, writers, actors, and entertainers, including Paul Robeson, Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, Bill Robinson, Rose McClendon, Hubert T. Delany, W. C. Handy, Bessye Bearden, Walter White, Arthur Schomburg, and Roscoe Conklin Bruce, as well as the downtown hostess of high bohemia, Muriel Draper. The principals of the Cotton Club Review and Noble Sissle performed. Evidently Gumby's

sexual predilections, which were widely known, had done little harm to his social respectability, at least in this segment of the community.

In addition to collecting books relating to African Americans, Gumby created an enormous number of scrapbooks on the subject, which he donated to Columbia University in 1951, an arrangement that included his employment as curator for a time. The collection is a gold mine of information about the Harlem Renaissance—especially about those who were “in the life” (this volume, 223). In 1951 Gumby wrote Nugent about the attractions of Columbia:

Bruce I am not exaggerating when I say that Columbia University is like a harem, there are types there that would make a Narcissus or a Hermes look like a scare-crow. And yet only one of them have dared to rate over the two stares [stars] with me; and that one only went a half star better, altho we spent the best part of the night along together in my room. . . .

In writing this letter to you; I have the coff-pot going, and feel like I am talking to you, you are the one person I don't hafter pull my punches with, and not afraid to reveal your own escapade; — not like Jackman, if he only knew that I know about a party up in the Bronx where he not only let his hair down, but went much father. I know the guy he had and I cant say I blaim him. He is a two-way brown-skin kid, was about 19 when I tried and failed. [Gumby's atrocious spelling is much in evidence here.]⁴¹

“Jackman” in this letter is Harold Jackman; he and Nugent served as Gumby's executors on his death in 1961. An enormously attractive and socially adept man, Jackman made a point of introducing his innumerable acquaintances to each other. (It was Jackman, for example, who introduced Nugent to Claude McKay.) Intimately familiar with both refined high life and low-down Harlem hideaways, the distinguished-looking Jackman enthralled visiting European aristocrats and white visitors from downtown. He sustained a lifelong friendship with Countee Cullen. Their friendship was such that when Cullen sailed for France three months after his wedding to Yolanda Du Bois, only Jackman and Cullen's father accompanied him—his new bride followed later. There is, however, no firm evidence of a sexual relationship between Cullen and Jackman. Although they were the closest of friends for decades and both were sexually active with other men, those facts do not in and of themselves establish that Cullen and Jackman were ever physically intimate with each other. Like Thurman, both were quite circumspect. Harlem's poet laureate married again in 1940 and remained married until he died in 1946; Jackman never married.



Poet Countee Cullen (left) and his best friend, Harold Jackman, who was a teacher and was often described as one of the handsomest men in Harlem. Cullen's photo is inscribed, "For Bruce—who without this might forget, Countee." Photographs by James L. Allen (circa 1929).

Cullen and Jackman corresponded extensively, with Jackman reporting at length during the late twenties on the doings of Nugent, Wallace Thurman, Edward Perry, Caska Bonds, Claude McKay, Richmond Barthé, Alain Locke, Carl Van Vechten, and Eric Walrond.⁴² This network of relationships among men sexually attracted to other men renders tangible the observation that the Harlem Renaissance was "surely as gay as it was black, not that it was exclusively either of these."⁴³ The network also connected those involved in the Harlem Renaissance with the (white) bohemian elite; the international avant-garde; the worlds of theater, popular entertainment, jazz, and blues; the streets; and the underworld. The extent to which shared sexual interests made possible some of the breakthroughs of the era is a subject that deserves further research.

Before and after *Porgy*, Nugent made art. His work was published in *Opportunity* and featured in *Ebony and Topaz*, a large-format anthology edited by Charles S. Johnson and published by *Opportunity* in 1927 (66–70, 247). How-

ever, there were very few venues in which African American artists could exhibit their work. Indeed, the situation was so desperate that the residents of Niggeratti Manor organized their own exhibition on the premises in April 1927.⁴⁴ The show launched the career of African American portrait photographer James Allen (who was himself extremely photogenic). He, like Nugent, apprenticed with the catalog firm of Stone, Van Dresser & Co.⁴⁵ His importance has only recently been recognized; Yale University Gallery of Art mounted a one-man show of his work in 1999 (for examples of Allen's work, see 23, 30).

An oasis in Harlem's artistic desert was the Harmon Foundation, which, in the late twenties and early thirties, organized traveling exhibitions of the work of black artists. Nugent entered the juried competition, with four of his works being listed in the catalog of the 1931 exhibition, which also included contributions from such now-esteemed artists as Augusta Savage, William Henry Johnson, Archibald Motley, Richmond Barthé, James Lesesne Wells, and Hale Woodruff.

Not content to limit himself to any particular aspect of the arts, Nugent was also involved in one way or another with many of the early efforts to develop African American concert dance companies. He danced occasionally with Hemsley Winfield in the twenties and with Asadata Dafora in the thirties. (Winfield achieved a measure of celebrity when he danced the role of Salome in drag with his troupe, the New Negro Art Theatre, at the Cherry Lane Theater in 1929.)

In 1933 Nugent appeared as a dancer in *Run, Little Chillun*, a "Negro Folk Drama" written by Hall Johnson, in which a "pagan religious cult" invades a "normal Southern village," challenging the town's revivalist Christian faith. Nugent, of course, was among the savages. He recalled having been coached for the show by Doris Humphrey, who was pregnant at the time and rather irritable. He did not find her simpatico—although he *was* enthralled with her partner, Charles Weidman—and was pleased when José Limon, a Humphrey-Weidman protégé, replaced her as his coach.

The play was actually something of a pageant. The action was accompanied by the Hall Johnson Choir, which Johnson, a classically trained violinist, had organized in 1925. (It was Johnson's setting of "Fire," a poem by Langston Hughes, for his choir that suggested the name *FIRE!!* to the Niggeratti for their 1926 publication.) Two of *Run, Little Chillun's* four acts were devoted to "spectacular and stunning" reproductions of the religious services of the two competing cults. The production played four months on Broadway and then went

on tour. The critical consensus, as summarized in *Literary Digest*, was that *Run, Little Chillun* was “noble and magnificent, superb and orgiastic, startling and ecstatic, savage and appealing, frenzied and moving, elemental and emotional, an example of group acting the Moscow Art Theater in its heyday could not have improved upon.”⁴⁶

In the middle and late thirties Nugent’s precise whereabouts are hard to trace. True to form, he drifted from place to place and man to man. Sometimes he stayed with his mother, who then lived in the Bronx. We do know that in 1936, Carl Van Vechten took photographs of Nugent in New York, posing him with a bust of Antinous, Emperor Hadrian’s favorite (227). Also, there is some indication that he spent time in Chicago and studied art there.

In 1937 one of Nugent’s most important short writings, “Pope Pius the Only,” was published in Dorothy West’s little magazine, *Challenge* (244). The teen-aged West had been a frequent visitor to Niggeratti Manor. She had acted with Nugent in *Porgy* and sailed with the company to England in 1929. In the early thirties she journeyed to Russia with a group of black writers, among them Langston Hughes and Louise Thompson (Wallace Thurman’s estranged wife), to make a Soviet-sponsored film about African Americans. Although the film never materialized, everyone involved had the experience of a lifetime. On her return West founded the modest periodical, *Challenge*, which was intended, perhaps, to be a less flamboyant sequel to *FIRE!!* Although *Challenge* appeared only irregularly for several years, its roster of writers was impressive: Langston Hughes, Pauli Murray, James Weldon Johnson, Countee Cullen, Claude McKay, Frank Yerby, Zora Neale Hurston, Carl Van Vechten, Parker Tyler, Charles Henri Ford, Owen Dodson, and Edouard Roditi, among others, appeared in its pages. The last issue, renamed *New Challenge*, was opened to “a young Chicago group” of writers, with Richard Wright as associate editor. The issue was spectacular, with contributions from Wright, Ralph Ellison, Alain Locke, Margaret Walker, and Sterling Brown. West, however, felt pushed aside and was uncomfortable with the rather stridently leftist views of her new collaborators. Therefore, she closed the magazine and moved to Martha’s Vineyard, where she lived for the rest of her life. In 1946 her first novel, *The Living is Easy*, appeared. Nearly fifty years later her second novel, *The Wedding*, became a best-seller. She died in 1998 at the age of ninety-one.

In the late thirties Nugent experienced a rare period of steady employment when he was hired by the Federal Writers’ Project (FWP), where his coworkers included Ralph Ellison, Claude McKay, and Waring Cuney, a fellow Washingtonian. Working under Roi Ottley, he wrote biographical sketches of black not-

ables, as well as articles on the history and current condition of blacks in New York (147–56, 211–30). He also researched and wrote biographical profiles of residents from colonial times (“Colonial Worthies”). While he never abandoned his apolitical posture as an aesthete, the rush of the intelligentsia to the left in the thirties had its effect on him: he went so far as to become a shop steward in the union that represented FWP employees.

During this FWP period, Nugent became a good friend of now-obscure artist Henry “Mike” Bannern. Bannern and Charles “Spinky” Alston maintained a studio designated as the site for a Works Progress Administration mural project—a place where younger artists from the community congregated and worked. Jacob Lawrence, Romare Bearden, Norman Lewis, and Charles White were among the members of the “306 Group,” so named because the studio was located at 306 West 141st Street. Nugent had tremendous respect for Bannern as an artist and in later years often said that he did not think Bannern had received his due.

In the early forties Nugent joined the Negro Ballet Company, which was founded in 1939 by Wilson Williams, who had studied with Helen Tamiris and probably with Martha Graham and Charles Weidman as well. The company appeared at the Humphrey-Weidman studio theater in 1941 and 1942. It was headquartered in the upper studios of Carnegie Hall, where some of its members, including Nugent, lived for a time. When the Williams troupe went broke, Nugent and other members of the company, hoping to save it by staying together, took a cold-water flat on Charles Street in Greenwich Village. Later, after the group dissolved, Nugent moved into the Jane Street apartment of Warren Marr II and his sister, Grace Marr. Warren Marr, who had been a publicist for the Wilson company and part of the group on Charles Street, became editor of the NAACP magazine, *Crisis*, in the 1970s.

Nugent, like many other Americans, performed his patriotic duty during World War II: he corresponded at length with members of the armed forces. Nugent certainly did not find this particular obligation burdensome, reflecting as it did his interest in young men so well. Among his correspondents was Mario Monteforte Toledo, a Guatemalan writer in exile who served for several months in the U.S. Army in 1945 and 1946. Nugent, who knew Monteforte before he was inducted, collaborated with him in translating one of his poems—“Cabagüil,” a Mayan creation myth—into a ballet in English. After his discharge from the army early in 1946, Monteforte returned to Guatemala to participate in the fledgling democracy, which had in 1944 replaced a failed dictatorship. Within the year, he became head of the majority party and was



Grace Marr Nugent in 1951. She was Bruce's wife from 1952 until her death in 1969.

elected to the unicameral Guatemalan congress. For a time he served as president of Congress, which put him first in the line of succession to the Guatemalan presidency. In 1950 he became disillusioned with conflict within his party and declined to stand for reelection. In 1954 the democracy was replaced by a new, CIA-sponsored dictatorship, and Monteforte was arrested and went into exile again. After many years in Mexico, he returned to Guatemala in the 1980s. Having written many books—novels, poetry, and literary criticism—as well as a landmark study of Guatemalan sociology, Monteforte is among the most eminent living figures in Hispanic-American letters.

In the close quarters of the Greenwich Village apartment Nugent shared with the Marrs, a highly romantic but platonic relationship developed between Nugent and Grace, who had graduated from Harlem Hospital School of Nursing in 1941 and was studying nursing education at Teachers College, Columbia. A brilliant and beautiful woman, she earned both B.A. and M.A. degrees there. In 1944 she was appointed instructor in nursing education at Columbia, where she taught microbiology. At the time she was the only African American on the Columbia faculty. In 1949 she returned to Harlem Hospital as educational director of nursing. After two years she left to become supervisor of nursing

education with the New York State Department of Education, an achievement that was another “first” for African Americans. In 1952 Grace Marr returned to New York City from Albany and, much to the surprise of many of their friends, married Nugent. The marriage lasted seventeen years.

In the years before the Gay Liberation Movement, it was not uncommon for men who had sex with other men to marry. Often, homosexual activity was kept hidden from the wife. In other cases the marriage was a convenient “cover” for the extramarital sexual activities of both parties. The Nugent-Marr marriage fell into neither of these categories. Deeply in love with Nugent, Grace Marr was fully aware of his homosexuality but decided to marry him anyway. She apparently hoped she could “change” him and that eventually the marriage would be physically consummated. Her hope remained unfulfilled. Bruce maintained a studio separate from the residence he shared with his wife and quite openly continued to have liaisons with other men.

Even so, it is no exaggeration to state that, for Bruce at least, marriage was literally a lifesaver. Grace provided stability and support during a period in which the physical and emotional consequences of his relentlessly Bohemian lifestyle might otherwise have come crashing down on him.

In 1953, shortly after her marriage, Grace Nugent became assistant executive secretary of the American Nurses’ Association (ANA), working in the Inter-group Relations Unit. She held this post until 1959, when she abandoned her promising career to devote herself to “Operation Democracy,” a project that she conceived during her years with the ANA and that preoccupied her for the rest of her life. Daughter of a clergyman, Grace was profoundly idealistic. She came to abhor all of the social conditions that blocked the realization of each person’s full human potential—poverty, discrimination, and the dehumanizing conditions of work in modern society. Her project aimed to effect broad and comprehensive—but vaguely defined—reform. While it attracted some initial support from her friends, her ANA contacts, and the Interdenominational Ministers’ Alliance of Brooklyn and Long Island, it soon foundered due to a lack of focus and a failure to identify concrete, achievable goals. For years she carried on alone, supporting herself and her project on her meager earnings as a per-diem and private-duty nurse, berating herself for not putting even more effort into promoting her cause.

During the sixties Grace and Bruce drifted ever further apart. In 1969, frustrated both in her humanitarian aspirations and in her marriage, Grace Marr Nugent committed suicide.

From the forties on, Nugent worked as a freelance artist and portraitist. This



Nugent in the 1950s.

activity did not support him. Occasionally he took “regular” jobs, at one time tending the night desk at the Brevoort hotel and, from 1957 through the 1960s, working part-time for a hardware supply company in lower Manhattan. He also wrote several novels, none of which were published. Thus, he was left to survive on the wages of his wife and the kindness of friends.

One such friend was Bernard Kay, a native of New Hampshire whom Bruce had known since the twenties. A person of exceedingly diverse talents, Kay was a successful actor, director, and producer, as well as a practicing psychologist and a translator. His omnivorous and cultivated intellect, good looks, and sincere empathy drew many young men of genius into his circle, including the actor Earle Hyman and Samuel R. Delany, the writer. Kay directed the teenaged Marlon Brando in his first Broadway appearance (*Bobino*, a children’s play). Nugent created his “Gilgamesh” drawings for a Kay production that never came to fruition (see 240–41).

Raymond Jenkins also helped sustain Nugent over the years. A talented African American artist and native of the Bronx, Jenkins chose the security of New York City civil service employment as a draftsman over the vicissitudes of a career in the arts. He and Nugent met in the thirties and remained close until

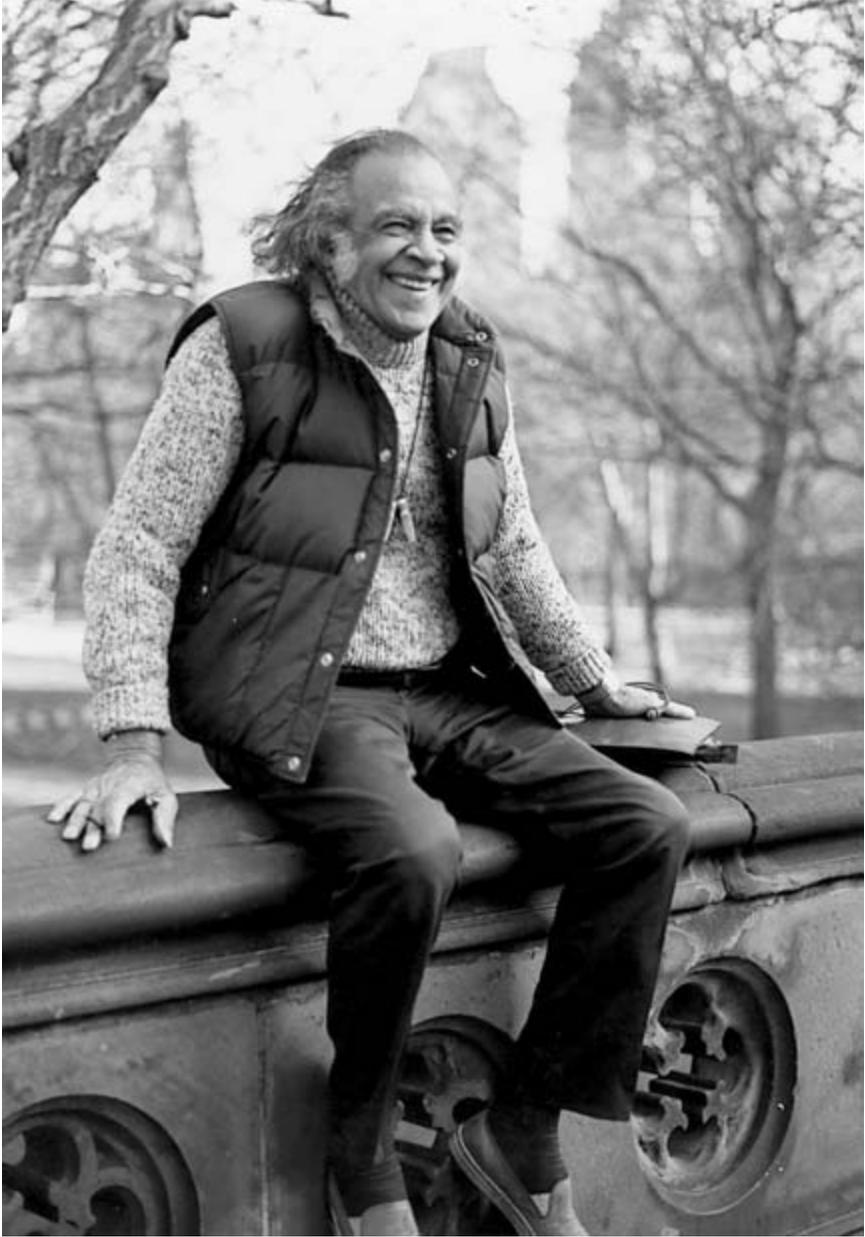
Nugent's death. Although Jenkins was about ten years younger than Nugent, his death followed Nugent's by only a few months.

In the late sixties Nugent joined other prominent African American artists and concerned citizens to form the Harlem Cultural Council, on which he served for a time as co-chairman and for many years as a member of its board of directors. The group functioned as a conduit for municipal and federal funds for the support of the arts. It sponsored the highly successful "Jazzmobile" and "Dancemobile" projects, in which major artists performed on Harlem streets from stages constructed on flatbed trucks. The council was instrumental in organizing political support for the construction of a new building for the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, the division of the New York Public Library that houses the Western world's most important collection of materials relating to Africa and the African diaspora. The council also took a leading role in mobilizing the community protest against exclusion of black artists from a central role in planning the Metropolitan Museum of Art's landmark exhibition, "Harlem on My Mind." Nugent was particularly proud to have been directly involved in the council's confrontation with museum director Thomas Hoving in 1969.

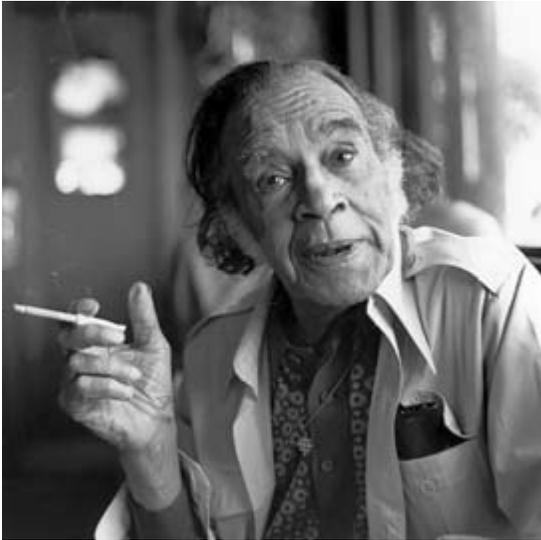
Also in the late sixties Nugent began a collaboration with young poet Abba Elethea (James W. Thompson) on a cultural history of Harlem. Elethea was a member of the "Umbra" group of writers active at the time on New York's lower east side—a group that included Tom Dent, David Henderson, Calvin Hernton, Raymond Patterson, and Ishmael Reed. Nugent and Elethea prepared a book outline that received high praise from their prospective publisher, but an advance sufficient to complete the project was not forthcoming.

After his wife's death, Nugent scraped together funds for a trip to Rome. He had always been fascinated by Italian men and had studied the language off and on. Rome enthralled him, and he returned each summer for several years. During his first trip in 1971, he met a handsome young Roman with whom he became deeply involved, maintaining yet another of his extensive correspondences, laboriously translating his own letters into Italian. Their relationship continued from summer to summer, even after the young man became engaged and was married, ending only in 1979 (plate 17).

Throughout the seventies Nugent maintained his studio, which he also used as a residence, in the upper reaches of 150 Nassau Street in New York's financial district. The building was locked on weekends, during which time he was essentially homeless. He began staying with a friend who owned an apartment



Nugent in Central Park in 1984. Photograph by Thomas H. Wirth.



Nugent in the Madison Café at Fourteenth and Washington Streets in Hoboken in 1982. Photograph by Thomas H. Wirth.

building in Hoboken, finally moving into an apartment there and closing the Nassau Street studio.

The seventies brought the first serious scholarly study of the Harlem Renaissance, and Nugent became an important resource. His personal recollections have informed many historical and biographical studies of the era. In 1971 he was interviewed by Robert Hemenway for a biography of Zora Neale Hurston. Interviews with David Levering Lewis (1974, 1977) and Arnold Rampersad (1984) followed. His 1982 interview with James V. Hatch was published by the Hatch-Billops Collection in their series, *Artists and Influences*. An interview with Nugent also appears in Jeff Kisseloff's *You Must Remember This: An Oral History of Manhattan from the 1890s to World War II* (1989). In his widely hailed book, *When Harlem Was in Vogue*, Lewis acknowledged his debt to Nugent: "Somewhere in Hoboken, New Jersey, Richard Bruce Nugent lives. To him, above all, this book owes whatever quality it may have of being written from inside of its subject, for many portraits of personality and unravelings of complex relationships were possible largely because of his astonishingly accurate memory and the objective perceptions of the past which he helped to create."⁴⁷

The eighties brought a wave of post-Stonewall interest in gay history, and here, too, Nugent was an important resource. He appeared in the 1986 video documentary *Before Stonewall*. A Nugent interview was published in Joseph

Beam's *In the Life: A Black Gay Anthology*. Isaac Julien, the black gay British filmmaker, used "Smoke, Lilies and Jade" as the basis for a significant portion of his important 1989 film *Looking for Langston*.

I was introduced to Bruce Nugent by Arnold Rampersad in 1981. By this time Nugent was past retirement age and living on very modest Social Security benefits. As a book collector specializing in African American literature and as a gay man, I found him fascinating. He was a world-class conversationalist. Soon we were brunching regularly at the Madison Café at Fourteenth and Washington Streets, around the corner from his Hoboken apartment. We went to conventions of the College Language Association and the National Association of Black and White Men Together. We attended a conference on the Harlem Renaissance at Hofstra University and a black bibliophiles' conference at Howard. We went to gallery openings, where he renewed acquaintances with old friends and colleagues. (I shall always remember Bruce's elation when he met the ninety-eight-year-old Erté for the first time at the Dyansen gallery in Soho and acknowledged the older artist's influence on his own early work.) In 1982 Bruce found a copy of *FIRE!!* in his files, and we published a facsimile edition, which gave *FIRE!!* a renaissance of its own.

Bruce was an unregenerate Bohemian to the very end. His unkempt apartment was more than some visitors could take. His sexual interests never flagged. Young men from the neighborhood were always welcome, and many took advantage of his open door. After his eightieth birthday Bruce began to slow down. In March 1987 he was hospitalized. On 27 May 1987 he died of congestive heart failure, having outlived by many years most of his Harlem Renaissance compatriots. A memorial service in celebration of his life was held on his eighty-first birthday, 2 July 1987, at the Schomburg Center in Harlem.

II

As a writer Nugent stands at the intersection of two separate literary traditions—black and gay. For his significance to be properly assessed, he must be viewed simultaneously from both perspectives. The wider context—American culture as it evolved during the first third of the twentieth century—must be considered as well.

Nugent's seminal work was his pioneering prose composition "Smoke, Lilies and Jade," published in *FIRE!!* in 1926. Its homoerotic perspective is explicit. Alex, the protagonist, encounters a man on the street at four o'clock in the

morning. They retire to Alex's room, and "as they undressed by the blue dawn . . . Alex knew he had never seen a more perfect being . . . his body was all symmetry and music . . . and Alex called him Beauty . . . long they lay . . . blowing smoke and exchanging thoughts . . . and Alex swallowed with difficulty . . . he felt a glow of tremor . . . and they talked and . . . slept" (this volume, 75).

Such an explicit, sympathetic treatment of same-sex desire was not yet acceptable to mainstream publishers. In the late teens, Henry Blake Fuller, an established writer, was unable to find a publisher for his genteel comedy of manners, *Bertram Cope's Year*; the male-male romantic interests at the core of the plot were too obvious. The book was finally published by a friend in 1919.⁴⁸ Robert McAlmon's book of stories *Distinguished Air* was published in 1925— not in the United States but privately in Paris.⁴⁹ In England, publication of such material could have led to criminal prosecution in the long-lived aftermath of the Oscar Wilde affair; E. M. Forster's novel *Maurice*, written in 1913–14, was not published until 1971.⁵⁰ Five years passed after the appearance of "Smoke, Lilies and Jade" before Liveright published Blair Niles's *Strange Brother*, a novel featuring a homosexual as a leading character, in 1931.⁵¹

Even in the context of underground homoerotica, which was by then well established, "Smoke, Lilies and Jade" was unique—a forthright, uncoded invitation to the reader of any sexual orientation to enter the interior consciousness of a bisexual man and assume a homophilic subjectivity. There is none of the guilt and anguish that had previously characterized most writing about male same-sex desire and that would continue to dominate gay literature for many decades. "Smoke, Lilies and Jade" celebrates sexual attraction between men with exquisite sensitivity, without apology or prurience.

As a gay writer, Nugent began squarely in what might be characterized as the tradition of perfumed decadence. This line of development began with the publication of Joris-Karl Huysmans's notorious novel, *A rebours*, in Paris in 1884, continued with Oscar Wilde and his contemporaries in England in the 1880s and 1890s, and flowered in the United States in the 1920s in the novels of Carl Van Vechten. Associated with this literary tradition were artists like Aubrey Beardsley, the illustrator of the written version of Wilde's play *Salome*, and Erté, the Russian-born Parisian who dominated the pages of *Harper's Bazaar* during the 1920s.

Nugent's connection with these influences is clear. Not only was he personally acquainted with Van Vechten, he also read Van Vechten's novels, which were then bestsellers.⁵² Moreover, Wallace Thurman's *Infants of the Spring* explicitly sets forth Nugent's awareness of and enthusiasm for the work of Huys-

mans and Wilde. Paul Arbian (the character based on Nugent) wrote a novel entitled *Wu Sing: The Geisha Man* dedicated to:

Huysmans' Des Esseintes and Oscar Wilde's Oscar Wilde
Ecstatic Spirits with whom I Cohabit
And whose golden spores of decadent pollen
I shall broadcast and fertilize.⁵³

Like Nugent's "Smoke, Lilies and Jade," Huysmans's novel includes a homoerotically charged street encounter. Huysmans's protagonist, Des Esseintes, having exhausted the capacity of numerous mistresses to arouse him sexually, meets a young man "wretchedly dressed in a little cheviot jacket too tight round the hips and barely covering the small of his back, [and] close-fitting black trousers," whose "face was disquieting; pale and drawn . . . it was lit up by great liquid eyes," with a mouth which "though small, was bordered by thick lips divided down the center with a groove, like a cherry." The young man's "arm brushed that of Des Esseintes, who slowed his pace as he thoughtfully considered the young man's mincing walk." A "mistrustful relationship" followed, which "lasted for months; Des Esseintes could no longer think of it without a shudder; never had he submitted to a more seductive, more compelling servitude, never had he experienced such dangers, yet never had he felt more painfully fulfilled."⁵⁴

Carl Van Vechten injected these "decadent" European sensibilities into American letters with the publication of *Peter Whiffle* in 1922. In this novel he transposed Huysmans's *A rebours* from the Parisian world of the Comte Robert de Montesquiou (the real-life model for Des Esseintes) into the milieu of affluent and well-traveled Americans like Mabel Dodge, who, during the decade before the Great War, had formed the nucleus of America's first avant-garde. Both novels center on wealthy, effete young men drifting indecisively through life without emotional ties to anyone but themselves. Both contain lengthy catalogs of exquisitely described fabrics, flowers, furnishings, books, jewels, and perfumes.

Van Vechten was by no means so explicit in *Peter Whiffle* about the homosexual inclinations of his protagonist as Huysmans was in *A Rebours*. The closest thing to a sexual encounter in the novel is the protagonist's long pause before Donatello's statue of David in Florence, described by Van Vechten as "that exquisite soft bronze of the Biblical lad, nude but for his wreathed helmet, standing in his adolescent slender beauty with one foot on the head of the decapitated giant," which Whiffle, the eponymous protagonist, declares to be

“the most beautiful object that the hand of man has yet created.”⁵⁵ But the implications of this and certain other scenes are hardly obscure. In one, Whiffle is described as wearing “green trousers, a white silk shirt, a tie of Chinese blue brocade, clasped with a black opal, and a most ornate black Chinese dressing gown, around the skirt of which a silver dragon chased his tail. He was combed and brushed and there was a faint odour of toilet-water. His nails were manicured and on one of his little fingers [was] a ring.”⁵⁶ In the coded language of fin de siècle literature, every one of these details implies sexual interest in other men.

Several fey characters appear in Van Vechten’s next novel, *The Blind Bow-Boy* (1923) and its sequel, *Firecrackers* (1925). In the former book, the character Paul Moody appears as “a young man with curly golden hair and blue eyes and a profile that resembled somewhat Sherril Schell’s photograph of Rupert Brooke, a young man with slender, graceful hands which he was inclined to wave rather excessively in punctuation of his verbal effects . . . smoking a cigarette in a jade holder of a green so dark and so nearly translucent that it paraphrased emerald.”⁵⁷ The same Paul spends the first part of *Firecrackers* in pursuit of a supremely graceful and physically ravishing young man who was hired by Paul’s wealthy wife to repair the furnace. Another character in *The Blind Bow-Boy*, Ronald, Duke of Middlebottom, has inscribed on his stationery the motto, “A thing of beauty is a boy for ever.”⁵⁸

In one sense, these are peripheral details. As Van Vechten wrote to Mabel Dodge, “My intention in writing is to create moods, to awaken unconscious echoes of the past, to render to shadows their real importance. I don’t think I ever think of sex at all. It plays around here and there, but that’s not what my books are about. They seem to me to be books about a man who is alone in the world and is very sad.”⁵⁹ Who, however, is this figure, alone and sad, but Van Vechten himself? And, where does this figure appear? In *Blind Bow-Boy* and *Firecrackers*, the most likely Van Vechten character is female: Campaspe Lorillard. She is an independent, imperious figure who, like Van Vechten himself, is intent on maintaining control of her life even as she seeks out the erotic and the bizarre. While Lorillard incorporates the persona of Mabel Dodge as well as of Van Vechten, it is Van Vechten speaking through her when she says, “How was it possible to read an author who never laughed? For it was only behind laughter that true tragedy could lie concealed, and only the ironic author who could awaken the deeper emotions. The true tragedies of life were either ridiculous or sordid. The only way to get the sense of this absurd, contradictory, and perverse existence into a book was to withdraw entirely from reality. The

artist who feels the most poignantly the bitterness of life wears a persistent and sardonic smile.”⁶⁰

As Byrne Fone has pointed out, “What Van Vechten describes here is his own method.” Here, according to Fone, “are the central mechanisms of camp, the application not of the transcendent or of the profound but of the surface sublime, to make real life unreal and hence bearable and understandable.”⁶¹ Thus, it can be argued that these novels are, in their very essence, performances in drag.

Nonetheless, Van Vechten’s treatment of homosexuality is elegantly indirect. Although the closet door may be more or less transparent, his characters do remain in the closet. With the exception of *Nigger Heaven*, he never explicitly discusses their erotic lives. Moreover, his exquisitely polished prose style is quite traditional in that it consists of straightforward narrative (save for the omission of quotation marks and his penchant for archaic words).

In “Smoke, Lilies and Jade,” Nugent appropriates from Van Vechten and the European aesthetes their coded vocabulary: his protagonist celebrates the “joy of being an artist and of blowing blue smoke through an ivory holder inlaid with red jade and green.” But Nugent differs from Van Vechten in two respects. He lifts the veil to reveal, and invites the reader to share, the protagonist’s (largely homosexual) erotic sensibilities. And he employs a modernist prose style—stream of consciousness, phrases separated by ellipses, fleeting impressions strung like beads in lines across the page.

. . . his lips were so beautiful . . . quizzical . . . Alex wondered why he always thought of that passage from Wilde’s *Salome* . . . when he looked at Beauty’s lips . . . I would kiss your lips . . . he *would* like to kiss Beauty’s lips . . . Alex flushed warm . . . with shame . . . or was it shame . . . he reached across Beauty for a cigarette . . . Beauty’s cheek felt cool to his arm . . . his hair felt soft . . . Alex lay smoking . . . such a dream . . . red calla lilies . . . red calla lilies . . . and . . . what did it all mean . . . did dreams have meanings . . . Fania said . . . and black poppies . . . thousands . . . millions . . . Beauty stirred . . . (this volume, 83)

It is a style that could not be more appropriate to the transgressive content of “Smoke, Lilies and Jade.”

“Smoke, Lilies and Jade” placed Nugent in the avant-garde. It foreshadowed Charles Henri Ford and Parker Tyler’s radically experimental novel on a homosexual theme, *The Young and Evil*, but preceded it by seven years. (*The Young and Evil* was published in Paris by Obelisk Press in 1933 and enjoyed the en-

thusiastic sponsorship of international luminaries Djuna Barnes and Gertrude Stein. Stein declared that it “creates this generation as *This Side of Paradise* by Fitzgerald created his generation.”)⁶² “Smoke, Lilies and Jade” also preceded another milestone in gay literature, Robert Scully’s high-camp, gender-bending, pornographic romp, *A Scarlet Pansy*, which may have been written before 1926 but, like *The Young and Evil*, was not published until 1933.⁶³

Nugent, then, was a black gay man who insisted on participating in the most advanced discourse of the dominant culture, even as he defied that culture’s norms. In this regard, Nugent was continuing in the tradition of his distant African American literary ancestors; his insistence parallels Phillis Wheatley’s effort in prerevolutionary America to participate in order to force (or persuade) whites to recognize black people as fully human.⁶⁴ In refusing to accept the supposition that homosexual themes, modernist forms, and “decadence” were off-limits to black writers, Nugent was not trying to “be white.” Rather, he was struggling to expand his contemporaries’ conceptions of blackness.

Nugent’s Bible stories, written in the late twenties after “Smoke, Lilies and Jade” appeared, were stylistically less radical, but in the context of the time, they were, if anything, more transgressive (113–46). The open, uncoded conflation of homosexuality with the gospels in these stories is even now as unsettling to the conventionally minded reader as it is exhilarating to the iconoclast. In writing them, Nugent drew directly from the tradition of the European aesthetes, who also used biblical themes: Huysmans’s fascination with Gustave Moreau’s painting of Salome dancing before Herod; Wilde’s subsequent play on the same theme with its barely coded homosexual subtexts; Beardsley’s disturbing and beautiful drawings that accompanied Wilde’s published text; and John Addington Symond’s poem “The Meeting of David and Jonathan” are obvious examples.⁶⁵

Unlike Symonds and other British homosexual writers, such as Edward Carpenter, who cited biblical or classical references in an effort to make homosexuality respectable by association, Nugent’s use of biblical themes is confrontational. Same-sex desire, to him, required no justification—it was a fact of life. His Bible stories directly challenge both homophobia and shallow piety. “The Now Discordant Song of Bells,” for example, is a parable of love, but the love is homosexual—between Carus, Herod’s catamite, and the magus Caspar. In the end, the formerly decadent youth surpasses the gentle and restrained Caspar in profundity.

Nugent’s confrontational stance mirrors the iconoclasm of his friend and fellow Harlem Renaissance writer, Wallace Thurman, the editor of *FIRE!!*. Thur-

man, in turn, was strongly influenced by the leading American iconoclast of the period, H. L. Mencken.⁶⁶ Thus, Nugent's work embodies both the European and the American influences on the Harlem Renaissance.

At the time Nugent and his contemporaries began writing, America was a cultural battleground. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, the best American writers had been struggling to emancipate themselves from the stifling weight of Anglophilic, late-Victorian culture. Except in New York and, to some extent, Chicago, established cultural institutions were controlled by corseted opera lovers who took "great books" with their afternoon tea and by men of wealth who lined their libraries with leather-bound sets of the classics. There was no lack of high culture in the heartland—even avant-garde culture. Before World War I, Sergei Diaghilev's brilliant *Ballet Russe* flashed across the country. Isadora Duncan danced, Sarah Bernhardt acted, theatrical companies toured. The result, however, was not to stimulate local centers of creativity but to enhance the allure of the distant metropolis, with T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and Carl Van Vechten leading the exodus from the provinces early in the century. After World War I, the "lost generation"—Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Lewis, Dos Passos, Crane, and Wolfe among them—fled the towns and prairies to Paris or New York.

The younger Harlem Renaissance writers and artists followed the same pattern. Zora Neale Hurston arrived in New York from Florida, via Baltimore and Washington, D.C. Aaron Douglas came from Kansas. Langston Hughes arrived from Missouri, via Kansas, Illinois, Ohio, and Mexico. Wallace Thurman arrived from Salt Lake City via Los Angeles. Nugent, of course, came from Washington, D.C.

This generation was in revolt against Victorian social and sexual proprieties, against the weltanschauung of Horatio Alger and Pollyanna, and against silence as a tactic for dealing with unpleasant realities. Revolt generated reaction, and the reaction within the African American community was, if anything, stronger than that in the dominant culture. Most community leaders, responding to traditional stereotypes of black people as wanton, stupid, and slothful, were deeply offended by realistic treatment of the seamier aspects of African American life. Dedicated to strengthening bourgeois norms as an essential means of "race advancement" and believing that positive images of African Americans were essential to combating prejudice and discrimination, such leaders condemned alike the blues, jazz, the novels of Claude McKay, and the poetry of Langston Hughes. Critics writing in African American news-

papers like the *Pittsburgh Courier* and *Amsterdam News* expressed and reinforced this position. Paradoxically, these leaders and critics found themselves defending the conservative aesthetic values of the old Anglophilic social order, which was decidedly unsympathetic to black aspirations.⁶⁷

The stance of the African American cultural elite that young writers should place their talents at the service of race advancement implicitly required those writers not only to portray black characters in a positive (or at least sympathetic) light but to eschew the modern—the radical—and to concentrate on developing excellence in widely accepted forms that would not alienate a potentially sympathetic (white) audience.⁶⁸ In the context of the 1920s, however, this expectation placed a heavy burden on those young writers; the artist who is constrained to work in forms that have lost their vitality, and who is constrained also to “put his best foot forward” for the sake of race advancement, is seriously handicapped in his efforts to produce work of the first rank.

Some had more sophisticated views. Among them was W. E. B. Du Bois, the pre-eminent African American intellectual of the period. In addition to being editor of *Crisis*, Du Bois had published the lyrical and decidedly nontraditional *Souls of Black Folk* at the beginning of the century. Even before the twenties, he opened the pages of *Crisis* to emerging African American writers. Aware that racial defensiveness and Victorian prudishness had had a detrimental effect on the quality of African American literary efforts, he defended younger artists like Langston Hughes against *Crisis* readers who complained that the work of those artists was too explicit about matters such as prostitution.⁶⁹ Still, there were limits to Du Bois’s tolerance.

Du Bois believed that in the real world (as opposed to the ideal world of theoretical philosophy) Beauty could not exist independently of Truth and Right.⁷⁰ Accurate depiction of sordid reality might well be beautiful, but only if the moral conclusions conveyed by that depiction were correct. Prostitution limned with pathos was acceptable; prostitution painted as an enticing or fulfilling way of life was not. Thus Du Bois defended Hughes’s early poems about prostitutes, but he excoriated Claude McKay’s *Home to Harlem* as “filth.”⁷¹ Art for art’s sake (which Nugent espoused) was an aesthetic which Du Bois emphatically rejected.⁷² He never reviewed *FIRE!!* or “Smoke, Lilies and Jade,” but inasmuch as that story glamorized both deviant sex and indolence, Du Bois presumably didn’t approve.

Alain Locke was more accepting of the younger generation than Du Bois. His book *The New Negro*—a seminal anthology that created a comprehensive framework for the interpretation of intellectual developments in the African

American community after 1900—presented the younger generation’s work alongside that of established intellectuals like Du Bois and James Weldon Johnson. Locke recognized that many younger writers were among “the moderns.” He also recognized that the modernist work of white writers and artists like Sherwood Anderson, Eugene O’Neill, and Pablo Picasso had generated much of the white interest in “things Negro” that was so important in sustaining the Harlem Renaissance.⁷³

Locke did not agree with Du Bois’s emphasis on moral correctness: he did not view art as a means of moral instruction, and he strongly opposed the conflation of art with propaganda. He valued, above all, authenticity of expression. He was interested in establishing artistic traditions in which the sensibilities and life experiences that African Americans shared could be fully and freely expressed. Furthermore, Locke agreed with the school of thought that held that Western civilization had become over-refined and had produced an unhealthy alienation from the body, which was manifest in the restrictive and hypocritical sexual morality of the Victorian era.

The modern recoil from the machine has deepened the appreciation of hitherto despised qualities in the Negro temperament, its hedonism, its nonchalance, its spontaneity; the reaction against oversophistication has opened our eyes to the values of the primitive and the importance of the man of emotions and untarnished instincts; and finally the revolt against conventionality, against Puritanism, has fought [*sic*] a strong ally in the half-submerged paganism of the Negro. With this established reciprocity, there is every reason for the Negro artist to be more of a modernist than, on the average, he yet is, but with each younger artistic generation the alignment with modernism becomes closer. . . . Negro elements, culturally transplanted, have, I think, an important contribution to make to the working out of our national culture.⁷⁴

Locke’s support for the younger generation, however, was not unqualified. This fact is evident in his review of *FIRE!!* In that magazine, which was in essence the younger generation’s manifesto of revolt against the strictures of the bourgeoisie, they in effect proclaimed themselves to be full-fledged modernists. Given his convictions, one might predict that Locke would wholeheartedly approve of *FIRE!!* But, after noting that “the strong sex radicalism of many of the contributions will shock many well-wishers and elate some of our adversaries,” Locke wrote,

If Negro life is to provide a healthy antidote to Puritanism, and to become one of the effective instruments of sound artistic progress, its flesh values must more and more be expressed in the clean, original, primitive but fundamental terms of the senses and not, as too often in this particular issue of *Fire [sic]*, in hectic imitation of the “naughty nineties” and effete echoes of contemporary decadence. Back to Whitman would have been a better point of support than a left-wing pivoting on Wilde and Beardsley.⁷⁵

This comment is clearly directed at “Smoke, Lilies and Jade,” not the other contents of *FIRE!!* It is especially noteworthy because Locke was, as we have seen, a self-identified gay man. Nugent, moreover, was a protégé and an object of his sexual desire. Significantly, Locke does not condemn the depiction of same-sex desire per se. Indeed, his reference to Whitman clearly reveals to other cognoscenti that he himself was “in the life.” Rather, Locke insists here that such depictions be coded and “wholesome,” so as not to alienate the general audience—a strategy of concealment that he had in common with all other gay Harlem Renaissance writers except Nugent. In his abhorrence of flamboyant “decadence,” Locke was typical of middle-class gay men of his time, who often felt an intense need to differentiate themselves from “fairies,” thereby avoiding the social damage that would inevitably accompany any identification with that group.⁷⁶

Locke delivered another rebuke to the younger generation in *Harlem*, a fledgling journal that Wallace Thurman edited a year after the first and only issue of *FIRE!!* appeared. Locke’s rebuke was especially pointed because it appeared in an article that Thurman had invited him to submit. “Not all of our younger writers are deep enough in the sub-soil of their native materials,” he wrote. “Too many are pot-plants seeking a forced growth according to the exotic tastes of a pampered and decadent public. It is the art of the people that needs to be cultivated, not the art of coteries.”⁷⁷

Thus, despite his espousal of artistic self-expression, Locke imposed on writers and artists of color a heavy burden of representation. In a 1937 review of McKay’s *A Long Way from Home*, Locke acknowledged for the record that “artists have a right to be individualists, of course,” but made it clear that only “Negro writers expressing a folk in expressing themselves” deserved praise. Locke bitterly condemned McKay’s “lack of common loyalty” to the race. Broadening his condemnation to include other unspecified New Negro writers and artists, he accused them as a group of “spiritual truancy and social irre-

sponsibility” and deplored their “exhibitionist flair.” “The program of the Negro Renaissance,” he asserted, “was to interpret the folk to itself, to vitalize it from within; it was a wholesome, vigorous, assertive racialism. . . . Negro writers must become truer sons of the people, more loyal providers of spiritual bread and less aesthetic wastrels and truants of the streets.”⁷⁸ Thirty years later, this principle became the aesthetic foundation of the Black Arts Movement.

If “the people” is defined (as it usually is) to be the “normal” heterosexual majority, it necessarily follows from Locke’s line of reasoning that the aesthetic self-expression of gay black sexuality is without validity. Only by rejecting the burden of representing the race as a whole, as Nugent did, or by insisting that “the people” be defined broadly and pluralistically so as to include gay people, among others, have gay black writers been able to emerge.

Of all the male Harlem Renaissance writers who were sexually attracted to other men, only Nugent broke the taboo that Locke, through his critique, attempted to enforce: only Nugent published work that would lead his readers to identify him unmistakably as “queer.” Whatever one’s friends may have known or suspected, whatever gossip may have circulated in wider circles, one did not proclaim one’s homoerotic sentiments in print. This taboo was consistent with the social convention of the “open secret.” Other Harlem Renaissance writers did sometimes skate very close to the edge of self-revelation. They included male characters who had sex with men in their books; they portrayed intense male-male emotional ties; they wrote poetry that on close reading expresses the joy and anguish of same-sex love; and they wrote poems that are ostensibly about race but that actually, or simultaneously, address sexual orientation—but the narrative voice in their work either kept its distance or wore the mask of ambiguity.

Wallace Thurman was particularly careful to distance himself from his homosexual characters. In *The Blacker the Berry*, for example, protagonist Emma Lou discovers her exploitative boyfriend, Alva, “sitting on the bed embracing an effeminate boy.” Since Thurman here uses homosexual activity as a device to emphasize Alva’s descent into degradation, he as narrator is not implicated.⁷⁹ In Thurman’s second novel, *Infants of the Spring*, homosexuality appears most obviously in the Nugent-based character, Paul Arbian. Although Arbian is sympathetically portrayed, he remains an exotic, well distanced from the narrator. Thurman’s autobiographical character, Raymond, forms an intense, interracial friendship with Stephen Jorgensen, the fictional counterpart of Thurman’s white lover, Harold Jan Stefansson, but the sexual aspect of the

relationship is carefully disguised, with only the subtlest hints of an erotic attraction—“something . . . too preposterous and complex to be recognized or considered.”⁸⁰

Claude McKay's first two novels, *Home to Harlem* and *Banjo*, skate closer to the edge; close reading reveals a strong homoerotic subtext.⁸¹ The novels celebrate not only “the irrepressible exuberance and legendary vitality of the black race” but male bonding.⁸² *Home to Harlem* is centered around the friendship between Jake, the carefree protagonist, and Ray, McKay's intellectual alter ego. Jake is not shy about expressing his feelings.

Jake gripped Ray's shoulder: “Chappie, I wish I was edjucated mahself.”
“Christ! What for?” demanded Ray.

Becez I likes you.” Like a black Pan out of the woods Jake looked into Ray's eyes with frank savage affection.⁸³

Later in the novel, it becomes clear to the careful reader that there is an erotic element in this relationship. In one episode, Ray, fighting insomnia, “looked up at Jake, stretched at full length on his side . . . sleeping peacefully, like a tired boy after hard playing, so happy and sweet and handsome.” A cocaine-induced fantasy follows: “And he was a gay humming-bird, fluttering and darting his long needle beak into the heart of a bell-flower. . . . Now he was a young shining chief in a marble palace; slim, naked negresses dancing for his pleasure . . . gleaming-skinned black boys bearing goblets of wine and obedient eunuchs waiting in the offing. . . . And he was a blue bird in flight and a blue lizard in love. . . . Taboos and terrors and penalties were transformed into new pagan delights, orgies of . . . cherubs and seraphs and fetishes and phalli.”⁸⁴

In another episode, Ray deflects the advances of a prostitute: “The round face of the first girl, the carnal sympathy of her full, tinted mouth, touched Ray. But something was between them. . . . He was lost in some sensual dream of his own . . . like black youth burning naked in the bush . . . like a primitive dance of war or of love . . . the marshaling of spears or the sacred frenzy of a phallic celebration.”⁸⁵

The next day, Jake, commenting on Ray's rejection of the attractive “chippie,” comes out and says, “Youse awful queer, chappie.”⁸⁶ But, even this comment retains the ambiguous double meaning of the word *queer*. Nowhere in the novel is there any indication that Ray's implied homoerotic desire for Jake is ever physically consummated.

Banjo narrates the adventures of a group of black vagabonds on the Mar-seilles waterfront. One critic has aptly described the waterfront as the “site of

promiscuous social interaction and continental drift . . . on the margin of the city . . . [and] on the margin of urban social structures.”⁸⁷ In the era before Stonewall, sailors were widely recognized as potential sexual partners by those inclined to pursue them; the sailor was, in fact, a central figure in the gay subculture.⁸⁸

Without exactly saying so, McKay makes it clear that his vagabonds are a sexy, virile bunch. Banjo, their leader, for example, “was lying flat on his back on one of the huge stone blocks of the breakwater. . . . He had no shirt on and, unfastening the pin at the collar of his old blue coat, he flung it back and exposed his brown belly to the sun. His trousers waist was pulled down below his navel. ‘Oh, Gawd, the sun is sweet!’ he yawned and, pulling his cap over his eyes, went to sleep. The others also stretched themselves and slept.”⁸⁹

“The boys” live among pimps and prostitutes, and are totally free of domestic attachments. Banjo has a long-term relationship with Latnah, one of the prostitutes, but he comes and goes and sleeps around as he pleases. While there is no indication of homosexual activity among the group—their sexual partners are always female—they do tend to follow the impulses of the moment, and it takes little imagination for a gay reader to infer that, given an appropriate inducement, some of them would happily consent to having sex with another man. In a word, they are potential “trade.”

Ray, McKay’s alter ego in *Home to Harlem*, also appears in *Banjo*—again as the best pal of the major character. Surely the “animal joy [Ray] felt when in company with the boys” has sexual desire as one of its components.⁹⁰ At the conclusion of the novel, Ray leaves Marseilles with Banjo, who admonishes, “Don’t get soft ovah any one wimmens, pardner. . . . A woman is a conjunction. Gawd fixed her different from us in moh ways than one. . . . Come on, pardner. Wese got enough between us to beat it a long ways from here.”⁹¹

Obvious as they are to the twenty-first-century reader, the sexual undercurrents in these novels are subtle enough that they probably did not register with McKay’s contemporaries—except, of course, with those who consciously shared his erotic interests in other men. The first part of the twentieth century was a period in which working-class men were celebrated as paragons of masculinity, as opposed to men of the middle and upper classes, who many observers believed had become “overcivilized” and “soft.”⁹² In the popular mind, it was middle- and upper-class men who were primarily associated with homosexual activity. The fact, well known to gay men, that many of these “normal” working-class men were susceptible to seduction by other men was not part of the wider public discourse.

McKay was at his most explicit in one of his early poems, “Bennie’s Departure.”

Once his cot was next beside me,
But dere came misfortune’s day
When de pleasure was denied me,
For de sergeant moved him ‘way:
I played not fe mind de movin’
Though me heart wid grief be’n full;
’Twas but one kin’ o’ de provin’
O’ de ways o’ dis ya wul’.⁹³

This piece and “Consolation,” another poem in *Constab Ballads*, which was published in London in 1912, describe McKay’s affection for and emotional dependence on a fellow recruit. In the words of McKay’s biographer, “[‘Bennie’s Departure’] bordered upon a passionate declaration of homosexual love.”⁹⁴ However, there is no indication that contemporary readers interpreted the poem as deviant. Despite the Wilde affair and the recent emergence of the term “homosexuality” in medical and psychological discourse, romantic feelings between males seem not to have implied sexual desire or physical consummation to most English and Jamaican readers in 1912. Since it was not publicly discussed, the possibility that masculine-appearing men might have sexual relationships with other men seems simply not to have occurred to those who had no personal experience with such situations. Public perceptions were changing rapidly, however, and it is doubtful that the homoerotic implications of these poems would have escaped notice even ten years later. Significantly, the poems never became widely available, nor were they reprinted in McKay’s lifetime.

Same-sex desire also pervades the work of Countee Cullen; there, too, it is discreetly clothed in ambiguous imagery. Most of Cullen’s poetry about love is ungendered and can therefore be read as an expression of his own erotic interest in other men. While that particular interpretation is not forced on the reader, it is hard to avoid if one knows anything about Cullen’s romantic relationships with other men as he revealed them in his letters to Locke.⁹⁵ Particularly resonant with the gay experience is the depiction of hidden love:

So must I, starved for love’s delight,
Affect the mute,
When love’s divinest acolyte
Extends me holy fruit.⁹⁶

Even (or perhaps especially) in a religious context, Cullen uses passionately romantic imagery in depicting male-male relationships, as in “The Black Christ,” in which the narrator laments the death of his brother.

My Lycidas was dead. There swung
In all his glory, lusty, young,
My Jonathan, my Patrocles, . . .⁹⁷

In “Judas Iscariot,” Judas is given the task of betraying Christ in order to save mankind:

Then Judas in his hot desire
Said, “Give me what you will.”
Christ spoke to him with words of fire,
“Then, Judas, you must kill
One whom you love, One who loves you . . .

The poem concludes with the narrator speaking of Judas:

But I would rather think of him
As the little Jewish lad
Who gave young Christ heart, soul, and limb,
And all the love he had.⁹⁸

Cullen dedicated “More Than a Fool’s Song” to Edward Perry, who was one of the gay men who associated with Caska Bonds and Bruce Nugent, and who may have been Cullen’s lover.⁹⁹ This poem celebrates paradox and inversion of values, and concludes with the following lines, which probably refer to society’s prevailing view of same-sex love: “The souls we think are hurtling down / Perhaps are climbing up.”¹⁰⁰

In a few instances, Cullen openly celebrates male-male attachments. Take “Tableau,” for example, which he dedicated to his white lover, Donald Duff.¹⁰¹

Locked arm in arm they cross the way,
The black boy and the white,
The golden splendor of the day,
The sable pride of night.

From lowered blinds the dark folk stare,
And here the fair folk talk,
Indignant that these two should dare
In unison to walk.

Oblivious to look and word
They pass, and see no wonder
That lightning brilliant as a sword
Should blaze the path of thunder.¹⁰²

Or consider “Uncle Jim,” whose heart is “walled up with bitterness” against “white folks.” The poem concludes:

I have a friend who eats his heart
Away with grief of mine,
Who drinks my joy as tipplers drain
Deep goblets filled with wine.

I wonder why here at his side,
Face-in-the-grass with him,
My mind should stray the Grecian urn
To muse on uncle Jim.¹⁰³

One critic has interpreted “Heritage,” one of Cullen’s best-known poems (which begins, “What is Africa to me” and is dedicated to Harold Jackman), as the narrative of the internal struggle between Cullen’s need to maintain public respectability and his illicit homosexual desires. Thus, he must “twist and squirm” on his bed, stopping his ears to keep out the “great drums throbbing through the air,” his “dark blood dammed within / Like great pulsing tides of wine,” ultimately forcing himself to “quench my pride and cool my blood, / Lest I perish in the flood.”¹⁰⁴

Langston Hughes was perhaps the most circumspect of all. There was no revealing correspondence comparable to Cullen’s with Locke. Even Nugent, one of Hughes’s closest friends in 1925 and 1926, was unable to state unequivocally for the record whether Hughes was sexually attracted to men or not, although he suspected that Hughes was.¹⁰⁵ Some of Hughes’s early poetry can be interpreted as the expression of same-sex desire, but that work is only a tiny part of his enormous oeuvre. Nonetheless, those examples are notable. Consider “Poem [2].”

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.¹⁰⁶

The Hughes poem “Boy,” loosely quoted in “Smoke, Lilies and Jade,” can also be read as an expression of sexual desire (79–80).

He was somewhat like Ariel
And somewhat like Puck
And somewhat like a gutter boy
Who loves to play in muck.

He had something of Bacchus
And something of Pan
And a way with women
Like a sailor man.

He was straight and slender
And solid with strength
And lovely as a young tree
All his virile length.

He couldn't have been a good man,
All shut up in a cell,
'Cause he'd “rather be a sinner,”
He said,—“and go to hell.”¹⁰⁷

It has been pointed out that Hughes is especially eloquent on the subject of sailors.¹⁰⁸ “Port Town” is another sexually ambiguous poem about sailors.

Hello, sailor boy,
In from the sea!
Hello, sailor,
Come with me!

Come on drink cognac.
Rather have wine?
Come here, I love you.
Come and be mine.¹⁰⁹

The reluctance of male Harlem Renaissance writers publicly to reveal their sexual interest in other men continued into the next generation. Robert Hayden, for example, carefully hid his same-sex desires. Therefore, for thirty years Nugent stood as the only African American to write from the perspective of a

man who not only acknowledged but openly celebrated his erotic fascination with other men. Only in 1956, with the publication of *Giovanni's Room*, did James Baldwin emerge as another overtly gay writer.

Critics likewise maintained a long silence on the subject of homosexuality. The fact that a significant portion of the Harlem Renaissance writers had same-sex erotic interests was not generally acknowledged until the 1980s, and it was even later when scholars actually began to take these desires into account in textual analyses.

Nugent the visual artist, like Nugent the writer, drew on both black and gay influences, sometimes combining them in unexpected ways.

He shared with Aaron Douglas and Sargent Johnson the distinction of being among the first African American artists to celebrate their African heritage by utilizing African motifs in their work. Prior to the Harlem Renaissance, black artists shunned the primitive. Ironically, as Alain Locke pointed out in the 1925 "Harlem" issue of *Survey Graphic*, African sculpture had influenced Matisse, Picasso, Modigliani, and other modern European artists; Locke went on to suggest that "surely this art, once known and appreciated, can scarcely have less influence upon the blood descendants than upon those who inherit by tradition only."¹⁰ This issue of the magazine had been illustrated by Winold Reiss, a classically trained Bavarian artist who had an interest in folklore and "ethnic types." He had executed an array of superb portraits of African American leaders and Harlem residents, which were featured in the issue, along with several of his black and white drawings of Harlem life, executed in a manner reminiscent of *Scherenschnitt*—a German folk technique employing black, scissors-cut silhouettes. Aaron Douglas was so impressed that he came to New York, in part, at least, to study with Reiss. He soon developed his own distinctive style, simplifying and strengthening Reiss's technique of drawing in silhouette, and his work was often featured in *Crisis* and *Opportunity*. Nugent, who was a good friend of Douglas and his assistant in executing murals on the walls of Harlem nightclubs, also began to draw in silhouette and to incorporate African motifs into his work. From time to time, Nugent accompanied Douglas to lessons with Reiss.

Nugent's work is both similar to and different from the work of Douglas and Reiss. Like them, for example, Nugent employed dance as a trope to express primitive vitality and freedom from sexual inhibition. But, whereas dance was only an occasional subject for Douglas and Reiss, it was central for Nugent: images of dancers dominate his early drawings and recur throughout his



Weinold Reiss, *Interpretation of Harlem Jazz* (1925).

oeuvre (65, 68–73, 147–55). Nugent displayed extraordinary skill in capturing the shapes of his dancers' bodies and suggesting movement by means of a simple, highly stylized vocabulary. To Nugent, the forms and movements of dance were of importance in themselves, not just as symbols of the primitive.

Whereas Douglas turned to ancient Egyptian art as both a symbolic connection with the ancient African past and a source of ideas about design and representation, Nugent's art evolved under the influence of Beardsley and Erté. The sinuous curves of the lynch victim's body and the surrounding vegetation in the illustration accompanying "Pope Pius the Only" (247), for example, are distinctly Beardsley-esque, as is the use of seemingly peripheral details—the dying flowers, the stringy moss—to reinforce and elucidate the work's theme. (Beardsley's *The Climax*, an illustration for the published version of Wilde's *Salome*, is presented here for comparison.) Indeed, much of Nugent's work is a dialogue with Beardsley. The erect flowers at the base of the figures on pages 65 and 71 are direct allusions to the flower rising from the pool of Jokanaan's blood in "The Climax." The lush foliage surrounding Nugent's



Aubrey Beardsley, *The Climax*
(1894).

dancers in these images also mirrors the vines that frame Beardsley's illustrations for *Le Morte Darthur*. Similarly, the three candles that appear in Nugent's drawings of monks (237, 239) unmistakably refer to Beardsley's artistic signature, which appears to the right of the flower in *The Climax*.

Although the techniques and tropes of Beardsley, Douglas, Reiss, and others appear in Nugent's art, the synthesis is uniquely his. No one else brought the fin de siècle aesthetic sensibility so effectively to bear on African or African American subject matter. Few have more skillfully attacked prevailing sexual, religious, and racial norms simply by celebrating the joyous potential of transgressive sexuality.

Especially noteworthy for its originality is Nugent's Salome series (plates 1–7). These images are like nothing anyone else has done. The nudes, mostly women flamboyant in their sexuality, are titled with the names of biblical characters. As in his Bible stories, Nugent's conflation of sexuality and the scriptures is highly transgressive. Equally interesting is the masklike nature of his faces—indeed, of the entire bodies of these women.¹¹¹ These figures present



Aaron Douglas, *Dancers*
(1928).

sexuality as performance, as artifice—as drag. They, like Nugent’s persona itself, perfectly express the zeitgeist of Manhattan in the twenties, in which life was lived as theater.¹¹²

Nugent’s open assault on mainstream religious sensibilities is not without precedent in African American culture; it echoes David Walker’s devastating attack on hypocritical Christianity in his 1829 *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*.¹¹³ Nugent’s stories are more subtle than Walker’s *Appeal*, but they, too, were highly subversive. By placing biblical characters in a context in which traditional Christian assumptions about sexuality and race are violated, Nugent challenged readers to acknowledge that their prejudices were (and are) inconsistent with basic Christian principles. Nugent continued his commentary on religion, the church, and sexuality in his sexually suggestive drawings of monks—drawings that still have not lost their power to shock (234–40).

In the 1940s, Nugent explored further his favorite themes and refined his

technique. His draftsmanship rose to a high level of expertise; he augmented his exquisite pen and ink drawings with the transparent Japanese dyes that were used at the time to tint photographs (plates 9–11). During the 1950s, however, Nugent began to turn away from the mannered techniques that had characterized much of his previous work, both literary and visual. Increasingly, his work became a forthright expression of his erotic interests. He drew portraits of exquisite young men in the style of Michelangelo (plates 15–16; 233, 266–67). He wrote realistic, sexually explicit novels exploring the emotional complexities of relationships between openly gay men like himself and the straight men they attract and to whom many of them are attracted.

Some of Nugent's work is in print. "Smoke, Lilies and Jade," his groundbreaking contribution to *FIRE!!*, has been included in several recent Harlem Renaissance anthologies. Some of his images have recently been republished as well. But because Nugent did not pursue a conventional career as a writer or artist, and because his work profoundly subverted sexual, racial, and religious norms, most of it was never published. What was published appeared in periodicals that are now available only in research libraries. This collection is intended to rectify that situation by gathering together his more important published work, selections from his unpublished manuscripts, and examples of his visual art.