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THE CASE OF *EBONY* AND *TOPAZ*: RACIAL AND SEXUAL HYBRIDITY IN HARLEM RENAISSANCE ILLUSTRATIONS

Caroline Goeser

Ebony and Topaz was issued once in 1927 as a collection of essays, poetry, and illustrations edited by Charles S. Johnson, the African American editor of *Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life*. Though the volume has received little scholarly attention, it articulated the theme of racial hybridity that not only proved an integral component of Harlem Renaissance cultural production but marked the diversity of American modernism between the wars. Significantly, Johnson's editorial method in *Ebony and Topaz*, which promised minimal interference and direction, allowed his contributors freedom to broach controversial subjects shunned by the more conservative African American editors of the period, such as W.E.B. DuBois. As a result, Johnson's compendium resisted limitation to the facile theme of racial uplift and challenged restrictive classifications of racial identity.

The most culturally subversive production came from two illustrators of *Ebony and Topaz*, Charles Cullen and Richard Bruce Nugent. Seemingly benign at first glance, their illustrations interrogated the interdependence between racial hybridity and alternative sexual orientations. On the one hand, these illustrations disrupted negative stereotypes of black identity by confounding racist connections between black skin and "primitive" identity. At the same time, they challenged prevailing tendencies within the African American community to fix black identity to a narrow ideal of racial uplift, a message that served to ossify rather than relax fixed categories of race.

Ebony and Topaz merits discussion within the context of American little magazines. Issued in magazine form, with an illustrated soft cover, the volume was published as a non-commercial extension of *Opportunity*, seeking to express a variety of creative responses to African American culture without the burden of appealing to a wide reader-

ship.¹ Johnson's editorial introduction emphasized the value in releasing his contributors' concerns with reader response, and he promised that they would maintain independence from their editor:

It is a venture in expression, shared, with the slightest editorial suggestion, by a number of persons who are here much less interested in their audience than in what they are trying to portray. This measurable freedom from the usual burden of proof has been an aid to spontaneity, and to this quality the collection makes its most serious claim.²

Beyond his explicit commitment to artistic freedom, however, Johnson rigorously refused editorial authority. He rarely cued the reader to his own specific opinions about the variety of subjects broached in *Ebony and Topaz*. In fact, W.E.B. DuBois considered Johnson's lack of editorial dominance as the volume's greatest failing. He dismissed *Ebony and Topaz* as "a sort of big scrapbook, quite without unity, even of race," noting Johnson's refusal to limit the collection to a singular theme of racial uplift. DuBois further revealed his preference for a fixed message: "If the whole thing had been split up into a half dozen little booklets, each with its artistic unity and clear spiritual message, the net result would surely have been greater and more valuable."³ But Johnson would consistently emphasize freedom over propaganda in his editing of *Ebony and Topaz*, as well as *Opportunity*. In 1926, Johnson wrote in an *Opportunity* editorial, "This journal is designed to inform and interpret, both through sociological discussions, and through what it may offer of the cultural experiences of Negroes."⁴ Resisting a unifying editorial voice, Johnson promoted critical inquiry, leaving the mode of interpretation to his contributors.

Johnson's editorial method can be elucidated by several prevailing attitudes toward African American identity that he faced in 1927. On the one hand, perceptions persisted among many Europeans and Euro-Americans that black identity was tied inherently to buffoonish or slovenly behavior. The refrain was heard even from Paul Guillaume and Thomas Munro in their *Primitive Negro Sculpture* of 1926. Despite their praise of "Negro" art, they asserted that "Negroes" across time had shared primitive traits, including "passivity, lack of initiative and organization, intellectual backwardness, occasional irresponsibility of conduct."⁵ On the other hand, Johnson faced attitudes from Alain Locke and others within the African American community in Harlem, who wished to prove Guillaume and Munro's assumptions dead wrong. "This volume aims to document the New Negro culturally and socially," Locke wrote in his "Foreword" to *The New Negro* of 1925. "There is ample evidence of a New Negro in the latest phases of social change and progress," he charged, countering claims that black Americans were halted permanently in their evolutionary process.⁶ However, younger

African American artists and writers, such as Langston Hughes, tired of Locke, who seemed more interested in proving parity between blacks and whites than in exploring the distinctive qualities of African American cultural production. In 1926, Hughes wrote defiantly:

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 . . . If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter either.⁷

Opting instead to carve a separate space for the creative contributions to *Ebony and Topaz*, Johnson vowed, on the one hand, to leave "the usual burden of proof" behind, as he stated in his introduction. His promise was a notable jab at Locke and DuBois as editors, who he felt constrained the creativity of black artists and writers by directing them to broadcast a specific, aspirational racial identity. In a pointed critique of Locke's *New Negro*, Johnson remarked wittily about *Ebony and Topaz*, "This volume, strangely enough, does not set forth to prove a thesis, nor to plead a cause, nor, stranger still, to offer a progress report on the state of Negro letters" (11). On the other hand, Johnson's critique of Locke was gentle and did not aim to alienate more conservative readers, as had Hughes. With fewer heavy-handed claims than Locke, but without the rancor of Hughes's criticism, Johnson allowed the writings and art of his contributors to evince a variety of themes. In this light, his editorial mode of anti-stance can be considered a strategy rather than a failing. Indeed, the political hybridity of Johnson's stance between Locke and Hughes reflects the cultural hybridity he sought to achieve in the pages of *Ebony and Topaz*. It further allowed freedom of expression for his contributors while also maintaining accessibility to a varied readership. Perhaps most importantly, he made room for a plurality of racial identities rather than one "New Negro" persona. Convinced there was no single prescription for black American identity, he concluded in his introductory essay, "Those seeking set patterns of Negro literature will in all likelihood be disappointed for there is no set pattern of Negro life" (13).

It is not surprising, therefore, that the reader found a variety of contributions by authors and illustrators of varied racial backgrounds within the pages of *Ebony and Topaz*. For, central to Johnson's aims in compiling the collection was the mixed race participation in exploring "the materials of Negro life." "It is significant," he continued in his introduction, "that white and Negro writers and artists are finding together the highest expression of their art in this corner of life" (11). Reflecting his inclusive aims, the list of contributors of fiction and poetry included precocious young black writers, such as Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, and Zora Neale Hurston; popular white dramatists, such as

Paul Green; and college student writers at Fisk University. Also seeking wide-ranging types of writing, Johnson supplemented the short stories and verse with non-fictional essays on racial issues from anthropological and sociological perspectives by Julia Peterkin, E. Franklin Frazier, and George Schuyler, among others.

On a more subversive level, however, Johnson's writers and illustrators engaged with the kinds of subjects that were hotly debated on the pages of *Opportunity* and the *Crisis*, such as mixed race identities and mixed race sexual relations. Toward the center of the volume, for example, Johnson placed Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poem, "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point." Radical for any time period, Browning's nineteenth-century, rhymed verses formed a diatribe against southern white slave masters written from the perspective of a young slave woman who had been raped by her white owner. In an incredible act of defiance, she killed the light-skinned child who resulted from the rape. Cloaked in Browning's elegant verse were themes that many conservative, middle-class African Americans wanted to avoid, from slavery, to sexual relations between whites and blacks, to rape, to mixed race identity.

Indeed, the themes of mixed race identity and shifting racial identities animated several key contributions to *Ebony and Topaz*. E. B. Reuter contributed a sociological study of mixed race identity, "The Changing Status of the Mulatto," which was prefaced by Richard Bruce Nugent's *Drawings for Mulattoes*. While this essay and the preceding illustrations focused exclusively on mulatto identity, several authors of short stories used the theme of racial hybridity as a subtext. Careful to make explicit the interstitial skin color of the leading characters in his short story "General Drums," John Matheus described the skin color of Charlie as "the earth, color of khaki," and of Malissy as "olive brown," further clarifying her mixed race heritage by alluding to her "squaw-faced grandma."⁸ In other short stories, light-skinned characters experienced shifting racial identities, marked by their skin turning dark black. In Arthur Huff Fauset's short story "Jumby," the main character, Jean-Marie, was a young African American woman with light brown skin who lived on an island in the Caribbean. In the beginning, she feared her African heritage, afraid that through some curse her skin would turn black: "Suppose, now, that she had awakened to find herself bitten by a cobra, her limbs swollen double, and her pale amber brownness turned a hideous black!"⁹ By the end of the story, however, she longed for reunion with her African past, expressed through a sexual relationship with her black lover, Babuji.

The most "taboo" component of *Ebony and Topaz*, however, was its illustrative material, which paired the theme of mixed race identity with homosexual relationships and transvestitism.¹⁰ The drawings of Charles Cullen, which illustrated the cover and several pages of the

compendium, were particularly subversive, because at first glance they seemed aspirational, as if complying with the theme of racial uplift that some readers may have expected (Figures 1–4). At the same time, Cullen’s male figures could be read as double-sexed, with poses suggesting gay or bisexual activity (see especially Figure 4). Richard Bruce Nugent’s *Drawings for Mulattoes* recounted a satirical history of mixed race individuals that concluded in a nightclub, the figures’ campy poses making allusion to the transvestites of Harlem’s infamous drag balls (Figures 6–9).

Johnson was taking a considerable risk by including writings and art that engaged with mixed race identity, homosexuality, and Harlem dance halls. These were themes that many social and literary critics of the period deemed most scandalous and immoral. DuBois, for example, considered Carl Van Vechten’s novel *Nigger Heaven* “a blow in the face” to respectable African Americans. He felt Van Vechten had written exclusively about the dregs of society who participated in Harlem’s nightlife, with illicit references to “gin and sadism” and “one damned orgy after another.”¹¹ Elsewhere, DuBois and E. Franklin Frazier considered dancing in cabarets and interracial activity (especially involving same-sex relations) to be indicative of a neighborhood’s slum status and therefore the worst of all vices.¹²

In the face of such straitlaced contemporary mores, Johnson did not make overt reference in his introduction to the more illicit themes of *Ebony and Topaz*. As was typical of his editorial method, he allowed his contributors the freedom to broach controversial subjects without commenting directly on their specific content. At times, Johnson’s introduction seemed tangential, and even slightly cagey. For example, he spilled quite a bit of ink on his authors’ choice of southern subjects, which editors like Locke had indeed avoided in large measure by focusing on the urban north. “The taboos and racial ritual are less strict,” wrote Johnson in describing those African American writers who were turning anew to working class characters in the South. He continued:

The sensitiveness, which a brief decade ago, denied the existence of any but educated Negroes, bitterly opposing Negro dialect, and folk songs, and anything that revived the memory of slavery, is shading off into a sensitiveness to the hidden beauties of this life and a frank joy and pride in it. (12)

However, the southern folk subjects were not the most “taboo” components of the compendium, and Johnson’s lengthy discussion of this theme seems to have functioned to alert his readers to radical content without specifying its most illicit details.

In this context, Johnson’s title choice for the compendium both allowed for controversial content while at the same time drawing little

attention to it. On one level, the title suggested themes of racial uplift. Ebony and topaz were valuable natural resources that could be compared metaphorically to the social and artistic contributions of black Americans and those of mixed race identity, whose skin might be described respectively as the color of ebony and topaz. However, “ebony” and “topaz” may have called to mind other referents. If the reader had conjured the color equivalents of ebony and topaz—“black” and “tan,” a number of connections might have occurred. One association could have been drawn with contemporary jazz music. For in 1927, in collaboration with Bubber Miley, Duke Ellington composed, performed, and recorded the Black and Tan Fantasy with his orchestra. As a piece in two sections, “Black” was composed by Miley and “Tan” by Ellington, suggesting the racial identity of each musician.¹³ On a more illicit level for some, “black” and “tan” would have called to mind the Black and Tan clubs in Harlem, which catered inclusively to black, white, and mixed race patrons.¹⁴ Ellington and Miley’s composition referred explicitly to the Black and Tan clubs, which not only encouraged mixed race relations but were also known as rare venues in which homosexual activity was tolerated.¹⁵ While Johnson did not title his compendium “Black and Tan,” he nonetheless left room for associations between *Ebony and Topaz* and the Black and Tans. Especially in conjunction with Cullen’s cover illustration, Johnson’s title gained the subtext of interracial, homosexual relationships, such as those sanctioned by Harlem’s Black and Tan clubs (Figure 1).

Johnson’s allowance for controversial subject matter and illicit innuendo in *Ebony and Topaz* held further significance than mere titillation. For the references to mixed race identity, homosexuality, and transvestitism actually supported Johnson’s pledge to disengage narrow assumptions about racial identities. These were interstitial characteristics that necessarily complicated facile classifications of race, and gender as well. While Johnson did not feature these qualities as overt subjects of his compendium, the illustrations of Cullen and Nugent addressed this “taboo” material directly, radically disrupting the boundaries between white and black, male and female.

Printed in yellow and black on light green paper, Charles Cullen’s cover illustration introduced the reader to his multivalent iconography (see Figure 1). Inspired by Aubrey Beardsley’s exotic imagery, as well as Art Deco design, Cullen’s composition features two idealized nude figures, one black, the other light-skinned. The black figure is a muscular male, who stands behind the light-skinned figure and arches his head back blissfully toward a brilliant sun—symbolic of black America’s bright future. However, the figure’s blissful expression is not inspired by utopian ideals alone. His hands rest gently near the back of the light-skinned figure, who stands in front of the black youth, though on a lower register. This figure is less obviously sexed, seeming instead to possess both male and female attributes. On the one hand,



Figure 1. Charles Cullen, cover illustration for *Ebony and Topaz: A Collectanea* (1927). Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. Reprinted by permission of the National Urban League.

the figure has shortly cropped hair and a muscular torso and buttocks, suggesting male identity. On the other, the sultry facial features, long delicate arms and fingers, elaborate necklaces, and one full breast mark the figure as feminine. The figure can therefore be read as double-sexed, or as male wearing female accoutrements, as would a transvestite. This ambiguous figure stands suggestively with its head in front of the groin area of the black figure behind, who in turn responds ecstatically.

In his frontispiece and two other drawings for *Ebony and Topaz*, Cullen celebrated idealized, nude forms of the black male body (Figures 2–4). These youthful, lean, muscular bodies glisten with reflected light, as if oiled for an ancient athletic event. In his frontispiece, as on the cover, two figures interact suggestively (Figure 2). The black male youth, whose figure stretches diagonally across the composition, displays his nude body before an ambiguously gendered figure in the lower left. With female accoutrements (bobbed hair and jewelry), the figure's chiseled chin and neck appear male, suggesting a man in drag who passionately gazes upward at his male lover. With the snake dangling from the lush foliage at right, Cullen drew association with the Garden of Eden, perhaps playfully recasting Eve as a transvestite. More suggestive still was Cullen's drawing in *Ebony and Topaz* that appeared also in Countee Cullen's collection of poems, *Copper Sun* (Figure 4). It features a black male youth kneeling on the ground, seeming to smell the sweet aroma of a plant. However, Cullen has charged the image with a kind of electrical current or aura that emits from the back of the kneeling figure, suggesting activity beyond the mere admiration of a flower. Behind the kneeling youth stands an ambiguously gendered figure, whose breasts mark the figure as female, though other attributes appear male. This figure's groin area is covered erotically by the energetic aura around the kneeling figure, whose suspended buttocks are temptingly within reach. Again, as in Cullen's cover illustration, the standing figure responds ecstatically, with head thrown back blissfully.

Charles Cullen was one of several non-black illustrators closely associated with Harlem Renaissance print culture.¹⁶ He did magazine work, as well as book illustration, notably for Countee Cullen's collections of poetry. From historical publications to recent scholarship, writers have repeatedly misidentified Charles as a black artist and as Countee's brother. For example in 1927, one reviewer of Countee's *Copper Sun* seemed amazed that "one colored family can produce a poet and an artist as significant as Countee and Charles are."¹⁷ Countee penned a letter in 1927 to another reviewer who had evidently made the same error. "Mr. Charles Cullen is not related to me," he stated, adding unequivocally, "He is not even colored."¹⁸

Charles typically published illustrations that accompanied poetry and prose by gay male authors, from Walt Whitman to Oscar Wilde to



Figure 2. Charles Cullen, frontispiece illustration for *Ebony and Topaz* (1927). Collection of the author. Reprinted by permission of the National Urban League.

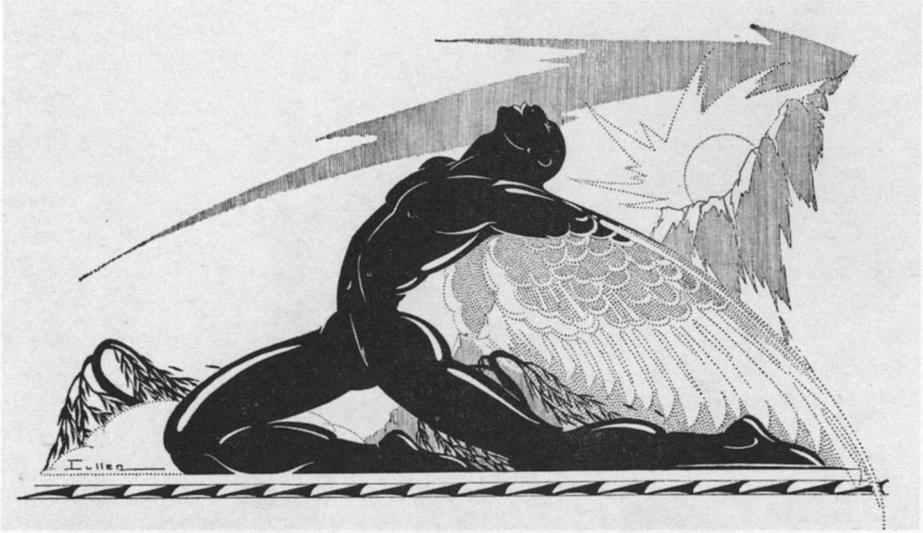


Figure 3. Charles Cullen, untitled drawing, in *Ebony and Topaz* (1927): 116. Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. Reprinted by permission of the National Urban League.

Countee Cullen.¹⁹ Just as these texts coded gay sexuality and therefore operated differently depending upon the reader's response, Cullen's drawings allowed for multiple readings. At first glance, many readers of *Ebony and Topaz* may only have seen Cullen's drawings through the ideological lens of racial uplift. Even recent scholars, such as Walter Kalaidjian, have focused on Cullen's "utopian iconography... of uplifted black figures that strain toward a hopeful vista of dawning new prospects."²⁰ To end there, however, is to miss the multivalent iconography of Cullen's illustrations.

In the case of his drawings for a 1933 edition of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, Cullen lamented that some readers missed the complexity of his imagery (Figure 5). He commented in a letter to one of his colleagues,

Many of my most enthusiastic admirers have raved about these drawings in complete ignorance of their homo-sexual significance. I mention this fact because it was my original intent to soft-pedal while remaining essentially true to the Whitman text. I should regret it if my drawings were too obvious.²¹

His remarks clarify his desire to communicate gay content, hoping at the same time that his drawings would retain subtlety, allowing for their public circulation.

While his drawings in *Leaves of Grass* often paired same sex couples, as in the central embrace of two men in "O Captain! My Captain!"



Figure 4. Charles Cullen, untitled drawing for Countee Cullen's *Copper Sun* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1927), reprinted in *Ebony and Topaz* (1927): 136. Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. Reprinted by permission of the National Urban League.

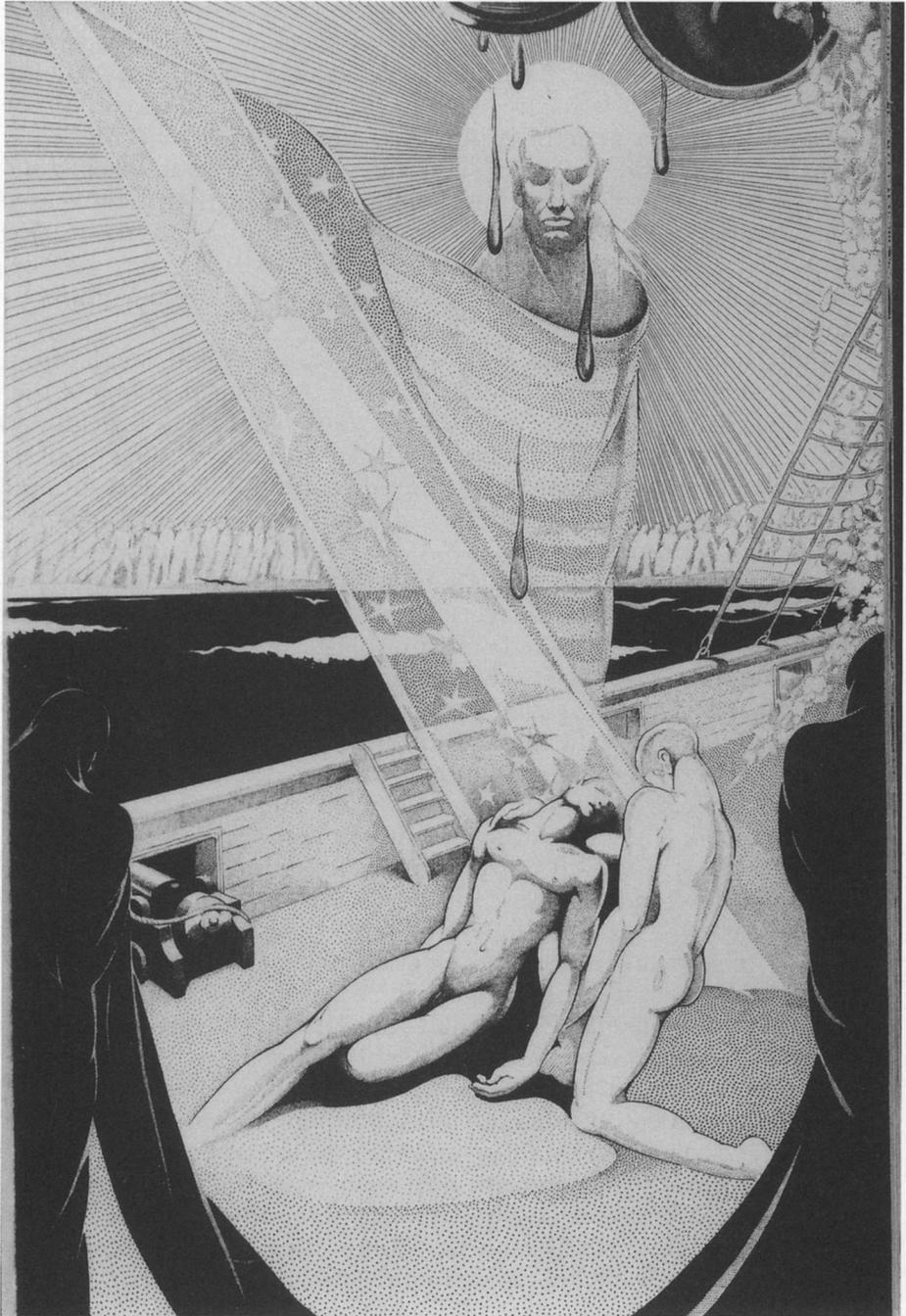


Figure 5. Charles Cullen, illustration for Walt Whitman's "O Captain! My Captain!" in *Leaves of Grass* (New York: Thomas Crowell, 1933), 196.

(Figure 5), the hybrid identities of the figures in his *Ebony and Topaz* drawings consistently neutralized the illicit sexuality of his imagery. In his cover and frontispiece for *Ebony and Topaz*, couples interacted in provocative ways, but with the safety valve of one figure who could be read as either male or female, allowing for the possibility of either straight or gay relations. At the same time, Cullen's double-sexed figures implied the possibility of bisexuality, which further complicated the assignation of one gender as over against another. By confusing the boundaries between "normal" and "aberrant" behavior, and between male and female genders, Cullen questioned the assumptions behind these conventionally fixed categories.

Similarly, in another series of illustrations for *Ebony and Topaz*, Richard Bruce Nugent confounded conventional classifications of race and gender, delightfully expressing the interdependence of racial and sexual hybridity. In his *Four Drawings for Mullattoes*, Nugent illustrated an interstitial racial type, aiming to destabilize conventional definitions of racial and gendered identities. His drawings charted the "evolution" of "mulattoes" from the African jungle to the modern city, while at the same time satirizing such a conception of evolution. Portrayed as slipping between categories usually deemed oppositional, his mulattoes were double-raced and double-sexed, enjoying freedom from conventional classifications, while participating in a mongrel cultural event that crossed normative racial and gendered barriers. Further, Nugent made specific allusion to sites of interracial activity in his drawings, as several of his mulattoes can be identified as drag performers associated with the famous costume balls in Harlem.

The series begins in a natural setting in *Drawing No. 1*, with three native ancestors of the mulatto striking dramatic poses (Figure 6). Rather than specific tribal African figures, Nugent's black natives appear stereotyped, as if on a Hollywood movie set, cueing the reader at the outset to read his imagery as tongue-in-cheek. Further, their bodies and headpieces are only suggested rather than carefully detailed, their identities masked by their flat, silhouetted forms. They stand among what appear to be palm trees, with fronds barely visible at the top of the composition. However, the trunks of these "trees" are carved intricately with mask-like imagery and therefore appear totemic. From these jungle origins, the mulatto in *Drawing No. 2* appears as a hybrid bust on the model of an ancient Janiform vase—half black and half white (Figure 7).²² However, Nugent's assignation of color defies normative categories, with the black profile appearing as an ancient Greek bust, the white head as a tribal African mask. Further, the settings for each profile purposefully disrupt conventional stereotypes that pitted nature against culture. In Nugent's topsy-turvy drawing, jungle nature forms the setting for ancient Greece, while culture (taking the form of city buildings) provides the backdrop for tribal Africa.

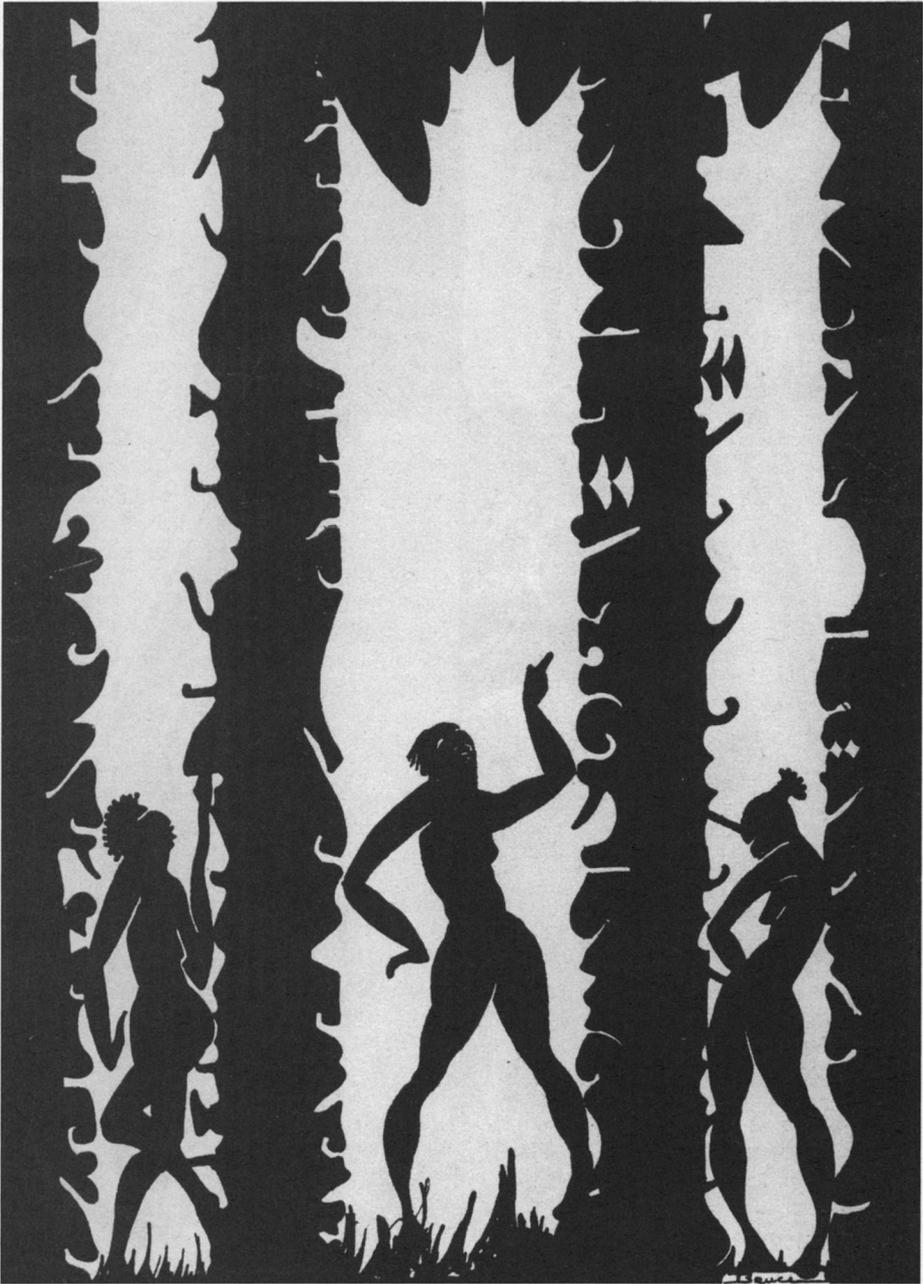


Figure 6. Richard Bruce Nugent, *Drawings for Mulattoes—Number 1*, in *Ebony and Topaz* (1927): 103. Collection of the author. Reprinted by permission of the National Urban League.



Figure 7. Richard Bruce Nugent, *Drawings for Mulattoes—Number 2*, in *Ebony and Topaz* (1927): 104. Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. Reprinted by permission of the National Urban League.

Nugent's third and fourth drawings feature animated mulatto dancers who make their way into the modern world. In the third, Nugent's playful dancer is both primitive and modern. Her primitive half is black and nude; her modern half is white and dressed in a two-piece flapper costume, stockings, and a high-heeled shoe (Figure 8). Again, Nugent's background settings purposefully confuse these stereotyped identities, with the primitive totemic structure at right behind the modern flapper, and a modern Art Deco chevron design behind the primitive dancer. In the final drawing, Nugent has again divided his composition between black and white, specifying a modern cabaret setting, implied by the dancing figures and musical notation, but also by the palm trees, which figured in the Harlem cabaret murals that Nugent designed with Aaron Douglas (Figure 9). This composition features a large black head at the center, which has been revealed from behind a white female mask, a visual stereotype that can connote the act of passing for white. At the bottom of the composition, figures dance in a row uninhibitedly. They both occupy and animate the poses of their native ancestors in *Drawing No. 1*, but with the added complication that their specific identities are masked by both black and white silhouettes.

Nugent's imagery disrupted expectations regarding the racial identity and social status of the "mulatto." On the one hand, he affirmed preconceptions that mulattoes were literally half-black and half-white and therefore, on a social hierarchy, somewhere in between black and white. On the other hand, he confused these assumptions by tricking the stereotypes, particularly in *Drawing No. 2*, in which he divided the composition along color lines but defied normative racial associations (Figure 7). In a light-hearted and humorous way, Nugent's method paralleled the sociological study of mulatto identity that followed his drawings in *Ebony and Topaz*. Titled "The Changing Status of the Mulatto," the article was written by Dr. E. B. Reuter, professor of Sociology at the University of Iowa.²³ Reuter asserted that, despite the number of light-skinned mulattoes who had achieved leadership positions in the nation at large and within African American communities, readers should not conclude that mulattoes were biologically or intellectually superior to those of purely African descent:

The significance of this distribution of superior men has commonly been misunderstood. It seems on first blush to be somehow indicative of an underlying difference in capacity, to imply a marked superiority rooting in the fact of a white ancestry and relationship. . . . The mixed ancestry of so many Negro leaders has given support to the biological bias at the same time that it has served as evidence to prove the incapacity of members of the Negro group. (107)



Figure 8. Richard Bruce Nugent, *Drawings for Mulattoes—Number 3*, in *Ebony and Topaz* (1927): 105. Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. Reprinted by permission of the National Urban League.

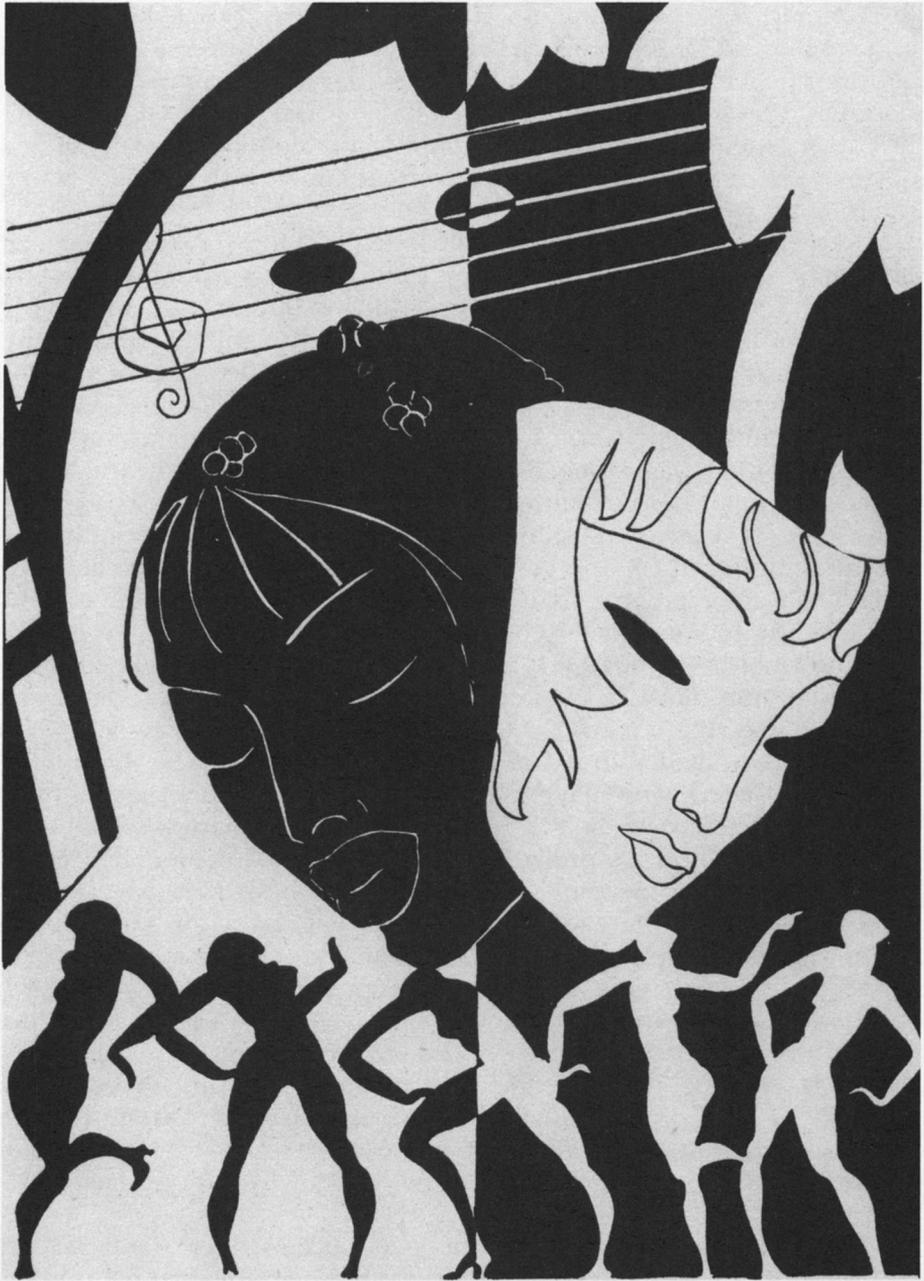


Figure 9. Richard Bruce Nugent, *Drawings for Mulattoes—Number 4*, in *Ebony and Topaz* (1927): 106. Collection of the author. Reprinted by permission of the National Urban League.

In summarizing his arguments, Reuter emphasized that the behavior and intellectual capacity of individuals depended not on their racial origins but on their historical, economic, and environmental conditioning. "The fact that the mulattoes have in the past produced more prominent men," he concluded, "should be understood as a simple and obvious consequence of the historic circumstances that have favored them" (110).

Reuter's scholarly essay and Nugent's playful drawings seem, at first glance, to have little in common, save their connection to mulatto identity. Yet, Nugent's method was akin to Reuter's in portraying mixed race characteristics as learned, not innate, and as cultural and political rather than biological. He did this most effectively by playing the trickster with visual stereotypes, reversing assumptions associated with the stereotypes. In his *Drawing Number 2*, for example, he has dismantled the connection that the stereotypes demanded between black skin and primitive identity, or white skin and civilization (Figure 7). By reassigning skin color to reverse the stereotypes, Nugent reveals how arbitrary the connections were in the first place, ultimately making fun of the "truths" about racial identity that Americans had learned and assumed to be driven by nature.²⁴

The tenor of Nugent's self-appointed role as trickster related to his unconventional lifestyle, which he lived openly by 1920s standards. Raised in Washington, D. C., Nugent moved to Harlem as a young man quite secure in his homosexual identity. While many of the Harlem Renaissance writers were gay or bisexual, none lived their sexuality as openly as Nugent, who spoke and wrote candidly about his homosexual encounters and his preference for white or "Latin" men.²⁵ He had found early in his life that "he didn't like to have jobs," as Thomas Wirth has said.²⁶ Instead, he became a vagabond of sorts, living promiscuously from man to man, stopping to shower and "wash his shirts" at the apartment of Aaron and Alta Douglas.²⁷ He was known for his outlandish dress; in the words of Steven Watson, he went "tieless, underwearless, sockless—and sometimes even shoeless—wearing a single gold bead in one pierced ear."²⁸ Writing to Langston Hughes in 1927, Carl Van Vechten reported seeing Nugent at an *Opportunity* awards dinner "with his usual open chest and uncovered ankles. I suppose soon he will be going without trousers," he quipped.²⁹

In 1926, Nugent wrote what has been assessed as "the first literary work on an openly homosexual theme to be published by an Afro-American writer."³⁰ He published it in Wallace Thurman's short-lived avant-garde journal, *Fire!! A Quarterly Devoted to the Younger Negro Artists*. It was a stream-of-consciousness piece, titled "Smoke, Lilies, and Jade," about Alex, who discovers his lust for another man, androgynously named Beauty, while also maintaining love for his girlfriend, Melva. Nugent's story was radical, both in its exploration of

love between two men and in its consideration of bisexuality. In a final daydream about his relationships with Melva and Beauty, Alex declares, "one can love two at the same time."³¹

His protagonist's statement points to Nugent's own delight in creating characters who were two things at once. This quality permeates his *Drawings for Mulattoes*, in which figures are both black and white, male and female, primitive and civilized. He employed his "both/and" chicanery in his first drawing, asking his viewer to perceive forms as both positive and negative. Together with a playful and subtle erotic element, Nugent's eye trickery further cued the viewer to read the series as tongue-in-cheek. As Thomas Wirth has written, "Eroticism is an element in nearly all of Nugent's work."³² From the phalluses he painted on the walls of "Niggerati Manor," where he lived with Wallace Thurman and Langston Hughes, to his more private drawings of fanciful male orgies, Nugent carried his own sexual audacity into his art. Within this context for eroticism, many of the forms in Nugent's *Drawing No. 1* may be interpreted as phallic (Figure 6). While the totemic palm trees that dominate Nugent's composition may be seen as phallic in their own right, much of the "carving" on the totems appears phallic as well. Reading these phallic forms depends on the viewer's ability to shift perspective, perceiving the black totems against a white ground, but also white totems on a black ground.

Nugent and Douglas used the same technique in several Harlem cabaret murals, which unfortunately no longer survive. They were executed in red and blue, so that viewers could perceive one scene in red on a blue ground, or another in blue on a red ground. One view afforded them African scenery, but in the other perspective, "the scene shifted to the modern city."³³ Similarly in Nugent's *Drawing No. 1*, the first white form on the left appears as a totemic shaft, its right edge carved with openings for the eyes and mouths of masklike forms. However, if one shifts perspective to view the black ground to the right of the white totem as a positive image, the forms that read as openings on the white shaft now appear as projections from a new black totem. Many of these dark forms are shaped as phalluses in varying states of erection. The interlocking black/white masks and phallic forms may be Nugent's playful way of suggesting the sexual activity that would produce a racially mixed child or mulatto, while at the same time it alludes to his own sexual activity with, and preference for, white men.

Nugent's delight in allowing the viewer to see two forms at once found its greatest resonance in terms of gender. His primitive ancestors in *Drawing No. 1* are silhouetted in black and ambiguously gendered. With decorative headpieces, they could be male performers in a ritual. However, their full breasts suggest female anatomy. Similarly, the small Venus-like figure superimposed on the central head in *Drawing No. 2* is not only half white and half black but also appears hermaphroditic, with a female breast and wide hip at left, but a flat

male chest and a muscular leg and buttocks at right (Figure 7). His primitive/flapper in *Drawing No. 3* may also be read as double gendered (Figure 8). While the white half wears decidedly female garb, the primitive half at left appears androgynous, possessing both a female breast and a muscular thigh suggesting male anatomy.

In his *Drawings for Mulattoes*, performance plays a key role in Nugent's play with gender hybridity. In *Drawing No. 3*, the transformations from black to white, primitive to civilized, and male to female occur while the figure dances before the viewer (Figure 8). In his *Drawing No. 4*, the dancers at the bottom of the composition perform in a row on the dance floor or stage of a Harlem cabaret (Figure 9). The looming heads above also draw associations with performance, calling to mind the linked theatrical masks of tragedy and comedy.³⁴

Performance came naturally to Nugent, as an outgoing personality and also as a professional actor and dancer. Despite his disdain for jobs, his love of the theater and dance held his interest long enough to be cast as one of the denizens of Catfish Row in *Porgy*, which ran on Broadway and toured throughout the country and in London from 1927 to 1929. He also danced in a production of *Run Little Chillun'* in the early 1930s.³⁵ But performances in Harlem cabarets, especially in the Black and Tan clubs, held a special allure for Nugent, as rare venues where homosexual activity was not only condoned but celebrated, and where gays and lesbians of varying racial backgrounds could interact. Nugent remembered fondly the different clubs catering to a variety of homosexual preferences. He recalled one speakeasy that accommodated, in his words, "rough queers . . . the kind that fought better than truck drivers and swished better than Mae West."³⁶ Some of the most gender-bending Harlem entertainment occurred in night-clubs and at costume balls, where men impersonated women and women took on the guise of men through dress. Highlighting the costume balls held at Hamilton Lodge and the Savoy Ballroom was the beauty contest, in which, as Eric Garber writes, "the fashionably dressed drags would vie for the title of Queen of the Ball."³⁷ Nugent reveled in the gender fluidity Harlem's night life afforded, declaring "[male] and 'female' impersonation was at its peak as night club entertainment. . . . The famous Hamilton Lodge 'drag' balls were becoming more and more notorious and gender was becoming more and more conjectural."³⁸

Several of Nugent's drawings published in venues apart from *Ebony* and *Topaz* may be read through the lens of "conjectural" gender, and more specifically, drag performance.³⁹ His androgynous figure appearing in *Fire!!* is perhaps his most obvious published drag performer (Figure 10). The figure's campy pose is heightened by its facial features, which seem applied cosmetically. With full, pursed lips, a winking eye, and dramatically arched eyebrows etched in white, the figure seems to flirt coyly over its raised shoulder with an imagined

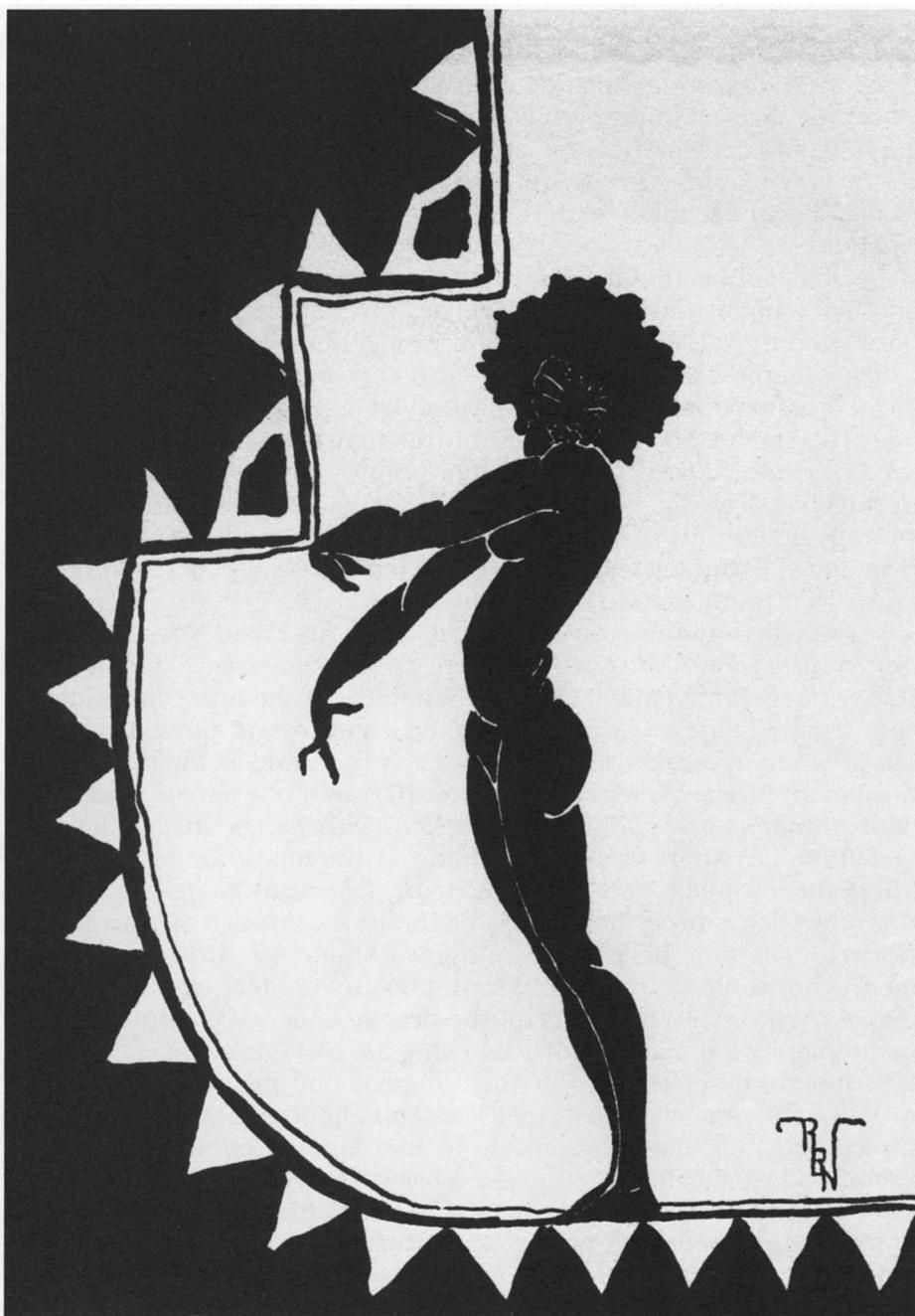


Figure 10. Richard Bruce Nugent, untitled drawing, in *Fire!! A Quarterly Devoted to the Younger Negro Artists* 1.1 (1926): 24.

audience. The decorative border at left curves under the figure's feet and provides him/her with a kind of runway from which to perform in drag. The border may also be read as an outlandish primitive head, with bulging eyes that pop out toward the androgynous figure, and a gargantuan mouth that opens to reveal a row of triangular teeth. There is a playfully erotic quality about Nugent's primitivist mask, which appears so taken with the young man in drag as to swallow him whole.

Published on the March 1926 cover of *Opportunity*, Nugent drew another ambiguously gendered figure with a primitivist earring and palm tree at left. His figure wears exaggerated signs of femininity, which prompted Thomas Wirth to read it as a man in drag.⁴⁰ With its facial features applied cosmetically and its earring worn as a costume, both the gender and primitivism of this figure appear performed. Indeed, the line between the signs of primitivism and gender are blurred in Nugent's drawing, with dark lips, dramatic eyebrow, and triangular smudge on the cheek suggesting both feminine cosmetics and primitivist facial paint. Likewise, the earring reads as a sign of femininity as much as a primitivist accoutrement.

In the light of these drawings, one might also read Nugent's *Drawing for Mulattoes No. 4* as a veiled drag performance inspired by Harlem's costume balls (Figure 9). While the white mask looks decidedly female, with a fashionably bobbed hairdo and pursed lips, the black head appears more androgynous, resembling as much the ovoid head of an African American male youth as that of a female figure. The figure's hair is also ambiguously styled, with bangs suggesting a female bob, but short tightly curled hair at the top of the head, resembling the cropped hair of an African American male. As George Chauncey has discovered, most of the cross-dressed performers at Harlem's costume balls were young, working class African American men, who would be eager to win the beauty contest with its modest monetary prize.⁴¹ While some of the drag queens were actually white, many more were black youths masking as white, impersonating their favorite white actresses.⁴² In this context, one might read Nugent's white mask as such a costume. The dancing figures at the bottom of his composition may also allude to the dancing contestants at the Hamilton Lodge ball. The only accessories Nugent has drawn distinctly are the high-heeled shoes, which, together with the dancer's stereotyped, campy steps and poses, typify drag performance. Cavorting riotously, they alluded loosely to newspaper illustrations of cross-dressed dancers at Harlem's costume balls. Published in the *Amsterdam News*, one cartoon carried the caption, "And, Girls, How They Carried On!"⁴³ Beyond caricatures, however, Nugent's dancers are silhouetted, either black against white or white against black, camouflaging their racial and gender identities to privilege their active dancing. With constant, energetic movement, they resist fixation,

occupying instead an interstitial status—what Nugent has deemed most delightful about mulatto identity.

In his *Drawings for Mulattoes*, Nugent satirized presumptions about mixed race identity in order to dismantle the fixity of racial identity, and to complicate assignments of gender and sexuality. Rather than carrying their identities as evolutionary burdens, his interstitial figures performed their racial, gendered, and sexual identities, wearing them as costumes that they might just as easily throw off. In the process, Nugent radically disengaged the body from prescribed racial and gendered characteristics. As “clothing” for the body, race and gender could be worn at will and in startling combinations.

Johnson’s *Ebony and Topaz* functioned in the capacity of an American little magazine, providing a print venue for uninhibited artistic expression. Rather than alienating certain readers, however, the compendium contributions operated on several levels. Most strategically, the coded imagery of Cullen and Nugent could be deciphered differently depending on the reader’s orientation. As a whole, the compendium challenged a variety of Americans to rethink an easy inclination to ground identity in unexamined and ossified definitions of race, gender, and sexuality. Though easily overlooked, Johnson’s warning that there was “no set pattern of Negro life” flew in the face of those on both sides of the color line who, with starkly different motivations, had worked so hard to define and thereby fix African American identity. His freedom from this “burden of proof” opened space in *Ebony and Topaz* for progressive critical inquiry that sought to question how Americans could move outside restrictive classifications of race, which in turn could foster emancipated attitudes toward gender and sexuality.

NOTES

This essay is dedicated to my dissertation advisor, mentor, and friend, Matthew Baigell, Professor Emeritus at Rutgers University. It stems from papers I gave at the College Art Association Annual Conference, New York, February 2003, and the Modernist Studies Association Conference, Pennsylvania State University, October 1999.

¹ There were also a limited number of volumes issued in hard cover.

² Charles S. Johnson, “Introduction,” *Ebony and Topaz: A Collectanea* (New York: *Opportunity* and the National Urban League, 1927), 11. Further references will be noted parenthetically.

³ W.E.B. DuBois, “The Browsing Reader,” *Crisis* (May 1928): 165.

⁴ Charles S. Johnson, “Editorials,” *Opportunity* (June 1926): 174.

⁵ Paul Guillaume and Thomas Munro, *Primitive Negro Sculpture* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1926), 9.

⁶ Alain Locke, *The New Negro: An Interpretation* (New York: Albert and Charles Boni, Inc., 1925), xv.

⁷ Langston Hughes, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” *The Nation* (June 23, 1926): 694.

⁸ John Matheus, “General Drums,” *Ebony and Topaz*, 29.

⁹ Arthur Huff Fauset, "Jumby," *Ebony and Topaz*, 15.

¹⁰ In this article, I do not consider Aaron Douglas's *Ebony and Topaz* illustrations for the short stories "Jumby" (14), "On the Road One Day, Lord" (22), and "General Drums" (28).

¹¹ W.E.B. DuBois, "Books," *Crisis* (December 1926): 81–82.

¹² Kevin J. Mumford, *Interzones: Black/White Sex Districts in Chicago and New York in the Early Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 138.

¹³ See Michael Erlewine et al., eds., *All Music Guide to Jazz*, 3rd ed. (San Francisco: Miller Freeman Books, 1998), 331–43, and Mark Tucker, *Ellington—The Early Years* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1991).

¹⁴ For a history of Black and Tan clubs, see Mumford, *Interzones*, 30.

¹⁵ Mumford, 82–83.

¹⁶ Other white illustrators associated with the Harlem Renaissance include Winold Reiss and Prentiss Taylor. For a short biography of Charles Cullen, see Cary Nelson, *Repression and Recovery: Modern American Poetry and the Politics of Cultural Memory, 1910–1945* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 278–79.

¹⁷ *San Francisco Chronicle* (August 7, 1927); clipping in Scrapbook II, Countee Cullen Papers, Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans.

¹⁸ Countee Cullen to Kathleen Tankersley Young, October 3, 1927; Box 4, Folder 15, Countee Cullen Papers, Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans.

¹⁹ Cullen illustrated four volumes of Countee Cullen's poetry (*Ballad of a Brown Girl*, *Copper Son*, *Color*, and *The Black Christ*), a 1933 edition of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, and a 1931 dramatization of Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, in addition to a number of books and journals edited by Henry Harrison.

²⁰ Walter Kalaidjian, *American Culture Between the Wars: Revisionary Modernism and Postmodern Critique* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 78.

²¹ Charles Cullen to A.J. Buttitta, editor of *Contempo*, March 4, 1933; *Contempo* collection, The Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin.

²² For her discussion of Nugent's drawings and the Janiform vase, see Susan Gubar, *Racechanges: White Skin, Black Face in American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 107–12.

²³ E. B. Reuter, "The Changing Status of the Mulatto," in *Ebony and Topaz*, 107–10. Further references will be noted parenthetically.

²⁴ Nugent's trickery relates to the tradition of black American vernacular expression and humor that Henry Louis Gates has identified as "signifyin(g)." For his explanation of this mode of expression as "the language of trickery" that "presupposes an 'encoded' intention to say one thing but to mean quite another," see Gates, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 52 and 82.

²⁵ Wallace Thurman, Countee Cullen, and Alain Locke were among the gay writers and intellectuals associated with the Harlem Renaissance. Langston Hughes, though never open about his sexuality, seems to have had homosexual leanings as well.

²⁶ Author's interview with Thomas Wirth, June 1997. For his recently published volume of Nugent's art and writings, see Wirth, ed., *Gay Rebel of the Harlem Renaissance: Selections from the Work of Richard Bruce Nugent* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002).

²⁷ Oral history interview with Nugent conducted by Jean Blackwell Hutson, April 14, 1982, preserved in the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York.

²⁸ Steven Watson, *The Harlem Renaissance: Hub of African-American Culture, 1920–1930* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1995), 90.

²⁹ Carl Van Vechten to Langston Hughes, May 11, 1927, published in *Letters of Carl Van Vechten*, ed. Bruce Kellner (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 95–96.

³⁰ Thomas Wirth, "Richard Bruce Nugent," *Black American Literature Forum* (Spring 1985): 16.

³¹ Richard Bruce [Nugent], "Smoke, Lilies and Jade," *Fire!!* (November 1926): 39.

³² Wirth, "Richard Bruce Nugent," 16.

³³ Wirth, 16.

³⁴ Gubar, *Racechanges*, 110.

³⁵ Author's interview with Thomas Wirth.

³⁶ Eric Garber's interview with Nugent, 1981, as quoted in Garber, "A Spectacle in Color: The Lesbian and Gay Subculture of Jazz Age Harlem," in *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*, ed. Martin Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey, Jr. (New York: Penguin Books, 1989), 323–24.

³⁷ Garber, "A Spectacle in Color," 325.

³⁸ Richard Bruce Nugent, "On 'Gloria Swanson'," Federal Writers Project, New York, reprinted in Wirth, ed., *Gay Rebel of the Harlem Renaissance*, 221–23. "Gloria Swanson" was a well-known black female impersonator who entertained cabaret audiences in Harlem.

³⁹ Here, I draw on Ellen McBreen's intriguing analysis of Nugent's unpublished drawings for Oscar Wilde's *Salome*; she interprets several as men in drag. See her "Biblical Gender Bending in Harlem: The Queer Performance of Nugent's *Salome*," *Art Journal* 57 (Fall 1998): 27.

⁴⁰ Wirth, ed., *Gay Rebel of the Harlem Renaissance*, 66.

⁴¹ George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890–1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 257.

⁴² Chauncey, 263.

⁴³ "And, Girls, How They Carried On!" *Amsterdam News*, March 7, 1936, as cited in Chauncey, 262.