

“TO WORK BLACK MAGIC:” RICHARD BRUCE NUGENT’S QUEER TRANSNATIONAL INSURRECTION

Ryan Tracy

The Graduate Center, CUNY

ABSTRACT

Richard Bruce Nugent’s (1906-1987) refusal to give up homoerotic decadence in his literature and visual artwork posed critical problems for the “New Negro” Renaissance’s project of creating urgently needed representations of black masculinity that could be viewed as emancipatory and powerful. Nugent’s little-known short story from 1937, “Pope Pius the Only,” is no exception. As a response to Italy’s invasion of the sovereign African kingdom of Ethiopia in 1935, as well as to the ongoing lynching crisis in Jim Crow America, Nugent’s psychedelic story telescopes the global and historical scale of white supremacy, while insisting that a desire for “Latin” men and Roman culture can be part of the labor of black liberation. Drawing on contemporary debates in queer theory, this paper argues that Nugent’s attempt “to work black magic” can be understood as a politics of national and racial disidentification that alternates between relational and antirelational modes of resistance.

Keywords: Richard Bruce Nugent, Decadence, New Negro Renaissance, Ethiopianism, Italian Fascism, Queer Theory

HOW DO YOU SOLVE A PROBLEM LIKE RICHARD BRUCE NUGENT?

True, he had indeed found Harlem and Amsterdam captivating...
Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Against Nature*

Richard Bruce Nugent (1906-1987) was a problem. During the 1920s and 30s, the heyday of the cultural flourishing that was known as the New Negro (or “Harlem”) Renaissance, he was criticized by friends and cultural leaders alike for his bohemian tendencies and his willingness to inscribe homoeroticism and Wildean aestheticism into the nascent body of New Negro writing. While he was, indeed, captivated by Harlem’s cultural efflorescence, Nugent also felt somewhat captive, or constrained, by the sometimes conservative social attitudes that Harlem patricians could hold in relation to self and artistic expression. As scholars of Nugent’s racial and sexual politics have argued, Nugent’s personal and artistic embodiment of bohemianism and dandyism was sometimes viewed as a betrayal of the duty of race loyalty that circulated within the African-American literary milieu of the Renaissance (Cobb 2000, Glick 2009, Miller 2009).

Such sentiments have been voiced as recently as 1997, when Arnold Rampersad, in his introduction to the reissue of Alain Locke's *The New Negro*, wrote somewhat notoriously that Nugent "was far more concerned with his gay identity than with his race or ethnicity" (Rampersad 1997, xxi). While Rampersad has since revised his position, his earlier comment suggests that the view that homoeroticism and African-American racial solidarity are mutually exclusive has outlived the timeframe of the Renaissance.¹ Without simply defending Nugent, I argue in this essay that Nugent's commitment to decadence and aestheticism was not necessarily at odds with the Renaissance's project of constructing models of black male national identity that could be considered emancipatory and powerful. Nugent did, however, refuse to submit to a dogma that was circulating within the discourse of the New Negro: that one could be loyal to the black national community, or one could be decadent—but one could never be both.

Nugent's interest in decadence should be understood, however, in relation to his lifelong appreciation of Roman culture, and a related desire for, and identification with, "Latins," a term Nugent used to refer to men of both Italian and Spanish decent. Scholar Thomas Wirth, in his biographical writing on Nugent, stresses more than once that Nugent was "fascinated by Italian men" (Wirth 2002, 37 and 191). This homoerotic sexual preference for "Latins" is inscribed throughout Nugent's life and work. The male object of affection in Nugent's most well-known short story, "Smoke, Lilies, and Jade" (1926), is Adrian (or "Beauty"), who is marked as ethnically "Spanish" by the narrative. But the illustration that Nugent created to accompany the story presents a light-skinned male bust whose black hair, smoky eyes, and crimson lips could just as easily be taken for markers of Italianness. In his novel, *Gentleman Jigger* (published posthumously in 2008), there are several extended, romantic—and occasionally violent—interludes between Stuartt, the light-skinned African-American semi-autobiographical protagonist, and a number of Italian-American men, including "Orini," a mafia Don from Chicago. Most remarkably, Nugent's personal archive is populated with numerous correspondences between himself and Italian-American men with whom he served in the United States military during World War II—a war in which he would have been

¹ Rampersad, who was a friend of Nugent's, offers a warm-hearted re-reading of Nugent's black queer politics in his forward to *Gentlemen Jigger* (2008). See Nugent, in references.

asked to explicitly identify himself as an enemy of Italy. As a central figure of the Harlem Renaissance's project of racial uplift, Nugent's homoerotic desire for "Latins" ran up against efforts of New Negro leaders to define black male American identity in opposition to whiteness, and to the growing threat that Italy posed, as a newly fascist nation, to the only remaining indigenous sovereign African state: Ethiopia. In a sense, Italy's turn to fascism in the 1930s made Nugent's fascination with "Latins" more problematic than ever. This paper, then, takes Nugent's homoerotically charged desire for and identification with Latinness as a fulcrum for thinking through a broader set of questions regarding the socially transformative potentials of homosexual and black identity, as they intersect with each other and with discourses of national and international belonging.

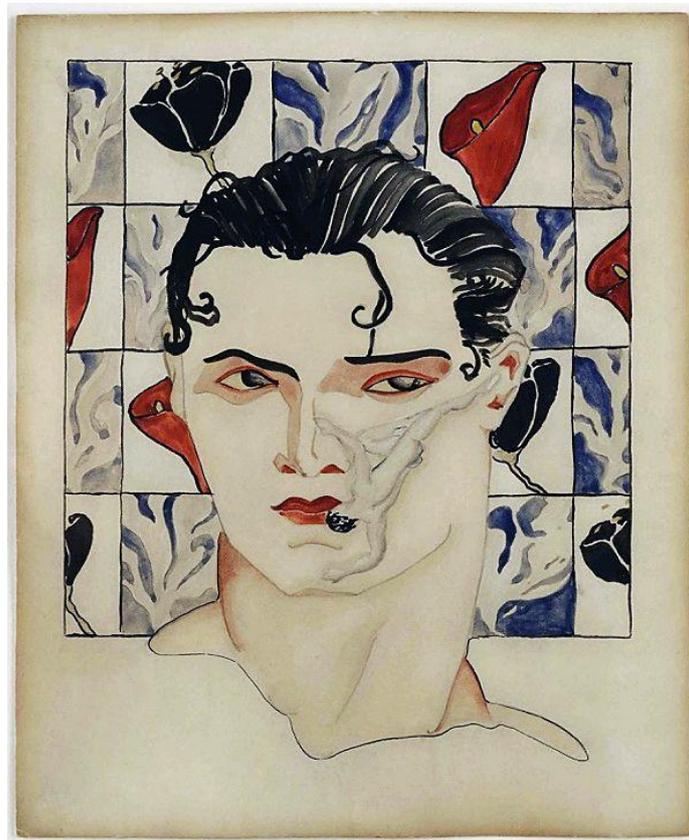


Figure 1 Pen and ink design for "Smoke, Lilies, and Jade" (1926) Richard Bruce Nugent.

My interest in the transformative powers of blackness and male homoeroticism in Nugent's work is influenced by the wealth of scholarship that has recently emerged to reevaluate Nugent's status as a central figure of the Harlem Renaissance and African American literature. In the last two decades, scholarly work by Michael L. Cobb (2000), Darryl Dickson-Carr (2015), Brian Glavey (2016), Elisa Glick (2009), Kristin Mahoney

(2017), Monica L. Miller (2009), and A. B. Krista Schwarz (2003) has helped overturn some of the longstanding misconceptions about Nugent's racial politics. In one way or another, all of these scholars argue that Nugent's embrace of aestheticism and dandyism enabled him to arrive at modalities of speech and embodiment that could, in Cobb's formulation, "accommodate the often-overlapping qualities of *both* race and queer sexuality" (Cobb 2000, 342; emphasis in the original). My work here is indebted to and follows this interpretation of Nugent's life and work.

At the same time, the questions I ask in this essay are influenced by the queer theoretical work organized around what is sometimes referred to as "the antisocial thesis in queer theory," or the series of debates surrounding definitions of queerness that occurred in the early 2000s. These debates tended to cast white gay male scholars like Lee Edelman (2004) and Leo Bersani (1995), as defenders of antirelational queerness (or "queer negativity") against, almost exclusively, José Esteban Muñoz, who offered the most vocal, if highly nuanced, critique of antirelationality in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009).² The crux of this disagreement is centered on whether queerness should be thought of as an inherently anti-social, negative rejection of all categories of personhood defined by a heteronormative social order, or as a future-oriented affective longing for a queer community that would be organized around non-coercive supports between queers differently positioned by various social hierarchies. For Bersani and Edelman, a psychoanalytic approach to queerness becomes the ground for a radical critique of the very categories of personhood that structure social legibility around the compulsoriness of heterosexual identification and consumer capitalism. In this view, the deconstruction of the ego through the pursuit of homoerotic pleasure, what Bersani sometimes calls "self-shattering," might lead to a wholesale rejection of social categorization as such, thus opening up radically free modes of queer being in the world. But for Muñoz, anti-social queerness and "self-shattering" is only part of the

² For a primer on this debate, see the post-mortem from the 2005 MLA panel that brought these disagreements to the fore; Robert L. Caserio, et al., "The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory" (2006), in references. While Tim Dean was paired with Muñoz on the side of queer relationality in the 2005 MLA panel, his psychoanalytic approach to thinking of queer identity prior to social categories of identity would not square with Muñoz's centering of race (see Dean's "Homosexuality and Otherness" and "Paring His Fingernails," in references). Likewise, the MLA panel aligns Jack Halberstam with Edelman against Muñoz and Dean, but Halberstam's work in *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011) emphasizes the importance of thinking of queer failure as an opportunity for collective struggle (see Halberstam, in references). In this way, Muñoz emerges, in my view, as the queer theorist most consistently identified with relationality.

story. While Muñoz sees a kernel of negative, relational refusal in queerness, he also understands that refusal to be implicitly tied to a desire for a queer, collective future. At his most insistent, Muñoz will argue that the antirelational position, in its attempt to do away with all conventions of social categorization, including race, is more popular with white gay male theorists because of their privileged position as white people. In a 2005 MLA panel, Muñoz provocatively called the queer theoretical investment in relational abstraction “the gay white man’s last stance” (Muñoz in Caserio, et al 2006). For Muñoz, queers of color, having been disproportionately disenfranchised, have the most to lose in antirelational queerness, and the most to gain by orienting queerness toward a collective, communal future.

I will to a certain extent side with Mari Ruti’s admirable attempt, in *The Ethics of Opting Out: Queer Theory’s Defiant Subjects*, to “soften the division between the antirelational and relational orientations of queer theory” (Ruti 2017, 92). Ruti claims that “the diversification of the rhetoric of negativity in recent queer theory has begun to erode the split between the antirelational and relational schools,” and she turns to a reevaluation of Jacques Lacan’s work on radical desire to further blur this division (Ruti 2017, 6). To this I would add that the division between these “schools,” from the outset, was not all that tenable to begin with. It is clear to me that both Edelman and Bersani imagine antirelationality as possessing a radical political (or anti-political) potential for restructuring social relations to achieve what Bersani calls “an anticomunal mode of connectedness” (Bersani 1995, 10). This view follows from—at least, from a Bersanian perspective—Michel Foucault’s contention that homosexuality represents “a historic occasion to reopen affective and relational virtualities, not so much through the intrinsic qualities of the homosexual but because the ‘slantwise’ position of the latter, as it were, the diagonal lines he can lay out in the social fabric allow these virtualities to come to light” (Foucault 1997, 138).³ In other words, a renewed sense of social alliance is precisely what will follow from homosexually-grounded antirelational strategies of resistance. At the end of the day, one might say, an anti-social relation is still a relation.

³ Mari Ruti is perhaps right to place Bersani and Edelman on opposing sides of a Foucault/Lacanian division in queer theory. But Edelman’s Lacanian queer theory of the death drive similarly aims at new understandings and forms of queer sociality. Hence, his frequent use of the first-person plural pronouns “us” and “we,” as well as his call for queers to “acknowledge our kinship” with antisocial queer figures of literary and cinematic history (Edelman 2004, 49). For Bersani’s detailed discussion of Foucault’s homosexual politics, see *Homos* (1995), in references.

I also wish to push back against the uncritical acceptance of the view, suggested by Muñoz, and seconded by Ruti, that antirelationality has little to offer queers of color (Ruti, 125-126). A perusal of literature written by black queer male writers will turn up numerous examples of anti-social affect. Richard Bruce Nugent's close friend Wallace Thurman wrote and published two novels, *The Blacker the Berry* (1929) and *Infants of the Spring* (1932), each of which charts rejections of certain forms of black sociality. James Baldwin's suicidal Rufus Scott from *Another Country* (1962), and the near erasure of blackness in *Giovanni's Room* (1956), could each be read as literary manifestations of Baldwin's antirelational sensibility. And the erotic erasures of black selfhood recounted in Gary Fisher's posthumous *Gary In Your Pocket* (1996) are surely examples of black and queer antirelational expression.⁴ I situate Richard Bruce Nugent within this field of queer male African-American literature, and I hope to show how Nugent's specific embrace of literary decadence allows him to straddle the line between relational and antirelational modalities of being in the world. Instead of thinking of relationality and antirelationality as mutually exclusive positions—with white queers on one side, and queers of color on the other—Nugent helps us think of these positions as having a supplemental, rather than oppositional, structure, depending on the desires and struggles of the queer(s) in question.

It is worth re-reading Muñoz's introduction to *Cruising Utopia*, since that is where he emphasizes his appreciation for Edelman's polemic. Muñoz represents his critique of Edelman's death-driven battle cry—"Fuck the social order" (Edelman 2004, 29)—not as an outright rejection of antirelationality, but, as a "powerful counterweight" to it (Muñoz 2009, 17). It is, in fact, Muñoz's explicit investment in the decadent literary and aesthetic tradition that leads to a strong current of antirelational argument in his work. The entire project of *Cruising Utopia* is, after all, introduced under the banner of Oscar Wilde's highly individualistic queer socialist utopianism. The opening epigraph of *Cruising Utopia*—"A map of the world that doesn't include utopia is not worth even glancing at."—is taken from Wilde's socialist tract, "The Soul of Man Under Socialism" (1891), and evokes the arch criticism of the dandy's aesthetic judgment. And Muñoz's

⁴ Robert Reid-Pharr's essay on Gary Fisher in *Black Gay Man*, in which Reid-Pharr casts doubt on the possibility of rescuing any positive value of blackness untainted by the reality of historical violence, can also be read as an affirmation of an antirelational black gay politics (See Reid-Pharr 2001, in references).

use of “cruising” and “taking ecstasy,” as metaphors for queer sociality, evokes both flâneurism and recreational drug use, both longstanding tropes of decadent solipsism.

Furthermore, in his chapter, “Just Like Heaven: Queer Utopian Art and the Aesthetic Dimension,” Muñoz turns to Herbert Marcuse to think of queerness as a “queer refusal” of the “here and now.” Focusing on what Marcuse calls, “the performance principal,” which Muñoz glosses as “the way in which a repressive social order is set in place by limiting the forms and quantity of pleasure that the human is allowed,” Muñoz argues that a refusal to give up queer desires is central to anti-capitalist queer utopianism (ibid., 134). According to Muñoz, a queer refusal of the pleasure-limiting performance principal would present “an interruption in the mandates to labor, toil, and sacrifice that the performance principle inscribes” (ibid., 137). In discussions of both white artists and artists of color, Muñoz argues that Narcissus—a major figure in the decadent imaginary—provides a model for a salutary agency of “refusal” with the power to restructure social relationality around queer forms of labor. Because of this stress on narcissistic refusal, Muñoz’s work in *Cruising Utopia* should be thought of alongside the thinking of Leo Bersani, Lee Edelman, and Tim Dean, all of whom, albeit from different perspectives, dedicate numerous pages in their work to the complex relationship between narcissism and queer desire.⁵ In short, reading the full breadth of Muñoz’s argument in *Cruising Utopia* is precisely what comes to undermine any strict, indivisible line between the antirelational and relational divide.

Recent theoretical work on queer temporalities has continued to think of queerness as a force that disrupts the affective organization of time around heterosexual procreation and the binary division between public and private labor, or, to borrow Elizabeth Freeman’s coinage, “chrononormativity” (Freeman 2010). In her book, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*, Freeman defines chrononormativity as “the interlocking temporal schemes necessary for genealogies of descent and for the mundane workings of domestic life” (xxii). In contrast, queer affects and relationships denaturalize heterosexuality, calling into question its privileged position in the organization of social temporality, which includes its conceptual monopoly on the

⁵ Muñoz also pushes back against David Harvey’s Marxist-oriented dismissal of racial and sexual minoritarian struggles as “narcissistic [leitmotifs] of bourgeois urban culture” (Harvey in Muñoz 2009, 30). In this way, Muñoz presents his defense of these struggles as a kind of decadent anti-anti-narcissism.

future. Thinking of the work of queer temporalities in relation to the debate between antirelation and relational queer theory, which implicitly and explicitly revolved around the question of time, will help shed light on Richard Bruce Nugent's complex relationships with homosexuality and blackness, both of which function to create diagonal, lasting social alliances that cut across some of modernity's most belligerent hierarchies, including white supremacy, patriarchy, heteronormativity, class, and nationalism. My aim in this essay is to grapple with the many interpretive demands of Nugent's life and work; in particular, his black and queer re-mapping of affective and historical networks via (to some) a stubborn allegiance to decadent aestheticism.

In what follows, I will provide a close reading of the short story, "Pope Pius the Only" (1937), Nugent's lyrically decadent yet critically overlooked response to domestic and international forms of anti-black violence. I will place this story alongside some of Nugent's other literary and visual work, tracing the contours of his racial and sexual politics across his corpus. Before that, however, I will offer a brief outline of the discursive and historical context into which "Pope Pius the Only" was born; a context in which the political utility of decadent aesthetics was consistently being called into question.

"SATISFIED TO WOO DECADENCE"

...there's the bizarre fact that queerness reads,
even to some black gay men themselves, as a kind of whiteness
Hilton Als, *White Girls*

Prior to, and during, the Harlem Renaissance, images of black men produced by white-owned popular media were by and large based on harmful racist stereotypes that presented polarized images of black male sexuality as either bestial and violent, or comic and therefore nonexistent. The literary and political climate of the Renaissance, in which Richard Bruce Nugent's "Pope Pius the Only" was written and published, was crisscrossed with debates about the role African-American literature should play in the almost non-negotiable project of overturning these distorted views. Within the very narrow parameters in which New Negro writers had an opportunity to construct images

of black masculinity that would be flush with American national ideals, “decadence” became a watchword for literature that was seen as compromising this effort. A general ambiance of anti-decadence, then, emerged as a guiding force in New Negro representations of black male sexuality.

I define “anti-decadence” as a phobic, culturally Western European nationalist discourse on the body that began in the late 18th century and continues up to the present. The rhetoric of anti-decadence tends to rely on exaggerated claims of cultural decay—often through racist, misogynistic, homophobic, and xenophobic tropes—to stir up populist sentiment for new projects of nation and empire building. In this sense, far from befalling a nation after it has been established, anti-decadence often *precedes* the founding of something new—i.e. a new order of political power. Racialized from the outset, anti-decadence arose as a cultural and political revolutionary force within Western European imperialist powers that had already institutionalized white supremacy through the trans-Atlantic slave trade and various forms of political disenfranchisement, racial segregation, and settler-colonialism. By the end of the nineteenth century, then, when French Symbolists were attacked with the epithet “decadent,” the phrase would have had the potential to evoke anxieties about the specific decay of white national identity (Mosse 1988). At the same time, however, decadence in the Western European cultural imagination became indelibly linked to the relatively new concept of male homosexuality, in part because of the highly publicized trials of Oscar Wilde (Mosse 1988, 44; Sedgwick 1990, 128; Somerville 2000, 2). Thus, by the turn of the twentieth century, the “decadent” epithet could have signified as a decay of the national body through the loss of either racial or heterosexual integrity—or both.

Yet the charge of decadence did not properly belong to any one ideological faction. In *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick draws attention to the incoherence of decadence attribution by pointing out that the Western discourse against decadence was protean, elastic, and could be adapted to a number of “modern” political projects, including “Marxist, Nazi, and liberal capitalist ideologies” (Sedgwick 1990, 128). Anti-decadence during the New Negro Renaissance, therefore, should be read as a particular manifestation of the elasticity of decadence attribution within the broad trend in Western nationalism. During the New Negro Renaissance, anti-

decadence was additionally risky because of the movement's name. The New Negro Renaissance explicitly invited a comparison with its Italian predecessor (*the Renaissance*), thus risking an idealization of Western and Latin culture that it would continually have to work against. New Negro investments in American cultural nationalism, therefore, appear to have imported the white European critique of decadence—with one major modification. While the critique of decadence retained its evocation of homophobic anxiety, its racial dimension had inverted, and could now be used by New Negro Renaissance critics as a coded reference for whiteness.

This new association between decadence and “a kind of whiteness” (*pace* Hilton Als) was closely linked to a homophobic maintenance of black masculinity and a strong call for responsibility toward the labor of racial uplift. Such calls fell hard on the artists and writers associated with “Niggeratti Manor,” the Harlem boarding house where Nugent lived with Wallace Thurman, Zora Neale Hurston, Dorothy West, and a number of younger Renaissance figures. In his 1932 satire of the New Negro milieu, *Infants of the Spring*, in which the phobic accusation of decadence runs literally from the first to the last page, Wallace Thurman lampoons some of the public criticisms that the younger generation received in the Black Press:

Instead of pursuing their work, [these younger artists] were spending their time drinking and carousing with a low class of whites from downtown. Racial integrity they had none. They were satisfied to woo decadence, satisfied to dedicate their life to a routine of drunkenness and degeneracy with cheap white people, rather than mingle with the respectable elements of their own race. This showed, of course in their work, which was, almost without exception, a glorification of the lowest strata of Negro life. (Thurman 1932, 121)

The emphasis on “work” in this passage highlights the way that anti-decadence within the New Negro movement linked racial truancy to a dangerously irresponsible attitude toward the project of racial uplift, which, to understate the severity of the task, required (and still requires) a daunting amount of cultural and political labor. It also required correcting a long and fraught history of black labor in the United States, one that encompassed both the brutality of forced and unpaid labor under chattel slavery and the distorted and prejudicial view among white Americans that Negroes were inherently lazy. The “New Negro” movement also tried to expand the kinds of work that black

Americans were allowed to do. Much of the paternalistic anti-decadent criticism that came out of the Renaissance was therefore limned with the normalizing overtones of “seriousness,” and sought to promote a politics of respectability that required black Americans to demonstrate their capacity to participate in the national labor force. Writers like Thurman and Nugent were thus writing under an intense pressure to devote their literary labor to uplifting the race through representations of respectable black masculinity that could be held up as powerful models of “New Negro” national identity.

Mussolini’s invasion of Ethiopia in 1935 reinvigorated the urgency of creating images of masculine, black nationalist integrity, while also stoking ethnic tensions between African-American and Italian-American communities (Shankman 1978, 31-43). African-American cultural identification with Ethiopia—or “Ethiopianism”—was not, in 1935, new, nor was it limited geographically to Harlem. According to historian John Cullen Greusser, “Ethiopianism” was widespread and had been circulating in American culture since the mass Christianization of slaves at the end of 18th century (Greusser 2015, 98). When Ethiopia successfully defended itself in 1896 in the first Italo-Abyssinian conflict—effectively putting an end to the European “scramble for Africa”—the victory was experienced by many black American communities as a deeply personal one (Greusser 2015, 10).⁶ Three decades later, the coronation of Haile Selassie as the Emperor of Ethiopia in 1930 “generated new interest in Ethiopia among African Americans” (ibid. 98). Consequently, when Italy again invaded Ethiopia in 1935, African-American communities were outraged; in part because the invasion was rightly construed as yet another European assault on black African sovereignty, and in part because many African-Americans regarded fascism as a mirror image of Jim Crow and other forms of de facto racial segregation at home (Greusser 2015, Putnam 2012, Reid-Pharr 2016, Scott 1978, Wilson 2010). In response to this transnational, double front of white supremacy, a sometimes militarized image of an impenetrable, hard-working and hard-bodied, black American male seems to have become increasingly appealing to African-American intellectual and cultural leaders.⁷

⁶ Aric Putnam points out that the flourishing of African-American churches with names like “Abyssinian” and “Ethiopian” began soon after the Ethiopian victory at Adowa in 1896. See Putnam, in references.

⁷ See, for instance, Melvin Tolson’s poem, “New Negro,” from *Dark Symphony* (1941). Writing at the tail-end of the Renaissance, Tolson draws a Whitmanesque, superhuman portrait of the New Negro as a heroic defender of

Dorothy West's literary journal *Challenge*, published between 1934-37, became another battleground for the conflict between decadence and blackness in African American literature. In the "Forward" to the very first issue, James Weldon Johnson expresses regret about the failure of some of the Renaissance's young writers (whom he does not name) to establish professional careers for themselves. Attributing this failure to a "lack" of "persistent and intelligent industry," Johnson issues an avuncular warning that "younger" Negro writers "must not be mere dilettantes; they have serious work to do" (*Challenge*, March 1934, 2). Johnson's stress on the link between hard work and racial uplift is reminiscent of anti-decadence anxieties about laziness and political apathy that I have already mentioned. If there is a sexually repressive "performance principle" at work here, it seems to be invested in channeling the creative energies of the Harlem Renaissance toward the liberation of black Americans from racist tyranny. This might lead us rightly to conclude that not all "performance principles" are equally bad, or repressive in the same ways. Nevertheless, writers like Nugent, Wallace Thurman, and Langston Hughes found the "propagandistic" approach to New Negro writing unnecessarily burdensome and threatening to artistic and sexual expression.⁸

This inaugural strain of anti-decadent sentiment in *Challenge* rises to something of a fever pitch in the transition between Spring and Fall 1937 issues of the journal, two years into the Italian occupation of Ethiopia. The Spring 1937 issue of *Challenge*, in which Richard Bruce Nugent's "Pope Pius the Only" was published, was—significantly—the last issue of that magazine before its rebranding as *New Challenge* under the editorial leadership of Richard Wright and the "Chicago group" of writers who infused a vehemently pro-Marxist and anti-fascist point of view into African-American literary criticism at the tail end of the Renaissance. *New Challenge's* emphasis on black social consciousness, the "realistic depiction of negro life" in literature, and its explicit self-positioning as an antifascist journal—"We do ask," the opening editorial announces, "that the bigot and potential fascist keep away from our door" (West, Fall 1937, 4)—was tethered to a heightened rhetoric of anti-decadence. Along with Wright's "Blueprint for

national integrity: "His giant hands fling murals upon high chambers, / His voice thunders the Brotherhood of Labor, / Hard-muscled, fascist-hating, Democracy-ensouled, / Strides in seven-league boots / Along the highway of Today / Toward the Promised Land of Tomorrow!" (Tolson 1999, 40).

⁸ See in particular Darryl Dickson-Carr's discussion of the tensions between artistic freedom and racial uplift in the Harlem Renaissance in *Spoofing the Modern: Satire in the Harlem Renaissance*, in references.

Negro Writing,” one of the most important pieces of black literary criticism written during the first part of the twentieth century, contributions by Eugene C. Holmes and Alain Locke sound the alarm of the decadent descent of the New Negro.

New Challenge seems to arrive, then, as an attempt to put a final, closing word on the debate over decadence in New Negro writing. It is a sad irony that the “new” challenges posed within its pages brought a swift and unfortunate end to the entire *Challenge* enterprise.⁹ This failure seems all the more unnecessary when one reflects that “Pope Pius the Only” was published in the issue prior to *New Challenge*. As we will see, Nugent’s turn to decadent aestheticism in order to address many of the pressing issues facing black Americans in the 1930s, and to map a global historical black literary and cultural network, anticipates *and* repudiates the theory that decadence was inherently opposed to New Negro racial consciousness. In diving deep into the narcissistic waters of literary decadence, Richard Bruce Nugent is able to draw diagonal lines across racial and sexual binaries while staging a political critique of fascism and white supremacy. Rather than re-tracing the figure of a hardened, impenetrable black masculinity, Nugent’s decadent revolution will be figured as a homoerotic desire for blackness and Latinness via a disseminating, “flaccid” penetration of the fascist (Italian) other.

“A MAD TALE”

All this whiteness burns me to a cinder.
Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*

“It was decidedly uncomfortable.” Thus begins “Pope Pius the Only,” Nugent’s little-known contribution to anti-lynching and antifascist African-American fiction.¹⁰ This “mad tale” (as Dorothy West had called it) is Nugent’s most politically explicit work of fiction, and likewise, one of his most compelling enactments of the political utility of decadence and aestheticism (West 1937, 43). While taking up just five small pages, “Pope Pius the Only” traverses a stunning panorama of geopolitical history while tracing the

⁹ Thomas Wirth and George Hutchinson both suggest that Dorothy West closed the magazine in part because of Richard Wright’s takeover.

¹⁰ Aside from Thomas Wirth’s brief comments on this story, the only other commentary I have found is from Craig Gable in his introduction to the anthology of short fiction from the Harlem Renaissance, *Ebony Rising* (2004).

violent exchange of trans-Mediterranean military conquests that have transpired between North Africa and the Italian peninsula, from ancient to modern times. By deploying stream of consciousness, collage, free-indirect discourse, poetic wordplay, mixing vernacular and formal languages, and assuming an emotionally detached high ironic tone, Nugent stages a dense articulation of queer and black cultural politics that nevertheless remains nebulously aloof from the prevailing rhetorical protocols and visual strategies that organized African-American responses to the twin crises facing black communities in 1935: the ongoing lynching crisis, and the crisis that occurred when fascist Italy invaded the sovereign kingdom of Ethiopia.

The narrative of “Pope Pius the Only” follows the wanderings of a character named “Algy;” although, “a character,” here, may not be particularly apt. Via an incessant movement of depersonalization, Algy shape-shifts indifferently from human to hybrid, from black to white, from past to present—and back again—sometimes *becoming* the mythological and historical figures and places he encounters. The radical instability of Algy’s identity appears to be the result of him getting high and hallucinating from smoking marijuana, and—somewhat shockingly—from inhaling smoke that is emanating from his own body because he is being burned alive by a white lynch mob. The superimposition between the decadent descent into narcosis (from smoking “marijuana,” “reefers,” or “griefers”) and the lyrical portrayal of lynching is certainly one of the story’s most innovative and provocative aspects. The narrative tension is drawn between these two irreducible events, which, to borrow a phrase from the literary critic Jacqueline Goldsby, form a joint and disjointed “locus of narrative sensation and thematic unity within the text” (2006, 167). As Algy “strolls,” “trucks,” “stomps,” sits, swims, dances, stands, sleeps, “and burns,” he drifts narcotically through space and time: from the Southern United States and Russia in the 19th century, to ancient Rome and north Africa, to Revolutionary Haiti and Boston, to Harlem and Addis Ababa of the 1930s.

One is confronted by the narrator’s high ironic tone, which evokes the blithe manner of an English dandy. That the phrase “It was decidedly uncomfortable.” refers simultaneously to the ecstatic experiences of getting high on marijuana *and* of being burned alive is probably Nugent’s most scandalous contribution to Renaissance-era race-conscious fiction. The arch understatement sounds less like an account of extreme

racial violence than it does one middle-class English dandy informing another about a weekend train ride to the suburbs. Nugent's "Algy"—likely a reference to Oscar Wilde's "Algy," or Algernon Moncrief from the play *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895)—is at times blasé, curious, indifferent, campy, and makes value judgments about his surroundings; not through conventionally moral and political critique, but through the lens of aesthetic taste. He is also a "poof"—a puff of smoke, but also a *poof* or *poofster*, an idiomatically English epithet for a homosexual.¹¹ Yet Algy will also be marked as ethnically black via Nugent's use of phenotypic descriptors, black vernacular speech, his deployment of Harlem as an important site of the story's *mise-en-scène*, and for the fact that he is a victim of a "lynching." His brief turn as Hannibal, the ancient North African military leader who famously invaded the Italian peninsula from the north (with elephants), links Algy's blackness to the continent of Africa and the millennia-old history of militarized, trans-Mediterranean conflict. Thus, from the outset of Algy's psychedelic journey, ancient Rome, Africa, Englishness, blackness, and homosexuality each manifest in the highly unstable image of the decadent *poof*—the *cinder*—or the *flaming faggot*.¹² It is worth returning to the beginning of the story:

It was decidedly uncomfortable. But then Rome had burned, so who was he? Algy sniffed his smoke and burned. The fire around his feet was beginning. Slowly and hotly they burned and then—poof—the acrid trail singed clean his legs, and—poof—his crotch—poof-poof—his eyebrows. (Nugent 2002, 244)

As Andrew Hewitt notes in *Political Inversions: Homosexuality, Fascism, and the Modernist Imaginary*, "the problem of self-knowledge" lies at the root of the narcissistic problematic opened up by the decadent imaginary (Hewitt 1996, 240). By asking, *Who is Algy?*, Nugent foregrounds this problematic, syncretizing black, homosexual and nationalist identifications in the incoherent spectacle of Algy's flamboyant body. If the title of "Pope Pius the Only" is at all meant to refer to Algy, then Nugent early on conflates Roman, English and African ethnic identifications, evoking the shared histories of ancient Rome and modern England as historically imperialist economic and political formations that built their empires to a significant degree on trafficking in

¹¹ Nugent traveled to England in 1929, and would likely have encountered the homosexual epithet "poof" while there (Wirth 2008, 15-17).

¹² For more on the origins of "fag" and "faggot" in New York's queer culture of the 1920s and 30s see Chauncey, in references.

African slaves. And as a stand-in for burning Rome, Algy's immolation flaccidly embodies the racial and sexual decay that the hard-bodied "New Negro" was supposed to be able to fight back against. At the same time, though, this image draws a direct parallel between the Roman state in its period of decline and the threat that blackness poses to an American national body founded on the principle of white supremacy. On these counts, Nugent offers a political critique of white supremacy that black decadent writers supposedly were neither able nor concerned to produce.

Algy's vacillation between black and white cultural and historical markers seems to be motivated by the ontological paradox at the heart of the decadent aesthetic.¹³ In fact, the forward motion of the narrative is plagued at every step by an almost nonstop stream of descriptive contradictions. Algy is fast and slow, awake and asleep, alive and dead. The opening fire burns so hot that it is cold, and Algy transforms into a piece of "dry ice," which continues to burn and smoke even under the currents of cooling waters. "Algy floated along," the narrative continues, "and turned over on his back, his little gills fanning. And he knew he was no longer a cinder with black face and hands, because the noise of the waters had washed him clean, washed him in the blood of the lamb" (ibid.). In what appears to be an intertext with Charles Kingsley's casually racist Victorian-era children's story *Water Babies* (1863), which depicts the adventures of a young English chimney sweep, blackened from soot, whose whiteness is restored when he falls into a magical water world—Algy is both blackening (because of the fire) and whitening (because of the *white noise* of Christian redemption). The undecidability implicit in Nugent's deployment of the white/black binary is vertiginous, and sets tremors across a range of categorical distinctions. For instance, the transition from fire to water allows us to hear Algy's name as *algae*—a form of plant life that grows in subaquatic colonies. Alg(ae)y, who we may remember is smoking "reefers" with "gills fanning," is also described as a "water baby," and his waterboundness will bring him into contact with a merman, and later, the "carcass of a sea anemone," poetically evoking what modernist poet Marianne Moore (a contemporary of Nugent) has called "mythology's wish to be interchangeably man and fish" (Moore 1967, 23).¹⁴ As algae, Algy's subaquatic ontology

¹³ In his important study on Catholicism and decadence, Ellis Hanson defines decadence as an "aesthetic of paradox" (Hanson 1997, 7).

¹⁴ For Moore's poetry, see "The Plumet Basilisk" in Moore, Marianne. *Complete Poems*. New York: Penguin Books, 1994.

evokes the specter of a queer and liberatory counter-colonization that will bear out in the story's final moments.

Nugent's superimposition of black, queer, English, American, African, and Roman identities—as well as human and non-human markers of difference—is representative of the broader challenge to categorization presented by Nugent's promiscuous approach to genre. When it was first published in *Challenge*, Dorothy West placed the story under the category “Special Articles,” sandwiched between Marion Minus's essay “Present Trends in Negro Literature” and an anthropological study of “The Spider in Jamaica Folklore” by Louis G. Sutherford (West 1937, Spring, 1). While I have treated “Pope Pius the Only” as a short story, it nevertheless partakes of a wide range of genres and literary species. Algy floats through the nursery rhyme and fable, the 19th century revenge plot, the American lynching narrative, the Rousseauian reverie, the Joycean mythical method, the symbolist poem, the Steinian tender button, and the American minstrel show, without the slightest urgency to draw borders between them.

The literary gregariousness of “Pope Pius the Only” is mirrored by the social world that the story depicts. As Algy continues to drift, like a time traveling social butterfly, he encounters a trans-historical pageant of literary and cultural personalities, such as Phillis Wheatley, Toussaint Louverture, Crispus Attucks, Ira Aldridge, and John Brown; all icons of black American cultural and political history. Algy's experiences of self-erasure (or to use one of Leo Bersani's antirelational concepts: “self-shattering”) paradoxically open up radical potentials for black and queer relational encounters that normative temporal and spatial configurations of narration would foreclose. By lifting the barriers between normatively organized dimensions, Nugent constructs what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick might have called a *nonce taxonomy* of black and homosexual global history. For Sedgwick, nonce taxonomy names the value of gossip in helping queer (or maybe just disenfranchised) people to understand what's going on, who we are, and who other people are in relation to ourselves.¹⁵ Cruising global history is a way for Algy to navigate a path toward self-becoming via a decadent catalogue of the “who's who” of

¹⁵ For more on queer practices of “nonce taxonomy,” see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. 1990. *Epistemology of the Closet*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Western black and gay male culture. This is, I think, also an example of the kind of “politicized cruising” that José Esteban Muñoz envisions in *Cruising Utopia* (Muñoz 2009, 18). Algy’s perambulatory encounters have the wistful, almost catty air of high-society (or bathhouse) gossip—“He bowed pleasantly to Phillis Wheatley as he passed, for she had passed on” (Nugent 2008, 246). The affective, utopian map drawn by Algy’s social contacts highlights the close link between racial and sexual epistemology and self-understanding in the American national context.

Yet for all of Algy’s social fluidity, a strong current of affective solipsism runs through the narrative. It feels important, here, to remark that “Pope Pius the Only” is not the only time Nugent limned the representation of anti-black violence with the solipsistic aesthetics of decadence. Early in his career, Nugent created a powerful black and white illustration on the subject of lynching in a style clearly influenced by Aubrey Beardsley’s illustrations for Oscar Wilde’s *Salome*. The image depicts a lone black figure hanging in a sinuous S-shape from a tree branch dripping with Spanish moss. The head of the figure is outlined in knots, suggesting ethnically sub-Saharan black hair, while the moss indicates a Southern locale. The figure is suspended above what may be a stream of water fringed by tufts of grass. Behind the figure are outlines of hills between which a sun or moon is either rising or setting. The temporal undecidability evokes a similar sense of transcendent timelessness as the one depicted in “Pope Pius the Only.” The drooping head of the figure is echoed by the silhouettes of two poppies that sprout up languidly along the far side of the stream, suggesting the Greco-Roman scene of Ovid’s “Echo and Narcissus.”



Figure 2 Nugent's pen and ink drawing accompanying William V. Kelly's "Black Gum,"

This image was published alongside William V. Kelly's short story "Black Gum" in the January 1928 issue of *Opportunity*. While there are differences between Kelly's story and Nugent's illustration (this may indicate that Nugent was independently inspired to create the image), Nugent's deployment of decadent aesthetic strategies turns out to be highly resonant with Kelly's story. The intense charge of isolation that motivates the decadent imaginary finds a home in the literary trope of the lynching victim as a singular, exquisite sufferer, left dead (or left to die) in remote locations. In this way, Nugent is able to adhere a decadent ethics of individualism and isolated suffering to the pathos of the tragic lynching victim. Nugent's illustration also shows us the common ground between aestheticism's gothic, post-Poe interest in finding the grotesque beautiful, and the strained task that faced creative writers who wanted to draw attention to the lynching crisis by representing it in literature.

Returning to "Pope Pius the Only," Algy's racialized and homoerotic isolation is marked by a retrospective focus on Rome, and the Roman Catholic Church, consistent with the decadent tradition's almost constitutive preoccupation with Roman Catholicism (Hanson 1997, *passim*).¹⁶ Algy is given the title of "Pope," the supreme and

¹⁶ It is worth remembering that Joris-Karl Huysmans's foundational decadent text, *À rebours*, was originally titled *Seul*, or, *Alone*. See Nicholas White's Introduction to Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Against Nature*. Trans. Margaret Mauldon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

singular sovereign of the church. He is also named “Pius,” which is the name assumed by both of the Popes who reigned during Italy’s fascist period.¹⁷ Yet he neither precedes nor follows any of the other Pope Piuses. Algy is “the Only” Pope Pius. The most pious Pius. In the manuscript of the story, the word “Only” is underlined, presumably by Nugent (Nugent circa 1935, manuscript). The appearance of the papal epithet “the Only,” and Nugent’s underscoring of it, push the decadent predilection for solitariness into overdrive as Algy’s antirelational, omniscient *onlyness* is dangerously dispersed across his fractured experience of embodied identity. Going further, when Algy is literally cut up into pieces by French colonial authorities—“they cut him to pieces, and that was confusing—cut him into one Herndon and nine Scottsboro pieces of eight” (Nugent 2002, 247)—Nugent draws together the reliquary tradition of the Catholic Church (the practice of saving and preserving body parts of Saints and martyrs) and one of the worst horrors of America’s lynching crisis: the mutilation and dismemberment of the victim from which white Americans would frequently take home souvenirs. In Nugent’s decadent reliquary, Algy embodies both saintly and abject corporeal disintegration while indexing the persistence of American racial injustice toward black Americans.¹⁸

We might also think of Algy’s fragmented experience of being and time in terms of Elizabeth Freeman’s notions of “temporal drag” and “damaged time.” For Freeman, “temporal drag” names queer affect’s heightened orientation toward the past, and toward “outmoded” embodiments that help queers move differently through the world. Temporal drag can also be thought of as a “politics of deconstruction” in which “an antirepresentational privileging of delay, detour, and deferral” enables queers “to arrive at a different modality for living historically” (Freeman 2010, xvi). Turning to psychoanalytic models of subject-formation, Freeman regards temporal drag as the result of “damaged time,” whereby past traumas restructure the subject’s experience of present time. “[Touches] that are both painful and pleasurable,” Freeman argues, “break open the past, slicing it into asynchronous, discontinuous pieces of time” (ibid., xii).

¹⁷ Pius XI and Pius XII were the last two Piuses, reigning successively, between 1922 and 1958, as the first two sovereigns of the newly founded Vatican City.

¹⁸ The “Scottsboro Boys” were a group of nine black teenagers who were falsely accused of raping two white women in Alabama in 1931. Eight of the nine young men were sentenced to death by an all-white all-male jury, hence Nugent’s phrase “nine Scottsboro pieces of eight.”

While Freeman, importantly, regards the queer experience of damaged time as “the signature” of the decadent literary culture of the 1890s, Freeman’s notion could also be useful for thinking of the diasporic African-American experience in America (ibid., 7). Nugent’s own commitment to decadent affect could then be understood as a strategy for articulating the intersection of black and homosexual identity through an intensified relationship with a past (or pasts) that have consistently been erased for black and queer Americans.

In “Pope Pius the Only,” experiences of pleasure (getting high) and pain (being burned alive) have literally broken the past into pieces. Reassembled in Algy’s languid imaginings, the painful and pleasurable affective eruptions open up new ways of “living historically.” Algy lolls haphazardly through space and time, drowsily, yet attentively, his head marking the hours away without ever gathering them into a normative chronological progression:

But it had been of greatest importance that he drop his head, first forward, then back, and let it loll . . . Then space would converge, and thoughts and time; dimensions would become distorted and correct; he would become aware and super aware and aware of awareness and on and on in a chain of dovetailings and separate importances. Everything would have its correct perspectives—time, thought, deed and the physical surrounding him and surrounding that and—first first dimension, second dimension, third, fourth and fifth dimension—no need to stop there—the incredible dimension of the pin point, the worm, the man—at one and the same time blending yet separate. Not only did he have to imagine the fourth side of things now, he could see it. See all sides—top, bottom, four sides, outside *and* inside. (Nugent 2002, 245)

For Algy, the experience of damaged time breaks through the frontiers of both sexual and racial chrononormativity, producing a “omnipotent” sovereignty that reorders space and time so that they become both “distorted and correct,” thus enabling a radical experience of black and homosexual belonging.

Yet despite the narrative’s radicalization of space and time, the year 1935 serves as a sort of temporal anchor; a paradoxical drag that the present-day enacts on Algy’s trans-historical *flâneurism*. “Nineteen thirty-five, summer and fall” (ibid.). This sentence fragment appears mid-way through the narrative, marking the year fascist Italy drew on its own mythological relationship with ancient Rome to violate international treaties and invade Ethiopia as retribution for its defeat in 1896 (Putnam 2012, 100). But 1935 also gives context to a number of significant events of domestic national

importance that emerge and recede in the narrative, including: the American lynching crisis; the retrials of the Scottsboro Boys; Major New Deal programs, including the Federal Writer's Project (WPA) and the National Recovery Act (NRA); the overturned conviction of black activist and communist organizer Angelo Herndon; the assassination of Huey P. Long, Governor of Louisiana and a rare white Southern progressive leader; and a Harlem race riot that targeted mostly white-owned businesses. That all of these events are accounted for in Nugent's dreamlike narrative is surely a rebuke to criticisms that decadence and aestheticism could not meet the demands of addressing contemporary problems. Contra Wright, Nugent's *unrealistic* depiction of Negro life in "Pope Pius the Only" evinces a remarkable capacity for representing black social consciousness.

The anchor of the present day also pulls the narrative eastward toward Ethiopia, where the crisis of the Italian occupation is unfolding. In the penultimate moments of the narrative, Nugent imagines the liberation of Ethiopia as a stealthy penetration of Mussolini's military enabled by Algy's magical ability to pass for Italian. While dancing "the gri-gri" and "Charleston" down Harlem's 7th Avenue, Algy pauses to take a drag on the "reefer," which clears his mind of thoughts, and again allows for a *temporal drag* to open up the dimensions of space-time:

Algy drew deep on the 'reefer' and knew how great it was that he did not think. That no thought of Haile Selassie frowned on him. He couldn't think and that was well, for who wants time and space and physical fact—deed and thought contort distraught. Viva la Mussolini and cock-a-doodle-doo—until time to sleep. (Nugent 2002, 247)

The evocation of the Emperor of Ethiopia and the Italian fascist dictator performs a geographic shift to the Mediterranean and the Horn of Africa. The two military leaders are drawn into parallel here: Mussolini, with his own fantasy of Rome's mythological past, and Haile Selassie (or Ras Tafari)—whose reign as the emperor of Ethiopia was also predicated on myth or belief—as a descendent of King Solomon and the living incarnation of Christ on earth. Algy, however, slips between these figures, paying them little mind, oversleeping the alarm of the allegorical cock's crow sounded by Mussolini's invasion. Instead, Algy wends his way toward what I read as an orgiastic, homoerotic counter-occupation of the invading Italian forces via the strategy of racial passing:

[Algy] slightly swam down the Nile, the Blue Nile, and the Nile, the White Nile, and joined the Italian army. But only to work black magic, for he conjured—
 “Abrac-Adowa” and lo it fell, crashing mightily from 1896, and Algy entered Addis Ababa with forty thieves. They were looking for peace—pieces of eight—which were Africa and others through Africa. So Algy thought, “how simple,” and Adigrat fell regained. (ibid., 247-48)

There is much to parse in this brief passage, which is densely packed with black cultural signifiers, pan-Africanist perspective, global historical events, trans-cultural literary references (such as the middle-eastern epic *One Hundred and One Nights*), and homoeroticism. I will tease out only a few important threads of significance. All of the “A”s that jut out into the text strike me as a graphic replication of the capital A in Algy’s name: Abrac-Adowa, Algy, Addis Ababa, Africa, Adigrat. The A’s seem to rise like African pyramids among the horizontal lines of text, gathering with them all of the “A”s that Algy has encountered and become: Angelo Herndon, Ira Aldridge, Crispus Attucks, and a trio of “Alexanders”—Alexander the Great, Alexander Pushkin, and Alexandre Dumas. The “A”s proliferate like the forty thieves who are, perhaps, forty more Algies—a decolonizing penal colony of Algies that anticipates Jean Genet’s association of homosexuality and theft.¹⁹ “A” is also a letter that begins the names of several other of Nugent’s literary characters, like Alex and Adrian from “Smoke, Lilies, and Jade,” Angel from “Lunatique,” and Aeon Brennan, a character, modeled on Nugent’s friend and fellow writer Jean Toomer, who appears in both *Gentleman Jigger* and Nugent’s unpublished novel *Half-High*.²⁰ This might all be read as part of a system of naming organized around the decadent ethos of “Art for Art’s Sake;” or, in the words of *Gentleman Jigger*’s protagonist Stuartt, whose name is literally occupied by the word “art”—“Art with a capital ‘A’” (Nugent 2008, 176).

“Conjuring” certainly evokes a major motif of magic in African-American life and literature.²¹ The dash and the line break provoke a moment of suspense, a rupture in

¹⁹ Thanks to Wayne Koestenbaum for hearing that the Ethiopian princess “Aida,” from Italian composer Giuseppe Verdi’s 1871 opera, might be waiting in the wings of Nugent’s story. Perhaps the nearby colonized North African nation “Algiers” can also be heard in Algy’s name. For more on Genet, homosexuality and the ethics of thievery, see Bersani’s *Homos*, in references.

²⁰ “Lunatique” is an excerpt from another of Nugent’s unpublished novels. See (Nugent 2002, 248 and 261).

²¹ See, for instance, Charles W. Chestnut’s *The Conjure Woman* (1899) and Rudolph Fisher’s *The Conjure Man Dies* (1932). The popularity of the online hashtag #blackgirlmagic suggests the continuing relevance of an African-

space and time that anticipates the arrival of an event. This event turns out to be the liberatory, performative force of a black magical conjuring—“Abrac-Adawa.” This magical conjunction recalls the northern Ethiopian city of Adowa, the geographical site of Ethiopia’s 1896 victory over invading Italian forces. Joined with the nonsensical command “Abracadabra,” “Abrac-Adawa” summons a past victory as a precedent and motivating force for a new one. This magical command brings down the Italian occupation and allows Algy, who is racially passing as a member of the Italian army, to pass with forty thieves, Ali Baba-like, into the Ethiopian capital of Addis Ababa. The new “fall” of the Ethiopian capital is, paradoxically, a regaining of independence and sovereignty. Algy’s “black magic,” therefore, represents a disseminating force of conjugal penetration that turns the fascist occupation of Ethiopia against itself in an autoimmune, deescalating insurrection.²²

“Joining” resonates, here, not only as central component of the erotics of Algy’s covert operation, but also as an imperative of real-life strategies of African-American resistance to European fascism. In addition to the numerous Harlem-based aid organizations that mobilized financial and political support for Ethiopia, several African-Americans attempted to join the Ethiopian army in order to fight with Ethiopia in opposition to Italy. While their efforts were mostly thwarted by the United States government, African-Americans were eventually able to join the fight against fascism during the Spanish Civil War.²³ Nugent, who “joined” the U.S. army in its fight against the “Axis” powers, proposes here another strategy of alliance; a non-oppositional modality of opposition, or, in Lee Edelman’s antirelational terminology, “an impossible project of queer oppositionality that would oppose itself to the structural determinants of politics as such” (Edelman 2004, 4). One could also think of Nugent’s representation of strategic passing in terms of what José Esteban Muñoz calls “disidentification” (Muñoz 1999). Writing about the relationship between passing and “drag,” Muñoz

American cultural identification with magic, which might also include the recent publication of the poet Morgan Parker’s book of poetry *Magical Negro* (2019).

²² My use of “autoimmunity” here is drawn from Jacques Derrida’s work on the self-deconstructing structure of the Western concept of sovereignty. For more on autoimmunity, see Derrida, in references.

²³ Ivy Wilson notes that the United States government denied requests by African-American men to fight in the Ethiopian army. Whereas, during the Spanish Civil War, numerous African-Americans were permitted to fight on the side of the Spanish republicans (Wilson 2010, 276). For more on African-American involvement in anti-fascist struggles in Europe, see John Cullen Gruesser (2016), Robert Reid-Pharr (2017), William R. Scott (1978), and Ivy Wilson (2010), in references.

argues that racial passing “is often not about a bold-faced opposition to a dominant paradigm or a wholesale selling out to that form. Like disidentification itself, passing can be a third modality where a dominant structure is co-opted, work on and against. The subject who passes can be simultaneously identifying with and rejecting a dominant form” (ibid., 108).²⁴ Nugent does not represent the battle for Ethiopian independence as a full-frontal assault by a clearly defined oppositional force. Rather, Nugent invests in the fantasy of a homoerotic conjugal alliance, between both the liberator and the oppressor, that is enabled by the self-effacing disidentificatory strategy of racial passing. Not unlike Homer Plessy, who in 1892 conspired to bring down the Jim Crow-era “One Drop” rule by drawing attention to the incoherence of a system of racial order founded upon the legibility of one’s skin, Nugent harnesses racial passing in order to deconstruct white supremacy from within.

While the only times passing is directly mentioned in “Pope Pius the Only” occur when Algy “passed” Phillis Wheatley, it seems fair to say that Algy has been passing this entire time; passing for white, black, human, fish, hero, hetero, truant—“so who was he?” In the passage where Algy racially passes to join the Italian army, the motif of passing subliminally evokes *passing* and *passage* as a major motif of anti-fascist history. *¡No pasarán!* (“They shall not pass!”) became a popular anti-fascist slogan during the Spanish Civil War, which took place while Nugent was working on “Pope Pius the Only.” Algy’s conjuring initiates a homoerotic force of dissemination that folds *¡No pasarán!* back in on itself. The fascists shall not pass because the anti-fascists are racially passing and dismantling the Italian occupation in an act of penetrative sabotage. In short, the “black magic” that Algy conjures initiates a surreptitious chain of fucking that queers the Italian occupation by fucking white supremacy (over). This is a flagrant departure from the tenor of hyper-masculinity that, as Ivy Wilson points out, attended many of the African-American literary responses to the Ethiopian crisis (Wilson 2010, 266). The fantasy of the disseminating force of a white-passing homoerotic counter-occupation narrates a queer desire for the restoration of black sovereignty, and for the demilitarization of affective bonds between the north of Africa and the Italian peninsula. Algy and his “forty thieves” were, after all, “looking for peace” across the

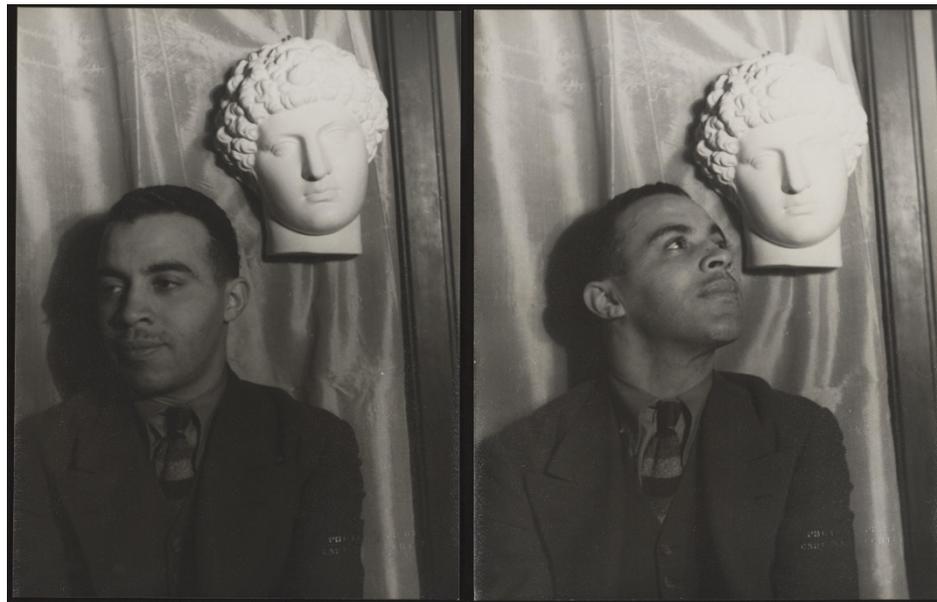
²⁴ Monica Miller also uses José Esteban Muñoz’s concept of disidentification to think about the complex self-fashioning of the “black dandy.” See Miller, in references.

damaged time of global racial and ethnic conflict. In looking for “Africa and others through Africa,” Algy inverts and displaces the history of the European colonization of Africa so that Africa and African America (the Scottsboro Boys—“pieces of eight”) could be reassembled and drawn back into a black and queer social world.

In light of Nugent’s profession of a lifelong sexual taste for “Latins,” the representation of conjugal, pacifistic passing in “Pope Pius the Only” should be read as an inscription of Nugent’s racially inflected, disidentificatory homosexuality. Nugent was known to have occasionally passed, and when he did, he sometimes adopted a Latin-American persona—Ricardo Nugenti de Dosceta (Wirth 2002, 11). The conjugation of his own name into a Latinate cognate embodies the queer work around race, identity, desire, and wordplay that I have been tracking throughout this essay. In interviews, Nugent describes his experiences of racial passing as fun, playful forays across a color line he saw as presenting an unnecessary barrier between himself and the things that he valued and desired. The constitutive incoherence of the color line is reworked here as a reciprocal incoherence of racial passing that the color line paradoxically enables. *Gentleman Jigger’s* Stuartt, who spends most of the latter portion of the novel passing for white, articulates the queer agency of incoherence that Nugent proposes in “Pope Pius the Only.” “You know,” Stuartt confesses at a dinner party, “I can never be coherent about things that are really important to me” (Nugent 2008, 110). Nugent’s own refusal to be racially coherent manifests, in “Pope Pius the Only,” as a form of black magical power that does not renounce the desire for Latinness or literary decadence, both of which were important objects of Nugent’s erotic and aesthetic life.

On February 16, 1936, around the time Nugent would have been working on “Pope Pius the Only,” he sat for a series of portraits with his friend, and fellow aesthete, Carl Van Vechten. Two of the portraits show Nugent sitting in front of a curtain, underneath a white bust of Antinous (another A), the male favorite of the Roman emperor Hadrian. There is a highly formal quality to these portraits. By several accounts, Nugent rarely wore a tie, and often appeared in public looking like an irreverent bohemian. But here, he is smartly dressed in a jacket, vest, collared shirt, and tie, and his hair is cropped short. In one of the photographs, Nugent is looking pensively away from the bust. In the other, Nugent has turned his face upward toward it. Nugent’s head, in both photos, seems to fill the negative space carved out by Antinous’s hair, cheek,

and neck, casting a black shadow against the curtain. These photos seem to capture all of the ambiguities and paradoxes of Nugent's relationship with his own racial and sexual identities, and his lifelong devotion toward Latin men, Latin culture, and the decadent tradition. Simultaneously antirelational and relational, Nugent's queer refusal to give up his bad romance with Rome explains, for me, why the desire for the restoration of Ethiopia's national sovereignty coincides with, and is inextricable from, a desire to "join" the army of "Latins."



Figures 3 and 4 Portraits of Richard Bruce Nugent by Carl Van Vechten, February 16, 1936.

The closing moments of "Pope Pius the Only" drive home the irreducible tension between the antirelational and relational forces that structure the narrative. After having restored Ethiopia to its sovereignty by orgiastically disarming the Italian military with "black magic," Algy's work is done, and we are drawn precipitously back to the scene of lynching—and, or—getting high:

And it burned—the chains on his wrists were white hot now, and Algy thought, 'How needlessly painful. How annoying,' and turned over to sleep through the lynching. But his lips were parched. Not that he liked it, but there he was—he'd no idea that being the fly in the ointment could be so sticky. (Nugent 2002, 248)

The final moment is wry and haunting, and is written against nearly every rhetorical convention of anti-lynching narratives of the late nineteenth and early twentieth

centuries.²⁵ Algy seems to turn a drowsy, almost bored shoulder to the tiresomeness of racial violence, succumbing to the pleasures of sleep and withdrawal after having come to Ethiopia's rescue, only to return home to the stinging reminder of the realities of white supremacy in America. In Nugent's decadent imaginary, queerness and blackness do not have to choose between relational or antirelational modes, any more than they have to choose between solipsistic decadence and loyalty to collective struggles.

I have been reading Nugent's work, and "Pope Pius the Only," in terms of queer theoretical work on the socially transformative power of antirelational and relational homoerotic alliances. In this view, a structurally antirelational homosexuality allowed Nugent to develop lasting, life-long attachments to "Latin" men; homoerotic attachments that cut slantwise through the cultural hierarchies and prejudices of American white supremacy. Nugent's antirelational sensibility also cut through the counter discourse of the New Negro that placed blackness on one side, and homosexuality, whiteness, decadence, and "Latins" on the other. If there is a utopian impulse in Nugent's vision, it is perhaps that our desire to fuck each other might enable an anti-violent politics of queer futurity that would support the particularity of the other's life, because without them, the future of coming together would be lost. In "Pope Pius the Only," and elsewhere in Richard Bruce Nugent's work, we see Nugent depersonalize racial, ethnic, and erotic relations between Italian, African and American national and cultural identities, so that they might be experienced as durable and loving; relations that cut slantwise through the interdiction that black and queer life has no claim to the future, and no right to a future together.

²⁵ While race apathy may have been represented in lynching narratives, it would have been used to shock in order to incite racial solidarity and political mobilization, as in James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), also an important intertext for this story. For more on literary conventions of anti-lynching narratives, see Jacqueline Denise Goldsby and Karlos K. Hill, in references.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Als, Hilton. 2013. *White Girls*. San Francisco: McSweeney's.

Bersani, Leo. 1996. *Homos*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Caserio, Robert L., et al. "The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory." *PMLA* 121, no. 3 (May, 2006):819-828.

Chauncey, George. 1994. *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World 1890-1940*. New York: Basic Books.

Cobb, Michael L. "Insolent Racing, Rough Narrative: The Harlem Renaissance's Impolite Queers." *Callaloo* 23, no. 1, "Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender: Literature and Culture" (Winter, 2000):328-351.

Dean, Tim. 1998. "Paring His Fingernails: Homosexuality and Joyce's Impersonalist Aesthetic." In *Quare Joyce*, edited by Joseph Valente. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Dean, Tim. 1991. "Homosexuality and the Problem of Otherness." In *Homosexuality & Psychoanalysis*, edited by Tim Dean and Christopher Lane, 120-143. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Derrida, Jacques. 2005. *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Dickson-Carr, Darryl. 2015. *Spoofing the Modern: Satire in the Harlem Renaissance*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press.

Edelman, Lee. 2004. *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Fanon, Frantz. 2008. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Translated by Richard Philcox. New York: Grove Press.

Featherstone, David. "Black Internationalism, Subaltern Cosmopolitanism, and the Spatial Politics of Antifascism." *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 103, no. 6 (2013):1406-1420.

Freeman, Elizabeth. 2010. *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Foucault, Michel. 1997. "Friendship As a Way of Life." In *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, edited by Paul Rabinow and Robert Hurley, 135-140. New York: New Press.

Gable, Craig. 2004. *Ebony Rising: Short Fiction of the Greater Harlem Renaissance*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Glavey, Brian. 2016. *The Wallflower Avant Garde: Modernism, Sexuality and Queer Ekphrasis*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Glick, Elisa. 2009. *Materializing Queer Desire: Oscar Wilde to Andy Warhol*. Albany: SUNY Press.

Goldsby, Jacqueline Denise. 2006. *A Spectacular Secret : Lynching in American Life and Literature*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Gruesser, John Cullen. 2015. *Black on Black: Twentieth-century African-American Writing about Africa*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky.

Halberstam, Jack. 2011. *The Queer Art of Failure*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Hanson, Ellis. 1997. *Decadence and Catholicism*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Hewitt, Andrew. 1996. *Political Inversions: Homosexuality, Fascism, and the Modernist Imaginary*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Hill, Karlos K. 2016. *Beyond the Rope: the Impact of Lynching on Black Culture and Memory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hutchinson, George. 2007. "Introduction" to *The Cambridge Companion to the Harlem Renaissance*, edited by George Hutchinson, 1-10. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Huysmans, Joris-Karl. 1999. *Against Nature*. Translated by Margaret Mauldon. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Mahoney, Kristin. 2017. *Literature and the Politics of Post-Victorian Decadence*. London: Cambridge University Press.

Miller, Monica L. 2009. *Slaves to Fashion: Black Dandyism and the Styling of Black Diasporic Identity*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Moore, Marianne. 1994. *Complete Poems*. New York: Penguin Books.

Mosse, George L. 1988. *Nationalism and Sexuality: Middle-Class Morality and Sexual Norms in Modern Europe*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

Muñoz, José Esteban. 1999. *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Muñoz, José Esteban. 2009. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York: New York University Press.

- Nugent, Richard Bruce. Typescript. *Half-High*, 1926, JWJ MSS 92, Box 19, Folder 4, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.
- Nugent, Richard Bruce. Manuscript of short story "Pope Pius the Only," circa 1935, JWJ MSS 92, Box 19, Folder 7, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. New Haven: Yale University.
- Nugent, Richard Bruce. 2002. *Gay Rebel of the Harlem Renaissance: Selections from the Work of Richard Bruce Nugent*, edited by Thomas Wirth. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Nugent, Richard Bruce. 2008. *Gentleman Jigger*, edited by Thomas Wirth. Philadelphia: Da Capo Press.
- Putnam, Aric. 2012. *The Insistent Call: Rhetorical Moments in Black Anticolonialism, 1929-1937*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.
- Rampersad, Arnold. 1997. Introduction to *The New Negro*, by Alain Locke, i-xxvii. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Reid-Pharr, Robert. 2001. *Black Gay Man: Essays*. New York: New York University Press.
- Reid-Pharr, Robert. 2016. *Archives of Flesh: African America, Spain, and Post-Humanist Critique*. New York: New York University Press.
- Ruti, Mari. 2017. *The Ethics of Opting Out: Queer Theory's Defiant Subjects*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Schwarz, A. B. Christa. 2003. *Gay Voices of the Harlem Renaissance*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Scott, William R. "Black Nationalism and the Italo-Ethiopian Conflict 1934-1936." *The Journal of Negro History* 63, no. 2 (Apr., 1978):118-134.
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. 1990. *The Epistemology of the Closet*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Shankman, Arnold. "The Image of the Italian in the Afro-American Press 1886-1936." *Italian Americana* 4, no. 1 (Fall/Winter 1978):30-49.
- Somerville, Siobhan B. 2000. *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Thurman, Wallace. 2008. *The Blacker the Berry*. 1929. New York: Dover Publications.
- Thurman, Wallace. 2013. *Infants of the Spring*. 1932. Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Publications.

Tolson, Melvin B. 1999. *"Harlem Gallery" and Other Poems if Melvin B. Tolson*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia.

West, Dorothy, ed. 1934. *Challenge: A Literary Quarterly* 1, no. 1.

West, Dorothy, ed. 1937. *Challenge: A Literary Quarterly* 2, no. 1.

West, Dorothy, ed. 1937. *New Challenge: A Literary Quarterly* 2, no. 1.

White, Nicholas. 1999. Introduction to *Against Nature*, Joris-Karl Huysmans. Translated by Margaret Mauldon. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Wilson, Ivy. "Are You Man Enough?: Imagining Ethiopia and Transnational Black Masculinity." *Callaloo* 33, no. 1, "Ethiopia: Literature, Art & Culture (Spring, 2010):265-277.

Wirth, Thomas H. Introduction. 2002. *Gay Rebel of the Harlem Renaissance: Selections from the Work of Richard Bruce Nugent*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Ryan Tracy is a scholar working at the intersections of deconstruction and literary modernism. His writing has appeared in a number of literary and scholarly journals, including *Derrida Today*, *PANK Magazine*, *The New Engagement*, *The American Reader*, *The Brooklyn Rail*, and *The Gay and Lesbian Review*. Ryan is a Ph.D. candidate at the CUNY Graduate Center. His current work traces conceptual and figurative links between the work of Jacques Derrida and anglophone modernists, such as Virginia Woolf, Richard Bruce