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FACULTAD DE FILOLOGÍA

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GRADO EN ESTUDIOS INGLESES

Trabajo de Fin de Grado

# A Queer Approach to the Harlem Renaissance through the Figure of Richard Bruce Nugent (1906-1987)

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This thesis is submitted for the degree of English Studies

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Vº Bº

Signature

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## ABSTRACT

In this essay I discuss the author Richard Bruce Nugent (1906 - 1987) as a literary rebel of his time during the African American cultural and artistic movement termed as Harlem Renaissance (1920s – 1930s). The core idea of this social and literary current was to project a new progressive image of the black community. In so doing, eminent figures of the movement such as W. E. B. Du Bois and Alain Locke supported the idea that black art should be used for the sake of racial uplift. However, Nugent was opposed to this concept of collective artistic expression and he showed his resistance towards it by articulating a queer-individual expression of art. To support my hypothesis, I present a brief analysis of Nugent's short story "Smoke, Lilies and Jade" (1926) as it is considered to be his masterpiece which epitomises his queer artistic expression at its best. In addition, I have included some of Nugent's drawings and paintings which are also suggestive examples of his queer expression. Moreover, I examine that Nugent, by distancing himself from the social realism which was being promoted at that time, became the voice of the queer community of the Harlem neighbourhood which struggled against oppression, injustice and mistreatment from a homophobic society. Keeping all these crucial factors in mind this paper intends to shed light upon Nugent and his work, which significantly contributed to both the Harlem Renaissance and the gay tradition of African American literature.

**KEY WORDS:** African American, Du Bois, Harlem Renaissance, Homosexual, Locke, Nugent, Oppression, Queer, Racial uplift.

## RESUMEN

En este ensayo examino la figura de Richard Bruce Nugent como un transgresor literario de su tiempo durante el movimiento artístico y cultural afroamericano el Renacimiento de Harlem. La idea fundamental de esta corriente artística y literaria era el fomento de una nueva imagen de la raza negra. Para ello, importantes figuras como W. E. B. Du Bois y Alain Locke se alzaron como abanderados de este movimiento, con la idea de que el arte negro debía ser utilizado al servicio del avance racial. En este sentido, este estudio pretende demostrar cómo Nugent se opuso a esa idea de expresión artística colectiva y configuró una expresión artística individual desde una perspectiva queer. Para apoyar mi hipótesis, presento un breve análisis de la historia corta de Nugent “Smoke, Lilies and Jade” como la pieza literaria que epitomiza al máximo su expresión artística queer. Con el mismo propósito incluyo también algunos dibujos y pinturas del autor en los que su inscripción queer es sugerente. Además, exploro cómo el autor, distanciándose del realismo social que se defendía entonces, se convirtió en un portavoz de la comunidad gay en Harlem, la cual intentaba traer a la palestra las opresiones e injusticias de una sociedad que los alienaba. Con todo esto, este ensayo pretende dar a conocer un poco más la figura de Nugent y su obra, los cuales han significado una contribución importante al Renacimiento de Harlem y a la tradición gay de la literatura Afroamericana.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Afroamericano, Avance racial, Du Bois, Homosexual, Locke, Nugent, Opresión, Queer, Renacimiento de Harlem.

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## Introduction

One of the most important historical events of the 1920s in the U.S. was the Harlem Renaissance, an artistic and cultural movement that promoted the progress and betterment of the African American community. In his book *Harlem Renaissance*, Nathan Irvin Huggins asserts that this period “meant opportunity and promise for all kinds” (26). However, as scholar Alden Reimoneng points out, within this intellectually stimulating environment very little attention was given to the fact that most of the remarkable artists were either gay or bisexual (n.p.). However, recently, critics Michael L. Cobb and Eric Garber have demonstrated in their essays “Insolent Racing, Rough Narrative: The Harlem Renaissance’s Impolite Queers” and “A Spectacle in Color: The Lesbian and Gay Subculture of Jazz Age Harlem” respectively, the significant artistic and cultural contribution of gay and bisexual personalities during the Harlem Renaissance.

An unrecognised yet transgressive figure of the Harlem Renaissance was Richard Bruce Nugent, a gay man who lived life on his own terms without feeling compelled to adhere to society’s morals and conventions that refused to treat homosexuals as equals. Through this ingenious author, this paper, much like Cobb and Garber’s argument, aims to investigate the artistic and cultural movement of Harlem in the 1920s with specific focus on the queer literati.

Popular opinion may beg to differ, but I think that Nugent’s works and his crucial role in the Harlem Renaissance has not yet been fairly acknowledged. Therefore, in this paper I shall explore how Nugent through his unique artistic style opposed the idea which claimed that black art should be used for the sake of racial advancement and how his challenging of the same eventually led to the publication of the first short story on homosexual desire written by an African American author making Nugent a literary

pioneer of his time. In order to do so, the paper begins with a brief overview of the Harlem Renaissance and then in the second chapter, it attempts to demonstrate that Nugent's works were groundbreaking in a sense that not only did they reject collective artistic expression as endorsed by his certain contemporaries such as W. E. B. Du Bois and Alain Locke, but also gave us the first homoerotic black text, "Smoke, Lilies and Jade" (1926), which can arguably be the most significant example which represented the originality of his literary style.

## 1. The Harlem Renaissance (1920s – 1930s)

In this chapter I first give an overview of the Harlem Renaissance, by discussing the reasons that led to it and its notable figures. Then, I shift my focus to homosexuality and for that purpose I refer to author Susana L. Penedo's definition of *queer*. Finally, I show the existence of a partially repressed queer subculture during this period. This chapter therefore provides us with the cultural and literary context in which Richard Bruce Nugent dwelt and creatively evolved in terms of his works.

### 1.1 Historical Context

In the 1920s, Harlem, a predominantly black neighbourhood in New York City, started to thrive culturally and economically. Slavery had been abolished since almost half a century, which meant that African Americans were slowly realizing and working towards their aspirations and dreams. This consequently witnessed relocation of waves of black migrants to north-eastern American cities. In addition, this large neighbourhood became a potential source of industrial workers for companies which produced supplies for European countries during World War I (Huggins 14). Within a



few years, Harlem rapidly became a hub for the black population and business. This community “was synonymous with opportunity, the release of the individual spirit...” (Huggins 24) Hence the place emerged as a cultural milieu for both communal and individual growth of black people.

During this period, a new African American identity alongside a new expression of black culture started to take shape. A desire to emphasise on the pride of the black race arose and this positive outlook became one of the main foundations of the Harlem Renaissance. It was an artistic, cultural and literary movement that marked the recognition and consolidation of the African American presence in the United States.

Regarding the main figures of the Harlem Renaissance it is important to mention W. E. B. Du Bois, Alain Locke and James Weldon Johnson as they were possibly “the [three] most distinguished African American[s] of this generation” (Wirth 4), while Langston Hughes undoubtedly still remains the most prolific and widely recognised figure of the period. In collaboration with other renowned literary figures, Hughes put into effect “the idea of an ‘art quarterly’ devoted to younger African American artists” (Wirth 13), which resulted in the creation of *Fire!!* (1926). This journal was pivotal in its attempt to bring the issue of homosexuality to light, and most of its contributors were either gay or bisexual. Later on, they dubbed themselves *the Niggeratti*, an “independent and rebellious [group] of younger talents” whose intention was to create art for themselves as black individuals (Wirth 14).

Despite all this racial and cultural development, the issue of homosexuality was still ignored. This fact is surprising since, as I have explained before, many significant Harlem literary figures were homosexuals. Hence, in the following section I will try to show the importance of this matter.

## 1.2 Repressed Queer Life in Harlem and the Struggle to Bring Queer Subculture to Light

As previously mentioned, during the heyday of the Harlem Renaissance the majority of the issues concerning gays and lesbians were disregarded. However, a queer subculture did exist in Harlem. Before discussing this issue, I feel it is pertinent to give an accurate explanation of the term *queer*.<sup>1</sup>In the first chapter of her book *El laberinto queer: La identidad en tiempos del neoliberalismo*, Susana L. Penedo explains Queer Theory as a way to understand sexual identities based on similarity in social conditions rather than inherent traits. Moreover, Penedo defines the term queer as a medium through which one can transgress the margins of heteronormativity by hybridising aspects of race, gender, society and class. I will draw upon this theory in order to refer to the gays and lesbians of the Harlem Renaissance as queers because, as I shall elaborate later, they fit this definition in terms of *similarity* and *hybridisation*.

Even though there was a queer subculture, it was still partially repressed. Such repression became even more obvious when sexuality was depicted within art. But first, it is important to note that such a subculture provided us with glimpses through which one could learn how it was to be queer and black during that time. In his article “A Spectacle in Color: The Lesbian and Gay Subculture of Jazz Age Harlem”, Eric Garber gives an illustrative account of queer life during the Harlem Renaissance by describing the places where homosexuals usually met and socialized with each other.

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<sup>1</sup> “Cada persona entiende ‘queer’ desde su experiencia personal y lo utiliza para definir su propia posición en el mundo . . . [E]sta subjetivación que afecta al término ‘queer’ es inherente a la propia filosofía que lo acompaña: una necesidad por autodefinirse y protegerse de una inclusión involuntaria en un etiquetado general con el que el individuo — que necesita sentirse único y exclusivo— no se siente identificado.” (37)

Parties and costume balls held at both buffet flats and speakeasies<sup>2</sup> were the main gay-oriented events which often took place in the heart of Harlem. Parties tended to be private and were known as *rent parties*. Garber explains that “[private] parties were the best place for Harlem lesbians and gay men to socialize, providing safety and privacy” (320). Likewise, characterised by their legality and easier accessibility to a larger public, costume balls were, in Langston Hughes’ words, “spectacles in color [where] both men and women could dress as they pleased and dance with whom they wished” (qtd. in Garber 323). Therefore, it can be said that these places acted as safe havens for the homosexuals where they were free from social restrictions.

Lesbians and gay men gathered and socialised in these places because they could identify with the people who visited such places. This brings us back to Penedo’s idea of similarity which allows for inferring that this process of being able to identify with each other helped shape a queer collective. Nevertheless, black homosexuals had to deal with “racial oppression, economic hardship, and homophobic persecution” (Garber 320). This illustrates that despite trying to shape a queer community, repression and ostracism still remained a constant form of mistreatment which homosexuals had to endure.

Issues such as racial and homophobic persecution were so grave and critical that the Niggeratti felt that they must raise awareness and demand for this discrimination to end. A scene from Rodney Evans’ film *Brother to Brother* (2004) depicted how the Niggeratti, through their magazine *Fire!!*, intended “to show [the lifestyle of] . . . queers and whores, [which were] two types of people that upstanding Negroes<sup>3</sup> [wanted] no part of.” Penedo’s idea of the hybrid crystallises here as we see that even though the

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<sup>2</sup> Speakeasies: term used specifically during the Harlem Renaissance to refer to designated public places where gay men could gather and socialise.

<sup>3</sup> Upstanding Negroes: black people who aimed at a respectable public image.

younger writers wanted to express themselves through their work by blending together art and sexuality in order to create a new and progressive black identity, they were in fact met with protest and retaliation from the *respectable* black people. The upstanding blacks showed repugnance towards the ideas and themes presented in *Fire!!* It can be said that this incident occurred because the “stance of the African American cultural elite [was] that young writers should place their talents at the service of race advancement” (Wirth 47). This aspect will be examined in the next chapter. Any black artist or writer who did not actively contribute towards improving social acceptance of their race was considered a potential threat.

Thus far, this paper has discussed the historical context of the Harlem Renaissance, and explained queer life in the neighbourhood. It also commented upon the tendency of silencing queer lifestyle whenever an attempt was made to bring it in attention of the society. In the next chapter I analyse the author, Richard Bruce Nugent, who, by refusing to accept race as the sole factor which should inspire his work, and by combining his art and his queerness, succeeded in articulating a queer-individual artistic expression.

## 2. Richard Bruce Nugent (1906-1987): A Pioneer in Opposing a Collective Expression of Art and in Publishing the First Black Text on Homoerotic Desire

In this chapter I introduce the black aesthetics concept of W. E. B. Du Bois and Alain Locke, and I argue that as an opposition to this concept Nugent created his own unique, artistic expression. Thereupon, I briefly analyse Nugent’s “Smoke, Lilies and Jades” and attempt to prove it as the most significant representation of his queer artistic expression.

## 2.1 Against a Collective Artistic Expression

In the introduction of this paper I explained that Nugent was a queer author who lived a life on his terms without feeling compelled to adhere to society's conventions and morals which were largely homophobic in nature. Born in Washington D.C., Nugent moved to New York when he was still an adolescent and there he took art classes. Due to his creative bend of mind he was immediately drawn to the Harlem Renaissance. In this highly intellectually stimulating environment the author met important literary figures such as Langston Hughes, Wallace Thurman, Countee Cullen, Zora N. Hurston and other notable personalities; and as previously mentioned, Nugent, along with them, became a part of the rebellious group known as *the Niggeratti*. This group of young talents created the magazine *Fire!!*, which aimed at depicting certain realities, such as the lifestyle of homosexuals and prostitutes, which some black people did not want to accept.

I have also emphasised that the core idea of the Harlem Renaissance was to project a new and better image of the black community and portray them in a positive light, breaking away from racist, offensive stereotypes. In his book *Gay Rebel of the Harlem Renaissance*, Thomas Wirth states that “most elite African Americans were intent on maintaining a hyper-respectable public image as a means of personal and racial advancement” (22). Thus, young groups like the Niggeratti were expected to use art as a means of racial uplift. This idea was nurtured by the black aesthetics concept promoted by eminent figures such as W. E. B. Du Bois and Alain Locke.

On the one hand, “Du Bois believed that . . . [accurate] depiction of sordid reality might well be beautiful, but only if the moral conclusions conveyed by that depiction were correct” (Wirth 47). This theory suggests that Du Bois viewed art as a means of both moral correction and instruction. On the other hand, Locke viewed art as

a means of racial progress. In his essay “Insolent Racing, Rough Narrative: The Harlem Renaissance’s Impolite Queers”, Michael L. Cobb implies that Locke, through his collective stance, criticised the idea that black art should serve as a means to express race from an individual perspective. To support his argument, he quotes Locke: “Each generation . . . [has] its creed, and that of the [Harlem Renaissance was] the belief in the efficacy of collective effort, in race co-operation. This deep feeling of race [was] . . . the mainspring of Negro life” (qtd. in Cobb 331). Therefore, it can be observed that for Locke, the advancement of race was the ultimate purpose; and in his opinion every artistic effort/action should be motivated by that.

However, Nugent “had begun to chafe at the subtle and not-so-subtle censorship involved in always putting [one’s] best feet forward for the sake of racial uplift . . . [He was] convinced that great art must be based on ‘truth’, however disagreeable that truth might be to some” (Wirth 14). In this respect, he decided to express race by creating art inspired from his own identity as a homosexual, which allowed for his works to lend an unmistakably queer perspective which was unique in terms of its honesty and boldness. Such a perspective became Nugent’s individualistic trait which clashed with the contradictory idea of collective expression advocated by Du Bois and Locke. As a result, Nugent emerged as a pioneer who contested and broke away from the idea of art as a collective expression by creating his own unconventional style and, according to Wirth, he became the first African American author to create art from a queer perspective. (57)

It is beyond the scope of this paper to attempt a thorough analysis of all of Nugent’s work, therefore I will refer only to some of his specific works which portray his queer artistic expression at its potential best. Amongst Nugent’s literary work, I have selected the short story “Smoke, Lilies and Jade” as it is considered to be his most

significant work which effectively demonstrates his queer-individual expression of art. As for his contribution to the visual arts, I have selected *Design for Gilgamesh* (date unknown), *Orgy Under the Cross* (date unknown) and *The Bullfighters* (1957)<sup>4</sup>. These are gay-themed drawings and paintings in which, on close inspection, homoeroticism is suggestive.

## 2.2 “Smoke, Lilies and Jade”: The Most Distinguishing Portrayal of Nugent’s *Queer-individual* Artistic Expression and a Literary Groundbreaking Milestone in the Harlem Renaissance

Thus far I have discussed that Nugent rejected both Du Bois and Locke’s black aesthetics concept and created his own queer-individual expression of art and its greatest example is “Smoke, Lilies and Jade” (1926). Written in a modernist stream-of-consciousness style, “Smoke. . .” is an autobiographical short story about Alex, a bohemian young man who, provoked by *smoke*, wanders through his thoughts and imaginations. He chances upon Beauty on the streets, a man with whom Alex gets sexually involved. It is interesting to note that their meeting escapes the realms of words and this makes the story unique. Hence, it can be argued that the *language* here is the language of homoeroticism which is the core of the story and is explored with “exquisite sensitivity, without apology or prurience” (Wirth 41). This homoerotic desire is clear in the following description of Beauty:

. . . [Alex] saw two strong white legs. . .dancer’s legs. . .the contours pleased him. . .his eyes wandered. . .on past the muscular hocks to the firm white thighs. . .the rounded buttocks. . .then the lithe narrow waist. . .strong torso and broad deep chest. . .the heavy shoulders. . .graceful

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<sup>4</sup> See appendix for some of Nugent’s drawings.

muscled neck. . . squared chin and quizzical lips. . . Grecian nose with its  
temperamental nostrils. . . the brown eyes . . .

Through this homoerotic content Nugent challenges the idea of collectivism that Locke attempted to endorse. Unapologetic expression of homosexuality, either in reality or within the fictional universe, both indicated “a rebellion against Black elites desire to only portray the uplifting sides of Black life.” (qtd. in Christoph Ruffing 6)

Not only did the content of “Smoke...” oppose the idea of collective advancement, but the style of writing was also unconventional. Contrary to the “restrained and polite approach to the representation of race” (Cobb 331) advocated by Locke, Nugent wrote his short story in an elliptical style. This literary technique was “seen as decadent, distracting, or even ‘white’, and [also] as [a departure] from the social realism that many Renaissance leaders, such as DuBois [and Locke], felt necessary to producing ‘racial uplift’” (Vitale 200-201). As a way to convey his artistic differences, Nugent turned to an individualistic technique in order to render a shocking queer text in the form of an unrestrained literary expression.

Due to its clearly wild and transgressive form and content, Nugent’s “Smoke...” marked a literary milestone both in the Harlem Renaissance and within the gay subculture of African American literature. This piece is arguably considered the first text on homosexuality *published* by a black author (Reimoneng n.p.; Vitale 199). All these factors can therefore suggest Nugent as a transgressor or a rebel of his time. However, it does not imply that the other gay or bisexual literati of the Harlem Renaissance “[did not portray] intense male-male emotional ties”. They did, “but the narrative voice in their work either kept its distance or wore the mask of ambiguity” (Wirth 50), while in Nugent’s work it is difficult to detect any kind of ambiguity; he is blatant with regards to his homoerotic desire.



To put everything in a concise manner, in this section, I have presented both Du Bois' and Locke's black aesthetics collective concept which was seen by the two authors as an effectual means of racial advancement. Furthermore, I have tried to show how Nugent opposed the aforementioned concept by articulating a queer-individual expression of art which found its strongest voice in the story "Smoke, Lilies and Jade", a work that became a landmark both in the Harlem Renaissance and in the gay tradition of African American literature.

## Conclusion

Richard Bruce Nugent's masterpiece "Smoke, Lilies and Jade" (1926) marked a literary milestone in the Harlem Renaissance both in terms of its form and content. Homosexuality was elegantly and unapologetically dealt within the story and this individualistic trait challenged the opposing idea of collective expression espoused by luminaries such as W. E. B. Du Bois and Alain Locke. The narrative style employed by the author also showed a resistance towards the idea of social realism which was being promoted at that time. This point is to be taken into consideration since I think that the attitude of figures like Locke, inadvertently only sanctioned creativity when it adhered to mainstream norms. This is to say, as Cobb suggests, by advocating a collective expression, any individualistic expression was considered a threat (346). This can entail that queerness was viewed as an individual trait which may not necessarily treat race as the core idea of a creative work.

Nugent blended together art and queerness in order to oppose a collective idea of artistic expression which oppressed queer people like him. He used his voice as a writer and as an artist to bring forth the hardships of sexual minorities whose attempts to fight

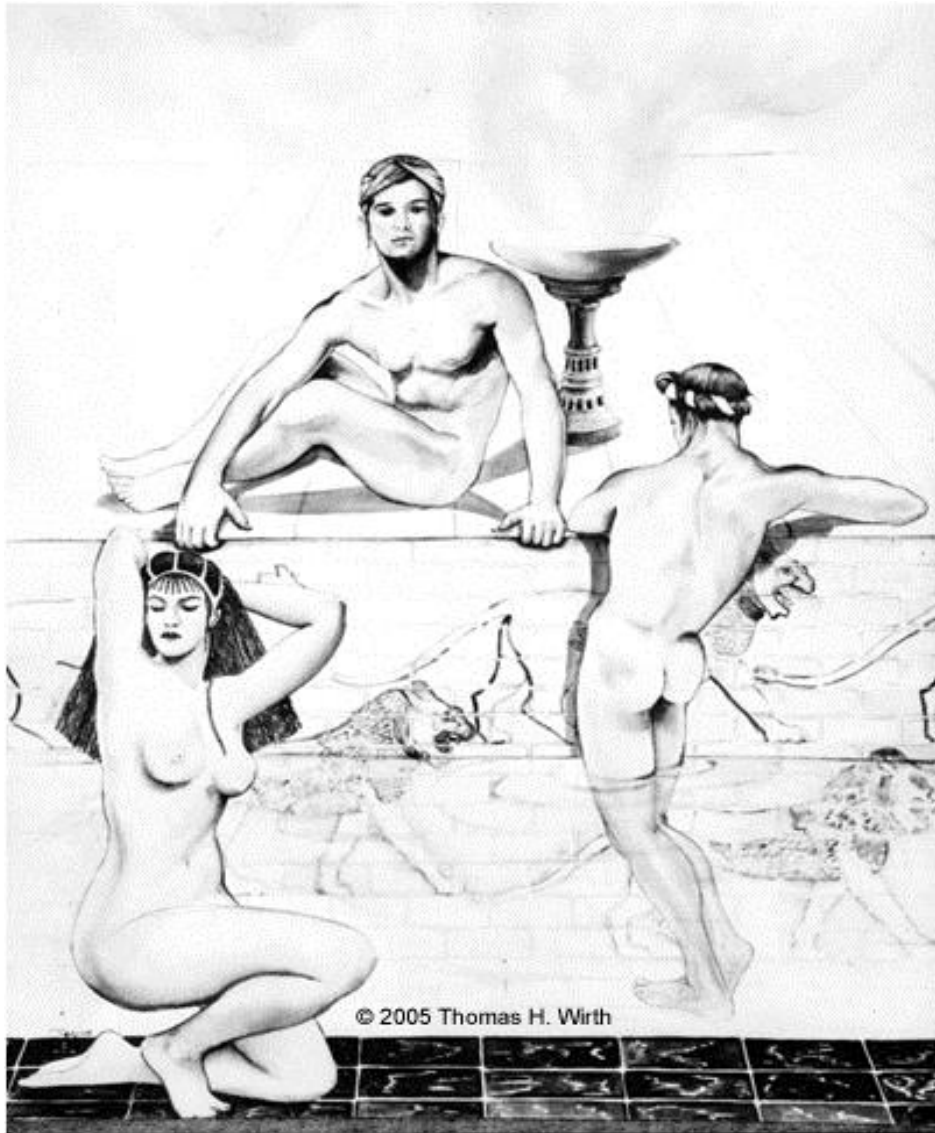
against oppression were often thwarted. Nugent, by creating art from his queer-individual perspective, discarded the expectations of black elites who insisted that young talents should only use art for racial uplift. This is the most important reason why I believe that this author was a remarkable and outstanding figure of the Harlem Renaissance who courageously “lived his life as openly [gay] as he wrote it” and made his queerness a means through which he could express himself sexually, racially and artistically (Stokes 912). It is indeed unfortunate that Nugent and his works have not received the merit they deserve. I think that, once his contribution to the Harlem Renaissance and gay tradition of African American literature is given its due credit, future investigations on the author could help shed light upon queer black literature and culture in a more unabridged and insightful manner.

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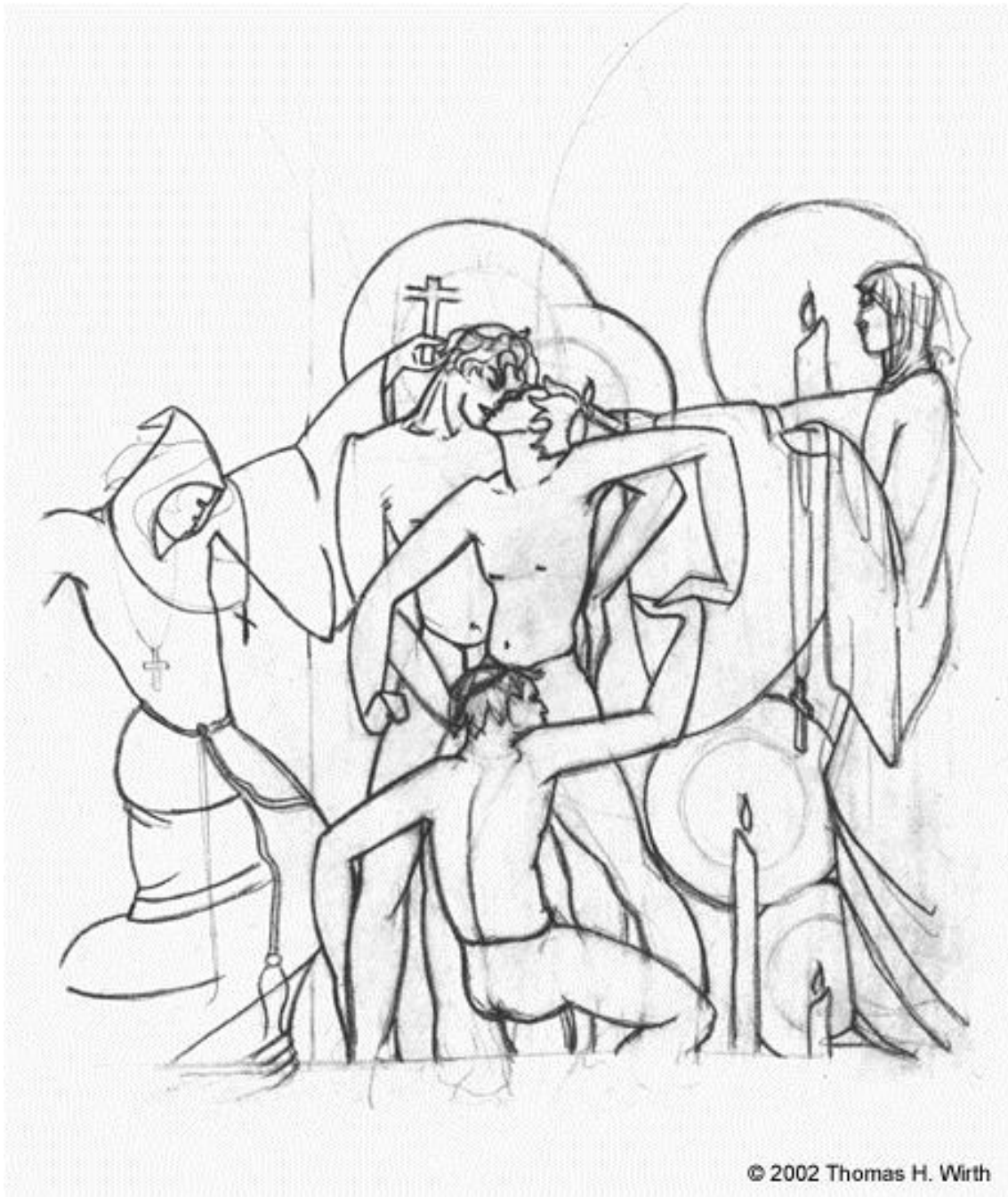
Appendix

Drawings by Richard Bruce Nugent



© 2005 Thomas H. Wirth

*Design for Gilgamesh (Date Unknown)*



*Orgy Under the Cross* (Date Unknown)



*The Bullfighters* (1957)