Casting *Feral Benga*: A Biography of Richmond Barthé's Signature Work

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Figure 1 - Richmond Barthe, 1946

James Richmond Barthé (1901-1989) was born in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi into a family of devout Roman Catholic Creoles. Barthé was an introverted child prone to daydreaming and reading fairytales several times over. He began making pictures by copying typography and photographs from local newspapers and popular self-help magazines like *Physical Culture* all the while ignoring his schoolwork. Not surprisingly, his formal education ended at age fourteen. By this time, Barthé was a voracious reader with impressive self-taught drawing talent. Two years later, he left home for New Orleans to accept employment as a houseboy for a well-heeled family who summered in Bay St. Louis. Barthé held that position for eight years. While living in the midst of European finery, his artistic tastes and influences matured towards the nineteenth-century Romanticism and Neoclassical painting collected by his employers.

As was the case throughout the American South, art schools in New Orleans did not train African Americans. In 1924, with the support of his parish priest, Barthé moved to Chicago to begin painting classes at The Chicago Art Institute School. Chicago represented Barthé's introduction to big city life as well as an exacting segregation that was new and unsettling. Nevertheless, his talent as a painter grew. However, it was a series of classroom portraiture exercises executed in clay that brought the soft-spoken and handsome Barthé public attention in 1927 when they were included in the groundbreaking *Negro in Art Week* exhibition held at The Art Institute of Chicago.[1] By that time, Barthé had completed three years of evening instruction under painters Charles Schroeder at The School and privately with Archibald J. Motley, Jr. He thought of himself as a painter, but given the reception of his initial attempts at sculpture, he gradually turned from painting to sculpture as his professional career began in earnest.

With the help of the first of two Rosenwald fellowships, Barthé moved to Harlem at the height of the Renaissance (just months before the October 1929 stock market collapse). Meeting celebrated philosopher Alain Locke and actor-illustrator Richard Bruce Nugent convinced Barthé that Harlem was the most vibrant and progressive place to be for a young African-American artist looking for authentic source material for his art. However, after a year uptown, Barthé

rented a cold-water, walkup apartment on the edge of Greenwich Village, which also served as his studio. Living downtown allowed Barthé to associate with bohemian circles that welcomed him without undue emphasis on his race and encouraged his strong interest in nude figures. His nudes created mixed criticism from African Americans: positive for the impressively rendered anatomy and negative for the unabashed nakedness. Downtown audiences understood and appreciated Barthé's affinity with Classical tradition and wholeheartedly embraced his use of the nude. Barthé's mostly white, and often homosexual, clientele allowed him to indulge his penchant for the male nude, which over time became his most memorable subject matter.

Dominated by actors, dancers, writers, and artists Barthé's list of friends and patrons reads like a Who's Who of pre-WWII homosexual society. Notable figures, like Lyle Saxon the New Orleans journalist and historian, Winifred Ellerman, the wealthy novelist who published under the name Bryher, Edgar Kaufmann, Jr., heir to the famous Pittsburgh mercantile empire, and Carl Van Vechten the stage critic turned photographer whose portraits document the era's notable African Americans, promoted and commissioned Barthé's sculpture. One of the most lasting and important friendships was with the undisputed African-American arbiter of taste, Alain Locke.

Barthé is the only African-American sculptor of his generation for whom the male nude was central. Barthé's decisive use of sensual body language for his figures was daring during an era when black men were victimized because they were considered sexually lascivious and dangerous. He left himself open to accusations of perpetuating damaging stereotypes. Subsequently, Barthé's persistent, and successful, employment of the male nude as an object of beauty and desire left writers mute relative to the attention his African-American contemporaries received for their race-centered work. Although, decades after his celebrity waned, Barthé agreed with critics that his art was "old-fashioned," his adept weaving of art-historical and contemporary models, harvested from an extensive knowledge of high art and an enthusiasm for popular trends, situated his thematic and compositional choices squarely within progressive art practices.[2] Unfortunately, his academic forms and traditional methods obscured Barthé's bold and thoroughly up to date visual expression.

In general, African-American art received tightly guarded critical treatment during Barthé's lifetime. Published material perpetuated a mythic homogeneity for African-American art that was built on the shaky foundation of shared race.[3] All black people were believed to be cut from the same fabric. Subsequently, the diversity of African-American artists' visual expressions is only recently being fully explored. Recent analyses of African-American art have broadened, however, historians still hesitate to investigate sexuality as a feasible and explicit theme for artists of Barthé's generation. Without addressing Barthé's homosexuality, analyses of his work remain incomplete because his creative instincts were often driven by desire and sexual longing.

Barthé received a steady stream of commissions for his life-like portraits and imposing figures. His respect and affection for men particularly resonates in the beauty of his animated and seductive nudes. Unable to dismiss the artist all together because he was too successful and talented, writers took refuge in dull formalist descriptions. In 1943, James Porter declared that "Barthé's handling of the nude Negro physique proclaims his gift for natural plastic feeling."[4] As late as 1993 when Romare Bearden and Harry Henderson briefly acknowledged that Barthé enjoyed "singing the praises of the beauty of the body," writers continued to offer scant analyses.[5] Not surprisingly, critics and historians discuss *Feral Benga* with little more than cursory descriptions because to look deeper would require addressing Barthé's homosexuality.

The nature of Barthé's aesthetic program is voiced in this daring figure. It is clear that beauty alone did not drive Barthé to consistently represent the black male body in his art. Through the nude, Barthé revealed the basic humanness of black men while flaunting their sexual vitality. Years of anatomy classes at the Art Institute of Chicago coupled with modern dance classes he attended in Manhattan guided Barthé as he added emotional substance to the physical accuracy of his work.

Figure 2 - Feral Benga Bronze 1935

In 1935, Barthé created *Feral Benga*, a graceful full-figure, male nude that stands approximately two feet high. The work of art, as well as the artist's encounter with the man it portrays, marks a critical moment in the art and life of this accomplished academic sculptor. *Feral Benga* is Barthé's signature piece. He completed the figure within a few months after seeing Benga perform. As one of several emerging African-American artists taking stock in the Negro art renaissance philosophy formed a decade earlier, Barthé celebrated all that was interesting and pleasing about blackness. As the country recovered from economic collapse, African-American artists began to commemorate their race in earnest, not only through depicting race-specific themes but, also taking more seriously their aesthetic connections to Africa. With dignity, Barthé effectively brought the black male body into the respectable fine art arena.

Figure 3 - Feral Benga in Costume, c. 1934

Both dancer and sculpture presented Africa in an accessible, non-threatening modern package cast on the stage and in bronze. François Benga, the Senegalese cabaret dancer immortalized in Barthé's sculpture, was himself cast in changeable roles on and off stage.[6] Since his arrival in Paris, François became Feral Benga, a professional chorus dancer who appeared with stars, like Josephine Baker, who drove Parisian audiences wild with carnal choreography often set in steamy and distant places. After seeing Baker perform in Paris, French poet Jean Cocteau exclaimed that finally "eroticism had found a style."[7] Benga's exotic and feral stage persona made him a sought-after companion within trendy bohemian circles.

Barthé saw Benga perform during his first visit to Paris in 1934. He began visualizing his memories of Paris and the 'authentic' African dancer in his New York studio immediately upon his return. Ironically, Barthé's *Feral Benga* met with a similar fate as the dancer. While exhibited in up-scale fine art galleries and priced accordingly, the sculpture was privately admired for its audacious sexual allure.[8]

By the time *Feral Benga* was completed, Barthé had skillfully established his relationship with both white and black Manhattan. As mentioned earlier, his search for professional and social freedom ended below 34th Street among more diverse and mainstream artists and collectors. However, Barthé quickly realized that freedom in an integrated neighborhood was relative not absolute, and further that homosexuals faced limitations regardless of location.[9] Culture critic Manthia Diawara observed that open expression afforded white gays, within and without their communities, does not often extend to black gays who function under "the camouflage of expressive forms such as music, dance, and transvestite attires, which are more reassuring to heterosexuals."[10] Barthé revealed himself exclusively to those men and women 'in the life'; outside of those circles, he remained aloof and sexually neutral. He joined the Harlem Artists Guild, but was never an active member.[11] Once Barthé moved out of Harlem, his social involvement was limited at best. His disinterest in women and marriage was considered a reflection of Barthé's devotion to his art. With barriers compounded by race, black gay men experience a heighten awareness of their otherness especially within black communities where religion, and a wish to be seen as 'normal,' leaves very little tolerance for alternate life ways.

Barthé's sculpture was his 'camouflage.' Nudes based on Classical models made celebrating his homosexuality possible, while protecting the heterosexual public identity Barthé advanced throughout his life. The sculptor also often gave his figures generic titles which effectively concealed the identities of individuals who inspired or posed for his genre figures.[12] They were also often hybrid compositions. For example, a dancer's torso might be carried by the legs of a basketball player, and the handsome face of a young street urchin would crown the assemblage. However, *Feral Benga*, actually titled for its living model, is a unique glimpse of how Barthé reinvented contemporaries realities to suit his taste for Classical art and its 16th century renaissance.

When Barthé visited Paris in 1934, Benga was already notorious in American and European bohemian circles. The following year, then-amateur anthropologist Geoffrey Gorer's *Africa Dances: A Book About West African Negroes* was published. This slim volume's travel-log prose and snapshot photography became popular among Negrophiles interested in all aspects of black culture. *Africa Dances* was dedicated to Benga who accompanied Gorer on his research journey through Western Africa.[13] Barthé's knowledge of African dance developed with the help of Gorer's book, and his knowledge about Benga also increased.

In his book, Gorer identified two distinct types of African dance – warlike and orgasmic. For Barthé the two types were interdependent. In *Feral Benga*, violence and sensuality vie for dominance, pain mingles with pleasure, male blends with female, and popular culture breaths life into high art representation. A thoroughly self-contained figure, *Feral Benga* swoons trance-like in ecstasy. Such sexual innuendo boldly written on the black body was risqué for the time, but not untapped by other artists. *Feral Benga*'s veiled androgyny was akin to the work of Barthé's close friend Richard Bruce Nugent.[14] Nugent was an eccentric artist who took great joy in overt displays of the Renaissance era's propensity for racial and sexual intermingling by often layering multiple significations into his amusing and audacious drawings.[15] His *Drawings for Mulattoes*, for example, were Rorschach tests where each viewer brought something new to the picture. Racial, cultural, and gender bifurcation are tightly woven into complex narratives offered up in deceivingly simple forms. These expressive methods were endemic to artists who, like chameleons, adjusted their identity to their immediate environment. What is revealed on the surface might appear adequate, but what lies beneath offers substance.

Feral Benga is one of several African dancing figures in Barthé's oeuvre. In 1933, Barthé completed *African Dancer* (Whitney Museum of American Art) his first and largest dancing figure. He composed 'African' dancers using a variety of sources, such as his own mirror image, photographs or other works of art. Barthé's primary interest in arresting human anatomical movement took precedence over depicting ethnic authenticity. Subsequently, *African Dancer* was praised for its uncompromising authenticity, despite the fact that the figure's headband and pelvic covering are associated with no existing African ethnic identity. Apparently, Barthé's own blackness added authenticity to his *African Dancer*. *Feral Benga* was, without a doubt, authentic without the help of the artist's ethnicity.

Feral, a tidy word meaning wild animal enhanced the dancer's exotic appeal.[16] He was African and 'wild.' Parisian public relations agents created a persona for Benga, which was directly opposite the shy and introverted François.[17] Amidst the glitter and romance of Paris, Benga, albeit on a Parisian stage, was the first flesh-and-blood African Barthé had met. His keen memory made the sensual foundation of Barthé's sculpture possible, but he relied heavily on photographic aides, to assure visual accuracy. It is unlikely that Benga ever appeared naked on stage, but for Barthé nudity was the key to a timeless art that avoided the thorny trappings of culture and class.[18] The realism of the body was key to Barthé's work.

Nudity was considered Africa's 'authentic' costume by Westerners, even though it was clear that nakedness in West Africa was uncommon, and that references to it was a source of embarrassment for colonized Africans.[19] Africa's 'proud' nudity became a model of personal freedom to countless repressed members of clothed societies. In fact, African nakedness, as a natural way of being, attracted many European and American artists to the sculpture and traditions of what was once known as the 'dark' continent. Even with its theatrical presence and diminutive size, *Feral Benga* appears surprisingly natural. The figure's full frontal nudity, coupled with the large sword held aloft, commingled rapt passivity (the orgasmic tilt of the head, closed eyes, and tightly-clamped thighs) with suspended activity (bent knees, raised heels and swirling arms). The figure's elongated waist separates the heart from the genitals and creates a compositional balancing act between love and sex. Viewers can indulge their senses for, with eyes shut, there is an open invitation to do so. Then there is the threatening weapon held tightly overhead. Dances like Le Pilé Feuille come to mind. A retention of traditional West African rituals kept alive in Haitian folk dance, Le Pilé Feuille includes the machete used to metaphorically cut away evil. With this in mind, the potential violence of *Feral Benga's* falling blade is diffused. Barthé strove to balance European tradition with modernity and incorporate elements specific to African-American heritage. He succeeded in *Feral Benga*.

Barthé's artistic balancing acts were particularly complex in *Feral Benga*. He wanted to link his art to an imagined, artistic Africa that described the vast African Diaspora and still find favor with wealthy, white collectors. By integrating classical ballet's smooth and studied movement with frenetic and often improvisational black folk dance, Barthé expressed his own sophistication and multi-ethnicity. With his mix of French, American Indian, and African ancestry, Barthé cast a wider net than most in gathering inspirations and ideas. He felt authorized, indeed compelled, as a trained professional with European ancestors to measure up to recognized master artists.

Figure 4 - Battle of the Naked Men

Antonio Pollaiuolo's *Battle of the Naked Men* (c.1465) in The Metropolitan Museum of Art collection must have caught Barthé's eye on his many visits to that museum. The etching, picturing what appears to be man's battle with his many identities, contains identical models in a variety of poses. The scene is static, even though a fierce battle is underway, and intensified by how difficult it is to distinguish enemies from comrades among them. Unprotected bodies stretch out and open like *Feral Benga* exposed to the sharp metal of sweeping weapons. Although standing alone, a similar tension is sensed in *Feral Benga* as one moves around to set the figure in motion. The dancer appears vulnerable and unstable from the side, powerful and unpredictable from the front, and decidedly erotic from behind. When wielding a heavy blade such as that hanging above *Feral Benga's* head, one miscalculated move would surely result in injury.

Figure 5 - Ken and Tyler

The art historical models for Barthé's sculpture are often recognizable, but early critics overlooked European influences when writing about African-American art because such borrowing was believed to undermine the 'originality' of black expression. Therefore, comparing *Feral Benga* to a fifteenth-century Italian print was never considered. However, Barthé and Pollaiuolo have more than compositional affinities. The public acceptance of both *Battle of Naked Men* and *Feral Benga* was due, in part, to their idealized structures, which rendered nudity noble rather than sexual (at least on the surface). Mythological figures, theatrical performances, or images of far off continents like Africa and Asia offered a comfortable distance between art and audience for displaying the undressed body. However, black nudes based on classical models, a convention not widely used in fine art, which did enjoy limited popularity as the 'noble' African savage in the 18th century, boldly resurfaced in the late 20th century as Robert Mapplethorpe's homoerotic photographs proudly declare.

Although Benga used his popularity as a native African to advantage in Paris and New York, he dreamed of forming an authentic West African dance troupe for European and American audiences that did not compromise the fundamental passion of tribal movement. By 1937, when he visited New York, Manhattan's appetite for African dance was already whetted by Asadata Dafora and Randolph Sawyer who choreographed elaborate African-based dances for the urban stage.[20] Even so, Benga's beauty caused quite a stir in New York's homosexual circles. Prior to the advent of the gay liberation movement, homosexuals carefully guarded their identities in public. However, gay artists often deliberately employed high art portrayals of male nudity in covert celebration of a sexual orientation others deemed socially aberrant. Benga's flawless, hairless, and often-exposed, brown skin inspired gay artists like Van Vechten and Pavel Tchelitchev. Both made portraits of the dancer during his New York visit. Van Vechten

photographed Benga holding white water lilies against his bare chest while staring into the camera like an amphibian rising out of a pond. Benga also modeled for Tchelitchev's painting *Deposition*, a bizarrely oriented composition that leaves the viewer hovering over a naked man in despair being sucked into a void. Benga's face and physique inspired others but Barthé's portrait statuette had no equal.

Alain Locke, one of several homosexual men of public stature from the Harlem Renaissance era, admired Barthé and collected his art. Locke was as careful as he was clever in maintaining an uncompromisingly private advocacy of same sex relationships throughout his life. He preferred the subtlety of Walt Whitman to the audacity of Oscar Wilde because Whitman was openly embraced as a man's man without being marked as homosexual.[21] Locke, as expected, included *Feral Benga* along with a dozen other Barthé works in his 1940 pictorial survey *The Negro in Art: A Pictorial Record of the Negro Artist and of the Negro Theme in Art* because Barthé's work elegantly merged Afrocentric themes with Eurocentric methods. Locke's caption for *Feral Benga* read "Benga: Dance Figure" emphasizing the portrait and downplaying the sensationalism inherent in the dancer's stage persona as well as the figure's nudity.[22]

Feral Benga was first exhibited in the celebrated 1937 *Dance International* exhibition at Rockefeller Center, however, it was not pictured in the exhibition's copiously illustrated catalog. The earliest of over a dozen published photographs of this popular sculpture was in Locke's 1940 survey. The sculpture's photogenic quality made it the natural choice to illustrate later exhibition catalogs and art historical texts. When reviewed together, these photographs are instrumental for dating casts of known copies. New Jersey's Newark Museum boasts the only museum held cast of *Feral Benga* from the 1930s. Newark's *Feral Benga* is one of only two known links to Barthé's 1935 clay model.[23] Over fifty years later, subtle but significant changes were made when Barthé, inspired by a revitalized interest in his early work, allowed the figure to be cast in a new edition.

At the height of his career, Barthé took great pains with the finish of his sculpture. Foundry work received vigilant scrutiny to ensure that the bronze was chased to a seamless finish and read true to its original clay model. The traces of pulled and smoothed clay created with fingers and tools animate figures like *Feral Benga* and act as a road map of Barthé's meticulous rendering methods. This practice also reflected his admiration for the late 19th century French master Auguste Rodin who left impressions on surfaces that are his signature.

Barthé also chose his patinas with sensitivity. His belief in the visceral impact of color came from his formal training in oil painting. Newark's *Feral Benga*, a deep blackened brown, perches on a round, thin disk pooled under the figure's feet like a spotlight bathing over the performer. Dominating the robust lower body, large bulging thighs are tensed by an elevated pose struck on the balls of its feet. In contrast, the elastic midsection stretches up and fans out into a ribcage that supports propelling arms forming parentheses along a vertical axis. The handle of the machete-arched overhead protrudes beyond the figure's right palm, its sturdy blade slightly widened before ending at a point that guides the eye down and around once more. Allusions to Sigmund Freud's theories of phallic substitution and fear of castration are simultaneously made as the only inorganic element, the machete, represents a literal and metaphorical double-edged sword. *Feral Benga's* portrait-quality face documents not only the look of this engaging performer, but the psychic escape he found in dance.

Figure 6 - Feral Benga Bronze 1986 edition

What appear as minor differences between the two *Feral Benga* editions of , separated by more than fifty years, actually alter the figure's rhythm and visual impact. The edition cast in 1986 represents an artist distanced by advanced age and disengagement with the subject. Details that would have ensured fidelity to the earlier casts went unchecked and are perhaps a sign that the later edition was market driven rather than guided by artistic concerns. For example, the palm of *Feral Benga's* hand in the 1986 edition completely envelops the machete handle. Without the handle's butt making the instrument distinct from the figure's hand, the blade flows like a licentious extension. The base, thicker and smaller, is a platform that no longer reminds us of the spotlights that illuminated Benga and captured Barthé's imagination. Both machete and base, cast separately and then welded to the finished bronze figure became mere plastic props. But, the most overwhelming difference between the two is the surface finish.[24]

The exterior of the 1986 edition lacks the signature traces of the sculptor's hands. These track marks Barthé left imbedded his working life into the surface, the time he spent creating the work, into his art. The overall shimmer created by light on the 1935 *Feral Benga* clings like perspiration on a exhausted dancer's body. It remains unknown how involved the octogenarian Barthé was with the 1986 casting of *Feral Benga*.[25] More in line with his work from the 1960s and after, but in stark contrast with the 1935 *Feral Benga*, the slick surface on the later model robs the figure of its powerful tactile qualities and deadens its once erotic impact – an echo of the original.

The lost casts of the exquisite *Feral Benga* will no doubt find their way to center stage as Richmond Barthé's art receives long-overdue celebration. *Feral Benga*, a portrayal of a modern African 'acting savage,' is much more than choreographed or contrived ethnicity. It is a key work in Barthé's autobiography, the era's history, and a forgotten dancer's memory. *Feral Benga* is 20th century American sculpture at its provocative best.

Illustration Credits:

Figure 1. Photographer Unknown. Portrait of Richmond Barthé. Harmon Foundation portfolio, 1946.
Figure 2. Richmond Barthé. *Feral Benga*, 1935. Bronze, 19_ inches high. Harmon Foundation portfolio, 1946.
Figure 3. Rosardy Studio, Paris. Feral Benga in costume, c.1934. Black and white photograph. Private collection.
Figure 4. Antonio del Pollaiuolo, *Battle of Naked Men*, c.1465. Engraving, 15 x23 inches. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Image downloaded on 6-30-03 from http://www.kgi.ruhr-uni-bochum.de/raffael/kap_2/kap_2_2.htm
Figure 5. Robert Mapplethorpe, *Ken and Tyler,* c. 1984. Black and white photograph. Image downloaded on 6-30-03 from http://www.zabtuze.com/summer2002/censor.html
Figure 6. Richmond Barthé. *Feral Benga*, 1935 (cast in 1986). Bronze, 19_ inches high. Private Collection.

Notes:

[1] The *Negro in Art Week* was the first fine arts exhibition devoted to African and African-American artists in a major American art museum.

[2] There are several instances where Barthé referred to his art as "old-fashioned." One that stands out was in 1965 when his entry for the first international exhibition of black art to be held in Dakar, Senegal was rejected. He believed this was due to the traditional nature of his work. Richmond Barthé to Hershel Shohan, 20 December 1965. Private collection.

[3]Kymberly N. Pinder pointed out in "Black Representation and Western Survey Textbooks" (Art Bulletin 81, Sept. 1999) that this practice is most damaging in survey texts when the complexities in art made by African Americans are explained away by race in unavoidably brief entries.

Censorship aimed at preserving the memory of African-American artists also deadens the writing about African-American art. One particularly disturbing instance of censorship occurred when art historian Judith Wilson was denied the right to reproduce any of Romare Bearden's images because his executors found her essay "offensive, inaccurate and ...damaging to the reputation of the late Mr. Bearden." Judith Wilson, "Getting Down to Get Over: Romare Bearden's Use of Pornography and the Problem of the Black Female Body in Afro-U.S. Art," in Gina Dent, ed., *Black Popular Culture* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1992), 15.

[4]James Porter, *Modern Negro Art* (reprint; 1943, Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1992), 126.

[5]Romare Bearden and Harry Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists: From 1792 to the Present* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), 144.

[6]Feral Benga, born into Senegal's dominant Wolof tribe, was the illegitimate grandchild of one of Dakar's richest property owners. In 1925, shortly after being disinherited by his father, he left Dakar for Paris. For more background on Benga see Geoffrey Gorer, *African Dances: A Book About West African Negroes* (London: Faber & Faber, 1935).

[7]Vincent Cronin, *Paris: City of Light, 1919-1939* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), 126.

[8]Unfortunately, the number of *Feral Benga* figures cast during Barthé's long life, and their present locations, remain a mystery. Only late in life with dimming memory did Barthé find merit in recording the details of art sold or given as gifts. The *Feral Benga* bronze exhibited in *Rhapsodies in Black* is one of ten from the last edition cast in 1986 three years before Barthé's death.

[9]Barthé's brother, who lived with the artist on West 25th Street from the mid to late 1930s, recalled how difficult it was for Barthé to be himself in Harlem society because, as a black celebrity, his words and actions were heavily scrutinized. However, the downtown social scene had its problems as well. Barthé understood that he would not be served at certain establishments unless accompanied by a white patron. Louis Franklin interviewed by the author, 1 May 1993.

[10]Manthia Diawara, "The Absent One: The Avant-Garde and the Black Imaginary in *Looking For Langston*," in Marcellus Blount and George P. Cunningham, *Representing Black Men* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 215.

[11] Later in life, Barthé could not recall having been associated with the Harlem Artists Guild although he did have friends who were active members and his name appears on the Guild's roster. This is understandable since the Guild's 1935 'manifesto' against "coddling rather than professional attitude toward Negro art" of the Harmon Foundation was caustic. Barthé, championed by the Foundation well into the 1960s, adamantly disagreed with the Guild's stand. Barthé interviewed by Camille Billops, audiotape, St. Albans, NY, 9 December 1975. Hatch-Billops Collection, New York, New York.

[12] For example, *The Boxer*, 1941 (The Metropolitan Museum of Art) was Tiger McWay, a guard at the Savoy Ballroom, and *Boy with a Flute*, 1939 (private collection) was Allen Meadows, an aspiring amateur dancer.

[13] According to Gorer, Benga was a "*Europeanized* African… whose position in Paris was rather like that of the fashionable divorcée in the nineteenth century: a person whom it was chic to be seen with in the right places" and inappropriate everywhere else (7) Although Gorer's book was considered a significant contribution to West African dance history, on closer scrutiny his interest in Africa appears similar to the motivation for his first book *The Revolutionary Ideas of the Marquis de Sade*. Gorer recorded with delight, equal to that he took in the dances themselves, what he determined was the sadistic sexual behaviors of West Africans. These 'facts' added spice to the ostensibly social/scientific text and must have increased sales as well.

[14] I am grateful to Thomas Wirth for his willingness to share his extensive knowledge about Nugent. His editorial savvy and enlightened introduction in Richard Bruce Nugent, *Gay Rebel of the Harlem Renaissance* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002) produced the definitive work on the artist.

[15] Susan Gubar described Nugent's drawings as "an etiological narrative about the interdependence of black and white in the evolution of American culture," but Nugent's unusual (for the time) openness about his homosexuality allows for an equally relevant reading of same-sex race relations and cross-gender hybridization overtly displayed in his art. Susan Gubar, *Racechanges: White Skin, Black Face in American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 107-112.

[1616]Ironically, Wolof family names do refer to animals; Benga is the jackal, a small wild dog.

[17] In retrospect, the pseudonym was fitting for a cunning and handsome young man who negotiated elite European and American circles with finesse and a well-tuned black body.

[18]Barthé would have agreed with critic John Berger when he neatly described nakedness in fine art as "a form of dress." Berger quoted in Paul Ableman, *Anatomy of Nakedness* (London: Orbis Publishing, 1982), 50.

[19]Gorer, 165.

[20] For more on this topic see Richard Long, *The Black Tradition in American Dance* (London: Prion, 1989).

[21] Alain Locke, *The Survey Graphic* (Fall 1927): 563.

[22]*Feral Benga* was not titled as such until 1947 when it was shown in Barthé's final one-man exhibition at Grand Central Galleries in New York. It was titled "Benga" before that date.

[23] The second known 1930s cast of *Feral Benga* is in the Joyce & George Wein collection, New York.

[24] Right-handed, Barthé mirrored himself by putting the machete in the figure's right hand. An unfortunate oversight left *Feral Benga* inverted in Richard J. Powell's exhibition catalog for *Rhapsodies in Black: Art of the Harlem Renaissance* (University of California Press, 1997), 73.

[25] It is also unknown what model was used to create the mold for the 1986 edition leaving this open to speculation. No plaster has been identified, and the traditional edition of 6 casts to a mold was increased to 10.