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“Expressive Camouflage”: Classicism, Race, and Homoerotic Desire in the Male Nudes of Richmond Barthé

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James Richmond Barthé (1901–1989) is unique among so-called New Negro artists in that his works focus primarily on the male form in all its classicizing and modernizing masculine glory as a way to explore nuances of what concerned him most: his race, his spiritual sense, his homosexuality, and his class. Barthé’s male nudes became the material and aesthetic terrain through which he attempted to work out and work through the intricacies and complications of these issues. Classical themes and the cultural weight that came with them were a means through which he attempted to resolve the inherent conflicts among these intricate topics. He exploits the black male body as a site for aesthetic, political, cultural, and erotic critique while also directing attention to the potentially transformative aesthetic and political roles of race and homoeroticism through classical themes. He does not quote classical sources directly but instead lights upon their motifs or allusions, incorporating into them those just-mentioned themes rendered through the male nude body at rest or in motion.



Figs. 1–4. Left to Right: Richmond Barthé, *Black Narcissus*, 1929. Bronze, 19 1/2 inches high. Courtesy Childs Gallery, Boston; Richmond Barthé, *Boy with a Flute*, 1939. Plaster, life size. Destroyed about 1942; Richmond Barthé, *Fallen Aviator*, 1945. Bronze, 18 3/4 in. high. Collection of Tuskegee Institute, Tuskegee, Alabama; Richmond Barthé, *Africa Awakening*, 1959. Bronze, 27 x 15 1/2 x 10 1/2 in. Museum of Art, University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg

Barthé’s sculptures of black male nudes are curious in that what surfaces from them are sometimes conflicting discourses and contentious dialogues that result from the appropriation, incorporation, and bestowal of elements of a classicizing ethos onto the racially distinctive body. His approach to the male physique taps into the contested legacies and genealogy of Hellenic classicism as these are linked or associated with overt and covert

strategies for producing alterity in the West. Although the correlation between racial and cultural difference with Western tropes of classicism is not new, it has not sustained a defined path and level of analysis in the study of African American art as it has, for example, in the examination of African American literature.¹ “Expressive Camouflage” is a modest attempt to stimulate and contribute to the discourse.

By way of a select number of sculptural works that include *Black Narcissus* (1929; fig. 1), *Boy with a Flute* (1939; fig. 2), *Fallen Aviator* (1945; fig. 3), and *Africa Awakening* (1959; fig. 4), this essay sets out to explore the aesthetic, cultural, and personal strategies behind Barthé’s approach to classical idealism and its application to the racialized body.

Barthé and the Nude

Barthé preferred classical forms and themes in conjunction with the male nude as “early declarations of the academic training and artistic tradition that set [him] apart” from his African American contemporaries.² Because the nude was the foundation of classical art, Barthé exploited that focus on the body from the start. Very early on, he “staked his claim to classical models,” exploiting this foundation of the Western tradition as a way to “raise African American subjects out of the ghetto” and “rescue the contaminated [stereotyped and caricatured] black body out of centuries of denigration.”³ His was an unusual, if not noble, quest. However, the price for doing so required that he succumb to classicism as a master narrative, which he did. This approach to sculpture became “part of his expressive camouflage in that male nudes based on classical models or themes made the articulation of his homosexuality possible.”⁴ He found mythological characters such as Narcissus, Pan, and Icarus to be “models of psychological complexity and physical perfection appropriate for the portraying of black men” and his erotic desire for them.⁵

According to the art historian Margaret Vendryes, early in his artistic pursuits, Barthé was drawn to classical art and wanted his work to be seen in light of classical masterpieces. For Barthé and other students of art, Hellenic and Roman classicism had been the aesthetic and cultural standard against which the works of most artists and contemporary society could be judged. Hellenic classicism, joined with the male physique, functioned as a means for Barthé to valorize the male form by way of idealization, while allowing him to justify his interests in racial matters and to satisfy his homoerotic desires.

Beginning in the late nineteenth and continuing into the twentieth century in the United States, the pursuit of classicism came into question for some artists and observers, and a debate raged about its relevance to the process of defining the unique qualities of American culture and its institutions. Further undermining the importance of classicism in the early twentieth-century American context was the growth and interest in primitivism as a critical sign of engagement with modernism. In this context, I am defining primitivism as both a popular movement and a modernist discourse that dominated the social and cultural spheres of the United States and Europe in the first half of the twentieth century. As a discourse, primitivism is multiple, complex, and chronologically overlapping. It coincided with the beginnings of European colonial expansion. As a movement, primitivism refers to a popular art trend in the early twentieth century in which the formal aspects of African art were appropriated as creative inspiration for the development of a modern visual language that supported a cultural “rediscovery” of Africans, African Americans, and things African.

It was the Harlem Renaissance and the New Negro Movement of the mid-1920s in the United States that fostered this vogue for a renewed kind of blackness. While retaining his interest in a classicism associated with the Western European tradition, Barthé was also ensconced in matters of primitivism as a modernist movement and discourse.

However, Barthé’s focus on classical art aesthetics and its sources was one means by which the artist also tended to distance himself from being pegged as a black artist expected to be steeped primarily in racial art. Although Barthé did understand and recognize the importance of race and the necessary demonstration of racial pride through cultural pursuits, he was wary of focusing on it to define his work.

His interest in the nude, be it male or female, was unusual for most African American artists of the period who considered it as “forbidden territory” even when justified through classicism and other attributes of the Western canon. The reasons for this are complex and impossible to tackle in the limited space of this essay. Suffice it to say, however, that the black naked body and the potential for its objectification and brutalization fostered a climate of self-imposed censorship among the majority of African American artists.⁶

Barthé’s technical and aesthetic strength was with the male nude, combining expressivity of the body with a focus on racial distinction. He was adept at sculpting the idealized body as well as the naturalistic one. He adhered to the belief that there were “obvious physical differences between black and white male bodies,” that is, that race for him was “anatomically significant.”⁷ For the sculptor, the aesthetics of white male bodies were based on ideas about “established civilization,” whereas those governing black physiques were founded on notions of naturalism and primitivism. By and large, for his white male figures, Barthé based the torso on classical sculpture, rendering those bodies as “muscular as if chiseled out of white marble.” For his black male forms, on the other hand, he used life models, resulting in physiques that were “boyish and lanky,” rising “out of organic mass.”⁸

Barthé was not the only artist of the period to combine a penchant for classical idealism with aspects of the real or naturalistic body. Many of Max Kalish’s sculptures of men, with their muscular torsos and bare chests, recall the heroic and powerful male nudes of antiquity.⁹ Barthé was familiar with Kalish’s work, and throughout his own sculptural efforts he would follow that artist’s lead in injecting a romantic sensibility into the rendering of both naturalistic and classical forms.

“Caught Up in the Coils of Classicism”

In the hands of an African American artist such as Barthé, the appropriation and investment of classicizing principles with black bodies engages some vexing and yet ironic complications, in that classicism often serves as a cultural caché exploited as a means to, all at once, legitimize, uplift, and empower both culturally and aesthetically. Classicism and its aesthetic language in art are typically employed as exemplars of civilization, progress, and modernity, whereas the presumed opposite of classicism—primitivism—has been constructed as the former’s ideological counterpart, regressive to its paradigms. The concepts of classicism and primitivism, as I treat them here, are an investment in cultural schemes of hierarchizing used as a means to demonstrate or wrest power and control over the racialized and objectified other.

Many of the concepts behind Barthé’s thematic choices for his sculptures parallel ideas contained in Alain Locke’s New Negro philosophy, the most significant being the complementary alliance established between classicism and primitivism. Several of Barthé statues embrace this liaison. The focus and placement of these supposedly oppositional strains within some of Barthé’s sculptures operate to intensify a dynamic tension among classicism, primitivism, and homoerotic desire. At the same time, through these works Barthé attempts to resolve conflicts among public strategies of cultural legitimizing, via the embrace of classicism, the need for racial uplift, and visualizing personal expressions of homoeros.

Locke, a lifelong friend and firm supporter of Barthé and his work, viewed primitivism as a positive and affirming trait to be exploited productively by African American artists. In his New Negro philosophy, he sought to combine Afrocentrism and Eurocentrism as partly an attempt on his part to make room for the injection and legitimation of homoerotic sentiment and ethos into African American art and culture.¹⁰ Through many of his sculptures, Barthé successfully brought to visual life the philosopher’s somewhat ambiguous thoughts on primitivism and classicism, embracing both as affirming and empowering modernist trends simultaneously permitting the undercurrents of a Hellenized homoeroticism associated with classicism to reveal itself for appreciation from both primitivists and classicists.¹¹

Barthé and Locke seem to have had no interest in using the Western canon to attack or to negatively critique European culture. However, Barthé’s appropriation and conscientious assimilation of a Hellenic classical ethos of the black body serves to disrupt the inaccurate binary construction of Africa and the West. Locke’s New Negro philosophy labored similarly at such a disruption. Both artist and philosopher agreed that any attempt to starkly divide Eurocentrism and Afrocentrism ignores complicating categories such as gender, sexual orientation, class, and ethnicity.¹²

As had been the case with Barthé, Locke was also a closeted gay African American man who subsumed much of his same-sex desires and sentiments into his cultural pursuits and intellectual productions.¹³ In a 1923 letter addressed to the African American poet Langston Hughes, Locke admitted how much he himself had been “caught up early in the coils of classicism,” confessing to “an early infatuation with Greek ideals of life.”¹⁴

Just as the eighteenth-century art historian of classical antiquities Johann Joachim Winckelmann had done centuries earlier with his homoeroticized musings over works of classical statuary, Locke successfully managed, in his writings on African art and culture, to obliquely equate Africa with Greece by using the language of classicism and Hellenic temperament to describe and compare the cultural production of both civilizations. He successfully subsumed his sexual subjectivity beneath the surface of Africa’s cultural significance by turning Greece into Africa and romanticizing their respective homoerotic undercurrents. In doing so, his interest in joining Africa, primitivism, and classicism was “at least partly motivated by a desire to create a cultural context for black homosexuality.”¹⁵ In other words, Locke managed to couch his preoccupations with same-sex desire in enigmatic terms as subtext beneath the surface of Africa’s cultural significance—a point of view and a strategy fervently embraced and exploited by Barthé through many of his sculptural pieces.

Beyond Narcissism



Fig. 1. Richmond Barthé, *Black Narcissus*, 1929. Bronze, 19 1/2 inches high. Courtesy Childs Gallery, Boston

As a foundation of classical art, the nude was a cornerstone of Barthé’s artistic education at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, founded as the Chicago Academy of Fine Arts in 1879, and one of the first US art schools to admit and support African American students. It was in the early twentieth century that the Art Institute actively built collections of European art and presented quality exhibitions. It was there where Barthé discovered the nude as the foundation of classical art. The early collections of the school of the Art Institute consisted of instructional objects, most notably a large group of plaster casts of works from classical antiquity and European sculpture, to which Barthé had access. While at the institute, Barthé spent a considerable amount of time copying these casts and by doing so “learned through looking how classical artists brought their religion to life through the body.”¹⁶ It was in 1934, however, during a European sojourn, that Barthé made his first and only visit to Paris, where he “solidified his love of classical sculpture.”¹⁷ While there, he visited the Louvre and also took in the many classical and Italian Renaissance–inspired works of art.

Barthé’s statue *Black Narcissus* of 1929 (fig. 1) is one of the earliest nude male figures in his body of work to display his interest in

combining racial specificity with allusions to classical antiquity and incorporating cues to his private homoerotic desires. His depiction of the subject matter is unusual in terms of form and content and constitutes one of many points that separates him from his African American contemporaries working in the figurative tradition.

The myth of Narcissus is told in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* and was probably intended as a moral tale against excessive pride. In the arts, Narcissus has often functioned as a symbol of same-sex passion. This is probably so because of the affection of men for him and also because he finally fell in love with a man (himself). Narcissus has also been seen as a masturbatory icon because of his self-love and also as effeminate because of his focus on his own beauty.

It is not clear if there was a specific classical or Italian Renaissance artist or artwork from which Barthé drew inspiration for his statue. In most standard depictions of the myth, Narcissus is shown as a white male youth, sometimes cherubic, staring longingly into water at the moment he discovers his reflection. In his statue, Barthé gives his Narcissus “negroid” facial features and shows him gazing into a handheld mirror.

Barthé’s use of the word “black” as part of the title of his piece was not in reference to race but was employed as metaphor, alluding to color and to plant symbolism.¹⁸ Similarly, the word “Narcissus,” although clearly referencing the canonical myth, denotes the sedative properties of the single-stem narcissus flower, which is commonly white and “overpoweringly aromatic” and intoxicating. The plant was known for its medicinal and botanical properties in classical antiquity, and the name is linked to a Greek word for intoxicated (narcotic). Several Greek authors, such as Sophocles and Plutarch, reference the plant, as does the Roman author Virgil, who mentions it often in his writings. In addition to its intoxicating fragrance, the flowers of Narcissus are also hermaphroditic (bisexual).

In titling his sculpture *Black Narcissus*, Barthé demonstrates his ability to combine metaphor and plant symbolism with Greek mythology and racial allusions. Clearly, Barthé’s employment of the words “black” and “Narcissus” in the title of his sculpture was an intentional demonstration of his intellectual acumen and his facility with wordplay as a means to generate layered meaning reflective of his own interests and concerns. As Vendryes notes, the irony of a black Narcissus “makes this otherwise quiet, and formally derivative, figure quite provocative.”¹⁹

In addition to all that has been said so far, there might also be a literary connection to the title and content of the statue that suggests yet another potent stratum of signification. The writer Joseph Conrad, in his 1897 novella titled *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, “made a conscious play on black versus white, primitive versus civilized.”²⁰ The full title of Conrad’s novella is *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”: A Tale of the Forecastle*, which is also subtitled *A Tale of the Sea*. The story has been interpreted as an allegory about isolation versus solidarity and is a critique on the increasing indifference to the suffering of others.²¹ Barthé, who from an early age was exposed to the kind of literature Conrad was writing, and who often in his work referenced and incorporated aspects of his personal life and emotional state, may very well have been aware of the irony of both Conrad’s “nigger” and his statue in relation to himself.²²

Black Narcissus and subsequent statues by Barthé provide visual evidence that his sculptures tend to be self-reflexive of his own life story. He channeled most of his physical and emotional needs into his male nudes, and *Black Narcissus* is no exception. The very act of sculpting the male form satisfied and comforted Barthé artistically and emotionally. It was through the sculpted male form, combined with classical themes, that he worked out and worked through what he mostly cared about—matters of race, spirituality, and homoerotic desire. His *Black Narcissus* and Conrad’s “nigger” of the Narcissus are, in a very interesting way, autobiographical. In the story, Conrad’s “nigger” is James Wait, a dying West Indian black sailor on board a merchant ship, called the *Narcissus*, on its way from Bombay to London. In the story, Wait, who falls seriously ill from tuberculosis and ultimately dies, is characterized as superior to his shipmates in brains and brawn. It is plausible that the youth portrayed in *Black Narcissus* refers to Barthé himself, who was reputed by many to have been young, stunningly handsome, and self-assured but also arrogant, self-obsessed, and physically frail. With a hint of arrogance communicated through the “contrapposto thrust of the hips and the garment casually draped over a slender arm, the figure’s blackness and nudity allude to an environment both sophisticated and wild.”²³ *Black Narcissus* references Barthé’s own reputed narcissism in that he was simultaneously shy, self-contained, reclusive, and cocky as a young black artist. It was during this early phase of his career that he attempted to “bury his rural past as he built an adult identity” fashioned out of protecting and making use of certain childhood memories.²⁴

Lastly, Sigmund Freud’s ideas about narcissism may also be useful in coaxing significant meaning from *Black Narcissus*. Freud had a lot to say about narcissism, concluding that it is a pathological condition that hinders normal sexual development—a disorder from which, he claimed, homosexuals commonly suffered. As pathology, homosexuality was linked to narcissism and was seen as “an arrested form of interest in oneself.”²⁵

Boy With a Flute

An unambiguous combination of the classical and primitive body can be seen with Barthé’s life-sized figure, *Boy With a Flute* (fig. 2) and his *Model for Boy With a Flute* (Collection of Peter D. Guggenheim), both from 1939. The life model for these pieces was an aspiring young African American dancer named Juante Meadows, who traveled in the artistic circle of the white modernist Carl Van Vechten and who appeared in many private interracial male nude photographs shot by Van Vechten beginning in 1932.²⁶ Barthé and Van Vechten were on friendly terms and shared an interest in incorporating the racialized and eroticized male nude into their art. It was Barthé who had “procured” Meadows for the photographer who, in turn, used Meadows in many of his private male nude photographs.²⁷

In *Boy with a Flute*, Meadows has been transformed into a “broad-shouldered imp with the look of a mischievous satyr in his dark eyes.”²⁸ Barthé has taken liberties with Meadows’s actual physique by “pumping up his undeveloped muscles” and transforming the lanky youth into “a Greek athlete.”²⁹ In essence, Meadows has been retooled into a black version of the god Pan, a Greek mythological figure scorned for his ugliness. As such, the statue uses a known personage from Greek mythology to comment “on how Eurocentric standards of beauty [have] caused African Americans to destroy what was attractive about their difference.”³⁰ This was clearly a theme of interest to Barthé, who cared, by way of his art, to preach the beauty of the black male body.

In Greek mythology, Pan is the god of the wilderness, shepherds, and flocks, as well as companion to nymphs. He is a hybrid god, having the hindquarters, legs, and horns of a goat. In this respect, he is closely related to fauns and satyrs. Although Barthé had numerous opportunities to take in several Hellenistic sculptures of flute-playing satyrs and fauns at the Louvre while on his 1934 Paris visit, and could have used them as examples, he chose not to capitalize on the hybrid, half-animal, half-human aspect of the mythological figure. Instead, he selects to show a nude human male playing the flute.

The Pan-satyr-faun connection is steeped in sexual symbolism. In mythology, Pan is famous for his sexual powers and is often depicted with a phallus. One version of the myth states that the god learned how to masturbate from his father, Hermes, and taught the habit to shepherds. The presence of fauns and satyrs in Greek art automatically references Pan and

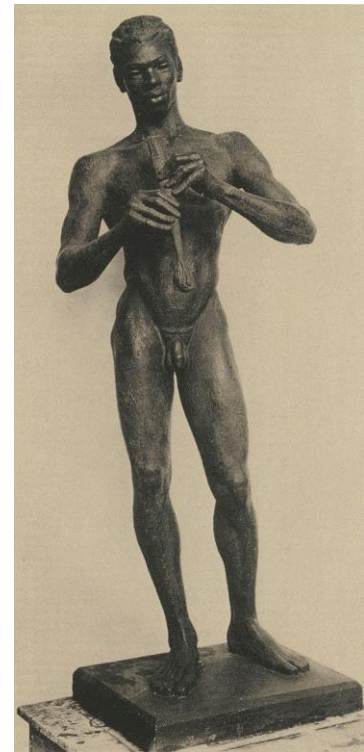


Fig. 2. Richmond Barthé, *Boy with a Flute*, 1939. Plaster, life size. Destroyed about 1942

alludes to unbridled sexual activity.³¹ In visual representations from antiquity, Pan, satyrs, and fauns are frequently shown playing pipes or flutes. During the nineteenth century, images of nude flute players abounded and were associated with eroticism and arcadian or woodland environments. Such visual depictions, as seen in Thomas Eakins’s 1880s photograph, *Standing Male Nude with Pipes*, often have strong homoerotic implications in that holding and fingering the shaft of the pipe and blowing on it has sexual connotations associated with the phallus and the act of fellatio. This is an inside joke that Barthé, and that part of his audience who were in the know, would have greatly appreciated.

Boy with a Flute constitutes Barthé’s commentary on classical mythology and the import that racial distinction and homoeroticism could bring to it. Unfortunately, the work was not financially successful, despite its sexual imagery. The incongruity of racialized physiognomy and the idealized classical physique may have proved too off-putting for audiences. The work remained in Barthé’s studio after its weeklong display at the 1939 Whitney Museum of American Art annual exhibition.³² At some point after 1945, the statue was irreparably damaged while in Barthé’s studio and was eventually discarded.

Icarus for a New Age



Fig. 3. Richmond Barthé, *Fallen Aviator*, 1945. Bronze, 18 3/4 in. high. Collection of Tuskegee Institute, Tuskegee, Alabama

In 1945, Barthé produced a sculptural work that used a mythological figure to reference an episode in African American history and combined it with classical allusions. It was at the end of World War II that the sculptor was privately commissioned by an anonymous European American Air Force officer to sculpt a memorial for an “African American comrade” who had “trained at Tuskegee , and . . . [who] crashed trying to lift off.”³³ The sculpture, called *Fallen Aviator* (fig. 3) is directly related to the Second World War and serves as a powerful symbol of determination and defeat, hubris and punishment. The work sets out to memorialize virile black manhood by way of allusion to African American history and a classical myth, specifically, that of Icarus. In most visual depictions of the myth, Icarus is shown with his father, Daedalus, who, according to the story, was a renowned craftsman charged with designing and building a huge labyrinth, located under the court of King Minos of Crete, to imprison the

minotaur, a hybrid mythological creature that was half-man, half-bull. In order to guard the secret of the labyrinth, King Minos had Daedalus and Icarus imprisoned in a tower above the palace. To escape the edifice, Daedalus fashioned two sets of wings made of feathers and wax—one for himself and the other for Icarus. Daedalus taught his son how to fly. However, before doing so, he warned Icarus not to fly too close to the sun, because the wax holding the feathers together would melt and he would plunge to his death into the sea. Despite his

father’s warning, Icarus became overjoyed with the sensation of flight and flew too close to the sun. The wax melted, and Icarus fell into the ocean and drowned.

There are many symbolisms associated with the Daedalus and Icarus myth that Barthé’s exploits and combines with the racial element associated with the Tuskegee Airmen and African American history, as well as with the homoerotic implications associated with the myth. The lesson of the story that is relevant to Barthé has to do with the Greek virtues of “healthy-mindedness, self-control, and moderation guided by knowledge and balance.”³⁴ So the flight of Icarus could be interpreted as a lesson in the value of moderation, of advocating one to respect one’s limits and to act accordingly. Icarus’s age is also relevant to the meaning of the myth, for as a typical adolescent, Icarus was impulsive in following his appetite for life, to rush into the unknown adventure, to chase dreams, to follow temptation and not to heed the warnings of danger from more experienced others.

Barthé’s depiction is meaningful in the way he combines various symbolisms attached to the myth with African American history. The statue references the Tuskegee Airmen—the popular name given to a group of African American fighter and bomber pilots who fought in World War II. They were the first African American military aviators in the US armed forces. At the time, all black military pilots who trained in the United States did so at Moton field, the Tuskegee army air field, and were educated at Tuskegee University, located near Tuskegee, Alabama. Barthé’s Southern roots (he was born in Mississippi) would have made him knowledgeable of this history.

When the statue was created, segregation was still exercised in the military. Although the practice technically ended in 1948, just three years after the creation of the work, its application persisted nonetheless. So, by referencing this historical actuality by way of the sculpture and combining that reality with a classical myth about freedom and its potential dangers or drawbacks, Barthé used classical antiquity as both a form of racial uplift and as a warning against African American complacency.

Africa (and Greece) Awakening

Throughout much of the 1940s, there was a creative and financial lull in Barthé’s career. In 1949, he decided to move from New York City to Jamaica. There, he purchased a house with some adjacent land in the small village of Colgate. Proof of his continued enthusiasm in using classicism as expressive camouflage for his homoerotic interests is seen in the name he chose to give to his new domestic headquarters—Iolau—the name associated with the nephew, lover, and charioteer of the brawny god Heracles (Hercules) and the title of Edward Carpenter’s 1917 anthology devoted to



Fig. 4. Richmond Barthé, *Africa Awakening*, 1959. Bronze, 27 x 15 ½ x 10 ½ in. Museum of Art, University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg

the documentation of same-sex historical attractions. By giving the name Iolaus to his property, Barthe was hoping “to attract new and special friends.”³⁵

It was while at Iolaus that Barthé created, in 1959—a decade after arriving in Jamaica—his dynamic statue titled *Africa Awakening*. He described the piece as “a giant of an African recently aroused and blatantly angry.”³⁶ Barthé’s foreboding figure is bald-headed and broad-chested, with a muscular physique. The tense musculature and expressive face contribute to the apprehension one senses in the statue. This tautness is countered by a graceful horizontal stretch and radical twist of the body at the waist that instantly calls to mind the classical statue *Dying Gaul* (Capitoline Museums, Rome) from the late third century BC. Unlike that classical work, however, whose figure is in a position of expiration and passive defeat, Barthé’s figure “rears up like an angry predator.”³⁷ Based on the title and the subject matter, Barthé’s figure represents an allegory of Africa rousing to consciousness and potential action. It is a metaphor for an aggressive black self-awareness and resistance against external and internal forces.

According to Vendryes, the statue is autobiographical and grew out of the sculptor’s troubled mind due to the unstable political situation in Jamaica.³⁸ It was during this period that the island colony was fighting for its independence from British rule, and times of unrest prevailed. Barthé was uncomfortable and resentful of the situation. He experienced suspicion and contempt from Jamaican natives when a rumor spread that he was using local male models for his nude images. Nudity for Jamaicans signaled sexuality and suggested to them that immoral things were perhaps going on at Iolaus. These rumors damaged the artist’s reputation on the island and isolated him further. Barthé’s social and racial status, along with his homosexuality, were, up until then, closeted against a homophobic environment. This situation caused him to sink into a severe depression that pushed his mental state to the edge and eventually obliged his friends to commit him to a sanitarium in nearby St. Ann’s Bay, where his depression and paranoia deepened.

With such an angry yet aesthetically stunning work that exhibits his command of the anatomical structure of the male form, Barthé seems to be on the defensive. *Africa Awakening* combines the artist’s concerns about bringing into harmony his status as a black gay artist vis-à-vis these aspects of his identity (his blackness and his gayness) and his perceived place in a hostile world around him. Alluding to a classical model to vent such a frustration provided both legitimacy and solace at this isolated and isolating critical moment in his life and career.

Conclusion

Barthé is unique among African American artists of the period in that he exercised creative borrowing in exploiting the classical tradition and transformed the associative meanings of classicism into interests related to his own personal needs and desires, along with larger concerns related to African American history and visual culture.³⁹ Barthé’s approach to classicism does incorporate a black consciousness, but in so doing, it fails to narrow or break down the racial distinction between white and black. Any hopes of universalizing classical aesthetic language as relevant to African American experience falls short. However, we should give Barthé credit for at least attempting to do so. We need to ask, in what ways has Barthé appropriated, incorporated, and transformed our understanding of classicism as

it relates to African American art, culture, and experience? Better still, in what ways does Barthé successfully reroute, through appropriation, incorporation, or transformation, the classical tradition as it rings relevant to issues of race and homosexuality? These are some of the questions this essay has attempted to consider.

Notes

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- ¹ See, for example, Emily Greenwood, “Re-rooting the Classical Tradition: New Directions in Black Classicism,” *Classical Receptions Journal* 1, no. 1 (January 2009): 87–103. <https://academic.oup.com/crj/article/1/1/87/360590>.
- ² Margaret Rose Vendryes, *Barthé: A Life in Sculpture* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008), 47.
- ³ Vendryes, *Barthé*, 47.
- ⁴ Vendryes, *Barthé*, 70.
- ⁵ Vendryes, *Barthé*, 49.
- ⁶ Richard J. Powell, *Black Art and Culture in the 20th Century* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1997), 146–47.
- ⁷ Vendryes, *Barthé*, 112.
- ⁸ Vendryes, *Barthé*, 112.
- ⁹ Melissa Dabakis, “The Individual vs. the Collective: Images of the American Worker in the 1920s,” *IA, The Journal of the Society for Industrial Archeology* 12, no. 2 (1986): 51.
- ¹⁰ James Smalls, “Sculpting Black Queer Bodies: The Case of Richmond Barthé,” in Anne Crémieux, Xavier Lemoine, and Jean-Paul Rocchi, eds. *Understanding Blackness Through Performance* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 204–5.
- ¹¹ James Smalls, “Féral Benga: African Muse of Modernism,” *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art* 41 (November 2017): 54.
- ¹² Kevin J. Wetmore, *Black Dionysus: Greek Tragedy and African American Theatre* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2003), 43.
- ¹³ This is not surprising, especially when we consider that in the history of art, the “father of modern art history,” Johann Joachim Winckelmann, did a similar thing in his writings on classical art. On Locke’s homosexuality, see Leonard Harris, “Outing Alain L. Locke: Empowering the Silenced,” in Mark Blasius, ed. *Sexual Identities, Queer Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 321–41. Also see Leonard Harris and Charles Molesworth, *Alain L. Locke: Biography of a Philosopher* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2008).
- ¹⁴ David Bergman, *Gaiety Transfigured: Gay Self-Representation in American Literature* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 177.
- ¹⁵ David Bergman, “The African and the Pagan in Gay Black Literature,” in Joseph Bristow, ed. *Sexual Sameness: Textual Differences in Lesbian and Gay Writing* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 159–60.
- ¹⁶ Vendryes, *Barthé*, 48–9.
- ¹⁷ Vendryes, *Barthé*, 61.
- ¹⁸ As Vendryes has observed, the term “negro,” rather than “black,” was used to describe African Americans until the late 1960s. See Vendryes, *Barthé*, 49.
- ¹⁹ Vendryes, *Barthé*, 49.
- ²⁰ Vendryes, *Barthé*, 49.

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- ²¹ Norris W. Yates, “Social Comment in *The Nigger of the Narcissus*,” *Proceedings of the Modern Language Association of America (PMLA)* 79, no. 1 (March 1964): 183.
- ²² Vendryes, *Barthé*, 49.
- ²³ Vendryes, *Barthé*, 49.
- ²⁴ Vendryes, *Barthé*, 49–50.
- ²⁵ Sigmund Freud, “On Narcissism: An Introduction (1914),” in James Strachey et al., *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Volume 14 (London: Hogarth Press, 1957), 192.
- ²⁶ On this clandestine trove of homoerotic photographs, see James Smalls, *The Homoerotic Photography of Carl Van Vechten: Public Face, Private Thoughts* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006).
- ²⁷ Very little is known of Meadows’s biography, but he was probably a young dancer who circulated among Harlem’s black and white gay cultural elite, to which Barthé belonged. It is important to note that there is a parallel between the sculpture of Barthé and the photographs of Van Vechten in that both artists were keen on playing out in visual form the overlapping of their respective homoerotic desires and their penchant for primitivism juxtaposed with European classicizing allusions. See Smalls, *The Homoerotic Photography of Carl Van Vechten*, 96–98.
- ²⁸ Vendryes, *Barthé*, 117.
- ²⁹ Vendryes, *Barthé*, 117.
- ³⁰ Vendryes, *Barthé*, 117.
- ³¹ Robin Osborne, “Men Without Clothes: Heroic Nakedness and Greek Art,” *Gender & History* 9, no. 3 (November 1997): 515.
- ³² Vendryes, *Barthé*, 119.
- ³³ Vendryes, *Barthé*, 120.
- ³⁴ Aquileana, “Icarus’ Fall: ‘The Myth. Symbolism and Interpretation,’” *La Audacia de Aquiles* (blog), April 19, 2014, <https://aquileana.wordpress.com/2014/04/19/icarusfall-the-myth-symbolism-and-interpretation>, accessed January 1, 2018.
- ³⁵ Vendryes, *Barthé*, 156.
- ³⁶ Vendryes, *Barthé*, 164.
- ³⁷ Vendryes, *Barthé*, 168.
- ³⁸ Vendryes, *Barthé*, 170.
- ³⁹ On the classical tradition as creative borrowing, minus consideration of the racial dimension, see John S. Crawford, “The Classical Tradition in American Sculpture: Structure and Surface,” *American Art Journal* 11, no. 3 (July 1979): 38–52.