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REMEMBER ME TO HARLEM

EDITED BY EMILY BERNARD

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*The Letters of Langston Hughes
and Carl Van Vechten*

EDITED BY EMILY BERNARD



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Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Praise](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[A NOTE ON THE TEXT](#)

[DRAMATIS PERSONAE](#)

[INTRODUCTION](#)

[1925–1926](#)

[1927–1930](#)

[1931](#)

[1932–1934](#)

[1935–1940](#)

[1941–1944](#)

[1945–1949](#)

[1950–1964](#)

[ENDNOTES](#)

[APPENDIX I - INTRODUCING LANGSTON HUGHES TO THE READER by Carl Van Vechten](#)

[APPENDIX II - TWO POEMS BY LANGSTON HUGHES](#)

[APPENDIX III - CARL VAN VECHTEN 1880–1964](#)

[APPENDIX IV - TRIBUTE TO CARL VAN VECHTEN by Langston Hughes](#)

[SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY](#)

[ILLUSTRATION CREDITS](#)

*For Clara Jean Jefferson Bernard, poet, mother, friend
and
for Bruce Kellner, thank you*

Acclaim for Emily Bernard's **REMEMBER ME TO HARLEM**

“A rich, informative collection; Bernard’s commentary is both easy and thorough.”

—*Vibe*

“A gratifying portrait of two people who followed their passions and seemed to have had an extremely good time along the way.”

—*Black Issues Book Review*

“The letters between the two friends are a joy—warm, witty and intelligent.”

—*Austin American-Statesman*

“A wonderful trove, overflowing with rich cultural history and chatty asides.”

—*Time Out New York*

“These letters, superbly chosen, attest to the depth of [Hughes and Van Vechten’s] relationship, its sparkling optimism, its priceless sense of honor, and its determination to survive despite the expectations of a needlessly divided nation.”

—Arnold Rampersad,
author of *The Life of Langston Hughes*

“A testament to how mutual affection and common interest can eradicate the barriers of race, age, class and culture.”

—*The Commercial Appeal*

“Emily Bernard’s lucid, scrupulous annotation bring this rich period to life.”

—Steven Watson,
author of *The Harlem Renaissance*

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INTRODUCTION

Langston Hughes and Carl Van Vechten met at a benefit party in Harlem on the evening of November 10, 1924. “Kingston” was the name Van Vechten heard and recorded in his diary; maybe he was distracted by the commotion surrounding his new acquaintance. Hughes had returned that day from a ten-month stay in Europe, where he had made his way through Paris and Italy working and writing poetry. From abroad, he had dazzled black Harlem literati with his work, and now everyone was eager to meet the celebrated newcomer. He was twenty-two years old. At forty-four, Van Vechten was long used to public curiosity. For nearly twenty years, he had enthralled New York with his opinionated dance and music criticism, as well as with several novels. He was equally famous for his personal flamboyance. The *New York Times* chronicled his social life and fashion peccadilloes with a breathless fascination typically reserved for movie stars. But on that night in 1924, Carl Van Vechten was just another onlooker, drawn to Harlem because of the cultural movement blossoming there. The movement would become known as the Harlem Renaissance. Even during its first stirrings, Langston Hughes was understood to be one of its most promising talents. Months later, the two men would meet again at another Harlem event and embarked on a friendship that would endure until Van Vechten’s death almost forty years later.

Photographs from around 1924 reveal a large, imposing Van Vechten, with thin graying hair and generous lips that barely reached over a famously protruding pair of front teeth. His odd looks were complemented by a one-of-a-kind wardrobe that included jade bracelets, ruffled blouses, and silk lounging robes. The whole effect was irresistible for popular caricaturists of the era such as Ralph Barton and Miguel Covarrubias. By contrast, Langston Hughes was the definition of handsome in 1924, slender and elegant, with the dreamy looks befitting a poet. These surface differences hint at more substantial contrasts that would seem to make a friendship between them unlikely. Van Vechten’s privileged Midwestern background had nothing in common with the nomadic, neglectful upbringing Hughes had endured. Poverty had shaped Hughes’s life the same way that material comfort was taken for granted in Van Vechten’s. For all of his financial hard luck, however, Hughes never developed anything more than a casual attitude about money. He had a hard time asking for it even when it was owed to him, and it never stayed in his pockets long once he got it. Van Vechten wanted Hughes to take a more deliberate attitude toward his finances. Hughes in turn wished Van Vechten would take the relationship between art and politics more seriously. Their ideas on the subject clashed while their friendship was still young, and remained one of the most tender points of disagreement between them. On top of all of these differences, there was race.

Blacks in 1920s Harlem were generally of two minds about downtown white interest in uptown happenings. The same white money that kept most Harlem activities afloat also pushed black people out of their own establishments. In a 1927 essay called “The Caucasian Storms Harlem,” the black writer Rudolph Fisher described the situation common in most Harlem cabarets: “I am actually staring at, I frequently feel uncomfortable and out of place, and when I go out on the floor to dance I am lost in a sea of white faces.” Some Harlem clubs, like the famous Cotton Club, barred black patrons.

altogether. Black resentment grew quietly. “They didn’t say it out loud,” Langston Hughes wrote in his 1940 autobiography, *The Big Sea*, “for Negroes are practically never rude to white people.” Harlem blacks understood all too well the bottom-line importance of white investment in Harlem. Still, blacks resented being treated “like amusing animals in a zoo,” to use Hughes’s words, by whites whose interest in black culture lasted only until the bartender’s last call. “Rent parties,” thrown ostensibly to raise rent money for the host, became an important way for blacks to congregate privately, away from the curious gazes of white people.

Initially, Carl Van Vechten’s interest in black culture seemed to be an exception to the general shallowness of white voyeurism uptown. His signature Harlem tours were rites of passage for white sophisticates, but Van Vechten’s fascination with black culture far outdistanced the curiosity of those he shepherded to Harlem. He wrote articles for *Vanity Fair* and other mainstream magazines extolling the virtues of spirituals and the blues, arguing for their recognition as authentic American art forms. He threw parties as a way of introducing struggling black artists to influential whites. These parties became legendary in black circles and were written up regularly in the society pages of the *Amsterdam News*. Van Vechten loved his nights at the Savoy, but he was also a dedicated and serious patron of black arts and letters.

Things changed after August 1926, when Carl Van Vechten published his notorious novel *Nigger Heaven*. After that, his name became synonymous with white exploitation of black culture; the association still holds today—that is, when he is remembered in connection with the Harlem Renaissance at all. Most of the time, Van Vechten’s name generates more blank stares than disapproving frowns. But during the heyday of this cultural movement, Van Vechten was, in the words of the late historian Nathan Huggins, “the undisputed downtown authority on uptown night life.”



Scholars argue about the exact dates of the Harlem Renaissance, or the New Negro Renaissance, as it was called then, but nearly all agree that the term itself is misleading. For one thing, there was never exactly a “renaissance.” What took place during the 1920s was not a rebirth but just another stage in the evolution of black American art that had begun in the 1700s. In addition, black intellectual and cultural activities during the early part of the twentieth century were by no means limited to New York’s Harlem. Literature, music, and politics also flourished in cities like Detroit, Chicago, Philadelphia, and Washington, D.C., all of which were prominent destinations for the quarter-million black migrants fleeing Southern poverty and racial violence during the period known as “the Great Migration.” The promise of jobs in these cities gave migrating blacks the last reason they needed to leave the South. Post–World War I economic prosperity all over the country was the grease that kept the wheels of the Harlem Renaissance in motion. But although the bulk of Harlem Renaissance activity shut down with the crash of 1929, many black artists didn’t produce their best-known work until after the New Negro Movement had more or less closed up shop.

There are, of course, practical reasons for the centrality of Harlem to the movement. For literary hopefuls like Langston Hughes, Harlem was important because of the recent establishment of New York as the center of the publishing industry. But practical reasons aside, Harlem was simply a mythical place, the stuff of fantasy. “I’d rather be a lamppost in Harlem than Governor of Georgia

went a popular folk saying. The activity on and off the streets was constant. Inside cabarets, buffets, flats, speakeasies, and ballrooms, each dancer, singer, and musician was more ingenious than the one who came before her. “Harlem . . . isn’t typical—but it is significant, it is prophetic,” philosophized one of the godfathers of the movement, Alain Locke. The two-mile section of northern Manhattan was known as the “black Mecca,” and claimed two hundred thousand black residents by 1928, the year the Harlem Renaissance was in full bloom.

The Harlem Renaissance had almost as many philosophers as cabaret dancers. No one articulated the vision of the movement more precisely than W. E. B. Du Bois, an intellectual of international prominence whose career would span two generations. Du Bois was the founder of *The Crisis*, the official magazine of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), an organization Du Bois also helped to found. *The Crisis* was the most important forum for black news and culture, and every black writer dreamed of getting published in its pages. Other magazines carried weight; *Opportunity* and the *Messenger* were also important vehicles of black thought. But none of the other journals could boast a leader as impressive as Du Bois. *The Crisis* was his pulpit. His editorials were passionate lectures about racial uplift. In an April 1920 issue, he identified the arts as the path for black salvation: “A renaissance of American Negro literature is due; the material about us in this strange, heart-rending race tangle is rich beyond dream and only we can tell the tale and sing the song from the heart.” No word was published in *The Crisis* that didn’t meet Du Bois’s standards. Because art had the potential to liberate black people from social bondage, Du Bois believed, it should be approached with gravity, even reverence. Every time a writer put pen to paper, he was taking the future of the race in his hands.

While writers, painters, and philosophers contemplated the significance of this unique historic moment, most other Harlemites struggled to find work and to survive the racism they found in their new Northern homes. The experience of this majority barely exists in contemporary stories about the Harlem Renaissance, and that’s the way the movement’s architects wanted it. Du Bois himself believed that the social status of blacks could best be achieved through the efforts of a very small fraction of blacks and whites. This “talented tenth” would pull “all that are worthy of saving up their vantage ground.” Influenced by the Victorian morality of their youth, Du Bois and other movement leaders were motivated by a “politics of respectability,” and were always mindful of the derogatory beliefs the white world held about them.

So, effectively, several different “renaissances” took place during the 1920s. Those who sought leadership from Du Bois had little use for the pageantry of the black political leader Marcus Garvey, and probably neither constituency wanted anything to do with those who heard salvation in the baritone of the cross-dressing blues singer Gladys Bentley. Though all of black America was energized by the social and political changes, only a very few were interested in the debates taking place in the parlors of Striver’s Row, a nickname for one of Harlem’s most elite neighborhoods. As Langston Hughes put it in *The Big Sea*, “The ordinary Negroes hadn’t heard of the Negro Renaissance. And if they had, it hadn’t raised their wages any.”

Cynical by 1940, Hughes virtually swooned the first time he set foot in Harlem in 1924. He wrote wistfully in *The Big Sea*: “I was in love with Harlem long before I got there.” Harlem was Hughes’s first home, at least in symbolic terms. Born in 1902 in Joplin, Missouri, to Carrie and James Hughes, he came from a distinguished line of black radicals: his maternal grandmother’s first husband had

died fighting with John Brown at Harper's Ferry. This venerable ancestry did not translate into a blessed childhood for young Langston, however. His parents' unhappy marriage effectively ended when he was still a boy, and Hughes spent the majority of his childhood shuttling from relative to relative while his mother, Carrie, struggled to establish herself in a variety of careers. She loved her son but was simply unable to provide him with any stability. She married again and gave Langston a stepbrother, Gwyn Clark, whom he always looked after, as he did his mother. Carrie would depend on Langston in his adulthood, expecting him to provide for her. Sometimes Van Vechten would get involved and give Carrie financial help when Hughes was unable to do so.

Hughes may have resented his mother, but he hated his father. James Nathaniel Hughes was a difficult man to like. "My father hated Negroes," Hughes explained in *The Big Sea*. He also thought his son's literary ambitions were a waste of time, although Langston didn't realize the full extent of their differences until he went to visit his father in Mexico during his seventeenth summer. Langston suffered during that visit; his hatred for his father made him physically ill. The visit changed him, but it also helped him shape an image of himself in opposition to his father. More importantly, it was during this trip that he wrote one of his most famous poems, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers." Still, he would revisit that painful summer again and again in later years, using it like a barometer to measure other difficult experiences against it. His childhood would provide material for his poetry, plays, and novel, *Not Without Laughter*.

By contrast, Carl Van Vechten's childhood was so stable that he found it stifling. He was born in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, in 1880 to Charles Duane and Amanda Fitch Van Vechten. Like Hughes, Van Vechten was descended from political radicals: his mother was a suffragist who kept company with abolitionists and his father's donations helped establish the Piney Woods School for free black children at the turn of the century. The elder Van Vechten instructed his children to address with respect the blacks who worked on their property. Young Carl expanded upon the lesson when he was a college student at the University of Chicago, and became a regular in the city's black entertainment night spots, as well as its black churches.

By the time the Harlem Renaissance was born, Carl Van Vechten's interest in black culture was already intense. But it wasn't until the mid-twenties that this interest exploded into an "addiction," as he himself later called it.

It started with a book. Walter White's searing novel about the Atlanta race riots, *Fire in the Flint*, moved Van Vechten to ask their mutual publisher, Alfred A. Knopf, for an introduction to the author. Within days, Van Vechten knew "every important Negro in Harlem," or so he claimed. It was White who escorted Van Vechten to the historic NAACP event at Happy Rhone's cabaret on November 10, 1924, where both men met Langston Hughes.

Van Vechten told his biographer, Bruce Kellner, that he and White "got on like a house afire," which was lucky, considering how useful the friendship was for each of them. As secretary of the NAACP, White was eager for access to Van Vechten's world of downtown connections. Van Vechten didn't disappoint him. Not only did he facilitate individual meetings for White, he gave parties at which powerful whites met black artists on the most intimate of terms. Countless unions were forged at these events. His parties created Harlem legends, such as the one in which Mrs. Astor is greeted so familiarly by a porter at Union Station. "How do you know my name, young man?" she asked. "Why,

met you last weekend at Carl Van Vechten's," he responded. White wasn't the only one who came to identify Van Vechten's tony address as the "downtown office of the NAACP." Van Vechten's ingenious brand of "social work" was one of his greatest contributions to the Harlem Renaissance.

Van Vechten's next deed was what many consider the least of his contributions to the Harlem Renaissance: *Nigger Heaven*. In three breathless months, Van Vechten composed this banal story of a thwarted love affair between Mary Love, a librarian at the Harlem branch of the New York Public Library, and Byron Kasson, a would-be writer. The novel would have disappeared like most 1920s potboilers were it not for a few off-color scenes and its title. Van Vechten's representations of black sexuality offended those who believed that black uplift should be achieved through the politics of respectability. With his title, he had violated the unwritten law that forbade a white man's using the word "nigger."

What complicated Van Vechten's case was that he knew the law. As a footnote to the first appearance of "nigger" in the book, Van Vechten cautioned: "While this informal epithet is freely used by Negroes among themselves, not only as a term of opprobrium, but also actually as a term of endearment, its employment by a white person is always fiercely resented." He even added a final directive: "The word Negress is forbidden under all circumstances."

So why did Van Vechten call his book *Nigger Heaven* when he knew better? He claimed the title was ironic. He also must have believed that he was entitled to use the term. Friends like Zora Neale Hurston had crowned him an "honorary Negro." One of his favorite portraits was a Miguel Covarrubias cartoon of himself in blackface titled "A Prediction." Van Vechten took all of this literally. A combination of naïveté and arrogance led him to believe he was unique, a white man who had transcended his whiteness.

Van Vechten's choice was also inspired by his keen commercial sensibilities; he saw African American culture in terms of potential book sales. "The squalor of Negro life, the vice of Negro life offer a wealth of novel, exotic, picturesque material to the artist." This was Van Vechten's own response to a questionnaire he anonymously composed for *The Crisis*, called "The Negro in Art: How Shall He Be Portrayed?" and published six months before the release of *Nigger Heaven*. Writers from every corner of American literature were solicited for responses. In his own response, Van Vechten waved away black "sensitivity" to sensationalistic depictions as bad business sense. "Are Negro writers going to write about this exotic material while it is fresh," he wrote, "or will they continue to make a free gift of it to white authors who will exploit it until not a drop of vitality remains?"

The boldness with which he asserted his right to the "exotic material" of black culture had a lot to do with the swift condemnation that followed on the heels of the book's publication. The black press denounced *Nigger Heaven* and the "Negro pseudo-intellectuals" who had abetted the white author in its creation. Those who had been suspicious of Carl Van Vechten all along now had the evidence they needed to condemn him. It seemed to many that Carl Van Vechten had had hidden motives, that he had ruthlessly exploited Harlem for his material gain.

The book had its black defenders, however, many of them, not surprisingly, Van Vechten's close friends. "No book could possibly be as bad as *Nigger Heaven* has been painted," Langston Hughes wrote in the *Pittsburgh Courier* in 1927, gently sidestepping the question of the novel's literary

qualities. Even when Hughes returned to the controversy nearly fifteen years later in *The Big Sea*, he never tried to base a defense on the book's merit. Instead he sympathized with those who felt alienated by the racial epithet in the title but insisted that readers put the whole thing in perspective. "The critics of the left, like the Negroes of the right, proceeded to light on Mr. Van Vechten, and he was accused of ruining, distorting, polluting, and corrupting every Negro writer from then on," Hughes remembered.

Of all his black associates, Van Vechten was most often accused of corrupting Langston Hughes, particularly when Hughes's second book of poetry, *Fine Clothes to the Jew*, was published in 1925, even though Hughes had composed most of the poems before he met Van Vechten. *Fine Clothes* drew as much fire for its title and sensual content as did *Nigger Heaven*. In defending Van Vechten, then, Hughes was essentially defending his own artistic decisions.

Hughes allowed that Van Vechten's title may have been "an unfortunate choice." In 1926, he was one of several people—including Van Vechten's own father—who tried to dissuade Van Vechten from using it. But whatever discomfort he felt never interfered with his support for the book. In fact, when Van Vechten was threatened with a lawsuit for using popular song lyrics in the book without permission, he turned to Hughes, who was then a student at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania. Hughes jumped on the first train and replaced the borrowed lyrics with originals in a night-long session at Van Vechten's apartment.

Hughes's generosity was inspired, at least in part, by gratitude for the man who had arranged his first book contract. Several months passed before Hughes and Van Vechten caught sight of each other again after their initial encounter on November 10, 1924. But when they met again on May 1, 1925, they formed one of the most enduring bonds of their lives. An awards dinner sponsored by *Opportunity* magazine brought them together this second time. Langston Hughes walked off with the first prize for his poem "The Weary Blues." Again, Van Vechten found himself in the crush of people trying to congratulate the young poet. But this time around, the two men discovered one of their many common interests, and spent the evening together doing what they both loved: prowling the nightspots of Harlem.

Hughes visited Van Vechten's apartment on West Fifty-fifth Street the next day, where he explored the lavish rooms and read some of his poetry. Van Vechten, or "Carlo," as his intimates called him, insisted that Hughes leave his manuscript of poems overnight. When Hughes came back to claim it, Van Vechten had suggestions and a title. What did Hughes think of calling the book *The Weary Blues*?

He had a publisher in mind as well. Van Vechten quickly made arrangements to have lunch with his friend and editor, Alfred A. Knopf, whose firm was only ten years old in 1925. Within three weeks, Hughes had his first book contract. Van Vechten also arranged for *Vanity Fair* to publish a selection of poems from the manuscript.

In his first letters to Van Vechten, Hughes marvels at his older friend's attention and generosity. Van Vechten's influence at Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., was at its height in those days. He had been a Knopf author since 1916, when the publisher, with his year-old company, had convinced Van Vechten to compose a book for him, a collection of essays called *Music and Bad Manners*. Van Vechten continued to produce a book of essays every year for Knopf that were reviewed well but sold poorly.

Then, he struck gold with his first novel, 1922's *Peter Whiffle*, a fictional biography that went through eight printings in the first year. He had discovered himself as a writer several years before, after a friend remarked that his letters made better reading than his published material: "After that a change came over my writing. It was true; I had been excluding personality from my work. I had not been expressing myself, and writing which is not self-expression . . . is entirely useless." With *Peter Whiffle*, Van Vechten's experiments with self-expression had finally paid off, and Knopf began dominating the best-seller lists with a redoubtable trio of writers: H. L. Mencken, Joseph Hergesheimer, and Carl Van Vechten.

Van Vechten had considerable muscle to flex at Knopf when he decided to help Langston Hughes, who dreamed of a similar kind of literary success. Hughes had impressed the black literati with his early poems, but none of his Harlem mentors had the power to get Hughes published. Van Vechten's one lunch date with Alfred Knopf meant that Hughes could quit his tedious day job doing research for the African American historian Carter G. Woodson. Soon, Van Vechten was hard at work helping other black writers get published at Knopf. Nella Larsen's novels *Quicksand* and *Passing*, the 1925 reissuing of James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, as well as many of the significant works of Langston Hughes all came about as the direct result of Van Vechten's influence.

Although Hughes certainly felt a debt to Van Vechten, who would serve as his de facto editor and agent for years to come, gratitude hardly covers the range of feelings Hughes and other blacks felt for Van Vechten. What they saw in Van Vechten was more than a useful contact; he was a fellow champion of free expression in black arts and culture.

By 1926, a conflict had split the Harlem literati in two. Old school writers like Du Bois still believed that blacks should use literature as a way to put their best foot forward, to produce an image that challenged the racist manner in which white people most often portrayed them. But a younger group of new school writers loved the very features of black culture that old school writers found embarrassing. As a leader of the new school, Langston Hughes articulated the views of this group in his powerful 1926 essay, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain": "Let the blare of Negro jazz bands and the bellowing voice of Bessie Smith singing Blues penetrate the closed ears of the color near-intellectual until they listen and perhaps understand." Hughes found the anxieties of the "smug Negro middle class" boring. He was energized by the way the black majority lived their lives while the elite worried about appearances: "These common people are not afraid of spirituals, as for a long time their more intellectual brethren were, and jazz is their child." Like Van Vechten, he had an eye on the market: "They furnish a wealth of colorful, distinctive material for any artist because they still hold their own individuality in the face of American standardizations." But mainly, he celebrated artistic freedom: "We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame."

Hughes's words became a rallying cry for black writers who rankled at the constraints imposed upon them by both white expectations and the agendas of black taste-makers like Du Bois. And after *Nigger Heaven* was published, Van Vechten became something of a poster boy, a perfect case in point for black writers who wanted to change the rules about black art. The fact that their work provoked their stuffy mentors was a pleasing side effect to their revolution.

Like Hughes, Van Vechten loved "the low-down folks," as Hughes called the black working class

But for many blacks his whiteness raised questions about his motivations. The black poet Countee Cullen—Hughes's rival for the affections of Harlem poetry lovers—never forgave Van Vechten for the title *Nigger Heaven*. Du Bois's scathing review of the book ended with the suggestion that readers "drop the book gently in the grate." Even whites found his affiliations with blacks suspicious. "Sullen-mouthed, silky-haired author Van Vechten has been playing with Negroes lately," *Time* magazine remarked cattily in 1925.

Black friends mounted a defense. In his autobiography, *Born to Be*, the black singer Taylor Gordon called Van Vechten, the man who had discovered him, "the Abraham Lincoln of Negro Art." Zora Neale Hurston once said, "If Carl Van Vechten were a people instead of a person, I could then say these are my people." Nella Larsen proclaimed Van Vechten "the best thing that ever happened to the Negro race." But none of this was enough to salvage Carl Van Vechten from his present-day fate of virtual erasure.

Nigger Heaven does not really explain Van Vechten's disappearance from the history of the Harlem Renaissance. Nor does the fact that he was a white man whose influence in this black movement was sometimes unwelcome. Almost every black artist had to negotiate white patronage in some form or another. But no white patron has been disdained as intensely as Carl Van Vechten. Why? Because Van Vechten was a gay white man active in a black movement whose homosexual overtones are still controversial. By virtue of both race and sexual orientation, Van Vechten's motives have always been doubly suspect.

Van Vechten was married for over forty years to Fania Marinoff, a Russian actress, who was "simply the only satisfactory person alive," he wrote in a 1928 diary entry. But Van Vechten had various sexual interests; posthumous records further confirm this fact. In the 1950s, Van Vechten willed nearly twenty mysterious scrapbooks to the James Weldon Johnson Collection at Yale's Beinecke library; his instructions were that they not be opened until twenty-five years after his death. In 1989 they were opened and were found to reveal homoerotic photographs, cartoons, and drawings. The images are deliberately tongue-in-cheek, so to speak, but the scrapbooks also contain more serious articles, such as news clippings about gay bashings, drag balls, and scandals about individuals caught performing "perverse acts."

Van Vechten did not make a particular secret of his sexual interests. On the other hand, Langston Hughes's sexual orientation continues to cause a lot of public speculation. In the course of working on this book, I have been asked many times whether the two men were lovers (they were not). Anyone looking to this book for confirmation that Hughes was gay will be disappointed. In fact, anyone seeking information about Hughes's romantic life at all will be frustrated. Hughes was famously secretive about his private life. In his youth, he wrote excitedly to Van Vechten about the same few women he describes in his autobiographies. At least in his letters, Hughes never shared with Van Vechten any more about his love life than he committed to public record.

Van Vechten himself rarely refers in these letters to his interest in men. The men with whom he had three successive long-term relationships—Donald Angus, Mark Lutz, and Saul Mauriber—appear in these letters as dear friends of Carlo's, which they all would become. Van Vechten had several other short-term affairs and even more brief flings with other men. Hughes would have been aware of Van Vechten's extramarital activities—as was Fania—but they do not play a part in the friendship the two

shared in letters.

Sex isn't the only thing the two men never discussed. Hughes had a complex relationship with his white patron, Charlotte Mason. When she dropped him, he experienced the most profound heartbreak of his life. But you won't see any reference to this episode in his letters. In addition, Van Vechten never discusses with Hughes the confusion and sadness he felt when *Nigger Heaven* was excoriated by the black press.

What these letters do reveal are many of the important changes that took place in American culture during the first half of the twentieth century. Their correspondence is an unusual record of entertainment, politics, and culture as seen through the eyes of two fascinating and irreverent men. Hughes and Van Vechten gossip about the antics of the great and the forgotten. And what is between the lines is often just as meaningful. As Carlo wrote to Langston in a June 4, 1925, letter: "There are so many things that one can't talk about in a letter."



"What letters you write! Maybe I do too. Sometimes I wonder if OUR letters wont be the pride of the Collection!" Carl Van Vechten wrote to Langston Hughes on August 16, 1943. Carl refers here to the James Weldon Johnson Memorial Collection of Negro Arts and Letters, which had become his new obsession by the early 1940s. All of Harlem was devastated when Johnson was killed in a car accident in 1938, and Van Vechten more than most. The two had been close since the 1920s, having met at the same 1924 party that had brought Hughes and Van Vechten together. They shared a common birthday June 17, along with Alfred A. Knopf, Jr., and the three of them celebrated it together every year, along with their families. Van Vechten was an honorary pallbearer at his friend's funeral.

Within a year of Johnson's death, Van Vechten was trying to raise funds for a memorial statue to be erected in the middle of Harlem to honor Johnson, but when the war broke out, the necessary materials became scarce and the project proved too expensive. In the meantime, Johnson's widow, Grace Nail Johnson, had been approached by the Library of Congress for her husband's papers. Van Vechten was inspired. He approached Bernhard Knollenberg, head librarian at Yale University, and together they established the James Weldon Johnson Memorial Collection of American Negro Arts and Letters at Yale, which may well be the greatest contribution made by Carl Van Vechten to the cause of black art and letters.

"It seemed most appropriate to couple the name of my friend James Weldon Johnson with materials of which his advice had been so important an element in its selection. My love and respect for the dead poet actually demanded that I do so," Van Vechten wrote in a 1942 essay for *The Crisis*. The decision was also practically motivated. Van Vechten knew that if the collection was in his own name, black writers and artists might not donate their work. Finally, Van Vechten loved the idea of donating black materials to a white institution. He would reverse the order when he established the George Gershwin Memorial Collection of Music and Musical Literature at Fisk University in 1947.

Archival work was Van Vechten's fourth career. He had given up writing novels when his last effort, *Parties*, published in 1930, proved a failure. He promptly turned his attention to photography, an interest he had nurtured since childhood. From 1932 until his death in 1964 he took portraits

every well-known African American who would sit for him. Not everyone would. Sidney Poitier was “exceptionally rude” to him, as Van Vechten would tell Hughes in a 1959 letter, and Ralph Ellison rebuffed his offers altogether. By some blacks, Van Vechten would never be forgiven for *Nigger Heaven*. For others, the simple fact of this white man’s fascination with blackness was too peculiar for his stomach.

Others were perhaps put off by the way Van Vechten talked about his photography. He himself referred to the act of taking pictures as a way of “capturing” people. Carlo had been an ardent collector since he was a child watching his mother tend to her precious tin trunk of heirlooms. He describes those moments as having generated his own interest in the act of collecting in “The Tin Trunk,” an essay in his 1932 collection of autobiographical essays, *Sacred and Profane Memories*. Van Vechten’s proprietary attitude about his photographs extended increasingly to his feelings about black culture in general, particularly as he got older and even bad press about him was hard to find.

By the 1950s, the James Weldon Johnson Collection was virtually the only thing he discussed in his correspondence with Hughes, one reason that fewer letters from that period are included in the collection. Another reason is that Hughes was simply too busy to write as often as he did in the early years. “Everybody else seems to hear from you but me,” Carlo complained to Langston on December 6, 1942. Van Vechten would never have made such a comment fifteen years earlier when Hughes was writing so frequently that Van Vechten noticed if a day went by without a letter from him. But things had changed. Hughes was in demand all over the world. By the late 1940s, he had to hire an assistant just to help him keep up with his correspondence. Meanwhile, Van Vechten was not the star he had been. He would never find out what happened when Hughes approached his editor at Knopf about the possibility of Van Vechten’s contributing the foreword to his latest edition of poems. “I certainly do not think that at this time it would be a good idea to ask Carl Van Vechten to write one,” was his editor’s answer.

By the 1950s, Van Vechten was pestering Hughes constantly about going through the materials in his basement to be sent to Yale. Finally, on October 11, 1959, he wrote Langston these lines: “Perhaps I did not make myself clear to you last night about the way I feel about the JWJ Memorial Collection of Negro Arts and Letters. For the past ten years I have devoted at least fifty per cent of my waking hours to this perpetuation of the fame of the Negro and it saddens me to realize how few Negroes realize this and how still fewer make any attempt to assist the collection.”

Van Vechten signed the letter “yrs, with too much impatience and some faint hope, Carlo, the Patriarch,” something he’d taken to calling himself in jest in his old age. Perhaps his gentle sign-off was meant to soften the tone of his accusations. But Hughes was probably used to Van Vechten’s bitterness by then. That wasn’t the first time Van Vechten had complained to Hughes about his erasure from black cultural history. His deeds were being passed down but his name wasn’t. If this letter reverberates with a patronizing sting, it also sags with the frustration of an old man forgotten by time and the culture he helped to nurture.

I remember when I first read this letter as a college student, preparing to write my senior thesis. A year before, I had learned about Carl Van Vechten; at first I simply had to find out more about the white man who had had the audacity to call a novel *Nigger Heaven*. Then I became interested in the dynamics of his relationships with Harlem Renaissance writers, especially Hughes. The more I read

the more questions I had. What was the story of their friendship? Was it built only on gratitude? Did Hughes privately resent Van Vechten? What was the secret that kept their friendship alive?——

I discovered the secret when I happened to glimpse a note Hughes had hand-written on the envelope: “CVV at a ripe old age.” Langston loved him. He loved the bitter old man as he had loved the younger, famous version who had gotten him published. He hoped that future readers would understand Carlo’s angry lines through the lens of his own fondness, respect, and compassion.

Hughes wrote back the very next day. He made fun of Van Vechten’s attitude and teased him about the ugly undercurrents of his professed benevolence. He ended his letter with a final dig at Van Vechten’s new penchant for lamenting “the faults of the race.” Hughes included an addendum: “I was so glad to see you the other night. I guess absence makes the heart grow fonder.”



This book is a story about two people, one famous, one formerly famous but now mostly unknown, who lived during an extraordinary period in American history. Between the two of them, they knew *everyone*, and nearly all of those people come to life in the pages that follow. Langston Hughes and Carl Van Vechten helped make the movement we know as the Harlem Renaissance, and for that reason their story is meaningful. But the most important story in this book is about a friendship—often complicated by race, power, and money. Like most friendships, it endured its share of ups and downs. But unlike most friendships, this one thrived because of difference, not in spite of it.

A NOTE ON THE TEXT

This volume represents a mere fraction of the nearly one thousand five hundred letters exchanged between Langston Hughes and Carl Van Vechten between 1925 and 1964. The letters I have chosen were selected both for their liveliness and for the stories they tell. My decisions were guided largely by significant episodes in the friendship between the two men.

Hughes and Van Vechten dated most of their letters, but sometimes they identified them only by the day of the week on which they were written. Often I found the undated letters contained information that enabled me to assign them an exact date. When this wasn't possible, I approximated dates as precisely as I could.

Every letter in this volume appears in its entirety. In order to present each writer's voice faithfully I deleted nothing. The few misspellings and errors in grammar or punctuation that I judged to be accidental and potentially distracting to the reader I corrected. The misspellings and errors in grammar that remain reflect the spontaneous nature of the letter and the idiosyncrasies of the author. For instance, Hughes often spelled Van Vechten's wife's name "Fannia" instead of the correct "Fania." Both Langston Hughes and Carl Van Vechten sometimes invented spellings for words where conventional spellings seemed to them insufficient. In these cases, editorial corrections would have actually compromised the unique qualities of their correspondence. The same is true in the case of Van Vechten's punctuation. Sometimes he wrote entire letters without a single period, using only dashes and dots as punctuation. I let these letters stand as they are because, again, polishing them meant jeopardizing their essential spontaneity. I did, however, reorder some of the marginal material that appears in several letters. Often a typewritten letter from either man would be framed by handwritten scribbles, meant either to clarify or embellish points made in the letter. In these cases, I tried to remain as true as possible to the form of the original letter while still heeding typesetting constraints. Editorial intrusions are indicated in brackets, including the rare moments when either man's handwriting proved impossible to decipher. The use of *sic* has been generally avoided.

This "Note on the Text" is followed by a list of friends and acquaintances [dramatis personae] who appear often in the correspondence and played significant roles in the lives of Van Vechten or Hughes. A symbol (‡) appears next to the first mention of the name of a person identified in the list. I hope readers will enjoy reading these letters in sequence, so I haven't included bracketed surnames after first names subsequent to the first mention of a person who appears frequently. For instance, it will quickly become clear that "Walter" is always Walter White, "Nora" Nora Holt, "Eddie" Eddie Wasserman, "Harold" Harold Jackman, and "Dorothy" Dorothy Peterson. Several others who are mentioned in the correspondence only rarely I identify in footnotes. A few people I simply could not identify. Other names are common enough to make identification unnecessary.

The bibliography lists the works I consulted in order to prepare this volume as well as titles of books about the remarkable period known as the Harlem Renaissance. In the acknowledgments I give the locations of the original letters that are printed here.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

MARIAN ANDERSON (1902–1993) became the first African American to sing at the Metropolitan Opera in New York City, in 1955. She had become a phenomenon in Europe after a debut recital in Berlin in 1932.

DONALD ANGUS (1899–1990) was the stage manager for the 1925 *Revue Nègre* in Paris, which featured Josephine Baker. He and Carl Van Vechten met in 1919 and began an affair that eventually segued into a long-term friendship.

RICHMOND BARTHÉ (1901–1989) was a prominent African American sculptor who worked in clay, marble, and bronze. He began painting at the age of six, entered the Chicago Art Institute in 1924, and graduated in 1929. His career spanned sixty years.

GLADYS BENTLEY (1907–1960) was a powerful singer and outrageous cabaret performer. She was openly bisexual and usually outfitted herself for her act in a bow tie and tails. In *The Big Sea*, Hugh Downs reminisced about the days when Bentley would play her piano from ten in the evening until dawn the next morning, “an amazing exhibition of musical energy.”

ARNA BONTEMPS (1902–1973), a librarian and writer, moved from Los Angeles to Harlem in 1928 when he met Langston Hughes. The two became lifelong friends and collaborators. Bontemp's first novel, *God Sends Sunday*, was published in 1930. In 1943 he began a twenty-two-year career as head librarian at Fisk University.

BENJAMIN BRAWLEY (1882–1939) was a critic, teacher, and author of several literary studies, one of them being *The Negro in Literature and Art in the United States* (1919). Brawley was outspoken in his belief that Harlem Renaissance writers represented the race poorly when they used vulgar themes in their work.

STERLING A. BROWN (1901–1989) was among the most formidable poets, folklorists, and literary critics of his generation. He was the author of *Southern Road* (1932), a collection of poetry, and of studies of African American literature, such as *The Negro in American Fiction* (1937). He taught at Howard University for forty years.

CHARLES CHESNUTT (1858–1932) was the first modern African American fiction writer. His short stories captured black Southern vernacular speech and were published in *The Atlantic Monthly* in the 1880s and '90s. The NAACP awarded him a Spingarn Medal for his literary achievements in 1928.

MIGUEL COVARRUBIAS (1904–1957) was born in Mexico and emigrated to the United States in 1923 with the help of Carl Van Vechten. He immediately became one of the most sought after caricaturists and illustrators in New York. His work regularly appeared in *Vanity Fair* and *The New Yorker*, among other magazines.

COUNTEE CULLEN (1904–1947) was Hughes’s friendly rival for the title of Harlem’s poet laureate although they had very different styles. Modeling his work on the English Romantics, Cullen published his first book of poetry, *Color*, in 1925 while he was still a graduate student at Harvard. He never shook his suspicion that Van Vechten was “coining money out of the niggers,” as he wrote to his teacher and intellectual Harold Jackman on October 7, 1925.

NANCY CUNARD (1897–1965) was a member of the Cunard shipping family. She was an editor by trade and a staunch Communist by conviction. Her family was scandalized by her passions, including her live-in relationship with the African American musician Henry Crowder. Cunard’s greatest contribution to the Harlem Renaissance was her massive anthology, *Negro*, published in 1934.

MABEL DODGE. See MABEL DODGE LUHAN.

AARON DOUGLAS (1898–1979) was one of the most highly regarded painters of his generation. He moved to Harlem in 1925 and met Winold Reiss, a German portrait artist whose work influenced a number of young black painters. He illustrated the advertisements for *Nigger Heaven* and contributed work to periodicals like *The Crisis*, *Vanity Fair*, *Theatre Arts*, and *American Mercury*.

MURIEL DRAPER (1886–1952), a friend of Van Vechten’s, was famous for the salon she presided over at her London residence, Edith Grove. Harlem Renaissance figures were regulars in its New York equivalent during the 1920s. Draper wrote the introduction to Taylor Gordon’s 1929 autobiography *Born to Be*, to which Carl Van Vechten wrote the foreword and the artist Miguel Covarrubias contributed the illustrations.

W. E. B. DU BOIS (1868–1963) was among the twentieth century’s greatest visionaries. He was the author of the remarkable 1903 work *The Souls of Black Folk* and was a founder and director of the NAACP from 1910 to 1934. He also established *The Crisis*, the most influential journal of the Harlem Renaissance. He believed Harlem Renaissance artists should take responsibility for the political and social implications of their work. He became dissatisfied with the integrationist philosophy of *The Crisis* and the NAACP and parted ways from both in 1934, when his interest shifted to more radical and global concerns. In 1961, he formally joined the Communist party and took up residence in Ghana. By the time he died he had written twenty-one books and edited fifteen others.

MAX EWING (1903–1934) was a writer and a musician who contributed music regularly for the Greenwich Village Follies. He was famous for the “art gallery” in his home, floor-to-ceiling display of celebrities. Van Vechten designated Ewing one of the “Famous Beauties of the XXth Century,” a title he bestowed on men he admired. Ewing’s 1933 novel, *Going Somewhere*, satirizes New York social life in the 1920s. He killed himself in 1934.

JESSIE REDMON FAUSET (1882–1961) is sometimes called one of the “midwives” of the Harlem Renaissance. She was the literary editor at *The Crisis* from 1919 to 1926, as well as the author of four novels about the black bourgeoisie. Fauset was the first editor to appreciate the genius of Langston Hughes. She also helped nurture the work of George Schuyler, Jean Toomer, Countee Cullen, and Claude McKay.

RUDOLPH FISHER (1897–1934) moved to Harlem in 1925, where he established outstanding career

in both literature and medicine. He published short fiction in the *Atlantic Monthly*, *The Crisis*, and *Story* magazine throughout the 1920s. At the same time, he developed a successful practice as an X-ray specialist. His first novel, *The Walls of Jericho* (1932), is a satiric look at Harlem society. Hughes called him “the wittiest” of the “New Negroes of Harlem.”

EMMANUEL TAYLOR GORDON (1893–1971) was both a singer and a writer who teamed up with the composer John Rosamond Johnson for a series of concerts of spirituals in the United States and Europe. Gordon’s 1929 autobiography, *Born to Be*, included an introduction by Van Vechten, who helped nurture his career.

PORTER GRAINGER (?–?) was an actor, a writer, and a musician. He appeared in many shows during the twenties and contributed the scripts to several of them, including *Get Set* with Donald Heywood in 1923 and *Lucky Sambo* with Freddie Johnson in 1925. Grainger sometimes accompanied Bessie Smith at private parties. In the 1930s, Grainger slipped into obscurity.

WILLIAM CHRISTOPHER (“W. C.”) HANDY (1873–1958) was a composer who became known as “the father of the Blues.” He played the cornet and the organ and cofounded a music publishing company with Harry Pace in 1907. He may be best known for his 1914 song “St. Louis Blues.”

ROLAND HAYES (1887–1976) was a tenor who began his musical career with the Fisk Jubilee Singers in 1911. His phenomenal success in Europe won him American recognition in 1923. Hayes became a leading interpreter of German lieder in the United States.

CHESTER HIMES (1909–1984) was a novelist and autobiographer who captured the attention of Carl Van Vechten with the manuscript of his novel *Yesterday Will Make You Cry*, which would not be published until 1998. In 1960, Van Vechten called Himes’s 1947 novel *Lonely Crusade* “the best novel ever written yet by a Negro.” Himes moved to Paris in 1953, in part because his novels failed to achieve the critical recognition in the United States that they received in Europe. In Paris, Himes was part of the African American expatriate community that included Richard Wright and James Baldwin.

NORA HOLT (1890–1974) was the first black woman to receive a master of music degree from the Chicago Music College, in 1918. During the Harlem Renaissance she was a celebrated nightclub performer. One of Van Vechten’s constant companions, she was one of the most glamorous Harlem Renaissance personalities. Holt was the model for Lasca Sartoris, *Nigger Heaven*’s femme fatale.

ZORA NEALE HURSTON (1891–1960), a folklorist, playwright, essayist, and fiction writer, was born in Notasulga, Alabama. Hurston had her first story published in the Howard University literary magazine while she was an undergraduate there from 1918 to 1919. By 1925, Hurston was in New York, where she studied anthropology with Franz Boas at Columbia University. She graduated from Barnard College with a bachelor of arts degree in 1928. Her published works include her 1937 novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and her 1942 autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road*.

HAROLD JACKMAN (1900–1960) was a schoolteacher in Harlem, a well-respected intellectual, and a close friend of both Hughes’s and Van Vechten’s. He founded the Countee Cullen Memorial Collection at Atlanta University in 1947. Jackman was the physical model for Byron Kesson, the protagonist in *Nigger Heaven*.

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