**Carl Van Vechten (1880–1964)**

**Summary**

Carl Van Vechten **(b. 17 June 1880, Cedar Rapids, Iowa; d. 21 December 1964, New York City)** was an American writer who wrote about music, modern dance, and literature and authored seven novels. He was an early professional dance critic in the United States. An important patron of African-American artists in the 1920s and 1930s, he guided numerous young writers through New York’s publishing houses and promoted black vernacular music and artistic achievement in venues such as *Vanity Fair*. In addition to his literary work, Van Vechten was also an accomplished photographer who took portraits of hundreds of prominent artists, writers, and performers. While his own creative output was substantial, one of his signal contributions to early-twentieth-century culture was as an archivist; his meticulous collecting of material, ephemera, and images was organized and donated to a number of libraries.

**Early Life and Career**

Carl Van Vechten was born in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. Growing up, he frequented Green’s Opera House, an important venue for touring theatrical and opera productions that inspired a lifelong engagement with music and the performing arts. He entered the University of Chicago in 1899 and immersed himself in the city’s bohemian circles. While in school he began a career in journalism, first for his school newspaper and then for the *Chicago American*, where he wrote about Chicago’s fashionable society.

In 1906 he moved to New York City. After publishing an article on Richard Strauss’s controversial opera *Salome*, he was hired as assistant to the music critic for the *New York Times*. His reporting on opera led to his involvement in New York’s musical and literary circles, and he made important social connections through Oscar Hammerstein’s Manhattan Opera House, a key cultural institution of the time.

In 1909 he became an early dance critic in the United States when the *New York Times* assigned him to write about dancers such as Anna Pavlova, Isadora Duncan, Loïe Fuller, and Maud Allan. His dance criticism helped to introduce these dancers and their new styles to a large audience and elevated modern dance in the United States to a theatrical event comparable to ballet and opera. A few years later he became the drama editor for the *New York Press*.

Van Vechten collected some of this writing in *Music after the Great War* (1915) and launched a career as a full-time writer. He published his second collection of essays, *Music and Bad Manners* (1916) with Alfred A. Knopf, inaugurating a deep friendship with the young publisher. This was followed by a number of nonfiction collections, including *Interpreters and Interpretations* (1917), *In the Garret* (1919), *Interpreters* (1920), and the whimsical *The Tiger in the House* (1920), a six-chapter study of the character of the housecat. The style and tone of these writings anticipated the casual irreverence of the Jazz Age.

**Scenes in New York City**

Van Vechten’s charm, whimsy, and flamboyance made him a popular figure in New York’s cultural scenes. He regularly attended Mabel Dodge’s famous Fifth Avenue salon, which brought together bohemians, artists, intellectuals, socialists, and activists. Through Dodge he met the expatriate American modernist Gertrude Stein (1874-1946). Van Vechten and Stein became lifelong friends and he served as her literary executor after her death. In 1914 he married the Russian actress Fania Marinoff (1890-1971). Van Vechten and Marinoff had an unconventional and tumultuous marriage, aggravated by Van Vechten’s drinking and his sexual relationships with other men. Nevertheless, the two remained married for fifty years, until Van Vechten’s death.

In the 1920s, Van Vechten began publishing fiction. His first novel, *Peter Whiffle: His Life and Works* (1922), was a loosely autobiographical chronicle of a young man as he wandered around the cultural scenes of New York. He then published *The Blind-Bow Boy* (1923), *The Tattooed Countess* (1924), and *Firecrackers* (1925). In all his novels he drew creative inspiration from the scenes and people around him, and they were less notable for plot than for their ability to capture mood and dialogue. Van Vechten and Marinoff began hosting elaborate Prohibition-era parties that brought writers and artists together. An inveterate collector of literature, art, and ephemera, Van Vechten also collected scenes: he made himself central to the social scene of New York art and opera in the 1910s and Harlem’s avant-garde in the 1920s and 1930s.

At this time, Van Vechten began frequenting Harlem, an emergent entertainment and nightlife district. His early interest in modern dance paved the way for his entrée into the Harlem scene, where his reviews of black theatre and dance in magazines such as *Vanity Fair* introduced him to the performances flourishing in Harlem’s nightlife. He became a strong advocate for emerging black artists of the Harlem Renaissance. He led poets Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, and other authors to major publishing opportunities. As he became more involved with black culture in Harlem, he wrote his best-known work, the infamous novel *Nigger Heaven* (1926). This novel of black middle-class manners was divisively received in African-American intellectual circles. Many felt Van Vechten exploited — even betrayed — the contacts he made in Harlem and were offended by the title (a slang term for the segregated gallery in a theatre) and the book’s stereotypical portrayals; others found the novel an unflinching exploration of Harlem society. Through this writing, Van Vechten publicized Harlem to many white New Yorkers who began visiting the neighborhood in search of pleasure and sensation in the practice known pejoratively as ‘slumming’ (one popular song of the period about Harlem by African-American composer Andy Razaf invited listeners uptown to ‘Go inspectin’ / like Van Vechten’).

Following two more novels—*Spider Boy* (1928) and *Parties* (1930)—he turned from writing to portrait photography. In the 1930s and 1940s he took thousands of portraits of writers, singers, dancers, actors, musicians, and painters. A meticulous collector, he began cataloguing his voluminous personal archives in the 1950s. Two significant collections to emerge from this undertaking are the James Weldon Johnson Memorial Collection of Negro Arts and Letters at Yale University and the George Gershwin Memorial Collection of Music and Musical Literature at Fisk University. These collections have been an invaluable contribution to the history of early-twentieth-century culture.

**Legacy**

For decades Van Vechten was associated with the primitivism and exploitation suggested by the title of *Nigger Heaven*. Scholars of African-American literature viewed the novel in particular, and Van Vechten’s patronage of black writers in general, as having perniciously limited the representational possibilities available to African-American authors. More recently, however, scholars and biographers have begun to re-evaluate Van Vechten’s contributions to American modernism. His distinct literary style — characterized by fragmentation, episodic structure, and a disregard for conventional punctuation — contributed to the formal experimentations of the United States literary avant-garde. Scholars working in visual culture have similarly demonstrated the influence of his photography and his voluminous scrapbooks, which pasted together ephemera and clippings from the 1920s and 1930s. Van Vechten’s unfixed sexuality has likewise helped to illuminate the significant role of nascent gay and lesbian subcultures in Harlem and Greenwich Village in the development of American modernism.

Across literature, visual culture, journalism, and the social worlds he organized, Van Vechten’s legacy emerges finally as a consistent and sustained sensibility toward American culture that shaped the numerous artistic networks to which he contributed: a bohemian irreverence toward the unconventional (whether on the page or in the bedroom); an aesthetic decadence that, though influenced by European modernism, was unmistakably homegrown; and what his friend Mabel Dodge called a particular ‘whimsicality’ that often produced unlikely but revealing juxtapositions within cultural hierarchies and aesthetic forms. The reach and significance of Van Vechten’s sensibility are still being discovered.

**Shane Vogel**

**Works**

**Non-fiction**

*Music After the Great War* (1915)

*Music and Bad Manners* (1916)

*Interpreters and Interpretations* (1917)

*The Merry-Go-Round* (1918)

*The Music of Spain* (1918)

*In the Garret* (1919)

*The Tiger in the House* (1920)

*Lords of the Housetops* (1921)

*Excavations* (1926)

*Red* (1925)

*Feathers* (1930)

*Sacred and Profane Memories* (1932)

**Fiction**

*Peter Whiffle: His Life and Works* (1922)

*The Blind Bow-Boy* (1923)

*The Tattooed Countess* (1924)

*Firecrackers: A Realistic Novel* (1925)

*Nigger Heaven* (1926)

*Spider Boy* (1928)

*Parties* (1930)

**Published Photographic Collections**

Byrd, R.B., ed. (1993) *Generations in Black and White: Photographs by Carl Van Vechten from the James Weldon Johnson Memorial Collection*, Athens: University of Georgia Press.

Davis, K. (1993) *The Passionate Observer: Photographs by Carl Van Vechten,* Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.

Padgett, P. (1981) *The Dance Photography of Carl Van Vechten*, New York: Schirmer.

**Collected Non-fiction and Letters**

Bernard, E., ed. (2002) *Remember Me to Harlem: The Letters of Langston Hughes and Carl Van Vechten*, New York: Vintage.

Burns, E., ed. (1986) *The Letters of Gertrude Stein and Carl Van Vechten: I, 1913-1935* and *II, 1935-1946*, New York: Columbia University Press.

Kellner, B. (1979) *“Keep A-Inchin’ Along”: Selected Writings of Carl Van Vechten about Black Arts and Letters*,Westport: Greenwood Press.

Kellner, B. (1987) *Letters of Carl Van Vechten*, New Haven: Yale University Press.

Padgett, P. (1974) *The Dance Writings of Carl Van Vechten*, New York: Dance Horizons.

**References and Further Reading**

Bernard, E. (2012) *Carl Van Vechten & the Harlem Renaissance: A Portrait in Black and White*, New Haven: Yale University Press.

Kellner, B. (1968) *Carl Van Vechten and the Irreverent Decades*, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.

Kellner, B., ed. (1980) *A Bibliography of the Work of Carl Van Vechten*, Westport: Greenwood Press.

Smalls, J. (2006) *The Homoerotic Photography of Carl Van Vechten: Public Face, Private Thoughts*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

White, E. (2014) *The Tastemaker: Carl Van Vechten and the Birth of Modern America*, New York: Farrar, Strauss &Giroux.

**Paratexts**

“Self-portrait”: <http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Carl_Van_Vechten_1934.jpg>

The Library of Congress has a collection of 1,395 portraits taken by Van Vechten, including many modernist writers and performers, any of which could be included in the entry. <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/vanvechten/>. Some possible suggestions include:

Josephine Baker <http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/D?van:4:./temp/~ammem_JrtB>

Gertrude Stein <http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/D?van:3:./temp/~ammem_fNlj>

Bessie Smith <http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/D?van:4:./temp/~ammem_cGGe>

Mabel Dodge Luhan <http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/D?van:2:./temp/~ammem_UQnc>:

Aaron Douglas, *Publishers Weekly* ad for *Nigger Heaven*, June 26, 1926 (Manuscripts, Archives, and Rare Books Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations; reprinted in Bernard, *Carl Van Vechten & The Harlem Renaissance*, p. 117).