Introduction

IN 1932, WHEN MOST AMERICANS were still reeling from the devastating effects of economic depression, Carl Van Vechten (1880–1964)—perhaps black America's most notorious white supporter and patron of the arts—decided to give up his career as a theatre critic and novelist of light fiction and to become a full-time amateur photographer instead. He was introduced to the possibilities of photography through a friend, the noted Mexican caricaturist Miguel Covarrubias (1904–1957), who had just returned from a trip abroad with a new Leica camera.[1] The Leica was the first small, hand-held, and lightweight camera designed to use inexpensive 35mm film. The new invention quickly became popular with professionals and amateurs alike and Van Vechten wasted no time in purchasing one for himself. It was at that moment that he started giving serious attention to photography as an art form.[2]

Van Vechten's sudden switch from literary pursuits to photography was not all that unusual considering his privileged social position and his flippant approach to art and life. It was through photography that Van Vechten could continue to exploit the light, the witty, and the whimsical beyond the written page. Although some observers were enamored of his carefree outlook, others were not. His attitude toward life in general and his refusal to take the correlation between art and politics seriously was to remain one bone of contention between him and many African-American creative and intellectually astute minds of the Harlem Renaissance.

In the 1930s, the wealthy white New York society matron and patron of the arts, Mabel Dodge Luhan (1879–1962), endearingly observed of Van Vechten that he was inclined to treat all aspects of life lightheartedly and as amusing.[3] In almost everything he did, Van Vechten's expressed desire was to portray "extremely serious themes as frivolously as possible."[4] In the literary world, he had gained the reputation as someone who loved the exotic, the bizarre, and the trivial. His off-handed and matter-of-fact approach to sober themes and subjects was to become the hallmark of his fiction, criticism, and photography.[5] His goal in photography was, among other things, to combine his carefree attitude toward his social life with his interest as collector and patron.

Several years before introducing Van Vechten to the new camera technology, Covarrubias had satirized his friend's notorious obsession with African-American culture in a 1926 caricature titled *A Prediction* in which Van Vechten was showcased as a black man with discernible "negroid" facial features (Fig. 1). Around the same time, the influential magazine *Vanity Fair* took note of Van Vechten's negrophilic obsessions in derisively declaring that he was "getting a heavy tan."[6] In a review of Van Vechten's notoriously salacious novel *Nigger Heaven,* which appeared in 1926, the playwright Avery Hopwood went so far as to jokingly alert readers to the possibility that Van Vechten was an imposter and not white at all. In a letter addressed directly to Van Vechten, Hopwood stated: "I am explaining that you really see little of Harlem these days, but that you saw a great deal of it before you *passed.* They are all surprised to hear about your Negro strain, but I tell them that your best friends *always knew.*"[7]

What Hopwood was hinting at was Van Vechten's indulgence in what has been termed "racechange" — that is, the "traversing of race boundaries, racial imitation or impersonation, cross-racial mimicry or mutability, white posing as black or black passing as white, pan-racial mutuality."[8] The phenomenon, as forming a critical nexus in the birth and shifting foundations of American modernism, both unveils and questions interracial contacts and cross-cultural mixings. The dynamics of these cross currents are volatile, ongoing, incomplete, and, like identity itself, can not be denied, ignored, or oversimplified. As Van Vechten's private photography suggests, the traversing of sexual and racial boundaries operated as a theatrical metaphor for Van Vechten who, in his social life, consciously played multiple roles through which he projected himself as avid guardian, artist, patron, victim, and savior to black America. His multiple social, literary, and artistic activities garnered him a key position in the social and cultural imagination of both whites and African Americans. The calculated and impassioned exploitation of African Americans and their culture was to become Van Vechten's ticket to notoriety and fortune.

Of all the movers and shakers in the Harlem Renaissance who became instrumental in forging a unique brand of American modernism in New York in the years spanning the 1920s through to his death in 1964, Carl Van Vechten was undeniably the best known and most influential—easily earning a reputation as an expert on uptown night life, the rhythms of Harlem, and its black inhabitants through his activities as novelist, music and dance critic, patron of the arts, and photographer. As a powerful catalyst keeping "the Negro in vogue" for almost five decades, Van Vechten was an essential asset to many aspiring African-American artists and writers. His acquaintance with influential black and white socialites and cultural notables afforded him ready entrée into exclusive dance, opera, music, and theatre circles. He was well connected in the white-owned and white-operated world of publishing and gave many African-American artists their first break by introducing them and their work to important whites in key positions of power. Van Vechten's unwavering passion for writing, theatre, photography, and philanthropy afforded him a noteworthy status as "midwife to the Harlem Renaissance."[9]

Over a span of more than three decades, Van Vechten produced thousands of photographs on a wide range of subjects. These, along with his literary oeuvre, constitute a massive body of work that has yet to be examined within the context of twentieth-century

American modernist practice.[10] In photography, Van Vechten specialized in portraits of both white and African-American artists, writers, and other individuals of social and cultural prominence.[11] These portraits tackled identity formation as desired by the sitter and forged by the photographer. As celebrations of racial and cultural diversity, they were most unusual for the period in visually documenting, in the best manner possible, those African Americans who contributed to America's cultural richness in the formative years of its engagement with modernism. They also helped to underscore the later observation made by Susan Sontag that "photography has the power to turn people into objects that can be symbolically possessed . . . to appropriate the thing photographed . . . means putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge—and, therefore, like power."[12] As a documentarian and collector of rare and extraordinary people as objects of art, Van Vechten took full advantage of the possibilities photography afforded. He was aware that he pushed his obsessions for collecting and cataloguing to extremes when, in added reference to portrait photography, he proudly referred to himself as "an obstinate cataloguer."[13]

It has been noted of Van Vechten's public portrait photography that issues of identity, role-playing, and fabrication are forcefully in evidence. These same characteristics clearly invade his private work. Considering that his own identity was complex and multiple, it is more than likely that his approach to the topics of race and race relations was just as multifaceted, multiple, and fickle. His public and private photographs indicate the dizzying complexities involved in representing the self through the other—complexities that become more charged in the context of his relationship to the African-American community of Harlem.[14]

Van Vechten's prominence within the worlds of theatre, music, and the performing arts, allowed him a facility in fostering friendships with social and cultural notables of all races. White European and Euro-American elites included the French filmmaker, visual artist, and writer Jean Cocteau, the surrealist painter Salvador Dali, the photographer Man Ray, the artists Pavel Tchelitchew, Paul Cadmus, Jared French, and a host of others. Van Vechten managed to photograph all of these individuals and many others at least once.[15] Indeed, to do so Van Vechten must have commanded a considerable clout of access. Bruce Kellner, one of Van Vechten's biographers, lists over one thousand Van Vechten photographs of black and white celebrities—and these are only those that have been catalogued so far. There exists perhaps at least that many more!

As will become evident throughout this account, the act of photography itself was critical to Van Vechten's psychological and social definition. Not only was his intention to use it as outlet for both artistic expression and instrument of cultural/racial documentation, he also employed the medium as a means of popular myth-making about himself in relationship to African Americans and to modern gay culture—a strategy that helped to bolster his success and notoriety during and even after the period of "negromania" (an obsessive fascination with black people and their culture) that typified the Harlem Renaissance.

Van Vechten's photographs of black and white cultural elites came to public attention in 1935 when they were exhibited at the Second International Leica Exhibition of Photography in New York amid the works of other noteworthy American photographers who included Cecil Beaton, George Platt Lynes, and Edward Steichen. The inclusion of Van Vechten among these notables attests to the fact that, even though he was an amateur, he

was no stranger to the circle of professional photographers of the day, many of whom engaged in conscious forms of modernist experimentation. On seeing Van Vechten's portraits in the Leica exhibition, the art critic Henry McBride, himself a gay man, noted of Van Vechten's contribution that "what is literature's loss is photography's gain—quite distinctly Mr. Van Vechten is the Bronzino of this camera period."[16]

Van Vechten's photographic output is infrequently mentioned in the literature and few have critically assessed his visualizations of African Americans. The widely disseminated public images of black cultural elites such as Paul Robeson, James Weldon Johnson, Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, Nella Larson, Langston Hughes (Fig. 2), and Zora Neale Hurston (Fig. 3)—just to name a small handful of the vast number of personalities photographed—always present the subject as dignified and beautiful within the confines of a Western art tradition of portraiture. These photographs were lauded as instrumental in countering the barrage of stereotyped racist images of African Americans that had been popularly disseminated throughout the United States. They present the upper echelon of African Americans in the most sophisticated and urbane manner and demeanor. These portraits are the ones on which rest Van Vechten's reputation as a committed and sympathetic photographer of African Americans.[17] However, despite the praiseworthiness and familiarity of these images to the general public, they only tell part of the story of Van Vechten as a "passionate observer" and "obstinate cataloguer."[18]

After becoming versed in the technical aspects of the photographic medium, Van Vechten immediately built a complete darkroom in his lavish midtown apartment at 150 West 55th Street and began working feverishly, in tandem with his celebrity portraits, on processing a series of images that lay claim to a "terrible honesty" in which black and white male nude figures are either placed within the artificial confines of the studio, replete with carefully selected backdrops and props, or, situated outdoors in wooded spaces where they pose in highly suggestive erotic scenarios (Figs. 4–7).[19] With these works, elements of the primitive and the theatrical combine.[20] These untitled images all date to the 1930s and 1940s and were never publicly exhibited. Their untitled status supports the claim that few people knew of their existence, for they most likely circulated within a closed circle of Van Vechten's most trusted white and black male acquaintances (most of whom were gay or bisexual) with a penchant for indulging in the erotic and artistic aspects of modernist primitivism. These photographs are part of a larger collection later given by Van Vechten to the Beinecke Library at Yale University to which he instructed that the boxes containing them remain sealed until twenty-five years after his death.[21] Clearly, he must have been concerned about how these images might have been received had they been publicized during his lifetime. The boxes were finally unsealed in 1989. Having now surfaced from their archival confines, these intriguing images can be critically assessed and aesthetically appreciated (or defamed) within the context of what we know and surmise about Van Vechten's life, motivations, and connections with the African-American community in pre-Stonewall-era New York.

The cultural historian Steven Watson has recently observed that the Harlem experience lent itself to dichotomies between black and white, high and low, gay and straight.[22] These divisions played an important role in the conceptualizing of Van Vechten's homoerotic and interracial photographic imagery. These rare images engage an ambivalent dialogue on the

nature of Van Vechten's own struggles with identity, erotic desire, and modernist history while at the same time operate to simultaneously praise and police male sexuality and the body. Unlike his very public celebrity photographs, these private works partake in a redefinition of the African-American head and body and project that reinterpretation into a legitimizing vision of racial and cultural idolization and marvel. In the process, they question the overlap and intersections of interracialism, homoerotic desire, and visual representation in the context of American modernist interests and practices. They constitute what I see as a significant body of images representative of the tensions between Van Vechten's public persona as a respected patron and promoter of African-American art and culture, and his private thoughts and feelings resulting from his all-consuming relationship with African Americans, his quest to be modern, and the need to give tangible expression to his homosexual and homoerotic propensities.[23] The images in question force inquiry into how those desires informed and participated in interracial exchange during this period and, in addition, how they underscored and undermined mainstream attitudes to modernist primitivism.[24]

These photographs of racial and interracial male nudes expose a very private and, perhaps for some, "sinister" side to Van Vechten's seemingly benevolent social and philanthropic enterprise. Taken in conjunction with his literary contributions and influence as a patron of African-American arts and letters, they force the acknowledgment of a fact difficult for many to accept—that white patronage during and after the Harlem Renaissance carried with it an accompanying racial and sexual agenda and was motivated by a bias for an exotic primitivism that viewed African and African-American people and their cultural expressions as means through which the patron could enter into what he or she believed was a more authentic relationship with the world.[25] Although it is true that during and after the Harlem Renaissance "every black artist had to negotiate white patronage in some form or another,"[26] no white person has been as vilified and held in contempt as Carl Van Vechten. Why? Because he was an extremely active, influential, and powerful gay white male in a black cultural movement. So, by virtue of white privilege, his status as a white male, and his sexual orientation, Van Vechten's motives have and continue to remain suspect.

Without minimizing the significance of the limited circulation and private nature of Van Vechten's homoerotic and interracial images during his lifetime, it is worth asking what relevance they might hold for us today. Their ability to still arouse both consternation and excitement was made clear to me when, several years ago, I gave a presentation on a small sampling of these images at an academic conference on black queer art and politics. Other African-American gay men in attendance publicly expressed their appreciation of Van Vechten's nudes. Many confessed that they found his images to be far more erotic and attractive than anything produced by white, gay photographer Robert Mapplethorpe (1946–1989) or even Van Vechten's contemporary, George Platt Lynes (1907–1955). However, on a subsequent occasion, I presented some of these same images at a symposium on the Harlem Renaissance and was surprised by displays of discomfort and hostility they provoked by both whites and African Americans in attendance. Although he remains a significant figure in the Harlem Renaissance, clearly Van Vechten's own racial background and his homoerotic interracial visualizations do not fit neatly into the currently held idealized and optimistic view of racial matters in the Harlem Renaissance.

Clearly, the dependency of black artists and writers on their white patrons, and their links to modernist primitivism as an artistic and social movement, tended to manifest themselves in moments of ambiguity and ambivalence. Thus, these works constitute a dilemma in that they beg the question of whether the racial and sexual fantasies they manifest should necessarily compromise the credibility and integrity of white patronage. Should Van Vechten's racial and interracial homoerotic photographs, in light of his positive and affirmative deeds and accomplishments as a patron and supporter of African-American art and culture, necessarily disqualify or call into serious doubt his "public face" of sincerity and integrity? Do these formerly sequestered representations of interracial fantasies reinforce or undermine racist myths about black sexuality and/or about interracial harmony? Should the discernments of racial and sexual fantasies through representation overwhelmingly dictate or determine our views and judgment of an individual's public face and actions? Ultimately, it all boils down to whether or not we can trust photographic representation as a reliable barometer of both psychosexual conditions and social realities, for the camera can and does deceive. When all is said and done, however, these photographs spotlight the emotional and social complications that result from the human necessity to satisfy and yet balance private needs and public standing. They exemplify the unstable regions in the intersections of fantasies, desires and social realities. As such, they provoke sentiments and questions that cannot be resolved with a singular yes or no, good or bad, racist or sympathetic, response.

Despite their initial shock value, it is important to reiterate and understand that these photographs were not created for public viewing and served a vital psychological and social need for Van Vechten the man. They exhibit his attempt to equate interracial erotic intercourse with interracial social cooperation by giving a visual record to fantasies of male interaction that revel in the erotically and racially forbidden. Given the fact that gay eroticism has always been viewed as transgressive across racial, cultural, and class lines, Van Vechten's attempt to seemingly challenge conventional moral sensibilities through the secret production of this imagery, reinforced his own sense of modernity and his self-perceived racial/cultural enlightenment. These photographs, placed in social and historical conjunction with the black celebrity portraits, as well as with much of the literature Van Vechten produced before 1932, exemplify an attempt to satisfy and to resolve a conflicted need to legitimate his negrophilic sympathies publicly and to satisfy his homoerotic desires privately, while simultaneously laying claim to an "enlightened" engagement in contemporary notions of the primitive and, therefore, in the modern. For Van Vechten, these images were probably the result of an insistent polarized tension between public appearance and private needs; between an inner reality and an outer theatricality; between serious objective concern for black people, their history and culture, and a highly subjectified racial and sexual exploitation. They represent strains of contention brought on by a concurrent split between negrophilic and negrophobic identities that arise within the historical and cultural contexts of colonialism, primitivism, and the stereotype.[27] The interracial and homoerotic images discussed in this book illuminate Van Vechten's contradictory and problematic psychological and social relationship to African Americans. It was a passionate yet confusing affinity that evoked the uncertainty and multiplicity of the gay and racial aspects of modern cultural expression in general.

Although we might feel free to take delight in these images today, it must be kept in mind that these photographs were created solely for Van Vechten's viewing pleasure and for that of his most intimate of associates. He did not write or publicly say anything about them, nor are they discussed directly in any of his abundant correspondence with contemporaries. Such private pictures have meanings that are encoded in a highly personal way, and as outsiders viewing the pictures today, we are excluded from such knowledge and can only speculate on their intentions. My assessment of these images is based, however, on details we already know about the photographer and the black and gay cultural contexts of the period in which Van Vechten was working. Nevertheless, no quick conclusions or easy analyses can be made. As readers, we are only voyeurs who have been denied personal involvement. Thus, my observations here are based on a combination of subjective readings, on the "psychologizing" of Van Vechten, and on historical knowledge of the black and gay subcultures in which this book's protagonist tried to simultaneously inhabit and direct.[28]

Despite any degree of pleasure that the contemporary viewer may experience from these photographs, throughout this discussion I also acknowledge implied and actual negative power relations in gestures of white control and exploitation of the black male body. It is rather obvious that Van Vechten's images labor toward the corporeal in such a way that the black body, with all of its (re)constructed constituent cultural and ethnographic parts, is fashioned into a legitimizing vision of racial and cultural idolization and marvel—a fantasy construction that no doubt benefited Van Vechten and, by extension, the gay, modernist, white male erotic and social imagination. However, as will become evident later on, there were parallel desires exhibited at the same time in the works and actions of artists of the African-American gay community in Harlem. These black artists and their works also broached interracial and homoerotic desires through the language of modernist primitivism for purposes of identity formation, acceptance, and empowerment.

Before Mapplethorpe

The racial and interracial representations created by Van Vechten allow for intervention in important contemporary debates centered on the complex interstices of race, homosexuality, and visual culture. This conversation was, for the most part, begun by the contemporary cultural theorist Kobena Mercer, whose critical work on Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs of black male nudes has brought into sharper focus the complexities involved in racial and homoerotic relations both inside and outside of representation.[29] Mercer rethought his earlier negative response to Mapplethorpe's work by critically interrogating his own viewership and identification with homoerotic networks of looking. His process of rethinking revealed ambivalences and ambiguities in his personal response to such representation. As Mercer had discovered and as Van Vechten's work helps to clarify, interracial gay relations (in representation and in social reality) involve complex multidirectional exchanges of psychological and emotional needs and desires. Race and racial difference can constitute significant and crucial aspects of erotic exchange. So, by asking the question of whether or not Van Vechten's male nude photographs should adversely compromise his credibility and integrity as patron to black America, I have raised the possibility, as did Mercer with

Mapplethorpe's photographs of black men, that the issues implicit in Van Vechten's images are more complex and more ambivalent than might at first be expected, and less easily read as racist discourse.

In many ways, the ideas presented in this discussion of Van Vechten's nudes continue and expand on the conversation Mercer had started. Unlike Mercer, however, whose strategy for reassessing Mapplethorpe's imagery was predicated on what he viewed as ambivalent "structures of feeling" as a black gay male spectator, I approach Van Vechten's interracial male nudes from the standpoint of admiration and delight in their interracial and erotic suggestiveness. I like these photographs and find them attractive on an intellectual, aesthetic, and erotic level. However, as will become part of the discussion further on, I am also aware of the shame, guilt, and negativity that are associated with white projection of erotic fantasy onto the black male (and female) body. I cannot and do not deny that the brutalizing and selfish eroticizing of black bodies throughout history by white modernists have had real negative effects and continue to cast a shadow over these and other racially oriented (homo)erotic nude photographs. It is precisely this ambivalence in terms of contemporary reception and (unintentional) spectatorship that make Van Vechten's interracial male nudes so intriguing.

Even though the ideas generated by Mercer's rethinking of Mapplethorpe's black nudes parallel and draw significant critical connections to Van Vechten's imagery in terms of the dynamics of reading and reception of homoerotic interracial representation, I would like to point out that there are notable differences between Mapplethorpe and Van Vechten, particularly in terms of content, social context, and historical specificity. The social and historical background for Mercer's rethinking of Mapplethorpe's work was the 1980s in the United States, the calamity of the AIDS crisis, censorship, political controversies over federal policy and arts funding, and the emergent influence of the conservative Christian Right.[30] In noteworthy contradistinction, the circumstances and context for the production and limited reception of Van Vechten's imagery during the 1930s and 1940s are noticeably different and center around issues of race relations in the early part of the twentieth century, white patronage, and the fashionability of modernist cultural practices that included primitivism and fetishism with all of their Freudian and neo-Freudian associations. Thus, throughout this discussion I keep in mind that Van Vechten's images were fashioned under modernist and not postmodernist conditions even though their confluence of art and life, as well as their self-consciously applied camp and matter-of-fact qualities, give them a curious flavor of complexity that is associated with the postmodern era. I must admit, however, that for me, there is something intriguing and emotionally stirring in the self-conscious blandness and amateurishness of these interracial and homoerotic photographs that, in my opinion, make them more psychosexually immediate and engaging than the photographs of black men and interracial couples produced by Mapplethorpe.

Because the majority of the key players of the Harlem Renaissance, both black and white, were male, the movement itself took on a "predominantly male character."[31] This is not to deny the importance of women of both races to the movement. However, the visibility and power of the elite world of gay men in which Van Vechten was involved speaks to the patriarchal nature of the movement and the unfortunate marginalization of women. Not surprisingly, Van Vechten's male nudes were never intended for public or private female viewership

even though gender difference is implicated in them. Although it would be an interesting and important exercise to speculate on the psychosexual processes and gender ramifications of female spectatorship with Van Vechten's male nudes, I do not engage such an exercise here.

Given the intended private nature of Van Vechten's photographs, the question of what these works may have meant to or how they may have served the social aims and personal fantasies of Van Vechten and his male contemporaries is, I believe, more immediate and significant than how they might function for us today. However, their impact on a contemporary (gay) male viewing audience cannot and should not be ignored. Also significant here is the issue that, whereas Mapplethorpe's homosexuality was no secret to his audience and central to the content of many of his images, there were efforts made both during Van Vechten's lifetime and after his death to publicly hide his sexual orientation and purge any suggestion of homoerotic desire from his public photographs. Both sexual and racial taboos during the 1930s and 1940s exerted considerable pressure on keeping individuals and their desires closeted in ways very different from the more "liberated" environment of the 1980s. This situation does, undoubtedly, affect not only the genesis, look, and execution of visual imagery, but also complicates interpreting their intended and actual function.

The last significant difference between Mapplethorpe and Van Vechten that I would like to clarify is that the former obsesses with racialist imagery in which the black body and its aestheticized parts are fetishistically focused on in the masculine economy of the gaze, thus fixing black male body parts as evidence of "race" in an imaginary construction of otherness. As Mercer has suggested, this process continues to have negative incriminating implications for the white gay imaginary. I think, however, that Van Vechten's photographs are different in that their playful focus on both racial and interracial relations diffuses the tendency to scopically fix, fetishize, or objectify the body as *only* marked by race. Van Vechten's compositional placement of black-against-white facilitates the imaginary projection, acknowledgment, and identification with fantasies about racial and cultural "difference" in an attempt to breakdown those very notions of difference. What makes Van Vechten's representation of racialized and interracialized male nudes distinct from those of Mapplethorpe is that skin and fragmented body parts are not the principle signifier of erotic fantasy. Instead, Van Vechten perceives all expressions of interracial exchange fetishistically—be they psychological, physical, or social. Skin remains, however, a significant element in Van Vechten's work, for the fetish is always experienced in contrastive terms to the white male body even when that body is conspicuously absent from the internal visual frame.

Van Vechten's own subject position and interests as creator and master of the visual image constitutes part of an authorial transference onto all of his images. His tendency to project himself into his literary and visual imagery stemmed from his acknowledged double role as both participant and observer of black culture during the Harlem Renaissance—a role that clearly contributed "an unexpected dimension" to his literary, critical, and photographic work.[32] This projection, in alliance with the racial fetish, the stereotype, and the psychic/social dynamics of homoerotic desire, assists in the formation and affirmation of a social self predicated on a play between mastery (control) and pleasure as well as on anxiety and defense. By positioning himself as author and voyeur both inside and outside of these images, Van Vechten completes a cycle of cathartic union with and subconscious fear of the black man.

Thus, the spectatorial effect of these photographs take on added meaning. On the one hand, Van Vechten projects himself as gallantly embracing black people and, on the other hand, he privileges himself as disinterested onlooker who witnesses and records blacks embracing their racialized and sexualized selves.

In almost all of the photographs under consideration here, Van Vechten exploited the black-and-white medium to play off and construct dualistic meanings in contrastive aspects of race and culture. Photography itself assisted in the codification of a schema in which elements of the racial, sexual, and artistic—highly theatricalized and performed, interweave in a web of subjectively defined relationships between the races. The photographer's endeavor to unify the primitive and the modern, and his attempts to project an impression of mutual gratification and fantasy indulgence through erotic exchanges between white and black men, are reinforced through formal means of patterning—in particular, careful choices of background designs, studio props, and poses.[33] As well, by pairing black and white nude bodies in visual space, Van Vechten also engaged the controversial notion of miscegenation. Kevin Mumford has observed that the concept of miscegenation was, at the beginning of the twentieth century, also applied by sexologists and prison reformers to interracial same-sex relationships, thereby conceptualizing the absence of gender difference by way of racial difference.[34] Furthermore, Van Vechten cleverly plays with the idea of black and white on multiple levels. Artistically, he uses black-and-white photography to pattern black and white bodies in stark poses or situations of alternating harmonized and polarized tension—opposites are made to attract. This act of manipulation and substitution speaks to his involvement in what he perhaps perceived as a progressive strain of his modernism. For Thomas Waugh, "the absence of gender (difference) . . . distinguishes gay eroticism from straight eroticism and this is crucial, politically, . . . morally, . . . [and] aesthetically." In gay eroticism, "power roles are not preassigned (as in heterosexual eroticism) and thus have the potential to be in flux—interchangeable, ambiguous, spontaneous, multivalent, and egalitarian."[35] In fact, gay eroticism, Waugh contends, "potentially threatens the social hierarchy by violating patriarchal taboos, by creating spaces for alternative sexual practices, by valorizing sexuality as non-reproductive pleasure."[36] Waugh defines eroticism as "a whole range of cultural practices that turns us on . . . with the intent and/or effect of arousal, and/or the articulation or description of sexual behaviors and/or objects."[37] Eroticism often, but not always, includes an element of transgression against social taboos. In Van Vechten's case, the taboo was not only that of homosexual activity, but interracial fraternizing as well. Unlike gender difference, racial distinction is not automatically made "equivalent to subordination and domination,"[38] even though in the iconography of cultural/racial difference, domination has proven an ineradicable dynamic. As Van Vechten's imagery attests, racial difference is the most fundamental format for the erotic operations of his image-making and fantasy. In his erotic universe, "[racial] difference operates pervasively as structure, as focus, and as stimulant."[39] As Waugh again reminds us, this association of the erotic with the sexually and racially forbidden seems to be one of several culturally determined characteristics of Euro-American civilization.[40]

Figure 8 illustrates Van Vechten's unique homoerotic and interracial project. In the confines of the studio environment, two male figures—one white and the other black—are placed against a curtain backdrop. Their arms are raised above their heads and their bodies

are poised in a mirroring contrapposto stance. The foregrounded white figure has his back and buttocks exposed to the viewer whereas the backgrounded black man is frontally positioned to reveal both his face and genitalia. Both figures are objectified as passive objects of desire in that they are "feminized" in their bodily attitudes and recall curvilinear poses typically associated with women in Western art. The stress on skin tone contrast has replaced the "norm" of sexual difference. In the formal relationship between black and white bodies, however, the white man takes on the passive role in his vulnerability to anal exposure and potential penetration. The black male figure becomes the phallic counterpart to the anally susceptible white man. An erotic fantasy based on hierarchical relations of sexual power between the races is set. However, this image, like so many others in the interracial series, is not bound by a single fantasy reading of white over black power relations. In Van Vechten's male nudes, it is the black man who can either assume passive positions or take on roles of dominance. Clearly, in this particular image there is an attempt by the photographer to reverse a racial and sexual stereotype. How effective such a strategy is, however, remains open to debate and will be considered in more detail in subsequent chapters.

In some of his photographs, Van Vechten exploits the various combinations possible with the juxtaposition of black and white. In some instances for example, such as in Figure 9, black and white visually and compositionally harmonize. Figure 10 focuses on the inherent flow of lines and rhythms even though black and white exert physical and visual oppositional forces against one another. Figure 11 engages in an alternate form of pleasure in looking at interracial contrast in the placement of both models before a curtained backdrop in a front-and-back position intended to highlight and contrast the linear contours of their bodies. As both figures peer through the hands of the black man and beyond the picture frame, the viewer is invited to take a closer look as well. As with Figure 8, the play of body curves and angles is aesthetically reinforced by the careful study of light and dark patterns on the surface of the photograph. The oppositional nature of these images in terms of formal language and content is underscored by the attempts by Van Vechten to harmonize bodies that are perceived socially and physically as opposites. Once again, I think Van Vechten not only understood the aesthetic and photographic power of light and dark contrast, but gave sociological and erotic import to it as well.

"Fetishism" and Other Theoretical Concerns

The psychological/social divide of fetishism is particularly significant to Van Vechten's work and yet that division is often blurred because his imagery functions as fantasy reinforcement for construction and maintenance of his social persona. Because of their intended private nature, his works underscore the therapeutic and cathartic function of art-making that is so often espoused by modernists. The deep psychological and sexual components of fetishism, sadomasochism, and homoeroticism are all tied into the construction and inner workings of desire and feature as necessary components of Van Vechten's brand of modernity. However, what Mercer's critical work on Mapplethorpe makes clear is that fetishistic practice in representation must not only consider identification by the artist, but must also take into account the subjective positioning of the spectator—be he or she actual, intended, or accidental.

In his reassessment of Mapplethorpe's black men, Mercer invoked Frantz Fanon's indictment against the fetishizing colonialist gaze—that is, the gaze that sees a black man only as a penis.[41] Mercer was, at first disturbed by Mapplethorpe's seeming complicity in this colonialist mind set—reinforcing and not challenging racist assumptions. Despite the fact that many of Mapplethorpe's black models are named (although I realize that the power to name does not automatically remedy strategies of objectification), Mercer felt that the black man's own agency and desires were silenced and only exploited to fuel the fantasies and actions of white spectators.[42] However, as the art historian Gen Doy notes, "although black agency and black control over black desires would be ideal, the reality is that the body represented will always become a symbol or a stand-in for someone else's fantasies, desires, insecurities, etc. Also, we must not forget that the very nature of the medium of photography itself entails objectification which is not the same as fetishization."[43]

Although Mapplethorpe's images may have been part of the transformation of pornography into art, he did not challenge the social and cultural assumptions about relationships of power between the races. This is what, at first, disturbed Mercer who eventually changed his mind about Mapplethorpe's black nudes when he took into account spectatorship and his own mixed feelings about these images. He began to question why, despite all of his protests, he found Mapplethorpe's images aesthetically pleasing and erotically arousing. Mercer reassessed his earlier position in stating: "But now I am not so sure whether the perverse strategy of visual fetishism is necessarily a bad thing, in the sense that as the locus of the destabilizing shock effect it encourages the viewer to examine his or her own implication in the fantasies that the images arouse."[44] Mercer considered now his own viewership—the substitution of himself in the gazing position of the white man and his own desire for black men. Thus, the indeterminacy of reading a visual text forces us to look at the spaces of need and desire "in-between" the viewer and the image.

Through a process of critical reassessment, Mercer concluded that a photograph (or any visual or verbal form of representation) is not necessarily a mirror of feelings but, rather, a staged performance. If there are any feelings, these are generated by the viewer and not the visual representation. This accounts for Mercer's point that "spectators are situated in complex configurations of gender, sexuality, class and 'race.'" And it is for this reason that "photographs can be read differently by different people, and also their meanings can change when viewed at different times and in different contexts."[45] As for myself, a similar complexity of viewership and feelings apply to Van Vechten's images.

"Fetishism" and "primitivism" are two closely associated modern terms and concepts that must be considered in any discussion of Van Vechten's male nude images.[46] Both conspire to constitute "a system of multiple beliefs, an imaginary resolution of a real contradiction . . . ," and are operative in Van Vechten's photographs.

Fetishism is one of many distinct aspects of primitivism in which the processes of identification and denial of difference are the direct result of the drama of subjectivity associated with sexual and racial difference. In theory and in practice, primitivism and fetishism are related events.[47] As well, both have close ties to the stereotype and colonialism—discourses that allow for the continuation of fantasy in that people pegged as racially, ethnically, or

culturally distinct come to stand in as representatives of fixed ideas about the nature of a pri-
mal sexuality and otherness.[48] Van Vechten's photographs engage primitivism by employing
two kinds of fetish in a modernist context—the racial or epidermal, and the (homo)sexual.
As the cultural theorist Homi Bhabha has noted, the former aspect of the fetish differs from
the latter in that the former can never be hidden and is significant in both the processes of
"negrophobia" (fear of blacks) *and* "negrophilia" (desire for blacks).[49] The "charm" of Van
Vechten's homoerotic interracial images is that they successfully conflate *philic* and *phobic* atti-
tudes about race in their interracial and homoerotic indulgence.

Although the empirical approach to the history of art can and often does allow for unique
insights into questions around representation, I have discovered that, in dealing with Van
Vechten's private images, my art-historical training in the social history of art has often hin-
dered my abilities to deal satisfactorily with these works as psychosexual residue. Significantly,
both empirical history and set theoretical paradigms can have an irritating way of limiting
the immediate emotional experience of certain kinds of representation. Both can impede the
understanding and the appreciation of the inner workings of desire and fantasy that often
have a weighty impact on lived experiences and human interaction. Van Vechten's interra-
cial and homoerotic images both confirm and reinforce the observation that any set bound-
aries of theory, history, or fantasy are mostly arbitrary and always fluid. It was, after all, a
rather narrow focus on the theoretical aspects of fetishism that initially convinced Kobena
Mercer that Mapplethorpe's images of black men were racist and ill-intentioned, thus con-
demning Mapplethorpe the man as wrongly guided in his artistic, fantasy and sociosexual
life. All of this is not to say that history and theory can not be useful to a better understand-
ing of the photographic image, for it was also via a process of wading through both that Mer-
cer came to realize that sexual and racial fetishism and the psychological effects on the viewer
were not necessarily interchangeable nor a bad thing.[50] In his critical reexamination of Map-
plethorpe's images of black men, Mercer began by questioning fetishism as a legitimate the-
oretical concept for evaluating racialized representation. He ended up railing against it as a
Eurocentric "master discourse" that seduces in its conspicuous absence of race.[51] As a the-
ory, fetishism is complex and problematic. Anne McClintock sees the fetish as standing "at
the crossroads of psychoanalysis and social history" because it profoundly affects "the imag-
ination and the flesh."[52] The historical and theoretical construction of the concept "race" com-
plicates the matter even further.

So, in his reassessment of Mapplethorpe's black male images, Mercer recontextualized his
previous argument of fetishism's implied negativity as a process of "erotic objectification and
aestheticization of racial difference," and posited instead an alternative take on it. He accom-
plished this by first acknowledging that "fetish" or "fetishistic" carry negative connotations in
our society that we have been socialized to believe and accept. So, too, has it been drummed
into us that indulgence in homosexuality, sadomasochism, interracial fraternizing, and primi-
tivism, are wrong. Thus, inherent in the concept of the fetish, fetishism, and other areas of
concern here is a moral position—a location that had informed Mercer's earlier negative read-
ing of Mapplethorpe's images of black men. From there, Mercer then acknowledged the use-
fulness of fetishism as a tool for "conceptualizing issues of subjectivity and spectatorship in rep-
resentations of race and ethnicity," but at the same time he warned against its pitfalls.[53]

In a similar vein, the art historian Whitney Davis has stressed, in his dissecting of Freud's famous 1926 essay on fetishism, the importance of distinguishing fetishism and fetishistic practice from other psychological interests such as obsession, phobia, voyeurism, homosexual longing, mourning, and sadism.[54] Although these preoccupations are evident in various combinations throughout Van Vechten's interracial homoerotic imagery, he had a tendency to use photography as a fetishistic practice—that is, as a suitable medium for playing out the formation of desire in a controlled racial, erotic, and social fantasy.

Fetishism has always played a significant role in determining and shaping erotic fantasies and desires. However, fetishistic looking and fetishistic practice are not necessarily related occurrences. The former is part and parcel of the psychological dynamic of desire and, as such, shades into but cannot be equated with fetishism as the acting out of sexual practice. As well, desire and the act of looking are complex and ambivalent psychological mechanisms inherently constitutive of fetishism itself.

Some scholars have determined that fetishism as a theoretical tool is not very helpful in the analysis of racialized and homoeroticized imagery because Freud's account of the subject ignored completely the element of race in fetishistic practice and, as well, was "embedded in the patriarchal system of sexual division . . ."[55]—thus failing to satisfactorily integrate homosexuality or consideration of homoerotic desire. In most cases, fetishism merely affirms a heterosexual subject position and operates to "de-homosexualize fetishistic looking."[56] In other words, the theoretical model of fetishism is typically of limited use in deciphering the "circuitry through which individual [homoerotic] desire must circulate."[57]

Fetishism is one of many fantasy tropes through which individuals control and order a mass of complex information so as to successfully project values and beliefs onto people, places, and objects of fear and desire.[58] The fetish operates within erotic representation as a visual substitute for the "real" object, or, for the experience of sexual contact. In Van Vechten's case, sexual contact is joined with an attempt at harmonious racial union, and is heightened by "photography's supposed connection to the 'real' world—thereby setting into motion "the mechanisms of voyeurism and fetishism almost by definition."[59] As well, the acts of model setup, photographing, and printing, turn the act of looking into a fetish. In this respect, the photograph itself becomes a fetish object and the presentational aspect of the image turns that representation into a fetish. This entire process is unavoidably linked to the sight, desire, threat, objectification, and commodification of the black male body.

Because the function of fetishistic representation is to make present for the admirer what is absent in the real, Van Vechten's photographs can be characterized as visualizations of a fantasy of mastery and control over the "objects" of his own needs and desires—that is, black men and his self-delusions of single-handedly achieving interracial harmony throughout American society.[60] Fantasy of mastery and control is an inherent trait in the problematic aspect of fetishism because it resides in colonizing discourses and as such inevitably sets up negative colonizer/colonized, master/slave, white/black relationships of power.[61] As Van Vechten's images will reveal, however, these binaries are not as clear-cut as one might assume.

Within the context of colonial discourse, Homi Bhabha has addressed the flux and flaw of fetishism as foundation for the construction of both negrophobic and negrophilic tendencies.[62] Mercer has underscored Bhabha's observations in his discussions of skin color

as fetish. Both theorists expose fetishism as the "splitting of conscious and unconscious belief that is relevant to the ambiguous axis on which negrophobia and negrophilia intertwine."[63] The intrinsic and troubling flux and reflux of fetishism encoded in Van Vechten's photography simply exposes the complicated and unfixed nature of a theoretical paradigm as it invades a kind of representation that speaks to the interstices of erotic desire and racial difference.

Van Vechten's brand of primitivism and fetishism are based on stereotypes about race. The stereotype operates much in the same way as does the fetish—as a scene of fantasy and defense or as a desire for an authenticity that is threatened by the difference of race, color, and culture.[64] What complicates the matter here is that Van Vechten produced imagery that is both racial and *inter*racial in nature. That is, both black and white men are subjected to the same negative relationships of power; both are susceptible to exploitation as "virgin territory to be penetrated and possessed by an all-powerful desire to probe and explore."[65] Van Vechten's use of the racial stereotype and fetishism as avenues for a fantasy of mastery and control is intensified and complicated by a combined interracial and homoerotic investment. So, in discussing Van Vechten's photography in the context of all the conceptual and theoretical tropes just mentioned, I distinguish between his "racialized" nudes in which a sole black figure is contextualized in an artificial studio environment or in a natural setting read as "primitive," and his interracial images in which black and white men are similarly narrativized as they interrelate on primitive and erotic levels.

Spectatorship: Then and Now

One intriguing yet ambivalent aspect of Van Vechten's imagery is its engagement with spectatorial mobility. In the realms of fantasy and desire, spectatorial mobility allows the viewer only the illusion of access to positions of control or submission. Van Vechten's black figure can function as either a rival or accomplice in encountering the object of the viewer's desire. And herein lies the attraction to these images for me. The desired object and desiring subject are not fixed, rather, they are mobile depending on the spectator's wants, needs, and desires. Unlike most contemporary homoerotic imagery such as that produced by Mapplethorpe, where and how to look are mostly dictated by the photographer. Van Vechten's images do not command a "categorical" identity or subject position for the viewer. A greater fluidity in spectatorship legitimizes and yet seriously complicates the relationship of power between white and black men. Thus, the black figure is *and* is not "used, laid bare, and overdetermined from without" by white eyes in the realm of fantasy.[66] Neither and yet both spectator and object become powerless and powerful in fantasy at some point. Van Vechten's photographs emphasize ambivalent interracial relations of looking and desiring that often destabilize any subject/object dichotomy in terms of seeing and being seen. For myself, this dynamic does not destabilize or promote any ambivalent "structure of feeling" as Mapplethorpe's black nudes had done for Mercer. On the contrary, I find my participation in the mobilized fantasies provoked by these images to be an important element in their reception.

The representation of black bodies by those classified as nonblack renders more volatile the close relationship between visual culture and pleasure/desire. Generally speaking, black

bodies speak to the "desire, threat and fear for the (white) viewer of the so-called Other."[67] Kobena Mercer's essays on Robert Mapplethorpe's imagery are, in this regard, important in that they speak to the relationship of the viewer or spectator to the image. Due to the unfixed nature of spectatorship and reception, I agree with Mercer that meaning does not reside with the photograph itself, but is created by the onlooker who brings to the image his or her own racial, sexual, aesthetic and cultural "baggage." Viewer subjectivity and spectatorship are critical considerations for any reading of Van Vechten's male nudes, for what his photographs succeed at doing is provide for the construction of multiple positionings by the viewer as voyeur, connoisseur, ethnographer, masochist, sadist, fetishist. They offer the spectator, regardless of race, multiple erotic fantasy situations from which to indulge.[68] That is to say, it is the spectator who supplies or conjures erotic possibilities. The potentialities and various combinations of erotic fantasies—voyeurism, masochism, sadism, and so on—arising out of spectatorship can be stimulating for both subject and object of desire in the realm of both fantasy and reality. These sorts of complications provide a window onto the ambivalences and intricacies of desire and fantasy that can not always be definitively pinpointed and rationally explicated by lofty theoretical positions or by critical historical narratives on modernism. Moreover, Waugh notes, "the dividing line between the world of an image and the world outside (the private and the public) is blurred, and individual erotic fantasies are not always equivalent to collective sexual (or racial) politics."[69] We have to be careful not to conflate these images of fantasy and desire with documentation or social reality. Representation here is a fantasy in which an expressed desire may or may not be fulfilled. As Waugh reminds us, the photograph is only a trace of that desire, not a mirror of it.[70] In other words, the photograph can not and does not give us the whole picture.

In his book *Hard to Imagine,* Waugh has pondered how to "balance the infinite subjectivity and variability in the positions of spectatorship around an image and the specificity of the historical context of its production and reception."[71] Spectatorship and historical context are important and are usually overlooked by conservative observers. Waugh concludes that "it is images in interaction with the world that count, not images in isolation, and it is only through sharing our responses that we can understand that interaction."[72] Van Vechten's male nude photographs demand a look at how an intended and unintended audience might receive them. *The Homoerotic Photography of Carl Van Vechten* presents just one (my own) of many possible responses.

Most contemporary interpretations of Van Vechten's gaze on the racialized body are ones that assume the inscribing of a "look" that implies hierarchical ordering of white modernist subject over black passive object. But what makes these works atypical of most representations of colonialist and primitivist visual tropes of the slave/master relationship is the apparent delight taken in showing white capitulation and "sacrifice" to the black man as a means of communicating a semblance of interracial cooperation and harmony. Yet, at the same time, these images allow for the possibility of the contemporary viewer to take multiple fantasy subject positions and interpositions that complicate the interconnections among race, fantasy, desire, and visual representation. More than anything else, Van Vechten's images underscore the fact that there is a distinction to be made between racial and interracial representation—a distinction that engages complications surrounding spectatorship and the facile

mobility of fantasy boundaries for the viewer that not only transgress status quo notions of race and sex, but become indicative as well of the mobility and confluence of the viewer's own fantasies or social needs and desires in relation to those of the photographer. On one level, Van Vechten's photographs of racial and interracial male nudes could be read as modes of representation fashioned to "facilitate the [white] imaginary projection of certain racial and sexual fantasies about the black male body."[73] Yet, on another level, they are classic expressions of ambivalence and ambiguity in that they exemplify the fracturing of homo-erotic desire and interracialism into complicated and complicating psychological, social, and spectatorial emotional effects.

Van Vechten's male nudes are visual manifestations of a pre-Stonewall-era gay social and cultural history—a history that coincided with the attempt by artists to create and define a uniquely American brand of modern art practice. Along these lines, A. B. Christa Schwarz has convincingly analyzed the "gay literary voice" of some of the key players in the Harlem Renaissance. No such analysis has yet been considered for the movement's "gay visual voice." Van Vechten's foray into the primitivized and interracial male nude gives us only one of many glimpses into the intersection of homosexuality and the visual/performing arts during and immediately following the Harlem Renaissance. With this said, one of the primary goals of this book is to expose to the reading and seeing public an unusual archive of homoerotic racial and interracial imagery that has been kept, until now, in the closet and to consider them in relation to Van Vechten's interests in and contributions to modernist primitivism, homo-erotic photography, and to the black and gay histories of the Harlem Renaissance and beyond. We should keep in mind the complexities involved in engaging such an archive that con-firms the work as a vital and living part of pre-Stonewall-era homosexual identity, and is representative of cultural and subcultural norms within the gay and heterosexual communi-ties of that period. When looking at these photographs, we must consider the cultural con-text out of which they come and the time period in which they are made. Looking at Van Vechten's photographs, involves more than just our eyes—they engage our intellects, emo-tions, prejudices, and our own fantasies and desires. We should not deny ourselves the pleas-ure of looking. Despite all the looking, however, we must also acknowledge and take delight in the fact that such private pictures stubbornly retain their ambiguity.

These images give a glimpse, however nebulous, into the inner life of a public figure. My purpose here is not to embark on any systematic psychological or psychoanalytic probe into Van Vechten's subjectivity—I leave such an endeavor up to the experts. Periodically throughout the text, however, I do engage discourses such as primitivism and fetishism that require some engagement, albeit not comprehensive, with psychoanalytic ideas. My primary intention is to bring before the contemporary seeing and feeling public another side of Van Vechten's reputation by way of privately produced works that tap into complex wants, needs, and desires of a man operating in a society in which racial and sexual transgressions were celebrated in private but frowned on and banned outright from public display.

The Homoerotic Photography of Carl Van Vechten takes a glimpse into the ambivalent pri-vate desires of one man and provides evidence of the social and psychological dynamics of an underground world of interracial homoeroticism during the 1930s and 1940s in New York. This world corresponds, not coincidentally, with artistic and cultural forays into vanguard

American modernist practices. These photographs provide a visual record—albeit exaggerated—of a social history of interracial homoeroticism during the pre-Stonewall-era and postheyday of the Harlem Renaissance.

Van Vechten's male nudes activate both the passive and active gaze. For homoerotic culture in particular, gratification in looking seems especially important because "looking not only stimulates and organizes desire but also legitimizes it."[74] Van Vechten's private male nudes comprise "a personal working out of erotic displacements, transferences, and tensions through the entanglements of looking and representing."[75] In embarking on this investigation, I have knowingly launched these previously hidden images into public viewership and, in so doing, have possibly destabilized and fractured the subjective locations (i.e., emotional access and identity reinforcement) of those not privy or receptive to a gay sensibility or interracial interest. I acknowledge that this process of "outing" and perhaps dividing, privileges those who are able to position themselves psychically, socially, and even physically in relationship to homoerotic and interracial desires and might well exclude or alienate those who can not or do not. In the end, the subjectivity of the contemporary viewer is inevitably destabilized and divided regardless of race, gender, or even class.

Van Vechten's photographic scenes and their related issues invite the spectator into what Mercer refers to as "those messy spaces in-between . . . binary oppositions . . . that ordinarily dominate representations of difference."[76] The shifting subject positions and numerous permutations of racial and homoerotic fantasies elicited from Van Vechten's visual imagery, exemplify the complexities of desire in which questions of race, homosexuality, social identity and power, enter into the very "real" psychological and lived relations and spaces between black and white men. These kinds of responses can not be explained solely by systematic theoretical paradigms because the "problem" with paradigms is that they tend to be removed from our lived experiences that are based, in significant part, on fantasies and desires—interests that reside in those "messy spaces in-btween." As visual manifestations of gay and racial fantasy and desire, Van Vechten's photographs help illuminate and bridge those untidy gaps.

Van Vechten is a case study of a modernist who was simultaneously "chic" and marginal. His private archive of letters and images help us to construct a twentieth-century modernist history of racial, erotic, and social desire. Van Vechten's male nudes play a role in, what Waugh has termed, "the evolution of gay collectivities of image-sharers" and gay cultural activity. The sharing of gay imagery depended on a combination of new image-making technologies (ie., faster films and smaller cameras; the postcard industry, etc.) and a gay cultural expression based on gossip, or, what Waugh describes as "a life-critical role in the traditional gay underground."[77]

My perspective on Van Vechten's interracial male nudes has been enriched by recent groundbreaking works that have documented and charted the historical trajectory and reception of licit and illicit homoerotic imagery. I am immensely indebted to the ideas contained in Thomas Waugh's *Hard to Imagine: Gay Male Eroticism in Photography and Film* (1996), Emmanuel Cooper's *Fully Exposed* (1995), Allen Ellenzweig's *The Homoerotic Photograph* (1992), and Deborah Bright's *The Passionate Camera* (1996). Waugh's book, especially, has been helpful in contextualizing Van Vechten's male nudes in terms of homoerotic desire and

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race in photographic representation. Waugh began his investigation by confessing his own wants, needs, and desires in the intellectual pursuit of his project. His experiences spoke to the seeing and knowing of homosexual desire as a means of constructing one's own identity. Moreover, the anecdotal tales he relays speak to the "shared eroticization of the visual representation of bodies and acts."[78] Waugh's richly illustrated book is about "the politics of pleasure and the pleasure of the visual . . . the collective history of desire, shame, transgression, and resistance . . ."[79] The author calls for a "fuller acknowledgement [and acceptance] of the erotic as a driving force in the gay imaginary."[80] I have found Waugh's book also invaluable in its attempts to revalue in a positive way the (homo)erotic, showing "how desire is at the center of (cultural) production, circulation, and reception."[81] Private photographs such as those produced by Van Vechten, provide an insight into (erotic and interracial) desire, lifestyle, as well as the evocative power of the photograph.

Like Waugh, I too am compelled to confess and acknowledge the awareness of my own process of transfiguring "personal desire into an intellectual obsession."[82] Although *The Homoerotic Photography of Carl Van Vechten* makes no claim to providing a comprehensive or encyclopedic sweep of homoerotic licit and illicit imagery, as does Waugh's work, I feel obligated to give validity here to my obsession with the interracial and the homoerotic in the visual domain. This subject bestows a certain amount of confirmation and intellectual gloss to my own fantasies and desires. As an African-American gay male, I admit that my investigation is personal in its "political, intellectual, and libidinal" claims. There is a certain emotional and intellectual thrill I derive from the homoerotic and interracial frisson of these images and their suggestive powers. By contrast, I am fully aware of the historical and ideological problems they pose vis-à-vis white visualization of the black male body. As a result, my approach may seem schizophrenic in that, on the one hand, I detect unique and compelling qualities in Van Vechten's visualization of race and homoeroticism, and yet, on the other hand, I am profoundly aware of their unnerving and potentially racist implications. Van Vechten's images expose the intense and often troubling dynamics of homoeroticism and racial idealization that was in circulation during and, indeed, continues well after the Harlem Renaissance. It is with his erotic interracial images that Van Vechten's public persona as patron and his idealized private sexual and racial fantasies merge and conflict. The flux and flaw of such images ultimately reflect the ambivalences that plague past and present gay social and sexual interracial relations in the United States. I think that it is a conflicted, ambiguous, and tantalizing world worth entering and exploring.