

The Harlem Renaissance was as much an artistic and cultural movement for African-Americans as it was a significant influence on the burgeoning gay movement, both for African Americans and white Americans, in the 1920s – some 40 years before Stonewall. Many of the notable writers and performers of the time were gay, lesbian, or bisexual or at least there were strong suspicions about their queerness. These writers and artists ranged from the more “out” such as writer Richard Bruce Nugent and blues singer Gladys Bentley to those who were known to love both sexes, like Bessie Smith, or those who kept their private lives more reclusive, such as Countee Cullen and Wallace Thurman.

Yet to draw such lines of distinction as “out” or “reclusive” wrongly places these individuals, and thus their achievements, into a more contemporary context of post-Stonewall and Civil Unions. Such distinctions were not as readily possible as they are today, especially for African Americans who may have identified as gay, lesbian or bisexual, either publicly or privately, in the 1920s. Many had to put their sexuality over a matrix of additional societal prejudices already present about their race, gender (for women) and class identities. For leading figures of the Harlem Renaissance who were also queer, their art would help them begin to transgress these boundaries. In essence, their art became the focus of their lives with few exceptions, at least publicly.

The managing of these boundaries, both real and perceived, is what makes the correspondence between Carl Van Vechten (1880-1964) and Langston Hughes (1902-1967), two leading figures of the Harlem Renaissance, so engaging. A selection of letters from their friendship is chronicled in *Remember Me to Harlem: The Letters of Langston Hughes and Carl Van Vechten, 1925-1964* (Knopf, 2001 – the paperback edition is being released this month). Emily Bernard, the editor of the book, is an Assistant Professor of English and ALANA Studies at the University of Vermont. Bernard spent several years examining and studying the approximately 1,500 pieces of correspondence between Van Vechten and Hughes, much of which is part of the James Weldon Johnson Memorial Collection at Yale University.

Van Vechten was born in Cedar Rapids, Iowa and grew up in a socially progressive white family. Van Vechten was a member of elite social circles in New York City and his parties were infamous for both the value of the networking which took place as well as the drinking and bawdiness which went on. He became a prominent patron of the arts during the early to mid part of the 20th century and developed a very specific and influential interest in African-American artists. Beyond Hughes, Van Vechten also helped to shape the careers of Jessie Fauset, Miguel Covarrubias, and Ethel Waters. Van Vechten, who was married, had many sexual relationships.

Hughes, born February 1, 1902 (this month marks his 100th birthday) in Joplin, Mississippi, is often cited as the poet laureate of Harlem. Hughes, who never married, is considered one of America's greatest poets. The two men met at a benefit in Harlem in 1924. Their brief encounter that evening led to Hughes' first book published by Knopf, with assistance from Van Vechten who was close friends with Arnold Knopf, and a friendship that would last until Van Vechten's death in 1964.

pansies and marguerites to you!

▼ Exploring
Emily Bernard's
Remember Me to
Harlem:
The Letters of
Langston Hughes
and
Carl Van Vechten,
1925-1964
By Kevin McAteer

