

Arts

The letters included in *Remember Me to Harlem* bring to life a unique friendship between two men of very different backgrounds. These men are both charming and witty letter writers and their admiration for each other is undeniable. In addition, Bernard's scrupulous footnotes offer the reader a broader context of major historical events in which the letters are written as well as intriguing details about the individuals who enter and exit the lives of Hughes and Van Vechten. Their shared passion for poetry, blues, and literature is the dominant subject of the letters. There are often several references to key literary and artistic figures of the time, including several notable queers (Nugent, Cullen, Bentley, Smith, Wallace, Gertrude Stein, and

Hughes notes: "Your letters are so very charming, dear Langston, that I look forward every morning to finding one under the door. I have been lucky during the past week." A few pages of reading these letters and you will begin to look at your own mail with a more discerning eye, not to mention how empty AOL's "you've got mail" greeting begins to sound. Van Vechten was known for his eloquent and witty "sign-offs" of his letters, something Hughes would periodically model in his own letters. Among the creative letter-ending farewells were: "tons of California poppies and four chow dogs to you!; laurel and bayleaves to you!; Pansies and Marguerites to You!" The last of which Bernard had sold to Knopf as the original title of the book. According to Bernard, her

interpretation here? Or should it be something the readership should make?" Even with the new title Bernard admits, "a careful reading of the footnotes would produce an interesting analysis."

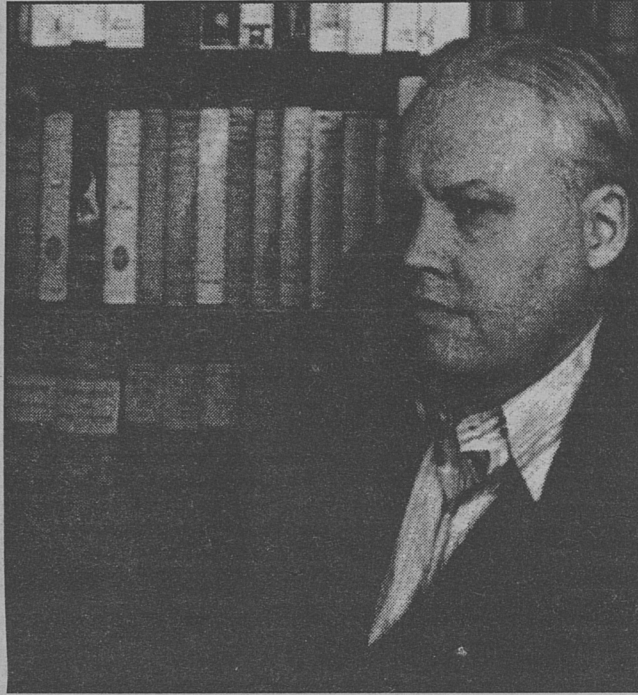
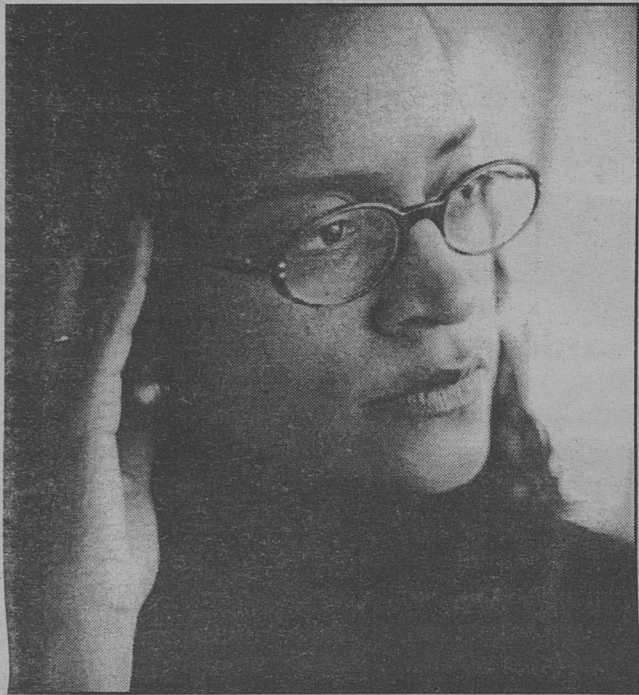
Langston Hughes' sexuality has long been a subject of debate among scholars and activists. Bernard, who faces questions about Hughes' ambiguous sexuality in almost every interview she conducts, claims that part of Hughes' appeal is his seeming innocence, thus the subject of his sexuality becomes central. "Many want to believe that Hughes never had sex and that he was this chaste, immaculate person," Bernard notes, "and in fact it's hard to find any evidence to the contrary."

References to women as girlfriends in Hughes' letters are fairly generic and once his "girlfriends" mention marriage Hughes immediately separates himself from the relationship. "Yet at the same time, it's really hard for me to accept and believe that a man who loved wine, literature and sleep as much as Langston did, that he didn't have sex," says Bernard. Bernard's point about a shared (mis-) understanding of Hughes' sexuality is further illustrated in a footnote to a postcard dated December 20, 1940 in which Van Vechten wrote to Hughes: "... Did you see your name in the list of eligible bachelors in the *Amsterdam News*?..."; the question's footnote reveals that the list, which appeared on December 14, 1940, described Langston as "likable, conscientious, but somehow enveloped in a thin cloud of mystery."

Van Vechten, on the other hand, lived a much more open "gay" life, or at least as open as one can be in those times. Although Van Vechten was married for over 40 years to Fania Marinoff, he also had, according to Bernard's research, at least three long-term relationships with men (Donald Angus, Mark Lutz, and Saul Mauriber). Bernard notes in her introduction that "Hughes would have been aware of Van Vechten's extra-marital activities – as was Fania – but they do not play a part in the friendship the two shared in letters."

In addition, Van Vechten kept private scrapbooks, which consisted of nude and pornographic pictures of men. The scrapbooks also included clippings from newspapers about incidents of gay bashing and the infamous Drag Balls, which took place in Harlem and Greenwich Village and were popular with both the heterosexual and homosexual communities. Interestingly, Van Vechten included his scrapbooks as part of his personal papers, which were bequeathed to Yale University. The scrapbooks came with one condition however: that they were not to be opened until 25 years after his death. Today the Van Vechten scrapbooks are subject to the mere curious as well as the serious scholar who consider them an important contribution to pre-Stonewall gay history.

Beyond what the book does or does not reveal about each man's sexuality, the letters included in *Remember Me to Harlem* illuminate the strains of maintaining an interracial friendship in an American society which was deeply divided along racial and economic lines. Only a few years after their first meeting, Hughes finds himself in a position of defending Van Vechten's novel *Nigger Heaven* (1926). As Bernard describes in the introduction to her book, "the novel would have disappeared like most 1920s potboilers were it not for a few off-color scenes and its title." Van Vechten saw the title as ironic and included a footnote at the first appearance of the word "nigger" which stated that it was a word commonly used by African-Americans but not to be spoken by whites. The publication of the novel was negatively received by many African-American leaders, including W.E.B. DuBois, and is often seen



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Above left, UVM Asst. Professor of English Emily Bernard. Right, Carl Van Vechten.

James Baldwin). Despite these bits of queer history, don't be completely fooled. If you are looking for a book which will finally "out" Hughes you will certainly be disappointed.

What the book does offer, however, is a personalized mapping of a friendship between two men, one white and one black during a time when it was still illegal for the races to congregate publicly. The early letters reflect the tone and giddiness of two boys in love who simply can't wait a day until they hear from the other. At the closing of one of his earlier letters to Van Vechten, Hughes writes: "I do want to come up to New York again soon. And remember your promise: a whole day to look at your beautiful things. And talk with you." Van Vechten's reply to

editor, a sophisticated New Yorker during that era (she was Hughes' last editor at Knopf) and still today, understood the implications of "pansies" – in the 1920s it was common for gay men to wear pansies in their lapel to signify their inclusion in the gay community. "But she also believed that it [Hughes' homosexuality] was something he didn't have to announce, because it was so obvious and understood," says Bernard. Nevertheless, representatives of Hughes' estate balked at the title and suggested to Bernard that it promised the reader something the book was not offering: a discussion about their [Hughes and Van Vechten] sexuality. Bernard eventually acquiesced, noting, "it is a fine line for the editor of a letters collection. Would I be making an