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# Carl Van Vechten's Nigger Heaven: Envisioning and Reinventing American Transatlantic Bohemia in Harlem

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Carl Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven*: Envisioning and Reinventing  
American Transatlantic Bohemia in Harlem

by

Edward N. Tabor

A Thesis

Presented to the Graduate and Research Committee

of Lehigh University

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Carl Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven*: Envisioning and Reinventing American Transatlantic Bohemia in Harlem  
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## Abstract

This study of Carl Van Vechten's controversial novel, *Nigger Heaven*, creates a transatlantic model as a new platform to judge Van Vechten's work. This paper sets forth the argument that Van Vechten's importance in the modernist movement, as well as his significant contribution to the Harlem Renaissance, is a worthwhile addition to studies in the field. An analysis of transatlantic modernism is developed in context with Van Vechten's earlier works, and the study culminates with a close reading of the multiple elements of transatlantic/transnational/cosmopolitan elements of Harlem presented in *Nigger Heaven*.

## I. Introduction

In her study of Carl Van Vechten, Emily Bernard succinctly questions: “Does a white person, any white person, have the authority to tell a black story? In particular as story called ‘nigger?’” (108) Although Bernard doesn’t want her readers to rush to a conclusion, uncovering Van Vechten’s intentions prove to be a complicated task. Perhaps too easily and too often white writers like Van Vechten have assumed the authority of relating the narrative of black experience, and their involvement in African American literature as story tellers and patrons is well documented. White involvement in black literature may be problematic at times, but considering it as part of the story of the Harlem Renaissance enriches the account of that period. Particularly important in this dynamic is the transatlantic framing from white writers like Carl Van Vechten, which black writers, like Nella Larsen, Claude McKay, and Langston Hughes, built upon and expanded in subsequent fictional accounts of Harlem life. Surprisingly hidden behind the ironic and racist title of *Nigger Heaven*, Van Vechten’s intentions of portraying the artistic and cultural capital of Harlem were sincere, if not entirely unproblematic.

Van Vechten, whose transatlantic career attuned him to understanding the workings of *avante garde* thought, began to notice the burgeoning of modernism in Paris during the first decade of the twentieth century. Later, he witnessed the rise of an arts community in the Greenwich Village of the teens, and ultimately he found a culmination of such modernist movements in Harlem of the 1920s. Van Vechten’s physical travel through the modernist world, allowed him to see Harlem as an artistic locale similar to those he witnessed in Europe. In fact, *Nigger Heaven* focuses on Van Vechten’s observations of cosmopolitan black intellectuals who, travel to Europe, speak in

Francophone dialects, and discuss the merits of Harlem alongside the works of Europe, the Caribbean, and Africa. Van Vechten's international travel attuned his vision to modernist circles, allowing him to see the Harlem of the early 1920s as an *avante garde* locale; *Nigger Heaven*, in fact, demonstrates Harlem as the new *avante garde* remapping of the Greenwich Village of the teens.

Despite Van Vechten's positive qualities which link him to the revivifying experiments of modernism, venturing into a study of a book that has stirred so much controversy may produce enough off-putting criticism to encourage most writers to steer clear of its dangers. The difficulty of addressing Van Vechten, who at first glance appears nothing more than an opportunist and white interloper simply may not be appealing to those who seek to understand the Harlem Renaissance as a pure movement of race and culture. Marcia Leisner describes this problem of Van Vechten most concisely: "it is difficult to be fair about such an individual today; a dilettante par example, chronicler of bohemia, ballet and blacks, he was full of good will but in retrospect most irritating." (62)

Without denying Van Vechten's infiltration in the Harlem Renaissance, the current studies of Modernist African American literature, and Modernism in general, would benefit from a closer look at Van Vechten's role in the movement. Specifically, a re-evaluation of his controversial book, *Nigger Heaven*, may provide some new information about the role of the Harlem Renaissance in modernist circles. My purpose throughout this essay is to demonstrate that Van Vechten reveals the dynamic transatlantic relationship of the Harlem Renaissance to the European movement of High Modernism, and secondly, to show that Van Vechten, despite his reputation as an interloper, should be

studied alongside the African American writers of the period.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, by discussing Van Vechten's earlier work *Peter Whiffle*, which may be read as cataloging of modernist experiments, we may establish Van Vechten as a connoisseur of modernist circles. Reading *Peter Whiffle* as precursor to *Nigger Heaven* helps to sort out Van Vechten's modernist agenda in his view of Harlem. Having established that Van Vechten's role in modernism was entirely enthusiastic, we can rethink his role in Harlem not merely as an exploiter, though he is sometimes problematic, but as one who had a positive enriching influence on Harlem, which allowed the wider world to see it as a deeper more international movement, and may also have had a positive effect among African American writers. By including Van Vechten in a study of African American modernism, we may see what George Hutchinson describes as the dynamic of "intercultural matrix," which allows "the greater freedom and variety of *interracial* and *interethnic* relationships [and] only intensified the experimental development on new forms of 'racial' expression." (author's italics 6) Van Vechten certainly saw himself as a contributor to the social and intellectual community of Harlem, and he may have opened the door for other writers to express Harlem as a place not bound by its borough limits.

In current studies, Carl Van Vechten is most widely known for his photography of modernist writers and his portraits represent nearly the entire Harlem Renaissance as well as countless other modernists. In a sense, Van Vechten's photography has become a visual memory of the diversity of the period. However, few realize that in the 1920s,

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<sup>1</sup> Thus far little has been written to discover or uncover the tri-fold connection of Paris, Greenwich Village and the Harlem Renaissance in Van Vechten's work. In fact, critics either don't see or completely overlook the link with Van Vechten's transatlantic novels and his novel about Harlem. In African American literary studies, some significant work has been done to promote the connection of Paris and Harlem; for example, the Winter 2005 edition of *Modern Fiction Studies* "Paris and the Black Atlantic" represents a number of critical perspectives which investigate some of the forgotten connections of the Harlem Renaissance to Paris.

Van Vechten was a popular novelist who embodied modernist ideals, and the subject of his writing ran the gamut from American expatriates, Hollywood movie stars, to the Harlem Renaissance. He reached the peak of his career and fame during the 1920s, and thereafter, Van Vechten was nearly forgotten in literary circles. His biographer, Bruce Kellner, prefaces his book, *Carl Van Vechten and the Irreverent Decades*, with an account of his research process in which he describes Van Vechten's obscurity in the early 1950s, and the difficulty of unearthing the then-living figure. Several times, Kellner repeats the phrase "Who the hell is Carl Van Vechten?" to emphasize his frustration in the project. Van Vechten had an international career similar to other modern expatriates, but he also did something that most white writers avoided – he sought out and experienced the culture beyond the white world. His recognition of Harlem as part of the modernist dynamic predates the academic community's acceptance by 70 years.

Van Vechten's choice to cross the racial divide, not only to experience black culture, but also to write about it, proved to be his literary death knell. Indeed, the controversy that grew from the 1926 publication of his book, *Nigger Heaven*, may have encouraged him to quit writing altogether. The controversy surrounding him and his disappearance from the literary landscape helped to send him into obscurity. Van Vechten seems to have been a figure who threatened the conception of white/black relationships and he may have been simply too contradictory and too dangerous to discuss. It is worth noting that Van Vechten hasn't been relegated to complete obscurity; over the years, interest in Van Vechten's memory has resurfaced. In 1995, Robert F. Worth published a powerful essay "Nigger Heaven and the Harlem Renaissance" which presents a scathing account of

Van Vechten's decadent nature and is particularly interested in the controversy created by the novel. Worth looks to Van Vechten as summary of the damage which white voyeurs create by entering Harlem. Such criticism is certainly well-founded, yet a more charitable look at Van Vechten has also followed his reputation. A select few scholars -- such as Edward Lueders in the 1950s, Bruce Kellner in the 1960s, Leo Coleman in the 1990s, David G. Holmes in the 2000s and most significantly, Emily Bernard in 2012-- have singled out Van Vechten's role in modernism and his key role in the Harlem Renaissance. It is Emily Bernard who has done the most significant work in revitalizing the literary reputation of Van Vechten, as well as exposing his important role in modernist experimentation.

What Van Vechten saw in Harlem, was not simply an isolated society repressed by the rest of the world, but a world in itself that functioned on a dynamic that mirrored the *avante garde* communities of the world. Van Vechten's near obsession with European and American modernisms demonstrates a pattern that is present in his earlier works and replicated in his focus on Harlem. On the other hand, Harlem offered something the Eurocentric locales didn't have, an inherent cultural repository of natural talent that informed and altered European modes of modernism.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Van Vechten's interest in the cultural "potent force" of Harlem is similar to his view of Stravinsky. His 1916 review of *The Rite of Spring*, for example, singles him out as one tuned into art in its purest form, specifically 'the primitive' side of modern art. In the essay he describes how a fellow viewer began to beat rhythmically to the music:

The intense excitement, under which he was laboring, thanks to the potent force of the music, betrayed itself presently when he began to beat rhythmically on the top of my head with his fists. My emotion was so great that I did not feel the blows for some time. They were perfectly synchronized with the beat of the music. When I did, I turned around. His apology was sincere. We had both been carried beyond ourselves. (qtd. in Kellner 74)

Such a manifestation of culture was not without conflict, and Van Vechten's 'intrusions' into Harlem show his ability to understand the free-play between the dominant and marginal aspects of Harlem. Robert Crunden describes this kind of free play in modern art communities, "Modern artists combined the highest and the lowest elements in a culture to the escape the bourgeois middle in a spirit of 'carnivalization.'"(xiv) Harlem manifested the expected contrasts of a modern bohemia, but it offered a more complex problem: Harlem was not only in conflict with itself, but with the rest of the white world. We may argue that Van Vechten's embrace of Harlem culture shows his belief that the bourgeois whites could find some self-definition in the complex play that occurred between white/black and low/high culture.

There is, of course, a danger within this play of black and white, in so much as the Harlem Renaissance is in danger of losing its own identity. Van Vechten was quite aware of this problem. In his essay, "Moanin' Wid a Sword in Mah Han" published shortly before *Nigger Heaven*, he warns of the dangers of African Americans losing their musical traditions to whites:

As James Weldon Johnson has pointed out [. . .] it was not long before the white man discovered that words dealing with white people might be fitted to these infectious rhythms, and soon Irving Berlin, and later George Gershwin -- to name the two most conspicuous figures in a long list -- were writing better jazz than the Negro composers. (55)

Van Vechten's awareness of a sometimes dangerous dynamic occurring between races and cultures is expressed in his fears of the exploitation of African American music.<sup>3</sup> In

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<sup>3</sup> Jazz historians may take some of Van Vechten's assertions as mildly exaggerated; Berlin and Gershwin never really take the place of Duke Ellington or Louis Armstrong. For more about the artistic continuity of

fact, Van Vechten seemed to fear that the Harlem Renaissance would be swallowed *dans son intégralité* into white culture, and thence its individual and rebellious spirit would be nullified in a cauldron of whitewash. He warned that the black writer who refused to speak of all levels of Harlem culture “readily delivers his great gifts to the exploitation of the white man without –save in rare instances—making any attempt, an attempt foredoomed to meet with success, to capitalize them himself.” (58) Ironically, Van Vechten’s *Nigger Heaven* appears to do just what he warned against; that is, allow a white man to capitalize upon the virtues of Harlem. Van Vechten’s goal wasn’t to exploit, but he failed to see that his work had an exploitive principle buried within his relationship to Harlem. He meant simply to emphasize the complexities of the Harlem culture, but the novel tends to go beyond what he expected. Furthermore, the publication of *Nigger Heaven* by the prestigious house of Alfred Knopf seems to show that the fruits of African American culture can only be reaped by a white writer. Reading Van Vechten exposes the white world’s precarious state of exploration/exploitation of Harlem and it emphasizes the dangerous territory that Van Vechten was exploring. Seeking the different and controversial was nothing new to Van Vechten and the roots of his exploration of Harlem begins with his transatlantic journey in modernist *avante garde* circles.

## **II. Transatlantic Modernism and Harlem**

Before proceeding with a discussion of Van Vechten’s work, it is important to clarify the idea of transatlantic modernism. In recent years a number of studies have addressed the re-evaluation of modernism by breaking the national boundaries of the literary and artistic circles. The term transatlantic modernism refers to the international, transnational

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African Americans in Jazz, see Robert O’Meally’s introduction to *Living with Music: Ralph Ellison’s Jazz Writings*.

and cosmopolitan nature of artists and thinkers of the early twentieth century. It is a term that looks at the different locations of modernism, whether in Europe or America and understands that a simultaneous movement was underway. In fact, the traditional belief that a distinct separation between American and European modernism may prove to be false if we consider the large amount of communication that existed between multiple locations. Specifically, the presence of the Atlantic represents a geographical barrier between the different continents, yet it appears to have been an ineffectual barrier against the communication of modernist thinkers and may actually have served as a bridge between the two. Salons, comprised of an international group of writers and artists, especially important in the cross pollination of modernist thought, thrived in New York's Greenwich village, London's Soho, and the West Bank of Paris. Certain figures appear to be rather strong in organizing salons that furthered communication between European and the American forms of Modernism. Mabel Dodge, for instance, reigned over the broadest group of artists in the prewar period, and one of the culminating effects of her salon was the 1913 Armory Show. (Crunden xv)

Artistic groups also found expression in Little magazines such as *The Little Review*, *Others*, *Rogue*, *The Dial*, *The Trend*, *The Glebe* and countless other publications. These magazines were exceptionally transnational and transatlantic demonstrating the impression that modernists felt no boundary between country and continent. *The Little Review*, which was published in New York, is a prime example of the exceptionally eclectic and international nature of modernism. Using the Autumn 1922 issue as an example, one finds the artistic renderings of Gautier, Duchamp and the Futurist Joseph Stella published next to Jean Toomer's "Fern," Gertrude Stein's "B.B. or the Birthplace

of Bonnes,” and James Joyce’s *Ulysses*. Clearly such magazines not only crossed national boundaries but also crossed racial divides as well. It is worth noting that Joyce’s *Ulysses*, which made its first public appearance in the pages of *The Little Review*, is unapologetically published alongside the Harlem Renaissance great Jean Toomer.

Uncovering this desire to break boundaries is the focus of the earliest scholarship in transatlantic modernism, which appears to have been initiated by Michael North, Sieglinde Lemke, and Paul Gilroy.<sup>4</sup> All of these writers place a special focus on black culture as an important catalyst in the mix of transnational and transatlantic modernism. In most cases the concept of black culture in Modernism is one that flows directly from Africa and into the controlled territory of white European artists. In this conception, the energy flows in a one-way transfusion invigorating the modernist projects of artists and writers. For instance, in *The Dialect of Modernism: Race Language, and Twentieth-Century Literature*, North argues that white writers in the early twentieth century mined black culture for useful and colorful phrases to alter and reform artistic norms; canonical figures like Eliot and Pound occasionally used African American dialect to seek freedom from the constraints of white culture. For North this is no more than racial ventriloquism which amounts to “a most intimate invasion whereby the dominant actually attempts to create the thoughts of the subordinate by providing it speech.” (11) Despite what appears to be a traditional/ imperial perception of cultural flow of black to white, North initiates a

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<sup>4</sup> See *The Dialect of Modernism: Race Language, and Twentieth-Century Literature* as well as 1992 : *A Return the Scene of the Modern*.

conversation that moves toward a concept that modernists were seeking identification in the figure of the racial other.<sup>5</sup>

A second generation of critics such as Laura Doyle, Laura Winkel, Genevieve Abravanel and Suzanne Churchill focus on a mixing of culture from both sides of the Atlantic rather than the model which favors a quasi-imperialist view of Europeans pillaging the talent from the Americas and Africa. Doyle and Winkel in the introduction to their anthology *Geomodernisms* argue for a view of “interconnected modernisms” which involve not only Europe and America, but also unsuspected locations such as Lebanon and Taiwan that stretch the bounds of modernism itself. (2-3) Similarly, Abravanel argues that simply by viewing Europe as the center of modernism is somewhat incomplete or inconsistent and she proposes that we view modernism in “modes” rather than through nationalities. (9-10)<sup>6</sup> Churchill, who tends to view the transatlantic modernist project on a microcosmic scale devotes the heart of her study to Alfred Kreymborg’s journal *Others* (1915-1919). Her paradoxically narrow look at the modernist phenomena of the Little Magazines invites us into a hyperconnected world of modernist thinkers who were joined together in the publication of arts journals. In fact, Little Magazines like *Others* tended to draw together the seeming dis-separate modes of modernism; Churchill argues that they tended to “assert a principle of unity among individuals who [were] solely defined by their difference from any norm.” (59) Churchill’s work shows that an era grounded in difference creates the ideal artistic

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<sup>5</sup> North’s book, *The Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language and Twentieth-Century Literature* is quite important to a transatlantic revision of modernist studies, in that he moves the focal point away from anglophilia and incorporates black culture into the mix.

<sup>6</sup> According to Abravanel “such modes include all of the familiar features of modernist writing: formal experimentation an interest in the materiality of language, [and] a turn to subjectivity.” Abravanel argues that this method opens the field to allow previously excluded authors into the mix of modernism. (10)

climate to foster communication, influence and stimulation. Moving away from traditional constructs of nationalism and canonical modes of modernism, these groundbreaking critics have uncovered vital lines of modernist communication and they have shown that many modernist communities functioned in mutual means and are rather difficult to divide on nationalistic lines. Considering the work of these critics in conjunction with this project, it seems clear that such studies invite more work in the consideration of African American roles in the transatlantic configuration.

In the 1920s Van Vechten epitomized what it meant to be a transatlantic modernist. Van Vechten traveled widely through American and European modernist salons, and he is one of the most international figures in the modern period. Not only did he assist authors on both sides of the Atlantic to bring their work to press, to name a few: Wallace Stevens<sup>7</sup>, Mina Loy, Nella Larsen, and Langston Hughes, he also sought to broaden American culture by crossing the Atlantic with some of the earliest American journalism on European Modernism. Van Vechten's life, fiction and journalism were part of a modernist phenomenon that linked Europe and America in a broader arts movement.<sup>8</sup> As publisher of the little magazine *The Trend*, he also promoted transatlantic authors like Gertrude Stein (Kellner CVV 80-81) Van Vechten's international modernist perspective, colored his views about the cultural context of Harlem and thus his fiction takes on a markedly different approach to the subject. By

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<sup>7</sup> "About his acquaintance with Wallace Stevens and his role in the early publication of Stevens' poetry, he [Van Vechten] has written in personal reminiscence entitled 'Rogue Elephant in Porcelain,' the manuscript of which is in his collection at Yale University." (Lueders, *Carl Van Vechten* 50)

<sup>8</sup> Beyond working for *The New York Times* and *The New York Press*, he was a regular contributor to the little magazine *The Trend*. *The Trend*, like many other little magazines tended to bridge the Atlantic, by offering articles, poetry, art, etc, that dealt with both European and American modernist subjects. Bruce Kellner discusses some of the content in his biography of Van Vechten, *Carl Van Vechten and the Irreverent Decades* pages 80-81. Carol Churchill points out that *The Trend* was exceptionally experimental, "according to its statement of purpose *The Trend* aimed to give 'the younger men free rein to experiment with new forms.'" (184)

considering the Harlem Renaissance in Van Vechten's transatlantic terms we may understand that he observed and promoted a broader cultural meaning for African American arts connecting them with other models of Modernism. Van Vechten saw the larger international scale of Harlem itself, and *Nigger Heaven* is an attempt to convince the reader that no modernist movement is totally isolated within the walls of culture or race.

### **III. Van Vechten and Urban Modernism**

As modernism began to flourish on both sides of the Atlantic, urban quarters became refuges for artists and writers. If we consider modernism as a movement that thrived in the unique soil of bohemian locales, it is unsurprising that much of Van Vechten's interest in modernist arts appears to be geographical. He was taken with the Left Bank and Greenwich Village when he first saw them, just as he later became enamored with Harlem. Urban locations became the place that modern artists needed, for they offered a gathering point for others with like minds. G.M. Hyde argues that the crowded city is perfect ground for a movement that requires both heterogeneous groups and individuality: "crowds mean loneliness and [. . .] the terms 'multitude' and 'solitude' are interchangeable." (337) Thus an individual who "wanders" about an unknown city can experience a cross between Romantic individualism and the flux and flow of the modern experience. Malcolm Bradbury also points to the urban nature of Modernism; he asserts that cities were "more than accidental meeting places and crossing points. They were generative environments of the new arts, focal points of intellectual community, indeed of intellectual conflict and tension." (96) As a physical and spiritual crossroads,

the modern city creates a dynamic that fosters both destructive and positive forces. These forces working sometimes in conjunction and sometimes against one another create the inherent conflict that is part of the formula for modernism.<sup>9</sup> However, conflict and difference isn't simply an abstract quality that a city or a neighborhood possesses. Neighborhoods and quarters within cities that offered something different from the norm, appear to have fostered a modernist way of thinking. Architecturally speaking such places tended to be "othered" from the design of the larger city. They were places that existed outside normal life, much like the artists who inhabited them. Paris's Latin Quarter<sup>10</sup> in the Left Bank is well known for its medieval twisting streets and as a home to artists and students. Greenwich Village also tends to follow the architectural extravagance of the Latin Quarter. In 1920, Anna Alice Chapin wrote about Greenwich Village as a personification of the extreme nature of the modern artist:

It had its lanes and trials and cowpaths and nothing could induce it to become resigned to straight and measured avenues [. . .] Greenwich Village will not straighten its streets nor conventionalize its views. Its intellectual conclusions will always be just as unexpected as the squares and street angles that one stumbles on head first. Its habit of life will be just as weirdly individual as its tangled blocks. (qtd. in Churchill 36)

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<sup>9</sup> Bradbury cites Josiah Strong's definition of the modernist city: "with their proliferating social problems, their melting-pot of classes and races cheek-by-jowl, their social contrasts, their inbuilt mixture of expectations and disillusion and their tentacular and mysterious growth—the 'storm-centres of civilization'" (98) Clearly a modernist center is also a troubled place and peaceful cities like those in the American Mid-west (excluding Chicago) could never be places of modernist upheaval.

<sup>10</sup> Richard Miller describes the Latin Quarter of the 1890s as the prototype of all later bohemian settings: Peopled by students and the tourists who came to watch them, this vast youthtown centered upon the Boul 'Mich' and comprised at least a square mile of cheap hotels, sidewalk cafés, cabarets, bars, nightclubs, dancehalls, beer cellars, and, in those days, bordellos. The Quarter was an area at once jubilant and sad, sensuous and cold, sensitive and cruel, and actionville permissive of any kind of harmless mania and all kinds of spontaneous fun, of which Greenwich Village, North Beach,, Soho, King's Cross, are but diminutive reflections. (98)

Chapin's view of the Village is one that creates an aura of adventure and confusion, and presumably one may be drawn to such a place for a taste of the different. It is also a place that appears to function on logic of its own that refuses conformity or convention; its antique disorder ironically makes it an ideal place for thinkers of "The New." The individual and unexpected nature of such places attracted those of artistic temperament, and, in short, the streets themselves were a rejection of bourgeois monotony.<sup>11</sup>

Harlem, which traces its roots back to the village that Peter Stuyvesant established in 1658, shared some of the haphazard construction that marks Greenwich Village. Harlem also became known as a city of nightlife and Van Vechten illustrates this on the first page of *Nigger Heaven*:

It was the hour when promenading was popular – about eleven o'clock in the evening. The air was warm, balmy for June, and not too humid. Over the broad avenue, up and down which multi-hued taxicabs rolled, hung a canopy of indigo sky, spangled with stars. The shops, still open, were brilliantly illuminated. Slouching under the protecting walls of buildings, in front of show windows, or under trees, groups of young men congregated, chattering and laughing. Women in pairs, or with male escorts, strolled up and down the ample sidewalk. (3-4)

The reader may imagine that this description of the street represents a first impression that captures Van Vechten's fascination with Harlem on his initial nocturnal visit to Harlem. Presumably, the difference that thrived, indeed pulsed, in this part of New York City struck Van Vechten that he was witnessing something unique. The narrator,

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<sup>11</sup> Regarding the Village, Albert Parry notes that "the stage was set for America to have a huge and definite Montmartre of her own" (qtd. in Homberger 156).

whose color is undefinable, but seems certainly white, takes the reader into the unknown locale through the eyes of a white voyeur, just as any truly adventurous member of the white community would explore on their own. Surprisingly Van Vechten's text lacks the architectural description that marks his other novels of exploration, like *Peter Whiffle* or the *Tattooed Countess*. Any unusual architecture is pushed to the background as the narrator fills the text with his impressionistic descriptions of the vibrant colors, life and air of a "different" kind of city. The transient nature of the promenading couples, the multi-colored taxis juxtaposed with the hard and sheltering walls of the city create the artistic, political, and racial contrasts that are at play in Harlem (including the white observer). Van Vechten's Harlem is a striking scene that demands the observer to be keenly aware of movement. A persistent fluidity is present in his description in which the eye wanders from the flow of taxi-cabs to the sky and buildings, finally resting on the people. In opposition to his views on Greenwich Village, Van Vechten uses the free-moving characters to present much of the artistic flavor while relegating the immovable structures to the background. Although they certainly exist, it is as if some of the traditional types of eccentric space are not necessary in Harlem, and something more deeply nonconformist shapes the city street to its own image. One traditional element of a bohemia, is the reversal of the hours of activity; Harlem refuses to conform to normal hours, as the narrator notices it is "brilliantly illuminated" even beyond the decent hours of business. The narrator's focus is on the light, while the text draws us to believe that lower Manhattan has already dimmed both literally and figuratively. Van Vechten's description recalls Wallace Thurman's writing in which he marveled that, "Harlem is the city of constant surprises, a city of ecstatic moments and diverting phenomena. It is a city

in which anything might happen and everything does.” (qtd. in Bernard 24) Such a description of Harlem invites the reader to create a mental connection to places like Greenwich Village, in which the neighborhood defiantly creates its own rules of existence, and then leads one to see Harlem as a vibrant new form of the old bohemia.

Alain Locke’s description of Harlem in his introduction to *The New Negro* captures what Van Vechten presents through his fiction:

Here in Manhattan is not merely the largest Negro community in the world, but the first concentration in history of so many diverse elements of Negro life. It has attracted the African, the West Indian, the Negro American; has brought together the Negro of the North and the Negro of the South; the man from the city and the man from the town and village; the peasant, the student, the business man, the professional man, artist, poet, musician, adventurer and worker, preacher and criminal, exploiter and social outcast. (6)

Although Locke’s social agenda is to draw together all of these dis-separate groups into a great communal life of the race, he describes a place that embodies the formula for the modernist city. Harlem is a place of conflict on numerous levels and accordingly becomes a place where modernist ideas are born. Emphasizing the critical importance of the place and its possibilities of social upheaval, Locke goes on to say “Harlem has the same role to play for the New Negro as Dublin has had for the New Ireland or Prague for the New Czechoslovakia.” (7) Locke’s focus on capitals of oppressed but uprising people, show his revolutionary intent. He links Harlem with international locations seemingly proclaiming no difference between an American modernist movement and the

high modernism of Europe. Furthermore, one can't ignore that he chose locales that gave us some of the most prominent modern thinkers: James Joyce and Franz Kafka. Although Locke appears to be prophesying a Joyce of Harlem, he did not imagine Van Vechten would portray Harlem as Joyce portrayed Dublin— as a place caught up in the trauma of excessive contrasts.<sup>12</sup>

As Locke points out, quarters and neighborhoods brimming with contrast were not simply unique in terms of artistic capital; they also tended to have a distinctive association with similar communities in the world. Artists who populated them arrived from the four corners of the world creating a kind of multinational communication. Malcolm Bradbury brilliantly describes the international link that such communities exhibited: “Not simply metropolitan, indeed, but cosmopolitan; one city leads to another in the distinctive aesthetic voyage into the metamorphosis of form.” (101) The scenes of cosmopolitan modernism never really experienced a complete separation, and the artists who made such places their homes often maintained connections between different communities.

Van Vechten's fascination with unconventional urban life in Paris and New York led him to discover these types of communities in his rambles. In *Nigger Heaven*, Van Vechten portrays Harlem as an international, multilingual location, with cultural associations closer to Europe than with lower Manhattan. As a multinational polyglot location, the stage was set for a place of transatlantic modernism. The community of artists and thinkers that were attracted to the black metropolis transformed it into an intersection of cosmopolitan sophistication and multinational black culture. In the 1920s,

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<sup>12</sup> Bruce Kellner points out that Locke may have been under the impression that Van Vechten intended to write a satirical novel similar to his earlier works; he had “not expected ‘so carefully serious and so unsatirical’ a novel.” (Keep A-Inchin' Along 76)

it is apparent that Harlem was becoming a new kind of modernist quarter, one that could trump the Greenwich Village of the 1910s.<sup>13</sup> In *Nigger Heaven*, Van Vechten's portrayal of an international Harlem tends to disconnect the location with the rest of the United States; consequently his version of Harlem is as much transatlantic as it is American. While Van Vechten may have been interested in the conflicting ideals of modernism in the United States, he seemed to harbor a bit of distaste for middle American philistinism and narrow mindedness. Van Vechten's own Midwestern upbringing had left him with a desire to avoid the stifling nature of his Iowa birthplace, Cedar Rapids, which he satirizes in his novel *The Tattooed Countess*. Like his character Gareth Johns, he wishes to escape the dullness of location and the claustrophobic nature of place that didn't allow difference.<sup>14</sup>

It seems that rewriting the national identity of the American past was vital for Van Vechten's portrait of Harlem. A strong argument may be made that Van Vechten has forgotten too much history and may even deny the roots of African American culture. In a misguided mode of collapsing difference, Van Vechten was well known for touting the similarity between white and black. Kathleen Pfeiffer argues that Van Vechten maintained a color-blind disposition: "I never thought of things , that way, you know; I never think of people as Negroes. I think of them as friends." (xxi) It is hard to believe that Van Vechten saw little distinction between the races, as it is evident that he believed being black offered a kind of social currency which admitted one to a private world. Van

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<sup>13</sup> James Weldon Johnson described Harlem as "the great Mecca for the sight-seer, the pleasure seeker, the curious, the adventurous, the enterprising, the ambitious and the talented of the whole Negro World." (301)

<sup>14</sup> The teenage Gareth Johns, Van Vechten's literary avatar, cries out in the novel : "I want to get away from this town . . . I want to visit the theatre and the opera and the art galleries. I want to meet people. I want to learn. Somewhere there must be more people like me" (77-81) For Van Vechten's youth see pages 3-19 of Bruce Kellner's *Carl Van Vechten and the Irreverent Decades*. For more about the Tattooed Countess refer to pages 152-159 of Kellner's book.

Vechten sought to immerse himself in the difference of the race, even to the erroneous and ridiculous extent that he hoped to pass as a very light-skinned African American.<sup>15</sup>

The problematic nature of Van Vechten's attraction and subsequent white-washing of Harlem culture is an issue in the analysis of his work.

#### **IV. Carl Van Vechten in Black and White**

Speaking of Carl Van Vechten, Michael North argues that his "linguistic imitation and racial masquerade are so important to transatlantic modernism because they allow the writer to play at self-fashioning." (10) In Van Vechten's literary career, play appears to have a significant role in his characters. Many of his characters use experimentation to flaunt difference and *Nigger Heaven* may have been Van Vechten's most important effort to discuss the relationship between black and white artistic communities. Toni Morrison eloquently argues that interest in African American culture presents a safe place of experimentation for white authors:

Africanism has become, in the Eurocentric tradition that American education favors, both a way of talking about and a way of policing matters of class, sexual license, and repression, formations and exercises of power. [. . .] Through a simple expedient of demonizing and reifying the range of color on a palette, American Africanism makes it possible to say and not say, to inscribe and erase, to escape and engage, to act out and act on, to historicize and render timeless. It provides a way of contemplating chaos and civilization, desire and fear, and a mechanism for testing the problems and blessings of freedom. (7)

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<sup>15</sup> According to Bruce Kellner, Van Vechten felt that "there were so many 'light-skinned Negroes' that anyone "with a proper escort is sure of not being identified as white.'" (Keep A-Inchin 5)

Considering Morrison's analysis of white writers who use blackness in literary America, we may note that Van Vechten seems to fit her definition to a "T." Van Vechten participates in this problem, but still remains interesting to critics, and indeed he may be adding more to Harlem than he is taking away. Van Vechten saw Harlem as a place that granted freedom from the norms of white society where he could experience and "play" with relationships of culture and class, but his play may indeed create a serious discussion of African Americans in the larger scene of Modernism. Just by the very fact that Van Vechten chose Harlem as his place of artistic excursion demonstrates the inherent capabilities of the location. In *Nigger Heaven*, Van Vechten seemed to be fully aware this kind of "play" by placing his characters in precarious situations involving difficult cultural and class distinctions in Harlem. It may appear even-handed that Van Vechten attempts to balance his fiction between low and high culture, but it may also demonstrate an attempt to see such relationships as only an experiment for the dominant white culture. It is nearly impossible to separate Van Vechten from the standpoint of exploitive writer, and the question remains, can a book that exploits a cultural group also help to create a new dialogue about that group, and even enhance the group itself?

Edward Lueders believed that Van Vechten often attempted to steer clear of sides in any argument: "Entertained and amused and often sympathetically attracted by causes and their exponents, Van Vechten usually maintained a detached critical awareness of their excess and self-conscious consistency of purpose." (*CV&T* 107) Yet, Van Vechten evidently saw the possibilities of the racial conflict in *Nigger Heaven*. Harlem may offer hope for American culture and art, but he was keenly aware that black culture is segregated and disfavored. Hence, even though Harlem may have international

connections, it still remains an isolated utopia within the strict rules of white culture. In *Nigger Heaven*, the black intellectual Byron Kasson, embodies the figure who seeks the freedom that Harlem offers, but finds himself spurned when he steps beyond its boundaries. He lets loose a tirade against Harlem, after receiving a racist insult from white horseback riders in Central Park:

Nigger Heaven! Byron moaned Nigger Heaven! That's what Harlem is. We sit in our places in the gallery of this New York theater and watch the white world sitting down below in the good seats in the orchestra. Occasionally they turn their faces up towards us, their hard cruel faces, to laugh or sneer, but they never beckon. It never seems to occur to them that Nigger Heaven is crowded [ . . . ] it doesn't seem to occur to them either, he went on fiercely, that we sit above them, that we can drop things on them, that we can swoop down from this Nigger Heaven and take their seats. No they have no fear of that! Harlem! The Mecca of the New Negro! My God! (NH 149)

The complexity of Byron's monologue goes to the very heart of what Van Vechten hopes to accomplish in the novel. To use Bakhtin's terms, the "heaven" is a carnivalized and reversed hierarchy; it presupposes the higher locale as the least desirable. Yet advantage of height is still present, not only in command of view, but in power of violence; the members of this balcony of Harlem can overpower the white portion of the orchestra/city even if unseen. In Byron's conception of Harlem, an ambivalent state exists in which an anonymous invisibility empowers as it gives the possibility for critical surveillance, but the height and distance of the balcony also removes the power of direct action.

Interestingly the white crowd occasionally reverses the critical gaze and looks to the black balcony. In this paradoxical moment, the white face reveals itself as “hard” and “cruel” denoting a kind of aristocratic dominance that seeks to crush the African American. It is interesting that the white gaze which may relate to the white world’s recognition of artistic talent in Harlem is presented as destructive. A “laugh” which may have a hopeful undertone is coupled with “sneer” clarifying the way the white world looks “down” upon black artists. The power of this reversal should not be lost in Byron’s bitter tone. The white world’s attempt to look “down” is revealed to be an upward gaze demonstrating the arbitrary racial constructs which traditionally have ruled artistic circles. Byron’s poetic clarity is a simple guise for Van Vechten’s purpose, which is a desire to expose the inner workings of racism and present a challenge to turn the tables. Of particular interest is Byron’s emphasis on the idea of crowding in the balcony. This statement speaks to both the physical state of Harlem real estate and to its artistic abilities. We may read this as a negative entrapment within the walls of Harlem and as the artistic free movement of the Baudelairian crowd. The white world, which is unaware of the “fullness” of Harlem culture has created an artistic segregation that is both beneficial and destructive. If the balcony, the ‘nigger heaven’ is a place filled with possibilities of artistic vision, then the crowd denotes a certain kind of revolutionary masses which have built their potential for strength in one place. Certainly Byron’s language leans toward a revolutionary conclusion which would sweep away the power of the white world. Byron doesn’t simply say they may escape the gallery, but that they have the potential to take the seats of the white world.

The crowds amassed in the balcony reflect the crowds of the street Van Vechten describes in the first chapter of *Nigger Heaven*. As in the opening passages of his novel, Van Vechten expressed the belief that it is the people who create the art, not the structures. In *Home to Harlem*, Claude McKay used the same symbol to construct the empowerment of the black community: “There is no better angle from which one can look down on a motion picture than that of the nigger heaven.” (284) Nonetheless, a place of privilege can become a place of imprisonment, if one is forced to occupy it.<sup>16</sup> Byron ambivalently proclaims the power of Harlem as the “Mecca of the New Negro” by his exclamation of disgust. For him, it would appear Harlem is a Mecca of the New Negro, but it only exists in that realm because African Americans are excluded from white circles. Byron’s failure to fully embrace his connection to the crowds of the balcony ultimately proves to be his downfall.

In a final note of irony, Byron’s words echo the close of the first chapter in which a prostitute, Ruby Silver, seeks to impress her new pimp, the Scarlet Creeper: “Does you know what Ah calls dis? She continued rapturously. Calls What? Dis place, where Ah met you –Harlem. Ah calls et, specherly tonight, Ah calls it Nigger Heaven!” (NH 8) Ruby’s embrace of the absence of white law in the more questionable corners of Harlem is probably one of the most controversial sections of the book. Even though the Scarlet Creeper and Ruby are the exotic antithesis of Byron, some truth lies in their conversation. Van Vechten places a special kind of focus on Ruby Silver and the Scarlet Creeper by

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<sup>16</sup> DuBois’ idea of the ‘veil’ bears a similarity to Van Vechten’s image of the balcony or “nigger heaven.” As the balcony offers a superior gaze, so does the veil: “the Negro is a sort of seventh son born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, [ . . . ] It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others. [ . . . ] one ever feels his two-ness.” (DuBois 568) Byron’s superior sight from ‘nigger heaven’ causes him to see his situation from an imagined perspective of the white observer, thus creating a warring consciousness that eventually destroys him.

making them the representatives of a kind of freedom that remains outside the norms of standard American culture. Their activity, although arguably immoral and degrading, is a reactionary kind of existence that flies in the face of the racial uplift and subsequent attempts at immersion of black culture. Van Vechten's unfortunate choice of a pimp and a prostitute as representatives of black culture, appears entirely biased, yet Claude McKay, in apparent response to Van Vechten, uses such a relationship to demonstrate the inner strength of Harlem's citizens.<sup>17</sup>

Regarding the question of safety as Harlem's inner strength, David G. Holmes argues that Harlem represents what Norris L. Nunley characterizes as "'hush harbors,' those 'safe spaces' for discursive productions that African Americans have constructed and maintained free from the critical gaze and influence of whites." (298) Byron's take on the sanctioned 'safe spaces' in the balcony is clearly ironic and doesn't support Holmes' assertion. Thus we are left with a question of intense contradiction of safe versus free. Holmes goes on to argue that not all spaces in Harlem are free from the white gaze, but certain areas maintain a safe distance from onlookers. If Harlem itself was open to white infiltration, private homes, and many night clubs remained entirely black. Byron also seems to speak of a desire for a centrifugal movement from the center of black culture, leaning to a freedom that Van Vechten expressed in his own transatlantic nature.

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<sup>17</sup> In the chapter entitled "He also cared" Raymond narrates a story about a pimp who sells 'the shirt off his back' to care for his beloved dying prostitute. The reader may note a subversive kind of outrage that exists in this chapter which depicts a loving relationship between oppressor and oppressed in the context of Harlem.

However, Byron's failure to adopt Harlem as his home tragically repeats the problem Van Vechten addresses in his warning to African American authors. Byron can't seem to fully embrace a cultural dynamic that includes a contradiction of terms and he remains caught in the struggle of the segregated cultural possession of American arts. Through Byron, Van Vechten aims to show the advantage that African American writers possess, but he fails to show the means to use it. While a situation of oppression may grant the greatest opportunity for cultural resistance and revolution, Byron becomes focused on the conflict rather than the solution, so much so that he loses himself in the bitterness of his observations. Like an agent of fate, Van Vechten sets Byron toward a destructive course of hopeless resentment; for Byron, Harlem is a Mecca for the culturally estranged, who look out into the world envying what they see. In his personal life, Van Vechten saw things from an entirely opposite different angle; for him, Harlem was an almost endless cultural repository of arts and culture.

Van Vechten's presence in Harlem offers a privileged view of the black world at the time. In other words, Van Vechten stands out as a white man fully immersed in the black world of the period, so immersed that he felt he had the right to create a book that dealt with nearly all levels of black society -- from the privileged to the prostitutes. For that matter he also felt justified in using the opprobrious title that ironically referred to Harlem as a false utopia. Van Vechten involvement in Harlem is a contradiction, as his relationship with the community is both exploitative and appreciative; nonetheless his double-sided nature remains part of the community in Harlem. Emily Bernard even points out that this contradictory relationship inspired new ideas in Harlem; she describes the novel's controversy as "unique, at least that insofar as it generated some of the most

remarkable writing of the Harlem Renaissance: the reviews.” (176) Several African American writers used Van Vechten’s novel as a jumping point to a more realistic New Negro. Using the characters of *Nigger Heaven* as an example, they argued against a simple racial uplift. These new black writers wanted to embrace all sides of Harlem culture. Wallace Thurman, one of the founders of the *avante garde* African American Journal *Fire!!*, benefited from the controversy as he used it as “a weapon to attack the old guard” of African American culture. (Bernard 176) Thurman was especially targeting figures like Dubois, who felt affronted that a white man could look into and write about the African American scene.

Van Vechten also opened the door for African American novelists who used Harlem’s transatlantic and transnational location as a basis for their fiction. The two novels that appear to stem directly from Van Vechten’s controversial work were Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand* and Claude McKay’s *Home to Harlem*.<sup>18</sup> McKay’s novel follows the exploits of Jacob Brown an American deserter from the First World War. Jake’s journey takes him to London where he soaks up British culture and dialect in the East End. After spending a few years in England and France he returns to Harlem and immerses himself in Harlem culture all the while bringing his European experience to bear upon his renewed connections to America. Like Van Vechten, McKay appears fascinated with a deep exploration of the club culture of Harlem. Yet, unlike Van Vechten who was clearly very conscious of presenting favorable portraits of black intellectuals, McKay limits black intellectual experience in his novel to one character, an expatriate Haitian

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<sup>18</sup> For McKay’s literary relation to Van Vechten’s novel, see Emily Bernard’s *Carl Van Vechten and the Harlem Renaissance* pages 161-163. Also see pages 191-92 for a discussion of Van Vechten’s friendship with Nella Larsen. Bernard notes that Van Vechten not only influenced Larsen’s book, but also suggested the title *Quicksand* to replace her original title, *Cloudy Amber*.

named Raymond. In what appears a reaction to Van Vechten, McKay presents Raymond as a slightly detached 19<sup>th</sup> century-leaning-bibliophile lost in the new culture of Harlem. It seems that Van Vechten's portrayal of a misdirected Harlem elite demonstrated in the bitterness of Byron Casson is ameliorated by McKay's desire to focus almost entirely upon the vivacity of the Harlem. If Van Vechten turned Harlem into an exercise in cultural tragedy, McKay found the same material a fitting site for a carnivalesque comedy where cultural conflicts end in friendly partings rather than deadly x gunfights. In spirit, the texts are surprisingly similar, presenting a mix of dialects and cultures. Both Van Vechten and McKay blend British, French, and Caribbean voices with those of the Harlemites, and both attempt to create a balance of night club culture with intellectual musings. Most notably, Dubois whose diatribes against *Nigger Heaven* were seemingly unparalleled, also disdained McKay's book.<sup>19</sup> In a review in *The Crisis*, he exclaimed that *Home to Harlem* was so "'nauseating' in its emphasis on 'drunkenness, fighting, and sexual promiscuity' that it made him 'feel . . . like taking a bath.'" (qtd. in McDowell xv)

While Dubois hated what he saw in McKay and condemned it as a blind following of Van Vechten, he praised Nella Larsen's interpretation of the same dynamic. Dubois called Larsen's *Quicksand* "a fine, thoughtful and courageous piece of work." (qtd. in McDowell xv) Larsen who was closely involved in Van Vechten's literary and cultural circles used *Quicksand* to respond to his interests in a transnational and transatlantic Harlem. The main character of the book Helga Crane, who bears similarities to the female protagonist of *Nigger Heaven* – Mary Love, becomes jaded with the elite culture of Harlem and seeks to find her European roots by visiting her aunt in

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<sup>19</sup> McKay met Van Vechten only once --of all places in a Paris café in 1929-- and never maintained any relationship with him. It is curious that he was so directly influenced by him and clearly treated as his literary heir. McKay vehemently denied either title. (Bernard 165-168)

Copenhagen. Although Helga's attempt to reconnect with a European family proves more alienating than beneficial, Larsen's novel honestly addresses the transatlantic connections of Harlem. Like Van Vechten, Larsen dismantles the myth that the Harlem Renaissance is solely an isolated experience; essentially, she suggests that Harlem must be paradoxically viewed from a European standpoint that both elevates and stereotypes black modernist culture.

Like his African American counterparts, Van Vechten celebrated black culture with all its natural contrasts, but he also recognized the problematic contradictions and paradoxes that existed within it. Van Vechten never really sought to sort out the differences as Larsen did, rather he attempted to celebrate the fact that the difference existed. When he wrote about the exotic or primitive sides of Harlem he attempted to balance them with the educated, elite, artistic and cosmopolitan sides. This kind of structure points toward the binary oppositions that exist between and within these groups. Van Vechten clearly wanted to show that Harlem had something that didn't exist in more mainstream versions of modernism—a free play of high and low, educated and primitive, African and European, all within one cultural group.

#### **V. Transatlantic Experimentation in *Peter Whiffle***

Beyond his ability to cross racial, cultural and international lines, Van Vechten tended to see the early twentieth century as a divided space, that of the pragmatic and of the artistic. Van Vechten's earlier novels address the rejection of conservative middle-American culture in favor of the free thinking European mode of expression. Edward Lueders describes Van Vechten as “an affirmative sort of bohemian who accepted things

as they came and indeed, was diverted and sustained by the very ‘perversities’ in life.” (CV 52) Embracing modern difference, in his own life by subverting middle class values, Van Vechten created characters in his novels, like *Peter Whiffle* and *The Tattooed Countess*, which sought artistic fulfillment in the bohemian digs of New York and Europe –often at the expense of conservative American thought. In a sense, these earlier works are novels of escape and rebellion centered upon a physical experience of *avant garde* ideals contrasted with home- grown American practicality.

Of particular importance is *Peter Whiffle*, Van Vechten’s first novel which positions him as a transatlantic novelist. The culture of American salons in Paris appear prominently in most of Van Vechten’s novels, but the Paris of that great ‘era of change’ (1908- 1914) is the focus of the opening chapters of the novel. *Peter Whiffle* can be simply summarized as a novel about a writer who can never manage to write a novel. Yet the purpose of the novel is not so much about inaction as it is about the joy of experimentation. In the preface, Van Vechten, who is the narrator of the novel as well as the friend of the fictitious Whiffle, recalls a letter Whiffle has written on the subject of artistic expression: “life, nature, art, whatever one writes about, are fluid and mutable things, perpetually undergoing change and, even when they assume some semblance of permanence, always, presenting two or more faces.” (PW 3) Whiffle’s words not only become his namesake, but they also speak of the ideas of the modern, which exist in a flux of change and require the individual to have two identities or “faces.” We can understand that Whiffle’s words relate to his excessive attempts at experimentation in art, but also to his locality; the text itself is transatlantic and travels frequently between numerous locales in Europe and New York. Whiffle also becomes involved with several

groups of American and European intellectuals and artists, most notable is the circle of Mabel Dodge (Edith Dale in the novel). In Van Vechten's fiction, we may gather that art often changes form, but it also needs to be refreshed from both sides of the Atlantic. Edward Lueders describes the novel as a comic adaptation of Melville's *Pierre*, "who pursues ideals both outside and within himself and is destroyed in the clash between the two." (CV 69) However, I believe, that this conflict of ideals also may represent the passage between Europe and America. Conflict also plays into one of the key dynamics of modernism, and such clashes between old and new spark a totally unique art form. In the novel, conflict destroys Whiffle. We may dismiss this ending as Van Vechten's mode of comic exaggeration, or we may see it as a limitation of modernism itself. The desperate search for the "new" may be the inherent danger of modernism, something that always seeks the new to destroy the old, may be in danger of imploding or collapsing upon itself.

At the heart of the conflict in the novel is geographical location. Whiffle is an American from the heartland of America and he sees Europe as an answer to his search for art and experience: "he had come from Ohio, that he was in Paris on a sort of a mission, something to do with literature, I gathered." (PW 39) Van Vechten presents Paris as an answer to what Americans are seeking in an alternate version of reality: "In fact, one meets more Americans in Paris than one does in New York and most of the French I manage to speak I have picked up in the island of Manhattan." (PW 18) We cannot deny Van Vechten's comic tone in the preceding quotation, but one must also see the seriousness of the New York connection to Paris. Van Vechten meets many expatriate Americans in Paris, but it is Whiffle who captures the modern tendency for free

movement and free thought: “There was doubtless, a certain element of restlessness and curiosity connected with this vacillation, a desire to miss nothing in life.” (*PW* 86) This tendency for free movement, of a *flâneur* like character, defines the modern transatlantic hero in Van Vechten’s writing. Throughout the novel *Whiffle* mimics Van Vechten’s life, traveling between New York, Paris, and Italy, and finally settling in Greenwich Village.

The American setting of *Peter Whiffle*, presents the life of a transatlantic modernist locale of Greenwich Village. Peter’s apartment is much like the typical haunts of the avante garde in that era:

His room on East Broadway had been painted ivory-white. On the walls hung three or four pictures, one of Marsden Hartley’s mountain series, a Chinese juggler in water colour by Charles Demuth, a Picabia, which ostensibly represented the mechanism of a locomotive, with real convex brass piston rods protruding from the canvas, a chocolate grinder by Marcel Duchamp and an early Picasso. (Van Vechten *PW* 147)

*Whiffle*’s rooms are much like the studio of Walter Conrad Arensburg, which Van Vechten visited in 1915: “A spacious duplex studio on West Sixty-seventh street [. . .] The seventeen-foot-high walls are covered with an impressive collection of modern art,” including works by Matisse, Picabia, Duchamp and a sculpture of an African figure. (Churchill 37-38). Arensburg’s rooms were also a rendezvous for “Duchamp, Beatrice Wood, Carl Van Vechten” and others.<sup>20</sup> (Churchill 38) In *Peter Whiffle*, Van Vechten

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<sup>20</sup> Churchill describes Arensburg’s studio: “A spacious duplex on West Sixty-Seventh Street, in the spring of 1915. The seventeen-foot-high walls are covered with an impressive collection of modern art, including Matisse’s ‘Mlle Yvonne Landsburg,’ Picabia’s ‘Physical Culture,’ and Duchamp’s ‘Nude Descending a

describes Edith Dale's parties as having the effect of an aesthetic Saturnalia: "She surrounded herself with as many storm centres as possible. [. . .] Arguments and discussions floated in the air, were caught and twisted and hauled and tied until the white salon itself was no longer static. There were undercurrents of emotion and sex." (Van Vechten *PW* 124) Van Vechten portrays the culture of Greenwich Village as a carnivalesque heteroglossia in which numerous focal points of modernism come together in a kind of ecstatic dance.

## **VI. Harlem, the Global Capital**

In contrast to *Peter Whiffle*, Van Vechten's fifth novel, *Nigger Heaven* never takes the reader to a foreign locale, but remains geographically centered in the United States. This lack of movement is merely on the surface, for the novel takes the reader (especially the white reader) to a place that defies the logic of dominant American culture – Harlem. Harlem's position as a global capital of black culture sets it worlds apart from white American society. Van Vechten meant to show the world that Harlem was a place of many contrasts- both high and low, black and white, local and international.

Harlem's contrasts create a fertile ground for artists and thinkers, thus Van Vechten focuses on two educated African American characters who are involved in artistic circles. *Nigger Heaven* is presented in two volumes; the first follows Mary Love, an underpaid librarian in Harlem, who is a culturally adept young member of artistic and intellectual circles. Volume two focuses on Byron Kasson, a young man educated in white universities who travels to Harlem to become a writer. Both characters enjoy Harlem for its cultural capital and both characters continue Van Vechten's interest in

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Staircase.' At one end of the fireplace mantle sits a sculpture by Constantin Brancusi; at the other, an African figure." (37)

young aspiring artists. While foreign soil is never touched in the novel, Van Vechten convincingly portrays Harlem as a place of international aspirations.

Van Vechten's tradition of mixing European and American salons holds true to *Nigger Heaven*, as it proves to be a surprisingly transatlantic text. Early in the novel, the narrator points out that Mary Love has journeyed through Italy. Amongst the minor characters of the novel, quite a few have international associations -- a number of them frequent European destinations and even spend several months a year in France. Van Vechten specifically presents a Haitian diplomat as a symbol of francophone intelligentsia and international black culture. Lasca Sartoris, the seductress of the male protagonist, Byron Kasson, has a strong European connection; she is "a legend in Harlem . . . who had married a rich African in Paris and had eventually deserted him to fulfill her amorous destiny with a trap drummer." (VanVechten *NH* 81) Bruce Kellner reports that Lasca is "a full-blown portrait of Nora Holt, the glamour girl Carl had met during his Harlem forays." (218) Kellner goes on to say that when *Nigger Heaven* was published she wrote to Van Vechten declaring "the cries of protest from the Harlemites reach me even in Paris." (218) Another character, Mrs. Sumner, one the members of Harlem's upper class, was educated in a French convent and "she had followed her father's example by sending her own daughters to Paris to school." (Van Vechten *NH* 95-96) She entertains Gareth Johns (a partial self-portrait of Van Vechten) who remarks that he lives "abroad most of the time," predominantly in Paris. (*NH* 97) Van Vechten also presents the influence of the British West Indies in his version of Harlem. Mary Love recalls seeing a "strange ceremony" in the park: "some black people from one of the British West Indies—monkey chasers they called them on Lenox Avenue [. . .] playing

cricket with proper bats and wickets [. . .] she had stood for a moment watching them and listening to their cockney speech.”( *NH* 60) She goes on to mention Rudolph Fisher’s story on the same subject. Fisher, the early Harlem Renaissance writer, who presents a transatlantic attitude in his stories to the point of presenting characters who experience the conflicting values of European, French speaking African and Southern American cultures in Harlem of the 1920s. Interestingly enough, he was dubbed by a contemporary as the Maupassant of Harlem, and the same critic goes on to say that Harlem is a location quite as interesting as “Dear Paree.” (qtd. in Eburne and Braddock 276) Van Vechten, it would seem is utilizing the international appeal of Harlem to make a point about its artistic possibilities. Harlem’s cultural diversity filled with people that are international, multifaceted and multilingual is a place so complex that it drips with modernist possibilities.

Perhaps to the reader’s surprise, we find that Mary Love is fluent in French and she discourses in French in several sections of the novel. Her bilingualism immediately links her with the international “unhoused writer, the writer who conceives language itself as polyglot.” (Bradbury 101) Modernism’s most canonical authors, Pound and Eliot, were known to argue that continental languages were vital to English literature. Eburne and Braddock point out that “numerous Harlem Renaissance writers presented the ability to speak French both as a sign of cosmopolitan sophistication and also more significantly, as a marker or even repository of geographical, social, and historical mobility.” (735) Mary’s interest in the francophone aspect of black culture<sup>21</sup> is evident in

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<sup>21</sup> It is Dubois who begins the trope of Harlem’s association with Paris in his sociological exhibit of African American History and Culture at the 1900 Paris Exhibition Universelle. This exhibition presents African American culture, as Dubois said “without apology or gloss,” and places it on a world stage. (qtd. in Rutledge Fisher 755)

her first discussion with the Haitian dignitary concerning international literature: “It was agreeable, too, to meet some one who knew a great deal about Cocteau and Morand and Proust.” (NH 56) Ironically she discusses white French authors, perhaps revealing her lack of knowledge concerning French-speaking black authors; this is certainly a forgivable oversight, because at the time the movement of negritude was in its infancy and only one Antillean author of the movement, Rene Maran, had published a novel.<sup>22</sup> Mary also speaks French with Orville Snodes, a YMCA official. To Mary, however, Orville seems to represent an affectation of culture rather than a true cosmopolitan existence. Orville is often in the company of the Albrights, a middle class black family whom Van Vechten satirizes for their extreme bourgeois lifestyle. Like the middle class, Orville’s interest in art focuses upon the mainstream; Orville corners Mary at one point at a party: “he demanded: Have you been to the Metropolitan Art Museum lately? No, she managed to stutter, with a distinct sensation of guilt.” (NH 68-69) Orville’s association with the Met. is somewhat paradoxical. It certainly shows the possibility that more mainstream European Art can have an effect on the Harlem Renaissance, but the Met. tends to privilege the white world over African American art. Even to this day, the Met tends to celebrate European and white American artists over artists from Harlem. Snodes is also representative of older progressive ideals of racial uplift that follow white avenues, rather than the New Negro ideals of thinkers like Alain Locke. Despite differences of ideology, Mary Love and Orville Snodes demonstrate the conscious effort among young Harlemites to be more Parisian and cosmopolitan.

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<sup>22</sup> Maran’s *Batouala* was published in 1921; similar writers such as Aime Cesaire didn’t begin to publish until the 1930s. See Michel Fabre: “René, Louis, and Léopold: Senghorian Negritude as Black Humanism.”

Although, Mary's rooms are adorned only with European art, Mary's bookshelf ranks international authors with those of the Harlem Renaissance reflects the pages of a little magazine, and appear to draw only slight distinction between seemingly separate continents and races. Her shelf includes, Jean Cocteau, Louis Bromfield, Somerset Maughan juxtaposed with Charles Chesnutt, James Weldon Johnson, Jean Toomer, Claude McKay and Walter White, and "usually a row of a dozen or so of the latest books [. . .] in an effort to keep abreast with the best of the modern output." (NH 41) Although Mary's position as a librarian may rank her as a member of the middle class, she tends to associate herself within the educated and artistic circles of Harlem. Her connection to all the important people of Harlem is clearly stated as Van Vechten emphasizes her schedule:

[She] knew all of the young men and women in the Harlem literary circles, most of the young school teachers, doctors, lawyers and dentists. To some extent they mingled with, but did not entertain, the richer social set that lived in the splendid row of houses Stanford White had designed [. . .] These people occasionally invited Mary or Olive to large dinner – or bridge parties. (NH 42)

Mary's social circles are hardly bohemian and her association with other young professionals, points to a desire to seek higher activities rather than seeking out company in artists' studios. While Mary is a central character in the book, it seems clear that the vitality of Harlem life is not to be found in her social outings. The cultural activity of

Mary appears limited to more elite circles excluding her from the more vibrant social scenes.

Where Mary excels in Harlem culture is in her reading. It is important to note that Mary's copies of Harlem Renaissance books are also inscribed, signaling a close relationship to the literary realm of the movement. Mary's international tastes are based upon a true embodiment of the African American modernist. Emily Bernard argues that the literary tastes of Mary are solely based upon Van Vechten's friend and fellow transatlantic author, Nella Larsen.<sup>23</sup> Van Vechten appears to emphasize the importance of the literary circle in Harlem, and insofar as Mary's character is concerned, the literary world is a replacement for the broader artistic circles of Greenwich Village. Mary's roommate, Olive, goes on to describe the change in black society brought on by the numerous writings of young African Americans: "their work had begun to appear in the *Atlantic Monthly*, *Vanity Fair*, the *American Mercury*, and *The New Republic* [. . .] times had changed when brains, rather than money, or a lighter colour, or straight hair was the password to social favor." (NH 42-43) It would appear that Van Vechten saw the cultural community in Harlem as a new center of modernism, something akin to Mabel Dodge's ability to draw in many storm centers, but also with the ability to maintain a purely black identity without remaining in one cultural realm.

If *Peter Whiffle* represents the possibilities of enlightenment and conflict for the transatlantic white American, *Nigger Heaven* represents the quintessential example of

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<sup>23</sup> In reference to Mary Love, Emily Bernard states that "Larsen biographer George Hutchinson has pointed out that it was Larsen's eclectic and erudite personal library that Van Vechten replicated on Mary's bookshelves" Van Vechten's use of Larsen as a partial basis for Mary Love is provocative, in that Mary's character seems to suffer many of the inner conflicts that Helga Crane of *Quicksand* endures. One may also be struck by the similar exotic taste that Mary Love and Helga Crane share in their decorating styles. In the opening pages of *Quicksand* we first become acquainted with Helga's taste for overtly lush and artistic styles adopted by the artistic elite of the 1920s. Her room is decorated with a "blue Chinese carpet" countless books, and furniture covered in oriental silk. (Larsen 1)

African American in the *avante garde* bohemia of Harlem, the transatlantic/transnational and global black capital. The Harlem that Van Vechten presents is a nation of the world, more than it is a borough of New York. In chapter two of *Nigger Heaven*, Dick Sill, one of the young black intellectuals in the novel, refers to Harlem as: “the Mecca of the new Negro! The City of Refuge!” (NH 45) Yet, it is in somewhat of an ironic tone that Van Vechten demonstrates Harlem’s isolation from the rest of New York and the entire United States. Mary Love attempts, somewhat unsuccessfully, to compare Harlem to Henri Christophe’s citadel in Sans Souci, Haiti: “On a rising slope at the apex of narrow ravine he built himself a palace – not unlike Louis’s great palace at Versailles” (NH 123) Mary’s hero/place worship shows the conflict within Harlem; although some of its upper class and intelligentsia have ties to Paris, it is also a kind of citadel and a prison hovering over some vast abyss. It would appear that the connection with Europe is not only a way to expand ideals but an attempt at self-preservation. Mary’s discourse on Haiti is a double-voiced narrative that presents the wish-image of Paris clothed in Harlem, yet ignores French colonial policy and looks to French culture as an embodiment of the new black state. In a similar vein to Mary’s discourse on Haiti, Eburne and Braddock in their essay, “Paris capital of the Black Atlantic,” describe Paris as a magnet of international black culture: it is “in the Benjaminian sense, a wish image of diasporic imagination.” (733) Eburne and Braddock’s reference to Benjamin’s essay “Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century” opens a new possibility of discussing Harlem in transatlantic terms. In other words, if Paris was a “wish –image” Harlem also represents an alterity to that image. Eburne and Braddock further describe “Black Paris” as a place of “encounter between conflicting notions of modernity –that is, between celebrations of and challenges

to the Hegelian progress of European West, as well as to racialized assumptions about African-American and diasporic primitivism and countermodernity.” (735) Paris, and French culture, are continually present in the background of Van Vechten’s novel, thus this conflict/challenge of progress and racialized assumption rises as it is portrayed in Van Vechten’s Harlem.

Harlem is a place of encounter in American modernity, but it is also a place of seclusion. In fact, Mary’s summary of Christophe’s black utopia seems to ironically recall Dubois’s description of the American “‘Black Bastille of Prejudice’ a ‘monstrous superstructure’ that had swallowed up ‘the democracy of a nation.’” (qtd. in Whalen 792) Even though he chose to live there himself, DuBois depicts Harlem as a symbolic prison. DuBois seems to wish for a storming of the Bastille and thus a people’s revolution, while Mary’s wish is only for the protection of a black nation embodied in the militant Haitian monarchy and its symbolic Citadel. By using Mary Love as a voice in this debate, Van Vechten complicates Dubois’ reference to the situation of Harlem; for Van Vechten, Harlem is an ambivalent location which is both Bastille and Citadel.

In comparison to Van Vechten’s other novels about modernist experimentation, artistic space and oppressive space are always clearly separated; thus it is surprising to find Van Vechten describing what he saw as the artistic free space of Harlem in the terms of an enclosure whether it is Bastille or citadel. Indeed, it seems that this problem becomes unresolvable for Van Vechten’s artist sensibility. In his youth, Van Vechten experienced his own sense of oppression in Cedar Rapids, Iowa but he successfully escaped to the free space of Paris and New York. In *Nigger Heaven*, his artistically minded characters cannot fully escape their enclosure and are forced to remake it from

within. Van Vechten demonstrates the distressing trial his characters must undergo in an act of internally self-creating themselves; in simplest terms it is the process of drawing the distinction between prison and fortress. In Harlem, free-space is one in the same thing as oppressive space, and the characters that inhabit this ambivalent enclosure appear forced to seek other means of escape. Such a trial tends to destroy the character of Byron, and leaves us with yet another difficult question: how is a Bastille different from a Citadel?

If a Bastille encloses, ghettoizes and oppresses, and a citadel offers a protective refuge which broadcasts its defiant nature to the rest of the world, then Van Vechten felt that Harlem existed in both identities. Initially, I believe he saw it simply as a citadel. In his letter to Gertrude Stein in June 1925, Van Vechten describes his desire to address the possibilities of Harlem in his forthcoming novel: "This will not be a novel about Negroes in the South or white contacts or lynchings. It will be about Harlem . . . about 400,000 of them live there now, rich, and poor, fast and slow, intellectual and ignorant." (CVV 208) Van Vechten preferred to move away from the negative history of American race relations and focus on the vibrant contrasts within Harlem itself. Yet as a final irony he can only conclude the novel in the constraints of a Bastille. Byron Casson's self-conflicted and self-destructive spiral of defeat leads him ever closer to an imprisonment within the confines of Harlem.

## **VII. Harlem: High and Low**

Although Van Vechten may not have been able to solve racial/cultural tensions in Harlem, his enthusiasm for African American culture was a product of a long study. As

early as 1917 Van Vechten had professed an interest in the international appeal of African American arts. In an article entitled “The American Composer,” he revels at Americans for imitating rather than seeking a true American voice: “Even lovers of Mozart and Debussy prefer ragtime to the inert and saponaceous classicism of our more serious-minded composers [ . . . ] it is the only American music which is heard abroad . . . and it is the only music on which the musicians of our land can build in the future.” (qtd. in Helbling 41) Van Vechten saw the importance of African American art and its international influence and he also saw the inherent contradiction in America concerning race.

As Van Vechten portrays Peter Whiffle’s rooms and Edith Dale/Mabel Dodge’s parties as brimming with the colors, voices, and emotions of “the new,” much of the landscape of *Nigger Heaven* is framed in a similar mode. We may argue that Van Vechten saw Harlem as an exotic locale, one that not only offered intellectual stimulation but also excitement. In fact, in *Nigger Heaven*, Gareth Johns encourages Byron to write about this subject: “the low life of your people is exotic. It has a splendid fantastic quality.” (NH107) In a mode of self-promotion, Van Vechten’s own ideas about the exotic side of Harlem, are voiced through Gareth Johns who directs Byron to play the part of explorer/exploiter. Ironically Van Vechten tended to be more interested in the intellectual circles of Harlem and often presents nightclub scenes as surrealistic and nightmarish moments of unbridled primitivism. Byron has difficulty identifying with the “exotic” places in Harlem and is eventually swallowed-up in an attempt to infiltrate the wilder sides of the culture.

For Van Vechten, the exotic side of Harlem, as it was for many white visitors, was an expression of primitivism.<sup>24</sup> The first and last chapters of the novel tend to invoke the appeal of the exotic or primitive nature of Harlem and are consequently the most notorious parts of the book. In chapter nine of *Nigger Heaven*, Van Vechten appears to warn of the dangers of Harlem's clubs and emphasizes this by heightening the state of Byron's alienation. In a climactic scene near the close of the novel, Byron Casson, bent on revenge, enters the Black Venus Nightclub. As he enters he discovers the club to be nearly full, and he is forced to sit with people he doesn't know. Byron is isolated in a world he doesn't know, and through a cacophonous mix of voices and music he slowly begins to detect words and phrases:

Byron was subconsciously aware of conversation at his table: Lawdy ain't her legs skinny! . . . She's no sheba . . . Bank wouldn't pay today. Too many winners. Dey jes' wouldn't pay. . . . Was it duh nummer you was playin'? . . . Naw, Ah figgers Ah won 'cause Ah lost. . . . Sho' Ah knowed Siki. Useter strut down duh boulevards o' Paris wid a long, black coat, a stove-pipe hat, an's a glass eye, carryin' a monkey on his shoulder and draggin' one yowlin lion cub on a chain, He was nobody's business.

(NH 278)

This passage is one of the more exceptional examples of what Van Vechten considered the exotic speech of Harlem. A notably different rhythm, tone and subject matter flow

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<sup>24</sup> Speaking of Claude McKay's novel *Home to Harlem* Robert A. Russ makes a convincing argument that black residents often saw white visitors as seeking a place where the laws of normalcy are uplifted. Russ singles out a passage in which three white "vice cops" patronize the speakeasy of Madame Suarez; they "had posed as good fellows, regular guys, looking for a good time only in the Black Belt. They were wearied of the pleasure of the big white world, wanted something new—the primitive joy of Harlem." (McKay qtd. in Russ 366)

through these conversations. Indeed, there are several voices overlapping at once which create a surrealistic spiraling of effect. This loss of traditional order in language parallels Byron's loss of sanity in the last pages of the novel.

Taken out of context the passage appears harmless enough and certainly seems to be presented as poetic microcosm of international black society. The subject matter ranges from sex, with an archetypal reference to Sheba, gambling by "playing the numbers," to a nearly surrealistic description of a person named Siki. Even in this conversation, Van Vechten places a reference to Paris. The speaker's reference may hint at an actual experience in Paris during the Great War, or it may be a kind of Benjaminian wish fantasy that places Paris as a crossroads of culture. Siki's clothing appears either to be the appropriate formal attire of the time, or a reference to a figure of the nineteenth century. Nonetheless, Siki comes off as one who commands the street; he struts, rather than walks. Like Peter Whiffle, he seems to have the air of the *flâneur*. This black Baudelaire dresses as a European, but carries with him the connections of Africa. The description of Siki borders on the eccentric and the narrative is rather questionable in itself, but it demonstrates an important European connection, even in the characters of the lower class. Van Vechten presents a picture of Harlem that encompasses a transatlantic nature of black culture in its unique dialect of English. Interestingly, this kind of language is also somewhat foreign or even distasteful to Byron.

Byron's semi-conscious state allows the dialect of Harlem to flow through his mind. Yet his inability to grasp the diversity and beauty of Harlem isolates Byron and he begins to take a cynical view of the situation:

It all became a meaningless jumble in Byron's mind, a jumble of meaningless phrases accompanied by the hard, insistent, regular beating of the drum, the groaning of the saxophone, the shrill squealing of the clarinet, the laughter of the customers and occasionally the echo of the refrain,

Baby, won't you come home today?

A meaningless jumble. Like life. Like Negro life. Kicked down from above.

Pulled down from below. (*NH* 278)

In this remarkable passage Van Vechten blends Byron's ironic tone with the joyous laughter and music of the nightclub. Here we see the Van Vechten's interest in infective rhythms that appear in Van Vechten's work even as early as his essay on Stravinsky.<sup>1</sup> Here the rhythm has broken away from the confines of formal music and expresses its true power in what we might call a Dionysian climax. Byron's refusal to partake in the joyful scene results in an internal furor that is so intense, the reader might take him for the underground man. His rejection of the scene as an absurd "meaningless jumble" direct us to see Byron, as one who is so caught up in formal culture (be it racial uplift or the desire to "pass") that he can not feel the energy of the moment. Byron's own thoughts blend with the narration in the short phrases that overcome his senses. Byron fails to catch the rhythm of the conversation and his train of thought is short, cut off and impotent, permitting him only to see negative associations to life in a modern polyglot culture. He is also clearly focused upon his desire to transition from black culture, but finds himself as one who is caught between black and white cultures. As the earlier scene in Central Park demonstrates, Byron cannot enter white culture, and this moment

illustrates his refusal to embrace his own blackness. Van Vechten appears to propose that Byron's refusal to exist in a hybrid condition is his own undoing.

Although the culture and identity of the "New Negro" occupies much of the dialogue in the novel, Primitivism, in the forms that traditionalists like Albert Barnes embraced, takes the forefront in one significant part of the novel.<sup>25</sup> As an apparent follower of this mode of thought, Mary Love organizes an exhibition of African sculpture at the 125<sup>th</sup> Street branch of the New York Public Library. As she organizes the exhibit, Mary begins to see, like so many artists that follow her, the beauty of the sculptures: "Mary was beginning to recognize the feel of the older work, the soft, smooth texture, like the best Chinese porcelains [ . . . ] she knew something too, now, about the more primitive design, lovelier in its conception, because it was more honest, than the more elaborate later trceries, created under Portuguese influence." (NH 55-56) Mary's desire to move away from the corruption of white influence and return to a more honest state also speaks of the problem of the previous form of black progressives who sought often to emulate white culture rather than embody the beauty of black culture. Mary's embrace of African Primitivism is an attempt to go deeper into the root of cultural identity. Leon Coleman argues that African primitivism served as a bridge between different cultural groups in the black community as well as one with the community of Modern artists in Harlem and Europe: "Africanism offered the black artist a new perspective in which he could see twentieth-century African Americans in relation to a dignified cultural past: a past in which the color black was the color of beauty." (56) Whereas primitivism may

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<sup>25</sup> Barnes contributed an article to Alain Locke's groundbreaking anthology *The New Negro*. In his essay, "Negro Art and America" Barnes describes the unique energy and spirit of the black race: "The contributions of the American Negro to art are representative because they come from the hearts of the masses of a people held together by like yearnings and stirred by the same causes. It is a sound art because it comes from a primitive nature upon which a white man's education has never been harnessed." (19)

have allowed white artists to borrow and exploit native tribes of the undeveloped world, African Primitivism, in the context of the Harlem Renaissance, shows the powerful roots of the culture and promotes a continual transatlantic/transnational communication with African nations. Even thinkers like Alain Locke emphasized the importance of discovering artistic roots in African art.<sup>26</sup> It is important to note that Van Vechten uses African art solely as a resource for his black characters. Although Mary Love's art exhibit may be small compared to larger museums of the city, it is a localized exhibit meant for the residents of Harlem and not truly intended for white interlopers.

A late scene in *Nigger Heaven*, finds Mary reminiscing on the revitalizing physical and emotional aura she encountered at Adora Boniface's party; she muses "The Negro blood was there, warm and passionately earnest: all her preferences and prejudices were on the side of the race into which she had been born." (NH 54) While Mary is contemplating the love of Bryon Kasson, she also reveals the soul of what Van Vechten saw in the cultural influence of Harlem. Mary feels the warmth of her own blood and sex flow through her race and this energy is the passion of her spirit and that of the Harlem Renaissance. Mary, like her counterpart Byron, fears the lower or more primitive side of her culture: "A casual kiss in the dark was a repellent idea to Mary. What she wanted was a kiss in the light --with the right man." (NH 54) Mary's disgust at the dark appears to represent the fear of her own darkness of skin and all of the cultural history that comes

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<sup>26</sup> Alain Locke speaks of a similar connection with African culture:

With the American Negro, his new internationalism is primarily an effort to recapture contact with the scattered peoples of African derivation. [ . . . ] Our greatest rehabilitation may possibly come through such channels, but for the present, more immediate hope rests in the revaluation by white and black alike of the Negro in terms of his artistic endowments and cultural contributions, past and prospective. (15)

Locke doesn't go as far as to say that seeking the primitive is the path to a new black culture, but he does appreciate the importance of Africa and its influence on the Harlem on the 1920s. Without using the term primitivism, Locke appears to assert that reviving the connection of blood and race is vital to its success.

with it. Seeking a kiss in the light, appeals to an embrace of an official culture, one which designates the right and wrong of moral relations. Mary's fear of her more natural side, reflects Van Vechten's belief that many African Americans were ignoring a well spring of inspiration. For Van Vechten, the primitive was also the root of the new, and what many readers saw as exotic, Van Vechten seemed to see as elemental. If Mary fears certain aspects of her racial/cultural self, she remains positive and her remarks about the power of the race echo throughout the novel: "in spite of all obstacles, we manage to keep something of our own, even make something of it." (NH 60)

While primitivism is certainly transnational, it doesn't connect with Africa in the same way that American modernism connects with Europe. On the other hand, the strength of the race and its cultural power, appear to have the possibilities of creating a world wide influence. Arguably Paris with its Jazz clubs and close knit black community had already experienced the cosmopolitan influence of Harlem when Van Vechten wrote *Nigger Heaven*. William Shack describes the rise of black culture in *Harlem in Montmartre*, "The sounds of black jazz that underlay *le tumulte noir* re-created a street culture reminiscent of Harlem, in which strolling was not merely going out for a walk along rue Pigalle or rue Fontaine; it was more like going on an adventure." (33) Shack's illustration of Montmartre in the early 1920s demonstrates the cosmopolitan effect of the Harlem Renaissance; it is interesting that Harlem was recreated in a neighborhood that in early decades was the haunt of Pablo Picasso, George Braque, Max Jacob and numerous other founding modern artists. Appropriately the Harlem Renaissance takes the place of early forms of modernism in Paris, if only on a small scale. Thus the movement is clearly not just localized in the "great walled city of Harlem" but its vitality and natural

energy had the power to change the rest of the modern world. Unmistakably, by the time Van Vechten wrote *Nigger Heaven*, the Harlem Renaissance had already begun to take the world stage.

Van Vechten clearly didn't view the cultural movement in Harlem as something existing in total isolation; his experience with modern experimentation in Europe gave him a cosmopolitan viewpoint, which allowed him to see the international connections of an artistic rhythm which was formed in France but reborn and transformed in the Harlem Renaissance. *Nigger Heaven*, which emphasized both the connection of European Modernism and the home-grown talents of Harlem, was an extremely important tipping point for white American readers who were perhaps little aware of the arts movement uptown.

The Harlem Renaissance is not a rebirth of Greenwich Village or any other forms of modernism; in fact, it represents a vibrant birth of a new international movement of black arts and culture. Carl Van Vechten was clearly attracted to it by its aura of genuine self-expression in opposition to the contradictory traditions of the American middle class. Van Vechten was not the first to observe or write about the Harlem Renaissance, but he links it to the movement of "The New" that was sweeping across the Western World. It is through his embrace of Harlem that we may see the connections to American bohemian centers like Greenwich Village, but we may also see the position the Harlem Renaissance holds on the modernist world stage. Harlem contains all the contrasts of a modernist locale, but those contrasts are deeper and more vibrant than other forms of modernism.

Van Vechten's life in Greenwich Village and his subsequent journeys in Harlem led him from one artistic space to another. His trips to Harlem were not simply white

tourism, but those of an artist, like his character Peter Whiffle, seeking to experience and live “the new” in whatever location it manifests itself. Mark Helbling argues that “Van Vechten intended his novel [*Nigger Heaven*] to be a ‘new focusing’ and a ‘point of beginning.’” (44) Aesthetically and geographically speaking, Harlem epitomizes that new point of artistic consciousness in America, that one true natural art that Peter Whiffle seeks for: “Art in this epoch is too self-conscious. Everybody is striving to do something *new*, instead of writing or painting or composing what is natural [. . .] we shall be happier if we go back to the beginning.” (PW 245) In the Harlem Renaissance, Van Vechten appears to have found what his character Peter Whiffle spent a lifetime seeking for; art that is driven by what is natural, not by the theoretical.

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### *Vita*

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