It is difficult to accurately define the so-called Harlem Renaissance, alias the Negro Renaissance, because it was not merely a literary movement but an extraordinarily exciting general cultural movement that arose with Harlem as its center. The Harlem Renaissance can be approached from many points of view, but basically, a conglomeration of six factors are responsible for its emergence: the Negro vogue in the world; second, the birth of a black intelligentsia; third, the Great Migration and World War I; fourth, the New Negro Movement; fifth, the Jazz Age; and sixth, the relationship between black and white intellectuals.

Considering the American social conditions before 1920, relationships between black and white intellectuals were rare. By 1920, however, these relationships had changed and expanded and naturally, white writers seriously and sympathetically described the black situation in such works as Eugene O'Neill's *Emperor Jones* (1920) and *All God's Chillum Got Wings* (1924); Waldo Frank's *Holiday* (1923); Dubose Heyward's *Forgy* (1925); Carl Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven* (1926); and E.C.L. Adams' *Congaree Sketches* (1927) and *Nigger to Nigger* (1928). Thus, closer and more expansive relations between black and white intellectuals were formed.

George S. Schuyler, the author of *Black No More* (1931), was a disciple.
of H. L. Mencken, and his writing reflected his literary debt to that important literary personage. The Jamaican-born poet and novelist, Claude McKay, a prominent figure in the Harlem Renaissance called "l'enfant terrible," made a lot of friends through his association with the Liberator according to his autobiography, A Long Way from Home (1937). Zora Neale Hurston owed not a few white persons a great deal. During these days, Carl Van Vechten's role was unique in that he associated with a multitude of black intellectuals and assisted them.

It is safe to say that until the present there have been only a few essays on Carl Van Vechten at home and abroad, especially, from the viewpoint of the Harlem Renaissance. In the general studies on the Harlem Renaissance, only his name and novel, Nigger Heaven, were mentioned; no one paid much attention or devoted much space to his role. Quite recently, however, two essays, "Carl Van Vechten Presents the New Negro" in Studies in the Literary Imagination (Georgia State University, 1974) by Leon Coleman and "Carl Van Vechten and the Harlem Renaissance" in Negro American Literature Forum (1976) by Mark Helbling, were published. These recent essays testify to Van Vechten's importance; and particularly from the viewpoint of the Harlem Renaissance, Van Vechten must be reconsidered as a significant literary figure. Van Vechten said the following in his oral history of Columbia University:

It was almost following the publication of Peter Whiffle that I began to get violently interested in Negroes. I would say violently, because it was almost an addiction. I had been brought up to be very respectful to Negroes.1

Naturally, there was a basis for Carl Van Vechten's being interested in Negroes. His parents were cosmopolitan and humanistic. At a time-
when black people had only a rare chance to go to school, his father was co-founder of the Piney Woods School for black children in Mississippi. Moreover, his mother’s friend Lucy Stone, was an advocate of woman’s suffrage, and his mother was under her influence. She was responsible for the public library in her town, raising the sum required by Carnegie before he would build a library and securing from state and city government sufficient income for its continued support. Van Vechten’s basic attitude toward blacks was one of respect, partly learned through his father, who addressed all blacks, including the laundryman and the man who cut the grass, as Mr. or Mrs. Needless to say, his father’s activities and attitude toward black people affected the young Van Vechten strongly, though his actual association with black people was rare in his youth.

Carl Van Vechten’s association with black people began at a nightclub in Chicago, where he became acquainted with Carita Day (previously known as Carrie Washington) who later became quite a celebrity as a singer. He would often dance with her and reminisced that:

Nobody in Chicago and afterwards in New York had any objection to dancing with Negroes at that epoch. I don’t understand it. It’s probably because I never asked them whether or not they did object. This was between 1903 and 1910. She was a Negro and her husband was a Negro. She was obviously a Negro although she wasn’t very dark but she was handsome.

When Van Vechten moved to New York in 1906 and became a music critic for the New York Times and Broadway Magazine, he naturally met many actors, actresses, singers and dancers. Bert Williams, a singer and actor who usually appeared in the Ziegfield Follies, became Van Vechten’s
black friend and remained his good friend even after he became very popular and successful. So Van Vechten's "violent interest in Negroes" in the twenties did not really occur all that suddenly. The foundation had already been laid through these early friendships.

After Alfred A. Knopf published Van Vechten's novel, Peter Whiffle in 1922, he published Walter White's first novel, The Fire in the Flint, a story about Atlanta riots, in 1924. Van Vechten was very interested in the book and asked Knopf to introduce him to White. Thus, Van Vechten and White became friends, and White subsequently introduced Van Vechten to many other blacks.

A week or so after their first meeting, White introduced him to James Weldon Johnson, who was to become a life long friend. Johnson and White took him to a N.A.A.C.P. fund-raising dance party at the Happy Rhone's Club, where he met Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Zora Neale Hurston, Wallace Thurman, Jessie Fauset, Rudolph Fisher, and George Schuyler. Van Vechten noted:

......Walter was very good to me. He asked me to parties, to lunches, to dinners, and so forth, and in about two weeks I knew every educated person in Harlem. I knew them by the hundreds from Paul Robeson to—well, Joe Louis didn't exist at that time; I known him too, but that's later.

After meeting Langston Hughes, Van Vechten helped him publish his first book of poetry, Weary Blues, and wrote the introduction. Hughes said in his autobiography:

What Carl Van Vechten did for me was to submit my first book of poems to Alfred A. Konpf, put me in contact with the editors of
Vanity Fair, who bought my first poems sold to a magazine, caused me to meet many editors and writers who were friendly and helpful to me, encouraged me in my writing of my first short stories, and otherwise aided in making life for me more profitable and entertaining.8)

The N.A.A.C.P. party Carl Van Vechten attended was of singular importance to him, as well as to the blacks, since it marked the turning point of a drastic change in his focus and activities. He became a vital link for young poets and novelists who had no connections with white publishers, and perhaps, even more importantly, an understanding and compassionate intermediary between white and black people. Johnson describes Van Vechten’s efforts and attitude in his autobiography, Along This Way:

Carl Van Vechten had a warm interest in colored people before he ever saw Harlem. In the early days of the Negro literary and artistic movement, no one in the country did more to forward it than he accomplished in frequent magazine articles and by his many personal efforts in behalf of individual Negro writers and artists. Indeed, his regard for Negroes as a race is so close to being an affectionate one, that he constantly joked about it by his most intimate friends.8)

Van Vechten’s principal contribution toward race relations, however, was in arranging for blacks and whites get to know each other at his salon parties. This literary salon, modeled after Mabel Dodge Luhan’s earlier endeavor, provided a warm, free atmosphere in which artists and intellectuals could break down their prejudices.

At the same time Van Vechten was entertaining at his salon, there
were other parties to which the black intelligentsia were invited. The most important of these gatherings were the parties of A'Lelia Walker, which were not exclusively for intellectuals, and the literary parties of Jessie Fauset, one of the black novelists of the Harlem Renaissance.

At A'Lelia's get-togethers, there was a curious mixture of black and white celebrities, numerous bankers and "stock exchange racketeers", poets and novelists; and Countee Cullen, Witter Bynner, Muriel Draper, Taylor Gordon, Langston Hughes, and Van Vechten would usually be there also. Her parties, it is said, were as crowded as the New York subway at the rush hour, but she was always prepared to enliven the elbowing with some drink. At Jessie Fauset's parties, Walter White, Aaron Douglas, Charles S. Johnson, and Langston Hughes would attend. Most of her parties were held exclusively for black people, and the few that were not were open only to very distinguished whites. While her literary parties were unique and valuable because black people there could speak about everything in an invigorating atmosphere, they were chained to the limitation of being held mostly for blacks.

There were two important factors about Van Vechten's parties: one, was the mutual association of black and white people; two, was the breakdown of prejudice. In the 1920's, considering the fact that there was no place where black people could associate with white people, this kind of party was rare and valuable for both races. At that time prejudice against black people was rampant, and the practice of strict segregation was vigorously pursued even in New York, which was considered to be a fairly free city for black people. Even the famous Cotton Club in Harlem was a Jim Crow club. When Eugene O'Neill's All God's Chillun Got Wings was performed in Manhattan in 1924, the Mayor of New York prohibited white and black children from appearing together on the stage.
Furthermore, it was very difficult for blacks to get tickets to the theater, and many restaurants also shut their doors on blacks.

"Everybody told me that Harlem was very dangerous," Van Vechten later said. Despite the social situation of those years and his white friends' advice, Van Vechten continued going to the nightclubs and enjoying life in Harlem.

In 1924 Van Vechten decided to move from a small apartment on 150 West Fifty-fifth Street. By this time he had published three novels and he had become wealthy. In spite of the upper-class neighborhood, Van Vechten dared to open his literary salon at this new apartment. Significantly, he never gave a party exclusively for blacks but also invited many well-known whites. Up to that time, blacks had never been given this kind of opportunity. It was the chance, particularly of young black writers and poets to became acquainted with white celebrities. The following passage clearly shows Van Vechten's attitude about his parties:

The party wasn't all colored, I never gave all-colored parties; I asked other people too. Otherwise it seems very, very snobbish. There were plenty of very well-known white people there.

Because of his unshakable determination to introduce talented people to each other, actors, actresses, painters, sculptors, editors, and writers would gather at his parties and enjoy dancing, talking, singing, and reading poetry. Langston Hughes reminisced in his autobiography:

At another Mr. Van Vechten's parties, Bessie Smith sang the blues. And when she finished, Margarita D'Alvarez of the Metropolitan Opera arose and sang an aria. Bessie Smith did not know D'Alvarez, but, liking her voice, she went up to her when she had
ceased and cried: "Don’t let nobody tell you you can’t sing!"

Carl Van Vechten and A’Lelia Walker were great friends, and at each of their parties many of the same people were to be seen, but more writers were present at Carl Van Vechten’s. At cocktail time, or in the evening, I first met at his house Somerset Maugham, Hugh Walpole, Fannie Hurst, Witter Bynner, Isa Glenn, Emily Clark, William Scabrook, Arthur Davison Ficke, Louis Untermeyer, and George Sylvester Viereck.  

It was characteristic that the white guests were persons who had influence upon the white population; the black guests ranged from porters to writers and poets. As an ex-musical critic turned well-known writer, Van Vechten had many friends, which was a great help in giving parties. Through his parties he succeeded in breaking down some barriers of prejudice. He never used oppressive means to do so, however. A little-known fact, for example, is that at the end of one party William Faulkner badgered Van Vechten into taking him to Harlem, which Van Vechten finally did, though against his will. Moreover, Van Vechten never used black people for propaganda purposes. He said "I never think of people as Negroes. I think of them as friends." His attitude won him the further trust of many blacks and whites as well, and as a result, his parties were packed to the ceiling. His method of breaking down prejudice was unique for his day:

I never tried to get anybody to stop hating Negroes. If they want to, it’s their business, but it’s damned silly. You can’t change people like that. They sometimes change; one girl I know, and still I know now, was so bitter about Negroes, I can’t tell you; and I didn’t do anything except invite her to my house occasionally when there were...
Negroes here. Gradually, she changed, and one night there was a Negro here who simply captivated her, because he was so extraordinary. Then she became very interested in George Schuyler because George Schuyler is no fool and can talk. Now she receives Negroes at her house and goes to their houses.15)

Through this association with black writers, poets, and people of various talents, white people became interested in blacks and developed an appreciation of their potentialities and contributions. In this sense, his parties had a revolutionary impact unlike the other parties of those days. To be sure, his way might now be denounced for being reconciliatory, but in those days "reconciliatory" really implied blind obedience to white people. On the surface, his behavior might have seemed weak-willed and impotent to some people, but in actuality what his actions signified was a steady, unswerving belief that prejudice must be eliminated and that he must contribute to this cause through the best means available to him. Van Vechten's small torch of humanism enlightened both races during the days of the Harlem Renaissance. One of the people who used to go to Van Vechten's parties, George Schuyler, described Van Vechten's achievements as revolutionary and compared them with those of Willi Muenzenberg in Germany:

With far different objectives but similar techniques, Van Vechten won over the same class in this country to acceptance of the Negro and appreciation of his potentialities and contributions. His disciples were the minority that tell the majority what to think, wear, see and hear, and they have multiplied tremendously in the past quarter century. It has now become smart to be tolerant, understanding and appreciative interracially, and if any one person can be credited
with bringing about this revolution it is Carl Van Vechten. You cannot have equality unless it is desired, and it will not be desired unless the idea is first accepted, which will not happen at the bottom until it first happens at the top. 16

Van Vechten and his tiny, pretty actress wife, Fania Marinoff, dedicated themselves to his parties in a most active fashion, going from person to person with the greatest of zest just like two bees drawing honey from flowers. While Fania dispensed her pretty and modest smiles, Van Vechten gaily dispensed liquid refreshment for those who wished to partake. Filling glasses and playing host, he introduced black poets and novelists to white celebrities. His sincerity aroused moderate seriousness in the guests, and his humor created a comfortable and congenial atmosphere. Through this natural atmosphere of friendliness and mutual consideration, his white guests began appreciating black people more and more. Langston Hughes pointed out:

Carl Van Vechten is like that party. He never talks grandiloquently about democracy or Americanism. Nor makes a fetish of those qualities. But he lives them with sincerity—and humor.

Perhaps that is why his parties were reported in the Harlem press. 17

In addition to helping black writers and poets become published and giving interracial parties, Van Vechten also helped black people through the N. A. A. C. P. From the fact that Walter White opened the office of the midtown branch of the N. A. A. C. P. in the same building where the Van Vechtens lived, we can imagine the importance of Van Vechten’s assistance. Furthermore, at that time, Van Vechten’s best friend, James Weldon Johnson, like White, was also a leading staff member of the
N. A. A. C. P. The problems the N. A. A. C. P. brought to Van Vechten were varied. His opinion about people was often solicited, and sometimes individual blacks brought him their problems through the N. A. A. C. P. It should be noted that Van Vechten never flaunted his role with the N. A. A. C. P., and even in his oral history he doesn’t mention his specific activities but merely suggests that he had a close connection with the group. To the question, “what kind of problems did the N. A. A. C. P. bring you?” he answered.

I can’t remember now, because they were various and sometimes important, sometimes unimportant. They were very often about people. Very often they wanted my opinion on certain men, that they were going to use in some way.¹⁸

In the beginning of his long relationship with black people he lavished his love upon everyone of them. Soon, however, he came to have a more correct appreciation of them. One night he rushed back to his home from Harlem and told his wife in great glee that he finally hated a black person; that is, at least he had found one black person he hated. As a result of this, he felt completely emancipated. He later remarked:

It had nothing to do with prejudice. I didn’t dislike him because he was a Negro. I disliked him for other reasons... I forgot what they were now—perhaps he was unkind to his mother or kicked his dog or something, I don’t know. But I disliked him. I’ve even forgotten who the man was, so I can’t describe the feeling really. I only remember coming home and saying, “at last I hate a negro.” Because up to that time, I had considered them all as one. Now I feel about him exactly the way I feel about white people—I like some,
am uninterested in others, and some of them I find very distasteful. But at that time I hadn’t got around to that.19)

Van Vechten’s personal assistance was not a foregone “give and take” situation—in fact, his help was often refused. His friendships with blacks were not foregone conclusions either; rather they were strengthened step by step and enhanced by personal idiosyncrasies, both his own and those of the people he associated with. Claude McKay, for example in his autobiography, A Long Way from Home, described his unique meeting with Van Vechten in Paris in the summer of 1929 as follows:

When we met at that late hour at the celebrated rendezvous of the world’s cosmopolites, Mr. Van Vechten was full and funny. He said “What will you take?” I took a soft drink and I could feel that Mr. Van Vechten was shocked.

I am afraid that as a soft drinker I bored him. The white author and the black author of books about Harlem could not find much of anything to make conversation. The market trucks were rolling by loaded with vegetables for Les Halles, and suddenly Mr. Van Vechten, pointing to a truck-load of huge carrots, exclaimed, “How I would like to have all of them!” Perhaps carrots were more interesting than conversation. But I did not feel in any way carroty... But he excused himself to go to the men’s room and never came back.20)

Van Vechten later sent McKay a message explaining that he “was sorry for not returning, but he was so high that, after leaving us, he discovered himself running along the avenue after a truck load of carrots.”21)

Mabel Dodge Luhan said, concerning his character, “How Carl loved...
the grotesque! He loved to twist and squirm with laughter at the oddty of strong contrast.” A white non-admirer of Van Vechten’s had told McKay that Van Vechten “patronized Negroes in a subtle way, to which the Harlem elite were blind because they were just learning sophistication.” After their Paris meeting this presumption was eradicated by McKay who found “Mr. Van Vechten not a bit patronizing, and quite all right.” Attesting to their friendship, beyond words, is the fact that when Claude McKay died in Chicago in 1948, Van Vechten was one of the pallbearers.

Van Vechten’s association with black people was deeper and more expansive than might be expected. Naturally, it is not enough to judge Van Vechten’s role in the Harlem Renaissance only in terms of his association with black people. His “indirect role” must also examined, that is, the opening of his literary salon in 1924 after the Harlem Renaissance had gotten underway. Moreover, he had no intention of leading the New Negro Movement or the Harlem Renaissance because he was modest and sincere. However, his dedicated efforts in the “know the Negro” campaign were great and, according to George S. Schuyler, “revolutionary”. Because his close friends during the Renaissance, for example, Langston Hughes, Walter White, Jessie Fauset, Countee Cullen, Rudolph Fisher, Claude McKay, George Schuyler, Zola Neale Hurston, Wallace Thurman, Aaron Douglas, Bessie Smith, and Paul Rebeson, seem like an all-star cast of the Renaissance, it is easy to have the mistaken view that he had a leading role in that movement. Although his salon activities were tremendous, in reality they were only the lubricating oil of the Renaissance. According to Robert A. Bone:
The influence of white intellectuals on the Negro Renaissance ought not to be overestimated. Some Negro critics have charged the New Negro Movement with white domination, but a sober appraisal leaves no doubt of its indigenous character. The New Negro Movement was not a "vogue" initiated by white "literary faddists", but a serious attempt by the Negro artist to interpret his own group life.\textsuperscript{25}

In other words overestimating the influence of white intellectuals such as Van Vechten and others may lead one to discredit the "serious efforts" of black writers, poets, and artists in their own behalf. After all, as Alain Locke pointed out, as the role of white intellectuals was vital in the "collaboration of white American artists",\textsuperscript{26} the role of the black intellectuals was the key factor in the Harlem Renaissance. Van Vechten, in providing a stimulating environment for the meeting of black and white minds, served the cause of literature—white as well as black.

\textbf{NOTES}


2) \textit{Ibid}.

3) Carita Day many years afterward assisted Van Vechten when he attempted to found the James Weldon Johnson Memorial Collection of Negro Arts and Letters at Yale University. She sent him many materials such as, letters, and photographs.

4) CVV, OH.

5) Van Vechten and Walter White later became estranged because Van Vechten felt that Walter had become a show-off and a blowhard.

6) CVV, OH.


9) Hughes, *The Big Sea, op. cit.*, p. 245: “A'Lelia Walker was a gorgeous dark Amazon, in a silver turban. She had a town house in New York (also an apartment where she preferred to live) and a country mansion at Irvington-on-the-Hudson, with pipe organ programs each morning to awaken her guests gently. Her mother made a great fortune from the Madame Walker Hair Straightening Process, which had worked wonders on unruly Negro hair in the early nineteen hundreds—and which continues to work wonders today. The daughter used much of that money for fun. A'Lelia Walker was the joy-goddess of Harlem’s 1920’s... When A'Lelia Walker died in 1931, she had a grand funeral. It was by invitation only. But, just as for her parties, a great many more invitations had been issued than the small but exclusive Seventh Avenue funeral parlor could provide for. Hours before the funeral, the street in front of the undertaker’s chapel was crowded.”

10) Ibid., p. 247: “At the novelist, Jessie Fauset’s parties there was always quite a different atmosphere from that at most other Herlem good-time gatherings. At Miss Fauset’s, a good time was shared by talking literature and reading poetry aloud and perhaps enjoying some conversation in French.”

11) CVV, OH.

12) Ibid.


14) CVV, OH.

15) Ibid.


18) CVV, OH.

19) Ibid.


21) Ibid., p. 320.

22) Mabel Dodge Luhan, *Movers and Shakers* (New York: Harcourt, Brace
and Company, 1936), p. 79.

* This essay is based on the report of the American Literature Society of Japan (1978).