While *Nigger Heaven* was generally received with favor by white critics and readers, it aroused a storm of controversy among Negro intellectuals. Commendatory reviews were given by Wallace Thurman in *The Messenger*......by James Weldon Johnson in *Opportunity* ......Unfavorable reactions were expressed by Hubert Harrison in *The Amsterdam News*......and by W.E.B. DuBois in *The Crisis*......

From September through December 1926, Carl Van Vechten was in the midst of a raging storm of controversy. From the first, publication of *Nigger Heaven* aroused a furor among black intellectuals and most of the black middle classes, to which the title of the novel was anathema. An article in *The Pittsburgh Courier*, for example, reported the heated discussion that took place in a Harlem Library as follows:

*New York, Nov. 4*—At a stormy meeting held in the auditorium of the West 135th Street branch of the New York Public Library last Thursday evening, Harlem, the section of which it is supposed to be a study, in no uncertain terms condemned “Nigger Heaven,” the latest novel by Carl Van Vechten. At a quarter past eight the auditorium was packed. Miss Ernestine Rose, head of the Harlem branch of the library, of which 90 per cent of the readers are colored, started the purpose of the meeting, which was the beginning of the “book evenings” discussions season. She introduced Mrs. Clarissa Scott-Delany, who presided. Mrs. Delany gave a brilliant and able introduction to the discussion, then called for speaker. Cleveland G. Allen, well-known Harlem journalist, was first to take the floor. He bitterly denounced the book and frankly said he had tried to have it suppressed. S.R. Williams followed Allen and supported his stand. George S. Schuyler ridiculed the work and said the characters did not have common
sense. Attorney Vernal Williams defended the book, but said he objected to the title. Attorney F. D. Johnson said he thought the book was taken too seriously, while Miss Louise Jackson said as literature she considered it trash. Emile Holly gave a brilliant criticism of the book and showed it could not be of much value, according to the best standards by which novels are judged. Aubrey Bowser, a public school teacher and author, said he wondered where the Society for the Suppression of Vice was when the book was released to the public. Nobody praised the book, but a few made weak apologies because they said they thought the author was sincere and meant no offence. The book was chiefly attacked because of the use of the word "Nigger" in its title.

Carl Van Vechten himself was not present, nor were any of those Negroes who supported the idea and helped him get his material. They were all bitterly scored.

It is strange that Schuyler’s name should be quoted in this article as one who attacked the book. According to the research of Hugh M. Gloster, Schuyler belonged to the defending group, and twenty-four years later when Schuyler wrote about Van Vechten he mentioned the book in quite a different manner. In the article he highly praised Van Vechten’s beneficial association with blacks and, recalling the situation at the time of the book’s publication, said: “The Negroes who objected to Nigger Heaven were mostly those who had not read it but disliked the title. James Weldon Johnson, Alice Dunbar Nelson and the writer were the only Negro reviewers who approved it without reservation....” In this article there is no suggestion of Schuyler’s having “ridiculed” the book or having said that “the characters did not have common sense.” Perhaps he was one of the “few” who made weak apologies because they said they thought author was sincere and meant no offence”? Or perhaps the reporter of The Pittsburgh Courier made a wrong report about him? In any event, Carl Van Vechten himself believed that Schuyler was one of his staunch supporters, reporting that, “All the white papers praised it (Nigger Heaven) to the skies, and all the Negro papers disliked it violently with the exception of George Schuyler and
Prior to The Pittsburgh Courier’s story, The Amsterdam News reported that a lecture would be given by Dr. Hubert Harrison on October 6, 1926 in which he would “reply to Nigger Heaven.” This kind of notice clearly showed the general reaction of the black populace. In the continuing controversy, W.E.B. DuBois was the most well known of the attacking group. He reviewed the book in the December 1926 issue of the Crisis. Despite anger and violent objections to the novel, he did maintain some of his critical faculties unlike James Weldon Johnson who, in defending his friend’s book, lost control of his. DuBois denounced Van Vechten as follows:

Carl Van Vechten’s “Nigger Heaven” is a blow in the face. It is an affront to the hospitality of black folk and to the intelligence of white. First, as to its title, my objection is based on no provincial dislike of the nickname. “Nigger” is an English word of wide use and definite connotation.... To all this the author has a right to reply that even if the title is an unhappy catch-phrase for penny purposes and his picture of truth untruthful, his book has a right to be judged primarily as a work of art. Does it please? Does it entertain? Is it a good and human history? In my opinion it is not.... “Nigger Heaven” is to me an astonishing and wearisome hodge-podge of laboriously stated facts, quotations and expressions, illuminated here and there with something that come near to being nothing but cheap melodrama. Real human fellings are laughed at. Love is degraded. The love of Byron and Mary is stark cruelty and that of Lasca and Byron is simply nasty.

DuBois obviously intended to break down all the positive points brought out by the defence group, whose comments had already been published. His criticism accurately struck at the book’s weaknesses, but his bombastic rhetoric showed his emotionality in the matter. As a leader, DuBois had fought for respect and admiration of his people, and he could not tolerate even a young black writer treating the vices or the morally degrading situations of certain blacks. His attitude on this point show why he could not be a leader in the Harlem Renaissance,
a movement that took the unregenerate masses to its bosom, and why it might be said that he won the literary argument but lost the historical debate.

Of all the black reviewers Wallace Thurman was the only one who gave a fairly objective and good review of *Nigger Heaven*. Admitting that he had been prepared to dislike the book when he first heard of the author’s intentions to write a novel of Negro life in Harlem, he said the following:

... since reading the volume I find myself forced to cancel my first conjecture and come forward with another, which is, that whites may find it a trifle tedious at times, but that Negroes will accept it so warmly that even the detested “Nigger” in the title will be forgotten, and, I would not be surprised should some of our uplift organizations and neighborhood clubs plan to erect a latter-day abolitionist statue to Carl Van Vechten on the corner of 135th Street and Seventh Avenue, for the author has been most fair, and most sympathetic in his treatment of a long mistreated group of subjects. True, some of his individual characters may seem tarnished, but the race as a whole emerges as a group of a long suffering martyrs, deservant of a better fate.

... I found the trimmings and trappings more genuine and more gracefully done than the thesis. The affair between Mary Love and Byron Kasson struck me as rather puerile. Show me any moral pair of even cultured lovers in Harlem skipping down bridle paths in a park, and show me any girl in Mary’s milieu who is as simple as Mary in the matters of an affair de coeur. The tragedy of the myopic Byron who wished to write but could find nothing to write about while a veritable ocean of material was swirling about him, and his passionate plunge with the fiery and exotic Laska Sartoris into a pool of physical debauch is of sterner stuff and much more calculated to draw the reader back to the volume for a second reading.

“Nigger Heaven” will also provide high Harlem with a new indoor sport, namely the ascertaining which persons real life the various characters were drawn from. Speculations are already rampant even
before a general circulation of the book, and I have heard from various
persons whom each character represents with far more assurance
than the author himself could muster.>?

Thurman’s criticism of two main characters, who admittedly deserve
sharp scrutiny for their shallowness and lack of substance, is not entirely
to the point since Bayron and Mary, along with the other characters
in the book, are only symbols in a novel abstracted from reality. If
Thurman wished to discuss the probability of the novel or its characteri-
izations, he should have made his intentions clear and his criticism
sufficiently serious, but this is typical of Thurman’s style.

James Weldon Johnson, the most famous amongst the defense group,
was not only one of Van Vechten’s closest friends but had helped to
write and edit *Nigger Heaven*. It might, therefore, be considered un-
ethical for him to have written a review favoring the book, but to
protect his friend and the book’s intent, he leaped into the fray in the
October 1926 issue of *Opportunity*. It was a timely move since this was
the month the controversy about the book reached its peak and was at
fever pitch among black intellectuals. Unfortunately, Johnson overly
praised Van Vechten, but perhaps this was inevitable considering the
close friendship between the two and the intensity of the situation:

... From its intriguing prologue to its tragic end, here is an absorb-
ing story. Whether you like or dislike it you will read it through,
every chapter, every page. Mr. Van Vechten is the first white novel-
ist of note to undertake a portrayal of modern American Negro life
under metropolitan conditions. Mr. Van Vechten is also the only
white novelist I can now think of who has not viewed the Negro as
a type, who has not treated the race as a unit, either good or bad.
In NIGGER HEAVEN the author has chosen as his scene Harlem,
where Negro life is at its highest point of urbanity and sophistication,
and there the entire action of the story is played out. The economy
of stage Mr. Van Vechten imposes for himself enables him to gain
in dramatic intensity but it does not limit him in the scope of the
action. The story comprehends nearly every phase of life in the Negro
metropolis. It draws on the components of that life from the dregs
Since the title itself was obviously central to the controversy among blacks, Johnson wisely decided to deal with this issue in his review. It was the title that W. E. B. DuBois would, two months later, first and most vigorously attack. And considering the situation of black at that time, it is easy to understand DuBois’ attitude—even now, most blacks intensely dislike the word “Nigger.” Johnson, who understood the irony of the title, therefore undertook a difficult and courageous assignment in trying to persuade blacks to accept the title:

... the title of Nigger Heaven is taken from the ironic use of the phrase made by the characters in the book. But whatever may be the attitude and opinions on this point, the book and not the title is the thing. In the book Mr. Van Vechten does not stoop to burlesque or caricature. There are characters and incidents in the book that many will regard as worse than unpleasant, but always the author handles them with sincerity and fidelity.

In his review Johnson also introduced the outline of the story in great detail and gave a good amount of space to the main character, Byron. On this point Johnson was more sophisticated in his criticism than Thurman, though it must be noted that he went overboard:

Byron is at many points a symbol of the tragic struggle of the race thrown as it is an unsympathetic milieu and surrounded by fateful barriers. But Byron’s story is especially true as an individual story. It is a true story—and an old story. It is the story of many a gifted and ambitious young colored man who has come up to New York as the field for success, and has been sucked in and down by the gay life and underworld of the great city. It is the story of talent and brilliancy without stamina and patience.

At the conclusion of his review, Johnson said:

The book is written with Mr. Van Vechten’s innate light touch and brilliancy, but there is a difference; Van Vechten, the satirist, becomes in NIGGER HEAVEN Van Vechten the realist. In every line of the
book he shows that he is serious. But however serious Van Vechten may be, he cannot be heavy. He does not moralize, he does not over-emphasize, there are no mock heroics, there are no martyrdoms. And, yet — Mr. Van Vechten would doubtless count this a defect — the book is packed full of propaganda. Every phase of the race question, from Jim Crow discriminations to miscegenation, is frankly discussed. Here the author's inside knowledge and insight are at times astonishing.11)

During the public controversy many notables and intellectual sent Van Vechten letters and telegrams, mostly offering encouragement. Even the New York Public Library received fifty-one letters (and telegrams, of which seventeen were from blacks, twelve from France, and the rest from white Americans. On August 20, 1926, Walter White sent a telegram to Carl Van Vechten:

As one race author to another I sent you my warmest congratulations on the natal of Nigger Heaven. I predict for it a warm welcome and a huge success. Such are my prayers.12)

On August 8, 1926, Eric Walrond, the business manager of Opportunity, who had published a collection of his own short stories called Tropic Death, also sent Van Vechten a telegram:

I have just read Nigger Heaven. I can not deny the impulse to tell you how much I enjoyed it. The Harlem it describes is accurately, creditably, glamourously enshrined.13)

And on September 2, 1926 Alain Locke, one of the major contributors to the New Negro Movement, sent the following letter:

Dear Carl:

"Nigger Heaven" (thanks so much for the copy) is for me quite the unexpected. It's art — but at the same time subconscious propaganda. I believe it will be quite effectual but really I haven't expected you to be so carefully serious and so unsatirical. But perhaps you were wise — certainly you were chivalrous, in stepping aside a bit from your usual style. For in my judgement you have brought us a step nearer
the flesh level of Negro material in American Art in this good cor-
rective sketch for the white reader who takes Negro life underseri-
ously and for the black reader who takes it over-seriously.... I'm not
curious to know what the reactions are — of course some of them
stupid — Laska is wonderfully charm — I wonder if after all she isn't
the crux of the white situation — both the white and the black world
will bite their thumbs at her — the society approaches at least made
for the first time.143

Another letter, before the controversy reached its peak, foretold in
essence what would soon occur. On September 12, Anna Laurence,
black woman unknown to Van Vechten, wrote to him warning of the
title's consequences. She obviously understood the minds and feelings
of the black masses:

Dear Sir:

I hope you will not consider this and intrusion, as I am a simple:
climber in the field where you shine so admirably, but I just felt to,
commend you on "Nigger Heaven." Mr. Van Vechten, you really know
"My" people; evidently you have contracted very closely in some way
to learn the little things about them, the things that the majority
of "US" hate to admit. I can't tell you that I like the title, I do not.
Had you called it "Black Heaven" or "Negro Heaven" I believe it
would have accepted heartily by a few broad minded intelligent people
in our race.

It was asked by a number of my Race to write it up, before I'd
seen it, feeling that it was of an insulting nature. I promised to do-
so, but the only criticism I can make is the above.

The gist of the book is this, you know our weaknesses, the majority
of Negroes are like children, hate to admit when they are in the
wrong. You have truely portrayed Negro characteristics, the indi-
viduals, but the Race as an entirety. "Nigger Heaven" is an eye opener
to the Negroes, it is putting them wise to faults that they can and
should correct. None of us like bitters, its tastes going down, but
after all sugar and water was never known alleviate human suffer-
ing.153

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Beside the above-mentioned letters, many other blacks encouraged and praised Van Vechten, including Paul Robeson, Nella Lassen, social worker Samuel B. Dawley, Jr., and Harold Denzil Jackman. During the controversy Langston Hughes kept silence, probably because he was one of those who helped Van Vechten publish the novel and who wrote poems for it that were included in the book's seventh printing. However, when he published his autobiography in 1940, he spoke out on the subject even though almost fifteen years had passed:

Carl Van Vechten was distressed at the reactions his book provoked in the Negro press. He had not expected colored people to dislike it. Certainly in the novel he had treated the Negroes of Harlem much better, for instance, than he had treated his own home folks in The Tattooed Countess. But I doubt if any of the more vociferous of the Negro critics had ever read The Tattooed Countess... or knew anything about his style. If they had they could not then have written so stupidly about Nigger Heaven...

... Mr. Van Vechten became the goat of the New Negro Renaissance, the he-who-gets-slapped. The critics of the left, like the Negroes of the right, proceeded to right on Mr. Van Vechten, and he was accused of ruining, distorting, polluting, and corrupting every Negro writer from then on, who was ever known to have shaken hands with him, or to have used the word nigger in his writings, or to have been in a cabaret...

... To say that Carl Van Vechten has harmed Negro creative activities is sheer poppycock. The bad Negro writers were bad long before Nigger Heaven appeared on the scene. And would have been bad anyway, had Mr. Van Vechten never been born.16

After the controversy intensified and seemed like it would continue unabated, Van Vechten left New York with his wife to escape the scathing attacks. First he went to Paris to renew his acquaintance with Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, then on to England, where he assisted in the publication of Nigger Heaven. The book and its author became famous, and after the book was published in England it was also printed in many countries such as Czechoslovakia, Denmark,
France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Norway, Sweeden, Poland, and Estonia.

NOTES

2) *The Pittsburg Courier*, Nov. 6, 1926.
9) *Ibid*.
12) Carl Van Vechten Collection, Manuscript Division, New York Public Library (hereafter called CVV, NYPL).
13) CVV, NYPL.
14) CVV, NYPL.
15) CVV, NYPL.

* This essay is based on the report of the American Literature Society of Japan (1979).