

## Out in Print

by J.S. Hall . Contributing Writer

### Long-hidden interracial nude pictures reveal celebrated photographer's ambiguities

New York socialite, dilettante, writer of light-hearted novels and photographer extraordinaire, Carl Van Vechten (1880–1964) was also a champion and patron of many African-American artists and authors of the Harlem Renaissance. Although now largely forgotten, he remains best known for his controversial 1926 novel "Nigger Heaven," which for obvious reasons rather strained his relationships with many of his friends in Harlem. And although married twice, he led an active life in Manhattan's gay subculture.

But like most people, Van Vechten had a hidden side beyond his homosexuality; among his possessions bequeathed to Yale University's Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library were some boxes whose contents could not be removed until 25 years after his death. When unsealed, they were found to contain numerous interracial nude photographs taken by Van Vechten; the existence of these photos had never been publicly acknowledged, and they were intended for private enjoyment by him and a select circle of trusted, like-minded intimates.

In 1992, a gay, African-American art professor named James Smalls viewed these photos at Yale and "audibly gasped — not from horror, but, rather, from the immediate realization that I had stumbled onto something magnificent and invaluable." Uncatalogued and untitled, these images exhibited a campy verve quite unlike any other homoerotic photographs created at

this time. Although undeniably quaint by twenty-first century sensibilities accustomed to hardcore imagery, these pictures would have been scandalous — if not ruinous and quite possibly illegal — during Van Vechten's lifetime. But whereas fellow photographer George Platt Lynes destroyed much of his own homoerotic work shortly before his death, Van Vechten entrusted his photos to the ages.

As Smalls notes, no other figure associated with the Harlem Renaissance "has been so vilified and held in contempt as Carl Van Vechten. Why? Because he was an extremely active, influential, and powerful gay white male in a black cultural movement." The existence of these photographs only complicates matters, because to the uninitiated, they could lend a sinister and/or prurient slant to Van Vechten's single-minded championing of "negromania." And while a number of these images could be considered racist at first, Smalls contends that closer examination reveals a campy spin that turns many racist stereotypes on their metaphorical ears. Little wonder, then, that Smalls considers them "unique and compelling," yet also "unnerving."

Ever the meticulous scholar, Smalls goes to great lengths to ensure that Van Vechten's photos are viewed as artifacts of their time (the 1930s and 1940s), taken by someone intimately familiar with the art movements of primitivism and modernism, and analyzes some of them with amazing (and occasionally mind-numbing) detail. In addition to much biographical information on Van Vechten, Smalls also addresses such topics as the tension between one's public persona and one's private life; compares and contrasts these photos with those of George Platt Lynes; scruti-

nizes Van Vechten's private scrapbooks which obsessively "found homosexuality where homosexuality had been suppressed... where it was not supposed to be..."; and examines the influence these photos had on the works of more explicit photographers like Robert Mapplethorpe, Rotimi Fani-Kayode and Ajamu Ikwe Tyekimba.

The 60 duotones herein have been faithfully reproduced from their original photographic sources, and while obviously done by a talented dabbler in photography, they nevertheless possess a good deal of charm and thoughtful intent. The Caucasian and African-American models embody Van Vechten's studies of contrasts and polarity, while little details like the spangly background drop cloth and props like a bunch of artificial grapes indicates the photographer's trademark light-hearted approach to virtually everything in life.

"My purpose in writing this book has not been to transform Van Vechten into some kind of modernist hero or romanticize him as a neglected, forgotten, or misunderstood artist of talent, genius, or both," Smalls writes. "Instead, what I have tried to do is to bring to light some heretofore private images that reflect and illuminate Van Vechten's sometimes contradictory and sometimes ambivalent psychological and social relationship to African-Americans and pre-Stonewall gay culture." Although written from a scholarly perspective, Smalls' prose is far more accessible than that of most purveyors of academia. That being said, readers with an interest and/or familiarity with modern art history might glean more enjoyment out of some of Smalls' more arcane reference than a casual reader would. ■

**info:** "The Homoerotic Photography of Carl Van Vechten: Public Face, Private Thoughts" . by James Smalls  
Temple University Press, \$35.00



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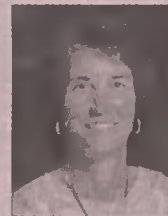
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