

**A Guide to the
Van Vechten, Carl Collection
Papers, 1917 - 1952**

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Biographical Note: Carl Van Vechten was born on June 17, 1880 in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. At an early age, he developed an interest in music and theater. He left Iowa in 1899 to attend the University of Chicago where he explored art, music and opera. He soon became interested in writing and contributed to the University of Chicago Weekly. While working with the Chicago American, Van Vechten covered a broad range of topics, and occasionally provided photographs.

In 1906, Van Vechten moved to New York City, where he worked as the assistant music critic for the *New York Times*. His interest in opera prompted him to take a leave of absence from the Times to examine this art form in Europe, in 1907. While in England he married his long-time friend Anna Snyder. The marriage ended in divorce in 1912. Van Vechten returned to his job at the *New York Times* in 1909 and soon became the first American critic of modern dance.

In 1914, Van Vechten married actress Fania Marinoff and soon departed from the Times. He continued to write and published several collections of his essays relating to music, ballet and cats. Van Vechten's first novel, *Peter Whiffle: His Life and Works*, was published in 1922.

Van Vechten was keen on promoting black artists and writers during the Harlem Renaissance. He was an avid collector of ephemera and books pertaining to black arts and letters, and he frequently visited Harlem. These experiences provided the inspiration for his controversial novel, *Nigger Heaven*, published in 1926.

In the early 1930s, Miguel Covarrubias introduced Van Vechten to the 35mm Leica camera. He began photographing his large circle of friends and acquaintances. His earlier career as a writer and his wife's experience as an actress provided him with access to both fledgling artists and the established cultural figures of the time. Some of his subjects from this period include F. Scott Fitzgerald, Langston Hughes, Alfred A. Knopf, Bessie Smith and Gertrude Stein. Van Vechten did his own darkroom work, but frequently used an assistant to help set up lights for the portrait sittings.

During World War II, Van Vechten volunteered at the Stage Door Canteen. Top-notch entertainers frequently performed there for servicemen. Van Vechten remained active, writing and photographing, up until his death in 1964.

Scope and Content Note: The Carl Van Vechten Collection consists of one archival box (.5 linear feet) containing an abundance of significant correspondence. The collection also contains several folders filled with correspondence concerning the George W. Gershwin Memorial Collection of Music and Musical Literature, founded by Carl Van Vechten. The integrated collection was established at Fisk University in 1947 for its musical traditions and promotion of racial harmony.

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Inventory

Box 1

- f.
 1. Correspondence, General -- Chalupt, R. – Kuapilo, V.
 2. Correspondence, General -- Lederman, M. – Witherspoon, H.
 3. Correspondence, General -- no date
 4. Correspondence, Gershwin Collection -- July 1950 – October 1950
 5. Correspondence, Gershwin Collection -- November 1950 – December 1950
 6. Correspondence, Gershwin Collection -- January 1951 – May 1951
 7. Correspondence, Gershwin Collection -- June 1951 – August 1952