

**Multitudes: A Celebration of the Yale Collection of American Literature, 1911–2011**  
*On view at Beinecke Library, Yale University, July 8 through October 1, 2011*

Checklist and Descriptions: James Weldon Johnson Memorial Collection

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James Weldon Johnson Memorial Collection & Collection Founder, Carl Van Vechten

Founded in 1941 by Carl Van Vechten, this collection honors James Weldon Johnson and celebrates the accomplishments of African American writers and artists. Including books, manuscripts, and visual materials, collection materials date from the eighteenth century to the present with a strong emphasis on the Harlem Renaissance. Grace Nail Johnson contributed her husband's papers, leading the way for gifts of papers from W. E. B. Du Bois, Walter White and Poppy Cannon White, Dorothy Peterson, Chester Himes, and Langston Hughes. The collection also contains the papers of Richard Wright and Jean Toomer, as well as groups of manuscripts or correspondence of such writers as Arna Bontemps, Countee Cullen, Zora Neale Hurston, Claude McKay, and Wallace Thurman.

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Miguel Covarrubias, *Caricature of Carl Van Vechten*, undated.

Few friends of the Yale Collection of American Literature have left a more significant and lasting mark than Carl Van Vechten. Mr. Van Vechten's generous contributions to the Library's collections—of books, manuscripts, correspondence, photographs, artworks, and more— included his own works and personal archives as well as extensive, carefully assembled collections of materials in areas of particular interest to him, most notably African American arts and letters. A writer, cultural critic, photographer, collector, and arts advocate, Van Vechten's connections in the worlds of twentieth-century literature, music, dance, and theater were remarkably broad. Putting those connections to work on behalf of the Yale Library, Van Vechten facilitated major donations in the areas of: African American arts and culture (as the founder of the James Weldon Johnson Memorial Collection of American Negro Arts and Letters he secured by donation the papers of James Weldon Johnson, Langston Hughes, and Walter White); American theater (especially the papers of the Theatre Guild donated by Lawrence Langner, Theresa Helburn, and Armina Marshall); American art (represented by the Alfred Stieglitz / Georgia O'Keeffe Papers, the Stettheimer Sisters Papers, and the Max Ewing Papers); and American literature (including the archives of Arthur Davison Ficke, Mabel Dodge Luhan, and Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas).

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*Exercises Marking the Opening of the James Weldon Johnson Memorial Collection of American Negro Arts and Letters Founded by Carl Van Vechten, Yale University, January 7, 1950.*

Photograph of guests attending the James Weldon Johnson Memorial Collection Opening Exercises, including Fania Marinoff, Grace Nail Johnson, and Langston Hughes.

The James Weldon Johnson Memorial Collection has for more than half a century been dedicated to documenting and celebrating the artistic achievements of African Americans. In the decades since its official opening, curators have actively built the Collection, adding a wide variety of new materials each year, from books and ephemeral publications to photographs and works of art to literary manuscripts and writers' archives. As a result of energetic collection development activities and generous gifts from friends of the Collection, the James Weldon Johnson Memorial Collection now includes more than 20,000 printed books, magazines, and other publications and some 3,000 individual manuscripts and archival collections running to more than 500 linear feet. The James Weldon Johnson Memorial Collection is unparalleled in achieving its goal, as described by Carl A. Lohmann in 1950, of "[gathering and preserving] materials through which the important contribution of the American Negro to the art and literature of his time is revealed." Over the decades the James Weldon Johnson Memorial Collection has become one of the most heavily consulted collections in the Yale Library, drawing undergraduate and graduate students as well as senior scholars from around the world. The Beinecke Library provides several short-term fellowships every year to Yale graduate students and visiting scholars conducting research in the Collection.

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Carl Van Vechten's original catalog of materials in the James Weldon Johnson Memorial Collection.

The James Weldon Johnson Memorial Collection of American Negro Arts and Letters was founded in 1941 by Carl Van Vechten as a memorial to Dr. James Weldon Johnson; the collection celebrates the accomplishments of African American writers and artists, with a strong emphasis on those of the Harlem Renaissance. Grace Nail Johnson contributed her husband's papers, leading the way for gifts from many of Johnson's friends and colleagues. A writer, cultural critic, and photographer, Van Vechten was also a visionary collector. His donation of books, manuscripts, correspondence, photographs, and memorabilia, as well as his ongoing advocacy for contributions from literary friends and fellow writers, established the James Weldon Johnson Memorial Collection as one of the most significant archives documenting African American arts and letters anywhere in the world.

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James Weldon Johnson, *National Hymn (Lift Every Voice)* manuscript. *From the James Weldon and Grace Nail Johnson Papers.*

Augusta Savage, *The Harp, or Lift Every Voice*, maquette of sculpture installed at the 1939 World's Fair.

Carl Van Vechten photograph of *Lift Every Voice* by Augusta Savage, 1939.

The manuscript of James Weldon Johnson's well-known and much-loved work "Lift Every Voice and Sing," a "National Hymn," as Johnson called it in the notebook in which the text is found, is preserved in Johnson's papers at the Beinecke Library. The James Weldon Johnson Memorial Collection includes a rare maquette of a sculpture by African-American artist Augusta Savage which takes its name from Johnson's memorable lyrics. Carl Van Vechten photographed the sculpture when it was installed at the 1939 New York World's Fair.

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James Weldon Johnson, *God's Trombones* (New York: Viking, 1927).

James Weldon Johnson, *Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*, with an introduction by Carl Van Vechten (New York: Knopf, 1927; reprint of 1912 first edition).

Carl Van Vechten, photograph of James Weldon and Grace Nail Johnson, December 3, 1932.

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Langston Hughes, *The Weary Blues*, with an Introduction by Carl Van Vechten (New York: Knopf, 1926).

Letter from Carl Van Vechten to Langston Hughes, [May 21, 1925]. *From the Langston Hughes Papers.*

Carl Van Vechten, photograph of Langston Hughes, undated.

Carl Van Vechten met poet Langston Hughes in 1925, when he was 45 and Hughes was in his early twenties. Van Vechten quickly recognized Hughes's remarkable talent as a poet and encouraged publisher Alfred Knopf to consider publishing his work. *The Weary Blues* was published just a year later, including an introduction by Van Vechten. The two men developed a close friendship that lasted throughout their lives. They corresponded regularly, exchanging frequent letters between Harlem and midtown. Both sides of their voluminous correspondence are preserved in the Yale Collection of American Literature.

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Richard Avedon, photographic proofs of Carl Van Vechten and Langston Hughes. *From the Langston Hughes Papers.*

Langston Hughes, *Shakespeare in Harlem* (New York: Knopf, 1942). *Inscribed to Carl Van Vechten; annotated on the cover by Hughes: The/ wishbone is / broken. / The dice / has thrown / a duce. The song is a / bitter old refrain. / What the / hell's the / use?*

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Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, [ca. 1937]).

Zora Neale Hurston, dedication to the James Weldon Johnson Memorial Collection, undated; manuscript pages for *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, undated.

*From the Zora Neale Hurston Collection.*

Carl Van Vechten met Zora Neale Hurston when she was working as a secretary for the writer Fannie Hurst. They liked each other instantly and shared a close friendship thereafter. "Zora is picturesque, witty, electric, indiscreet, and unreliable," Van Vechten wrote of his friend. "The latter quality offers material for discussion; the former qualities induce her friends to forgive and love her. No engagement, no matter with whom, is sacred to Zora; nor does she find it important to advise you that she intends to break it." For her part, Hurston was tremendously fond of Van Vechten. "If Carl was a people instead of a person," Hurston once said to Fannie Hurst, "I could then say, these are my people."

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Zora Neale Hurston, *Jonah's Gourd Vine*.

Carl Van Vechten, photograph of Zora Neale

Hurston, November 9, 1934.

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Carl Van Vechten, *The Tiger in the House* (New York: Knopf, 1920).

Carl Van Vechten, ed., *Lords of the Housetops, Thirteen Cat Tales* (New York: Knopf, 1921).

Carl Van Vechten, *Feathers* (New York: Random House, 1930).

Van Vechten's many enthusiasms included an abiding love of cats; conducting research for his own book about cats, *The Tiger in the House*, the writer amassed an impressive collection of books about the subject. He donated his cat library, along with drawings, paintings, and several porcelain sculptures of cats, to Yale in 1948. The collection is named in honor of his friend Anna Marble Pollock, who shared Van Vechten's love of cats. Considered by many to be the most significant (and best written) book about domestic cats, *The Tiger in the House* was reprinted in the New York Review Books Classics Series.

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Titles from the Anna Marble Pollock Memorial Library of Books about Cats.

Cat sculptures donated to the Yale Library by Carl Van Vechten.

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Carl Van Vechten, *The Blind Bow-Boy* (New York: Knopf, 1923). *Inscribed to Gertrude Stein.*

Photograph of Gertrude Stein, Carl Van Vechten, and Alice B. Toklas, January 4, 1935.

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Carl Van Vechten, *The Tattooed Countess* (New York: Knopf, 1924). *Inscribed to Sinclair Lewis.*

Carl Van Vechten, *Spider Boy: A Scenario for a Moving Picture* (New York: Knopf, 1928).

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Carl Van Vechten, *Music after the Great War* (New York: Shirmer, 1915).

Carl Van Vechten, *Music and Bad Manners* (New York: Knopf, 1916).

Carl Van Vechten, *In the Garret* (New York: Knopf, 1920).

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Carl Van Vechten, *Firecrackers: A Realistic Novel* (New York: Knopf, 1925).

Carl Van Vechten, *Peter Whiffle, His Life and Works* (New York: Knopf, 1922).