



Women of the Harlem Renaissance Professor Kate Dossett

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*If any have a song to sing
That's different from the rest,
Oh, let them sing.*

"To Usward," Gwendolyn Bennett, 1924.

Gwendolyn Bennett stands poised to deliver her glorious call to song. The night is March 21, 1924; the venue is the Civic Club in New York's Greenwich Village; and the occasion is a party Bennett has organized with Regina Andrews to celebrate the publication of Jessie Fauset's first novel, *There is Confusion*. Initiated by and for women creatives, the evening would come to be remembered as the party that launched the literary careers of a "younger group" of male writers. This was no accident. Hosted by Charles Johnson, editor of the journal *Opportunity*, with Howard University professor Alain Locke serving as toastmaster, the occasion was repurposed towards a different end. Locke had written to Johnson seeking reassurance that "the event was not to feature Jessie Fauset." Johnson obliged: The purpose of the evening he explained was to "present the newer school of writers" and he flattered Locke by calling him "the Dean of this younger group" (Wall 2001, 60). The conversations that took place that night between Black writers and white publishers led to a special edition of the magazine *Survey Graphic* in March 1925. Then expanded to a book-length collection called *The New Negro* published later the same year and edited by Locke, these anthologies have come to define the Harlem Renaissance, featuring poems, essays, short fiction, and artwork by some of the movement's shining stars: Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Zora Neale Hurston, and Jean Toomer.

These two volumes have come to be seen as the foundation stones of the Harlem Renaissance, yet they capture only a partial view of the movement. Women are poorly represented across the two publications: Just four of twenty-four contributors to *Survey Graphic*, and eight of the forty authors featured in *The New Negro* are women (Musser 1998; Honey 1999). And yet, even when they were pushed to its margins, women understood themselves to be at the heart of the movement we now call the Harlem Renaissance. Concentrated in the neighbourhood of Harlem in upper Manhattan, African American artists often referred to the increased opportunities for publication, exhibition, and performance in the 1920s as the "New Negro Movement." Not only in New York City but in Boston, Chicago, and Washington D.C., Black artists found new audiences for their work in the years after World War I. Women did not experience access to these new platforms on equal terms and the rewards were seldom equally distributed. The networks and structures that supported artistic production by men often held back the careers of women: Women were less likely to win prizes, fellowships, and publishing contracts with prestige presses; and when they did, they were often

subject to critical reviews that judged their work through a framework designed to reward the creativity of white men. Then there was the hard-to-quantify, but often devastating, assortment of slights and oversights, the invitations that never arrived, and the sneering attitude towards work that addressed “women’s concerns.” All of this made it difficult for women to achieve and sustain careers as writers and artists.

In this talk, I want to consider why women’s voices have become so hard to hear in the century since they first sang. I am interested in how our access to and interpretation of the Harlem Renaissance continues to be framed through the gendered and racialised hierarchies established and maintained by powerful knowledge-producing institutions, and in particular the role of archives and publishing. But I am also interested in the different practical and intellectual strategies Black women have developed to keep their work visible and valued. To explore this, I’m going to focus on two important writers who have very different publishing and archival legacies.

Jessie Fauset was the most published novelist of the movement, writing four novels between 1924 and 1933. She also played a central role in developing new artists as the literary editor of *The Crisis*, the journal of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored Peoples (NAACP) and one of the leading sponsors of new work by Black creatives during the Harlem Renaissance. Fauset also hosted a literary salon at her Harlem home, creating a space for Black artists to gather away from the gaze of white voyeurs. Her friend, Gwendolyn Bennett, was a poet and artist, whose poems and illustrations were first published by Fauset in *The Crisis*. Bennett went on to write a literary column for *Opportunity*, another important publication for Black artists, where she promoted and discussed the latest trends in Black arts. Unlike the landmark volumes edited by Alain Locke in collaboration with prestigious white presses and editors, nearly half of the poems and short stories published in *The Crisis* and *Opportunity* between 1918 and 1931 were by women. The careers of these two women demonstrate that women were not on the margins of the Harlem Renaissance; in fact, they played an important role in defining it. And yet, how and where their work was published and archived –or not– has shaped their legacy today.

Recovering the Harlem Renaissance

Before I turn to consider Jessie Fauset and Gwendolyn Bennett it is worth pausing to look at how our knowledge of and access to the Harlem Renaissance has evolved over the last century. The literature of the Harlem Renaissance was mostly out of print and out of sight by the 1950s. Its recovery was slow, inspired in part by the Black Arts Movement, the cultural movement that was an integral part of the Black Freedom Struggle from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s. This first wave of recovery work produced a particular version of the Harlem Renaissance, one which privileged the work of certain Black male writers who could be aligned with a radical Black aesthetic. Amiri Baraka, the Black dramatist, and most prominent spokesperson of the Black Arts Movement, wrote an essay in 1979 called “The Revolutionary Tradition in Afro-American Literature.” This revolutionary tradition, he argued, could be traced through slave narratives, the Civil War, and the Harlem Renaissance. Viewing the Harlem Renaissance as a “Literature of revolt” he singled out the work of W.E.B Du Bois, Langston Hughes, and Claude McKay. Women did not feature. It took years of scholarship by Black feminist scholars including Cheryl Wall, Maureen Honey, Barbara Christian, Gloria Hull, Deborah McDowell, Carolyn Sylvander, Claudia Tate, Mary Helen Washington, Nellie McKay and Hortense Spillers among others before work by women began to appear on American university programmes and publishers’ lists. In the 1980s and 1990s, Black feminist scholars not only recovered the work, but they also developed new models for understanding what was innovative and even radical about women’s writing in

the Harlem Renaissance. To do this, they had to change the academy which had long ignored and patronized women scholars: They developed Black women's literature and history courses, published anthologies of women's work, and studies of individual authors. Like the women they were writing about, much of this work was published by small, rather than prestigious, presses. But it was a project bigger than the academy: It concerned both those working within and beyond the academy, those who, like Alice Walker, were in "Search of our Mother's Gardens" (Walker 1984).

Alice Walker played a prominent role in the recovery of the novelist, folklorist and dramatist, Zora Neale Hurston, and in particular her 1937 novel, "*Their Eyes Were Watching God*" (Walker 1975). *Their Eyes* is a coming-of-age story that follows the dreams and sexual awakening of Janie Crawford, the granddaughter of an enslaved woman, as she navigates the Jim Crow South. Today, it is part of the canon: Hurston is the best-known novelist of the Harlem Renaissance. *Their Eyes* is regularly reissued: A core text on American Literature courses in Britain and the United States, it is the subject of thousands of undergraduate dissertations, journal articles, blog posts, and academic monographs. In its own time, however, it was not recognized in this way. Richard Wright, author of *Native Son*, published a scathing review. Lamenting its "facile sensuality" (a trait he traced back to the eighteenth-century Black poet Phyllis Wheatley), he accused Hurston of willingly adopting the minstrel mask to "make the 'white folks' laugh." It was, he claimed, a novel with "No theme, No Message, No Thought" (Wright 1937). *Their Eyes* sold fewer than 5,000 copies and fell out of print. It has taken an A-list of writers to recover and keep Hurston in the present, including Alice Walker and Oprah Winfrey, and, more recently, Jackie Kay and Zadie Smith. If this sustained effort has enabled Hurston to remain visible, others have not been so fortunate. While Hurston's writing about Southern folk has come to be a stand-in for the "authentic" "Black" experience, the road to recovery has been less open to those who wrote about the upwardly mobile urban experience, what the scholar Ann duCille calls "The bourgeois blues" (duCille 1993).

Jessie Fauset

Jessie Fauset was one of the most published authors of the Harlem Renaissance: She wrote essays, poems, short-form fiction, and four novels during the peak years of the Harlem Renaissance. Her legacy is preserved in her published work and in the personal papers of the famous men with whom she corresponded and who have archives in their own right. Fauset has no archive of her own. Fauset's literary work explores the intersection of gender, class, and racial identity in early twentieth-century America, and, in particular, the experiences of Black women. Her fiction centres the concerns of the modern, educated working woman: How to find a fulfilling job in racist and sexist society, how to express one's creativity without self-censorship, how to find love and sexual satisfaction, and how to take pride in racial identity while navigating the restrictive codes of Black femininity policed by both men and women. Along the way, Fauset explores the structures that underpin white supremacy in the United States and considers the possibilities of love across racial boundaries in a segregated society. In her final novel, "*Comedy: American Style*," Fauset turns to the sensitive topic of colourism within Black communities.

Fauset's work was praised by some of the leading lights of the Renaissance. W.E.B Du Bois, her one-time mentor and colleague at *The Crisis*, and Langston Hughes, whom she had mentored and published as a young poet, were both full of warm praise. Many others, however, both in private and in public, dismissed her work as "inauthentic," overly concerned with the "trivial" preoccupations of middle-class women. She was called the "Jane Austen of her day." Reviewing her first book for the "*New Republic*," the writer Eric Walrond

called it “mediocre,” “a work of puny, painstaking labor” (Walrond 1924). Her “outlook on life,” he complained, was “too glaringly that of the schoolmarm, the range of her experience” was “too petty and bourgeois” (Walrond to Countee Cullen, 1925). The poet Claude McKay also merged his critique of Fauset’s personality and work into one in his 1937 autobiography *A Long Way from Home* writing that “Miss Fauset is dainty as a primrose, and her novels are quite as fastidious and precious.” Male reviewers often missed the more or less masked critiques within Fauset’s work. For example, Fauset’s second novel “*Plum Bun*,” explores the artistic career and search for community by Angela Murray, a light-skinned African American artist who moves to New York and passes for white to access the opportunities routinely denied Black women. *Plum Bun* has a brilliant tongue-in-cheek scene in which Angela and her white lover, a rather inadequate but wealthy white man, finally get it together on a stormy night.

By the time she published “*The Chinaberry Tree*” in 1931, Fauset had had enough. Enraged by Alain Locke’s patronizing review of her third novel, in which he declared her work was slowly “maturing,” (Locke 1932) Fauset cast off her polite demeanour and confronted Locke in a stinging letter. She accused him of being the archetypal critic: “A self-acknowledged failure as a writer” who had set himself up to “criticize those who are at all possessed of the creative art.” Fauset was especially critical of Locke’s position as a gatekeeper to white patrons. Accusing him of subscribing to the school of “whatever is white is right” he preferred to “play it safe” on account of his considerable debt to the “grand white folks.” (Fauset to Locke, 9 January 1933, Alain Locke Collection). Zora Neale Hurston agreed, confiding to her friend, James Weldon Johnson that:

“Alain Leroy Locke is a malicious, spiteful little snot that thinks he ought to be the leading Negro because of his degrees. Foiled in that, he spends his time trying to cut the ground from under everybody else. So far as the younger writers are concerned, he runs a mental pawnshop. He lends out his patronage and takes in ideas which he soon passes off as his own.” (Hurston 1938).

Fauset and Hurston are likely alluding both to Locke’s role as an intermediary between Black artists and white publishers, but also to his relationship with Charlotte Osgood Mason, a wealthy white New York socialite who loved “primitive” art. Locke brokered financial relationships between Charlotte Mason and her protégés including Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, and Claude McKay. Mason’s deeply problematic notions of “Black art” and willingness to use her financial clout to pressure her protégés to meet her vision, caused a near breakdown for Hughes, while Hurston’s playful handling of the older woman caused many to accuse of her wearing the “minstrel mask” (Huggins 1971).

Fauset was wary of the influence exerted by white patrons on Black artists. When she was struggling to get her first novel published in 1924, one white publisher had told her that “White readers just don’t expect Negroes to be like this” (Starky 1932); Fauset’s resisted these pressures in her work. However, her reception then has harmed her visibility and legacy now. For much of the twentieth-century Fauset’s novels were out of print; even her short stories poems, essays, and reviews published in *The Crisis* were only accessible to those with access to a good research library. Instead, Fauset was celebrated as a “mid-wife,” a nurturer who helped Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, and Countee Cullen on the road to literary fame. This reputation is amplified by the testimony of the men she supported. There is no Fauset archive; our access to Fauset behind the scenes is filtered through the men who have archive collections of their own.

Fauset’s own writing is slowly becoming more accessible. In the last decade, Dover Publications, Random House, and Beacon Press have reprinted her novels. It is striking that the Dover reprints of her novels between 2013 and 2020 continue to categorize them as “domestic fiction.” By contrast, the recent Random House edition of *There is Confusion* published in 2020 tags Fauset’s first novel as “social problem fiction.” We might question whether the transition from “domestic” to “social problem” is a mark of progress for Black

women writers, but the release of the Random House edition as an e-book in its Modern Library Torchbearers Series is putting Black women writers of the Harlem Renaissance out there as never before.

Gwendolyn Bennett

I want to compare the career, reception, and legacy of Fauset with that of her friend, Gwendolyn Bennett. Bennett was a poet, writer, artist, educator, and activist. In histories of the Harlem Renaissance, she is most often mentioned as a poet and illustrator of *The Crisis* and *Opportunity*, and as the author of a literary column for *Opportunity* between 1926 and 1928 called “The Ebony Flute.” Yet, she was also an accomplished artist who studied in Paris and taught fine art at the prestigious Howard University. In contrast to Fauset, Bennett’s published output is slim: She published around twenty poems and a number of illustrations in journals, but she never published a volume of poetry. Unfortunately, most of her artwork was destroyed in a fire at her stepmother’s home, while the majority of the poems Bennett wrote (many addressing themes of social injustice) in the 1930s were never published in her lifetime. However, unlike Fauset, much of her unpublished work is preserved in the archive she collected and preserved throughout her life, large parts of which are now accessible through the published collection of her writings: “*Heroine of the Harlem Renaissance and Beyond*” (Wheeler and Parascandola 2018).

Bennett was unable, and sometimes unwilling, to publish her poetry in the 1930s. Yet, she never stopped writing; instead, she found ways to express, communicate and preserve her radical thoughts during these years through the careful curation of her personal and professional archive. The Gwendolyn Bennett Papers at the Schomburg Centre for Research in Black Culture in New York City document her development as an artist from her teenage diary from the 1910s through to her unpublished poems and essays from the 1930s and 1940s. Bennett’s archive appears to be in conversation with another, shadow archive, preserved in the U.S. National Administration and Records Administration; Bennett’s FBI file documents another version of her career. In the final part of this talk, I want to consider how Bennett’s archival practice in the 1930s and 1940s offers a way of thinking not just about the relationship between the archive and publishing, but of archiving as a radical Black tradition.

On April 14, 1939, Gwendolyn Bennett attended a dinner at the Harlem YMCA to honour James W. Ford. The highest-ranking Black Communist in the United States, Ford had twice served as the American Communist Party’s candidate for the Vice Presidency of the United States. While the other speeches for Ford were being delivered, Bennett was busy writing a poem that she would perform and dedicate to Ford that same evening. The event was captured in a photograph published by the local Black newspaper, the *New York Amsterdam News*. In “The Leader,” Bennett pays homage not to the charismatic masculine orator of the public square but to the subversive leader, practised in dissemblance in order to continue the struggle for “the things/That jointly they believe” (Bennett Papers). It is a radical poem, for it names and discusses a form of leadership which seeks to bring about a fundamental restructuring of America while protecting the Black community. Susan Willis calls this specifying, or name-calling, an oral mode Black women use to engage radical ideas while attentive to the need to avoid surveillance.

Bennett needed to avoid surveillance. In 1938, she was accused of Communist affiliation by the House Un-American Activities Committee and subject to a “loyalty investigation” by the government agency that employed her as Director of the Harlem Community Arts Centre. The investigators put it to Bennett that she

had been “present at a dinner given for Ford and sat at the speakers' table” with other leaders of the party. Bennett denied many of the other charges put to her during the “loyalty investigation,” but she “refused to answer when asked if she was present” at the dinner. It is noteworthy that even as Bennett refused to confirm her presence at the dinner to her interrogators, she took pains to document her attendance in her own record of the event. Through her archive, Bennett found a way to catalogue, contextualise, and signal the importance and coherence of her 1930s poems. “The Leader” is organized together with a series of other unpublished poems including the overtly political “Threnody for Spain” (1939), “The Hungry Ones” (1938) and “Wise Guys” (1937). Each is typed out in identical typescript; some include annotations written in Bennett’s hand, adding context and commentary on the poem’s significance to its author. For example, a note on the typescript of “The Leader” explains: “This poem was written for and read at the dinner given for James W. Ford at the Y. I got the idea for it while here in the office and wrote it on a slip of paper all during the other speeches. Unbelievable but true. I dedicated it to him” (Bennett Papers). Bennett’s careful preservation of “The Leader” is a bold coda to her earlier refusal to be present. As the scholar Brian Dolinar has pointed out, the very act of keeping this poem during and beyond the peak of American anti-communism is notable: Many writers and artists destroyed work that associated them with radical movements in the 1930s and 1940s (Dolinar 2012). Bennett thought deeply about the written record, and how it could capture, expose, hide, and communicate a vision for radical change. This led her to develop her own archiving practice to preserve her radical legacy while evading capture by the agents and archives of surveillance.

In 1941, the FBI opened a file on Gwendolyn Bennett. We have access to these files because of the work of scholars who have filed Freedom of Information requests to the FBI. The scholar William Maxwell has been especially dogged in pursuing the FBI files on Black artists which he has made accessible through the website F.B. Eyes (Maxwell 2015). One of Maxwell’s remarkable discoveries was the establishment of what he calls a *Ghost Bureau*, a network of agents employed by FBI director J. Edgar Hoover to read Black authors. This entailed not just surveillance of their activities but careful study of the revolutionary potential of their work. Of the fifty subject files on Black authors Maxwell was able to obtain, just eight were on women. Bennett was deemed a particular threat and placed on a “register of enemies.” This meant the Bureau monitored her mobility, her employment, and her personal life until 1955. In the event of a national emergency, Bennett’s citizenship rights, including the right not to be detained unlawfully or indefinitely, could be withdrawn. However, unlike many of her male peers who were placed under surveillance, there is no evidence in FBI reports to suggest that Bennett’s artistic work was ever ‘ghost read’ by Hoover’s army of self-taught literary critics. If this archive of surveillance could be seen as a repository of work by Black writers, it too was one that privileged the work of Black men.

FBI reports on Bennett instead focus on her connections to radical leftist groups, especially the political affiliations of her white husband, and on finding ways to get Bennett to contribute to her own surveillance file. In 1953, after a decade of surveillance, the Bureau decided to interview Bennett. On her way to work one morning, Bennett was intercepted by two FBI agents who identified themselves and posed a series of questions about her political affiliations. Her response, as documented in her FBI file is worth quoting, it suggests not only that she had long been aware of the Bureau’s interest in her, but that she is watching them:

“She repeatedly stated that she had no information about herself or her husband that the FBI does not already have. When... Advised that she was not in a position to know the extent of the

information in the Bureau... She merely repeated her original statement that she was sure that she had no information that is not already in the Bureau's possession" (Bennett FBI File)

Bennett's insistence that "she was sure" might be understood as an example of what Simone Brown calls "*dark sousveillance*," which is a way of "enhancing the ability of people to access and collect data about their surveillance" in order to "render one's self out of sight" but also to create spaces from which to critique and resist antiblack surveillance" (Browne 2015, 21). *Dark sousveillance* is a part of Black people's lived experience and history, drawn from watching those in authority but also from Black people's experiences of resisting enslavement by pretending to be free, and by forging freedom papers. The FBI agents attempts to persuade Bennett to contribute to her own surveillance were a failure: Bennett walked away, and the interview was aborted. Her interrogators concluded another attempt would be pointless.

The making invisible and subsequent recovery of the legacies of Bennett and Fauset has taken different forms. While Bennett's poems from the 1930s were not published in her time she was able to preserve her radical legacy through her archive. Finally, she has a published collection of her work. Fauset was one of the most published novelists of the Harlem Renaissance, but her reception and categorization as a writer of "domestic fiction" made her challenge to racial and gender conventions invisible. Sometimes hidden in plain sight or rendered invisible by others, at other times they removed themselves from view to evade capture. But silence should not be confused with erasure. As Bennett writes in her 1924 poem, "Your Songs," "For silence is a sounding thing/To one who listens hungrily." Women have long found ways to keep each other's work visible. Sometimes this has required speaking even as their platform is being taken away (Bennett 1927)

Let us return to the evening of March 21, 1924. Bennett is waiting for a turn to deliver her poem "To Usward" to mark the publication of Fauset's first book. She has to wait until the very end, until all the other male speakers have made their speeches, and until Fauset has finally been allowed to say a few words. Eventually, the platform is hers. She uses it to celebrate those with songs to sing that are "different from the rest." This ode to Black creative possibility she dedicates to Fauset, who will publish it in the next edition of *The Crisis* (May 1924). Nearly a hundred years later, another poet stands waiting to sing, this time on a larger stage. Amanda Gorman, America's first national youth poet, celebrated the legacy of those who had gone before her when she delivered *The Hill We Climb* at the inauguration of the 46th American President and of the first woman and first person of colour to the office of Vice-President in January 2021. Gorman's poem reminds us of her nation's flawed past and uncertain future; but hers is also a poem of hope, filled with confidence that change can happen, "If only we're brave enough to see it." Wearing a ring gifted by Oprah Winfrey with a caged bird symbolizing a previous inaugural poet (Maya Angelou), she dedicates her poem to "the women who have climbed my hills before."

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