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Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture,
Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division

Guide to the

Gwendolyn Bennett papers

1916-1981

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Processed by Andre Elizee.

Summary

Creator: Bennett, Gwendolyn, 1902-1981

Title: Gwendolyn Bennett papers

Date: 1916-1981

Source: Gift of Martha Crosscup Tanner in 1982. SCM 82-70.

Abstract: Personal Papers consisting of correspondence, 1926-1946; educational and financial papers; resumes detailing Bennett's teaching and literary career; photographs; and diaries, 1925, 1936, and 1958. Bennett's Professional and Literary Activities are documented by research material consisting of newspaper and magazine articles written by or about Bennett and the Welfare Council of New York, for whom Bennett worked as a journalist; class notes and printed material from the School for Democracy, predecessor of the Jefferson School of Social Science, a Marxist adult education center, and the George Washington Carver School, two controversial schools investigated by the House Un-American Activities Committee for Communist infiltration. Also, typescripts of Bennett's poems and book reviews, 1928-1941. Frank Horne Literary Estate papers consist of typescripts of Horne's published and unpublished poems and letters, 1926-1963. Scrapbooks consist of news clippings, letters, and memorabilia and chronicles of her youth and published work, 1914-1934.

Access: Advance notice required.

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Creator History

Born in Giddins, Texas on July 8, 1902, Gwendolyn Bennett is principally remembered as one of the poets of the 1920's Negro Renaissance in Harlem, an artist and a political activist during the late 1930's and 1940's. Her artistic career, both as a poet and as a graphic artist, unfolded within the span of the

"Harlem Renaissance" which lasted approximately from 1920 to 1931. Bennett had a difficult life -- as a young child and as an adolescent. Both her father and mother were professional people -- her father Joshua Robin Bennett was a lawyer and teacher and her mother Maime Frank Bennett a teacher -- who had migrated from Texas to Washington D.C. around 1906. Their marriage, however, collapsed soon afterward, and Maime Bennett was awarded custody of young Gwendolyn. Joshua Bennett was dissatisfied with the legal settlement and in 1910, shortly after his second marriage to Marechal Neil, he kidnapped his daughter and, along with his new family, started moving from town to town along the eastern seaboard and the mid-Atlantic states. Gwendolyn was able to complete her elementary education in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania before following her father to New York, where she enrolled at Brooklyn Girl's High and graduated in 1921. She had begun to write poetry in high school and was the first African American student to be elected to her school's Literary and Drama societies. In the fall of 1921, she enrolled in the Fine Arts Department of Teachers' College at Columbia University, but unhappy with the racist atmosphere prevailing on the campus she transferred two years later to Pratt Institute where she studied Drama and Fine Arts, as well as Architecture and Planning. She graduated in 1924. During her adolescence, Bennett had dreamed of becoming a poet. The Harlem of the 1920's was the best place and time to make this dream come true. Coming on the heels of Dr. William E. Burghardt Du Bois and his "talented tenth" school of thought, a new generation of poets had begun to unveil the richness of African culture. A new cultural field had thus opened itself to the critical and inquisitive minds of Bennett and her peers, Langston Hughes, Jean Toomer, Countee Cullen, Claude McKay, among others. At the same time, the emergence of a black urban middle-class led to an unprecedented concentration of talented and enlightened people in Harlem and provided the necessary infrastructure for an intellectual and artistic awakening -- literary magazines and awards, social and cultural circles, as well as limited financial support. The *Crisis* and *Opportunity* magazines, in particular, became the home of the upcoming generation of artists. By 1925, Bennett was already an established figure in the literary and artistic milieu in Harlem. She was featured as a poet in the March 1925 special edition of *Survey Graphic* edited by Alain Locke and dedicated to the *New Negro*, and again in Locke's expanded volume *The New Negro* published in 1926. Earlier in 1926, while still at Pratt, she had illustrated the Christmas cover of *The Crisis*. Her poem *To Usward*, a statement of purpose and a tribute to the new generation was published in the May 1926 issue of both *The Crisis* and *Opportunity* magazines. The same year, she became assistant-editor of *Opportunity* magazine, and she contributed a regular column, *The Ebony Flute*, to that publication until 1928. In addition, in the mid-1920's, when the Negro Renaissance was in full swing, Bennett joined a group of young poets and artists, including Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Zora Neale Hurston and Aaron Douglas, in publishing a quarterly literary magazine called *Fire!*, devoted to the new generation of black artists. The historic and only issue of *Fire!* was published in 1926, and featured a short story, *Wedding Day*, by Bennett. The Negro Renaissance was not physically confined to Harlem. Bennett, for one, made her biggest contribution to the movement away from Harlem. In 1924, after her graduation from Pratt, she became a member of the Fine Arts Department at Howard University, and, as an assistant-professor, taught Design, Water-color and Craft. By the end of that year, she received a scholarship from the Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, and, in June 1925 sailed to Paris where she studied oil painting at the Julian Academy and philosophy at the Sorbonne. She returned to the United States in the summer of 1926 and resumed her classroom work at Howard University in September of that year. Bennett had married a medical student at Howard, Alfred Joseph Jackson, in the spring of 1927, in violation of the mores governing faculty-student relations at Howard. She resigned from her post, and, soon after his graduation, the new couple moved from Washington to Florida where Bennett worked as a teacher in the segregated Florida school system. There, confinement to a racially and culturally stifling environment and a difficult and disappointing marriage induced her to abandon poetry and the art world. She did not give up writing entirely however, and many book reviews and articles appeared under her name in the *New York Herald Tribune*, the *New Republic*, *The Crisis* and *Opportunity* magazines during that period. In the early 1930's, Bennett convinced her husband to leave Florida. The couple moved to Hempstead, Long Island in New York, where they bought a house in 1933. The following year, she started to work as a

journalist for the Department of Information and Education of the Welfare Council of New York. Many feature articles appeared in that period under her name in the columns of the *Amsterdam News*, the *New York Age*, and the *Baltimore Afro-American*, and in the magazines *The Crisis*, *Opportunity* and *Better Times*. She also handled press releases for the department and assisted many reporters in covering stories related to the Welfare Council and the Harlem community. Jackson fell ill in 1934 and died the following year. Bennett left Hempstead in debt and moved to a studio in Harlem owned by the sculptor Augusta Savage. In December 1935, she left her job at the Welfare Council and started working, first as a teacher, and in 1936 as a project supervisor in the Federal Art Teaching Project, in Harlem. In 1938, she became the director of the Harlem Community Art Center, under the Work Projects Administration. Bennett's stay at the Community Art Center was not uneventful. The Center was investigated by the House Un-American Activities Committee (H.U.A.C.) for "communist infiltration" and labeled a "Red front." She was suspended and eventually dismissed in 1941; this was not to be her last encounter with the H.U.A.C. That same year, she started working at the School for Democracy where she held a series of lectures on African-American art and music, a class on journalism and a poetry workshop. After her return to New York, Bennett had gone back to writing poetry, although her output remained sporadic. Intimate and personal, and permeated with a subtle feminine consciousness, her poetry reflects in general the changes in her life and the mood of the times. While growing up as an artist in the exuberant twenties, her poetry was optimistic and full of life. Later, in the thirties her writing became somber and bitter, not so much due to the Depression but because her life had grown somewhat more painful. She became ill and depressed after a difficult marriage and the death of her husband. Rejection and betrayal were the dominant themes in her poetry of that period. Then, in 1940, she married a white Harvard graduate and fellow school teacher, Richard Crosscup; the Second World War had already started, the economy was recovering from the Depression and the whole country was reconciled within a broad anti-fascist front. Bennett's life became more serene and her poetry more open to the world. At the beginning of the Cold War she retreated in silence. Bennett had grown more socially conscious in the mid 1920's. She was a founding member and the director of the George Washington Carver School from its inception in 1943 until its closure in 1947. The school and its staff were highly controversial. The school itself was an adult education center oriented toward blacks in Harlem who could not meet the academic standards or the high tuition fees required by other New York institutions. It had a broad range of courses and workshops, from English composition and American history to anthropology, music, consumer education, race relations and the labor movement. The presence on its board of Benjamin Davis, well known communist and New York City councilman, and other communist sympathizers such as actors Paul Robeson and Canada Lee prompted a communist "witch-hunt" in the New York newspapers, which led to the hurried departure of a great many teachers. The school was to be continuously harassed and, following a H.U.A.C. investigation, it finally closed down in 1947 at the beginning of the Cold War. Bennett was also active in the National Negro Congress, the Artists Union, the Negro Playwrights Company and the Negro People's Theater, all of which were indicted by the H.U.A.C. as "red front organizations." In the 1950's however, Bennett retired from public life. In 1948, she was hired by Consumers Union where she worked in various capacities until 1968 when she and her husband retired to Kutztown, Pennsylvania. There, the Crosscups opened and operated an antique shop named Buttonwood Hollow Antiques. Gwendolyn Bennett died on May 30, 1981 at the age of 77. She survived her husband by one year. She had no children.

Scope and Content Note

The Gwendolyn Bennett Papers (1914-1981) document the personal and professional life of Gwendolyn Bennett, from her adolescence in the mid-1910's to the late forties. The collection has been divided into the following series: PERSONAL PAPERS, PROFESSIONAL AND LITERARY ACTIVITIES and the FRANK HORNE LITERARY ESTATE.

Arrangement: Arranged in four series: I. Personal Papers; II. Professional and Literary Activities; III. Frank Horne Literary Estate; IV. Scrapbooks

Key Terms

Subjects

African American poetry
African American women -- Political activity
Harlem Renaissance
Public welfare -- New York (State) -- New York
Schools -- New York (State) -- New York
Women -- Diaries

Occupations

African American women artists
African American women poets
Afro-American teachers

Genre/Physical Characteristic

Diaries
Photoprints
Poems
Scrapbooks

Geographic Names

Harlem (New York, N.Y.) -- Social life and customs

Names

Bennett, Gwendolyn, 1902-1981
George Washington Carver School (New York, N.Y.)
Horne, Frank
School for Democracy (New York, N.Y.)
Welfare Council of New York City

Container List

PERSONAL PAPERS

The *PERSONAL PAPERS* consist of a small amount of correspondence between 1926 and 1946; educational, financial and employment records from the early 1920's to the late 1930's; fragmented diaries for the years 1925, 1936 and 1958; two scrapbooks and some miscellaneous items. The correspondence file includes one letter from George Picken of the American Writers' Congress (9 March 1937) informing Bennett of her admission to that organization, and two letters from A. Philip Randolph, president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters Association (28 April 1941) and Lester B. Granger, chairman of the Citizen's Sponsoring Committee for the Harlem Community Art Center (23 April 1941) to the commissioner of the W.P.A., on behalf of Bennett who had been suspended as director of the Harlem Community Art Center for alleged subversive activities. The employment records include many resumes written between 1934 and 1943 that provide detailed information both on her teaching and literary career. Of special interest are Ms. Bennett's diaries. Spanning four decades, they are very intimate and informative, particularly the one kept during 1936, a very painful and decisive period in her life. Of the two scrapbooks in the collection, the earliest one kept by Bennett during her adolescence, is a diary-like document, highly original and diversified, which reveals with a great richness of detail Bennett's artistic and versatile personality. The second scrapbook catalogues her published work between 1924 and 1931.

- b. 1 f. 1 r. 1 Biographical 1926-1981
- b. 1 f. 2 r. 1 Diaries 1925, 1936, 1958
- b. 1 f. 3 r. 1 Correspondence 1926-1946, 1970's
- b. 1 f. 4 r. 1 Educational Records 1925-1940
- b. 1 f. 5 r. 1 Employment Records 1925-1938, 1964
- Financial Records
- b. 1 f. 6 r. 1 1935-1941
- b. 1 f. 7 r. 1 Estate of Alfred Jackson 1933-1939

PROFESSIONAL AND LITERARY ACTIVITIES

PROFESSIONAL AND LITERARY ACTIVITIES. This series consists of research material and clippings of newspaper and magazine articles written by and about Bennett and the Welfare Council of New York, class notes and printed matter from the School for Democracy and the George Washington Carver School, typescripts of her poems and book reviews written between 1928 and 1941, and printed matter.

- b. 1 f. 8 r. 1 Welfare Council of New York 1934
- b. 1 f. 9 r. 1 Welfare Council of New York--Research material
- b. 1 f. 10 r. 1 School for Democracy--Class notes 1941-1943
- b. 2 f. 1 r. 1 School for Democracy--Class Notes n.d.
- b. 2 f. 2 r. 1 George Washington Carver School 1945, 1947
- Writings
- b. 2 f. 3 r. 1 Published Poetry 1933-1938
- b. 2 f. 4 r. 1 Poetry 1941-
- b. 2 f. 5 r. 1 Poetry n.d.
- b. 2 f. 6 r. 1 Ebony Flute 1927-1928
- b. 2 f. 7 r. 1 Reviews 1928-1931, n.d.
- b. 2 f. 8 r. 1 Notes for Short Stories n.d.
- b. 2 f. 9 r. 2 Printed Matter 1928-1942
- b. 2 f. 10 r. 2 Prose n.d.

PROFESSIONAL AND LITERARY ACTIVITIES (cont.)

- b. 2 f. 11 r. 2 Correspondence, re Poetry 1929-1941
- b. 2 f. 12 r. 2 Clippings 1925-1946

FRANK HORNE LITERARY ESTATE

THE FRANK HORNE LITERARY ESTATE. The poet Frank Horne was a life-long friend of Gwendolyn Bennett and her husband Richard Crosscup. The responsibility of Horne's literary estate, consisting of the typescripts of his published and unpublished poems between 1926 and 1963, was entrusted to Bennett, and is included in the collection along with letters sent to Bennett requesting permission to publish some of Horne's poems.

- b. 2 f. 13 r. 2 Biographical 1974
Writings
- b. 2 f. 14 r. 2 Arabesque 1926-1955
- b. 2 f. 15 r. 2 Other Poems 1963, n.d.
- b. 2 f. 16 r. 2 Correspondence re Horne 1976-1981

SCRAPBOOKS

- b. 3 f. 1 r. 2 1914-1927
- b. 3 f. 2 r. 2 1920-1934