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Gwendolyn Bennett and Juanita Harrison: Writing the Black Radical Tradition

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ABSTRACT

Narratives of radicalism privilege the intellectual thought of men whose ideas are preserved through publication and archives. Black women thinkers are often presumed to be missing from the archive. When they are present, their work is harder to find – often scattered across institutions whose archival practices fail to recognise Black female agency. Black feminist scholars such as Darlene Clark Hine and Saidiya Hartman have created new frameworks to map the unknowable, to reclaim and make visible that which has been withheld, without re-enacting the violence of the archive. This essay considers these issues by exploring the presence of Black women in archives of radicalism in the early twentieth century. It focuses on the public life and writings of Juanita Harrison, whose travelogue was a bestseller in 1936, and the archive of Gwendolyn Bennett, artist and writer who was at the centre of cultural networks in and beyond the Harlem Renaissance. Considering the two together, this article explores how both women attempted to control what was included and what was left out in their public writings and archives, and how this has been shaped by archives of surveillance that privilege the ‘doing’ rather than ‘thinking’ of radical Black women.

KEYWORDS

Black radicalism; archives; invisibility; knowledge production; Black women writers; Black women intellectuals; Gwendolyn Bennett; Juanita Harrison

In an essay of Black Left Feminist critique, Carole Boyce Davies borrows from Aaron Kamugisha to ask what kind of politics might have been produced had CLR James encountered Claudia Jones in London in 1948, or Cedric Robinson had shaped his vision of Black radicalism around the intellectual production of women. Davies is interested in imagining and encouraging a ‘creative leap’ to fully account for Black women’s contributions to radical resistance – and, crucially, to intellectual production (Davies 2016). Her questions indicate how archival absences shape scholarship from and about the Black radical tradition. In making her call for a ‘creative leap’, Davies draws attention to a similar set of possibilities to those articulated by Saidiya Hartman, who seeks to address the marginality, dispersal, and invisibility of Black women in archives through a framework of ‘critical fabulation’. Hartman advocates for a scholarly practice that employs imagination and empathy to ‘make visible’ the lives of those silenced by the archive (Hartman 2008, 11). The problem has not only been one of invisibility, however. Claudia Rankine, drawing on Judith Butler’s notion of ‘addressability’, explains that

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Black people are required to be present for white power to be sustained as such: the problem here is not so much the threat of extermination (the elimination of Black life) but the unwilling presence of Black people under an unwanted, ungenerous, inhuman gaze: the fixing and distortion of Black personhood (Rankine 2014).

Elsewhere in Black feminist literature, Darlene Clark Hine has addressed these conflicted presences in the context of Black women's vulnerability to sexual violence and the multiple jeopardies involved in their discussions of it. Hine has described a culture of dissemblance wherein Black women cultivated 'the appearance of openness and disclosure but actually shielded the truth of their inner lives and selves from their oppressors' (Hine 1989, 912). Understanding the prevalence of such practices has helped to reconceive Black women's activism especially in the early-twentieth century as being involved in a negotiation of rigid social expectations, which circumscribed their freedom to articulate inner truths and strident politics. In these regards, Hine and other Black feminist scholars chime with the insights of the Caribbean postcolonial theorist and poet Édouard Glissant, whose 'poetics of relation' highlights and champions what he calls *opacité* (henceforth 'opacity'). Glissant's opacity describes the right of the colonised to 'his or her own unknowability' (Murdoch 2013, 885). He associates comprehension with the exercise of an unwelcome power, and opacity is therefore 'that which cannot be reduced' (Glissant 1997, 191). Glissant particularly identifies this subversive opacity with Caribbean women, who possess '*a knowledge of camouflaged reality*' (Dash 1995, 156). Opacity, however, is not the same as invisibility; it is instead 'the real foundation of Relation', permitting solidarity without the ownership that comes with comprehension (Glissant 1997, 190–193).

Feminist approaches to the question of Black women's in/visibility produce new ways to map the Black radical tradition, especially as it relates to cultural expression. Black cultural radicalism might not be understood exclusively via rootedness in particular institutions of social protest, visible participation in activist milieux, or operation within sanctioned genres, but rather in the dispersal of radical conceptions of social life, veiled disclosures of solidarity and dissembled professions of political faith. This essay will take up two examples of Black women operating in the cultural sphere during the interwar years, whose work is given a new kind of visibility through the frameworks suggested above, and whose archives – shaped by histories of surveillance, erasure, and ambivalent visibility – we situate within the Black radical tradition.

Juanita Harrison

Juanita Harrison was a working-class Black woman whose momentary appearance in the public record in 1936 has given us a limited and curated insight into a unique life. Peripatetic and exuberant, the archived version of Harrison's life story is defined by a confident, individualist striving to escape multiple oppressive structures. Harrison's complex and conflicted visibility to American audiences and various state authorities, read via Black feminist and postcolonial theory, can draw attention to the ways that her migratory practice and travel writing participate in modes of resistance associated with the explicitly ideological radicalism of her more celebrated (usually male and educated) contemporaries.

Harrison was born into an African American family in post-Reconstruction Mississippi. Poorly educated and worked hard in domestic service, Harrison dreamed young of escaping the enforced provinciality of Jim Crow. Little detail is recorded of her life between her birth in 1887 and her departure for Europe in 1927, but on achieving maturity she realised her desire for a more nomadic lifestyle. She spent time as a resident of Cuba and Canada, as well as living in the South and Western United States. Her most settled period was in California during the 1920s, where she worked as a maid for the wealthy Dickinson family, who made their money in property. Mr. Dickinson invested Harrison's savings for her, and she was thereby given an annual security of two-hundred dollars: enough for her to undertake the global travel which she had dreamed of since her childhood browsing of magazines featuring photographs of exotic locations. Harrison departed from Hoboken, New Jersey, in June 1927. She first arrived in Plymouth, England and proceeded to travel through the British Isles and Europe, before taking a route through West Asia, North and East Africa, to Sri Lanka, the Indian subcontinent, and Burma. She then retraced some of her steps to East Africa and West Europe. By September 1930, she had resettled in France, where she remained until her financial situation had recovered from the shock of the global economic crisis. Departing Western Europe again in 1934, Harrison visited the Soviet Union, Japan, China, Korea, and the Philippines before sailing to Hawaii, where she remained until 1940 and where she died in 1967.¹

Harrison's practice of travel was eminently practical, adventurous, and individualist, even as she also demonstrated gendered solidarity, class consciousness, resistance to state authority, and a capacity for anti-racist protest. Harrison worked – usually in domestic service – to finance her travel, relying on her property investment only for additional financial security. In no traditional sense an intellectual, she was nevertheless an 'eccentric genius', 'unschooled but wise in the world' and with a 'knack for vivid word pictures'.² In 1936, the voluminous correspondence she maintained with various people over these years was compiled into a book published as *My Great, Wide, Beautiful World* and it is from this that most of our knowledge of Harrison's life and thought is derived. Published directly from Harrison's notes, the book left her spelling and grammar uncorrected and will be quoted verbatim here. Though on release treated as an 'amusing and interesting' novelty, the book rewards more serious attention as a contribution to Black intellectual history that emerges from far outside the usual circuits of intellectual production.³

Harrison delighted in confounding readings of her national and racial identity, dressing in whatever style was native to her context and passing with the aid of her racially ambiguous features (likely owed to mixed African American and Native American ancestry) (Norwood 1936, 6). This playful, changeable attitude to identity did not necessarily signify a transformation in Harrison's attitude to Blackness or Americanness. Harrison displayed a relatively stable sense of self throughout her years of travel.

Harrison's migratory practice is exemplified in an anecdote from her time in colonial India. On the train to Mumbai, Harrison resisted the conductor's attempt to seat her with privileged Europeans, instead enjoying the quiet company of low-caste Indian women. 'I like the women', Harrison asserted in characteristically colourful and ungrammatical prose, 'even the lowest cast are jolly and broad minded' (Harrison 1939, 111). As she shared this

space with these poor Indian women, Harrison marvelled that ‘in my red shawl and black veil on my head no one would think I had seen Broadway’ (Harrison 1939, 112). Harrison’s employment of literal veils invites easy comparisons with the ‘second sight’ described by W. E.B. Du Bois in his phenomenology of race. But her philosophy and practice of travel is also illuminated by Glissant’s sense of a camouflaged history and a savouring of unknowability. For Harrison, however, opacity is as much about what it permits her to see as it is about what she seeks to hide from her companions.

In Harrison’s text, opacity is therefore not strictly a mode of resistance to colonial gazes. In fact, Harrison routinely occupies a position of privilege relative to the people around her, even though she also tends to spurn special treatment and enjoys the company of poor and humble people. Nor is her opacity an attempt to disguise a subversive subaltern culture from authorities; it is precisely her Westernness which she hides, often from colonised peoples. In her attitude to non-Western cultures, Harrison is occasionally prone to reproducing colonial stereotypes. Harrison’s feminist commitments, for instance, tend to align her with the concerns of colonial reformers who sought to unveil Muslim women and exaggerate the incidence of practices like *sati* (widow-burning) among Indians (Harrison 1939, 60, 68, 136–7). In all these respects, our attempt to enter Harrison into the Black radical tradition ought to be cautious and conditioned by the complex ideological currents in her book.

Nevertheless, Harrison’s writing testified to her capacity for cosmopolitan cross-cultural encounter, her sympathy for the struggles of women, workers, and the colonised, and her willingness to protest racist treatment. In Egypt, Harrison noted the loosening of British control, but remained unconvinced by their government. ‘I wonder’, she wrote, ‘why they Build so many fine Hospital instead of putting up factories so the many idle men can have work to do’ (Harrison 1939, 78). Later, in India, she noted her approval at the suggestion of an Indian man that he might write a response to the racist bestseller *Mother India* about ‘all the Black sides of America’ (Harrison 1939, 156). Finally, when Harrison returned to Hawaii and was forced by poverty to seek out domestic work, she was advised by a woman at the YWCA ‘to go back as the white people here want only Japanese help’. Harrison was profoundly unimpressed, and ‘when I got through talking to her She thought very different’. At this moment, Harrison’s perspective on Americanism is deeply critical: she notes that this YWCA (unlike the many she had visited around the world) was ‘American’ and scoffed at the idea that ‘any nation can keep me from getting a job and the Kind and Place and price I want’ (Harrison 1939, 311). Harrison’s book contains contradictory ideological sympathies, but among them are certainly anti-imperialist, anti-racist, anti-nationalist, and feminist perspectives that constitute her as a Black radical subject.

Among them, too, was an interest in socialism and a resistance to arbitrary state power – characteristics shared with Gwendolyn Bennett, discussed below, and with more archetypal radicals such as Langston Hughes and W.E.B. Du Bois. In these regards, Harrison’s journey in the Japanese Empire was a salient moment. Harrison came to the Asian Pacific via the Soviet Union, arriving in the autumn of 1934. Her route through the USSR, combined with her American passport, drew the suspicion of Japanese imperial authorities. Landing at Shimonseki, the Japanese officials at first failed to identify her as ‘the lone American’. They began interrogating her about her baggage, and when the officers paused to consult with one another Harrison slipped away: ‘I was gone’ (Harrison 1939, 285). Harrison was able to spend several months travelling peacefully in the Japanese Empire, but by late January 1935,

the authorities' attitude had hardened once more. On docking at Keelung, Taiwan, Harrison was assumed to be 'a spy' because she 'had come through Russia'. The authorities confiscated her suitcase, to Harrison's apparent 'relief and enjoyment'. The confiscation gave her reason to visit a dress-making shop, where she 'danced about holding the skirt' and apparently drew a crowd of 'about 200' (Harrison 1939, 305).

Such good-humoured acts of resistance are, according to Jayna Brown, typical of Black women's mobile performances, wherein 'laughter is a powerful form of criticism [...] revealing the ways hierarchies breed their own instabilities' (Brown 2008, 5). As such, when Harrison's radical contemporaries found her work 'delightful' and 'swell' – as Langston Hughes wrote on buying her book in July 1936 – their delight was appreciative of her subversive comedy (Hughes to Noel Sullivan, 29 July 1936).⁴ Harrison, unlike many other 'working black women' had access to pen and paper, but like them she sited her protest at the body and articulated it through performance (Brown 2008, 10). In the compensatory excess of the dancing scene, then, is a suggestion of Harrison managing her troubles through dissembling performance.

Of course, reading Harrison as a writer and performer of politicised resistance ought not to impose ideological convictions where there is no textual or archival basis for them. But Harrison's interpellation as an international agent of Soviet intrigues invites us to refocus our reading of her book on the pages covering her time in the USSR. These provide a telling narrative of touristic travel in Soviet Russia, in which Harrison expresses approval of the progressive political agenda advertised to foreign visitors by the state. As she does so, Harrison combines a positive characterisation of Soviet state power with a typically anarchic sensibility.

Harrison first arrived in Leningrad from Finland on 2 September 1934. She stayed for only 2 days and did not reveal clearly why the stay was so brief. By 4 September, she was in Moscow, where she grew tired of the noisy, unrelenting construction work for the city's palatial metro system. Her stay was therefore brief, and she soon departed for Asia (Harrison 1939, 281). Harrison's time in Leningrad coincided with the celebration of 'Great Yuths Day' and she joined the preparations for the holiday, linking arms with the march of young Communist men and women and concluding that '40 and 50 years olds have nothing to do with the making of the Present Russia' (Harrison 1939, 278, 281).⁵ On visiting nurseries and a registry office, Harrison was similarly effusive, focusing now on the availability of divorce, the absence of stigma around children's legitimacy, and the enforcement of rules around the payment of paternal child support. In the Soviet Union, Harrison noted that there were 'no unemployed people' (in stark contrast with her observation in colonial Egypt) and she was impressed by the motto of 'Mr. Lenin': 'Learn, then learn some more then learn'. Most unsettlingly, given the Stalinist repression that would culminate a few years later with the purges, show trials, and generalised terror, Harrison was convinced that 'you are more free to do what you want to than any other country'. Harrison's perception of Soviet liberty did not prevent her from ignoring authorities when she felt like it, however. She insisted that Soviet gendarmes were 'as gentle as mothers with their babies', but herself disobeyed them repeatedly: 'I cut across many places and the Police blu his whistle I didnt even look back' (Harrison 1939, 278–9). Of course, alongside these sunny anecdotes, there were hints of impoverishment: the people in Moscow apparently dressed 'much better' than those in Leningrad; a Swedish woman insisted to Harrison that the girls at shop windows coveted the silk underwear on

display; an elderly man told her of the miseries of the older generations. But Harrison was dismissive of these incidents, noting that food and work were plentiful (Harrison 1939, 280–281).

Though Harrison's writing on the Soviet Union spanned only a few short pages, the impressions she recorded situate her within a well-established discourse of American travellers in Stalinist Russia who helped to construct it as a model of socialist modernity. More particularly, Harrison can be read alongside a celebrated list of Black women travellers in the USSR from Louise Thompson to Alice Childress who were impressed by its progressivism. Placing her in such a lineage indicates the possibility of figuring Harrison as a practitioner and thinker of what has variously been called 'Black internationalist feminism' or 'Black left feminism' (Higashida 2011; McDuffie 2011; Russell 2017). To think of Harrison in such terms is not to diminish the key historical role of organised, explicitly ideologised, and theorised Black radicalism. Instead, it is an opportunity to conceive of this political territory as an open, expansive commons, to which a woman of catholic politics, Catholic faith, and proletarian experience such as Harrison has access without the need for a Communist Party membership card, and in which she can be seen occasionally rambling on her singular path. Black radicalism, by the very openness of its constituent terms, ought not only to be a way of thinking about a politically firm cadre of intellectuals who combined African heritage with anti-capitalist politics. It might be imagined instead as a tradition of the commons as described in the tradition of history-from-below: multivocal, unpredictable, and variously sited.

Permitting such openness in the history of the Black radical tradition responds to the call by Tithi Bhattacharyya to 'write the memory of class struggle' through the 'relationality' of its multiple fronts (Bhattacharyya 2017). Without attention to this 'relationality', Harrison's radicalism can easily be submerged. As we have seen, Harrison's mode of political expression is not in the register of Marxism, pan-Africanism, or an uncomplicated Black feminism, even as it displays socialistic sympathies, feminist solidarity, and anti-racist protest. Her radicalism emerged from behind a veil of dissemblance. But the record of her travel is properly situated in the history of labouring people's 'underground mobility', in a continual search for autonomy outside the disciplinary structures of the plantation, the household, or the factory (Olsavsky 2019, 216). Together, these constitute Harrison as a 'black radical subject' who challenged the normal functioning of oppressive state apparatuses and constructed a discourse that spoke back to power (Davies 2008, 5).

The complexity of Harrison's politically charged utterances and actions are matched by her inconsistent attitude to public life and the closely related question of archival memorialisation. After the publication of *My Great Wide Beautiful World*, she was insistent that 'I do not care whether the public know who I am' and initially wished her writing to be published under 'another name'.⁶ Nevertheless, when Mildred Morris, white daughter of Harrison's employer in Paris, initially suggested that her writing 'should be put in a Book', Harrison was content to return to their household after her trip to India and 'work for nothing' in return for Morris's help (Harrison 1939, 16). It is very likely that Morris was the primary actor in connecting Harrison to the *Atlantic Monthly*, where a short selection of her writing was first published in late 1935. Morris then wrote a preface for the book, which was published by the Macmillan Company in the summer of 1936. As Harrison's original letters are almost all lost, it is unclear how

heavy-handed Morris was in editing the contents of the book and because of the presentation of the book as a diaristic narrative, it is similarly difficult to discern what Harrison's relationship was with the original recipients of the missives. The book sold very well and was read by such luminaries as Carl Van Vechten (Bernard 2002, 135), Langston Hughes, and William Pickens.⁷ Harrison's relationship with her celebrity was nevertheless ambivalent. For instance, when Miriam Matthews, a prominent Black librarian in LA, organised to exhibit some of Harrison's letters, photographs, and gifts from her travels, Harrison sent a young man to photograph the exhibition but failed to reply to Matthews's letters.

There is no better visualisation of Harrison's complex relationship with the public reporting and archiving of her life than the image of her which accompanies a 1936 article in the *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, recording the visit paid to her by Ellery Sedgwick, editor of the *Atlantic*. The image captures Harrison at the gate to the tent she called home during her time in Hawaii. On the gate is pinned the name of Harrison's eccentric abode: Villa Petit Peep. Harrison stands next to her tent in a patterned dress, and Sedgwick perches awkwardly on the other side of the gate in a suit and wears a *leis* (Norwood 1936, 6). In her book, Harrison explains the nature of her 'first and only Home', the 'True name' of which was derived from Harrison's routine practice of receiving guests on the seat outside the tent, permitting them only to 'Peep in' on her liminal domicile (Harrison 1939, 318). This passage about Villa Petit Peep closes the book, leaving the reader with an abiding question about whether we have ever been more than visitors perching on Harrison's garden seat, being given cautious peaks into an undoubtedly rich and varied life.

Tracing Harrison in the historical record means carefully picking over her problematic published work, her occasional press appearances, and the small collection of relevant materials contained in the papers of her friend Alice Foster and held at the Charles E. Young Research Library at UCLA. Beyond these materials, we have only occasional government records and contextual information, such as records relating to her employers and beneficiaries in LA, George and Myra Dickinson. Only as part of the recovery of Black women's writing has Harrison re-entered the consciousness of a still-small number of scholars. In this slow rediscovery, the possibilities of reading Harrison into the discourses of Black radical intellectuals has been neglected in large part because there is always something opaque, withheld, and obscure in her apparently frank disclosures. Her archival presence is momentary and conflicted.

Yet despite all this opacity, Harrison ultimately decided to publish a book under her own name; she felt some satisfaction at Mildred Morris's suggestion of publication; and she dispatched a friend to photograph the exhibition of her materials at the Vernon Branch of LA Public Library. Even as we recognise that Harrison lived for herself in defiance of normative expectations of women's domestic rootedness, she also lived to be seen and remembered. In imagining the click of her friend's camera in front of a glass case documenting her life, we discover that Harrison's refusal of transparency was not a rejection of public memorialisation as such, but a resistance to the inhuman attention that has marked Black women's history.

Gwendolyn Bennett

Gwendolyn Bennett was a poet, writer, artist, educator and political leader. Like many Black women intellectuals and creatives who worked across different arenas and genres, Bennett has often been positioned on the margins of moments and events she helped create and lead. She was acutely aware of how difficult it could be to occupy multiple spaces at the same time, reflecting in later life: ‘I’d feel that if I’d been either an artist, a graphic and plastic artist, or a writer, I might have had a single mind’ (Govan 1980, 204). Yet she also consciously exploited the desire of others to categorise her, precisely so that she might continue to exist as an artist, a writer, an intellectual and a leader. Bennett is remembered most of all, as a poet and illustrator of the Harlem Renaissance: her published poems and illustrations for leading journals of the 1920s Renaissance, *The Crisis* and *Opportunity*, remain her most accessible and best-known work. By contrast, most of her artwork, including pieces produced while studying in Paris between 1925 and 1926, was destroyed in a fire at her stepmother’s home. Considering the loss of Bennett’s artwork, alongside the fact that the majority of her poems, many of which were written in the 1930s, were never published, make it tempting to cast Bennett within a familiar narrative of gendered archival loss: artistic and intellectual women, and especially women of colour, seldom have monuments to their manifold achievements, and as scholars we have almost come to expect and repeat the narrative of archival absence.⁸

Recent scholarly work has begun to shift archival narratives about Bennett. *Heroine of the Harlem Renaissance and Beyond* (Wheeler and Parascandola 2018) collected together many of Bennett’s published and unpublished poems and short stories, alongside autobiographical pieces, the beginnings of a novel, and her diaries, all drawn from her personal collection, donated by her step-daughter to the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture shortly after her death in 1981. Together with the digitisation of Black historical newspapers and the availability online of Bennett’s FBI file following Freedom of Information requests made by the scholar William Maxwell, we now have a considerably expanded sense of her creative output, and greater access than ever to the archive of this prolific, diverse, and radical thinker. But even as scholars draw on the multiple, intersecting archives that document Bennett’s creative world—she eludes capture. Bennett’s apparent silence about her creative work from the 1930s and the fact that much of it remains unpublished have contributed to the idea of Bennett as a victim rather than creator and curator of her archive. The idea that Bennett was traumatised by her experiences in the 1930s and 1940s, a period that included the break-up of her marriage and death of her husband, a difficult love affair with the artist Norman Lewis, as well as a WPA loyalty investigation and the beginning of FBI surveillance, was a prominent theme of Sandra Govan’s PhD study. In 1979, Govan conducted a three-day interview with Bennett and found her ‘still extremely reluctant to respond when questioned about her life and career in the Thirties and Forties’ (Govan 1980, 10). Maureen Honey also notes Bennett’s silence on her unpublished 1930s poems and suggests she did not attempt to get them published, yet, she also signals the importance and coherence of the unpublished poems as a collection in her archive: the unpublished poems are collected together and typed out in identical typescript; titles are all in capitals and each new verse begins on a new left-hand margin (Honey 2016, 136; Gwendolyn Bennett papers Box 2, reel 1).⁹ Interest in and

speculation as to why Bennett decided not to publish this considerable body of writing, is understandable: publication is the oxygen that sustains a writer's career; it also suggests a mark of quality, a readership, and sometimes a reach for a future audience. For Black American writers, however, and especially writers working in a climate increasingly hostile to the broad coalition of the Cultural Front, there could be other ways to express and communicate radical ideas. Bennett cared deeply about the written record, how it could capture, expose, protect and transmit radical visions for change. Bennett's practice in the 1930s and 1940s offers another way of thinking not only about the interdependency of the archive and the radical Black tradition, but of archiving as a radical Black tradition.

On 14 April 1939, Gwendolyn Bennett attended a dinner at the Harlem YMCA to honour James W. Ford. The highest ranking African American Communist, Ford had served as the Vice-Presidential candidate for the Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA) in 1932 and 1936. While speeches by and for Ford were being delivered, Bennett was busy writing a poem, 'The Leader', which she would perform and dedicate to Ford that very evening:

Not blatantly
 Upon the lighted corners
 Of the public square
 Stands he
 But simply
 In the hearts of fellow men
 And in the things
 That jointly they believe
 With no huzzahs
 Of common praise
 But gently
 As a father or a friend
 Might lead
 He leads.
 But mark you well
 This man of gentle mien.
 Mistake you not his quiet word!
 His smiling lips
 Conceal a tongue of flame,
 And, gentle though his heart,

It holds,
 Together with a love of man,
 A steel of courage
 That with flashing stroke
 Will battle hatred
 And with frightful blow
 Lay low the foes
 Estranging man from brother man.

The Leader, Gwendolyn Bennett, 1939¹⁰

Two years later, Bennett was suspended from her post as Director of the Harlem Community Arts Centre, part of the Works Progress Administration's (WPA) Federal Art Project, on suspicion of being a Communist. The Emergency Relief Appropriation Act (1939) stipulated that Communists, aliens and Bundists (members of the secular socialist Jewish movement) could not be employed on the WPA and required all employees to sign an affidavit to this effect. Asked to appear before a New York WPA committee, the officers investigating her case put it to Bennett that she had been 'present at a dinner given for Ford -and sat at the speakers table with Browder and Minor' (Bennett FBI File Part 1, 9).¹¹ According to her FBI file, Bennett denied many of the charges made against her, but 'refused to answer when asked if she was present' at the dinner. The Black woman, who would not affirm her presence to white interrogators, took pains to document her attendance in her own record of the event. 'The Leader' is preserved in her personal papers in a manner that suggests it was part of a collection of poems that were important to her, and which represented a significant part of her work as a poet.

'The Leader' is a celebration of a particular mode of Black leadership. Bennett pays homage not to the charismatic Black masculine orator of the public square, but to a domestic, intimate and subversive leadership. Harder to detect, it promises protection to those it moves to action. It celebrates a leadership attentive to the risks of noisy performative resistance and practised in dissemblance in order to continue the struggle for 'the things/That jointly they believe'. It is a radical poem: for it names and discusses a form of Black 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 woman use to engage in radical ideas, while attentive to the need to avoid surveillance (Willis 1987). The decisions Bennett made about how and when to express her ideas, both in her writing and public performance, in what to publish and what to protect in her personal archive, suggest that even before she became a formal subject of surveillance, Bennett found ways to document her radical practice in ways that would elude capture by archives of surveillance.

Bennett's motivation for refusing to discuss her attendance at the Ford dinner is a matter of speculation, a question to which the archive offers no clear answers. It was not the only question she refused to answer: she would not affirm whether she had been involved in *Black and White*, the never completed Soviet film which had attracted

prominent Black leftist artists and activists including Langston Hughes and Louise Thompson to travel to Moscow in June 1932, nor did she respond to questions relating to her new husband, Richard (Dick) Crosscup, himself a suspected Communist. Bennett's failure to answer these questions, however, carried little risk: she had not participated in the Soviet film or visited Russia and refusing to provide evidence that might incriminate someone else was to be expected. By contrast, Bennett's participation in the Ford dinner was a matter of public record. Under the headline 'James Ford Honored At Dinner' The *New York Amsterdam News* published a photograph of the YMCA banquet. It pictures the top table including Ford who stands to deliver his speech, with Bennett seated to his left. On her other side is Robert Minor, a long-serving CPUSA functionary who in 1941 would serve as acting General Secretary of the party. Bennett is looking down, an arm outstretched on the table in front of her. It is a fascinating image, one that perhaps captures the moment Bennett scribbled down the poem she had been composing that day, the poem she was about to perform. Readers are reminded of her literary credentials: the *Amsterdam News* reporter identifies Bennett as one of the 'well-known authors' who were the 'distinguished sponsors' of the event alongside Richard Wright, Countee Cullen and other prominent Harlemites.¹²

Although Bennett was cleared of charges of 'subversive activity', the investigation cast a long shadow over her life and work. Because Bennett's 1930s poetry was never published, it would be easy to narrate a story of Black artists forced to accommodate the often overtly racist, anti-Communism which was already gaining in strength and volubility and would reach its peak in the decade after World War II. Bennett would hardly be alone in exercising caution when it came to publishing her work, given the surveillance she and other radical Black artists experienced from the late 1930s onwards. Yet Bennett's continued organising to bring about radical change – promoting Black artists through the Harlem Arts Centre and later as director of the radical George Carver School – hardly fits the narratives of Black anti-Communist accommodation. Rather than mouldcast Bennett into reductive narratives of heroic resisters or reluctant accommodators, attending to Bennett's creative and archival practice might offer new insights into what it was, and might be, to be a radical Black artist, intellectual and leader. In the early- to mid-twentieth century, our understanding of Black leadership and Black radicalism continues to be overly determined by parameters rooted in and reflected through a masculine imaginary. Whether signposted through a radical Black tradition long characterised by a charismatic Black male leader supported by women organisers, or the radical roll-calls of the FBI, Black women have too often been written out of the radical Black tradition (Edwards 2012; Theoharis, Woodard, and Gore 2009). The Black Cultural Front of the 1930s and African American responses to the pushback against interracial movements for racial justice in the 1940s and early 1950s have created a set of narratives and stock images into which Black women such as Bennett do not easily fit. Whether it is the renunciation of Communism (Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison), the apologetic accommodation of Langston Hughes in the face of HUAC interrogation, or the image of the still unbowed W.E.B. Du Bois, forced to appear before HUAC in handcuffs, historical narratives of Black radicalism, have long had to navigate the archive of white supremacy. And yet, the long and intertwined histories of enslavement, surveillance and record keeping about peoples of African descent in the United States can help us better understand not only the power of archives

to capture and enslave but also the long history of African Americans' refusal to be present in archives or to engage other forms of knowledge production designed to make Black people 'knowable, locatable, and contained' (Hartman 2008; Hartman 2019; Brown 2015, 79).

Bennett turns down the light on her creative work in the 1930s, but she does not extinguish it. Far from it: she finds other modes through which to create, narrate and document her experiences as an intellectual and artist. If, as Natalie Robins has suggested, FBI surveillance worked to silence and censor in ways hard to quantify (the books not written, the ideas not expressed) Bennett made her own calculations as to how and where to write, to communicate her radical ideas, while evading capture in the 1930s and 1940s (Maxwell 2015, 219–220). Through her personal papers, Bennett found a way to catalogue, contextualise and even celebrate her unpublished work. In particular, Bennett signals the importance and coherence of her political poems, written in the 1930s, in her personal archive. 'The Leader' is part of this collection. Organised together with a series of unpublished poems including a number of overtly political poems, such as Threnody for Spain (1939), The Hungry Ones (1938) and Wise Guys (1937), each is typed out in identical typescript. Several of the poems include comments in Bennett's handwriting, adding context and commentary on the poem's significance to its author. For example, a note written on the typescript of 'The Leader' explains: 'This poem was written for and read at the dinner given to 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'. Commenting on the circumstances in which she conceived the poem (at the WPA office) and later performed it (at a dinner she refused to admit to having attended) Bennett's typing out and preservation of 'The Leader' is a bold coda to her earlier refusal to be present. As 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 dated them to radical movements in the 1930s and 1940s (Dolinar 2012, 57).

What does it mean to practice and identify as a writer while avoiding being captured in print? These are questions that Bennett responds to through her writing and archival practice but also in how she encouraged others to write about her. As director of the WPA Harlem Community Art Centre and later the George Carver School in Harlem, Bennett was a notable public figure in mid-century New York City. The versions of herself she presented to the press in interviews and in biographical pieces offer no hint of the unpublished poems written in the 1930s, whether her political verses or her deeply intimate poems exploring the pain and pleasures of erotic love (Honey 2016, 141–143). Instead, she cultivated a domesticated persona, as a wife, homemaker and educator, her intellectual and creative work past pursuits or merely hobbies. She was by no means alone: Lorraine Hansberry routinely insisted she was a housewife in interviews she gave to the press in the 1950s (Kiser 2020).¹³ In May 1945, Bennett was featured in 'Harlem Portraits', a regular column in the *Pittsburgh Courier*, which focused on notable Harlemites. The article opens with a declaration from Bennett 'I am not one of those career women who can't do anything in a home'. The reader is briefly reminded that Bennett is the director of the George Washington Carver School, before learning what she looks like: 'Chubby and good-looking'. As with so many women in the public eye, Bennett's appearance and non-threatening persona were frequently mentioned in

newspaper reports, which routinely commented on her being ‘heavy’ while also stressing her pleasant and friendly demeanour. An otherwise flattering profile of Bennett in the *Chicago Defender* (it called her ‘One of Harlem’s most influential Negro women’) describes her as follows: ‘Miss Bennett is of medium brown color. She is 43; and she won’t mind if I say she’s a bit plump. Everybody likes her for it.’¹⁴ Bennett kept clippings of both articles in her archive. In these pieces there is a carefully calibrated interplay between politics and domesticity, artistry and hobby. For example, in one interview Bennett tells the reporter ‘all women should be able to cook well’ and that she is ‘not a political figure’. Yet she adds that ‘this is a day when women ought to be interested in politics’. In a piece which recounts her early career, first as a teacher of design and water colour painting at Howard University, next as a scholarship arts student in Paris, and then as an educator and director of community art education, we are also reminded that Bennett finds time for ‘hobbies’. These include growing flowers, but also art and writing. While the reader is informed that Bennett is too busy building the George Carver School to develop her political vision for the post-war world, nevertheless she is quoted as saying that she is determined to ‘keep educating the people to their full citizenship ... by preparing them to take their place in the world’.¹⁵

Bennett’s deflection away from her writing is understandable at a time when the FBI employed a team of ghostreaders to monitor Black literature. Black writing and writers were a central focus for intelligence programmes after the U.S. entered World War II in 1941. As Maxwell has detailed, some Harlem Renaissance figures such as Claude McKay were subject to intense surveillance during and after World War I, however many were not formally placed under surveillance until after the United States entered World War II. Prominent members of the Renaissance, including W.E.B. Du Bois, Langston Hughes, Alain Locke, Louise Thompson Paterson, J. A. Rogers, Georgia Douglas Johnson, George Schyuler, Sterling Brown, Walter White and Gwendolyn Bennett were awarded ‘the nation’s highest medal of radical honour,’ during this period. However, not all were placed on J. Edgar Hoover’s notorious Custodial Detention list ‘an index of prominent dissidents subject to summary arrest and military confinement in case of national emergency’ (Maxwell 2015, 60–61, 19–20). Bennett was among the eleven or so Black American authors assigned to a ‘register of enemies’ which monitored their mobility, mail, employment and home addresses and threatened their citizenship rights of habeas corpus in the event of a national emergency. Attorney General Biddle cast doubt on the legality of the Custodial Detention list as early as 1943, calling it ‘impractical, unwise, and dangerous’ but the FBI found ways to continue it under another guise (Maxwell 2015, 92–93). Bureau reports on Black writers drew on a range of sources in the 1940s. While human intelligence sources, including informants, were well represented, Hoover also directed agents to use ‘newspaper morgues’ and ‘public libraries’ in determining who should be subject to surveillance and how (Maxwell 2015, 93–94). Thus, as Maxwell puts it: ‘Traditional Bureau recipes for criminalizing literary speech were thus baked into Custodial Detention Policy’. The Bureau formally opened a file on Bennett in 1941 and continued to monitor her employment, her organisational activities and her personal life until 1955. 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. In fact, Bureau reports reveal little interest in her creative work.¹⁶ Given the FBI’s interest in Black literature even before the

1940s, it is remarkable that Gwendolyn Bennett, the writer, does not show up in archives constructed to capture Black literary subversion. While this could, at least in part, be attributed to the tendency of government agents to look for radicalism in the work of the male literary genius, it also reflects the decisions Bennett made about her creative life, including where and how to identify as a radical intellectual. Bennett, the passionate and political writer of poems, autobiographical essays and short stories in the 1930s; Bennett the careful custodian of her autobiography and first curator of her unpublished work that would live beyond its time; Bennett, who first kept a diary in her teens which she continued intermittently through the 1920s and 30s; Bennett played a role in what was kept, copied and archived about her life and work. She understood the power inherent in refusing to be present.

Bennett's refusal to be present is a prominent theme in Bureau reports, so much so that it may have been read as evidence of her subversive potential. Prompted by the 1941 WPA loyalty investigation, Bennett's FBI file opens with extensive and detailed coverage of her refusal to confirm her presence at various Communist affiliated events. Charges of Communist affiliation are mostly derived from informants, many of whom have the status of 'unknown reliability'. While the names of informants are routinely redacted, it is notable how often informants are described as being affiliated with one or the other of the two main Black newspapers in New York City: the *New York Age* and the *Amsterdam News*. By contrast, written evidence is largely derived from leftist newspapers, such as *The Daily Worker* and the *People's Voice*.¹⁷ Citations are most often to articles which cover, in a perfunctory way, events Bennett has spoken at or hosted at the George Carver School. Attempts to get Bennett to contribute to her own surveillance archive, voluntarily or otherwise, are unsuccessful. For example, the FBI found Bennett a difficult subject because they could not easily access her handwriting. She used a typewriter for nearly all her writing work, including correspondence. The need for 'additional handwriting specimens' was an ongoing theme in her FBI file. After several failed attempts, the Bureau resorted to a photostat of a bank cheque to secure the required sample.¹⁸ A later effort to question Bennett directly, was an unqualified failure. In the summer of 1953, the Bureau began making plans to interview Gwendolyn Bennett. Seeking authorisation from FBI Director, J. Edgar Hoover, the New York division of the Security Informant Program summarised the case to date: informants, of 'unknown reliability' had claimed Bennett was a member of the Communist Party or had close connections to those who were. It was now time to approach 'the subject' directly. Bennett was to be interviewed discreetly, away from her home and workplace, in order to ascertain her threat level.¹⁹ Following an unsuccessful first attempt to approach her in September, on 27 October 1953, two secret federal agents intercepted Bennett on her way to work. Identifying themselves as Bureau agents, they posed a series of questions regarding Bennett's political affiliations and patriotism. Bennett's response, as recorded in her FBI file, is worth quoting at length, for it suggests not only that she had long been aware of the Bureau's interest in her but also implies knowledge of what information the Bureau possessed:

she repeatedly stated that she had no information about herself or her husband that the FBI does not already have. When discreetly advised that she was not in a position to know the extent of the information in the Bureau's and that it was desired that information be obtained directly from her concerning herself or any acquaintance in an effort to further

substantiate or refute any information in the Bureau's possession. She merely repeated her original statement that she was sure that she had no information that is not already in the Bureau's possession.²⁰

Bennett's impertinent insistence that 'she was sure' might be read as an example of what Simone Brown calls 'dark sousveillance'. Brown adapts Steve Mann's concept of sousveillance, 'the ability of people to access and collect data about their surveillance and to neutralize surveillance' in order to understand how enslaved peoples and their descendants found ways not only to 'render oneself out of sight' but to create spaces from which to resist antiblack surveillance (Brown 2015, 21). Dark sousveillance is a Black way of knowing, drawn from watching those in authority but also Black experiences of resisting enslavement, including passing as free, forging freedom papers or other forms of escape. Brown cites Sojourner Truth's escape in 1826, when she 'walked off, believing that to be alright' (Brown 2015, 22). Bennett's 'evasive' responses, her 'failure to cooperate' suggest she developed strategies to resist antiblack surveillance, to show that her life was not a series of events to be collected, organised and made knowable. Her repeated insistence that the FBI knew all there was to know, might be read both as a demonstration that Bennett had knowledge of and returned the gaze of FBI surveillance, but also as a declaration of unknowability: there was no more to be revealed, at least not through the methods pursued by the FBI. This bold assertion is underscored by Bennett's decision to simply walk away, thereby terminating the brief interview. Her interrogators drew the conclusion that any further effort to interview Bennett would be to no avail.²¹

Conclusion

Bennett walked away from her confrontation with FBI agents, while Harrison 'slipped away': both acts might be viewed as precautionary responses to immediate danger, yet they are also part of a broader pattern of resistance to antiblack surveillance, which manifests itself in the intellectual practice of Black women. Bennett and Harrison knew when to 'render themselves out of sight'. Harrison's hyper/invisibility makes her an object of scrutiny on the Japanese-Soviet border: her ambiguous American and racial identity mean she is not immediately recognised as the 'lone American', while her travel in the Soviet Union makes her an object of the anti-Communist state's suspicious glare. Yet Harrison is assured in her retelling of the hostile encounter with Japanese fascism. Discarding personal belongings, creating her wardrobe and persona anew, Harrison is practiced in slipping away. But like Bennett, she does not simply refuse to be present; rather Harrison finds moments and methods that allow her to resist surveillance by affirming her presence. She creates a new visibility for herself as she performs a joyous dance in the street while buying replacement clothes. Likewise, Bennett did not always walk away in view of white interrogators; at times she too chose to 'slip away', to use her knowledge of whites' misplaced confidence in fixed racial categories to 'get past the barrier of my color.'²² Harrison and Bennett both used props to reconfigure white expectations of their racial identity and to pass higher up the colour hierarchy. In an undated essay in her archive, Bennett recalls with glee the time she passed for Javanese in order to secure work in a Batik art studio in New York City: the right lipstick; plenty of rouge; beads from the local Five and Ten Store and her silver earrings purchased as an art

student in Paris; the cosmopolitan Bennett could easily pass as Javanese. Bennett counts on white ignorance but also her own knowledge as a Black woman, ‘knowledge that comes so easily into Negro experience’.²³

Bennett and Harrison resist easy categorisation, whether by historical period, organisational affiliation or artistic genre. Moreover, their responses to the illogical, shifting and contradictory strands of the United States's patriarchal racial capitalist knowledge economy are not always coherent, consistent or knowable. For Black women, this has often meant a legacy on the margins, bit players in a historical past shaped by and for agents of change who are customarily figured as men, on the edges of but never pioneers in Black radicalism. But perhaps we might instead see their decisions to slip or walk away as part of a long Black radical tradition of refusing to be present, as well as a new iteration of Black writing in which women developed ways to affirm the existence of radical Blackness while evading surveillance.

Notes

1. Cathryn Halverson has written extensively about Harrison and is currently at work on a biography. Much of this biographical sketch is taken from Cathryn Halverson, *Playing House in the American West: Western Women's Life Narratives, 1839–1987* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2013), chapter 7.
2. William Pickens, ‘Waikiki’, 2 September 1936, in Claude A. Barnett Papers (hereafter, CBP): Associated Negro Press Part 1, News Releases Series A; Gaston Meares, ‘My Great Wide Beautiful World’, undated c. 1936, CBP: ANP Part 1, News Releases Series A.
3. Gaston Meares, ‘My Great Wide Beautiful World’, undated c. 1936, CBP: ANP Part 1, News Releases Series A.
4. Langston Hughes to Noel Sullivan, 29 July 1936, University of California Berkeley, Bancroft Library, Noel Sullivan Papers, Box 40 folder 1.
5. Ironically, Harrison was in her 40s at the time, but appears to have deceived people about her age and wrote about herself in terms that invited readers to imagine a younger woman.
6. Miriam Matthews, ‘Latest Book Reviews’, clipping, AFP 1:2; Miriam Matthews to Alice Foster, 6 October 1936, AFP 1:2.
7. Emily Bernard, *Remember Me to Harlem: The Letters of Langston Hughes and Carl Van Vechten, 1925–1964* (New York: Vintage Books, 2002), 135; Langston Hughes to Noel Sullivan, 29 July 1936, University of California Berkeley, Bancroft Library, Noel Sullivan Papers, Box 40 folder 1; William Pickens, ‘Waikiki’, 2 September 1936, in CBP: ANP Part 1, News Releases Series A.
8. For examples of how Bennett’s marginalisation within Harlem Renaissance scholarship has been attributed both to the diversity of genres she deployed as well as the loss of a significant portion of her artwork, see Belinda Wheeler and Louis J. Parascandola ‘Introduction’, in Wheeler and Parascandola eds., *Heroine of the Harlem Renaissance: Gwendolyn Bennett's Selected Writings* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2018), 1–2.
9. Maureen Honey, *Aphrodite's Daughters: Three Modernist Poets of the Harlem Renaissance* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 136; Gwendolyn Bennett papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library, Box 2, Reel 1 (Hereafter, Bennett papers).
10. Gwendolyn Bennett, ‘The Leader’ 1939, Bennett papers, Box 2, Reel 1.
11. Gwendolyn Bennett FBI File, Part 1, p9 <https://archive.org/details/GwendolynBennettFBIFile> accessed 15 July 2021.
12. ‘James Ford Honored at Dinner’ *New York Amsterdam News*, 22 April 1939, p6.
13. According to Kiser, Hansberry always insisted publicly that her occupation was Housewife rather than writer/playwright.

14. Earl Conrad, 'American Viewpoint: A Lady Laughs at Fate' *Chicago Defender*, January 51, 1946, p9 in Bennett papers, Box 2, Folder 2, Reel 2.
15. Leotha Hackshaw, 'Harlem Portraits', 26 May 1945, *Pittsburgh Courier*, no. page. in Ibid.
16. The only reference to her writing comes through a few excerpts quoted from the Black press, which mention Bennett's writing. See for example 'Labor Forum' *New York Amsterdam News*, 10 February 1945 which mentions Bennett is a 'nationally known poet and author' before going on to describe her role as director of the Carver school. FBI Report, 22 February 1945, p9, in Bennett FBI File, Part 1.
17. Bennett FBI File, Part 1.
18. 'Undeveloped Leads' New York Field Division, p11. See also memo to FBI Dir., 22 February 1945, Bennett FBI File, Part 2.
19. Memo to FBI Director 4 June 1953, Bennett FBI File, Part 2.
20. Memo to FBI Director, 23 September 1953 and 11 November 1953, Bennett FBI File, Part 2.
21. Memo to FBI dir. 11 November 1953, Bennett FBI File, Part 2.
22. Bennett, Undated essay, pp2-3, 'Professional and Literary Writings: Prose, n.d', Box 10, Folder 2, Reel 2.
23. Ibid, 3.

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