little-known documents

Gwendolyn Bennett's "The Ebony Flute"

EDITED AND WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY BELINDA WHEELER

Introduction

GWENDOLYN BENNETT (1902–81) IS OFTEN MENTIONED IN BOOKS THAT DISCUSS THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE, AND SOME OF HER POEMS OCCASIONALLY appear in poetry anthologies; but much of her career has been overlooked. Along with many of her friends, including Jessie Redmond Fauset, Langston Hughes, and Countee Cullen, Bennett was featured at the National Urban League's Civic Club Dinner in March 1924, an event that would later be "widely hailed as a 'coming out party' for young black artists, writers, and intellectuals whose work would come to define the Harlem Renaissance" (McHenry 383n100). In the next five years Bennett published over forty poems, short stories, and reviews in leading African American magazines and anthologies, such as Cullen's *Caroling Dusk* (1927) and William Stanley Braithwaite's *Anthology of Magazine Verse for 1927*; she created magazine cover art that adorned two leading African American periodicals, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's *Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races* and the National Urban League's *Opportunity: Journal of Negro Life*; she worked as an editor or assistant editor of several magazines, including *Opportunity*, *Black Opals*, and *Fire!*; and she wrote a renowned literary column, "The Ebony Flute." Many scholars, such as Cary Wintz, Abby Arthur Johnson and Ronald Maberry Johnson, and Elizabeth McHenry, recognized the importance of Bennett's column to the Harlem Renaissance in their respective studies, but their emphasis on a larger Harlem Renaissance discussion did not afford a detailed examination of her column.

"The Ebony Flute" appeared in *Opportunity* between 1926 and 1928. A facsimile of Bennett's first column is reproduced in its entirety here on pages 746–47 so that readers can see how it appeared at the time of its original publication. *Opportunity*'s circulation during the mid-1920s, approximately 11,000, was second only to that of the *Crisis*, which was 65,000. African American magazines like these, notes Nina Miller, "served as essential vehicles for sustained culture building, both in keeping artists' work before the public and in continuously theorizing the relations among aesthetics, race, and racial progress" (149). Bennett's growing reputation and her diverse interests no doubt motivated *Opportunity*'s editor, Charles S. Johnson,

BELINDA WHEELER, assistant professor of English at Paine College, is completing a book on Gwendolyn Bennett for the University Press of Mississippi. Three unpublished poems by Bennett that Wheeler recently discovered will appear in Cary Nelson's *Anthology of Modern and Contemporary American Poetry* (2014).

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to invite Bennett to design and edit a weekly literary column. Written at a time when geographically diverse readers felt isolated from pertinent events occurring inside and outside Harlem, as well as a time of literary and artistic conflicts between various groups—older African Americans and members of the New Negro movement, blacks and whites—Bennett's column played a leading role in the development of the Harlem Renaissance.

Bennett's commitment to her column and her growing reputation made "The Ebony Flute" one of the most talked-about columns in the African American community. Instead of devoting the column to one artist or work, Bennett adopted the "fragmentation inherent in an interdisciplinary field" (Howsam 75), dividing her column by subject and systematically discussing important topics of the day (selection 1). A member of Georgia Douglas Johnson's literary group, the Saturday Nighters, Bennett recognized the value of literary communities and created a format that made readers feel like members of their own literary society. Bennett's friendly, tailored discussions each month fostered congeniality between diverse groups, offered an alternative view of controversial figures or topics, gave readers national and international updates, and promoted reader involvement.

Through her column, Bennett established dialogues between diverse groups. In her first entry she embraced diverse communities by explaining how the column's title originated (selection 2). To promote congeniality, Bennett skillfully emphasized the achievements of older African Americans and members of the New Negro movement by mentioning how some members of the establishment were helping new writers (selection 3).

Bennett further united diverse communities by addressing contentious issues and defending controversial figures. One of the most debated events that occurred during the span of Bennett's column was the publication of Carl Van Vechten's book *Nigger Heaven* (1926). Van Vechten was a leading patron of the Harlem Renaissance who championed African American writers such as Hughes, and while many African Americans, including Bennett, Johnson, and Hughes, supported the white patron's new book, an equal number, among them Cullen, Alain Locke, and W. E. B. Du Bois, the *Crisis* editor, deemed the novel, in Du Bois's words, "an affront to the hospitality of black folk and to the intelligence of white" (516). In all but five of her nineteen columns Bennett favorably refers to Van Vechten or his book. Before the book's official release Bennett showed her immediate support for the work (selection 4). When *Nigger Heaven* appeared and came under fire by critics, such as Du Bois, Bennett confronted them head-on (selection 5). Bennett further supported Van Vechten by reproducing his letter that defended New Negro artists against attacks by white literary critics (selection 6).

Bennett also provided her audience with ways to read controversial "texts." Having participated in several theatrical productions during college, Bennett was comfortable reviewing recent plays, operas, and musicals, as evidenced by her analysis of the Broadway musical *Africana* (selection 7). Even when an African American play came out that many, including Bennett, did not favor, she provided her audience with another way to "read" the production so that her audience could understand its wider, positive implications (selection 8).

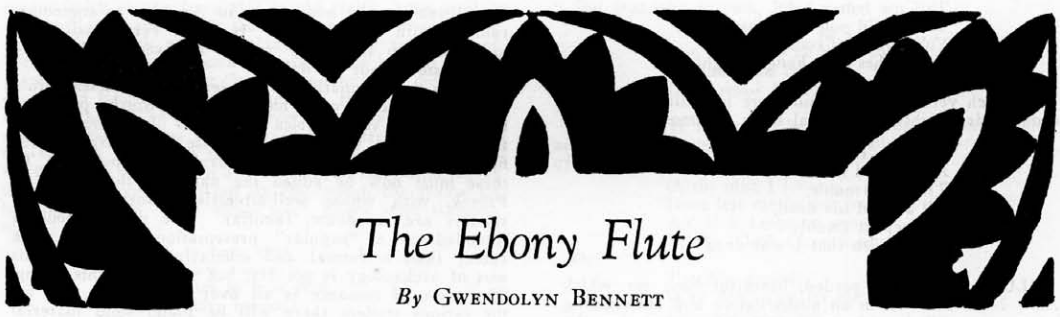
Bennett's column often included transnational or national discussions so readers could learn what others were doing to better the African race. For example, in her March 1927 column Bennett linked African Americans with their French counterparts, explaining how both were celebrating the new race consciousness (selection 9). Bennett also connected African Americans from around the country by highlighting the appearance of many new literary groups, thus illustrating the expansion of the Harlem Renaissance beyond Harlem and promoting her readership's deep connection with the developing movement (selection 10).

Bennett sparked creativity in her geographically displaced readers by providing news about upcoming contests and encouraging them to participate (selection 11), usually inserting this news in the middle of the column. By talking about the contests in the same space where she wrote about noted artists or events occurring inside and

(continued on page 748)

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260 OPPORTUNITY AUGUST, 1926



The Ebony Flute

By GWENDOLYN BENNETT

IN searching about for a heading that would make a fit label for literary chit-chat and artistic what-not I stumbled upon "The Ebony Flute." So lovely a name it is that I should like to have made it myself, but I didn't. I say "stumbled" advisedly. Reading again William Rose Benet's poem, Harlem, in the *October Theatre Arts Magazine* I was struck by the exceeding great beauty of his use of the "ebony flute" as an instrument upon which one could "sing Harlem." An ebony flute ought to be very effective for most any sort of singing for that matter. Ebony, black and of exquisite smoothness. . . . And a flute has that double quality of tone, low and sweet or high and shrill, that would make of Harlem or any other place a very human song. No better instrument then for the slim melody of what book one has read or who is writing what new play than an ebony flute . . . speaking of Benet's *Harlem,* what a lovely thing it is! It opens with:

I want to sing Harlem on an ebony flute
While trap-drums ruffle to a crash and blare,
With a clear note
From a sylvan throat
Of a clarinet—of a clarinet!
God and brute, black god and brute
Grinning, brooding in the murk air,
Moons of flame and suns of jet,
Hurricane joy and dumb despair.

Vermillion, black and peacock blue,
Pink, plum-purple, zig-zag green—
I want to sing Harlem with a paint-box too,
Shaking out color like a tambourine,
Want a red
Like a furious fire;
Want a black
Like midnight mire;
Want a gold
Like golden wire;
Want a silver
Like Heaven entire
And God a-playing at his own front door
On a slide trombone with a conical bore!

And on through line on line of beauty that coins a Harlem as a poet would see it, lush and colorful . . . fertile like rich earth. On and on to its close which ends with the crooning of his "Mammy Earth. . . ."

O child of the wild, of the womb of the night,
Rest, and dream, my dark delight!

Tropic Death, a book of short stories by Eric Walrond will come out in October. Boni and Liveright are the publishers. I can scarcely wait for this book to be on the market. . . . Few of the Negro writers that are being heralded on all sides today can begin to create the color that fairly rolls itself from Mr. Walrond's facile pen. *Tropic Death* ought to have that ripe color that is usually the essence of Mr. Walrond's writing . . . and also a simple forcefulness that the author often achieves. . . . A new magazine is added to the Chicago list of Negro publications: *American Life Magazine,* Moses Jordan editing . . . the same Mr. Jordan whose book, *The Meat Man,* was published a few years back. The June issue, Volume One— Number One, carried "From Venice to Vienna" by Jessie Redmon Fauset and "Pale Lady" by Langston Hughes. I have not seen the July issue of this magazine but look forward to seeing the future copies that will come out. . . . Maude Cuney Hare has an article on *Creole Folksongs* in the July number of the *Musical Observer.* Needless to say, Mrs. Hare's article is adequate . . . certainly there are few people more authoritative in their speaking of Creole folksongs than she.

Aaron Douglas is doing the illustrations for Carl Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven* which will appear August the twentieth. *The Publisher's Weekly* says that Mr. Douglas' advertisement for this book in the current magazines is the best for the month of June . . . but by far the most important thing about Mr. Douglas these days is his new wife. He married Miss Alta Sawyer of Kansas City, Missouri, on Friday June eighteenth. . . . The English edition of Langston Hughes' *Weary Blues* came out on July ninth . . . the second edition of *The New Negro* will be out in the fall. . . . The Negro writers must not let the first of September slip up on them without having their manuscripts ready for the Albert and Charles Boni contest. The address for sending the novels to the judges is 66 Fifth Avenue. . . . Thinking of novels makes me recall what Simeon Strunsky of the *New York Times Book Review* said not so long ago about beautifully written books. . . . "The beautifully written book as a rule is the over-written book. One sinks into beauty ankle-deep." He goes to quite some trouble to poke fun at the elegant conservatism of what is called beautiful prose today. But even in the face of Mr. Strunsky's caustic remarks on the question of beautiful writing, properly so-called, I should be ever so happy to find some of that ankle-deep beauty in the things that come out of the Boni contest . . . what of it, if some Negro should write a *Marie Chapdelaine* with its wistful but perfect simplicity or perhaps an "Ethan Frome. . . ." Mr. Strunsky rambles on to the amazing consolation that "We

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still have our newspapers. In them are the reservoirs of simple health upon which we can draw when the English language threatens to cave in under heavy doses of beauty between bound covers" . . . and we can do little else but wonder how any one can live in New York and see the rife yellow journalism of the daily news sheets and speak of them as the salvation of the English language . . . nor even the aridity of the *New York Times* could be set on the pinnacle that had been built for "beautiful writing."

"George Sand Reigns Again For A Day" in the *Times* for June twenty-seventh made me think of a young newspaper writer I knew in Paris who was always breaking into any conversation that chanced to be going on at the time with the information that he lived in the back part of a house the front part of which had belonged to George Sand . . . and I always think within myself that I could see in that about as much claim to fame as any. . . . F. Fraser Bond in reviewing *The Best Love Stories of* 1925: "Something has come over the American love story. . . . It seems to have grown up. No longer does it find its chief concern in the billings and cooings of tepid adolescents" . . . he goes on further to observe that "Peter Pan has put on long trousers." Can't you see some E. E. Cumings-John V. Weaver person coming forward with a "Come out of it Lovers" to scare away that something that has "come over" the love story of today. . . .

Hall Johnson's Negro operetta, *Goophered;* with the libretto by Garret is to have in it three lyrics by Langston Hughes: *Mother to Son; The Midnight Blues;* and *Song for a Banjo.* This operetta is for early fall or late summer production. Mr. Johnson is the winner of the third prize of the music section of the OPPORTUNITY Contest . . . and by the way, Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes are collaborating on an operetta the libretto of which is to be by Miss Hurston and the lyrics by Mr. Hughes . . . they are also writing a musical comedy together. . . . Mentioning musical comedies of a dusky character reminds me of the ill-fated *My Magnolia* which ran for a single week at the Mansfield Theater.

Jean Toomer, author of *Cane,* is spending the summer at the Gurdjieff Institute in Fountainbleau, France. . . . Countee Cullen and his father, Reverend Cullen, are traveling through Europe for the summer months . . . they will make many interesting stops chief among them a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. . . . Arthur Huff Fauset whose "Symphonesque" won first prize in the short story section of the OPPORTUNITY contest is to be a member of their party. . . . Dr. Rudolph Fisher has very endearingly nick-named his new baby "the new Negro."

Friday, July sixteenth, the annual reception for summer school students was given at the 135th Street Library. Mr. Johnson of OPPORTUNITY spoke on the OPPORTUNITY contests and what they had meant to the younger school of writers. When Mr. Johnson had finished his speech he called on several of the prize winners of the first and second OPPORTUNITY contests who chanced to be in the audience and asked them to read. . . . "Golgatha Is A Mountain" was never so lovely for me until I heard Mr. Arna Bontemp read it himself. He reads with a voice as rich in its resonance as his prize-winning poem is in its imagery and beauty. It was good to see so many of the people who are writing and doing things together . . . Zora Neale Hurston, Bruce Nugent, John Davis . . . Langston Hughes who talked a bit about blues and spirituals and then read some of the new ones he had been doing . . . and just before he sat down he read a poem called "Brass Spittoons" . . . as lovely as are many things with much more delectable names.

Horace Liveright is busy casting his play *Black Boy* for its fall production. Paul Robeson is to play the lead which I understand is to be a prize-fighter. I heard Mr. Liveright say the other night that he was having difficulty in finding an actress for the role of Irene who plays in the lead opposite Mr. Robeson. This part is difficult to fill since the heroine is supposed all during the play to be white and is discovered at the end to be a colored girl who "passes." Remembering the harmful publicity that attended the opening of *All God's Chillun* because of a white woman's playing opposite a Negro, Mr. Liveright has been leaving no stone unturned to find a Negro girl who can take the part. There are hundreds who are fitted for the physical requirements of the piece but few whose histrionic powers would measure up to the standard of Broadway production.

Clarissa Scott of Washington dropped into the office the other day on her first trip in the interest of the new social investigation work she is to be doing in New York this summer . . . the same Clarissa Scott whose *Solace* won a prize in the OPPORTUNITY contest for last year . . . and it was good to see her again and to know that she would be in New York all the summer . . . sandwiched between talk of what was happening in Washington and at Howard the question arose as to what was the most beautiful line of poetry written by a Negro . . . her first thought was:

Dark Madonna of the grave she rests;
Lord Death has found her sweet.

from Countee Cullen's *A Brown Girl Dead* . . . strange how discussions of this sort get started, isn't it? I had never thought in terms of the best or most beautiful or the greatest line of Negro poetry before . . . there are several that come in line for the distinction now that I come to think of it . . . without thinking too long my first choice is from Langston Hughes' new blues poem called *The Railroad Blues.* . . .

A railroad bridge is a sad song in de air

or

Where twilight is a soft bandanna handkerchief

. . . or perhaps Lewis Alexander's

A body smiling with black beauty . . .

or Jean Toomers

Above the sacred whisper of the pines,
Give virgin lips to cornfield concubines,
Bring dreams of Christ to dusky, cane-lipped throngs.

We wonder what William Stanley Braithwaite would say . . . or Claude McKay . . . or Jessie Fauset. . . . But all that resolves itself into the hopelessness of deciding what the greatest of anything is . . . nothing is really greatest but greatness itself. . . .

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outside Harlem and by encouraging "unknowns" to enter, Bennett placed those who might have felt isolated in the center of the conversation, highlighting their important role in the renaissance.

Bennett's "The Ebony Flute," like the Harlem Renaissance, "[s]eethed with energy" and was "ensconced in the great communications" of the time, reinforcing its place in the development of the African American artistic community (Hutchinson 6). What may have started as a simple column filled, in Bennett's words, with "literary chit-chat and artistic whatnot" soon became an important cultural document that had a direct and lasting impact on the African American community (260).

Note

The excerpts from Bennett's "The Ebony Flute" are published with permission of the National Urban League. Thanks must also go to the Schomburg Center for Research and Black Culture and New York University's Faculty Resource Network for supporting my Gwendolyn Bennett research. The spelling and usage in the following selections remain in their original forms except that obvious typos have been corrected. The ellipses in the selections are found in the original publication except when they appear in brackets, which indicate my editorial hand.

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The Ebony Flute

Selection 1

With timely alacrity Langston Hughes has thrown his hat into the intellectual ring with the pretty compliment of one poet to another. . . . "I think Countee's lines,

> *The dead are wisest for they know*
> *How deep the roots of roses grow.*

is very beautiful." . . . There has been a goodly response to the question as to what is the greatest or most beautiful line of poetry written by a Negro. . . . It is of incident interest that Robert Frost says the finest lines submitted to the 1926 Opportunity contest are from Helene Johnson's *The Road*, namely:

> *Ah, little road, brown as my race is brown,*
> *Your trodden beauty like our trodden pride,*
> *Dust of the dust, they must not bruise you*
> *down.*

Kinckle Jones suggests that his favorite is:

> *Yet would we die as some have done:*
> *Beating a way for the rising sun.*

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From Arna Bontemps' *The Daybreakers*. . . . And Aaron Douglas chooses from Jean Toomer's *Georgia Dusk* these lines:

> *A feast of moon and men and barking hounds,*
> *An orgy for some genius of the South*
> *With blood-hot eyes and cane-lipped scented mouth,*
> *Surprised in making folk-songs from soul sounds.*

. . . speaking of poetry calls to mind the announcement of William Stanley Braithwaite's *Anthology for 1926*. It is to have a larger scope this year. It is to be divided into four parts, i.e. The Poetry of the United States, Anthology of Poems 1926, Yearbook of American Poetry, and A Biographical Dictionary of Poets in the United States. The first section includes articles by Jessie B. Rittenhouse, Glenn Hughes, James Southall Wilson, Dawson Powell, Willard Johnson, George Sterling, Thomas Walsh, Henry Harrison, Alain Locke, Josel Washington Hall, Marianne Moore, Joseph Auslander, and E. Merrill Root. . . . There will be many of the younger Negro writers represented in his coming volume. *Golgotha is a Mountain*, by Arna Bontemps; *No Images*, by Waring Cuney; *Northboun'*, by Lucy Ariel Williams; *Tragedy of Pete*, by Joseph Cotter; *Lines to Elders, Scornful Lady* and *Confession*, by Countee Cullen; *Magula, Fulfillment* and *Calla Bella* by Helene Johnson . . . these are to be among those printed this year . . . they are either prize or mention winners in the 1926 Opportunity Contest . . . the book will be ready October twenty-first and its price is to be four dollars. . . . William Rose Benet writes me ever so pleasant a letter in which he says, "I am flattered that you like 'Harlem,' and glad that you should use the term 'The Ebony Flute' for a heading to your column, which column seems to me an excellent idea." . . .

Bruce Nugent, whose *Sahdji* appeared in the *New Negro*, has finished his first novel. As yet he has not named it . . . by the way, *Nigger Heaven*, by Carl Van Vechten, is to be on the stands the twentieth of August. However, the review copies are out and I was fortunate enough to see and read one of them. For me it is a splendid book. Mr. Van Vechten has done what I choose to call a perfect piece of research work . . . of it Isabel M. Paterson says in "Turns With a Bookworm"; "It is going to occupy much the same position this coming autumn as *The Green Hat* did last year." . . . We also had the rare privilege of glancing hurriedly over the proof for *Tropic Death*, Eric Walrond's book . . . it certainly has "flights of bright delight." He weaves the warm magic of the tropics with simple words and bright colors. *Drought*, which appeared in the London *New Age*, is heavy with its weight of heat and aridity. The author's careful description leaves the reader's lips parched and dry. This excerpt fairly bakes with white heat:

> *"The sun had milked the land of its moisture—pressed it dry. Star apples, sugar apples, husks, transparent on the dry sleepy trees. Savagely prowling through the orchards blackbirds stopped at nothing . . . turtle doves rifled the pods of green peas and purple beans and even the indigestible Brazilian bonavis. Potato vines yellow as the leaves of autumn severed from their roots by the pressure of the sun, stood on the ground, the winds eager prey. Undug, stemless—peanuts, carrot—seeking balm, relief, the caress of a passing wind, shot dead unlustered eyes up through sun etched cracks in the withering earth. The sugar corn went to the birds. Ripening prematurely breadfruits fell swiftly on the hard naked soil, half ripe, good only for fritters . . . fell in spatters . . . and the hungry dogs, anticipating the children, lapped up the mellow fruit."*

And we have much cause for being glad that Langston Hughes has won the 1926 Witter Bynner Contest. The prize was awarded for a group of five poems called "*A House in Taos*." The prize is $150 . . . the judges were Rose O'Neill, Vachel Lindsay and Witter Bynner. There were six hundred entries from forty-nine colleges in twenty-six states . . . the

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contest is for undergraduates in American colleges. . . . Tenth honorable mention was awarded to Waring Cuney, who won a half of the first prize of the Opportunity poetry contest for his poem *No Images*. Both Mr. Hughes and Mr. Cuney are students at Lincoln University. This year the prize winner was to have received a year's tuition to a Mexican University, with carfare from the United States border into Mexico. . . . Mr. Hughes is rejecting this part of the winnings and allowing it to pass on to the first honorable mention which goes to Josephine Jackson of Mt. Holyoke College. He puts it very nicely—"You see this way it makes it possible for two people to win prizes."

Contests grow thickly about us as the summer wears on. . . . The Survey Associates Incorporated offers a prize of $250 for the best account of the "most interesting thing you know about plays for grown-ups." . . . The manuscripts must not be less than 1,000 nor more than 2,500 words in length, typewritten, double spaced, and on one side of the paper . . . the last date is September thirteenth and the address is—Jury, Harmon-Survey Award 3, care of *The Survey*, 112 East 19th Street, New York City. . . . *College Humor* offers $10,000 in prizes for the best novel or story adaptable to magazine and motion picture production. . . . Midnight, February first, 1927, is the last date and the address is: Contest Editor, *College Humor*, 1050 La Salle Street, Chicago, Illinois.

Which reminds me that Donald J. Hayes is said to be at work on a new literary monthly of the Negro race, called *Vision* . . . to be published from Atlantic City . . . the editors characterize their hopes for the magazine in these words: "In contrast to other Negro magazines, it will have no chip on its shoulder, but will attempt to win friends by giving the Negro writer opportunity for development and by presenting work of distinction. The magazine will be published with white cooperation." . . . It pleases me to see that *American Life*, which had its *premiere* in June, is still in the running.

John Matheus' *Fog* is being translated into German by Dr. Herman Muller for a syndicate which supplies matter for literary publication in Germany. . . . O'Brien has written asking Arthur Huff Fauset for a hundred and fifty word biography of himself for this year's "Best Short Stories" . . . that means that *Symphonesque* goes in this year's honor roll. . . . Countee Cullen writes from Paris that it is the "only city" and that he'd like to stay ever so much. . . .

The Krigwa Little Theater has decided upon the plays that it will produce in the fall. . . . *Blue Blood*, by Georgia Douglas Johnson, which was awarded honorable mention in the play section of the Opportunity Contest; *Her*, by Eulalia Spence; *No 'Count Boy*, by Paul Green, which was produced in New York by the Dallas Little Theater in 1925 and was awarded the Belasco Cup in the National Little Theater Tournament . . . this movement plans working up a repertoire of both Negro and general plays which will be given alternately during the season. Aaron Douglas is decorating the walls of the Krigwa Little Theater which holds its meetings in the basement of the 135th Street Public Library.

Rudolf Fisher has had two stories accepted by the *Cosmopolitan Magazine*. . . . *Fire By Night* and *The Back-slider* are their names. Edwin Morgan's *Prayer* is to appear in *The Bookman* . . . he is spending his summer in Europe. Frank Horne, winner of the second prize of the *Crisis* Literary Contest for 1925, is assistant director of the Boys' Camp Welcome Hall which is situated at Saltaire, Fire Island . . . his *To Chick* from *Letters Found by a Suicide* is to appear in Braithwaite's *Anthology*.

I am particularly interested in reading *Beyond the Rockies*, by William Augustus Banks, published by Dorrance and Company in Philadelphia . . . it is a book of poetry written by a young man who has had an unbelievably hard time of it . . . in fact his struggle for a livelihood has been almost of a story-tale quality . . . the verse is carefully done and

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I find much of it worthy of special note . . . this particular verse has a wistful quality that pleases me: . . .

When January locks me in
Cool mists come dimming down.
The winter is suggesting then
The cool of Twilight Town.

. . . two other books of poetry have come to notice recently: . . . *Gems of Inspiration*, by A. R. Schooler; *Poems*, by Sarah C. Fernandis.

Richard Reid is doing a portrait of Reverend John Haynes Holmes, pastor of the Community Church . . . Mr. Reid is the artist whose work was in last year's Exhibit of Independent Artists. . . .

Yone Noguchi is criticizing the Japanese themes as presented by Lewis Alexander . . . he lives in Japan and had a book of *Hokku* published in 1920 by the Four Seas Company. . . . This poem, *To Countee Cullen*, appeared in the *Chicago Tribune* in the column entitled *Line o' Type or Two by The Faun*:

It matters not if your skin is dark
As the midnight jungle track,
I thrill to the beat of the song you sing
Feeling the torture and rack
That sundered the souls of your broken slaves
For hundreds of dead years back.

Under the march of your musical lines,
Under the tread of their feet,
I hear the wind in the jungle pines
And the drone of the tom-tom's beat,
With ebon savage under the sun
In the shimmering tropic heat.

Chance gave you the soul of a minstrel fair
Housed in a blackamoor's frame,
With your heart tuned high to the upper air
Though a scion of scorn and shame,
Refusing a outcast's usual lot
And turning it into fame!

. . . So the talk of this and that comes to a close. . . . I wonder how the manuscripts for the *Boni Contest* are coming along . . . and hope that there will be a novel come out of it worthy of the name of *the* Negro novel. . . .

(September 1926)

Selection 2

In searching about for a heading that would make a fit label for literary chit-chat and artistic whatnot I stumbled upon "The Ebony Flute." So lovely a name it is that I should like to have made it myself, but I didn't. I say "stumbled" advisedly. Reading again William Rose Benet's poem, Harlem, in the *October Theatre Arts Magazine* I was struck by the exceeding great beauty of his use of the "ebony flute" as an instrument upon which one could "sing Harlem." An ebony flute ought to be very effective for most any sort of singing for that matter. Ebony, black and of exquisite smoothness. . . . And a flute has that double quality of tone, low and sweet or high and shrill, that would make of Harlem or any other place a very human song. No better instrument then for the slim melody of what book one has read or who is writing what new play than an ebony flute . . . speaking of Benet's *Harlem*, what a lovely thing it is! It opens with:

I want to sing Harlem on an ebony flute
While trap-drums ruffle to a crash and blare,
With a clear note
From a sylvan throat
Of a clarinet—of a clarinet!
God and brute, black god and brute
Grinning, brooding in the murk air,
Moons of flame and suns of jet,
Hurricane joy and dumb despair.

Vermillion, black and peacock blue,
Pink, plum-purple, zig-zag green—
I want to sing Harlem with a paint-box too,
Shaking out color like a tambourine,
Want a red
Like a furious fire;
Want a black

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Like midnight mire;
Want a gold
Like golden wire;
Want a silver
Like Heaven entire
And God a-playing at his own front door
On a slide trombone with a conical bore!

And on through line on line of beauty that coins a Harlem as a poet would see it, lush and colorful . . . fertile like rich earth. On and on to its close which ends with the crooning of his "Mammy Earth. . . ."

Oh child of the wild, of the womb of the night,
Rest, and dream, my dark delight!

(August 1926, extract)

Selection 3

Dr. [Alain] Locke is preparing a pamphlet on four Negro poets: Jean Toomer, Claude McKay, Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes. . . . This is for Simon and Schuster, publishers of a series of *Pamphlet Poets*—I think Carl Sandburg, Natalie Crane and Edwin Markham are among some of the poets who have already been brought out. [. . .] *Theatre Arts Magazine* is getting out a volume on world drama made up largely of essays having appeared in its issues. Dr. Locke's two articles on the Negro in the field of drama are being welded into one for this volume.

And about Claude McKay:—This quotation from a rather wistful letter written in the sun-drenched South of France:

> "I suffered a big loss when my suitcase of manuscripts (containing all of the poems I have written during the last four years, dictionaries, reference books, etc.) was stolen at Marseilles last summer. Luckily I had in a satchel the novel I was writing and some short stories.
>
> At present I am devoting all my spare time to prose. I find poetry such an inadequate means of saying the things I have to say."

We are ever so thankful for the God-given satchel that saved the novel and short stories, however we cannot but tremble at the thought of the beauty that may have been lost in the ill-fated suitcase. We are a little awed before the immensity of Claude McKay's outlook when he can say poetry is too small a medium for the expression of his thoughts . . . he who has so beautifully wooed and won the Muse of Poetry. [. . .] Langston Hughes' new book of poems has been receiving very good reviews . . . as an appropriate send-off for the book there comes the announcement of his having been awarded the *John Keats Prize* of twenty-five dollars by *Palms Magazine* for his group of poems, *A House of Taos*. Mark Van Doren [the white literary editor of the *Nation* and later a Pulitzer Prize winner for poetry] was the judge.

(April 1927, extract)

Selection 4

Nigger Heaven, by Carl Van Vechten, is to be on the stands the twentieth of August. However, the review copies are out and I was fortunate enough to see and read one of them. For me it is a splendid book. Mr. Van Vechten has done what I choose to call a perfect piece of research work.

(September 1926, extract)

Selection 5

There are many who would accuse Van Vechten of mere exploitation in his relations with Negroes prior to the appearance of his book about them. This is not true, for Mr. Van Vechten can cite example after example of Negroes for whom he has a lasting friendliness. . . . there are, too, a goodly number of Negroes to whom he has rendered invaluable service towards the achievement of those things their hearts have held dear. His has been a rather intimate knowledge of this little

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understood people—small wonder his interest in their chronicle, fashioned by his own hand, should linger a while.

(April 1927, extract)

Selection 6

Recently Mr. Benjamin Brawly, Professor of English Literature at Shaw University, wrote a paper entitled *The Negro Literary Renaissance* which appeared in *The Southern Workman*. Mr Brawley had little or no high praise to spare for the "younger Negro" . . . there was an almost venomous sting in the severity of his criticism of those young black throats that have dared to sing a new song. I have come by a copy of a letter which Mr. Carl Van Vechten wrote in answer to Mr. Brawley's paper and incidentally in defense of the younger Negro. This question is of too great a moment for the letter to be hidden from the public eye and so I shall take the liberty to print it here:

> My dear Mr. Brawley:
>
> I have read with interest your paper entitled the *Negro Literary Renaissance*, in the *Southern Workman*. Your opinions are your own, and although I do not share them you are entitled to them. I think, however, that in such a paper, written by a college professor, one might expect a meticulous niceness in regard to matters of fact. You write: "When Mr. [Langston] Hughes came under the influence of Mr. Carl Van Vechten and *The Weary Blues* was given to the world," etc. *The Weary Blues* had won a prize before I had read a poem by Mr. Hughes or knew him personally. The volume, of which this was the title poem, was brought to me complete before Mr. Hughes and I had ever exchanged two sentences. I am unaware even to this day, although we are the warmest friends and see each other frequently, that I have had the slightest influence on Mr. Hughes in any direction. The influence, if one exists, flows from the other side, as any one might see who read my first paper on the *Blues*, published in *Vanity Fair* for August, 1925, a full year before *Nigger Heaven* appeared, before, indeed, a line of it had been written. In this paper I quoted freely Mr. Hughes' opinions on the subject of Negro folk song, opinions which to my knowledge have not changed in the slightest.
>
> I might say a word or two apropos of the quotableness of the verse of Countee Cullen. Suffice to say that the fact is that he is quoted more frequently, with two or three exceptions, than any other American poet. I myself quoted four lines as a superscription to *Nigger Heaven*, and two other lines later in the book, I think the concluding lines of his beautiful sonnet, *Yet Do I Marvel*, I have seen printed more often (in periodicals in other languages than English, moreover) than any other two lines by any contemporary poet.
>
> I beg to remain yours very sincerely,
>
> (Signed) Carl Van Vechten.

. . . And at this juncture I am moved to quote H.G. Wells: *Art that does not argue nor demonstrate nor discuss is merely the craftsman's impudence.*

Gwendolyn B. Bennett

(July 1927, extract)

Selection 7

A few nights ago I went to see *Africana* . . . never have I seen such gorgeous abandon as was exhibited by that chorus nor have I ever seen such a perfectly matched curtain of brownness as hung behind Ethel Waters. . . . literally there were the sort of "brown girls" about which the poets sing. I grow a little tongue-tied when I begin to speak of Miss Waters, herself. She sings to her audience with the same intimacy that one feels sitting in one's own home listening to one's own gramophone. The night that I was there the audience clamored for song after song and she delightfully gave them what they knew they wanted.

(September 1927, extract)

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Selection 8

Meek Mouse, a drama by Frank Wilson [. . .] opened in New York City at the *Princess Theatre*, on Monday, February sixth. [. . . most] dramatic reviewers gave the play a fair break yet it was quite evident that only an unimportant few of them spoke of it as great drama. The plot was hackneyed . . . here and there the acting was superb . . . the music, arranged and directed by Alston Burleigh was beautiful. But to us the play in itself and its success or failure was unimportant. We were more concerned with the fact that here had arrived the day when the theatre goers of Broadway were willing to attend seriously to the things that Negroes had to say about their own lives . . . then too, here were such players as Charles Moore who had played for nine years with *Williams and Walker* in their hey-day, Laura Bowman who has played for years in Negro stock companies, and J. L. Criner long known as one of the Lafayette Players who were in essence the spirit of the old school in Negro acting and yet they were taking a leading part in the new movement towards true Negro expression upon the American stage. So . . . de sun do move . . . *Meek Mouse* was produced by Lester Walton of the staff of *New York World*.

(April 1928, extract)

Selection 9

By the same token that American Negroes are writing new books and publishing new magazines, Negroes in other parts of the world are throwing their literary caps into the reading public's ring . . . a new magazine has been published in Paris, France, by Negroes from the French Colonies. Its name is *Le Voix des Negres* . . . it was formed by a number of political and literary leaders in Paris. This committee announces its aims as follows:

> "The preservation of the colored race; to combat calumny and prejudices, and to tighten the attachment of the Negro colonies to France."

. . . the editors of the magazine are proclaiming that Negroes are proud to be Negroes. This is in direct line with the new race consciousness among colored people of intelligence in America.

(March 1927, extract)

Selection 10

New Yorkers have a way of thinking that after Gotham nothing is. I suppose because the city itself is the very door of the Nation, even the name of the place becomes the synonym for the center of the world . . . evident then that we should come to think of New York as the great book-publishing, book-consuming ogre. Needless to say, gossip of this and that thing concerning books and their makers would tend by centripetal force alone to precipitate into what groups in the great Metropolis are doing and thinking . . . it is ever so refreshing to be brought sharply up against the fact that here and there in other less motley cities are little knots of people writing, and reading . . . perhaps hoping and certainly thinking. So when came a letter from Emma Lue Sayers of Los Angeles, California—

"This is just a line from the Far West to tell you how much we enjoy the *Ebony Flute*. And when I say 'we' I mean a Saturday noon writers' organization, which Charles S. Johnson was good enough to help us form, when he was in Los Angeles a few weeks ago. We call ourselves the *Ink Slingers*."

(December 1926, extract)

Selection 11

Other contests descend upon us . . . there is the new edition of the *Opportunity* Contest for this coming year with Mr. Holstein holding out a gracious hand to the new Negro

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. . . the *Crisis* awards to be made in a comparatively short time . . . a $500 reward for the most convincing proof as to who was the author of *The Yarn of a Yankee Privateer*—the date is January 1st; the address is Funk and Wagnalls Company, 354–360 Fourth Avenue, New York . . . there will be Sesqui-Centennial Awards to be given to the best poems taken from the *Braithwaite Anthology* . . . prizes of $100, $50 and $25 will be given to the three best poems. . . . The donor of these prizes is unknown. The biggest catch by way of prizes is that offered by *The Woman's Home Companion*—John Day Company. $50,000 in two prizes; $25,000 for the best novel by a man and $25,000 for the best novel by a woman. A competitor may submit more than one manuscript and any author is eligible "regardless of nationality." The date for the manuscript to be in the hands of the judges is July 1, 1927. The address is The John Day Company, 25 West 45th Street, New York City. It seems that with all this causeway one or two of our younger writers ought to be able to procure the means of a mere sustenance at any rate.

(October 1926, extract)

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