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## On Collectors and Collecting: The Joanna Banks Collection

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Keynote address delivered on Thursday, February 20, 2020 at the Jay I. Kislak Symposium, *Black Women Writing Across Genres in the Late 20<sup>th</sup> Century*. The symposium was held in conjunction with the exhibition *Writing Across Genres: African American Women Writers in the Joanna Banks Collection*. Symposium speakers addressed the flourishing of Black women writers as a cultural force in late twentieth century America.

This online publication honors the memory of Professor Cheryl A. Wall, who passed away April 4, 2020.

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## On Collectors and Collecting: The Joanna Banks Collection

### Abstract

Professor Cheryl A. Wall reviews the histories of African American book collectors in America in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. She locates Joanna Banks's own work documenting the creativity and productivity of Black women writers within that tradition.

### Keywords

African American Women Writers, Book collectors and collecting

### Disciplines

Africana Studies | Literature in English, North America | Women's Studies

### Comments

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*Note: Cheryl A. Wall shared this revised copy of her keynote address for the symposium Black Women Writing Across Genres in the Late 20<sup>th</sup> Century shortly before her passing on April 4, 2020. We publish it with her permission and to honor her and her contributions to scholarship.*

“On Collectors and Collecting”

Cheryl A. Wall

Symposium on the Joanna Banks Collection

University of Pennsylvania

February 20, 2020

The most famous essay by a book collector is arguably Walter Benjamin’s “Unpacking My Library: A Talk About Book Collecting.” A German philosopher and cultural critic, Benjamin begins his talk describing the scene in which he is unpacking his library. He invites his reader to join him among piles of volumes that are seeing daylight again after two years of darkness. But the mood, he promises is not elegiac, but rather, “one of anticipation which these books arouse in a genuine collector.” Benjamin does not discuss the forces that impelled him to pack up his library – in 1931, the rise of Nazism had caused him to flee Germany for Paris, which he was reluctant to leave because of his library. The essay was written as he was in flight. He paused to reflect on what the books that lay in disorder around him meant:

“The most profound enchantment for the collector is the locking of individual items within a magic circle in which they are fixed as the final thrill, the thrill of acquisition, passes over them. Everything remembered and thought, everything conscious, becomes the pedestal, the frame, the base, the lock of his property. The period, the region, the craftsmanship, the former ownership – for a true

collector the whole background of an item adds up to a magic encyclopedia whose quintessence is the fate of his object.”<sup>1</sup>

Benjamin writes as if he is still lost in the memories of the European cities in which he purchased his books and the circumstances – the catalogues and auctions – that attended the purchases. He concludes his meditation with by remarking that books “do not come alive in him: it is he who lives in them.”<sup>2</sup>

I don’t know whether that description resonates with Ms. Banks, though I suspect it might. I think I can say with certainty that Walter Benjamin did not imagine someone like her being a collector of books, let alone a collector of books by and about black Americans, especially black women. Yet, when Ms. Banks describes the experience of collecting, her words echo Benjamin’s. She recalls, “it was such a thrill to look through the stacks at places like Estate Books and The Drum and Spear and find another Black author I hadn’t heard of before. . . . I don’t remember all the ways that I discovered their names, but collections like *The Negro Caravan* by Sterling Brown and the periodical *Negro Digest* were very valuable for my search. For me, the hunt was exciting.”<sup>3</sup>

I would posit that Victoria Earle Matthews could have imagined Joanna Banks, for in her 1895 essay, “The Value of Race Literature,” she argued that African Americans had a literature of our own and that if it could not win the war against race prejudice, it could do much to advance the cause. Matthews, a prominent club woman and activist, who originally presented her paper at a meeting called by black women to protest attacks on their gender and race,

outlined a capacious definition of literature, including history, biography, scientific treatises, sermons, speeches, travel writing and essays, as well as poems and novels. She understood that from the beginning black Americans had written across genres. Plainspoken in its eloquence, Matthews's essay included a roll call of black authors from William Wells Brown and Frederick Douglass to Frances Harper and Charlotte Forten Grimké, that supported her argument that a race literature existed and that women as well as men had created it.<sup>4</sup> I don't know whether Ms. Mathews had a collection of her own, though I suspect she might have. What I know for certain is that there is a longstanding tradition of collecting among African Americans.

The most famous collector is unarguably Arthur Schomburg, the Puerto-Rican born bibliophile, whose collection of books, manuscripts, prints, photographs, and memorabilia documenting the history and culture of people of African descent formed the nucleus of what is today the leading center of research on Black Culture in the United States. According to an oft-repeated account, Schomburg's impetus for collecting was an encounter with his fifth-grade teacher who told him that black people had no history. He spent his life refuting the smear. He fulfilled his vocation as a bibliophile while working on his day job as a bank messenger. Before selling his collection to the New York Public Library, and being hired to be its curator, Schomburg had invited writers, including W.E.B. Du Bois, to his home to use the collection for their research; since 1926, the public has had access to his materials. Schomburg is one of several individuals whose private collections became the foundation of major archives at colleges, universities, and libraries across the nation.

Less well known than Schomburg, Daniel Alexander Payne Murray was a generation older. Initially hired as a janitor at the Library of Congress in 1879, Murray's aptitude for locating books on the shelves attracted the attention of the library's director. Murray rose

through the ranks to the position of Assistant Librarian, but with changes in the racial attitudes of his bosses, he was demoted to Assistant. It was a demotion he never accepted, and he used the title of Assistant Librarian for the rest of his tenure. Charged with assembling the collection for the American Negro exhibit at the Paris Exposition of 1900, Murray solicited books from prominent black Americans throughout the U.S. More than 900 books were on display, and after the exposition, the books were donated to the Library of Congress.<sup>5</sup>

Across town from the Library of Congress, Jesse Moorland served both as head of the Colored Division of the Young Men's Christian Association and as a member of the board of trustees of his alma mater, Howard University. In 1914 the Congregational minister donated over 3000 books about black Americans to Howard. In his letter to the University President announcing his gift, Moorland claimed that his collection was "regarded by many experts as probably the largest and most complete yet gathered by a single individual" and that he was "giving this collection to the University because it is the one place in America where the largest and best library on this subject [of the Negro and slavery] should be constructively established. It is also the place where our young people who have the scholarly instinct should have the privilege of a complete reference library on the subject."<sup>6</sup> This gift, combined with the one given by Arthur P. Spingarn, a white civil rights lawyer and long-time president of the NAACP, gave Howard what another of its presidents, Mordecai Johnson, deemed "the largest and the most valuable research library in America for the study of Negro life and history."<sup>7</sup> In his thirty-five-year global search, Spingarn had identified and included in his collection those writers who would be considered Negro in the United States, though not necessarily in their home countries. The collection is particularly strong in its coverage of Afro-Cuban, Afro-Brazilian, and Haitian writers. The collection is particularly important as well for its works by early Black American

writers and leaders, including Jupiter Hammon, Benjamin Banneker, Richard Allen, Daniel Coker, Paul Cuffee, David Ruggles, Peter Williams, John Marrant, Absalom Jones, Lemuel Haynes, and David Walker. An inscribed volume of Gustavus Vasa (Olaudah Equiano) is also among the treasures. In the years after its initial purchase, Spingarn added hundreds of volumes to complete this collecting effort, and the collection grew to contain items in many African languages, such as Swahili, Kikuyu, Zulu, Yoruba, Luganda, Ga, Amharic, Hausa, and Xhosa.

At a time when historically black colleges lacked the resources to establish archives for black studies and when predominantly white colleges and universities had no interest in doing so, individuals like Moorland and Spingarn, Murray and Schomburg, were committed to documenting the history and culture of African Americans. Their steadfastness and their generosity laid the foundation for the development of black studies in the United States.

Most collectors were bibliophiles, but some were captivated by materials other than books. Middleton (Spike) Harris, a social worker in New York City, organized the collection that provided the nucleus for *The Black Book*, the scrapbook of black history that Toni Morrison shepherded into print as the in-house editor at Random House. In addition to his day job, Harris, founded Negro History Associates, a nonprofit group, that self-published books and filmstrips, and set up exhibits for schools and community groups. Harris adopted as his motto: “generations of Americans who have learned to accept and live with the threat of atomic war, can learn to accept and live with the facts of historic truth.”<sup>8</sup> Pursuing a passion sparked initially by a search for his paternal ancestors during slavery, he had by the 1960s amassed one of the most extensive collections of black memorabilia then in private hands.<sup>9</sup>

Published in 1974, *The Black Book* documents the history of African Americans through an array of verbal and visual texts: posters, newspaper articles, letters, speeches, bills of sale,

spirituals and blues, work songs and folk tales, children's rhymes, drawings, advertisements, photographs (both family pictures and documentary photographs of quilts, tools, furniture, and other artifacts), recipes, patent applications, sheet music, playbills and movie stills, as well as formulas for conjure, and dream interpretations.<sup>10</sup>

It is significant that Morrison insisted that *The Black Book* “was not a book to be put together by writers,” but by “collectors – people who had the original raw material documenting our life.”<sup>11</sup> Morrison, our writer par excellence, understood the role collectors play in our cultural and intellectual lives. While hers was the hand that shaped the form of *The Black Book*, her name does not appear on the cover. The authorial signatures belong to Harris and his fellow collectors: Morris Levitt, Roger Furman, and Ernest Smith.

Men and women like them in cities across America were engaged in similar acts of preservation and dissemination. These were vernacular intellectuals, not scholars or academics, but intellectuals and bibliophiles, whose primary commitment was to their communities, whether local, national, or diasporic. Consequently, they did not follow academic protocols. While they were vigilant about verifying the authenticity of the documents they collected, they made no pretense of objectivity. They were on a mission. Their goals were two-fold: on the one hand to dispel the disabling myth propagated by Hegel and many others that Africa and her people had no history, and, on the other hand, to assemble archives out of which African Americans could create enabling myths borne of a difficult but proud past.

Here in Philadelphia, Charles Blockson amassed a collection of around 150,000 items that were acquired by Temple University in 1983. Like Schomburg, Blockson had been told by a teacher, “Negroes have no history. They were born to serve white people.”<sup>12</sup> He would write

several books to refute that smear. But the Charles L. Blockson Afro-American Collection is his most important contribution. The books, prints, manuscripts, letters and publications span four centuries from Leo Africanus to Langston Hughes and span geographical regions from Africa, through Europe and the Caribbean to the United States. The collection is especially strong in the history of blacks in Pennsylvania, the Underground Railroad, and the life and achievements of longtime Philadelphia resident, Paul Robeson.

In Los Angeles, Mamyé A. Clayton, a librarian who worked at USC and UCLA, was inspired to assemble a collection of rare and out-of-print books, documents, films, music, photographs and memorabilia so that “children would know that black people had done great things.” Her collection included a first edition of Phillis Wheatley’s 1773 volume, *Poems on Various Subjects Religious and Moral*, but it was best known for extensive holdings on the black experience in the American West, especially focused on the black migration to California and the history of blacks in Hollywood. Clayton had founded the *Black Talkies on Parade Film Festivals* in 1977.<sup>13</sup> For 13 years after her death in 2006, Clayton’s institution succeeded in sharing her collections with the community. But in 2019, the museum was evicted, and no permanent home has yet been located.<sup>14</sup>

Fortunately, we are celebrating a different outcome here today. Like Schomburg, Moorland, Murray, and Blockson, Banks has found an institutional home for her collection where it will be preserved and made available to all those who wish to take advantage of it. The collection’s strengths are manifest, and they build on the collections that precede it. The sheer volume of its holdings and the range of genres it includes are in the tradition of black collections. While it is first and foremost a collection of books, it features photographs and other complementary materials. It covers historical subjects and includes books by canonical authors

such as James Baldwin and Langston Hughes. Yet, just as each collection has its particular strengths – the history of slavery and abolition, the African diaspora, or a particular region, the strength of this collection stands apart from the collections whose histories I have briefly sketched.

What distinguishes the Joanna Banks Collection to my mind is first its focus on women as cultural producers, and secondly its engagement with the recent past as opposed to the more distant histories of slavery and segregation. It reminds some of us that we have lived through a renaissance of black women’s creativity, a renaissance that is the legacy of the Civil Rights Movement, of Black Power, and Feminism, a confluence of social movements that created conditions in which black women could write and then find publishers for their work.

The Joanna Banks Collection is not devoted to proving the humanity of black women; since well before 1970 we have been able to take our humanity for granted. The Collection celebrates the gifts of imagination, expertise, and eloquence that black women in stunning numbers have brought to the page. The thrill is no longer the province of the collector; it is no longer the thrill of the hunt. It is now the thrill of discovery, the thrill that we who are fortunate enough to explore the treasures collected here experience.

The Joanna Banks Collection documents the creativity and productivity of black women in its 3000 volumes of works by and about them, written across the genres of fiction, folklore, poetry, drama, essay, biography and autobiography, and scholarly monograph. In addition, there are 1000 volumes of children’s literature -- many beautifully illustrated -- that make black children their subjects, more than 400 cookbooks, and 159 periodicals ranging from the *ABBWA (American Black Book Writers Association) Journal* to *Y’Bird (Yardbird magazine)*. This collection within the collection includes such popular magazines as *Ebony* and *Ms.* as well as

some that are rare. I think of *Heresies* the feminist journal published in Brooklyn from 1977 to 1993 and *OO- Sh 'Bop*, a journal of creative culture published in Washington DC.

The Collection is filled with such singular treasures. But I want to suggest the larger contexts in which we may comprehend them. The first is literary: In 1970 Toni Morrison and Alice Walker published their first novels, *The Bluest Eye* and *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* respectively. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, an autobiography by another then unknown, Maya Angelou, climbed the bestseller list. Toni Cade edited *The Black Woman*, a volume featuring a chorus of women including fiction writers (Paule Marshall and Sherley Anne Williams), poets (Nikki Giovanni and Audre Lorde), and essayists, from jazz vocalist Abbey Lincoln to the activist Frances Beale. Beale's essay was tellingly titled "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female." In the aftermath of movements for civil rights and black power and at the height of the women's movement, black women began to insist on naming their own experiences. They made themselves heard. Within a decade, their voices redefined African American literature. By 1993, when Morrison was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, she and her black female contemporaries had remade the literary landscape of the United States.

Black women writers changed the plots that had governed much of black writing: the conflicts across the color line. They introduced new plots, characters, and prose. Their protagonists were often females, who faced choices every bit as challenging as their male precursors, though their dilemmas were often more private than public. Frequently set in small towns and rural backwaters, this writing focused on conflicts between black men and women as well as between blacks and whites. Authors told their stories in language, that was sometimes vernacular, sometimes formal, but often distinctive. Angelou, Morrison, Lorde, Clifton, Ntozake Shange, and Alice Walker created authorial signatures as recognizable as the vocal

signatures of the black women singers who sometimes inspired them.

It is no surprise that the writers I have named are richly represented in the Banks Collection. What may be surprising is how many of them wrote across genres. In addition to the autobiographies for which she is best known, Angelou wrote poems, children's books and cookbooks. Clifton may be as well known for her children's books as for her poetry, including *The Black BCs* and the series of books featuring Everett Anderson. Ann Petry's *Tituba of Salem Village* and *Harriet Tubman, Conductor of the Underground Railroad* were published as juvenile books as were several volumes of poems by Gwendolyn Brooks. Shange's *I Live in Music* and Walker's *To Hell With Dying* are two of the most stunning children's books published over the past several decades. And, of course, Morrison herself authored children's books as well as essays and speeches in addition to her eleven novels.

Scrolling through the collection's catalogue, I was reminded of the many writers who are less celebrated and in need perhaps of recuperation: the poets Ai, Birtha Becky, and Jayne Cortez, the playwrights Alice Childress and Adrienne Kennedy, and the poet, novelist, short-story writer, and children's book author, Sherley Anne Williams. For graduate students, in search of a dissertation topic, this collection is full of possibilities.

The second context that helps us put this collection in focus is the social and political context of black feminism. I don't have time to give you a primer on black feminism, so just let me read a statement from bell hooks, who has many books in the Banks Collection:

By repudiating the popular notion that the focus of feminist movement should be social equality of the sexes and emphasizing eradicating the cultural basis of group oppression, our own analysis would require an exploration of all

aspects of women's political reality. This would mean that race and class oppression would be recognized as feminist issues with as much relevance as sexism.

When feminism is defined in such a way that it calls attention to the diversity of women's social and political reality, it centralizes the experiences of all women, especially the women whose social conditions have been least written about, studied, or changed by political movements.<sup>15</sup>

The women least written about, studied or changed by political movements would, in hooks's view, be black women. In her writings, hooks reads the lives of black women through a political lens. Thus, their experiences under slavery, under segregation, and under the neoliberal conditions of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries are all comprehended as political. The feminist maxim, the personal is political, renews its meaning through hooks's theorizing. All aspects of women's everyday experiences are political realities that require our attention and our exploration so that we might undertake their transformation.

Thus, the work that black women did in their own kitchens as well as in the kitchens in which they were employed takes on a political valence. Hooks's analysis complements the understandings that cooks like Leah Chase in New Orleans, Edna Lewis in Charleston, and Sylvia Woods in Harlem had already articulated. Their individual cookbooks as well as the study of African American cookbooks titled, *The Jemima Code*, teach us that any claim that the United States has to a cuisine worth the mention runs through the kitchens of black women. The cookbooks in the Banks Collection foreground black women's artistry as well their labor, their talents as well their skill. Diasporic connections animate books of recipes from Louisiana,

Creole and Cajun, from Jamaica, from Danfuskie, and the Sea Islands more generally. We are not surprised to come across a book entitled, *Mother Africa's Table: A Collection of West African and African American Recipes and Cultural Traditions*. Or, to put a twenty-first century spin on things, *The Ethnic Vegetarian: Traditional and Modern Recipes from Africa, America, and the Caribbean*. Or, to take it old school, consider *The Church Ladies' Celestial Suppers and Sensible Advice*. Personally, I would like to spend some time in the *Brown Sugar Kitchen: New Style Downhome Recipes from Sweet West Oakland*. Just thinking about Oakland as downhome makes me smile.

As bell hooks also reminds us, black feminist theory and praxis require us to think seriously about the politics of raising children. She writes in *All About Love: New Visions*, “When we love children, we acknowledge by our every action that they are not property, that they have rights - that we respect and uphold their rights.”<sup>16</sup> No books in this collection have a greater hold on my imagination than the books written for black children. Some of the most celebrated authors – Eloise Greenfield, Andrea Pinkney, Patricia McKissack, Walter Dean Myers, and John Stepto – are represented in all their vibrancy. As one who came of age before books like this existed, I wonder what differences such books have made in the consciousness of children who learn to read using books that mirror their own beauty. That is something literacy educators will want to study.

Let me close by pressing on the word *love*: The Joanna Banks Collection is surely an expression of love. The definition of bibliophile is one who loves books, and this collection testifies to a profound love of books, and I would posit, to a profound love of black people. It documents our lives, especially the lives of black women, in all their complexity: from our theorizing to our nurturing, our pride in telling a good story and in setting a fine table, our love

of language and of each other. That love is now preserved in this collection, a collection that invites students, scholars, and regular readers, now and for generations, to come sit at a welcome table and partake.

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Unpacking My Library: A Talk About Book Collecting.” 1931. In Philip Lopate, ed. *The Art of the Personal Essay* (New York: Anchor Books, 1994), 364.

<sup>2</sup> Benjamin, 369.

<sup>3</sup> *Penn Libraries News*. “Major Collection Focusing on African American Women, Cookery, and Children’s Literature Comes to Penn Libraries.” 18 February 2019.

<sup>4</sup> Victoria Earle Matthews. “The Value of Race Literature.” 1895. Reprinted in *The New Negro: Readings on Race, Representation and African American Culture*. Eds. Henry Louis Gates and Gene Jarrett (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2007), 287-297.

<sup>5</sup> Alex H. Poole, “‘The Sage of Negro Bibliography’: Daniel A.P. Murray, The Librarian as Public Intellectual. *Library Quarterly*. 90.1(2019)” 56-93.

<sup>6</sup> Letter from Jesse Moorland to Stephen Newman, 18 December 1914. Quoted in Thomas Battle, “Moorland-Spingarn Research Center,” *Library Quarterly*. 58.2 (1988): 143-163.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Battle, 146.

<sup>8</sup> The motto was printed on the letterhead of Negro History Associates.

<sup>9</sup> Biography of Middleton Harris, Random House Files, Box 1265. Butler Library, Columbia University.

<sup>10</sup> For an extended analysis of *The Black Book*, see Cheryl A. Wall, “Reading *The Black Book*: Between the Lines of History,” *Arizona Quarterly*, 68.4 (Winter 2012): 105-130.

<sup>11</sup> Toni Morrison, “Rediscovering Black History,” *The New York Times Magazine*, (11 August 1974), 16.

<sup>12</sup> William Robbins, “Pennsylvania Blacks’ Life Illuminated,” *New York Times*, November 16, 1981: A14.

<sup>13</sup> <https://claytonmuseum.org/>

<sup>14</sup> “Dennis J. Freeman, “Evicted! Mayme A Clayton Library and Museum Looking for a New Home,” *Culver City Observer*, August 8, 2019.

<sup>15</sup> bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Boston: South End Press, 1984), 25.

<sup>16</sup> bell hooks, *All About Love: New Visions* (New York: Harper, 2000), 20.