Foreword

It is fitting that this first collection of Gwendolyn Bennett's published and unpublished work is appearing ninety years after Bennett left Harlem in 1928, when her spectacular rise in the firmament of literary stars known as the Harlem Renaissance ended. Bennett had been a central part of young artists making a big splash in Jazz Age New York, such as Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, and Aaron Douglas, who joined more senior colleagues Claude McKay, Jessie Fauset, Zora Neale Hurston, Nella Larsen, James Weldon Johnson, and many others to create the most powerful black arts movement ever seen up to that point. Despite her star power in the 1920s, as Belinda Wheeler and Louis J. Parascandola make clear in their splendid introduction, Bennett was completely forgotten by the time of her death in 1981, and it has taken nearly four decades to recover the lost poetry, fiction, visual art, literary columns, and social activism that she contributed to this flowering of modern African American culture in the age of Jim Crow. Confined to the small body of work published in her lifetime and challenged by archival material scattered throughout several libraries, scholars have struggled to develop critical models that adequately describe Bennett's artistic vision. Among the most successful of these critics are Sandra Govan, Cheryl Wall, Nina Miller, Mark Saunders, Michael Chaney, Theresa Leininger-Miller, Denean Sharpley-Whiting, and Belinda Wheeler herself.

Thanks to this scholarly attention, Gwendolyn Bennett's poetry and fiction are now included in major anthologies of the Harlem Renaissance, and she is commonly profiled in biographical entries, but we badly need *Heroine of the Harlem Renaissance and Beyond: Gwendolyn Bennett's Selected Writings*. Without it, we are looking through a glass darkly. When I put together my anthology of women poets from this era, *Shadowed Dreams* (2006), it was clear that the quality of Bennett's poetry put her in the top category of New Negro artists along with Angelina Weld Grimke, Helene Johnson, Georgia Douglas Johnson, and the male pantheon of writers with whom we are familiar, but biographical sketches of Bennett only hinted at

what inspired her work. As well, little did most people know that she had written over twice as much unpublished poetry as she had published while she soldiered through the dark days of the Great Depression. Only when I tackled a literary biography of Bennett for *Aphrodite's Daughters* (2016) did I read through the treasure trove of over fifty typed poems in her archive at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. These riveting pieces, along with her diaries from 1925 and 1936 and her autobiographical essays, fleshed out a lyrical poet whose haunting published verses were both beautiful and sharp-edged. Love, longing, hatred, and bitterness lay at the heart of these lyrics, yet their source was deeply buried in writings that never saw the light of day. Here, Wheeler and Parascandola have made available, along with much other material, fourteen of the unpublished poems, nine of the autobiographical essays, and fourteen of the diary entries written in Paris while she was on an art scholarship in 1925 and in Harlem as she struggled to put her life together a decade later.

Bennett's twenty-three published poems from 1923 to 1928 (with one appearing in 1934) were praised in her own era for their luminous portrayal of black women as beautiful, powerful, passionate, sensual, and proud. "To a Dark Girl" will always be one of the period's most well-known calls to never forget a dual heritage of greatness and enslavement. "Street Lamps in Early Spring" will likewise forever shimmer as a glorious portrait of night as an alluring dark goddess of queenly power. This edition includes these two along with thirteen of Bennett's best-known pieces, most of them from *Opportunity* and Countee Cullen's 1927 anthology *Caroling Dusk*. The youthful poet with her love of romance and fantasy who published these verses would give way to a mature woman unafraid to voice her deepest desires for erotic transport or her bitter disillusionment at love lost in later poems that never saw the light of day. "Train Monotony," "Dirge for a Free Spirit," and "Thin Laughter" are among the many unpublished poems that describe the deterioration of Bennett's marriage to Alfred Jackson, her tumultuous love affair with painter Norman Lewis, the traumatic loss of her father in what was likely a suicidal leap into the path of a subway car on a hot August day in 1926, and other painful disruptions Bennett kept out of the news. The editors have included this biographical information in their introductory material, some of which comes down to us from the black press. This kind of historical and biographical framing is key to unlocking the mystery of Gwendolyn Bennett the artist.

The diary entries included in this volume illuminate the poetry, as do Bennett's memoir essays written largely in the 1930s when she looked back at her childhood and adolescence. We learn a great deal about her parents from these essays, especially her father, who grew up in a small Texas town right after the Civil War and survived its cotton fields only to find himself working as a janitor after earning a law degree in Washington, DC, and evading the authorities. Bennett's parents were teachers whose intelligence could not insulate them from the tightening restrictions of segregation even in the nation's capital, nor from the disintegration of their marriage. Bennett learned firsthand as a child the difficulties of earning a middle-class standard of living even as an educated African American in the early twentieth century. She also learned to construct elaborate fairylands of romance to protect herself from some of life's harsher edges: the splintering of her family, the extramarital dalliances of her father, his futile efforts to establish a successful law practice, his many brushes with the law. The diary entries reflect these challenges and financial worries Bennett faced trying to survive as a student and artist in Jim Crow America. We see in the diaries as well her painful struggles to form stable intimate relationships, having been estranged from her mother, subjected to the violent loss of her father at age twenty-four, and trapped in a failed marriage to an alcoholic womanizer. The beautiful lyric voice Bennett found in her published poetry is rooted in emotional terrain, both public and private, that these materials describe with rare candor and raw passion. Here we see the strength it took for Bennett to believe in herself as an artist, writer, and woman worthy of love. The sunny smile so often seen in photographs of Bennett is a sign of this fortitude as well as a reflection of her incredible resilience.

Heroine of the Harlem Renaissance and Beyond not only draws back the curtain on Bennett's challenging life while adding to our appreciation of her art, it shines a light on her abiding commitment to "uplift the race" in the words of New Negro activists. Sandra Govan resurrected Bennett with her 1980 dissertation, *Gwendolyn Bennett: Portrait of an Artist Lost*, when she reminded us that this powerful poet was equally a central player in creating the Harlem Renaissance through her editorial work, her literary column "The Ebony Flute," and her public readings. Govan later spotlighted Bennett's organizing activity during the 1930s when she wrote essays for the Welfare Council of New York, directed the Harlem Community Art Center, and co-founded the George Washington Carver

School for Democracy. Bennett was a writer-activist par excellence and a precursor to community organizers in the 1960s and beyond. The selection of editorials, book reviews, and articles, many of them published for the first time here, reflect that activist who was looking to strengthen Harlem's community, forge ties between artists and students, bring art into the lives of ordinary people, and fight back against the exploitation of workers and the ravages of unemployment.

Bennett's activism surfaces in her creative work, too, and by including the unpublished pieces in their collection along with the published ones, the editors make clear that Bennett kept a firm grip on attacking sexism, racism, and class exploitation in all the genres within which she operated. Her two published short stories, "Wedding Day" (1926) and "Tokens" (1927), focus on down-and-out black men in Paris who are eaten alive by racism and succumb to its ravaging force. The unpublished poems "I Build America," "Sweat," "Wise Guys," "The Hungry Ones," and "[Rapacious women who sit on steps at night]" showcase a poet who was comfortable with the sweeping story mode of a folk ballad, the proletarian sensibility of a Steinbeck or Dos Passos, the unvarnished vernacular of working-class laborers, the desperate poverty of children and prostitutes, and the gnawing hunger of people in breadlines. She never wavered in her commitment to making these people on the bottom visible, or calling out the callous system that used and discarded them. Bennett's courageous radicalism drew the attention of right-wing politicians, and she was forced out of the Carver School only to come back to life working in the Consumers Union until her retirement in 1968. We see from her example, along with those of Dorothy West, Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Richard Wright, W. E. B. Du Bois, and others, how inextricably linked were the artistic and political goals of the New Negro movement and how radically its leaders deconstructed American capitalism's racist scaffolding.

Wheeler and Parascandola have given us a tremendous gift with all this primary material and more: a chapter of an unfinished novel hardly anyone knew existed, twenty letters to family and friends, visual art (including a painting Wheeler discovered that survived the fire destroying nearly all of Bennett's art), and essays describing Paris from the vantage point of a black woman artist at the height of modernism, Harlem in the depths of the Depression, and a terrifying night with the Klan in Florida. As they say in their introduction, "Together these works compose the single volume

that Bennett never completed in her lifetime. Collectively, these writings will add depth of appreciation to those admirers of Bennett's work during the Harlem Renaissance as well as those interested in the period in general. They also will aid our understanding of radical politics within the African American community in the 1930s." For a collection to offer all of that is truly a landmark moment in Harlem Renaissance, feminism, and modernism studies. We will all benefit from having Gwendolyn Bennett's multifaceted talent, courage, and vision put on full display in *Heroine of the Harlem Renaissance and Beyond*. I am tremendously grateful for it and look forward to the much-needed scholarship that will undoubtedly follow in its wake.

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