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A homemade history: Documenting the Harlem Renaissance in Alexander Gumby's scrapbooks

Irina D. Rasmussen

'The promissory notes were everywhere.'

Hugh Kenner, *A Homemade World* (1975)

A significant part of L. S. Alexander Gumby's vast collection of handmade scrapbooks pertains to the movement in the African American creative arts in the early decades of the twentieth century, which became known as the Harlem Renaissance – a moniker that captures the African Americans' unprecedented cultural awakening and the role of the Harlem district of New York City as a symbolic capital of new artistic developments in America and worldwide.¹ Assembled with great care, Gumby's scrapbooks attend meticulously to the movement's progress at home and abroad, preserving every available record of its local, national and cross-continental reception. The entire collection is composed with scissors. But Gumby's agency as a documentarian of the movement yields its own narrative implications in the way the movement's history is refracted through the sentimental, intimate filter afforded by the scrapbook format. What emerges is a cross-over form of vernacular historiography whose uniqueness lies in how the collection's scope, design and circulation transform scrapbooking into a curatorial undertaking guided by conservationist, aesthetic and social aims. The focus of this chapter is on how Gumby's editorial practices, compositional methods and book-making techniques allow him to integrate public records with private memorabilia, and to endow his collection with the co-equal qualities of a historiographic archive and a curated exhibition.

¹ The collection was donated to Columbia University in 1951 and preserved institutionally in the Rare Book & Manuscript section at Butler Library, named *Alexander Gumby Collection of Negroiana* ([ca. 1800]–1981).

Channelling the ferment of Harlem as an artistic and cultural hub, the collection and activities of the Gumby Book Studio that housed it reflect how the collections constituted a text-based public – an open-ended, widely accessible public that organized itself through circulation of texts and exchange of books and ideas.² My analysis takes its cue from Gumby's forward-looking interpretation of the present, shaped by his sense of the past and his recognition of the future reader. The form-sensitive reading I develop here is attuned to Gumby's method of composition through layout and assemblage, and to his exploration of the capacity of vernacular historiography as form to bring out the social potency of imagination. I argue that the scrapbook historiography in Gumby's execution facilitates the emergence of a *public* for circulating discursive flows. These flows transform the collection and the Gumby Book Studio into a *provisional institution* for consolidating formally innovative developments in the arts. These functions of circulation and institutionalization suggest that Gumby's scrapbooks need to be understood as an open-ended and a future-oriented archive designed to disseminate new historical awareness and shape the reception of the Harlem Renaissance in the future.

While the Harlem Renaissance as a temporal and qualitative period-reference keeps shifting and expanding, the emergence of black modernism in America and the efforts to organize and define it as a movement with shared socially interventionist aims occurred simultaneously. The key contributors – artists, critics, publishers, activists and public intellectuals – acted in response to site-specific issues, but also reached out to wider geographical contexts in Europe, the anglophone world and across the American hemisphere. Black modernism's self-definition owed much to the same tactics of manifesto writing and other forms of public address as those deployed by their modernist counterparts' elsewhere, in Europe and across the continents. New poetic techniques allowed them to break away from stifling expressive forms, while publishing outlets, some newly set up to experiment with publication formats, facilitated this artistic ferment.

Collecting, editing, publishing and anthologizing were central to consolidating new developments in the arts. In critical accounts of African American modernism, several key events are considered to be the movement's milestones. Lined up chronologically, these events demonstrate how popular entertainment, literary and artistic production, and experimental publishing were closely

² I use Michael Warner's (2005) definition of publics and counterpublics in his *Publics and Counterpublics* study.

intertwined. The 1921 opening of *Shuffle Along* – a musical revue with emerging stars of upmarket music hall entertainment such as Josephine Baker, Florence Mills and Adelaide Hall – was followed by the publication of James Weldon Johnson's anthology *The Book of American Negro Poetry* in 1922 and, a year later, Jean Toomer's *Cane* in 1923. The popularization of new musical, choreographic and poetic idioms in these works, all attuned to folk and street culture, spurred the search for fresh directions in the arts. A singular, well-documented event in the history of the Harlem Renaissance was the gathering of black literati at the Civic Club in Manhattan on 21 March 1924, aimed to help disseminate the work of black artists. Its principal organizer, the editor of *Opportunity* Charles S. Johnson, brought established publishers together with promising young African American writers to promote their debut. The young invitees, among them Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, Gwendolyn Bennett and Jessie Fauset, met with W. E. B. Du Bois, the founding editor of *The Crisis*, as well as the senior editors and heads of major publishing houses such as Harper & Brothers and Boni & Liveright. A year later, in 1925, the New Negro Renaissance was launched with the publication of a *Survey Geographic* special issue. The selection of essays, short stories and poems chosen by its invited editor, Alain Locke, was a public acknowledgement of a new era in black cultural expressions in America.³

The actual cultural scene was, of course, more crowded than an account given in a few bold strokes is able to recognize. The movement's dynamics owed much to countless smaller events and involved numerous agents. The production and dissemination of black modernism involved participants and scenes that are still waiting to be acknowledged and included in the historiography of 1920s Harlem. When Langston Hughes (1940: 178) wrote about Harlem from the viewpoint of the 1940s, he remarked that its literati sought to solve the race problem 'through Art plus Gladys Bentley'.⁴ His seemingly acerbic remark in fact draws attention to how the Renaissance constituted itself as a particular *public*, to use Michael Warner's term, where discursive and artistic practices converged with the political project of black emancipation. Defined as such,

³ My summary of the constitutive events of the Renaissance is indebted to Cheryl A. Wall's (2016) introduction to the movement.

⁴ Bentley was a talented piano player and blues singer who performed in men's clothing in gay speakeasies and clubs in Harlem; her voice was distinguished by 'characteristic interplay of a throaty alto with her improvisational trumpet-like notes that seemed to pop out of the top of her head' (Wilson 2010: 185).

not only did the Harlem Renaissance produce various 'modes of address, style, and spaces of circulation' (Warner 2005: 117), but it emerged from 'local acts of reading or scenes of speech' while reaching out to the 'general horizon of public opinion' (ibid.: 116). As Warner (ibid.: 16) explains his term, 'Publics are essentially intertextual, frameworks for understanding texts against an organized background of the circulation of other texts', not only by interweaving views and opinions to highlight public debate, but also by reflecting on the system behind circulation and production of knowledge. Vis-à-vis the silence about black experience in both the white press and the official annals of historiography, the artistic scenes and cultural platforms under the auspices of the Harlem Renaissance constituted themselves as distinctly African American to fill this void. The Renaissance-produced anthologies, journal issues, exhibitions and popular shows were collective undertakings, organized on a call-and-response model to be able to mediate black cultural achievements to diverse audiences.

Of further importance in Hughes's humorous remark is his blending of new art with Gladys Bentley, as her artistic career illuminates the countercultural aspect of the Renaissance. A lesbian club performer and a cross-dresser by necessity, to secure a job as a pianist within the male-dominated profession, Bentley began her career as a pianist in the late 1920s, 'playing the rent party circuit' (Wilson 2010: 155). 'Performing in her trademark white tuxedo', she made a name for herself by 'taking popular, mainstream songs and substituting the lyrics with her own off-color treatment' (ibid.). By the mid-1930s she was headlining at Harlem's Ubangi Club, described in the *New York Times* (1936: 11) as 'not only a fixture at' the club 'but a figure in the community'. Notorious for flirting with women in the audience, she drew large audiences partly because of the subversive appeal of her irreverent lyrics and partly because of her famed growling voice and daring piano compositions. In this context, Hughes's comment recognizes Bentley's success in creating her own cultural expression and a distinct social position for herself, which were both productive and disruptive. Bentley, the cultural phenomenon, suggests that the Harlem Renaissance encompassed not only publics but also the speech acts and positionality typical of *counterpublics*. Although a counterpublic is generally associated with an oppositional stance, foundational to its dynamics is not primarily its mode of protest but its capacity to 'mark itself off' against the 'cultural horizon' of the majority and challenge 'the hierarchy among media' (Warner 2005: 119). To view the Renaissance through the prism of its particular *publics* requires an account of how they constituted themselves in response to the movement's marginalization by cultural and state

politics. To widen this view further means considering how its *counterpublics* organized themselves in response to the hierarchies that defined expressive forms and controlled artistic production and circulation. These twin positionalities clearly affected the aesthetic and material practices central to the Renaissance practitioners' self-definition.

Alexander Gumby: A historiographer and book maker

In singling out Bentley, Hughes draws attention to an aesthetic practice and a subject position that enabled alternative agents within the Renaissance to make significant contributions. Alexander Gumby (1886–1961) was one such flamboyant personality in the midst of the Harlem artistic crowd, known as 'a bibliophile, amateur historian, social butterfly and proprietor of a well-known salon' – the Gumby Book Studio, on Fifth Avenue, 131st Street, in Harlem (Nugent 2002: 223). As an openly homosexual black man, Gumby, or the Count as he was known, channelled his desire to transcend the social limitations of his doubly-disadvantageous position into a 'fast life of the bohemian' (*ibid.*) through a life-long patronage of the arts, which he fulfilled by amassing a substantive collection of rare books and more than 300 hand-made, folio-size scrapbooks, each of about 100 pages, devoted to black history, culture and the arts. Both the rare books and the scrapbooks were on display in the Book Studio for its guests and visitors, with the scrapbooks incorporating news clippings, photographs, letters, theatre programmes, reviews and essays as well as whole issues or parts of literary journals. These records of black modernity are carefully assembled to give a sense of a collective undertaking and capture the impact of an unfolding cultural field.⁵

⁵ In her article 'Otherwise Lost or Forgotten: Collecting Black History in L. S. Alexander Gumby's "Negroana" Scrapbooks', Kristin Gilger (2015: 124, note 2) notes that while 'Gumby is generally acknowledged as an interesting personality within surveys of the period', 'his scrapbooks are not well studied'. Her bibliography references the 'Gumby Book Studio' entry in *Encyclopedia of the Harlem Renaissance*, Cary D. Wintz and Paul Finkelman, eds (New York: Routledge, 2004): 1: 455–6; an entry on 'Gumby Book Studio Quarterly' in *Encyclopedia of the Harlem Literary Renaissance: The Essential Guide to the Lives and Works of the Harlem Renaissance Writers*, Lois Brown, ed. (New York: Facts on File, 2006): 207–8; and the entry 'Levi Sandy Alexander Gumby' in *Harlem Renaissance Lives: From the African American National Biography*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, eds (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009): 230–2. In her discussion, Gilger (*ibid.*: 111) shows how Gumby's use of 'collage aesthetics' in his scrapbooks contributed to 'the making of African American modernity'.

The visual design of the collection projects quality and exhibition value, which made the scrapbooks well known in Harlem for their exquisite artisan design and the masterful and purposeful framing of the material. Gumby's approach to layout and composition bears all the hallmarks of curation, 'honor[ing] clippings through elaborate presentation' and displaying 'marvels of frame making, full of pockets and envelopes for a reader to explore' (Garvey 2012: 162).⁶ Invitations to exhibit his scrapbooks during various black history weeks in Philadelphia, Boston and New York City recognized the collection's salient exhibition value. Carter G. Woodson, the editor of the *Journal of Negro History* and one of the founders of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, wrote a personal letter to Gumby on 4 January 1929 to invite him 'to the now well established annual observance of Negro History week', commending Gumby for his work to compensate for actions not taken in some areas of public life (CMI [abbreviation for custom-made acid-free clam-shell type] Box 41, 'Scrapbook 11: Book Reviews, Part II').⁷ The opportunity to tour and exhibit his collection created a further incentive for Gumby to think of his scrapbooks as visual artefacts aimed at the general public.

The collection's archival qualities are salient not only in the materials' scope but also in Gumby's occasional instructions to his readers on how to handle them.⁸ His ultimate vision was clearly for his scrapbooks to be perused and studied for research purposes. In the essay accompanying his donation of the collection to the Special Collection of Butler Library at Columbia University, Gumby (1952: 23) notes that his archive is intended 'for serious historical research' as well as advancing book-making craftsmanship.

The Gumby Book Studio clearly constituted a space where thought and practice informed each other, serving as a gathering point for its participants

⁶ Ellen Gruber Garvey (2012: 163), a book historian, explains how Gumby 'pasted clippings onto special heavy brown paper, made frames for them of leather-grained bookbinder's tape, and wrote identifications for them on cards engraved "Gumby Scrap Book". He had some specially bound and stamped on the spine with titles in gold ... Some volumes push assertion of his importance as a compiler past even the spine stamping and engraved cards. He sometimes included his own homoerotic Ex Libris bookplate, featuring three scantily clad men sporting with a book.'

⁷ All references to the individual scrapbooks appear in the text indicated by their number in the catalogue of the Butler Library's *Alexander Gumby Collection of Negroiana*, MS#0527. The references include an archival-storage box number as well as the referenced scrapbook's title and number in the collection.

⁸ In 'Scrapbook 21: Countee Cullen', a pocket for the November 1924 issue of *The Bookman* is superimposed on news and poetry clippings. The pocket's corner is marked with a hand-drawn arrow and note, 'Please buckle'. In another instance, an envelope with clippings of ads for runaway slaves carries a lengthy instruction: 'Notice: Handle with care in removing and returning to packet. Don't force—go slow' ('Scrapbook 89: The Negro in Bondage').

to address, connect and reach out to the general public. Compiled in part from the contributions of the Harlem collective and designed to invite broader public use, the scrapbook collection defined the rationale for the Studio's social mission to provide a platform for distinct 'acts of reading and scenes of speech' (Warner 2005: 116). More concretely, the Studio's social activities included poetry readings, musical events, art exhibitions and musical recitals for school students, tea parties for society debutantes and meetings of the Ladies Progressive Club and the black college students' fraternity the Scrollers' Club, to mention a few. The Studio's social standing clearly exceeded that of a traditional society salon or coterie to encompass a variety of discourse publics and textual practices.⁹ While furnished originally for entertaining friends, it became a workspace 'in which to master the art of making scrapbooks' (Gumby 1952: 21). Hosting his friends

⁹ 'Scrapbook 36: The Gumby Studio, No. 2' contains posters, programmes and news items about events hosted by the Gumby Studio as well as requests from schools to host students' recitals, art balls and exhibitions, among other activities. Among the recorded events are musical recitals (by John Perry and Andrew Perkins in March 1928; by David R. Auld's violin students with Carmen Shepperd's piano students in May 1930), dramatic readings of poetry (by T. Thomas Fortune Fletcher and Richard Jefferson in December 1929; by Willis E. Branch in February 1930), an exhibition by the Art Students' Club (October 1929), Sunday afternoon teas hosted by young women's clubs of debutantes and a Musical Tea event (November 1929) organized by the young men's Scrollers' Club (the Delta chapter of Kappa Alpha Psi college fraternity for black students, whose objective was to stimulate fellowship among the pledges of Kappa Alpha Psi fraternity and promote the intellectual, social and moral welfare of its members). In a thank-you letter to the Gumby Studio, the Scrollers' Club members write that they 'would be very pleased to know that you accept our whole learned thankfulness for your kind help in everything to make our affair more successful, and for permitting us the use of your energetic man – a man who looked out for, upheld, and kept the interest of his race and their doings where the whole world can see and read, at any time ... The atmosphere of this unique studio was enjoyed by all our guests and friends. Not only were they pleased with our entertainment, but many of them who had visited your delightful studio for the first time, were surprised, even astonished, to know that in their race they had such a conscientious and diligent documentarian' ('Scrapbook 36'). Some records of the events demonstrate the historiographic potentialities of Gumby's collection. One record leads straight through to New York in the twenty-first century – a recent permanent exhibition, 'New York at Its Core', which opened in November 2016 at the Museum of the City of New York, contains a story about the 'Cotton Sculpture' dolls designed by Bermuda-born New Yorker Ruby Bailey (1912–2003). The twenty-nine fashion 'Manikins' in the collection 'are not only unique representations of animation and balance, but they provide compelling insights into her creative vision at a time when the "Black is Beautiful" ethos ignited her 1960s Harlem community'. (See Phyllis Magidson and Chris Piazza, 'Resuscitating Ruby's Dolls', 17 April 2017, in *Stories: Behind-the Scenes* catalogue, <https://www.mcny.org/story/resuscitating-rubys-dolls>.) However, the story of Ruby Bailey and her public discovery in 2004 begins in Gumby's scrapbooks. Gumby's record of the Art Students' Club art exhibition (October 1929) preserves the first public mention of Ruby Bailey's distinguished talent. A clipping from the *New York Amsterdam News* (26 November 1930) contains a review of the exhibition, 'Students' Exhibit Begins at Gumby's'. The reviewer, signed only as T. T. F., identifies among the 'bright spots in the exhibit ... the pastels of Edna Rabouin, the pen-and-ink sketches of Bernie Robynson and the charcoal and pastel studies of Ruby Bailey ... Miss Bailey's charcoal study of Mr. Gumby, director of the Gumby Studio, and her pastel, "Doris," are worthy of special notice and commendation' ('Scrapbook 36'). See also the story of the curation and restoration of Bailey's designs, <https://www.nyxt.nyc/museum-city-ny/new-york-at-its-core-ruby-bailey>.

in Harlem meant that ‘friends in turn brought their friends who brought their friends, *regardless of race or color* – those who were seriously interested in arts and letters’, making the Studio ‘a rendezvous for intellectuals, musicians, and artists’; in fact, ‘the first *unpremeditated interracial* movement in Harlem’ (ibid.: 21–2, emphasis added). Gumby’s hospitality and cultural activism increased the Studio’s outreach. He became known for his habit of surprising his visitors by ‘pull[ing] an enormous ledger-sized book from a shelf and [informing] you that it is devoted to *you* and *your* doings’ (Aubrey Bowser, ‘Book Review: A Negro Documentarian’, *New York Amsterdam News*, 13 August 1930, in CMI Box 65: ‘Scrapbook 35: The Gumby Studio, No. 1’, emphasis added).

It is clear that Gumby’s collecting practice and book-making techniques were guided by historiographic aims. While travelling across America and Canada to visit public libraries and study ‘various methods of compiling and mounting scrapbook material’, Gumby also scoured second-hand bookshops for rare books as well as old print materials to use as items for his scrapbooks (Gumby 1952: 21). His collection of rare books and old manuscripts included the original copy of Phyllis Wheatley’s poems, the complete collections of Toussaint L’Ouverture and nineteenth-century editions commemorating Crispus Attucks and Frederick Douglass’s writings, according to one reviewer. The volume he was most proud of was the original English publication of John Ogilby’s *Africa*, from 1670, which he displayed for the benefit of students of history, who ‘may delve into [its] musty yellow pages’ to experience history (Nell Occomy, *New York Amsterdam News*, 13 April 1929, in ‘Scrapbook 35’).

The rare-book collection upholds Gumby’s historiographic aim to record the first eruptions of black experience into European historical consciousness. Wheatley was the first published black poet, whose prominence is recorded in Arthur A. Schomburg’s 1916 bibliographical checklist of black poetry in the United States and across the Americas, *American Negro Poetry*. Schomburg (1916) concludes the list of 236 titles with a ten-page bibliography of Wheatley’s publications, stretching from 1770 to 1915. Toussaint L’Ouverture was also a first in being a black general and the leader of the Haitian anti-colonial revolution. Crispus Attucks was a black stevedore who became the first casualty in the Boston Massacre (1770), remembered as the first to die in the American Revolution. Memorialized in poetry, popular literature, historiography and painting, his fate made him into a political martyr for the Abolitionist movement and a figurehead for the American colonists’ pursuit of independence. In the collection, Attucks’s significance matches that of Frederick

Douglass, a writer who narrativized his experience of escaping slavery and, as a published author, strengthened the public impact of the Abolitionists' fight to end the Atlantic slave trade. Finally, John Ogilby's monumental *Africa* (1670) stands out by virtue of its age as the first guide to the African continent for an English-speaking readership. Ogilby's book was an early-modern translation of the first European writings about Africa collected in Olfert Dapper's Dutch publication, which is credited with introducing the continent's geography and topography to Europeans and providing descriptions of African societies and cultures. Dapper's seventeenth-century compilation of travellers' accounts and Ogilby's translation and reproduction of its maps and road atlases marked the beginning of the European representation of Africa. In sum, Gumby's collection of rare books reflects not only his sense of the importance of beginnings in historiography, but also his motivation to record the eruption of black modernity in his own time.

From commonplace books to scrapbooks: Mounting displays of knowledge

Historically, the scrapbook as an information-gathering practice and a book technology derives its identity from the early-modern practice of commonplace books. Commonplace books existed originally as manuscripts of handwritten quotations and, later, as compilations of printed cut-and-pasted citations. These formats included some form of commentary or annotation, leading compilers to develop, further down the line, elaborate systems of inserting slips or recycling textual samples by cutting and pasting them from disused published sources or manuscripts no longer in circulation (Blair 2010). These early-modern practices, Ann Blair explains, have stayed in use as compositional shortcuts, even as compilation practices acquired additional functions, for instance when:

scholars and writers cut and pasted from their manuscript notes and drafts to compose publication and lectures. Some also cut passages from printed books to insert into their notes, letters, or compositions ... In the nineteenth century, scrapbooks – and starting ca. 1900, clipping services – cut out passages from the ephemeral cheap print of newspapers and magazines. Until recently, cutting and pasting was not a metaphor for the process of selecting and reusing a passage but referred quite literally to a physical activity that parlayed the relative cheapness of print into avoiding the labor and inaccuracy of copying. William

Smellie, who compiled the bulk of the first edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (three volumes, 1768–7) ... ‘used to say jocularly, that he had made a Dictionary of Arts and Sciences with a *pair of scissors*, clipping out from various books a *quantum sufficit* of matter for the printer,’ ... [which] now echoes metaphorically the activities of writers who had glue and scissors in their tool kit alongside paper, pen, and ink.

(Ibid.: 228)

The history of composing with scissors, of recontextualizing print materials for anthologizing or creating new narrative constellations, places Gumby’s scrapbook-making in the long tradition of knowledge compilations. In scope and ambition it equals encyclopedias, dictionaries and reference books, comparable to one of the earliest comprehensive compilations of knowledge, namely the Swiss humanist scholar Theodor Zwinger’s encyclopedia, *Theatrum vitae humanae* (‘The Life of Man’ (1575)). Gumby’s method of narrativization, in contrast, draws on the approach of commonplace books where compiling is driven by thematic concerns rather than authorial attribution. A famous case in point is Francis Meres’s *Pallas Tamia* (*Pallas Housewife: Wits Treasury* (1598)), which was first to circulate some of Shakespeare’s sonnets a decade before they were printed, albeit in a different narrative context.

These forms of compilation evolved to manage and preserve vast quantities of quotations, bibliographical references and other kinds of textual material. Significantly, compilers did not simply recycle what they found, but actively ‘selected, summarized, sorted, and presented textual material to facilitate its use by others’ (Blair 2010: 175). In other words, the forerunners of the modern compilers ‘were never simple copyists’ (ibid.: 176). Instead, they ‘transformed the material as they disseminated it’ by ‘grouping the excerpts under headings or topical chapters’, by creating ‘parallels between passages from different authors and contexts and invit[ing] interpretations focused on thematic parallels that might differ from the thrust of the passage in its original context’ (ibid.). Consistent with the early-modern compositional practices used in commonplace books, Gumby adopts transposition as a way to achieve thematic coherence and social purpose – a method that came to define the collection’s aesthetic distinctness and cultural specificity. To read Gumby’s scrapbooks means attending to how his historiographic undertaking transforms collecting into an archival practice.

The dynamic and fluid structure of Gumby’s collection might appear to be in conflict with the qualities of permanence or finality we associate with an

archive.¹⁰ In describing how the collection's structure came about, he emphasized that his primary concern was how to accommodate the collection's growth while juggling a 'vast amount of miscellaneous material'.¹¹ He decided to 'classify' it into groups, to enable him to interfile 'new material' and keep up with the unfolding art scene and his subjects as they developed over time (Gumby 1952: 20–1). A 'looseleaf method' of composition gave his collection a structure more fluid than the traditional form of the bound scrapbook, even though it involved a continuous painstaking process of 'remounting the material'. Moreover, the interfiling method and the loose-page format allowed Gumby, further down the line, to reconceive the collection's overall structure. His initial division of the African American material into 'master subjects', each chronologically arranged, had to be replaced with a further subdivision into chapters, which in turn became 'separate books' (ibid.: 21). The books, being unbound, could grow to encompass decades and the topics could be developed in any number of constellations. In the end, this structure offered an open-ended framing of the material, opening its records to revisions of time and the possibility of historical resonance with its future readers.

The particularity of black modernity in America becomes recoverable in the way the collection's form captures the dynamics and cultural architecture of the movement's self-definition. Given the complex class affiliations and class sympathies within the Renaissance, Gumby's aspiration to give his material a refined, bohemian frame reflects the conflicting impulses within the movement to reject class snobbery while subtly embracing bourgeois sensibilities. The scrapbooks' gilded titles and elaborate designs imbue the collection with the refined tenor of the bohemian class, projecting at the same time the kind of care and agency we associate with the creative effort of a speaking subject, whose creativity needs to be understood not merely as labour, to use Hannah Arendt's (1998) characterization, but as work and action. The apparent showiness of the design actively signals the scrapbooks' intended status of belonging to cultural heritage, challenging the lazy definition of black culture as popular entertainment and the notion that black culture lacks gentility and refinement.

¹⁰ In a review in the *New York Times*, Geaney Garrott, 'Negro History in Scrapbooks', 27 December 1927, notes that the variety of records and materials Gumby exhibits make 'the "book studio" resemble a miniature museum' ('Scrapbook 35').

¹¹ In the beginning, while living and studying in Delaware and Philadelphia, he amassed a 'collection of clippings' that was already 'overflowing' by the time he moved to New York and added to his collecting passion 'all the playbills, pictures, and clippings' about Broadway when he became an avid theatre-goer (Gumby 1952: 20).

Arendt's distinction between labour and work bears a further elaboration in relation to Gumby, in particular her definition of human creativity as action. Creativity, she argues, involves courage to disclose oneself as a subject, to 'distinguish [oneself] instead of being merely distinct' (ibid.: 176) and to speak up 'as a distinct and unique being among equals' (ibid.: 178). The aspiration to act as an autonomous individual, regardless how entangled we are in the 'already existing web of human relationships, with its innumerable, conflicting wills and intentions,' requires addressing oneself to the general public, for action alone 'almost never achieves its purpose' (ibid.: 184). Only public utterance makes action real, because:

it 'produces' stories with or without intention as naturally as fabrication produces tangible things. These stories may then be recorded in documents and monuments, they may be visible in use objects or art works, they may be told and retold and worked into all kinds of material. They themselves, in their living reality ... tell us more about their subjects, the 'hero' in the center of each story, than any product of human hands ever tells us about the master who produced it.

(Ibid.)

In other words, to Arendt, subjects solidify their agency in words, stories and public address – the ways of raising one's voice to the level of public discourse.

Arendt's ascription of the reality-making potential of public speech draws attention to Gumby's scrapbooking as a textual space of action. The collection's social import lies not in overt political alignments but in understanding politics as a space of both collectivity and fierce contestation, emerging not only from 'the joy and the gratification that arise out of being in company with our peers, out of acting together and appearing in public, out of inserting ourselves into the world by word and deed,' but equally from the sore struggle on 'a battlefield of partial, conflicting interests, where nothing is counted but pleasure and profit, partisanship, and the lust of domination' (Arendt 2005: 313). Gumby's assembling of his collection and the activities of the Book Studio encompass the pain and pleasure of contemporaneous politics, manifesting the 'embodied creativity' and 'world-making' potential of the textual public that the collection came to constitute (Warner 2002: 54) – self-organized in its constitution, dynamic in its participation and open-ended in its accretion, bound intimately to the cultural dynamics of Harlem as a capital of modern African American life.

By repurposing existing cultural forms, the collection itself became a cultural form of a distinct kind. In documenting collaborations among artists, publishers and public intellectuals, Gumby's collection shared the period's conviction about 'the social potential of new art' to reach out to broader audiences, the conviction that transformed the practice of collecting into a form of social action and political agency (Braddock 2012: 3). While art collecting became 'a means of addressing the work of art to the public, of modelling and creating the conditions of modernism's reception' (ibid.), Gumby's focus on documenting the reception of the Renaissance was another significant step towards delineating an emerging cultural field. Jeremy Braddock's study showed how the modernist collection worked as 'a *provisional institution*, a mode of public engagement figuring future – and often more democratic (although the meaning of this word would be contentious) – relationship between audience and artwork' (ibid.). Braddock's analysis can be extended to Gumby's collection to argue that it too possesses the transformational potency of interventionist forms of collecting, and that its underlying drive was not simply to 'identify but perhaps more accurately to *interpellate* collective formations', which further affirms 'the aesthetic and social agency of the modernist cultural project' (ibid.: 16). Viewed as a provisional institution, Gumby's collection might seem to fall short of the work of anthology compilations, which were intended to formalize black art as a sociopolitical category, an aesthetic tradition and a cultural expression grounded in black experience. But, significantly, Gumby's scrapbook archive allows us to map collaborations behind the work of anthologizing as well as to trace records of the public sites of anthologies' reception and private sites of reading, and to place anthologies in the context of the actual networks and efforts that went into their making.¹²

On a rare occasion of Gumby stepping into the limelight, he includes a review of his work extolling the public and cultural agency of the documentarian. The reviewer commends the critical efforts of his fellow Harlemites collectors to document the Renaissance, emphasizing how the determination of 'the documentarian, whose patient and unselfish labors fertilize the soul from which grow the flowers of history and letters' in fact sustains the public work of every literary author (Aubrey Bowser, 'A Negro Documentarian', *New York*

¹² As a provisional institution, Gumby's collection captures the variety of positions among the contributors and compilers of anthologies, reflecting how each was guided by a distinctive conception of black art and its production, form and purpose.

Amsterdam News, 13 August 1930; in 'Scrapbook 35'). In Harlem this work is done in the service of a new culture, preserving for the future the few existing and widely dispersed records of black history and black cultures across the globe. As Bowser puts it, 'Negro letters especially have suffered from the lack of adequate documentation':

Much priceless information has been carelessly destroyed and much more is lying about in odd corners of the world, waiting to be found. But so much time and work must be expended to find it that it will never be unearthed unless someone can give his whole energy to the task. In recent years several gleaners, notably Arthur Schomburg, have gathered large collections of books and prints about the Negro; but *there are many scattered and fugitive things that cannot be found without a systematic and concentrated search.*

(Ibid., emphasis added)

Poignantly, he acclaims Gumby as the best manifestation of how such energy can acquire cultural force. Gumby is 'a man whose specialty is the gathering of these bits and putting them together'. He 'has toiled' for twenty-two years, 'patiently assembling clippings, prints, documents, books and letters, and preserving them in scrapbooks ... producing a complete history of the Negro in scrapbook form'. Aspiration to strive for completeness reflects the collector's ambition and effort, while Gumby's sense of urgency also channels a shared cultural sense of the need to contextualize the current surge of black cultural achievements historically so as to secure formally their resonance with the future.

At the hub of the emergent African American art scene

Cosmopolitan longings

Gumby's practices of collecting, archiving and curating served to capture the movement temporally, as 'currently unfolding in a sphere of activity' (Warner 2002: 96). Reading closely a few particular pages from the scrapbook titled 'The Gumby Studio' helps demonstrate how the Studio and the archive performed three interconnected functions: constituting a discourse *public* to advance social change; serving as a *provisional institution* to highlight formal innovations across the arts; and providing access to a research *archive* to spread new historical awareness. Characteristically, 'The Gumby Studio' scrapbook connects the African American art scene to the art movements in the European metropolitan

centres, opening it to continental artistic flows. A pair of facing pages juxtapose two events: a dramatist's programme for setting up an experimental theatre in New York, inspired by his European sojourn, and a news item about an African American artist's return from Europe, pronouncing that the artist's expressionist style has been repatriated to its original source. Gumby's juxtaposition of these two events points to the ongoing transposition of the expressionist aesthetic to America.

The verso page carries a clipping with a published manifesto by David Sturgis, which announces his plan for the opening of the new Universal Theater in New York. Sturgis, clearly an aspiring theatre director and playwright, pronounces death to the old Broadway stage and the old Hollywood screen and declares the new Universal Theatre is to be 'the meeting place of the people' and 'the institution of the poet', because the 'rights of the poet are the rights of the people'; 'Everybody, everything, must be born again.' The manifesto also includes a plan for its future epically-named productions: "'Civilization," a smashing indictment of modern society; "Vengeance," which lays bare the sadism of the Puritan; "Hell and Damnation," a terrible exposure of the white man in the Orient; "Negro World," a tragedy of a beautiful soul in an ugly environment' ('Scrapbook 35').

The recto page features a series of news clippings about a promising young artist, William H. Johnson, and his return from a three-year painting tour in France, Germany and Italy. One news item, from September 1929, advertises the upcoming exhibition of three of Johnson's paintings in the Gumby Studio. Other items record the public reception of Johnson's return to New York, hailing his celebration of black experience in paint and his distinct Expressionist style as shaped by the urban settings of Harlem, its street musicians, cafés and street life. The overall collection of clippings documents the public valuation of Johnson's style in terms of its modernist qualities of directness, firmness, vigour and spontaneity. In Gumby's treatment, Sturgis and Johnson exemplify the transposition of European modernism to America, and to Harlem in particular, allowing him to map two broad directionalities in the arts of the period: Sturgis's radical avant-garde vision of a theatre for the people (possibly unrealized, as I found no further records of the plan coming to fruition), and Johnson's accomplished and publicly recognized refraction of the cosmopolitan style through African American vernacular expressions of modernity.

The subsequent page clusters continue to map the making of Harlem as a black cultural capital. A group of clippings cover a public spat between two writers and researchers, Arthur Schomburg and Frank Byrd, in the *Inter-State*

Tattler (29 August 1930) about the originality of two mid-nineteenth-century theatre playbills pertaining to the career of the famous African American tragedian Ira Aldridge (1807–1867): one playbill exhibited at the New York Public Library (135th Street branch), the other held in Gumby's collection. In his published reply, Gumby clarifies the misunderstanding about the playbills in his collection, affirming that the Studio possesses five original playbills, one of which is, indeed, a London playbill of Ira Aldridge as Othello, dated 1827. But Gumby also refocuses the debate to emphasize the importance of the history of black theatre and the significance of Schomburg's reference to the African Company's production of Shakespeare's plays at the old Mercer Street Theatre, New York City.¹³

Participating in the debate allows him to clarify what motivates his own collection. It is not pride over possessing a few rare fragments, which would be 'bigotry or dogmatic order', but a kind of 'self-encouragement and an urge to go on with the work of unearthing records of the doings of our forebears who were and still are truly great' (*Inter-State Tattler*, 5 September 1930; in 'Scrapbook 35'). Grace Lynn's review of Gumby's theatrical scrapbooks, which follows the cluster, echoes Gumby's intentions, recognizing the historiographic value of his theatre collection. 'If the student requires stage data [for the Broadway classics] from 1833 down to John Barrymore, Gumby has it', she writes, adding that one particularly rare playbill in Gumby's collection honours the pioneers of black theatre – a mid-nineteenth-century all-black-cast burlesque show, 'Laughable Extravaganza entitled Buffalo Gals, or Da Real Translanticum Etiopicum Serenadicums', dated from 1847 (*Theatre Guild Magazine*, December 1930; in 'Scrapbook 35').

Two following pages in Scrapbook 35 support Lynn's critical acclaim. The verso page exhibits an autographed portrait of Leigh Whipper, signed 'To Mr. Gumby from Leigh Whipper, Porgy Co.' (dated '1928'), which is juxtaposed, on the recto page, with two communications to Gumby from Whipper: the actor's postcard signed '*His Majesty's Theatre*, London' and his letter from London (dated '5/5/29'), both reporting *Porgy's* success with British critics and viewers.

¹³ The African Company was the very first official all-black theatre troupe, led by Henry Brown, who founded the African Grove Theatre. The company opened its first season in 1821, six years before the abolition of slavery in New York state, with a production of *Richard III* at the Grove Theatre, which became known as the venue for the then-teenage Ira Aldridge's debut. Aldridge later became one of the company's leading performers before he departed for London.

Two histories coalesce in Whipper's memorabilia: the history of African Americans' union organizing and the groundbreaking Broadway success of DuBose Heyward and Dorothy Heyward's play *Porgy: A Play in Four Acts* (1927), which at the time toured successfully nationally and internationally.¹⁴ Gumby records Whipper's success as the Crab Man in the original 1927 production of *Porgy*, whose eponymous character is a disabled black slum-dweller trying to rescue his friend Bess from cruel men. The 1927 all-African-American-cast production premiered at the Theatre Guild in New York City, running for fifty-five weeks until 1929, and then toured the United States and Canada twice. Whipper's postcard from His Majesty's Theatre and his letter to Gumby from London mark the production's international tour, when the play was performed in London for eleven consecutive weeks. After that momentous year of *Porgy*'s success, Leigh Whipper joined the Actors' Equity Association labour union as its first African American member, and went on to become one of the founders of the Negro Actors Guild of America in 1936. In Gumby's *Porgy* constellation, this history of unionizing emerges strongly as a future context. The overlapping geographical, temporal and cultural loops in Gumby's theatre constellation make *Porgy*'s popularity resonate with the historic significance of nineteenth-century African American theatre productions. His coverage offers a reflection on how the exponents of the black vernacular culture 'achieved international recognition as bearers of a distinctly' African American culture 'that was also modern [and] American' (Nowlin 2005: 319).

The role of art in defining black Manhattan as an emerging hub of black modernity is discussed with intensity in other clusters containing personal letters to Gumby. One letter from a Captain Jean Baptiste van Rossum Shiffer (dated from 1930) is paired with a Post-Impressionist painting that features a dancing black female form, curving upwards along the flowing pattern of a colourful collage in the background. The painting, 'Impressions of a Negro Spiritual Dance', is signed by 'J. B. V. R. S.' – presumably the letter writer, van Rossum Shiffer. In the letter, the aspiring artist lays out a plan for the first All-Black Academy of Fine Arts and Crafts – the idea that came to him after

¹⁴ The story of the play's Broadway production was remarkable on many levels. Several young writers, such as Bruce Nugent, Wallace Thurman and Dorothy West, were hired in the 1927 production, and some remained in 'the extended Broadway run' as well as in 'the subsequent tour of dozens of cities, culminating in a trip to England in the spring of 1929', closing 'late in January 1930, after a run of more than two years' (Wirth 2002: 15).

attending the Gumby Studio the day before. Eager to promote the ‘young talents in Harlem’ in their study and work, van Rossum Shiffer promises to devote himself ‘free of charge’ to the project, ‘as often as [he] can – at least twice a week.’ The details of his plan include obtaining ‘the use of some Hall or School auditorium free of charge for our classes and with the aid of some of the folks that we are blessed with the necessary “coin of the psalms” to equip the Academy.’ The young artist’s fervent tone and the painting he gifted to Gumby speak volumes of the younger generation’s talent, ambition and hope. Their enthusiasm led to the formation of the Harlem Artists Guild in 1935 and the creation of the Harlem Community Art Center in 1937.¹⁵ Van Rossum Shiffer’s aspirations also pay off eventually, as six years later his name resurfaces as a professional illustrator for a published work.¹⁶ Gumby’s mementos capture the pull of the Harlem art scene and the energy its experimental ethos provided for the younger participants’ creativity.

Scaling the literary scene

Apart from its extensive records on the cross-fertilization of ideas in the arts, the collection highlights the centrality of literature to the emerging modern culture. Gumby devotes a series of scrapbooks to book reviews of newly published works, and also compiles scrapbooks focused on individual writers such as Paul Laurence Dunbar (‘Scrapbook 26’), Frederick Douglass (‘Scrapbook 24’), Wallace Thurman, Jean Toomer and Claude McKay (‘Scrapbook 128’), Countee Cullen (‘Scrapbook 21’) and Langston Hughes (‘Scrapbook 43’), to note a few. One particular record he preserves in his Studio guestbook (‘Scrapbook 38’) documents a singular literary event held at the Gumby Book Studio. A three-hour reception following the poet Countee Cullen’s return from a two-year stay in Paris was organized to celebrate the release of Cullen’s book of poetry, *The Black Christ and Other Poems* (1929), which he wrote on his European sojourn. A clipping from the *Amsterdam News* (17 September 1930) notes that Arthur Schomburg created a book of the guests’ autographs to mark the event – presumably the actual booklet of autographs Gumby includes in his Studio’s guest

¹⁵ The Art Center was organized under the leadership of Augusta Savage and Gwendolyn Bennett as a part of the Works Progress Administration Federal Art Project.

¹⁶ One of his first published projects was illustrating M. P. Munger and A. L. Elder, *The Book of Puppets: Stage Scenery, Puppets and Plays* (Boston, MA: Lothrop Lee and Shepard Books, 1936).

scrapbook.¹⁷ The inserted booklet of autographs, within the overall coverage of the Cullen event and despite the minimalist format of a mini-guestbook, enables the reader to trace the rich history the Gumby archive attempts to document and the outreach of the Book Studio within and beyond Harlem. The uniqueness of the Cullen event record transforms the autographs into nodal points for the stories and histories in Gumby's overall coverage of the Harlem Renaissance. By offering a connection between the individual histories of the gathered audience and their artistic contributions, the guestbook record provides a carbon copy of the world that unfolds through Gumby's scrapbooking.

Most of the attendees' autographs in the guestbook are accompanied by an ink drawing indicating the signatory's artistic, political or intellectual streak. The news clippings about the event are pasted on adjacent pages to detail the full programme and complete list of participants. This format enables Gumby to pull together the resources of the visual and the discursive forms to capture in miniature the collection's twin qualities of exhibition and archive. His combination of the textual with the visual invites us to read the event spatially and temporally, mapping Harlem onto the rich network of the movement's local, national and international cultural alliances. By cross-referencing the attendees' contributions to the arts with the coverage of the art debates in topically adjacent scrapbooks, Gumby recreates, by textual and visual means, the practised space of the movement's self-definition.

While the autographs invoke the gathered artists' physical presence, the accompanying ink drawings signify their intellectual achievements, telling the story of their alliances and creative impact beyond the geographical location of Harlem. The line-up of autographs begins with Countee Cullen's signature next to a drawing of the Crucifixion, which features a muscular black male body slumped on a white cross (Figure 6.1).

The drawing encapsulates the thematic parallel in Cullen's volume between Christ's execution and the physical suffering and violence inflicted on African Americans by the climate of racial hatred in Jim Crow America. The volume's title poem, 'The Black Christ', moves agonistically through dramatic alternations in tone, from euphoric to apocalyptic, to capture the pressure of injustice on the speaker's faith. Sites, apparently disconnected, are evoked simultaneously. The

¹⁷ Possibly Schomburg's creation, the record of the event and the attendees' autographs appear in 'The Gumby Studio Guest Book: A Registry of Visitors – Friends, Patrons of the Arts, Celebrities to the Gumby Book Studio, Twenty-one-forty-four Fifth Avenue, New York City' (CMI Box 15, 'Scrapbook 38: Gumby Book Studio: Guest Book').

Figure 6.1 Gumby Book Studio guestbook: page signed by Countee Cullen, Richard Bruce Nugent, Caska Bonds and Edward Perry. Rare Book & Manuscript section, Butler Library, Columbia University, New York.

speaker's voice breaks up into discordant cadences, pitting glory against shame, exaltation against spiritual mire and the sense of empowerment against the urge to self-destruct. The tonal fractures capture the condition of wrestling with the impossible contradiction between faith and violence. In a final sardonically redemptive gesture, the poem rewrites the biblical narrative from the perspective of black experience, where humanity rises again through black stooping and heals collectively through black suffering:

God's glory and my country's shame,
And how one man who curse Christ's
 name
May never fully expiate
That crime till at the Blessed Gate
Of Heaven He meet and Pardon me
Out of His love and charity,
How God, who needs no man's applause,
For love of my stark soul, of flaws
Composed, seeing it slip, did stoop
Down to the mire and pick me up,
And in the hollow of His hand
Enact again at my command
The world's supremist tragedy,
Until I die my burthen be;
How Calvary in Palestine,
Extending down to me and mine,
Was but the first leaf in a line
Of trees on which a Man should swing
World without end, in suffering
For all men's healing, let me sing.

(Cullen 1929: 69)

The vision of the body swinging from a tree encapsulates the despairing scene of the world being absolved, yet again, through suffering. By overlaying the scene of Christ's execution, salvation and final words of redemption with the burning scene of lynching, the poem stages the progress of a doubting soul through questioning its Christian faith towards the act of painful but inevitable sacrifice.

Cullen's guestbook record connects thematically to the drawing attached to Arna Bontemps's signature, which conjures up a similar poetic voice by featuring a grinning skull poised above a snow-clad mountain top and staring into eternity (Figure 6.2).

Figure 6.2 Gumby Book Studio guestbook: page signed by Arna Bontemps, George Schuyler, Maurice Hunter and Edward E. Pettis Jr. Rare Book & Manuscript section, Butler Library, Columbia University, New York.

The three crosses above the skull and the darkness enveloping the mountain slopes evoke twilight. At the mountain foot is a line of a vocal exercise – ‘aeiou’ – signifying the poet’s voice warming up his vowels. Topically, the drawing references Bontemps’s prize-winning poem ‘Nocturn at Bethesda’, which treats the stagnating biblical pool of Bethesda as a poetic figure for spiritual malaise and the disabling condition of body and soul that makes healing impossible:

This pool that once the angels troubled does
not move.

No angel stirs it now, no Saviour comes
With healing in his hands to raise the sick
And bid the lame man leap upon the ground.

The golden days are gone. Why do we
Wait

So long upon the marble steps blood
Falling from [our] open wounds? And why
Do our black faces search empty sky?
Is there something we have forgotten?
some precious thing

We have lost, wandering in strange lands?

...

An ancient terror takes my heart, the fear
Of quiet waters and of falling twilights.
There will be better days when I am gone
And healing pools where I cannot be healed.
Fragrant stars will gleam forever and ever
Above the place where I lie desolate.

Yet I hope, still I long to live;
And if there be returning after death
I shall come back. But it will not be here;
If you want me you must search for me
Across the shining dunes, perhaps I shall
Be following a desert caravan.

I may pass through centuries of death
With quiet eyes but I’ll remember still
A jungle tree with burning scarlet birds.
There is something I have forgotten, some
Precious thing.

I shall be seeking ornaments of ivory,
I shall be dying for a jungle fruit.

You do not hear, Bethesda.
Oh still green water in a stagnant pool
Love abandoned you and me alike.
There was a day you held a rich full moon
Upon your heart and listened to words.
Oh men now dead and saw the angels fly.

There is a simple story on your face;
Years have wrinkled you. I know, Bethesda!
You are sad. It is the same with me.

(CMI Box 130: 'Scrapbook 101: Negro Poets. Part II')¹⁸

The biblical pool of Bethesda, where Jesus healed a paralysed man, refers to a place in Jerusalem whose name means 'house of mercy' in Hebrew. In the poem the tables are turned. The pool's water is now stagnant and green, stilled and wrinkled by centuries of death, incapable of stopping the poet's bleeding wounds. Like Cullen, Bontemps dramatizes the loss of faith and the failure of memory and imagination by the impact of fragmented lines, achieved through enjambments. The poem's jagged rhythms replicate the sound and pace of the fractured times, generating the sense of the poet's wounded agony and spiritual doubt, but also his memory's tenacious questioning.

Cullen's and Bontemps's literary careers intersected with the careers of other literary figures who attended the reception: fiction writers, poets, essayists and editors of both short-lived literary journals and well-established magazines and newspapers, both black and white. Some signed the guestbook, others did not, but their names are listed in Gumby's clippings of the news coverage. A younger generation of writers on the scene belonged to the Harlem avant-garde circle, known for their radical critique of the 'New Negro' movement and its emphasis on moral rectitude, hard work, self-control and respectability. Wallace Thurman, 'the enfant terrible of the Harlem Renaissance and the most unsparing critic of his contemporaries (and himself)' (James 2004: 32), was one of the conveners of this group. While his autograph is missing in the guestbook, his name is noted in the event's news coverage; given his cultural work and extensive literary ties with the invitees, his presence is salient to say the least.

¹⁸ 'Nocturne at Bethesda' won the first *Crisis* prize for poetry in 1926 and was published in the December 1926 issue of *The Crisis* magazine.

Thurman collaborated with Bontemps while both were working as reporter/columnists in 1922 for a black-owned newspaper in California.¹⁹ Before Thurman moved to Harlem he founded *Outlet*, the magazine that was meant to be a Californian equivalent of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's *The Crisis*. In Harlem he became the editor (1925–1926) of *The Messenger*, a black political and literary magazine dedicated to 'scientific' socialism,²⁰ where he published Langston Hughes's short stories. After a brief stint at the white-owned *World Tomorrow*, he helped found an African American 'art quarterly' (Nugent 2002: 2) – the literary magazine *Fire!! Devoted to the Younger Negro Artists* (1926), to promote the writing of Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, R. Bruce Nugent, Aaron Douglas and Gwendolyn B. Bennett, among others. In his editorial work and literary writing, Thurman was markedly resistant to reducing black art to propaganda in the name of racial uplift. His position expressed the younger generation's shared sensibility that art should be committed to individuality, everyday experiences and self-understanding of ordinary African Americans, whether culturally sophisticated or conservative, sexually liberated or depraved, carefree or oppressed.

Thurman's editorship (1928) of the magazine *Harlem: A Forum of Negro Life* led to his collaboration with George Schuyler, another attendee who signed the guestbook – collaboration that further strengthened Thurman's anti-propagandistic approach to art. In Gumby's coverage of Thurman's literary career in 'Scrapbook 128', he records the reception of the first issue of *Harlem* and highlights the debates it provoked about new developments in the arts, placing reviews with words of high praise next to those of harsh criticism. One review by Aubrey Bowser from 1928 does both. He praises the magazine for continuing Alain Locke's 'New Negro' project and demonstrating 'a wealth of talent, of power and promise in our younger writers. It is a gallant attempt to create a Negro medium which shall exist for art and not be smothered under

¹⁹ For a more extensive discussion see A. B. Christa Schwartz's (2004) account of Thurman's careers in journalism and literature.

²⁰ Thurman and Bruce Nugent shared a flat in Harlem for two years, at 267 West 136th Street, and dubbed it 'Niggeratti Manor'. It became a gathering place for young artists. One room was painted in red and black – the colours of the cover of *Fire!!* – and adorned with homoerotic murals painted by Bruce Nugent. As Wirth (2002: 13) puts it: 'They called themselves "the Niggeratti" [Nugent's spelling] – an irreverent take-off on the pretentiously literate white audience for whose enlightenment the older impresarios (Du Bois, James Weldon Johnson, Charles S. Johnson and Alain Locke) were showcasing African American talent.' Interestingly, Langston Hughes in his autobiography *The Big Sea* rewrites the label as 'Nigerati', a spelling that 'renders the irony more genteel'; Thurman and Nugent's 'spelling self-consciously emphasizes the "ratty" aspects of the group' (ibid.: 273, note 7).

a weight of propaganda.' Yet Bowser also finds the magazine lacking in the way it 'is addressed not to the great mass of the race but to a coterie. Its tone is sophisticated, intellectual; it leans too far towards decadence', while the average reader 'refuses to swear to King Dirt ... [and] will never be convinced that dirt is more artistic than decency' (*New York Amsterdam News*, 28 November 1928; CMI Box 157: 'Scrapbook 128: Thurman, Wallace, Jean Toomer and Claude McKay').

Other clippings register the mixed reception of Thurman's novel, *The Blacker the Berry* (Macaulay 1929). A clipping of the publisher's promotion ad describes the novel as treating the Harlem scenes of notorious rent parties with 'wild hilarity and bitter tragedy'. A *New York Times* reviewer, in the adjacent clipping, criticizes the novel for imitating the genteel tradition of white literature, composing objectively from 'the vantage point of Emma Lou's "genteel" brain' but failing 'to dramatize how the world appears to her subjectively' ('Harlem Negroes' in *New York Times* Book Review; 'Scrapbook 128'). Another essay by Bowser, titled 'Black Realism' (1929), reads Thurman's novel as a symptom of 'an age of pessimism in literature':

The authors pass over thousands of Negroes who are living bravely, if not happily, and select the sickliest characters they can find ... Their books are peopled with cowards, toads, degenerates and plain fools, with hardly a manly or womanly fiber in them ... *The Blacker the Berry*, by Wallace Thurman, is a realistic novel, whose general theme is that a black girl might as well have been strangled at birth ... There are black girls, many of them, who have triumphantly weathered the storms that sank Emma Lou. We wish the author had chosen one of them.

(*New York Amsterdam News*,
13 February 1929; 'Scrapbook 128')

What Bowser identifies as Thurman's decadent pessimism in fact expressed a strand in Renaissance writing that combined poetic sensibilities with satirical and profoundly disillusioned attitudes.

George Schuyler, Thurman's close associate in journalism and literary composition (they worked together for *The Messenger* and collaborated on *Harlem* magazine), shared this sensibility. Like Thurman, Schuyler, writing for both the black and the white press, became an important polemical voice in the media landscape, known for his critical outlook on religion, conventional morality and Prohibition and for his harsh diagnosis of rural America and the South. Like Thurman, Schuyler turned a critical eye to the essentialism of the Harlem Renaissance, mounting harsh criticisms against all forms of cultural

and racial nationalism, be it the racial separatism of Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association or the authoritarianism of black leaders, black churches and black advancement organizations.

The growing influence of Schuyler's journalism shapes his record in Gumby's guestbook. To read it, it is necessary to understand the main targets of Schuyler's cultural critique. As he travelled widely in the South to observe and write reports about the relationship between the white and black communities, his critical voice was firmly grounded in social research. The observations he wrote for the Fabian socialist periodical *The Nation* later became his well-known essays 'The Negro-Art Hokum' (1926) and 'Blessed are the Sons of Ham' (1927). His opinion pieces came out regularly in a socially progressive black newspaper, the *Pittsburgh Courier*, in his long-running 'Views and Reviews' column. Crossing ideological divides, Schuyler collaborated with the famous editor of the liberal-conservative *American Mercury*, H. L. Mencken. One of Schuyler's essays for the *Mercury*, in particular, garnered him wide attention in the national press. Commissioned by Mencken to show 'how the whites look to an intelligent Negro', Schuyler's essay 'Our White Folks' (1927) was reviewed across the country and praised in the black press for 'out-Menckening Mencken' and being a 'masterpiece of sarcasm and Negro psychology'.²¹ In the essay, Schuyler (1927: 388) exposes the absurdity of Jim Crow segregation, considering that 'the two people are so intimately associated all day, not to mention at night', and attacks 'the obvious economic waste entailed' in 'a dual school system, Jim-crow railroad coaches and waiting rooms, separate cemeteries, and segregated parks, libraries and street cars' (ibid.: 388). In a classic dialectical move, he reverses the established epistemological hierarchy to argue that the intimate knowledge of the whites of an 'intelligent Aframerican' is rooted in his awareness of the unscientific basis of racial discrimination, the kind of nonsense 'that he cannot help classifying the bulk of Nordics with the inmates of an insane asylum' (ibid.). America in Schuyler's analysis emerges as an absurd dystopia where the African American 'is a sort of black Gulliver, chained by white Lilliputians, a prisoner in a jail of color prejudice, a babe in a forest of bigotry, but withal a fellow philosophical and cynical enough to laugh at himself and his predicament' (ibid.: 391). At the time of Gumby's reception, Schuyler was completing his first novel, *Black No More*, which came out a year later in 1931. Regarded as the first satirical novel

²¹ 'Out-Menckening Mencken', *New York Age*, 10 December 1927; Geraldyn Dismond, 'Our White Folks', *Inter-State Tattler* 25, 1927.

by an African American writer, the novel lampoons both the notion of racial difference and the liberal solutions to the perceived 'race problem', revealing how racialization and racial categories inadvertently validate the pseudo-theory of racial purity and its discursive assertions of the biological superiority of some and inferiority of others, while detracting from the reality of economic interests being the actual cause of social discord.

The ink drawing that accompanies Schuyler's signature in the guestbook features two aligned profiles of a white and a black face, conjoined and overlaid in the middle with the shape of Schuyler's 'Views and Reviews' news column in the *Courier* (see Figure 6.2). While the design, with its alignment between black and white profiles, manifests the underlying aspiration and the principle of Schuyler's journalism, the perfect arrangement of the outward-looking faces anticipates the publication of Schuyler's novel by projecting not only its major theme but also the main conclusion of his exploration of human nature – the politically powerful idea that human nature remains unchanged by skin colour.

The polemical force of this group of writers, as a literary and journalistic public, manifests itself in another signature and ink drawing. The drawing features the nib of a dip pen and accompanies the signature of a John Taylor. While his identity has been difficult to ascertain, the symbol of the writing pen makes it reasonable to assume that he belonged to the writers' group, making the drawing open telescopically to the discursive world of public journalism where Taylor is inscribed in Gumby's record as one of many.

A postcard from Langston Hughes provides a crowning literary record of the event (Figure 6.3). Featuring 'the Lincoln Memorial and Japanese Cherry Blossoms' in Washington, DC, the card is postmarked from Philadelphia and addressed to Gumby's secretary, Edward Kolchin: 'Sept. 12 Dear Mr. Kolchin, Very sorry I can't be present Saturday afternoon since I won't be in town. Thank you for asking me. Sincerely, Langston Hughes.' Hughes's literary connections with Cullen, Bontempt, Schuyler and Thurman, as well as his continued support for the Gumby circle's cultural work, add impelling political force to the placement of the postcard. Pasted in the scrapbook with the text and postage stamp facing up, the postcard triangulates Washington, Philadelphia and New York spatially, creating a visual counterpoint between the poet's handwriting, the invoked image of the national memorial and Hughes's reference to the Cullen event. It evokes both the poet's potent poetic voice and his ambitious political vision for Lincoln's America. In fact, around the same time Hughes wrote a

Figure 6.3 Gumby Book Studio guestbook: page shows Langston Hughes's postcard and signatures by Henry Wessels and Charles M. Peterson. Rare Book & Manuscript section, Butler Library, Columbia University, New York.

poem entitled 'Lincoln Monument: Washington', which was included in his 1932 anthology, *The Dream Keeper and Other Poems*:

Let's go see old Abe
 Sitting in the marble and the moonlight,
 Sitting lonely in the marble and the moonlight,
 Quiet for ten thousand centuries, old Abe.
 Quiet for a million, million years.

Quiet –

And yet a voice forever
 Against the
 Timeless walls
 Of time –
 Old Abe.

(Hughes 1994: 103)

Generated by the anaphoric repetitions of 'sitting' and 'quiet' in the first stanza and the rhythmic groupings in the second of the 'time/timeless' alliteration and the assonance of 'and/against/Abe', the poem's rhythm compensates for the silence of Lincoln's monumental voice, making it perceptible in the poetic reverberations of the walls of time with the timeless dream of freedom. The irrepressible weight of this dream manifests itself in the creative energy of the poet's Harlem.

Art, music and entertainment in coalescence

Creative agency and play are seen in the ink drawings that accompany the names of two visual artists at the reception, Ronald Joseph and Haile Thurman Hendrix. Joseph's signature drawing presents a set of lithographic tools – a round stone (flatbed), overlaid with a roller (pressure bar), which carries a vertical inscription 'Ronald Joseph' with the first and the last names aligned horizontally (Figure 6.4).

The letters of the two names partially bleed into each other, generating an illusion of the rolling movement of the pressure bar. The twenty-year-old Joseph later made his mark as an artist with his striking experiments in lithography and his mastery of printmaking techniques. Gumby preserved an original charcoal sketch by Joseph, 'Sea Scene', gifted to him by the artist, next to a news review of the sketch that correctly predicted the young artist's creative potential (CMI Box 35: 'Scrapbook 5: Art'). Thurman Hendrix's signature ink drawing

Figure 6.4 Gumby Book Studio guestbook: page signed by Ronald Joseph, Embry Bonner, Hall Jonson and William Service Bell. Rare Book & Manuscript section, Butler Library, Columbia University, New York.

features a cartoon of the artist's face, with his hair parted in the middle and the curved letter 'x' forming the thirty-three-year-old caricaturist's recognizable eyes, eyebrows, nose and moustache (Figure 6.5).

Figure 6.5 Gumby Book Studio guestbook: page signed by Haile Thurman Hendrix, L. S. Alexander Gumby, Wolf Meyerson and Alphaeus Hunton. Rare Book & Manuscript section, Butler Library, Columbia University, New York.

Joseph and Thurman Hendrix, a promising black artist and a white one, add youthful exuberance to the Cullen event and embody the sense of professional communion among the attendees – their coming together as a public to advance a non-racialized future for the arts.

In a similarly significant way, Gumby's arrangement of the signatures of the musicians attending the event tells the story of the changing fortunes of African American music and its growing local, national and international popularity. Embry Bonner's signature is accompanied by an ink drawing of his singing profile set on a background of a treble clef and musical notation (Figure 6.4). According to news coverage of the event,²² Bonner, a professional singer, attended the reception with other well-known vocalists such as Caska Bonds (marked only with a signature, see Figure 6.1), Jules Bledsoe (listed in the news), Taylor Gordon (signature only) and Hall Johnson (signature only, see Figure 6.4), all of whom at the time of the event were struggling to establish themselves as solo artists in America. While Jules Bledsoe succeeded in making his career abroad, others stayed at home as active professionals, contributing to the cultural life of the local community.²³ Hall Johnson became known as a choir leader in Harlem, as did Caska Bonds. Bonds, who was a celebrated Harlem vocal coach, organized regular student recitals at Grace Congregational Church on 138th Street, called locally the Harlem Opera House. His national success took off when he was cast as Joe in *Showboat* (1924), instead of the originally slated Paul Robeson. At the time of the reception Bonds was tutoring Embry Bonner, who later performed in the 1934 premiere of *Four Saints*, an experimental opera written in 1927–1928 for an all-black cast by American composer Virgil Thomson, with a libretto by Gertrude Stein. It is tempting to read the composed look on Bonner's singing face in the drawing as a sign of African American vocalists opening new territories in music.

Taylor Gordon's musical career was undoubtedly breaking new ground. His opening night at the Garrick Theatre in New York in 1925 established his distinct operatic style as shaped by the vernacular musical idioms of African American spirituals, slave songs and sorrow songs. His performance was seen as a reinterpretation and redrawing of the conventions of European classical music:

²² Gumby pastes two news items after the signature roll, one from the *New York Amsterdam News* (17 September 1930) and one by Geraldyn Diamond in her 'Social Snapshots' column in the *Inter-State Tattler* (19 September 1930).

²³ Jules Bledsoe made his name in Europe, with support from his manager Sol Hurok and his aristocratic Dutch boyfriend, the diplomat Adriaan Friedrich Hyugens.

For audiences used to hearing spirituals in European concert style, the lyrics carefully enunciated in standard English, the R's distinctly trilled, the consonants sharply clipped, the vowels carefully rounded and focused, Taylor's return to vernacular English, as well as his improvisational and disruptive singing style, was a radical departure, a fresh take on spirituals singing that bridged the gap between talented classical performers such as African American Roland Hayes and the original untrained voices that were the folk sources of music.

(Johnson 2019: 4)

Gordon's popularity and critical acclaim marked the arrival of the African American modernist style that combined classical sensibilities with vernacular expressions to render the modern world in its harmonious and disruptive manifestations.

The stylistic merger between popular expressive forms and established artistic genres has to be seen as 'an important social index'²⁴ of the new styles attracting and appealing to mass audiences. On the pages of the guestbook the professional vocalists at the Cullen event mix with popular music revue performers, composers, dancers and musical film actors. The careers of the popular entertainers exemplify particularly well the growing permeability of the divisions between popular and high cultural forms. In the guest scrapbook, Luke Theodore Upshure's signature ink drawing vibrates with rhythmic waves exuding from the tap-dancing of the musical notes on the piano keyboard (Figure 6.6).

A musician and composer, trained at the Institute of Musical Art in Morningside Heights (established in 1905), Upshure taught music and performed as an entertainer at musical events, among them Gumby's reception parties. In an invitation to his own house party, on 6 May 1934, Upshure writes in a playful but edgy tone: 'Please, come rest, meditate, make merry a while among friends in an atmosphere of tranquility far removed from the chaotic muddled world with its ghastly hypocrisies and eternal stupidity. It is my desire to give you a musical feast with wholesome music, just a sip of nectar before we

²⁴ Walter Benjamin (2002: 116) discusses the emergence of film, its popular appeal and mass audiences' 'progressive reaction to a Chaplin film' as being 'characterized by an immediate, intimate fusion of pleasure – pleasure in seeing and experiencing – with an attitude of expert appraisal ... As is clearly seen in the case of painting, the more reduced the social impact of an art form, the more widely criticism and enjoyment of it diverge in the public. The conventional is uncritically enjoyed, while the truly new is criticized with aversion. Not so in the cinema'; the cinema, to Benjamin, exemplifies the erosion of the separation between popular and highbrow culture, with the critical and uncritical attitudes of the public tending to coincide.

Figure 6.6 Gumby Book Studio guestbook: page signed by Luke Theodore Upshure, Porter Grainger, Clifford E. Licorish and Edward Kolchin. Rare Book & Manuscript section, Butler Library, Columbia University, New York.

are hurled back to the alcoves of the unknown.²⁵ Music to Upshure was clearly not a means of escape or forgetfulness, but an antidote to the ills of the world – a shared sensibility among the Gumby Book Studio attendees.

Somewhat in contrast to Upshure's upbeat visuals is an adjacent drawing attached to Clifford E. Licorish's signature – a crestfallen man, with his head buried in his palms, hunched on the vocal warm-up 'aeiou' line, signifying perhaps a blues singer, as Licorish's name appears on the page between Upshure and Porter Grainger's (Figure 6.6). Grainger, with only a signature, was a well-known Harlem songwriter and piano accompanist, but above all a music publisher. In 1926 he published a collection of blues songs, *How to Play and Sing Blues Like the Phonograph and Stage Artists*, shortly after a similar volume appeared authored by the father of blues, William Christopher Handy, *Blues: An Anthology*.²⁶ Gumby's Scrapbook 47, titled 'Jazz', recognizes Porter Grainger's and William Handy's contribution to music publishing, mapping the evolution of modern black music from the eruption of ragtime and blues on to the national stage to the impact of black music on classical music idioms. Gumby's trajectory of jazz begins with a series of articles about the remarkable career of James Reese Europe, known posthumously as 'the Martin Luther King of music'.²⁷ A review in the *Morning Telegraph* (12 November 1911) recognizes that ragtime's growing popularity owes to the 'out of ordinary' ability of James Reese Europe and his

²⁵ Anne McVey, Upshure's wife, cites Upshure's invitation in her interview with Chela Blitt and Dennis J. Bernstein, 'Postscript: How One WIN Moment Changed Three Lives: Anne McVey Upshure's 94 Years of War Resistance', *WIN Magazine* (Spring 2015), <https://www.warresisters.org/win/spring-2015/>.

²⁶ See William Christopher Handy, *Blues: An Anthology* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1926); Porter Grainger and Bob Ricketts, *How to Play and Sing Blues Like the Phonograph and Stage Artists* (New York: Jack Mills, 1926).

²⁷ The name was given to James Reese Europe (1881–1919) by Eubie Blake, the music score composer for *Shuffle Along* (1921), in recognition of Jim Europe's groundbreaking work for black musicians. Gumby preserves a review of Europe's career, which recounts his founding of the Clef Club in 1910, an organization that 'not only put together its own orchestra and chorus, but served as a union and contracting agency for black musicians'; and then his national success when 'On May 2, 1912, the Clef Club Symphony Orchestra put on "A Concert of Negro Music" in Carnegie Hall. The 125-man orchestra included a large contingent of banjos and mandolins and presented music by exclusively black composers. By this time, Europe believed that although black musicians respected white music of quality, they did not need to play or imitate it.' Among his other achievements, the reviewer, Irene Castle McLaughlin, a dancer who collaborated with Jim Europe as part of the famous dancing duo Vernon and Irene Castle, credits Europe with creating the turkey-trot and the fox-trot dances (see Irene Castle McLaughlin's review, 'Jim Europe – A Reminiscence', in 'Scrapbook 47'). During World War I, as the band master of the 369th Infantry Regiment, Europe formed and led the 'Harlem Hellfighters', credited with bringing jazz to Europe through their popularity in France. See 'James Reese Europe, 1881–1919', Library of Congress, Washington, DC, <https://loc.gov/item/ihas.200038842>.

Clef Club Symphony Orchestra, whose original compositions made their mark by reinterpreting 'marches and melodies of the Far Pacific and Cuban variety' for modern times.

From ragtime to blues, Gumby traces the history of the latter by covering Handy's career from the teens to the 1930s, reflecting Handy's efforts both to popularize the blues sound and to explore its complexity and sophistication. A cut-and-pasted review of Handy's successful tour in Georgia (*Pittsburg Courier*, 12 April 1918) describes how 'every dancer on the floor let loose a wicked foot and syncopated to a tune that belongs to the realms of musical art'. Another highlight from 1928 tells the story of the Handy Orchestra performing at Carnegie Hall, with Taylor Gordon's solos 'rewarded with storms of applause, rising to the point of approving yells and whistles' (Pitts Sanborn, 'Jazz and Jubilee Singers Take over Carnegie Hall', *New York Evening Post*, 28 April 1928; CMI Box 75: 'Scrapbook 47: Jazz. Part I'). A further feature article Gumby includes is an essay about Handy by Clifford McGuinness, 'Blazed a Path from Beale Street to Broadway', which commends the musician's groundbreaking efforts in the promotion of jazz symphony (1 March 1930, 'Illustrated Feature Section', in 'Scrapbook 47').

To substantiate Handy's contribution to establishing symphonic jazz as a distinctly modern music genre, Gumby includes a review of the Handy Orchestra's collaboration with George Antheil, a young exponent of avant-garde music, at a concert in Carnegie Hall in April 1927, praising Handy's orchestral performance 'in support of the world's most sensational composer direct from Paris'. Advertised as the American premiere of Antheil's technology-inspired composition *Ballet Mécanique*, the event was critically acclaimed for Handy's 'instinct for inner form' and Antheil's tribute to the 'African American invention of polyphony'. Ultimately, the reviewer suggests placing Handy in the canon of 'the world's music', where blues 'have an importance for their rhythm and the things their tunes say' about 'the essentials of quick life and rich rhythms and the broad humanity of masses of people'. The reviewer refers to Handy's achievements as a stark reminder to the aesthetes who might be 'too prone to forget', having spent too much of 'their time in the cold regions of Kantian philosophy', that blues express the feel of the modern times and thus manifest their 'contemporaneity' ('Scrapbook 47'). Symptomatically, all the reviewers in Gumby's assemblage avoid drawing clear distinctions between spirituals, ragtime, blues and jazz – a sign perhaps of the unsettling effect of black music on traditional genres and the growing rapprochement between entertainment and high musical culture.

Gumby celebrates the idea that jazz has developed into an epitome of modern American music as world music by carefully preserving a lengthy *Nation* review of a concert billed as 'An Experiment in Modern Music'. The concert's highlight – the premiere of George Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* – is praised as a formal merger of cosmopolitan and vernacular styles, 'a curious orgy of unrestrained laughter and tears, in which East and West met and merged'. Such a merger, the reviewer suggests, resulted in 'sustained, drawn-out Slavic effects in melodic passages of pure, Anglo-Saxon bathos. Perverted brasses and winds depicted, in subtle and intoxicating colors, humor of the slap-stick variety. Aphrodisiacal rhythms alternated with those of the ordinary dance' (Henrietta Straus, 'Jazz and *The Rhapsody in Blue*', *Nation*, 5 March 1924; 'Scrapbook 47').²⁸ To explain the strangeness of this musical composition, the reviewer points to Gershwin's unusual mixing of classical music with jazz – a technique that creates 'terrific rhythmical difficulty' and a capacity to produce the 'abandonment of all emotional reserve'. The review concludes on a baffled but encouraging note, announcing that jazz is a music in 'kinship with the world-thought of today'. It has grown up 'unheeded' in America, and now confronts its audience with the fact that 'its elements of the Russian, the Negro, and the native American' make it into 'that first distinctive musical phase of the melting-pot for which we have been waiting so long and which seems to have such endless possibilities'.

A sense of optimism about the ongoing transformation of the cultural scene is communicated in the ink drawing next to Roy de Coverley's signature. The Jamaican journalist, poet and entertainer appears as a tuxedo-dressed man, holding a mask to his face. The drawing captures Coverley's recognizable 'faun-like smile' and his attitude of a cheerful, bonhomie aesthete. In the history of Harlem theatre, Coverley appears among the ensemble cast in the opening production of William Jourdan Rapp and Wallace Thurman's *Harlem: An Episode of Life in New York's Black Belt* (staged by Chester Erskin) at the Apollo Theatre on 20 February 1929.²⁹ His dancing and choreographic gifts connect his signature, which appears on the Studio guestbook's first

²⁸ The concert was performed by Paul Whiteman's Palais Royal Orchestra at New York City's Aeolian Hall on 12 February 1924.

²⁹ In Robert Schlick's interview with Roy de Coverley in 1931 he describes the poet as 'brown, slender, with luminous eyes, answering with a faun-like smile'. See 'The Poems of Roy de Coverley', *The Crisis*, December 1933, 291.

page, to the ink drawing that concludes the whole record of the Cullen event (see Figure 6.3). This last record belongs to Henry Wessels, a vaudeville and musical film actor, who is drawn as a naked black body roller-skating on two musical notes, his arms stretched out in a forward movement, his head tilted backwards, weighed down by a heavy Native American feathered headgear. Wessels's career in vaudeville entertainment led him to appear on screen in the 1932 production of an all-black-cast musical film, *Harlem is Heaven*. The film's 'world premier' was advertised at the Renaissance Theatre in New York, on Seventh Avenue at 137th Street – the first black-controlled cinema catering to African American audiences – featuring Bill Bojangles Robinson playing himself as the Acme Theatre's star performer and director of its dance productions, and Wessels portraying 'Chummy' Walker. Wessels's dancing pose in the guestbook and his participation in this emergent moment in the history of African American film capture the stylistic cross-overs between early musical film and vaudeville that shaped the earliest sound-film genre in the late 1920s.

As we see, every ink drawing and every signature in Gumby's guestbook tells a story and has a history. These stories run as threads through the whole scrapbook collection, intersecting with each other and reaching out of this textual world into a future time and a future world of its readers. In Gumby's execution, his Harlem Renaissance scrapbooks offer a gathering of published works, publicized actions and public speech acts – the efforts of art collectives mounted for sustaining black art and entertainment. And as we began with Langston Hughes's retrospective glance at the Harlem Renaissance, I end with another poetic riff Hughes made with the hindsight of the 1960s on the voices, discursive pathways, artistic shapes and heated debates that shaped the Renaissance – the very scene carefully crafted in Gumby's constellations:

Harlem, like a Picasso painting in his cubistic period. Harlem – Southern Harlem – the Carolinas, Georgia, Florida – looking for the Promised Land – dressed in rhythmic words, painted in bright pictures, dancing to jazz – and ending up in the subway at morning rush time – headed downtown. West Indian Harlem – warm rambunctious sassy remembering Marcus Garvey, Haitian Harlem, Cuban Harlem, little pockets of tropical dreams in alien tongues. Magnet Harlem, pulling an Arthur Schomburg from Puerto Rico, pulling Arna Bontemps all the way from California, a Nora Holt from way out West, an E. Simms Campbell from St. Louis, likewise a Josephine Baker, a Charles

S. Johnson from Virginia, an A. Phillip Randolph from Florida, a Roy Wilkins from Minnesota, an Alta Douglas from Kansas. Melting pot Harlem – Harlem of honey and chocolate and caramel and rum and vinegar and lemon and lime and gall. Dusky dream Harlem rumbling into a nightmare tunnel where the subway from the Bronx keeps right on downtown, where the jazz is drained to Broadway whence Josephine [Baker] goes to Paris, Robeson to London, Jean Toomer to a Quaker Meeting House, Garvey to Atlanta Federal Penitentiary, and Wallace Thurman to his grave; but Duke Ellington to fame and fortune, Lena Horne to Broadway, and Buck Clayton to China.

(Quoted in Rhodes-Pitts 2011: 19)³⁰

This chapter tries to show how these effects of the Harlem Renaissance are already present as past, present and future-oriented directionalities in Gumby's individual scrapbooks, and how they reverberate across the collection. By compiling and preserving records of black modernity, Gumby's collection registers the world-creating work of the Harlem publics as crucibles of black modernism and black political emancipation. By covering the temporal and geographic scope that spans the continents, the collection registers how the increasing circulation of new artistic production shaped and was shaped by a modern cosmopolitan outlook that was locally articulated, forward-looking and non-hierarchical. Gumby's collection channels the Harlem Renaissance idea of a modern world emerging from the lived experience of a people who are able to dream, imagine and work creatively towards an equitable future. The movement was popular, and its Gumby historiography was intended to be usable and useful. The result became a remarkable archive that attunes its readers to the reality of a world taking shape through creativity, action and public speech.

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³⁰ As Sharifa Rhodes-Pitts (2011: 18) poignantly puts it, Langston Hughes in 'a 1963 special Harlem issue of *Freedomways* magazine, mixes sentimentality with a dose of his typically biting wit'.

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