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BLACK BIBLIOPHILES:
HONORING SCHOMBURG'S TRADITION

BLACK BIBLIOPHILES

Professional and amateur collectors indulge a passion for black history and culture

by Angela Ards

A bibliophile, according to Webster's, is "a lover of books esp. for qualities of format; also, a book collector." But talk to avid collectors of books on black diasporan life, and you'll find that a *black bibliophile* is a character cut from a more poetic mold. Engaged in no casual hobby nor collecting just for collecting's sake, black bibliophiles commonly speak of heeding "a call," following "energy," catching "the bug." The origins of their passions are often quite simple: a favorite childhood story book, or the dismaying lack of one. But in the tradition of Carter G. Woodson, now honored as the "father of black history" for founding Negro History Week in 1926, what motivates and sustains them is the need to document the history and culture of people of African descent.

The Schomburg Tradition

For 70 years, the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture has been the preeminent repository of materials relating to black life and culture, with more than 5,000,000 items, including rare books, manuscripts, sheet music, art, photographs, and audiovisual materials. For 15 of those years, Sharon Howard has been a guardian of what the library calls "the Schomburg tradition:" collecting, preserving, and providing access to information on black life. As the Schomburg's head of acquisitions, Howard is one of the most influential black bibliophiles in the country. Her job entails prowling obscure book stores and dank attics to retrieve what could be lost to history because of an absent-minded toss or an untrained eye. She often hits pay dirt, as in the recent acquisition of Eubie Blake's papers from a family home, or a 1990 jaunt to Brazil to expand the Center's holdings on African ancestry in South America. Currently Howard is planning to purchase from the Library of Congress the NAACP's organizational papers on microfilm, which "in essence the entire history of the civil rights movement."

According to Howard, "the Schomburg tradition" began in late 19th-century Puerto Rico when a grade school teacher told Arturo Alfonso Schomburg, the son of a biracial woman from St. Croix and a Puerto Rican man of German descent, that "the Negro had no history." When he migrated to the United States in 1891, Schomburg was 17, smart, and determined to prove his teacher wrong. He landed a position as supervisor of the foreign mail division at Bankers Trust (an impressive job for a black man at the turn of the century) and began corresponding with book dealers all over the world to create a collection that would become a lifelong pas-



© Benjamin Cotton

Camille Billops and husband James Hatch maintain a vast archive on blacks in the arts.

sion. In 1926, when the 135th Street branch of the New York Public Library purchased his volumes, he'd amassed more than 10,000 books, manuscripts, and newspapers, as well as a reputation as a leading black scholar.

Celebrating its 70th anniversary this year, the Schomburg—located in central Harlem, the symbolic capital of the black world—continues to be a unique storehouse of black history. In the past, access has been restricted to New York City residents over age 18 and visiting scholars and researchers, and its materials do not circulate. "Nothing goes out because it wouldn't come back," Howard explains. But soon, with the purchase of CD-ROM technology, the Center's holdings will be available directly from the Internet. "Books haven't gone out of business yet," she says with a sly smile, promising that the Schomburg Center will still be around to house its valuable stacks.

History in Your Grandparents' Attic

The manner in which Manhattan book dealer Elvin Montgomery gets most of his works on African American history—from white dealers who've acquired the works from the estates of black families—makes him fear that too many African Americans may be resting, rather than building, on the legacy of Woodson and Schomburg. The former management consultant began a mail-order book business 10 years ago to

support his own collecting habit. "Black history is a living science that must constantly be re-created, reinterpreted," says Montgomery. "We may wear our kente outfits—many of which are imported from Singapore and have never seen the coast of Ghana—but we often don't do what it takes to preserve, to own, our history." He paints a scenario of an elderly black person dying, the heirs coming to collect the car, TV, antiques, the silver and the porcelain, plus any available cash, and throwing out the trunks of papers and old records. The family often does not take the time to see, he says, that "there's a 1920s program of original poetry readings by Countee Cullen in Grandma's trunks, that her photographs are worth 15 bucks a piece, or that a signed Roland Hayes concert program is sitting under her church records," when "clean-out specialists" come along offering "to take all this off your hands" for \$10. Thus, valuable archives pass out of our hands.

The first-time collector-thinking about a potential acquisition should consider more than its age, condition and rarity. The savvy investor, Montgomery advises, will also be attuned to "emerging versus established trends." Black history is shifting focus from "the macro to the micro," from celebrities "to the black history in your own town, city, and family." For instance, if you're looking to acquire Benjamin Banneker's original diaries, a signed

Thelonius Monk contract, or dig up fresh memorabilia from the Harlem Renaissance, "Get ready to shell out hundreds of thousands of dollars," he warns—and still you may be disappointed. But even if you don't have a six-figure budget or stumble on a lucky find, "there are subjects in black history just sitting, gathering dust on the shelves, waiting to be discovered."

There's the history of black beauticians, for instance—from Madame C.J. Walker to the *Black Hair Is...* salon. As long as hair remains a crucial signifier of an ever-shifting black identity, documenting the coiffing of its kinks, coils, curls, and conks will be important to black life. The general history of black entrepreneurship is also ripe for investigation and discovery. After the 1960s, many African Americans entered government and corporate jobs and black-owned business declined significantly. But now that "we are being pushed out of these arenas in downsizing," Montgomery observes, there is likely to be a rise in black entrepreneurship and, a greater interest in its history. In ten years, he predicts, books on Maggie Lena Walker, the first black woman banker in the U.S., will be hard to find and extremely valuable. The smart novice will collect them now.

Another hot topic is literature by African American women, like Toni Morrison, Alice Walker and Maya Angelou. Considering the number of signed, first-edition Terry McMillan hardbacks many already have on their shelves, some are poised, perhaps unwittingly, to sweep in on the coattails of *Waiting To Exhale* toward a lucrative book collection.

But because black history is black wealth and books are most valuable for the knowledge of self and community they bring, Montgomery encourages nascent bibliophiles to explore the South and the archives of black institutions like churches, lodges, Baptist and Methodist conventions. In the membership lists of such records, "That's where you find people's great-grandmothers and fathers. That's undiscovered black history... Everybody has one interesting black ancestor. Your grandfather could have been the first black garbage collector in New York. Don't throw his stuff away—it's history."

Collecting for Posterity

Beyond merely collecting, Charles L. Blockson, the curator and namesake of a collection housed at Temple University in the heart of Philadelphia's black community, urges that people consider the importance of legacy, of bequeathing their works to an institution for posterity. In 1983, Blockson donated 20,000 books, pam-



Antiquarian dealer Elvin Montgomery, with his assistant Kenneth Carter, says history is found in the archives of black churches and lodges.

phlets and dossiers to Temple. Today, the Charles L. Blockson Collection contains over 80,000 items that are sought out by scholars and the general public alike, especially for its holdings on Blockson's research interests: the underground railroad, slavery, genealogy, and black Philadelphia. For instance, Lorene Cary, author of the 1991 memoir *Black Ice*, rummaged extensively through the Blockson stacks to re-create the story of slave woman Jane Johnson for her first novel, *The Price of a Child* (1995).

"This is my calling," says the noted scholar-historian, 62, his deep baritone booming over the phone during an interview. Recently profiled as one of the nation's premiere black bibliophiles in *A Gentle Madness* (Henry Holt, 1997) by Nicholas Basbanes, Blockson began collecting at age 10, "when no one was interested in black history." But now, a first edition of *Little Black Sambo* that he

acquired as a child—"people were giving them away because they were so ashamed"—is now worth \$250. First editions of Zora Neale Hurston that cost \$2 and \$3 in the '40s and '50s go for \$2000 and \$3000 today.

Blockson credits "foremother" Dorothy Porter Wesley, the late curator and librarian of Howard University's Moorland-Spingarn Collection, as an early influence and mentor. Porter, who died in December at age 91, assisted such distinguished scholars as W.E.B. DuBois and John Hope Franklin. In 1930, as a young librarian, she was asked by Howard to assemble a collection of books by black Americans. At the time, the library contained about 3000 volumes. Under her stewardship, the collection grew to more than 180,000 items and became a focal point for research on black history. David Levering Lewis's biographies of DuBois and Martin Luther King Jr. benefited from Porter's legwork,

as did Louis Harlan's work on Booker T. Washington, and William McFeely's on Frederick Douglass.

A "go-getter of raw material," is how John Henrik Clarke, Hunter College professor emeritus, describes Porter in her prime. She was known to frequent estate sales, acquiring trunks of old records, books, and personal correspondence. Clarke says Porter collected "things other people hadn't even thought about." For instance, he recalls that once while in Africa she bought scores of a *True Stories*-like series, "little pamphlets printed on the worst paper you could find and sold on the streets for just pennies." Today, because of Porter's eye for the obscure and the novel, the Moorland-Spingarn collection has one of the largest caches of popular African mysteries in the world.

Collecting for Knowledge

Dr. Clarke's own philosophy in book collecting, however, is "to start where you are and never collect a book you're not willing to read at least part of." The son of Alabama sharecroppers, Clarke, 81, is a self-taught scholar whose love of books began, ironically, with a lack of them. In Jim Crow Columbus, Georgia, where he grew up, blacks couldn't use the public library and there was only one bookstore of significance. But when he got to New York, he was a library regular, and, to his unabashed delight, "secondhand bookstores were everywhere."

Though he lost many of his books when he went to the army in 1941, Clarke's been collecting since 1945 and has over 50,000 volumes distributed in various black communities along the Eastern seaboard. His largest collection, the 30,000-plus volumes at his Harlem residence which focused primarily on African history, religion, and slavery also contains what he considers "the basic literature"—like the complete works of Harlem Renaissance poets Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen. And because he feels it's important that people "relate to one another," he collects the mythologies of world cultures, diasporan literature, travelogues of black people, as well as "the fine writings of Europeans when they didn't have a colonial axe to grind."

In addition to collections that bear his name at Cornell University and P.S. 123 in Harlem, Clarke has donated over 20,000 volumes to the Woodruff Center, the library that serves the five historically black colleges in Atlanta. That collection is noted for its material on blacks in the performing arts, race and apartheid, and includes every issue of *Presence Africaine*, the premier literary magazine of francophone Africa, published from 1954 to 1985,

of which Clarke was the most prolific English contributor.

Another important donation to a black research library in Atlanta are the papers of the late poet Audre Lorde, deposited at Spelman College. Since the college's founding in 1881, the library has mainly documented the all-women school's history. Archivist Renée McKinney says the Lorde acquisition "signifies the expansion of the archives to the world around us beyond Spelman." McKinney and director Beverly Guy-Sheftall hope to strengthen Spelman as a general resource for feminist scholarship on the lives of African American women.

Collecting for Joy

Joy is the operative word when D.C. collector Portia Thompson talks about her books. A longtime federal employee, Thompson used her first pay check after graduating from Howard to buy a Langston Hughes poetry anthology to start her collection. Almost 30 years later, at 51, she has about 2000 books that "go the gamut" of black life. Although Gwendolyn Brooks is her favorite poet, she is particularly proud of a rare Countee Cullen work, "Ballad of the Brown Girl!"—she has "a nice edition in a slip jacket made of onion skin."

One great joy of her collection, she says, "is being able to help so many children." Especially during Black History Month, she gets calls from students of all races with school reports due on African Americans. She recalls a white colleague whose son had to profile a black scientist "and it couldn't be George Washington Carver." At a loss, the father called Thompson, and she led him to biologist Ernest E. Just, the first recipient of the NAACP's Spingarn Medal for his pioneering research on fertilization and cell division. In this way, Thompson feels that "Black History Month is serving the purpose that Carter G. Woodson intended: that our story be told to the degree that other people know our history, too."

But her greatest joy, she continues, "is that knowledge is passed on." Because her children, and their children, are also avid readers, she knows that her investment in the collection will not go to waste. "Talk about legacy—it's a family affair."

Collecting for Empowerment

Filmmaker, visual artist, sculptor and photographer Camille Billops, is one-half of the team that founded the Hatch-Billops Collection on blacks in the arts, located in Manhattan's Soho. She muses in her raw poetic way that "collectors are like trash pickers. We save scraps to place a person in time and space, to embellish the story."

Begun in 1973 out of "the need to document the lives and art of African Americans," the Hatch-Billops Collection "was the next energy," says Billops, after finishing theater work in India with husband James Hatch. The first piece acquired was a letter from WPA artist and sculptor William Artis—blasting Billops and Hatch for their gall in requesting some of his work for their archive. Today, it contains vast documentation of blacks in theater and visual arts, such as the complete works of poet and dramatist Owen Dodson, original photographs of James VanDerZee, and work by "white people associated with black people," like Hettie Jones, first wife of Amiri Baraka né LeRoi Jones, and mother of author Lisa Jones and art curator Kellie Jones. The files on playwright and director George C. Wolfe include clippings about his Broadway shows, personal correspondence and time sheets from when he worked as the collection's typist while completing *The Colored Museum*.

Behind a big, painted brick-red metal door, the Hatch-Billops Studio—part loft, part office, part archive—opens into a stunning configuration of private and public space. Here, black history becomes the stuff not of museums but everyday use. Surrounding a bricked breakfast nook are original artworks by Romare Bearden, Hale Woodruff, Elizabeth Catlett, Robert Blackburn. In their midst hang sepia-toned photographs of Billops's Texan and South Carolinian relatives. A portrait of Marvin Gaye done by an anonymous homeless man also stakes a claim to these walls—Marvin's visage looks rather Picasso-esque: long and angular "like a deer," Billops admits.

At sixty-something, Billops has become adept at negotiating boundaries. With her dramatically mascaraed eyes and cornrows wrapped at the ends into

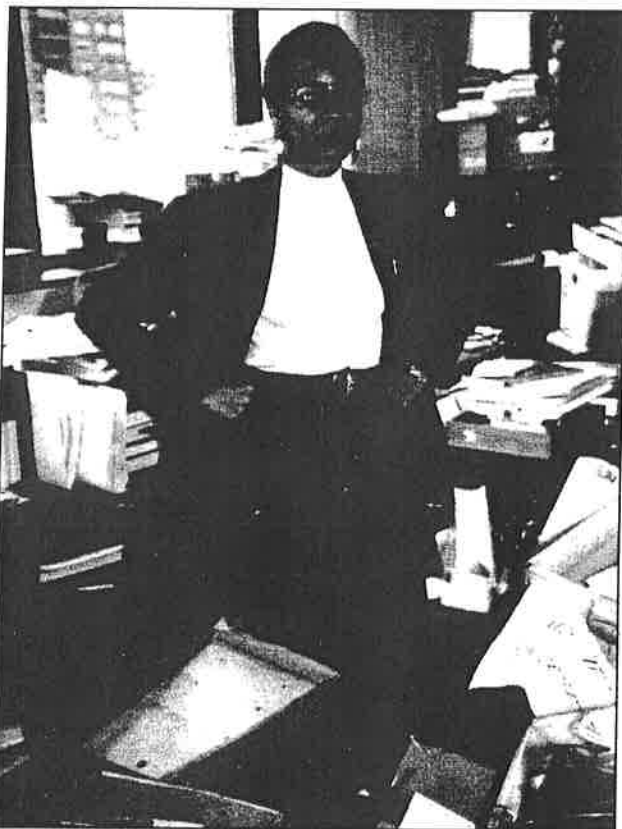
two ponytails flanking her shoulders, Billops looks a descendant of Cleopatra, Pocahontas, and Southern black women, like Janie Starks in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, who've traveled the world and found home within themselves. She and husband James Hatch have been crossing lines all their marriage. An interracial couple, he is the writer, and she, a visual artist. Billops acknowledges that much of the collection's financial success came from Hatch's greater access to grants in the early years. That fact once caused tensions in the black arts community, which have since subsided, she feels, since Hatch, a longtime scholar of black theater, has paid his dues.

This issue of who has access, interprets and ultimately controls black history is still a sensitive one that concerns Bridget Warren, co-owner with husband Todd Stewart of Vertigo Books in Washington, D.C. Specialists in international politics, world literature, and black studies since November 1991, Vertigo has carved a niche in the D.C. bookstore circuit as the place to hear readings by new authors of color. Yet it discomforts some local book buyers, otherwise impressed with Vertigo's inventory and programming, that Warren and Stewart are white people selling black books. The role of Vertigo, Warren says, "is not about controlling access, but providing it." Backed by multicultural investors including black poet E. Ethelbert Miller and A'Lelia Bundles, Madame C.J. Walker's great-great granddaughter, Vertigo invests in presenting writers without big publishing bucks behind them. In the summer, Vertigo sponsors monthly potlucks that serve as communal spaces where local bibliophiles can meet and identify first editions, complete bibliographies, and get appraisals. And because Warren believes that the real control of black books

and history lies with publishing houses, Vertigo has sponsored forums addressing how to increase the numbers of black editors in an industry known for its lack of diversity.

For many black bibliophiles, the only thing better than acquiring old books on African American history is anticipating brand new ones to collect and preserve in the future. Charles Blockson points out the significance of more black people beginning "to write our history, in our words" because it's the author's hand that controls history.

Angela Ards is a copy editor for the Village Voice and a freelance writer.



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Schomburg Center acquisition head Sharon Howard is guardian of a 70-year tradition.

Aspiring black bibliophiles who want more information about finding and evaluating black heritage collectibles are invited to attend Elvin Montgomery's exhibit and sale on February 17 and 18 at the Union Theological Seminary in New York City from 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. Admission is \$5. Montgomery will also be giving a daylong seminar on February 24. For details, call (212) 666-4449.