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Autographs, Autobiography, and Black History in Britain: the Congo House Autograph Book

Autographes, autobiographie et histoire des Noirs en Grande-Bretagne : le livre d'autographes de l'Institut du Congo

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Abstracts

English Français
This article utilises a recent discovery of a textual trace of black people's self-representation in Edwardian Britain. It concerns an autograph book, currently kept in private hands, bearing entries by black students who attended the African Institute, Colwyn Bay, in around 1905. This short text speaks to the difficulty of accessing private writings and self-representations by black people who lived in Victorian- and Edwardian-era Britain. Though there exist substantial texts written by black people in late-nineteenth-century Britain, including texts of an autobiographical type (broadly defined), self-expressive writings by black people are unquestionably rare. In retracing black lives, scholars frequently piece together information from archival and print sources. The autograph book is itself a work of fragments, though given their autobiographical character they are both rare and valuable: quotations from Shakespeare, sketches, original verse, epigrams, and quotations from scripture. These writings afford some degree of insight into the personalities of the students, who are otherwise generally represented by onlookers in the primary and secondary literature of the Institute.

Cet article s'appuie sur la découverte récente d'une trace textuelle de représentation de soi par des personnes noires dans la Grande-Bretagne édouardienne. Il s'agit d'un livre d'autographes, actuellement conservé chez un particulier, dont la plupart sont l'œuvre d'étudiants noirs de l'Institut Africain de Colwyn Bay, autour de 1905. Ce court texte invite à interroger la difficulté à accéder aux écrits personnels et aux représentations de soi des personnes noires vivant dans l'Angleterre victorienne et édouardienne. Bien qu'il existe en Grande-Bretagne à la fin du xixe siècle des écrits substantiels d'auteurs noirs, y compris de type autobiographique au sens intime de personnes noires sont incontestablement rares. pécialistes ont l'habitude d'assembler des informations ources publiées. Ce livre d'autographes est lui-même une tère autobiographique fait à la fois la valeur et la rareté : des citations de Shakespeare, des croquis, des vers poétiques originaux, des épigrammes et des

citations bibliques. Ces écrits offrent un aperçu de la personnalité de chacun de ces étudiants, en contrepoint des représentations produites par des observateurs extérieurs que l'on peut lire dans la littérature primaire et secondaire de l'Institut.

Index terms

Mots-clés : histoire des noirs, histoire impériale, autographes, représentation de soi
Keywords: black history, imperial history, autographs, self-representation

Full text

1 At the close of her personal *History* of 1831, Mary Prince, a Bermudan who had recently freed herself from slavery by travelling to Britain, states that she seeks to 'say the truth to English people who may read this history. . . . I have been a slave myself—I know what slaves feel—I can tell by myself what other slaves feel, and by what they have told me' (Prince 38). Her words reflect belief that British anti-slavery culture took interest in the lives of black men and women, seeking proof of individual suffering to encourage compassionate responses from readers. Following in Prince's wake, formerly enslaved African Americans continued to deploy autobiographical accounts as a means of rousing anti-slavery support in the Victorian period (Fisch; Murray). As slavery retreated from public consciousness in the mid and late nineteenth century, however, fewer platforms arose from which black people in Britain could tell the stories of their lives. With notable exceptions such as Mary Seacole's *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs Seacole in Many Lands* (1857) or the lesser-known Sierra Leonean A. B. C. Merriman-Labor's comic travelogue *Britons through Negro Spectacles; or, A Negro on Britons* (1909), seldom did Britain's black colonial subjects find outlets to write substantial accounts of their existence. Even in these examples, writings of a self-revelatory type are rare, or somewhat concealed among other, public-oriented statements.[1]

2 This article explores a textual trace of black people's self-representation in Edwardian Britain. It concerns an autograph book, currently kept in private hands, bearing entries by students who attended the African Institute, in Colwyn Bay, north Wales, between 1903 and 1906. Researching the lives of the students of the African Institute—or Congo House, as it was sometimes known—has made apparent to me the scarcity of black people's writings from the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century that offer personalised insights. Besides published works, the archive also normally frustrates attempts to understand black individuals' perspectives on their personal lives and day-to-day existence. Whatever forms of self-documentation the small number of famous individuals, or larger marginalised communities of black people, made at the time has apparently been lost to the prejudices, priorities, or sheer indifference of earlier generations to whom fell the opportunity to preserve such records. The consequent absence is what Michel-Rolph Trouillot, in *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (1995), observes as the work of the archive, and of history more generally, in deciding what—or whose—stories should be known, and what should be silenced. For contemporary researchers, methodological challenges abound. Not discounting many important findings, as well as methodologically rich and reflective discussions, by the likes of Caroline Bressey (for example, Bressey 2003; Bressey 2006), many studies of black people's lives in nineteenth-century Britain are forced to read between the lines of source materials, drawing informed inferences, and often highlighting the paucity of the records at their disposal (see Green; Sherwood).

3 The Congo House Autograph Book presents an opportunity to explore private self-representations among a community of black students in Edwardian Britain. Clearly, lting an autograph book to explore these questions. elf-representation, there is a risk of overstating the nally be regarded as ephemera. Is my focus on an autograph book as a means to explore black self-representation an 'undisciplining' of

Victorian studies, as has recently been called for amid a growing recognition of the need for the field to decolonise its purview and its practices (Chatterjee et al), or does this analysis of a very specific type of writing among other essays on more traditional forms of autobiography incorporate and include black perspectives without truly being able to centralise those perspectives, thus continuing to position them outside of the mainstream? While remaining alert to these issues, and without hoping to resolve them all, I want to suggest that, through their use of the autograph form, the students do shed light on aspects of their experiences in Britain which are hard to glean from other sources. This becomes apparent in the autographs themselves, which, though often unusually elaborate, literary, and interesting by the general standards of the autograph genre, nonetheless draw on the period's conventions of self-representation in ways that affirm the students' incorporation in a Victorian community knit together by social practices of humour, inventiveness, piety, and compassion. Despite being frequently required to perform similar attributes for assembled audiences in ways that could certainly have been experienced as demeaning, the evidence of the Congo House Autograph Book is that black students also invested personally and seriously in a culture of religious devotion and civilising uplift. While it would be easy to overstate the importance of the autographs in themselves, their value exists in demonstrating the worth of private, quotidian texts in reconstructing something of the hidden textures of black Victorian and Edwardian lives.

4 The African Institute (then known as the Congo Institute) was established in 1889 by William Hughes, a former Baptist missionary in the Congo. Its initial purpose was exclusively to train central African youths who could return to their homelands as self-supporting missionaries. Under the influence of reformist tracts such as General William Booth's *Darkest England and the Way Out* (1890), which compared the deprivation of Britain's urban centres to the supposed savagery of central Africa, Hughes selected his native north Wales as an appropriately pure and pious retreat for his scholars (Burroughs 56–58). Counting Henry Morton Stanley and king Leopold II of Belgium among its patrons, the school was—initially at least—firmly rooted in the British imperial and evangelical culture that sought to redeem Africans from an imagined 'Dark Continent'. Dependent on public subscriptions, the Institute nonetheless struggled to secure a sound financial footing in the over-saturated sphere of overseas charitable schemes. It also attracted acrimonious responses from missions and colonial officials in Congo and the Cameroons, the initial sites from which it sought students, with the former colony effectively banning educational migrants in around 1894, partly in response to efforts to secure students for Colwyn Bay. After securing an initial seventeen students from Congo and the Cameroons, the school expanded its reach into west African territories, where it would secure the majority of its students, and eventually also took in small numbers of students from southern Africa, the USA, and the Caribbean. From West Africa, the school would receive charitable support from African society and church leaders seeking increased religious autonomy.

5 In Britain, too, the public could be roused by reports of the students' Christian conversion and academic successes, often conveyed in stage performances and talks by the students. The presentation of the students' grateful and rewarding participation in practices of religious devotion and educational uplift, in Colwyn Bay and beyond, was key to the fundraising work of the school. In churches and on lecture-theatre stages, sometimes with their white schoolmasters and sometimes in independent deputations, the students attested to their spiritual transformation and their hopes to spread the word of God in their homelands. They sang hymns in English, Welsh, and their own languages. To give one of many examples, in January 1892, at the Calvary Baptist Chapel, Pontypridd, a 'largely-attended public meeting was held' to hear Hughes lecture on his travels and his plans to train 'Congoese [sic] lads to evangelise the Dark t appeal' for money, one of the ten 'lads' currently born youth named Wamba, 'sang several hymns in e'. Wamba's performance helped ensure that 'the Pontypridd and Rhondda Baptist Churches have energetically taken up the cause'

(Anon). Coverage of events in local newspapers frequently indicate the students' eager reception by communities of Christians seeking to claim their civilising credentials, as well as those of their African visitors.

6 The task of drumming support for Congo House was shared among many students, and not limited to speaking and singing on stage. As well as promotional travels in Wales and beyond, fundraising extended into other forms such as garden parties, demonstrations of African curios, cricket matches, and more. Entertainments of this kind engaged the local community, while its reportage generated interest from further afield. Besides their actual education, which typically involved apprenticeships to local tradespersons, these participatory events were a means by which the students developed understandings of self-representation in Victorian cultures of evangelical uplift—a point to which I return when analysing the Autograph Book.

7 In total, 87 students, including three girls and young women, attended Congo House, according to lists published by Hughes. As the base of support shifted to include African donors and patrons, the profile of the student body changed, becoming older, more educated, and more diverse. With these developments, the very purpose of the school transformed somewhat toward preparation for careers in medicine, law, teaching, and other professions. But the ceaseless search for financial support ultimately led Hughes to some rash decision-making and indiscriminate recruitment policies. In 1912, the racist, right-wing press, specifically *John Bull* magazine, seized upon these missteps in a sting campaign, while raising the alarm at one former student's fathering of a child with a local white woman. *John Bull*'s intervention brought about a swift, controversial closure of the school, which may explain why relatively few private records, such as ledgers or registers, which surely once existed, survive to this day.[2]

8 Passed through generations of hands in a family with historical ties to the Hughes family, the Congo House Autograph Book is a slim, black leather-bound booklet. It contains twenty-four autographs, most of which take up an individual page, though some are longer and/or are accompanied by further materials such as sketches. Relatively little is confirmed about the provenance of this text by my discussion with the current owner. The internal evidence is that it was owned by Hughes's eldest daughter, Katie, to whom a number of the autographs are addressed. Many entries are not dated, but those that are span the years 1903 to 1906. These were busy years, in each of which more than 20 students were registered with the school, based on lists publicly circulated by Hughes. The school was at its most diverse, in terms of the students' origins, with occupants in this spell hailing from various parts of southern Africa and western Africa, as well as the Caribbean and the USA. Many were bound for professional careers, as is indicated by some signatures' inclusion of the profession of the author (the Sierra Leonean Aaron James George signs his autograph 'Photographer, Bathurst', for example), and some students had begun to study at universities and colleges. Nonetheless their education remained highly pious, mixing book-learning and religious study with practical, vocational training, in ways advocated by many black leaders of this period, including the independent church leader and Lagosian intellectual Mojola Agbebi, who made his second visit to the Institute in 1904, duly signing the Autograph Book.

9 The Autograph Book provides a snapshot of a small and relatively privileged black community within a wider community bound together primarily by concerns of religion and education. A small text, there are clear limitations to what can be gleaned from it. Based on so few autographs, for example, it would not be advisable to analyse whether geographical or ethnic location significantly informed differences between the contributions. Taken together, however, the autographs do reveal insights into black people's self-fashioning in Edwardian Britain. To understand their value and enable their interpretation in the context of nineteenth-century self-representation, it is pectives on autobiography and the autograph book

previously attracted scholarly attention, the Congo House Autograph Book is unstudied. This status of course reflects its current obscurity,

and it is also linked to its genre, for it is hard to imagine that other forms of black writing, such as fully fledged autobiography, would have remained unknown for so long. Autograph books are neglected forms of cultural history. As Samantha Matthews notes, many of the early studies of the form, centred on nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century America, were anthropological analyses of 'orally transmitted texts of American identity and rites of passage' (Matthews 2000, 125). Scholarly attention has reclaimed the autograph book as a valuable form availing insights into marginalised viewpoints—of young people generally, for instance, and above all nineteenth-century girls' and women's lives. Yet the brief, fragmentary, frequently anonymised, and often highly contrived and iterative character of autographs have mainly encouraged their analysis as sociological documents rather than as sources on individual authors, be they the collectors or autographers (see Matthews 2007; Reid Ricker). Many versions of autographic writing do not obviously allow for elaboration upon the self, even in miniature form.

11 And yet as Matthews notes in her study of one of the more autobiographical of the sub-genres, the confessional book: 'At the root of the Victorian fascination with collecting autographs in albums and books is the potential of the autograph to signify subjectivity' (Matthews 2000, 125; see also di Bello). In autographs, the Victorians occasionally sought to record a bite-sized, carefully composed reflection of the self in a medium that may have been addressed to an individual confidante, but could well be read by unknown others. Under certain conditions, autograph books are forms of self-writing as 'part of the fabric of social obligation', to borrow the terms of Trev Lynn Broughton, a mode of local exchange and relation-building (Broughton 10). If they may be read as containing forms of autobiography, then these belong to a largely private realm of close contacts, not to the rapidly developing functions of economic exchange in a literary marketplace, like other forms of autobiography as detailed by Sean Grass. And yet, as both Broughton and Grass acknowledge, it would certainly be possible to overstate this distinction between private and public. Even the most private writings are, on some level, determined by the author's sense of his or her social position; they are 'marked by and sent to the world', as has been said of epistolary forms (Gilroy and Verhoeven 1). In publicly positioning their authors, autographs balance the need to give some account of the self against risk of exposure to unwanted tattle. 'Even a playful context is constricted by inherited inhibitions', as Matthews puts it (Matthews 2020, 140). The autograph book is an assemblage of self-identification formed of encounters with personally known others, but one in which ideas about the public appearance of the self are routinely presented.

12 Because of their form, autographs are inscriptions of self-fashioning that lend themselves easily to self-commodification. In contemporary contexts, the mass-reproduced autograph is a fungible token of economic and other value added to commodities (t-shirts, record sleeves, footballs) by attesting to personal contact with the author. The reproduced, engraved autograph was similarly a feature of the marketized literary autobiography in the nineteenth century (Grass 45–46). The autograph book—both in generic terms and in the instance under analysis here—is a more personalised record. It is one-off, nonfungible, and compiled not necessarily in expectation of economic value. Yet still it solicits its author's distillation of self-value into an economy of words or other signs. In requiring brevity and immediacy its style of self-presentation draws from the same store of techniques as found in the expanding and hugely popular advertisements columns. Indeed, as Lisa Reid Ricker details, by the 1880s expressions in autograph albums were openly commoditised—prone to duplication and borrowing, perchance aided by published guidebooks that suggested 'sayings'—and not necessarily intended as an authentic or essential assertion of the self (Reid Ricker 241).

aphs appear generally to have been carefully devised befitted the highly educated status, ambition, and students. They tend to convey serious sentiments, in contrast to the cynical, ludic, and self-deprecating style of later periods of autograph

writing (see Green and Devaney). They seek to convey an important, memorable side of the author, and few if any could be accused of hackneyed expression. The Bible and Shakespeare are the two main sources of inspiration for the quoted texts that form most of the autographs (often without attribution), as they were in multiple other examples of nineteenth-century autograph writing (see Matthews 2000, 135). James Mensah, of Elmina in the Gold Coast (Ghana), cited popular words from Psalms (25: 4–6), for example, while George Dixon Montsioa of Mafeking, South Africa, more elaborately combined words on obedience and goodness from Romans (13: 3) with advice to servants to be obedient and pleasing to their master from Titus (2: 9–10), before signing off with words from Hebrews (13: 1–4). Other instances include a contribution titled 'Judgement Day', which cites Matthew 25.40, and appears to be signed by 'A. S. Gabashane'. Abel Gabashane was the brother of Mabel Gabashane, one of the three female students at Congo House, and Dr Henry Barton Gabashane, who also studied in Britain (Killingray 406–07). Abel Gabashane's connections to the school are previously unknown. The words he chose to quote, which promise judgement for those who prey upon the weak, corroborates his reputation as a radical millennialist preacher in South Africa (Campbell 41).

14 Passages from Shakespeare similarly reflected on questions of appropriate conduct. Under the heading 'Content', another Gold Coaster, Albert Darlington (later known as Koffee Twintoh), reproduced lines from *Henry VI, Part 3*, in which the monarch proclaims that the crown worn in his heart, not to be seen, is 'called content: A crown that seldom kings enjoy'. Though again drawing upon a relatively obscure play, the precocious Lagosian Akidiya Ladapo Oluwole quoted rather contrasting words from *Richard II* (Act 3, Scene 2) which point to the especial powers of a king: 'The breath of worldly men cannot depose/The deputy elected by the Lord'. Whether the students had read or studied these works in full, or absorbed quotations by other means, is not known.

15 Other students ventured what appear to be original compositions. Perhaps the most enigmatic of these is Aaron James George's three-word epigram, simply 'It is enough', reflecting a witty confidence, or even a refusal to dabble in the verbose style common among his peers. Other compositions take the form of maudlin yet cheering poems promising remembrance of the autograph collector, as is common to the genre. The American Joseph Morford's is a more conventional autograph in that it addresses Katie Hughes directly and focuses on remembrance:

> Sometimes while looking through this book,
> Your eyes upon this page may look.
> Then, yes then, you'll remember me
> As I will you across the sea.

16 As well as signing off by noting his onward destination (Buguma, Calabar), Morford adds scripture to boot: 'Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also' (Matthew 6: 21).

17 Serious-minded original poetry also was offered. William R. Lukobi-Johnson, a Sierra Leonean, drafted what appears to be original verse titled 'Days of Whitsuntide', which focused on the autograph book genre's key themes of memory and friendship. Another apparently original poem, an allegorical dark fairy tale titled 'Faith and Love', was tendered in ornate handwriting by Davidson Don Tengo Jabavu. The son of a leading South African journalist, after further study in Britain and America he would return to his homeland as a pioneering educational reformer and black faculty member at University of Fort Hare. Jabavu's own most famous student, Nelson Mandela, would recall in his memoir that 'Fort Hare and Professor D. D. T. Jabavu are virtually synonymous' (Mandela 38).

oria composed an untitled anti-slavery poem. It is
ome lines from this poem— 'Forced from home and
ft forlorn', and 'What are England's sights, I ask, me
from my delights to sever —have autobiographical resonances, speaking to his own

homesickness and sense of forced separation. Relevant to such a reading would be the unusual decision, in comparison to other instances of anti-slavery poetry, to locate the poem in 'England' and imagine the narrator bearing witness to 'England's sights'. But, without discounting such a reading, it might well overemphasise insights into racialised experience that Kanyane himself did not envisage. With anti-slavery culture having become less prominent, anti-slavery verse remained as a quite conventional, relatively anodyne and non-denominational sentiment of late-Victorian culture, as well as a topic of popular entertainment. Any personal feelings on Kanyane's part are highly codified within that mode. As with the passages from the Bible and Shakespeare, Kanyane's poem could instead express conventionality, a display of morally steadfast learnedness designed to meet its readers' expectations, not necessarily to challenge those expectations with personal revelation.

19 In their quoted and original texts, the students demonstrated the piety, goodness, humour, and learnedness which the late-Victorian culture of evangelicalism sought in them, as it sought in itself. To conclude this section, I want to underline that, though ideas about race and racism were paramount among the social codes through which the students navigated their time in Britain, it is difficult to be too prescriptive about a racialised reading of the identities forged in the Autograph Book. The coming together of the African and diasporic students in writing the entries might be seen to echo characteristics of nineteenth-century African American literary culture, as discussed by John Ernest, revealing 'people's lives not as abstract and coherent individual stories, or independent tales, but as they were lived, in concert with others' (Ernest, n.p.). However, the phenomenon of 'writing lives together' has recently also been discussed as mainstream Victorian literary activity (James and North). As Patrizia di Bello remarks, 'to be inscribed in an album was a sign of belonging to or participating in a community of fellows, defined by intellectual, religious, geographical or sentimental connections' (di Bello 8). The ethnicities of the contributors were not necessarily what defined the students' community. In this respect, it is important to note that not only black visitors' autographs were entered in this book. Autographs by young members of a Sharp family of Armley, Leeds, and one by a Will Ainsworth, intersperse those of the black contributors. Alice Maude Stones, seemingly an Irishwoman bound for Spion Kop, wrote a long piece of apparently original verse followed by a sketch of a lion. There is also an entry from M. Owen, of Lagos, whose identity is otherwise unknown. Nor can the black authors simply be grouped together. When he signed the book, Mojola Agbebi was on his second tour of Britain. He was not a student but a teacher and famous figure in West Africa. He cites an eighteenth-century hymn, 'How Firm a Foundation', one inspired by writings in Isaiah. There are times at which the racial and ethnic identities of the students become apparent in their autographs, but these moments weave into a more complex overall picture of a grouping forged by the Hughes family, and seeking commonalities on various grounds, not least religion.

20 In considering the students' personal lives, it is difficult to demarcate intimate questions, such as religious devotion, from more material and worldly aspects of their experiences, such as their performances on stage. A danger arises in interpreting their assimilation into Victorian/Christian culture as insincere, or simply imposed upon them—the expression of a false consciousness. As well as reflecting a general difficulty in researching individual lives through publicly shared or oriented documents, this problem is exacerbated by the public-facing, and commercial, elements of the students' time in Britain, where they literally were tasked with performing their faith. But while it is valid to read these autographs as another instance of their public construction of identity, as I have done so far, I also want to consider how, at the same time, the autographs do permit analysis as personal expressions of real and deeply meaningful beliefs and relationships. This is an important point worth especial effort given the eiving private experience among black subjects in raphical insights are often lacking from primary

21 To see the personal significance of the autographs entails thinking about their initial recipient, Katie Hughes. Instructively, Reid Ricker warns against too close an association of autographer and his or her source material, arguing that the most significant 'link' meant to be established by the autograph is that between collector and contributor (Reid Ricker 250). To read the Congo House Autograph Book through the lens of personal relations shows the care and compassion invested in the autographs. For Katie Hughes's life was difficult. In 1889, at age two, she had been run over by a carriage, its wheel passing over her chest. Though having apparently recovered, she died in May 1909 after suffering for seven years from chronic rheumatism. Over much of that time she had been bedridden (Draper and Lawson-Reay 49–50, 225–26). A well-loved resident, she had nonetheless lived at the heart of the school, and, without belittling her, many of the contributions to her autograph book offer solace to a young life marked by ill-health and incapacity.

22 Some entries possibly represent Katie Hughes very literally in the form of portrait sketches. It is not possible to verify whether she is the subject of the sketch of a young woman reclining by Lawale Tubi of Lagos, nor of the profile portrait, notable for its intricate and ornate surrounding, by Asaph Leslie Kanyane. It is plausible that the pictures represent other family members or friends. But the fact that Kanyane paired his anti-slavery poem with such a familial, intimate picture illustrates well that even the most obviously socially located of the autographs were part of the forging of intimate connections. The representation of the autographer's piety, morality, humour, ambition, and more were, in other words, also investments in real relationships of a kind that are routinely obscured in other sources on black history in this period.

23 Certain autographs discuss the enjoyment and worth to be found in quiet existence. Ernestina Francis, one of the female students who was originally from the Congo, would spend much of her own life in the shadows of male students who were afforded more opportunities to study and travel than she was. In November 1905 she offered to Katie Hughes an epigram expressive of the variabilities of daily existence: 'All days pass, but not like each other. One brings tears & joys another.' Many of the autographs emphasize the value, in God's eyes, of lives lived in obscurity. To give one example, the Bermudan Cecil B. Conton wrote:

> Life so often seems empty and meaningless. We are so apt to think that we play no part in the drama of life. But in reality we are unconsciously surrounded by spectators who daily watch our deeds, so much so that our very existence becomes an instrument either for good or ill. Truly we like to serve but hereafter to live for Him.

24 Or to give another instance, one M. Owen of Lagos, who was not a listed student and who I have been unable further to identify, composed a verse titled 'Completed tasks', which begins: 'There are no lives unfinished, incomplete/God gives each man at birth some work to do . . .'.

25 Among the quoted words that seem particularly to have been carefully chosen with their recipient in mind were those picked by the leading student Ayodeji Oyejola, who was originally from Lagos. In September 1904 he recited:

> These unknown secluded years (of Christ) teach us that the noblest lives may yet be the most obscure; that life in the highest sense is not mere action; but the calm reign of love & duty towards God and man in our allotted sphere—that the truest & holiest joy is not necessarily that of public activity, far less that of excitement and noise, but rather where the calm around lets God and heaven be mirrored in an untroubled spirit.

26 Though not attributed by Oyejola, the words come from John Cunningham Geikie's very popular *Life and Words of Christ* (1880, 245).

ources on the school, the Congo House Autograph of the students outside of the norms of white e they garnered considerable attention. Though consisting of short texts, its contents do avoid the more hackneyed and imitative forms

of expression that characterise many other autograph books from this period and others. Still they must be read with caution, and attention to the generic constraints of the form. Through form as well as content, the autographs convey their authors' sensitivity to Victorian forms of self-fashioning. Having been encouraged to display 'Victorian' credentials in their time in Britain (as would many of them have been in their home environments in West Africa) it is unsurprising that the students' autographs conform to norms of the genre in this period. The students' autographs were deposited in a private book that belonged to a culture of public self-fashioning, and the students' time in Colwyn Bay was especially sculpted in the public spotlight. If neither throwaway nor entirely revealing, then the autographs certainly are glimpses of young lives unfolding in accordance with the era's codes of representation.

28 As I have also shown, however, unusual insights into personal lives and interpersonal relations are also detectable in this autograph book. This is apparent in the autographs' delicate and sympathetic address of their recipient, Katie Hughes. Of course, the various examples that I have read in terms of their significance to Katie Hughes may also reflect the personal concerns of the contributors. They are all well within the realms of normal autograph book entries for this era, and none speaks directly of personal circumstances. Yet still they seem carefully chosen and curated as soothing sentiments for the book's owner. In each of these examples, personal context adds much significance to what might otherwise be read as typical, pious presentations of the self. They show a charitable concern for Katie Hughes, a sincere attempt to translate scriptural learning into a positive resource for her. As such they offer a rare view of the personal lives of black students in Edwardian Britain, specifically the spiritual, emotional, and familial bonds to those with whom they lived and/or enjoyed relations of mutual support.

29 Just as the students reported largely peaceable relations with the Colwyn Bay community, the students' autographs nestle comfortably alongside those by white visitors to the school. Tonally, thematically, little separates them. Even the more personalised aspects of the autographs demonstrate an adherence to norms shared within a majority-white culture. As records of cultural assimilation, then, might the autographs be seen to pose problems to the endeavour to decolonize Victorian and Edwardian studies? I would argue their value lies precisely in revealing how some black people did share in widely held values, so finding a footing in society that might not otherwise have been granted to them. The contrasting outspoken and politically radical stance of contemporaries and of future generations of black people in Britain is all the better situated by a sympathetic reading of texts such as the Autograph Book. Were it not able to analyse the foundational roles of Christianity and of education, as reflected in the Autograph Book, the project of academic decolonisation would lose some perspective, as well as many inroads into understanding black history in nineteenth-century Britain.

30 Autograph books are potentially valuable in what they can disclose about these personal, shared and communal aspects of existence, in contrast to the conventions of many other forms of life writing, the focus of which lifts an individual into a spotlight that may cast shadows on those around them. If especially helpful in illuminating aspects of late-Victorian and Edwardian black British experience, given the real limitations in primary sources in this field, then the Congo House Autograph Book also demonstrates the wider value of the autograph book, and other similarly ephemeral texts, in reassessing what forms of writing can best help us document the histories of obscure lives.

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1 This is not to suggest that black authors in this period showed no interest in auto/biographical forms. For example, early pan-Africanist histories such as S. R. B. Attoh-Ahuma's *Memoirs of West African Celebrities* (1905) consisted of short biographies seeking to establish a heroic tradition of African 'celebrities'.

2 For a fuller account, see Burroughs. See also Draper and Lawson-Reay.

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