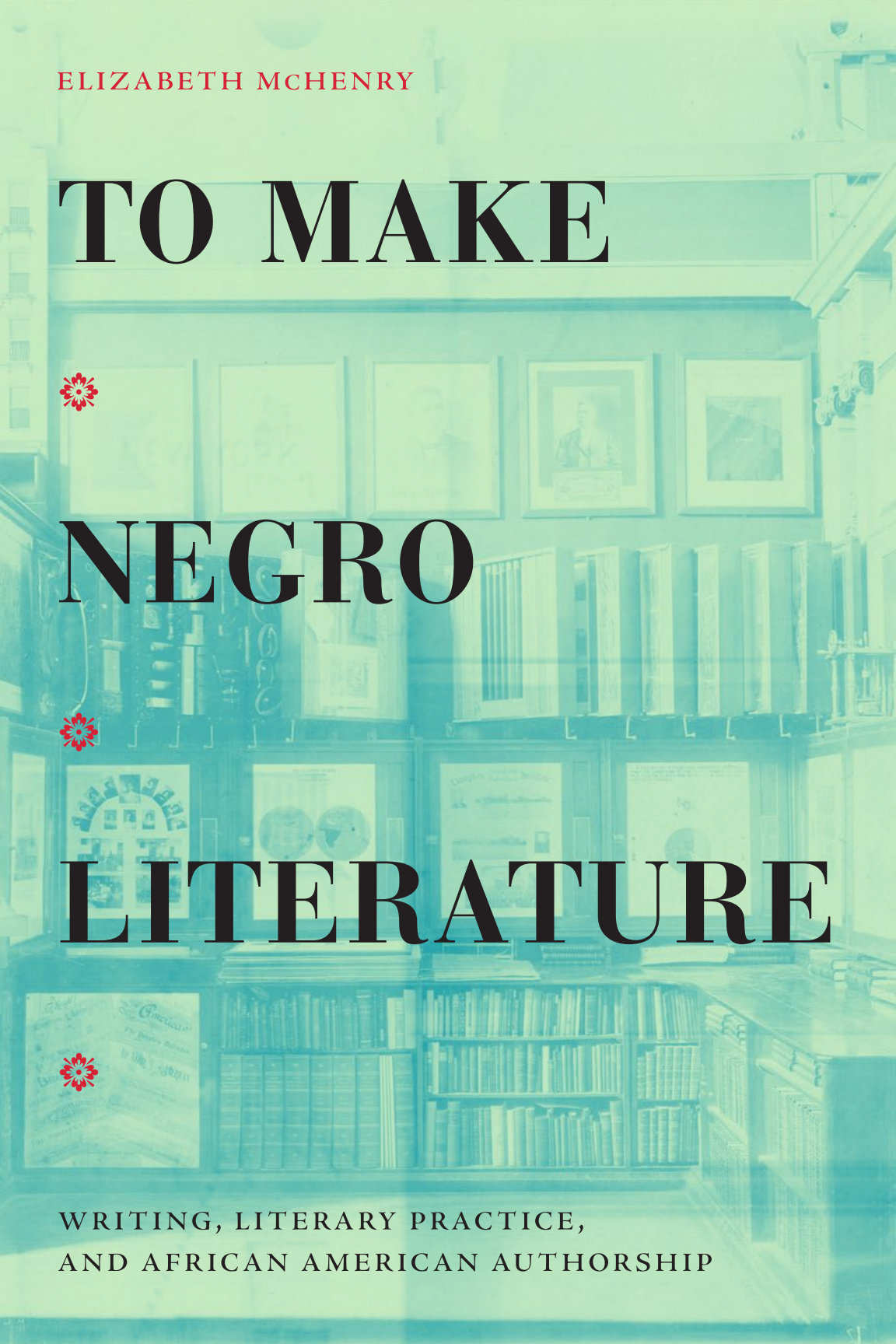


The background of the book cover is a photograph of a library interior, overlaid with a semi-transparent teal color. The library features tall wooden bookshelves filled with books. On the upper shelves, several framed portraits of men are displayed. In the lower left, there are some framed documents or maps. Three small red floral icons are placed on the left side of the cover, one near the top, one in the middle, and one near the bottom.

ELIZABETH MCHENRY

TO MAKE

NEGRO

LITERATURE

WRITING, LITERARY PRACTICE,
AND AFRICAN AMERICAN AUTHORSHIP

TO MAKE NEGRO LITERATURE

BUY

TO MAKE NEGRO LITERATURE



WRITING, LITERARY PRACTICE &
AFRICAN AMERICAN AUTHORSHIP



ELIZABETH MCHENRY



DUKE

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For Electa and Quinn,
and for Gene, who makes every moment count

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

MY THINKING ON THIS BOOK BEGAN OVER TWO DECADES AGO, WHEN I first came upon Mary Church Terrell's cache of short stories in her archive at the Library of Congress. I did not know at the time why these stories felt important to me. I only knew that there was something poignant about them, something they wished to communicate that remained unaccounted for in traditional narratives of Terrell's life and her activism. It was not until I returned to them years later that they began to appear to me as vital elements of an alternative or unwritten aspect of African American literary history. Of this book's many tentative beginnings, none was more important than the paper on Mary Church Terrell that I delivered at the Print Cultures Symposium at the University of Illinois in 2005. For his invitation to speak about my "new project" and, later, to expand on that paper in print, I thank Gordon Hutner. This book's fourth chapter reflects an earlier form of my thinking on Terrell and her fictional writing that appeared in *American Literary History* 19, no. 2 (Spring 2007), 381–401; any overlap between the old and new versions appears by permission.

Along the way, as each of the book's chapters took shape, I benefited immensely from the intellectual companionship and impassioned writing of fellow travelers working at the intersection of Black studies, African American literary studies, print culture and book history scholarship, and archival and material studies. Over the years, I have learned from and been inspired by the scholarship of Brent Hayes Edwards, P. Gabrielle Foreman, Eric Gardner, Jacqueline Goldsby, Saidiya Hartman, Laura Helton, Shirley Moody-Turner, Kinohi Nishikawa, and Britt Rusert, as well as by many others in the field of Black print culture. I remain indebted to Frances Smith

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Foster, the allure of whose scholarship first drew me to Black print culture and to the archives. Carla Peterson has been a fierce supporter from the beginning, and early conversations with her helped to lay the foundations for this book. Randall Burkett continues to feed my curiosity for what the archives hold, and I am grateful to him for his willingness to think with me about materials that have been dismissed by others. I am especially grateful to those who stepped in when I most needed them. This includes Priscilla Wald, who listened with such great care and, in doing so, helped me to reset the course of this project; Joycelyn Moody, who advocated for me on a moment's notice; and Kimberly Blockett, who, when the book refused to follow its plan, helped me to muster the patience its writing required.

A fellowship from New York University's Humanities Initiative (now the Center for the Humanities) in 2012 allowed me write what became the first chapter of this book and more generally provided the time and space to begin to understand the logic of what I wished to do. I am certain that this project would have remained unfinished without the generous support of the American Council of Learned Societies, and I have NYU to thank for a much needed sabbatical leave that, coupled with the ACLS fellowship, allowed me the true luxury of two full years of writing and revision. I received invaluable assistance from a number of archivists and librarians, including Charlotte Priddle, director of NYU special collections; Amanda Watson, the librarian for English and comparative literature at NYU; and Lynn Farrington, senior curator of special collections at the Kislak Center for Special Collections, Rare Books and Manuscripts, at the University of Pennsylvania. Along the way I tested my ideas before many audiences, whose comments, criticisms, and suggestions were critical to moving the project forward. For their invitations to visit, I'd like to thank in particular the Center for Literature and the Public Sphere at Seton Hall University, the Grolier Club and the Rare Book School, Yale University's Program in the History of the Book, the National Humanities Center, and the Black Bibliography Project. I'd also like to thank NYU's Print Culture Working Group, where a vigorous conversation about genre helped me to come closer to understanding the books sold by subscription that I address in my first chapter. There I connected with Ellen Gruber Garvey, whose generosity in talking with me about this project certainly helped to make it better.

The true constant across the years in which most of this book was written was my students at NYU. Every step of the way, the classroom has been an invigorating place to pursue interests, to try out arguments, and to take in ideas. It has been my privilege to work with an extraordinary group of students

whose love of the archives overlapped with my own. Conversations in particular with Matt Bruen, Jane Greenway Carr, Laura Fisher, Laura Helton, Kristen Highland, Rob Koehler, and Autumn Womack sustained me over the years and certainly enriched this book. Their rigorous engagement with obscure documents, their questions about collecting and archival practice, and their dedication to collaboration and scholarly community inspired me to think more deeply and more productively. Many NYU students have also provided much-needed help as research assistants, and their work—in tracking down sources, organizing references, and making PowerPoint presentations—eased my load immeasurably. In particular I would like to thank Laurie Lambert, whose folder of notes on Daniel Murray I returned to again and again during the writing of this book, and Olivia Howard, who did all that I asked of her and more. Ryan Healey also deserves special mention for working with me to bring order to the endnotes and the bibliography.

The English Department at NYU remains for me an ideal intellectual home, and I am grateful to my colleagues for what feels like a lifetime of camaraderie and support. Phil Harper remains my truest ally and most loyal advocate, and over the years he has generously given me—in terms of time, openness, and wisdom—more than I can ever thank him for. His careful reading of the earliest drafts of the book helped me to unlock its purpose and its arguments, and I have him to thank for pushing me to take on (rather than shy away from) Booker T. Washington's authorship. Pat Crain volunteered to read the manuscript in its most inchoate and unruly form, and her insightful comments and vital encouragement gave me the courage to keep going. Sonya Posmentier worked with me to design a road map for my fellowship year and, in doing so, helped me to launch what was the most inspired and enjoyable period of my writing life. She has been a constant source of productive conversation about this book and so much more. Over a series of lunches, Gene Jarrett asked all the right questions about the project and in the process helped me to clarify my vision of it. I am grateful to Lisa Gitelman for listening as I sketched out the final shape of the book, and for telling me, one fall afternoon over cocktails, that the book was done. John Archer was a reassuring presence and an outstanding mentor just when I needed it most. Along the way Tom Augst, Jennifer Baker, Nick Boggs, Chris Cannon, Patrick Deer, Carolyn Dinshaw, Juliet Fleming, Lissette Florez, John Guillery, Lenora Hanson, Isabel Hofmeyr, David Hoover, Alyssa Leál, Wendy Lee, Paula McDowell, Peter Nicholls, Patricia Okoh-Esene, Crystal Parikh, Cyrus Patell, Dara Regaignon, Catherine Robson, Martha Rust, Simón Trujillo, and Greg Vargo provided encouragement in ways small and large.

Una Chaudhuri, Maureen McLane, and Jini Kim Watson deserve special mention for their warmth and for their willingness to be leaned on, as colleagues, mentors, and friends: their support has made all the difference.

It is my good fortune to have found my way back to Duke University Press and, more specifically, to editor Courtney Berger, who from the start has been dedicated to moving this project forward. My thanks to her for believing in it, and for expertly navigating me through each step of the review process. Britt Rusert and an anonymous reader for the press offered extraordinary feedback on the manuscript: what a privilege to be read so generously, so carefully, and so well. In particular, Britt Rusert dared me to be bolder and more precise in my claims about *failure*, and her insistence that the manuscript needed to be trimmed helped me to produce a stronger and more focused book. Sandra Korn was a constant source of good advice, and her patience for my endless questions is much appreciated. I am grateful to Lisa Lawley for overseeing the production process, and to Emily Shelton, whose attention to detail and thoughtful suggestions on style made this a better book. Special thanks also go to the marketing team at the press and to Lalitree Darnielle, who generously made it a priority to scan images for me in her home under the most difficult of circumstances. The book's production costs were supported by the English Department at NYU, through its Abraham and Rebecca Stein Faculty Publication Fund. I am also grateful to the NYU Center for the Humanities for a generous TOME (Toward an Open Monograph Ecosystem) grant, which made it possible for this book to be freely accessible online.

I finished *To Make Negro Literature* in the midst of a global pandemic and at a time when racial violence and anti-Black sentiment has made the precarity of Black lives ever more apparent. The reverberating turmoil and loss that defined the year 2020 has only underscored the importance of friends and family in my everyday life and, certainly, in the completion of this work. I did not always want to be asked, "So, how's the book coming?" But I fully appreciate the love and the moral support that lay behind the question. To all the communities I call home: thank you for caring for me over the years, in ways large and small. I am especially grateful to Betsy Michel, whose thoughtfulness, kindness, and love epitomize what it means to be neighborly. I am also grateful for the friendship of two extraordinary women who have become like family to me. It is now unimaginable to think about cooking the Thanksgiving bird without Elena Lüthi, who approaches this project and all other things with fierce determination and an abundance of good humor. It is equally unimaginable to eat Sunday night dinner without Alison Magruder, whose cheerful presence has brought so much laughter and joy to our lives. My special thanks also go to

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This book was quite literally written in the presence of two extraordinary dogs, Blossom and Mabel, whose endless patience and enormous capacity

for sleep provided me with good company on even the longest and hardest days. It is a true gift that I was never alone when writing, and I have come to believe that I am incapable of doing my best thinking if Blossom and Mabel are not by my side. My thanks to Laura Cooper Davidson for loving them as much as I do, and for all the joy and beauty she brings to our world.

My family has surrounded me and cared for me from the very start, and their love and support is key to all that I do. I think of my grandparents, Elizabeth and Alphonso Williamson, every day, and each day I gain greater appreciation for what they accomplished as African Americans born in the opening years of the twentieth century. I cannot begin to fathom what they endured, and yet my most vivid memories are of their laughter, their optimism, and their love. I am a literary historian because of my mother, Mary Williamson McHenry: the example of her daily work, as a teacher and a scholar of African American literature, showed me the value of Black history and literature and of thinking through written words. She also modeled for me how to live a life of adventure, of courage, and of faith. My dad, Donald F. McHenry, is an extraordinary father and grandfather who makes it clear every day that, of all life's accomplishments, family is the most important one. I know that he learned this from his own mother, Dora Brooks McHenry, who died too soon but whose impact was so great; his ardent love for and dedication to us, and his insistence that all our goals are reachable is a tribute to her. His faith that this book would get written helped me to reach the end.

Chrissie McHenry has made everything in my life—from my childhood to my adulthood—better for her presence. In many ways she absorbs all the worst of me: my fears, my frustrations, my disappointments, my sadness. And yet she remains a model of kindness, love, good humor, and true generosity. I am grateful to be her sister, and so fortunate to have her. Sharing in the lives of her extraordinary children, Claire, Caroline, and Daniel Lempres, continues to be one of my greatest joys. Strong, smart, independent, kind, conscientious, and hardworking: each one is destined to do great things and make huge and necessary contributions to this world. To them I owe thanks for sharing so much with me, in terms of adventure, laughter, distraction, fellowship, love, and, of course, computer assistance. I am indebted to them for being always “on call,” to fix weird formatting, to remove strange lines that wouldn’t go away, and to catch all the typos that I didn’t see.

The most important environment for the creation of this book was the one that I found every day with my husband, Gene, and our two children, Electa and Quinn McHenry-Assaf. Quinn and Electa have truly grown up with this book and their constant presence—first as babies, then as

children, and now as teenagers—serves as a daily reminder of what is most important. I cannot imagine my life without Electa's astute fashion advice or Quinn's basketball wisdom or without their unique ways of seeing the world around them. Electa and Quinn are my greatest gifts and deepest inspirations, and their energy and enthusiasm has sustained me over the long haul. I know that they will be happy to hold this book and see that, yes, it is finally finished. My final and most profound thanks go to Gene Assaf, whose love makes everything possible and infinitely more worthwhile. Gene holds me steady in the most fundamental ways, and what he has done for me, for us, and for this book is inestimable. There are no words that can possibly express all that he means to me. He is an outstanding friend, partner, and father who reminds me each day that the point is not to cross the finish line but to taste, and to remember the taste, of all that is good along the way.

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INTRODUCTION

TO MAKE NEGRO LITERATURE



WRITING, LITERARY PRACTICE &
AFRICAN AMERICAN AUTHORSHIP



SOMETIME IN THE SUMMER OR EARLY FALL OF 1903, AS HE WORKED to find a balance between his life as a scholar and his aspirations as a civil rights activist, W. E. B. Du Bois quietly purchased a printing office at 163 Beale Street in Memphis, Tennessee. He did not live or work in Memphis, nor did he have experience in or knowledge of the business of printing. In theory, there were plenty of printing offices in Atlanta that would have been accessible to Du Bois, and as a professor of sociology at Atlanta University, he also would have had some access to the university's printing office. Described in the *Catalogue of Atlanta University* for 1901–2 as “large and well appointed,” the printing office was used as a place of instruction, where students learned the printing trade by working on publications for both the school and the larger Atlanta community.¹ But it was also where two monthly newspapers were published: the *Bulletin of Atlanta University* and a student newspaper called the *SCROLL*. It also housed Atlanta University Press, which, beginning in 1896, had produced the proceedings of the annual Conference for the Study of Negro Problems as well as related publications. And yet Du Bois invested his

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entire life savings—some \$1,600—in the Memphis print business, entering into an unlikely partnership with two former students who had recently graduated from Atlanta University. He hoped to make the printing office the home of a national Negro journal and the “basis of a publishing house” that would produce “supplementary reading for Negro schools, text-books, works of Negro authors, etc.” By taking control of a printing press, Du Bois was determined to give voice to Negro writers and artists, who would “be encouraged to write of themselves and depict the things nearest to them and thus speak more naturally and effectively than they usually do.”²

These were lofty goals, and, to Du Bois, the printing business represented a significant literary intervention. He used its presses to manufacture a broadside of his own poem “Credo,” which, distributed by Black clubwomen in places like Tuskegee, Alabama, would reach a wider and more diverse audience than it had through its original printing in the *Independent* in the fall of 1904. He also produced a journal, the *Moon Illustrated Weekly*, which had a limited distribution in Memphis and Atlanta beginning in December 1905. But the journal never had anywhere near a national readership, or the ten thousand subscribers that Du Bois had estimated he could potentially attract when planning the venture. The *Moon*’s demise sometime in the summer of 1906 went largely unnoticed, except by fellow journalists who took it as an occasion to ridicule Du Bois for what they considered an arrogant effort to venture outside the realm of academia. “With the pompous air and assumed dignity of a peacock . . . the Moon reached its zenith a few weeks ago and has fallen behind the veil,” wrote a correspondent for *Alexander’s Magazine*, playing on the image Du Bois mobilized in *The Souls of Black Folk* to theorize the dynamics of race and racism in the United States and across the globe.³ Du Bois himself attributed the demise of the *Moon* to the mismanagement of his younger colleagues, who, in turn, perhaps recognizing that Du Bois would never see or acknowledge his own “blunder in the matter,” blamed each other.⁴ Du Bois effectively walked out on the whole Memphis printing enterprise, deserting his partners and threatening them with legal action to recoup his investment in the business.⁵

I begin with the story of Du Bois’s short-lived experience as the owner of a printing business because it illustrates the sorts of narratives, rarely told about African American literary history, that are the subject of this book. Relatively few critics have focused their attention on this episode in Du Bois’s career, and those who have generally agree that the most we can say about the *Moon* is that it was a precursor to the *Crisis*, the highly successful journal for which Du Bois served as the founding editor. This perspective

insists that we quickly shift our attention forward, not only to the *Crisis*, a publication that is more readily accessible and more easily contextualized than the *Moon*, but also to the familiar ground of the Harlem Renaissance, the historical moment about which we literary critics are perhaps the most well versed. The *Crisis* was the official organ of the NAACP, and its primary purpose was to be a political and news publication that broadcast, according to its inaugural editorial, “those facts and arguments which show the danger of race prejudice.”⁶ It was launched in 1910, but the *Crisis* is more commonly associated with the key role it played in the development of Black literary voices during the Harlem Renaissance, the literary and artistic movement of the 1920s. Under the editorial direction of Jessie Fauset, the *Crisis* celebrated the talents of a generation of young African Americans by publishing their art and their writing. It was a crucial means through which Black literature found cohesion and visibility during a decade that awakened both white Americans and African Americans themselves to the place and purpose of racial art.

But by assessing the *Moon* as a precursor to the *Crisis*, we have subsumed its story as well as crucial lessons about how African American literature was made in the first years of the twentieth century into a larger and already written narrative, one that obscures the particularities of the *Moon* as a product of a specific literary historical moment that remains underappreciated. The years with which I am concerned in this book lie between two cultural heydays that are the subject of a great deal of scholarship. In recognition of the literary ambitions and accomplishments of Black women during the 1890s, we have dubbed this decade the “Woman’s Era,” identifying it as a moment that resulted in an impressive body of literary work appearing in various print formats. The inclusion, in 1988, of a number of texts from the 1890s as part of the set of thirty reprinted and then—newly discovered texts as *The Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers* drew considerable attention to individual authors like Anna Julia Cooper, Frances E. W. Harper, Gertrude Bustill Mossell, and Emma Dunham Kelley-Hawkins, while also encouraging scholars to look at and think of these writers as a part of a larger tradition of nineteenth-century African American literature.⁷ This series was widely celebrated and enticed a generation of researchers to appreciate in new ways the contributions of Black women to intellectual history and to the history of African American literature. Curiously, a *Supplement* to the series, published in 1991, included several texts by Black women from the early twentieth century; bundled together in a series on nineteenth-century writers, those volumes appear out of context and, as Frances Smith

Foster notes in a review of the series, include no explanation of the “reasons for or the implications of [their] inclusion . . . in a series about nineteenth-century literature.”⁸ Scholars are even more likely to subsume the literature of the first two decades of the twentieth century in an extended understanding of the Harlem Renaissance, as do Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Gene Jarrett in their collection of writings from the years 1892–1938, *The New Negro*. By organizing the collection around the “trope” of the New Negro, they point to a coherent narrative of racial uplift and creativity, refiguring the Harlem Renaissance as the “long New Negro Movement,” a continuum that runs from the nineteenth century well into the twentieth.⁹ The volume is an important and effective anthology that exposes students to a sampling of how the concept of the New Negro was mobilized over the course of almost four decades. But, like the *Supplement to The Schomburg Library of Nineteenth Century Black Women Writers*, it only reinforces my observation that the literary projects of the early twentieth century are rarely allowed to claim their own independent space.

In fact, most scholars that address this body of literature do so across a wider “postbellum, pre-Harlem” time frame. This is the case with Dickson D. Bruce Jr.’s foundational *Black American Writing from the Nadir: The Evolution of a Tradition, 1877–1915*, which provides an invaluable survey of the fiction and poetry produced by African Americans in the years between the end of Reconstruction and the beginnings of World War I. More recently, Barbara McCaskill and Caroline Gebhard’s edited collection *Post-Bellum, Pre-Harlem: African American Literature and Culture, 1877–1919* revisited these years, not to survey them but to illuminate the “unresolved contradictions” of the post-Reconstruction era. This volume brought much attention to a number of understudied authors and texts. The novelist Sutton Griggs was barely mentioned in that collection, but since its publication interest in his novels has spiked. His literary career is the focus of a collection of essays, *Jim Crow, Literature, and the Legacy of Sutton E. Griggs*, edited by Kenneth Warren and Tess Chakkalakal, which is dedicated to “mov[ing] Griggs from the margins to the center of African American literary history.” Another notable contribution to the field is James Smethurst’s *The African American Roots of Modernism: From Reconstruction to the Harlem Renaissance*, which focuses on the influence of African American artists and intellectuals on the development of literary modernity in the United States.¹⁰

All of this notable scholarship is “on” African American literature at the turn from the nineteenth to the twentieth century. But none of these studies focus as tightly on the years that surround the turn from one century to

another—years that carried great significance for African Americans, as the trope of the New Negro shows—or illuminate the kinds of texts, literary practices, or modes of authorship that constitute the subject of *To Make Negro Literature*.¹¹ I am not suggesting that the turn from the nineteenth century to the twentieth should be considered a discrete period, isolated or disconnected from the years that surrounded it. But I do believe that our tendency to group the years from 1877 to 1919, from the end of Reconstruction to the Harlem Renaissance, has prevented us from identifying the specificity of the intervening years. Without lingering on those years that surround the turn of the century, it is difficult to recognize and come to critical terms with an aspect of literary culture that is all too rarely the subject of study: *failure*.

Literary history seldom privileges that which is unsuccessful, whether in terms of writers and texts never recognized by publication, or projects that remained incomplete or unfulfilled. But these writers, texts, and projects are no less a part of literary history. The *Moon* is not just a precursor of the *Crisis*, where the failure of the former is eclipsed by the success of the latter; it is an event that demands we examine the scope and shape of literary culture at the moment in which Du Bois launched his printing business and conceptualized the *Moon*, and in which it failed. A more nuanced understanding of the *Moon's* content, the specific conditions of its publication and its failure, and the overall history of Du Bois's ownership of a job printing business is one component of this.

We do well to remember that Du Bois's printing business, as well as every other aspect of his life and his intellectual work, was supposed to fail: he worked to build what was intended to be simultaneously a Black business and a Black intellectual institution in the midst of what was a veritable assault on Black lives and livelihood. The fact that African Americans were deemed by whites to be incompatible with such institutions serves as a reminder of the *queerness* of Black life during the Jim Crow era: Black people were, to say the least, “cast out of straight time's rhythm,” to borrow José Esteban Muñoz's phrasing.¹² Excluded from American social, cultural, intellectual, and political institutions, African Americans' literary and intellectual efforts during this time must be seen as a remarkable historical record of the road maps of their rejection of this positioning. In recent years, the idea of success and, more specifically, the attendant category of failure have proven to be a rich site of theorization for scholars of queer studies. My attention to the ways that failure resonates queerly is particularly indebted to Muñoz, who usefully understands queerness as a forward-looking mode of

critique. In this context, queer failure is a rejection of what is, or, in Muñoz's words, a manifestation of a "brilliant offness" that is "not so much a failure to succeed as it is a failure to participate in a system of valuation that is predicated on exploitation and conformity." To see Du Bois's failure in these terms allows us insight into the ways that African Americans around the turn of the century "productively occupied" failure because it was a way to audaciously reject and refuse the place assigned to them and the disrespect shown to their intellectual lives as segregation and disenfranchisement were formalized and codified.¹³ This perception of failure suggests the importance of our reevaluating those texts, genres, institutions, and forms of authorship that we have dismissed as unsuccessful, unproductive, unconventional, anomalous, or irrelevant; they are an important archive of the queer literary practices through which African Americans rejected a system of racial categorization that deemed them socially intolerable, intellectually inferior, and politically unqualified.

The objective of *To Make Negro Literature* is to reorient our understanding of African American literary culture at the turn from the nineteenth to the twentieth century by taking account of a variety of projects and conditions of authorship that have been dismissed or gone largely unnoticed in traditional accounts of African American literary history. A key to doing this work is to focus on a specific historical juncture. While the framework of the "long nineteenth century" has done much to center that century within a trajectory of capitalist modernity, my book suggests the ways that the *longue durée* poses problems for recovering the unfamiliar and now mostly obscure cultural artifacts that existed in the seams of these historical folds. My aim is to turn our critical attention away from the usual markers of literary achievement (known authors and traditionally published works of poetry and fiction), not to dismiss their importance but as a means of expanding and supplementing our knowledge of the complex literary landscape in which our African American ancestors lived. At no point in history was that landscape more complicated than in the last years of the nineteenth century and the opening decade of the twentieth. This interval lies at the very heart of the period historian Rayford Logan famously termed the "nadir" of race relations in the United States.¹⁴ The generation of literary practitioners that animates this study experienced the promise of Reconstruction firsthand, but they matured intellectually during the years that saw the loss of the civil rights gained during Reconstruction and theoretically guaranteed by the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments. In addition to the erosion of Black political leadership, they witnessed the

rise of lynching and other forms of anti-Black violence, the systematic disenfranchisement of Black voters, the legalization of segregation, and the normalization of patterns of racial discrimination. By 1896, the Supreme Court decision in the *Plessy v. Ferguson* case only gave legal confirmation to what was social fact: that the full rights of citizenship would remain elusive for African Americans, and that racism was becoming ever more deeply embedded in American culture. It would become only more so in the first decades of the twentieth century, when Jim Crow laws expanded, white supremacist groups like the Ku Klux Klan flourished, and racial violence in the South drove African Americans to seek refuge in Northern cities.¹⁵

To use the word “Negro,” as I deliberately do in this study, is to evoke a particular moment in which African Americans embraced the word, insisting that its first letter be capitalized as a means of both controlling its meaning and signifying the recognition and respect due to people of African descent. By capitalizing the “N,” they meant to overturn popular and social tradition and defy the insult and negative connotations of the word “negro.” “Negro” with a capital “N” was a term of dignity, one that was forward-looking in that it spoke to African Americans’ determination to construct positive images of themselves in the hardening racial atmosphere of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. That the word appears throughout the early decades of the twentieth century with a lowercase “n” offers an indication of just how entrenched racism was in the nation. Even the *New York Times* did not adopt a policy of using an uppercase “N” in the word “Negro” until 1930, when they noted of this long-overdue policy: “It is not merely a typographical change; it is an act of recognition of racial self-respect for those who have been for generations in ‘the lower case.’”¹⁶ The refusal to capitalize the “N” in “Negro” has always been indicative of social custom and popular opinion that African Americans were unworthy of the dignity afforded by the typographical gesture of respect and recognition. And yet, in the post-Reconstruction landscape of racial violence and disintegrating rights, African Americans’ insistence that it be capitalized was a means of asserting themselves in a world that remained determined to break them down.

While for some African Americans the shift from “negro” to “Negro” did not appear overly significant, and the term “Afro-American” was already in wide use, for many Black intellectuals of that generation the capitalized title constituted nothing less than what Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Gene Jarrett call “a sign of plentitude, regeneration, or a truly constructed *presence*” that countered how the lowercase usage had symbolized “lack, degeneration, or a truly negated *absence*.”¹⁷ For the most part, then, the writers that I attend to

in this study considered themselves to be Negro writers, and the literature that they were concerned with making they considered, in a wholly new and radical way, Negro literature.¹⁸

At the moment in which they wrote, the successful literary appearance of any African American was a significant achievement. Scholars have noted that the years surrounding the turn of the century were “remarkably productive for African American imaginary literature.”¹⁹ In doing so, much of their attention has been directed to a handful of writers. By far the most well-known of these and the two writers who were the most visible during these years were Paul Laurence Dunbar and Charles W. Chesnutt. Both writers are usually hailed as the first to publish their work with mainstream, white publishers—Dunbar with Dodd, Mead and Chesnutt with Houghton, Mifflin. They are also among the first to be recognized by the American literary establishment, in this case both of them by the “dean” of American letters, William Dean Howells. What is equally important to their successes, though, is what that entrée to American letters required of them, and in what ways it reveals even more starkly the precarious instability of African American literary culture. In his reviews of their work, Howells had emphasized color—Dunbar was “of the pure African type,” while Chesnutt’s Negro blood was “diluted”—and clearly indicated how that feature of their life, their race, should limit what they represented in their literary productions. Dunbar was “most himself” when he wrote “entirely black verse,” by which Howells meant verse written in dialect rather than the formal literary English that made up over half of the poems in *Majors and Minors*.²⁰ And, while Chesnutt’s two collections of short stories, *The Conjure Woman* and *The Wife of His Youth*, were entirely palatable because the first had Uncle Julius speak in dialect, and the second because it allowed white readers to “acquaint” themselves with “those regions where the paler shades dwell as hopelessly with relation to ourselves, as the blackest negro,” Howells was dismayed by the subjects Chesnutt chose for his next works: in *The House Behind the Cedars*, passing, and in *The Marrow of Tradition*, the 1898 Wilmington race riot. He did not review the former and called the latter “bitter, bitter.”²¹

Both writers keenly felt the restraints those expectations cast on them. Chesnutt recognized that “the public as a rule do not care for books in which the principal characters are colored people, or with a striking sympathy for that race as contrasted with the white race.”²² Likewise, Dunbar spoke of the “irrevocable harm” embedded in the “dictum” Howells had “laid down regarding my dialect verse,” which Howells had praised as vibrant and authentic expressions of Black culture, while the rest of his poetry, written in

standard form, Howells deemed “not very interesting.”²³ Dunbar desperately “searched for strategies to counter the influence” of his dialect writing, which threatened to play into public demand for the demeaning images of African American minstrelsy.²⁴ Dunbar was deemed at his best when he wore a mask of Blackness, which was most readily characterized by the racially explicit dialect that, for Howells, worked in tandem with Dunbar’s complexion to define the authenticity of his Blackness. Other critics followed suit, one sensing that “Mr. Dunbar should write about Negroes” and “sound” Black while doing it.²⁵ When he didn’t do either—when he wrote about white people and did not use dialect—reviewers thought that he was writing about people and experiences “alien” to him.²⁶ What the fuller story of Chesnutt’s and Dunbar’s publishing careers reveals, then, are the paradoxes of authorship and literary production around the turn of the century: even those authors we associate with *success* during these years struggled to place their literature amid a literary landscape that was, for Black writers, still very much under construction.

This same instability also marked the careers of those writers who published their work in less prestigious and Black-owned venues. Pauline Hopkins, for instance, published all four of her novels with the Colored Co-operative Publishing Company, a Black-owned press that also published, from 1900 to 1904, the *Colored American Magazine*. In this case, what created instability for Hopkins and the publisher were the racial politics of late nineteenth-century America. Finding Hopkins and the magazine she edited too critical of his political positions, Booker T. Washington took control of the *Colored American Magazine* and derailed Hopkins’s career.²⁷ Sutton Griggs, as Du Bois would do later, established his own press, the Orion Publishing Company, which issued five of his novels between 1899 and 1908, but found that it was wholly unprofitable.²⁸

The importance of these authors and their literary accomplishments are undeniable. And yet what surfaces in this brief review are the inconsistencies of African American literary culture around the turn of the century. Despite the obvious degrees of success of these writers, a deeper look at their stories only begins to reveal the complicated, qualifying questions about Black authorship and the reach and possibilities of African American literature that lay beneath the surface of their achievement. It is this history of a fundamental instability in African American literary culture that I wish to excavate in *To Make Negro Literature*. To do so, I turn to a series of texts, projects, and practitioners that make visible the *unsettledness* of the category of Black literature at the turn of the century, even to those working in the field. Many of these are now largely unfamiliar or discounted in importance, but, I argue, taken

together, they begin to reveal African American literature's workspaces and its working conditions. My study is guided by the kinds of questions that these practitioners were asking at the very moment that a modern understanding of African American literature was taking form. How should that literature be defined and structured, and what were its proper parameters, practices, and subjects of attention? What were the viable venues for its publication, and what was its intended readership? How was authorship imagined and pursued, and in what ways was it compensated? What, in a word, was Negro literature?

It bears remembering that, at the turn of the century, variations on these questions were being asked not only by African American literary practitioners in their own circles, but also in intellectual communities and institutions of higher learning throughout the United States; they exemplify a moment when the place of literature and the meaning of literary study were being reconsidered and reconceptualized. Institutional histories of the professionalization of literary studies tell us that, at the end of the nineteenth century and into the first decade of the twentieth century, the study of literature was consolidating as a formal practice, and "English" as a discipline was taking shape. In the United States, preacademic literary culture (which took place in drawing rooms and literary societies, most often in the form of public oratorical performances) gave way to academic literary culture, and intellectuals began to imagine, develop, and debate particular scholarly and critical practices. The literary education provided by traditional colleges, where literary study was conceived as an extension of grammar, rhetoric, and elocution, was giving way to the democratic modern university's sense that literature could and should be organized and "taught." As Gerald Graff and others have argued, the turn of the century was when "English" was being conceptualized as an academic discipline and the organization, methods, and directions of the study of literature were being debated and reconstituted.²⁹ The questions that shaped this inquiry were both small and expansive. What were the parameters of literature and literary practice? How should literature be organized? What might a "literary curriculum" look like, and what vocabulary of terms should it use? How should a tradition of humanism and cultural values be considered and taught? What were the new branches of knowledge, and how should they be harmonized with the old? The fundamental questions that I argue were being asked about Negro literature at the turn of the century, and the intellectual work of mapping its parameters that I illuminate in this book, in fact reflect a larger unsettledness of literature as a category in the United States.

By evoking the question “What was Negro literature?,” I echo (with a signal difference) the title of Kenneth Warren’s much-discussed, provocatively titled monograph, published in 2011. I share with him an interest in developing a greater appreciation for the distinctiveness of literary practice and production at different historical moments. But my concern in *To Make Negro Literature* lies not in arguing for a new periodization of African American literature, as Warren does in that work, or in linking the racial coherence of African American literature during what he identifies as the Jim Crow era to a political response to segregationist thought and practice. Instead, I wish to attend to the *literariness* of literature in the years immediately following the institutionalization of Jim Crow, in order to provide a more granular account of African American literary and print culture. It is a time, I argue, when African American literature *doesn’t* cohere. That is one reason why this particular moment in African American literary history resists being written: it cannot be accounted for in a smooth, consistent, or cohesive narrative. What we must attend to, I contend, is not only what appears on the surface of this literary moment in its most visible published authors and major texts, but also those elements that are anomalous and that speak in another register to the infrastructure being built to support African American print culture.

To use the word “infrastructure” here is to evoke a world of building and of architecture. In doing so I wish to suggest the ways in which we might expose the blueprints of Black literary culture—that is, those literary projects and people that laid practical and conceptual frameworks for African American literature and the transmission of literary culture and that lie just beneath the surface of the known world of African American literary history. What kinds of writing and conditions of authorship have underwritten what has been valued as African American literature? What sorts of investments stand behind the most visible literary productions, and what kinds of interactions have played supporting roles in the era’s literary landscape? In what structures can we see the intellectual bases of literature and literary culture taking shape? The goal of this book is to bring to the fore what lies hidden—often in plain sight—in the background of literary history, as a way to rejigger both our understanding of turn-of-the-century African American literary culture and our conception of the appropriate objects of African Americanist literary inquiry.

At the time of this writing, the known world of African American literary history is more expansive than ever before. This is due in no small part to scholars working at the intersection of African Americanist inquiry and

print culture studies, who have made strong arguments for centralizing what in the past might have been considered peripheral sites of literary history. Fueled by the “archival turn” in American studies generally, literary scholars have effectively shifted our attention from a focus on Black literature to one on Black print. Perhaps the most dramatic result of this shift has been our attention to the early Black press and to periodicals, which abound with examples of the breadth of African American writing and literary activities. These new directions have opened windows onto the habits of Black readers and transformed our understanding of Black authorship, editorship, circulation, and reception of print. They have even revitalized studies of what was long privileged as the principal form in which African Americans found literary expression: the slave narrative. Scholarship on slave testimonies that appeared “piecemeal in anti-slavery newspapers, almanacs, and pamphlets” now complement our understanding of the “exemplary” narratives of Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs that were published as bound books under the supervision of well-known abolitionists.³⁰

Today it hardly seems worth mentioning that the archives of Black literature have never been more readily accessible or more fully discussed than they are now. Recent critical attention to the scholarship of Dorothy Porter illustrates the extent to which such research would be unthinkable without the foresight of generations of librarians and archivists who fought to preserve and make accessible the records of Black history.³¹ We are reaping the benefits of their work to organize these records in ways that would make Black studies an expansive field and facilitate robust investigations of the history of Black print. Nothing matches or can replace the benefit of working in the presence of rare documents and manuscripts, but the exponential increase in digital materials is providing scholars with unprecedented access to texts that were once largely unreachable or hard to find. This has only made more visible the broad range of materials, formats, texts, and genres that have been considered literary in different historical moments and further challenged us to locate the full variety of sites where literature appeared and literary culture unfolded. As Eric Gardner’s inquiry into the nineteenth-century African American periodical the *Christian Recorder* illustrates, lingering over those locations in which literary culture was not only embedded, but also supported, discussed, and debated, reaps extraordinary insights into the ways African Americans used and appreciated Black literature and print culture.³² Digital projects such as the “Just Teach One: Early African American Print” initiative are making readily available such texts as the novella “Theresa,” written by “S” and published in the pages

of *Freedom's Journal* in 1828, or William J. Wilson's "Afric-American Picture Gallery," published in 1859 in the *Anglo-African Magazine* under the name "Ethiop."³³ The fact that we can engage our students in ongoing recovery projects and the "hands-on" process of archival research ensures that the task of recuperating the full breadth and depth of African American literary history will be valued and taken up by the next generation.³⁴

All of these things mitigate the extent to which silence haunts the archives of African American literary history, but they can't resurrect the missing records of African American lives. Central to working in the archives of Black history are the challenges presented by their omissions and gaps. In the past decade, scholars have aptly assessed these archives as spaces of power, facing head-on the paralyzing dilemmas of how to effectively embody the Black past while at the same time respecting what cannot be known. Much of the theoretical work on archives and archival recovery and on the ways that Black archives are entangled in the politics and practices of institutionalization has focused on the archives of Atlantic slavery. But examples of these concerns in the areas of literary and print culture study abound. None have been more influential for scholars of Black print culture and African American literary history than the foundational scholarship of Frances Smith Foster and Carla Peterson. Both Foster and Peterson have been instrumental in guiding researchers to methodologically sound ways of approaching and contextualizing "recovered" histories and texts, not only in terms of their provenance, but also their place in the archives of Black print. Central to what their scholarship communicates is the importance of working productively across the gaps in our knowledge of the African American past and the silences of the archive by capitalizing on partial knowledge and modes of speculation. They have challenged us to work in slow, patient, and meticulous ways with bits or "scraps" of information, rather than rapidly move on to projects that seem easier or are more firmly aligned with familiar narratives of Black literary practice.³⁵

But part of what we are missing in African American literary history is a result of our own scholarly neglect. We have dismissed as unworthy of attention certain kinds of productions—texts and events that are not lost, then, but disregarded. It is four such events on which I focus in *To Make Negro Literature*: books sold by subscription; forms of print long considered reference tools rather than a genre of any literary value in themselves; forms of authorship that are today disrespected; and writing that simply failed to appear in the venues we think of as "publication." These kinds of events constitute undertheorized elements of Black print culture, their histories

difficult but not impossible to excavate and explore. The work of this book is to restore these stories and re-place them where they belong; as interventions that merit attention for the ways that they contributed to the making of African American writing and Black literary culture in their own time.

To Make Negro Literature, then, intends to expand the scope of literary studies. In doing so, it builds on a growing body of scholarship from across the humanities and social sciences that challenges popular concepts about what constitutes relevant archives and objects of study. In addition to looking beyond the printed book for our understanding of African American literary history, many scholars are now broadening our understanding of the “actors who are central to the production of black texts, but rarely make their way into scholarly studies, from black printers and compositors to papermakers, engravers, editors, subscription agents, and readers.”³⁶ These actors, as Britt Rusert insightfully notes in her survey of the state of African American print culture studies, are deservedly becoming—and will continue to be—objects of study. Never before have scholars come together more fully or assessed more thoughtfully the vast history of African Americans’ interaction with print, from the eighteenth century to the twenty-first, in a series of monographs, conferences, symposia, recovery and editorial projects, and special issues of periodicals dedicated to the study of African American and Black print culture. Perhaps most important, they are finding ways to pass on to graduate and undergraduate students both the skills necessary to responsibly do archival work and a dedication to the expansive scholarship of Black print culture. In short, Black print culture studies have never been more vibrant or plentiful. Still, as Joycelyn Moody and Howard Ramsby II note in *MELUS*’s 2015 special issue on Black print culture, we “simply need more such work.”³⁷

This book responds to that call and participates in the project of creating a more nuanced, more detailed history of African American literary culture in the historical folds between the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries by focusing on the circumstances of literary production and publication; on authorship’s sustainability and literature’s form and function; on the relationship between Black writing and emerging audiences and agendas; and on the frameworks that structure ways of organizing how to talk and think about literature and the literary.

I begin with an assessment of a difficult-to-define genre that I call “racial schoolbooks,” which were sold by subscription throughout the South and the Midwest around the turn of the century. This provides me with a lens through which to see a readership that literary history does not yet adequately recognize. It is unsurprising that much of what we know about

Black readers and print culture is centered on the urban North, where before and after emancipation African Americans had greater access to education and to the materials that advanced both literacy and literary culture than did African Americans in the South. It has proved far more difficult to illuminate print and literary cultures across the South, where African Americans were generally less privileged, less well-educated, and less likely to have access to the sort of organized literary activities and periodicals from which we have drawn much of our understanding of the literary cultures of the North. The racial schoolbooks I explore in the first chapter illustrate the kind of reading material that was available to late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century African Americans living in Southern states. I focus in particular on one book, *Progress of a Race*, a volume that was composed in large part of previously published bits, loosely connected by an authorial voice that walks readers through the history of the race and its progress. The volume reveals a mode of authorship akin to curatorial work, suggesting how books of this sort emerged from and also replicated other institutions of learning and representation. By locating *Progress of a Race* in a tradition of African American self-education, I illuminate the ways that it reproduced and even replaced the schoolhouse as the site of the advancement of literacy and literary education.

Christopher Hager has insightfully made the point that the acquisition of literacy is a process that “unfolds over time.”³⁸ *Progress of a Race*, I argue, stands as important evidence of the ways that literacy was extended, developed, practiced, and supported in African American communities across the South. It is an example of the kind of literature that was dismissed by highly literate people but embraced by the less literate, for it provided them with the means of both practicing literacy and seeing literary culture at work. Here I emphasize an important distinction, between the acquisition of basic literacy and the considerably more elusive idea of developing the analytical and critical skills associated with the literary. The schoolbooks I examine offered a framework through which African Americans—who might in fact be illiterate or semiliterate when they bought the book—could advance sequentially through a trajectory that began with “reading” the book’s illustrations, moved forward into reading curated bits of text, and finally ended with mastering the depth of thinking and critical analysis associated with the literary. This was the sort of pedagogical intervention that African Americans needed to unsettle the racial status quo and to activate the skills necessary for negotiating the precarious position in which they found themselves at century’s end, but it was certainly not an aspect of the

South's structures of segregated industrial education or vocational training that most Black Americans received. In considering this text, I bring to our attention a genre that has been considered an undistinguished literary form, hardly worthy of serious scholarly attention. I also illuminate a mode of selling books, by subscription, long associated with cheap and gaudy productions deemed without literary value or intellectual worth. In suggesting the importance of critically reassessing these texts, I argue that they make visible not only the important authorial project that is realized through acts of selection and compilation, but also the intellectual community established and authorized by the volume itself.

The second chapter of *To Make Negro Literature* is again interested in another kind of curatorial work and the development of intellectual community—namely, the ways turn-of-the-century literary practitioners thought bibliographically, which is to say how they returned again and again to the genre of the list as a means through which to catalog and frame Black print culture. One objective of the cluster of lists and bibliographies created in this period was clearly enumerative: they document an ongoing effort to announce Negro literature and to resolve questions about its existence and its historicity. But they were also powerful instruments of investigation, used by practitioners to test and stabilize how African American literature would be seen, defined, and used. Bibliography forms an important branch of literary study, but as scholars we are more apt to think of bibliographies themselves as tools that we make use of, rather than as documents worthy of our critical attention. And yet the bibliographies that I explore in *To Make Negro Literature* clearly reveal the precise ways literature was being conceptualized in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The chapter brings to the fore the extent to which lists and bibliographies were a crucial mode of African American intellectual practice: as structures through which their creators worked to assemble and sort elements of Black print culture and make it both visible and useable. In this, Black bibliographers participated in what was a national movement to establish the parameters of American literature, which advanced alongside the professionalization of bibliographic studies and library work that took place toward the end of the nineteenth century. African Americans were largely excluded from the organizations that spearheaded these efforts, but they were nevertheless committed to the project of shifting literary culture from an idle pastime of the privileged few to an intellectual pursuit associated with increased access and organized study. The array of lists I look at here—which includes those published in the context of the period's racial schoolbooks like *Progress of*

a *Race*, Daniel Murray's bibliography projects for the 1900 Paris Exposition and the Library of Congress, and the series of bibliographies through which W. E. B. Du Bois worked to create a population of "general readers" equipped to study the problem of the color line in academic ways—help us to see lists and bibliographies as important elements of Black print culture. Their authors themselves authored Negro Literature, not only by guiding readers to it, but also by showing how Black print culture should be valued, historicized, and read.

If the first two chapters of *To Make Negro Literature* focus on authorship that is curatorial in nature, the following two chapters shift their focus to two different kinds of authorship, both of which might best be described as *hidden*. In chapter 3, I consider a form of authorship that hasn't received scholarly attention in African American contexts: those who "author" not themselves, but others. It is no secret that T. Thomas Fortune wrote much of what was published under Booker T. Washington's name around the turn of the century, but little attention has been paid to Fortune's experience writing for Washington, or to the ways that he quite literally orchestrated Washington's career as an author of books. The sheer number of books that Washington published between 1899 and 1901 reveals that book authorship—as opposed to publication in newspapers or periodicals—was high on Washington's agenda around the turn of the century. This chapter looks at Fortune's role in setting that agenda and in the labor of writing that went into the fiction of Washington's authorship. Fortune's career as an important journalist is well known, but both his vision for Black literature and his dogged crafting of Washington's image as a leader whose ideas, he believed, needed "permanent preservation in book form," have been overlooked. In addition to offering an expanded history of the façade of Washington's authorship, the chapter explores the ways that Fortune worked to give shape and definition to Black literature and literary culture by manipulating Washington's career as an author. What the chapter makes visible is Fortune's wish to *organize* Black literary culture around the turn of the century by giving it a textual and geographic center as well as a public face. This was one way, he believed, to define Black authorship and negotiate its parameters. In the end, Fortune knew, it was irrelevant that Washington did not write what he authored. Through establishing for Washington a posture of authorial presence, Fortune was able to activate a concept of Black authorship, one that projected the centrality of literature to Negro leadership and generated a public with an interest in the kinds of racial authority, information, and insight literature could convey.

This concept remained provisional and, in the case of Fortune's own never-completed book projects, came at a price, but even the story of Fortune's frustrations as an author of fiction serves as an important reminder that the sum total of African American literary history includes not only what was written and published, but also those literary attempts that were imagined and never realized. The final chapter of *To Make Negro Literature* is centered directly on literary failure, one of the threads that unifies the chapters of the book and drives my analysis of African American literary culture between 1896 and 1910. As my discussion of the publishing success of Paul Laurence Dunbar and Charles Chesnutt indicates, there are certainly literary success stories from these years, but in turning to the story of Mary Church Terrell, I illuminate one writer's painful recognition of her own failure as an author, and what she did with that failure. Terrell was a successful lecturer, activist, and journalist at the beginning of the twentieth century, and yet she believed that, more than any other form, imaginative literature generally and the short story specifically had the potential to speak to the race problem and to the lives and struggles of African Americans in ways that nonfiction and journalism could not. Whereas her journalism appeared in African American print sources throughout the first decade of the twentieth century, her archives at the Library of Congress are full of the unpublished short stories she wrote and sought to place in the nation's elite literary magazines. The collection also includes a dispiriting series of rejection letters from the publishers of these magazines that made clear to her that she lived in a political climate unsupportive of literary ambitions like her own. The chapter explores the ways Terrell used this knowledge and indeed, the form of the cover letter, to mount a protest against a publishing industry that refused to accept the creative works of African Americans. By continuing to submit stories that she knew would be rejected, she challenged editors to establish rather than acquiesce to public opinion and open up their pages to stories that might counter the influence of the racist narratives they widely circulated. It was not a campaign waged for her own benefit; she realized that her own writing would not be published. But from her own failure she was trying to make future failures by African American authors less likely. That she purposefully saved these letters illustrates her decision to value, preserve, and curate materials that would give voice to her own understanding of the way the literary market worked for Black writers.

The focus of my interest in Terrell—her unpublished short stories and the letters she wrote to communicate to editors her disappointment in the network and cultural values of mainstream American magazines—brings

to the fore the central arguments of this book. *To Make Negro Literature* contends that the unsettledness and the complexity of turn-of-the-century literary culture needs to be revisited, so that we may read the stories of lesser-known and uncelebrated authors, messier and unpublished texts, and unsuccessful or underrealized projects alongside and against those that have received substantial critical attention. Materials of the sort I examine in this book demand close reading and critical analysis, for the simple reason that they broaden and complicate what is often perceived (and too often taught) as a seamless march from the past to the present.³⁹ In the faltering efforts, the failed strategies, the instability and the discontinuity that *To Make Negro Literature* brings to the fore is an important genealogy of African American literary culture, one that pushes us to expand our analytical rubrics and critical frames of reference in important ways.

One of the things I advocate for in this book is that we remain conscious of the still-limited kinds of works that receive our critical attention. While the focus of print culture studies has expanded tremendously in the last decade, it needs to expand further to include those components of African American literary history that did not appear in print and never made it to the stages of publication that we have traditionally associated with literature. Christopher Hager's patient, meticulously researched account of the manuscript writing of African Americans who were only marginally literate has much to tell us about the kinds of literary culture that existed outside of the realm of "highly literate people."⁴⁰ So too do the books sold by subscription that I examine in *To Make Negro Literature*, which have rarely warranted critical reading. One reason for this is surely because the profession of literary scholarship prizes what is original and creative, not what is manifestly unoriginal or utilitarian. Historians of Black print culture continuously lament not knowing more about those Black readers who were less highly educated, less cultured, and less privileged, but in dismissing books sold by subscription we have surely closed off one avenue through which to expand our understanding of the literary habits of those African Americans whose access to reading material was limited to the unexceptional and pedagogically oriented. Our own critical biases, then, have played a part in circumscribing our perspectives on African American literary history.

In writing *To Make Negro Literature* and thinking through its implications, I have been mindful of a key question: How can scholars make the fleetingly popular, the hidden, the forgotten, or the obscure aspects of African American literary history legible? My purpose in examining the particular authors and materials I look at in this book is not to resurrect them as

accomplished, in the terms usually used by literary critics. I doubt that T. Thomas Fortune and Mary Church Terrell's writing will ever garner critical acclaim, or that the racial schoolbooks of the late nineteenth century or the lists and bibliographies generated at the same moment will claim the same place in literary history as, say, Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk*. My turn to the archives is not for the purpose of changing this. Rather, it is for the purpose of allowing these elements of literary culture to be seen as repositories of knowledge about the literary past that stand for themselves. Writing about the need to develop an appreciation for "lostness, or condition of being lost" as a mode of "archival discovery that attends to the conditions that would produce textual absence," Kinohi Nishikawa reminds us how much there is to learn about the literary culture of a specific moment by looking at a text's ephemeral appeal and the conditions that surrounded its appearance in and then disappearance from the literary landscape.⁴¹ It need not always be that the materials we draw from the archives be added to a literary canon, or fit into a prewritten narrative of literary history. In the case of Terrell, her stories had no appeal for specific reasons, and never appeared in print. Nevertheless, outlining the story of her writing, of her aspirations to have her short fiction published, and of her failure to achieve this goal is crucial to seeing both the obstacles Black writers faced in the early twentieth century and the ways they sought to maneuver around them. Framing the failure of African American writers, texts, institutions, publications, and projects and, in Nishikawa's terms, charting the "path toward [their] becoming obscure," promises to significantly expand what we know about African American literary history.⁴²

In the end, then, this is an account of the "making" of Negro literature in the sense of accounting for some of the ways African American intellectuals at the turn of the century made that literature possible by focusing more clearly on its infrastructure. As Du Bois claimed in a handwritten 1905 assessment of the value of developing his job printing business into a full-fledged publishing house, a Black-owned publisher could both manufacture "supplementary reading for Negro schools" and allow Negro writers the space to "speak more naturally and effectively" about the "things nearest to them."⁴³ My attention in *To Make Negro Literature* is drawn to both the readers and the writers about whom Du Bois was concerned at the beginning of the twentieth century. In the first two chapters, I explore the infrastructure for readers first by looking at a specific kind of text, the "schoolbook," that in many ways attempted to supplement the Negro school itself for its potential readers, leading them from literacy to the threshold

of the literary. I then turn my attention to how those readers were directed to particular bodies of texts in the lists and bibliographies that cataloged, categorized, and made comprehensible the concept of “Negro literature.” In the next two chapters, I explore the conception of emergent *authorship* in these same years, of those who were striving to speak more naturally and effectively in print, but were constrained by different forces that kept them from being able to do just that. Both Fortune and Terrell are “hidden” authors whose writing exists in the texts of another or in the archives of their own making. These two processes together—the emergence of the Negro reader and the halting and hidden work of the Negro writer—were the conditions that rendered possible the making of Negro literature.

Writing in 1913, Du Bois noted that, “despite the fact that the literary output by the Negro has been both large and credible,” the “time has not yet come for the great development of Negro literature.”⁴⁴ This foray into the history of African American authorship, writing, and literary practices at the very end of the nineteenth century and very beginning of the twentieth seeks a greater understanding of the disjuncture between the “large and credible” literary “output” of African Americans that Du Bois points to here and his determination that a time had “not yet come” that would allow for the “great development” of Negro literature. To focus on a time when something has not yet occurred may seem counterintuitive to historians of African American literature, whose research remains, for the most part, oriented toward moments that celebrate achievements rather than those that highlight shortcomings. But I am hopeful that, in shifting our focus, we will be able to set new terms for the critical appreciation of those shortcomings at the turn from the nineteenth to the twentieth century, while illustrating the sort of work that remains to be done to expand the map through which we see African American literary history.

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NOTES

INTRODUCTION: TO MAKE NEGRO LITERATURE

- 1 *Catalogue of Atlanta University, Atlanta Georgia, With a Statement of Courses of Study, Expenses, Etc., 1901–2* (Atlanta, GA: Atlanta University Press, 1902), 18.
- 2 W. E. B. Du Bois, “A Proposed Negro Journal,” 4, ca. December 1904, W. E. B. Du Bois Collection.
- 3 Editorial Department, “Falling of the Moon,” *Alexander’s Magazine* 2, no. 4 (August 15, 1906): 9.
- 4 Edward L. Simon to Du Bois, December 22, 1906, W. E. B. Du Bois Collection.
- 5 For the fullest history of the *Moon Illustrated Weekly*, see Parrington, “*Moon Illustrated Weekly*,” 206–16 (reprinted, along with three extant issues of the periodical, in Parrington, *Moon Illustrated Weekly*).
- 6 “Editorial.”
- 7 Gates, “Foreword,” ix, encourages readers “to chart the formal specificities of this tradition and to trace its origins.”
- 8 Foster, “It Behooves Us to Struggle,” 353.
- 9 Gates and Jarrett, introduction to *New Negro*, 9.
- 10 Bruce, *Black American Writing*; McCaskill and Gebhard, *Post-Bellum, Pre-Harlem*, xii; Chakkalakal and Warren, *Jim Crow*, 8; Smethurst, *African American Roots of Modernism*.
- 11 For an assessment of how African Americans made use of the symbolism of the ending of an old and the beginning the new century, see Gates’s now-classic essay “Trope of a New Negro.”
- 12 Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 182.
- 13 Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 174. Also useful for thinking about failure as a mode of knowledge is Halberstam’s *Queer Art of Failure*. In reflecting on the queerness

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of Black life and literature during this time, I have also been influenced by Nyong'o's *Afro-Fabulations*.

- 14 Logan, *Negro in American Life*, 52.
- 15 Jarrett, "What Is Jim Crow?," 388–90, among others, makes the case that we can understand the legal segregation encoded in *Plessy v. Ferguson* as part of a historical and social continuum.
- 16 "'NEGRO' WITH A CAPITAL 'N,'" *New York Times*, March 7, 1930, 20.
- 17 Gates and Jarrett, introduction, 3. Examples include the National Afro-American League (1889), the Federation of Afro-American Women (1895), and the Afro-American Council (1902).
- 18 My assertion here that the word "Negro" was a hallmark feature of turn-of-the-century African American literature has been influenced by Crawford's argument in *Black Post-Blackness* that the word "black" was, "in a radical manner," a hallmark feature of the Black Arts Movement. The embrace of this word was, in Crawford's words, "a profound overturning of the identity category 'Negro'" (3).
- 19 Chakkalakal and Warren, introduction to *Jim Crow*, 9.
- 20 Howells, "Life and Letters," 630.
- 21 Howells, "Charles W. Chesnutt's Stories," 700; Howells, "Psychological Counter-Current," 882.
- 22 Chesnutt, quoted in Andrews, *Literary Career of Charles W. Chesnutt*, 127.
- 23 Dunbar, letter of March 15, 1897, reprinted in "Unpublished Letters of Paul Laurence Dunbar to a Friend," *The Crisis* 20 (1920): 73–76, quotation from 73.
- 24 Jarrett, *Deans and Truants*, 52.
- 25 Quoted in Cunningham, *Paul Dunbar and His Song*, 24.
- 26 The writer of the *Manchester Guardian's* May 18, 1898, review of Dunbar's 1898 novel *The Uncalled* lamented that the "characters are all white people" and criticized Dunbar for his foray into the "habits and feelings of an alien race." Quoted in Jarrett, *Deans and Truants*, 68.
- 27 Brown, *Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins*, 2; Knight, "Putting Them on the Map."
- 28 See Chakkalakal, "Reading in Sutton E. Griggs," in Chakkalakal and Warren, *Jim Crow*, 143–56.
- 29 Graff, *Professing Literature*. See especially the chapters under the heading "The Early Professional Era: 1875–1915," 55–120.
- 30 The body of Michaël Roy's work on slave narratives is exemplary of this. See Roy, "Slave Narrative Unbound," 259–76; the quote is from 268.
- 31 Laura E. Helton's work on Dorothy Porter and the ways that Black archives were organized in the first half of the twentieth century exemplifies the growing interest in the information infrastructures of Black studies. See Helton, "On Decimals, Catalogues, and Racial Imaginaries."
- 32 Gardner, *Black Print Unbound*.

- 33 Just Teach One: Early African American Print, a project sponsored by *Commonplace: The Journal of Early American Life*, is intended to advance recovery work of early African American print materials and facilitate their teaching by providing access to and contextualization for lesser-known texts. See jtoa.common-place.org (accessed December 2, 2020).
- 34 Examples of these projects abound, but two notable ones are the Colored Conventions Project, an effort to collect and digitize the print remnants—including minutes, press coverage, and petitions—of the “Colored Conventions” that took place in Black communities between 1830 and the 1890s; and Book Traces, a project that calls on students and scholars to locate, in their local libraries, books published before 1923 that bear traces of the past, be they inscriptions, handwritten annotations, or signs of alternative uses. Book Traces was organized by Andrew Stauffer, who teaches English at the University of Virginia; the Colored Convention Project was organized by P. Gabrielle Foreman, now in the English Department at Penn State.
- 35 An openness to speculation is perhaps the most important lesson of all that I list here. Carla Peterson addresses this directly in her reflections on the methodological issues she faced in writing *Doers of the Word*; see her “Subject to Speculation.” The example of the importance of asking questions and speculating is everywhere apparent in Frances Smith Foster’s body of scholarship. See especially her “Narrative of the Interesting Origins.” Saidiya Hartman discusses her scholarly method of working in the archives of Atlantic Slavery, calling the historical writing that results from it “critical fabulation,” in “Venus in Two Acts.”
- 36 Rusert, “From Black Lit to Black Print,” 996.
- 37 Moody and Rambsy, “Guest Editors’ Introduction,” 4.
- 38 Hager, *Word by Word*, 15.
- 39 Xiomara Santamarina makes a similar point in “Are We There Yet?,” 311.
- 40 Hager, *Word by Word*, 4, 23.
- 41 Nishikawa, “Archive on Its Own,” 177, 178.
- 42 Nishikawa, “Archive on Its Own,” 180.
- 43 Du Bois, “A Proposed Negro Journal,” 4, ca. December 1904, W. E. B. Du Bois Collection.
- 44 Du Bois, “Negro in Literature and Art,” 236.

CHAPTER ONE. “THE INFORMATION CONTAINED IN THIS BOOK WILL NEVER APPEAR IN SCHOOL HISTORIES”

- 1 Hopkins, *Contending Forces*, 141, 144.
- 2 Harper, *Iola Leroy*, 282.
- 3 For other such stories, see McHenry, *Forgotten Readers*; and Gardner, *Black Print Unbound*. Stephen G. Hall, in *A Faithful Account of the Race*, notes that