

Discursive Perpendicularity: Intersections of Black Print Culture Studies and Bibliography

PART ONE: IN THEORY

Introduction

The summer of 2020 was a watershed moment in the United States. The brutal murder of George Floyd sparked a national conversation on racial politics that penetrated all aspects of American society. Both the private and the public sectors were forced to grapple with the impact that anti-Black racism has had on Black Americans; and many businesses and institutions were compelled not only to affirm a stated commitment to antiracist practice but also to bring about constructive change within their own organizational operations. In keeping with this broader national trend, libraries, museums, and archives temporarily shelved much of their “vocational awe”—a term introduced in 2018 by Fobazi Ettarh to describe “the set of ideas, values, and assumptions librarians have about themselves and the profession that result in beliefs that libraries as institutions are inherently good and sacred, and therefore beyond critique.”¹ Leaders in these professions instead sought out to contend with how the racist and colonial legacies of these institutions have shaped current policies and workflows as well as their internal institutional cultures. The field was undoubtedly moving along this trajectory prior to the “racial reckoning” of 2020, but the upsurge of support for the Black Lives Matter movement ushered in an unprecedented amount of attention to these issues in all its facets.

The surge in attention broke the floodgates of special collections librarianship—arguably one of the most historically exclusive and hegemonic research environments within libraries and museums. Diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives have entered into meeting spaces, brainstorming sessions, and training programs in quantities that are seemingly exponential. As recently as four or five years ago, this racial and cultural hegemony was still being framed more innocently as the field’s

1. Fobazi Ettarh, “Vocational Awe and Librarianship: The Lies We Tell Ourselves,” *In the Library with the Lead Pipe: An Open Access, Open Peer Reviewed Journal* (2018), <http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2018/vocational-awe/>.

“diversity problem.” Now, however, attention formerly paid to such issues as micro-aggressions and the conspicuous absence of “minority” representation among staff and collections has given way to much more nuanced discussions on concerns like curatorial blackface, performative allyship, the archival gig economy, and cultural appropriation in galleries and museums. In other words, during the course of the past decade or so, the term “diversity” has devolved from a powerful social ideal, to a professional imperative, to a corporatized *buzzword* that has become devoid of its original meaning. Yet the complexity of what diversity actually looks like when conceptualized on a deeper level than the somewhat limited agendas of broadening demographic and cultural representation in workforce and collection development-related issues is only beginning to be reckoned with in a serious and sustained manner.

As a professional who is a member of the Black Indigenous People of Color (BI-POC) community, this latest wave of national introspection on race shed light on the kind of work that I have been invested in for more than a decade of professional development in the field. I have long been interested in methodically probing the colonizing episteme that underlies our ways of facilitating primary source research with printed books and ephemera. My main focus has been on how this episteme functions in the study of bibliography and the history of the book.² My work, though, has never been carried out on an island. It has grown out of a multitude of existing discourses, each with their own agency and intellectual histories. Throughout this analysis, I explore the path by which two separate discourses in particular have unfolded along different tracks and how they have come to a point of intersection. Detailing specific examples of recent partnerships and collaborations, I look at how academic bibliography and the study of Black print culture have begun to come together not by historical accident but through the concerted efforts of dedicated scholars who have the vision and fortitude to have productive conversations on the possibilities of effective and equitable scholarly communication. And, last, I consider the ways in which each has learned from one another and how this conversation can serve as a model for connecting communities of scholarship grounded in hegemony with those founded upon the radical notions of racial equity and liberation.

Methodology

I employ autotheory as a primary means of understanding the discursive perpendicularity involved in the meeting of two academic worlds. Prior to this study, I have used autoethnography to examine my personal reading and collecting practice in relation to the other communities of color who share my passion for nineteenth-

2. This agenda has been central to my work in developing ethnobibliography as a method of analysis.

century studies and Victorian literature. The use of autotheory, then, as a methodological framework has derived from my experience of the constructive value of reflexive examination. Autoethnographical method, which became increasingly popular as a method in anthropological work during the past decade, “Uses a researcher’s personal experience to describe cultural beliefs, practices, and experiences. Acknowledges and values a researcher’s relationships with others. Uses deep and careful self-reflection—typically referred to as “reflexivity”—to name and interrogate the intersections between self and society, the particular and the general, the personal and the political.”³ In essence, it is a formalization of a reflexive turn in anthropology that predated its development; and, in many respects, it is the culmination of the field’s response to the internal, postmodern critiques that questioned the objectivity of a discipline so deeply rooted in its own colonial history.

In this analysis, in a slight but not insignificant shift away from the autoethnographical, I draw upon autotheory as a more productive mode of probing recent developments involving the intersection of Black print culture and bibliography. Lauren Fournier’s recently published book on the subject, *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism*, provides one of the most extensive efforts at searching out the nature and purpose of autotheory in all its complexity.⁴ She draws attention to Stacey Young’s work on autotheory in the late 1990s, and she credits her with coining the term. Fournier, however, defines autotheory as “a mode of theorizing that draws attention to itself as such” that “exists in the place between criticism and autobiography” in a space of “radical self-reflection.”⁵ She describes it as “theory and performance, autobiography and philosophy, research and creation, knowledge that emerges from lived experience and material-conceptual experiments in the studio and the classroom.”⁶ Her study looks closely at how elements of autotheory were present in the writings of such thinkers as René Descartes, Immanuel Kant, Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Jacques Derrida; but she illustrates how the work of feminist artists and writers like Johanna Hedva and her *Sick Woman Theory* have combined embodied “practice and performance” to challenge the patriarchal suppression of the method’s inherent potential to intervene as a radical departure from the colonialist model literary nonfiction and essay writing.

Fournier situates autotheory as a method of feminist praxis. Similarly, current leadership in the study of Black print culture also has Black feminist roots. Through the work of scholars like P. Gabrielle Foreman, Elizabeth McHenry, Joycelyn Moody,

3. *Autoethnography: Understanding Qualitative Research*, eds. Tony E. Adams, Stacy Linn Holman Jones, and Carolyn Ellis (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014), 2.

4. Lauren Fournier, *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2021).

5. Fournier, *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism*, 35.

6. Fournier, *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism*, 41.

and Brigitte Fielder, my eyes have opened to how the patriarchal socialization that has permeated my earliest interfacing with the modern education system has become intermeshed with my internal framing of bibliography and the history of the book. Autotheory, then, helps me as a researcher to subvert and resist these patriarchal inducements by offering sustainable interventions to the colonial modes of knowledge-making that can involve multigendered perspectives in research practice and pedagogy.

I believe that my racial identity as a Black person, coupled with my positionality within both intellectual domains I am discussing, necessitates an autotheoretical approach to the scholarship. Pretenses to pure objectivity in this regard would be at once intellectually dishonest and impossible to maintain. Reflexivity in the study of books as material objects is a property that I have long argued as essential to arriving at sincere understandings of bibliographical analysis. Much like how Fournier has been able to identify the presence of autotheory in the philosophical discourses of canonical thinkers from St. Augustine to Derrida, bibliographers dating back to Thomas Frognall Dibdin and Alfred W. Pollard have interspersed their bibliographical research with personal narrative and biographical accounts. Even in the height of the twentieth century, in such cases where scholars like Fredson Bowers and Roy Stokes sought to underscore the objectivity of academic bibliography, there were always inherent biases in terms of the regions, chronologies, and cultures that were chosen at the expense of those that were simply left out of the picture.⁷ The result, of course, whether intentional or not, was that marginalized cultures of print were treated as if they were unworthy of scholarly intention, further reinforcing the mythology that people of color, especially Black people, were incapable of producing a sophisticated print culture. My own study of bibliography from my earliest years in higher education involved challenging this form of disciplinary and historical marginalization by working, one step at a time, to find a way for my own cultural experience to be afforded the same bibliographical legitimacy as textual artifacts constructed upon whiteness.

Literature Review

Black Print Culture

I first encountered Black print culture studies in 2012, during my research in developing ethnobibliography as a method of bibliographical analysis. There was a flurry of scholarly activity focused on defining this field of study during that time. My own research agenda involved applying my bibliographical training toward

7. Examples of this approach can be found in Fredson Bowers, "Bibliography, Pure Bibliography, and Literary Studies," *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* 46, no. 3 (1952): 186–208, www.jstor.org/stable/24298697; see also Roy Stokes, *The Function of Bibliography* (A Grafton Book; London, UK: Deutsch, 1969).

a serious consideration of the materiality of Black books and ephemera, and, in studying African American historiography under Robert A. Hill that year, I was introduced to the work of John Ernest.⁸ Ernest's chapter on the Black press in his book *A Nation Within a Nation* opened my eyes to the importance of the periodical press in the early nineteenth century.⁹ It highlighted the challenges that Black Americans faced in working to build communities across state lines through the printed word in an environment not only hostile to Black literacy and readership. The very premise of this anti-Black dehumanization was, in part, based upon the idea that Black people were incapable of producing a literary culture.

That same year, Lara Langer Cohen and Jordan Alexander Stein's edited volume, *Early African American Print Culture*, was published by the University of Pennsylvania Press.¹⁰ Jonathan Senchyne, Meredith L. McGill, Daniel Hack, Radiclan Clytus, and Derrick Spires were among its contributors. Setting the stage for future conversations, the collection of essays explored a range of topics including the impact of race on the afterlives of antebellum Black authored texts, the mobility of format and the importance of ephemera in the circulation of works by authors like Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, the reimagining of canonical authors in Black newspapers, the aesthetics of William Wells Brown's *Clotel*, and the bicoastal expansion of the geographic parameters to Black publications to encompass the West and San Francisco's Black press.¹¹ Jonathan Senchyne's chapter on the "racial encoding materialities of paper and ink" and Dalila Scruggs' attention to engraving in particular begin to predict future developments in applying the descriptive bibliographical lens to Black print culture. Still, to achieve its aims, the editors of *Early African American Print Culture* had charted out the intellectual history of the field in their attempt to define it:

Early African American Print Culture focuses on bridging early African American literature and print culture studies. The essays that follow do not take a single approach to this project; nor do they attempt to map its contours comprehensively. Rather, they showcase the variety of discoveries scholars might make when they ask what early African American literature looks like when read with an attention to its material condi-

8. John Ernest, *A Nation Within a Nation: Organizing African-American Communities Before the Civil War* (The American Ways Series; Chicago, IL: Ivan R. Dee, 2011).

9. Ernest, "Our Warfare Lies in the Field of Thought," in *A Nation Within a Nation: Organizing African-American Communities Before the Civil War* (The American Ways Series; Chicago, IL: Ivan R. Dee, 2011), 165–90.

10. *Early African American Print Culture*, Material Texts, eds. Lara Langer Cohen and Jordan Alexander Stein (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).

11. Lara Langer Cohen and Jordan Alexander Stein, "Introduction: Early African American Print Culture," in *Early African American Print Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 10–11.

tions, and what print culture looks like when it turns its attention to African American archives.¹²

By this definition, the book achieved its stated objective. Yet this germinal offering to a burgeoning discourse was by no means representative of the extent of the field's intellectual boundaries; it had only become the most visible distillation of these scholarly networks up to that point.

The editors of *Early African American Print Culture*, in fact, do make it a point to note the work that preceded their collection by a decade, mentioning that scholars like John Ernest, Eric Gardner, Edlie Wong, and Elizabeth McHenry had already “taken a materialist approach to African American texts, with enlightening results.”¹³ J. William Snorgrass, for instance, was charting out the importance of the earliest Black periodicals in the 1980s.¹⁴ In the 1990s, Carl Senna produced a much more extensive book-length historical account of the Black periodical press with his book, *The Black Press and the Struggle for Civil Rights*.¹⁵ These studies, however, were not yet designated as a part of print culture studies, as the field itself had yet to coalesce. It was not until the 2000s, when the momentum on Black print culture scholarship began to build with studies like James Danky's “Writing, and Resisting: African American Print Culture,”¹⁶ which, like the scholarship of Derrick Spires and Elizabeth McHenry, discussed Black print culture specifically in relation to rising literacy rates and the imperative for Black Americans to secure their citizenship through civic engagement;¹⁷ and Thabiti Asukile's 2010 study on Joel Augustus Rogers, in which he paid special attention to Rogers' contributions to the “African American scholarly tradition of biographical print culture.”¹⁸

12. Cohen and Stein, “Introduction: Early African American Print Culture,” 4.

13. Cohen and Stein, “Introduction: Early African American Print Culture,” 3.

14. J. William Snorgrass, “America's Ten Oldest Black Newspapers,” *Negro History Bulletin* 46, no. 1 (1983): 11–14, www.jstor.org/stable/44254722.

15. Carl Senna, *The Black Press and the Struggle for Civil Rights: The African-American Experience* (New York, NY: F. Watts, 1994).

16. James P. Danky, “Reading, Writing, and Resisting: African American Print Culture,” in *A History of the Book in America: Volume 4: Print in Motion: The Expansion of Publishing and Reading in the United States, 1880–1940*, eds. Carl F. Kaestle and Janice A. Radway (University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 339–58; also, Eric Gardner, “Remembered (Black) Readers: Subscribers to the ‘Christian Recorder’, 1864–1865,” *American Literary History* 23, no. 2 (2011): 229–59.

17. See, for example, Derrick R. Spires, “Imagining a State of Fellow Citizens: Early African American Politics of Publicity in the Black State Conventions,” in *Early African American Print Culture*, 274–89; also, Derrick R. Spires, *The Practice of Citizenship: Black Politics and Print Culture in the Early United States* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019) and Elizabeth McHenry, “Dreaded Eloquence: The Origins and Rise of African American Literary Societies,” in *Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African American Literary Societies* (Durham; London, UK: Duke University Press, 2002), 23–83, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11smkcf.5>.

18. Thabiti Asukile, “Joel Augustus Rogers: Black International Journalism, Archival Research, and Black Print Culture,” *Journal of African American History* 95, no. 3/4 (2010): 322–47, <https://doi.org/10.5323/jafriamerhist.95.3-4.0322>.

For years, Black women have been at the forefront of this scholarship. In 1990, for instance, Violet J. Harris was among the first to make a sincere attempt at trying to address a serious omission in both children's literature and Black literary studies.¹⁹ McHenry, in her book *Forgotten Readers*, issued one of the most in-depth histories of Black literary societies and book clubs.²⁰ Her exhaustive study of Black readership and reception history complicated prior notions of a strict divide between literacy and orality, and, with rigorously researched primary source evidence, it reinforced a growing area of the scholarship that looks at the ways in which literacy has had far different emancipatory ramifications for the Black community than for other populations. P. Gabrielle Foreman's research has been consistently predictive of future directions of the discourse, and her leadership has helped to move the field from a historicist stance toward its current critical turn.²¹ Her study on "white mulatta genealogies," for example, looked closely at print culture's complicated connections with Black female embodiment and racial passing.²² Her work on Julia C. Collins has shown how the *Christian Recorder's* serialization of Collins' *The Curse of Caste* encouraged a "histotextual" reading of the narrative that functioned in a "future orientation" toward social change.²³ Clearly, such scholars have persisted in contributing some of the most innovative and socially relevant scholarship in the field. Accordingly, in response to a request to moderate and introduce a session on "Early African American Print Cultures" organized by Benjamin Fagan, when Joycelyn Moody invoked Ntozake Shange's poetry and the contemporary political discourse to explore the role that print journalism has played in furthering violence against Black women, connecting the history print culture seeks to elucidate with present-day cultures of misogyny.²⁴

The imperative to tie the history of Black print culture to the most pressing issues facing today's Black community was taken up in a more recent edited volume in this field of study, *Against a Sharp White Background*.²⁵ Edited by Brigitte Fielder

19. Violet J. Harris, "African American Children's Literature: The First One Hundred Years," *Journal of Negro Education* 59, no. 4 (1990): 540–55.

20. McHenry, *Forgotten Readers*.

21. For a compelling look at how previous assumptions on racial representation are complicated and problematized by her critical readings on race and literature, see P. Gabrielle Foreman, "Reading/Photographs: Emma Dunham Kelley-Hawkins's *Four Girls at Cottage City*, Victoria Earle Matthews, and the Woman's Era," *Legacy* 24, no. 2 (2007): 248–77, www.jstor.org/stable/25679611.

22. P. Gabrielle Foreman, "Who's Your Mama? 'White' Mulatta Genealogies, Early Photography, and Anti-Passing Narratives of Slavery and Freedom," *American Literary History* 14, no. 3 (2002): 505–39, www.jstor.org/stable/26446155.

23. P. Gabrielle Foreman, "The Christian Recorder, Broken Families, and Educated Nations in Julia Collins's Civil War Novel *The Curse of Caste*," *African American Review* 40, no. 4 (2006): 705–16, www.jstor.org/stable/26446155.

24. Joycelyn Moody, "Obscene Questions and Righteous Hysteria," *Legacy: A Journal of American Women Writers* 33, no. 1 (2016): 1–7.

25. *Against a Sharp White Background: Infrastructures of African American Print*, eds. Brigitte Fielder and Jonathan Senchyne (The History of Print and Digital Culture; Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2019).

and Jonathan Senchyne, this collection represents somewhat of a radical departure from the way Cohen and Stein's volume had framed the discourse less than a decade prior to its release. Combining past and present, it offers a perspective that acknowledges multiple layers inherent in the historicity of print in relation to Blackness as it recedes from the dominance of grand narratives:

This is indeed an important time for thinking and writing on African American print culture in particular, although this project as a whole is far from new. Interest in the relevance and resonances of African American print production for black people in the United States and throughout the black Atlantic began with the early production of African American print culture itself. Editors and compilers of black writing, ranging from Samuel Cornish, John Russworm, Frederick Douglass, and Elisha Weaver to Alice Dunbar-Nelson, W.E.B. Du Bois, Alain Locke, and John Harold Johnson, have worked to create and curate this print culture.²⁶

Taking the long view of historiography, late nineteenth-century books like Irvine Garland Penn's *Afro-American Press* were engaged with Black print culture studies a century prior to its current academic instantiation.²⁷ Freed from chronological boundaries, then, and integrating the principles of Black activism, *Against a Sharp White Background* submits a series of essays from such contributors as Foreman and Ernest et al., whose chapters forge new connections of the physical and visual materiality of the Black book arts to fine art and the conceptual expansion of the "archive,"²⁸ Laura E. Helton and Jim Casey, whose research looks at the history of classification in relation to modern-day indexing and digital information retrieval systems,²⁹ and Beth A. McCoy and Jasmine Y. Montgomery looking at

26. Brigitte Fielder and Jonathan Senchyne, "Introduction: Infrastructure of African American Print," in *Against a Sharp White Background: Infrastructures of African American Print*, eds. Brigitte Fielder and Jonathan Senchyne (The History of Print and Digital Culture; Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2019), 10.

27. I. Garland Penn, *The Afro-American Press and Its Editors, The American Negro, His History and Literature* (New York, NY: Arno Press, 1969).

28. P. Gabrielle Foreman, "Slavery, Black Visual Culture, and the Promises and Problems of Print in the Work of David Drake, Theaster Gates, and Glenn Ligon," in *Against a Sharp White Background: Infrastructures of African American Print*, eds. Brigitte Fielder and Jonathan Senchyne (The History of Print and Digital Culture; Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2019), 29–61; John Ernest et al., "Visionary History: Recovery William J. Wilson's Afric-American Picture Gallery," in *Against a Sharp White Background: Infrastructures of African American Print*, eds. Brigitte Fielder and Jonathan Senchyne (The History of Print and Digital Culture; Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2019), 221–39.

29. Laura E. Helton, "Making Lists, Keeping Time: Infrastructures of Black Inquiry, 1900–1950," in *Against a Sharp White Background: Infrastructures of African American Print*, eds. Brigitte Fielder and Jonathan Senchyne (The History of Print and Digital Culture; Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2019), 82–108; Jim Casey in "Parsing the Special Characters of African American Print Culture: Mary Ann Shadd and the * Limits of Search," in *Against a Sharp White Background: Infrastructures of African American Print*, eds. Brigitte Fielder and Jonathan Senchyne (The History of Print and Digital Culture; Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2019), 109–30.

the book as an anti-Black object.³⁰ The volume also features a chapter on Richard Wright's *Black Boy* by Kinohi Nishikawa,³¹ which, much like his recent book *Street Players*, brings para- and intertextual analysis to provide nuance and multidimensionality to rigid conceptualizations of Black authorship and genre.³² Books like *Against a Sharp White Background* and *Street Players* can be grouped with a wave of new scholarship emerging in this field. Other recent titles, such as Eurie Dahn's *Jim Crow Networks: African American Periodicals*, Elizabeth McHenry's *To Make Negro Literature: Writing Literary Practice*, and *African American Literature*, and James West's *Ebony Magazine and Lerone Bennett Jr.: Popular Black History in Postwar America*, are doing the necessary work of further building out the scholarship.³³

Bibliography

I was introduced to bibliography as a field of study while in my mid-20s in the course of my work to pursue a career in the profession of rare book librarianship. During a 2007 internship at the Getty Center, I had the opportunity to read journals of bibliographical scholarship for the first time as a curious student. My first encounters with these essays can be likened to being lost in a dizzying maze of dense language and strange ciphers. Yet I was determined to keep proceeding down this educational path until I could read and interpret the essays with lucidity and comprehension, not fully understanding then that I, too, would someday be able to contribute something of value to the conversation.

Bibliography as it has been conceptualized and advanced as a part of Western scholarship and method stretched back centuries of intellectual development. Analytical bibliography, descriptive bibliography, and textual criticism, too, as subsets of this larger field of study have benefited from well over a century of scholarly attention. For the scope of this analysis, the quantity of notable offerings in these domains is far too voluminous to traverse comprehensively. However, in the interest of providing the appropriate context for the subject at hand, it is important to recognize the epistemological foundations as a basis for where the current divergent trajectory of the field has emerged.

30. Beth McCoy and Jasmine Y. Montgomery, "Dionne Brand's *A Map to the Door of No Return* and the Antiracism of the Book as an Object," in *Against a Sharp White Background: Infrastructures of African American Print*, eds. Brigitte Fielder and Jonathan Senchyne (The History of Print and Digital Culture; Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2019), 131–46.

31. Kinohi Nishikawa, "Richard Wright between Two Fronts: *Black Boy* in the Black Metropolis," in *Against a Sharp White Background: Infrastructures of African American Print*, eds. Brigitte Fielder and Jonathan Senchyne (The History of Print and Digital Culture; Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2019), 179–98.

32. Kinohi Nishikawa, *Street Players: Black Pulp Fiction and the Making of a Literary Underground* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2018).

33. Eurie Dahn, *Jim Crow Networks: African American Periodical Cultures (Studies in Print Culture and the History of the Book)* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2021); Elizabeth McHenry, *To Make Negro Literature: Writing Literary Practice, and African American Literature* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2021); E. James West, *Ebony Magazine and Lerone Bennett Jr.: Popular Black History in Postwar America* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2020).

To those unfamiliar with the bibliography as an academic pursuit, there is not a great amount of daylight separating R.B. McKerrow's *Introduction to Bibliography for Literary Students*,³⁴ published in 1927, from Phillip Gaskell's *A New Introduction to Bibliography*, published nearly a half-century later in 1972.³⁵ They are similar in terms of their topical coverage, their purpose, and their geographical and chronological scope. The impact of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century bibliographers, in fact, has enjoyed remarkable longevity; and the epistemological parameters they established for the field are still resonant, even on the fringes of the current discourse. Much of their durability is a byproduct of the distinctive amalgamation of rationalism and empiricism underlying their methods. The field's philosophical debates have remained largely within these boundaries for generations. W.W. Greg's response to Percy Simpson's *Proof Reading in the Sixteenth, Seventeenth, and Eighteenth Centuries*, for example, uses the bibliographical method to scrutinize a debate involving the degree to which Elizabethan printers proofed their printing prior to publication, claiming that the *errata*-based evidence Simpson provided for the supposition that these printers proofed their work could actually be read as evidence to the contrary.³⁶ The argument, when read with D.F. McKenzie's work in mind, does reveal a preference for induction.³⁷ The key point to note here in this essay (and many other works of bibliographical scholarship published during this period) is the focus on what the material evidence of print production can empirically expose to editors about the physical transmission of a text. Best known for a comparatively major departure from bibliographical orthodoxy, D.F. McKenzie posits exchanging the inductive method of his predecessors for a hypothetico-deductive one—essentially advocating for an even greater application of a form of scientific methodology to the bibliographical investigation.³⁸ Both are still dealing with the same concerns in trying to rely upon the evidence to establish “bibliographical truth.”

Bibliography had always maintained a close relationship with paleography and manuscript studies. Broadening the framework by which the material book could be analyzed, however, the second half of the twentieth century saw the rise of the history of book, and with it, such subfields as reception history and publishing history as well as significant growth in the areas of printing history and the study

34. R.B. McKerrow, *An Introduction to Bibliography for Literary Students* (Winchester, UK: St. Paul's Bibliographies, 1994).

35. Philip Gaskell, *A New Introduction to Bibliography* (New Castle, DE: Oak Knoll Press, 2007).

36. W.W. Greg, “From Manuscript to Print,” *Review of English Studies* 13, no. 50 (1937): 190–205, www.jstor.org.udel.idm.oclc.org/stable/510116; note also that Greg specifically references the methodological potential of what is already called the “New Bibliography” in his short essay, “The ‘Hamlet’ Texts and Recent Work in Shakespearian Bibliography,” *Modern Language Review* 14, no. 4 (1919): 380–85, www.jstor.org.udel.idm.oclc.org/stable/4623502.

37. D.F. McKenzie, “Printers of the Mind: Some Notes on Bibliographical Theories and Printing-House Practices,” *Studies in Bibliography* 22 (1969): 1–75, www.jstor.org.udel.idm.oclc.org/stable/40371475.

38. McKenzie, “Printers of the Mind,” 6.

of binding, paper, and print culture. Often viewed as contiguous to bibliography, the history of the book, which has its foundations in the *Annales* school of thought, situated the book within its macro-level sociohistorical and socioeconomic conditions. By comparison, bibliography was characterized by its emphasis on “bibliographical minutiae.”³⁹ As Thomas Tanselle described the relationship, the “growth of *histoire du livre*, the historical study of the impact on society, has from time to time brought increased attention to the kinds of details that have long been examined by bibliographers.”⁴⁰ Other scholars, like Michael Winship, particularly with his essay on the “‘BAL’ and American Book Trade History” would further demonstrate the potential value of bringing these discourses in closer conversation with one another.⁴¹

By the time I began studying bibliography in the early 2000s, the circular insularity of its internal debates had stunted the field’s ability to acknowledge the patriarchal and Eurocentric exclusivity of its paradigmatic subjectivities. McKenzie’s argument that the “essential task of the bibliographer is to establish the facts of transmission for a particular text, and he will use *all* relevant evidence to determine the bibliographical truth” was not simply indicative of an epistemological bias toward empiricism and causality; more tellingly, the unquestioned assumption of ascribing a masculine pronoun to the would-be bibliographer, a ubiquitous convention for the time, was indicative of deeper gender politics that effectively marginalized the contributions of scholars Elizabeth Eisenstein and Margaret Stillwell.⁴² The intellectual inheritance of the field’s orientation places works like Kate Ozment’s “Rationale for Feminist Bibliography”⁴³ and Robin Anne Reid’s “On the Shoulders of Gi(E)nts” at the nexus of bibliography’s critical turn and its goal of becoming more inclusive.⁴⁴ Whereas Ozment charted the frontiers of bringing visibility to the erasure of women’s robust contributions to the fields of bibliography and book history, Reid shows us what it looks like when the principles and perspectives of feminism are applied to bibliographical scholarship on an iconic male author. Matt Cohen argues along similar lines of expanding the field, in his essay “Time and the Bibliographer,” although he does so with a focus on the field’s epistemological

39. Thomas G. Tanselle, “A Description of Descriptive Bibliography,” *Studies in Bibliography* 45 (1992): 1–30, www.jstor.org.udel.idm.oclc.org/stable/40371955.

40. Tanselle, “A Description of Descriptive Bibliography,” 5.

41. Michael Winship, “‘BAL’ and American Book Trade History,” *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* 86, no. 2 (1992): 147–55, www.jstor.org.udel.idm.oclc.org/stable/24302952. The acronym BAL refers to the *Bibliography of American Literature*.

42. McKenzie, “Printers of the Mind,” 61.

43. Kate Ozment, “Rationale for Feminist Bibliography,” *Textual Cultures* 13, no. 1 (2020): 149–78, <https://doi.org/10.2307/26954243>.

44. Robin Anne Reid, “On the Shoulders of Gi(E)nts: The Joys of Bibliographic Scholarship and Fan-zines in Tolkien Studies,” *Mythlore* 37, no. 2 (134) (2019): 23–38, <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol37/iss2/3>.

tension between notions of colonialism and indigeneity.⁴⁵ When he declared that bibliography “has for the most part functioned within a colonialist set of assumptions about its means and its ends,” he put forth this controversial yet incontestable claim at a point where the turn in question had steered the field in entirely new directions.⁴⁶ The fact that discussions of Asian forms of bibliographical research and scholarship like Lianbin Dai’s “China’s Bibliographic Tradition and the History of the Book” are relatively scarce in the traditional discourse until the second decade of the twentieth century is not unconnected from the fact that one of the designations for the most influential practitioners of the field, the “Anglo Saxon School” was unwittingly based on a racial construction appropriated by ideologies of white supremacy.⁴⁷ This new way of thinking, then, centered on consciously changing the racial and gender dynamics of the field set the stage for a genuine, substantive merging of bibliography and the study of Black print culture.

PART TWO: IN PRACTICE

Case Studies

Derrick Spires’s keynote for the Bibliographical Society of America’s 2021 “Bibliography Week” was the culmination of years of intellectual exchange and relationship building. In one camp, scholars of Black print culture who are willing to share their extensive learning and expertise in the history of Black knowledge-making as mediated through modalities of print production; in the other, experts in the unique rigor that is conventional bibliographical scholarship. This characterization is of course a simplified abstraction that I am employing for rhetorical purposes. In terms of the respective knowledge-bases of each, the reality is much more complicated and intermingled. Demographically, however, one is self-evidently more diverse than the other. In actuality, Black scholars have been engaged in serious bibliographical work for generations. In 1897, W.E.B. Du Bois indicated that a “bibliography of the American Negro is a much needed undertaking,” but by 1905 he was able to produce his own meta-bibliography in *A Selected Bibliography of the Negro American*.⁴⁸ Black bibliographic production since its earliest inception has tracked most closely with enumerative work. Yet, as Laura E. Helton has shown in her work in tracing and recovering a rich heritage of bibliographers, indexers,

45. Matt Cohen, “Time and the Bibliographer: A Meditation on the Spirit of Book Studies,” *Textual Cultures* 13, no. 1 (2020): 179–206, <https://doi.org/10.14434/textual.v13i1.30077>. Note that Cohen’s essay surveys much of the intellectual debates of the field that have occurred throughout its history in revisiting questions as to how it functions and, consequently, who it serves demographically.

46. Cohen, “Time and the Bibliographer,” 181.

47. Lianbin Dai, “China’s Bibliographic Tradition and the History of the Book,” *Book History* 17 (2014): 1–50, www.jstor.org/stable/43956349; use of “Anglo-Saxon School” as a descriptor is found, for example, in Frans A. Janssen, “Le Livre À La Renaissance: Introduction À La Bibliographie Historique Et Matérielle, Written by Jean-Paul Pittion,” *Quaerendo* 45, no. 1/2 (2015): 167–70.

48. W.E.B. Du Bois, “The Study of the Negro Problems (1897),” in *The Problem of the Color Line at the Turn of the Twentieth Century: The Essential Early Essays*, ed. Chandler Nahum Dimitri (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2015), 77–110, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1287g49.7>.

catalogers, and collectors that includes such notables as Daniel A.P. Murray, Arturo Schomburg, L.S. Alexander Gumby, and Dorothy B. Porter, not just the incentives for doing this work but also the ontologies for the classification were specific to the needs, motivations, and concerns of the Black community. Enumerative bibliography, which should be viewed as being in constant dialog with the descriptive, has its own value as a legitimate and practical form of scholarly production.⁴⁹ Alex Gil, I think, best articulated this value in his innovative work on Aimé Césaire, stating that “we must understand enumerative bibliography as a process or set of relations between the author’s and the editor’s sign, publishing and memory mechanisms, and the *long-durée* of bibliography.”⁵⁰ Gil effectively used the affordances of digital scholarship to advance the enumerative work on Césaire cartographically with bibliographic mapping. Abdul Alkalimat and Irma McClaurin have done similar work in merging the data of enumerative bibliographical records with digital technologies to unearth new possibilities in mapping Black intellectual heritage.⁵¹ All such advances, however, still left questions of Black bibliography’s relation to the descriptive bibliographical tradition largely unanswered.

The Black Bibliography Project

Joe Weixlmann opened his 1978 review of Helen Ruth Houston’s *The Afro-American Novel 1965–1975: A Descriptive Bibliography of Primary and Secondary Material* stating, “In actuality, Houston’s book is not a descriptive but an annotated bibliography.”⁵² Weixlmann was even more critical of Elizabeth and Thomas A. Settle’s bibliography of the works of Ishmael Reed when he lamented, “Reviewing bibliographies of contemporary writers is, in the main, an unsettling act, since the ‘scholars’ who assemble the volumes tend to ignore the existence of even the most basic tenets of bibliographical investigation.”⁵³ The bibliographical standards in question were those established by the aforementioned so-called “Anglo-Saxon school” from Pollard, Greg, and McKerrow to Stokes, Bowers, and Gaskell. He dismissed the compilers’ improper use of terms like “edition” and “printing,” pointing out that “Settles tell us of the ‘second edition’ of *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* published

49. Helton, “Making Lists, Keeping Time”; see also Laura E. Helton, “On Decimals, Catalogs, and Racial Imaginaries of Reading,” *PMLA/Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 134, no. 1 (2019): 99–120, <https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2019.134.1.99>.

50. Alex Gil, “Placing Césaire: Some Considerations on Cartography and Enumerative Bibliographies,” *Caribbean Quarterly* 62, no. 3/4 (2016): 375, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00086495.2016.1260278>.

51. See, for example, Abdul Alkalimat, “Studies on Malcolm X: A Review Essay and Research Design: Bibliographic Essay,” *SAGE Race Relations Abstracts* 17, no. 4 (1992): 4–22; and Abdul Alkalimat, “African American Bibliography: The Social Construction of a Literature of Record” (2012), <http://alkalimat.org/writings.html>; see also Irma McClaurin, “Commentary on Digital Publishing in African American Studies: Continuing the Dialogue and Expanding the Collaborations,” *Fire!!!* 3, no. 2 (2017): 80–103.

52. Joe Weixlmann, “The Afro-American Novel 1965–1975: A Descriptive Bibliography of Primary and Secondary Material,” *Black American Literature Forum* 12, no. 1 (1978): 39, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3041499>.

53. Joe Weixlmann, “Ishmael Reed: A Primary and Secondary Bibliography,” *Black American Literature Forum* 16, no. 2 (1982): 81, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2904143>.

in England, whereas that 1973 Allison & Busby printing of the novel is actually the first impression of the third edition.⁵⁴ Yet, whether such sharp criticism was actually warranted given the variety of substantive and meaningful bibliographical production available to bibliographers, up until recently, the question of what descriptive and analytical bibliography can offer to Black literary and print cultures has remained an open one. As indicated in the project's rationale, the notion that descriptive bibliography could in fact offer something of value to these domains was largely the impetus behind Meredith McGill and Jacqueline Goldsby's founding of the Black Bibliography Project:

The Black Bibliography Project (BBP) aims to revive the practice of descriptive bibliography for African American literary studies. Our goal is two-fold. First, we want to remedy the dearth of accurate, organized information about Black print by creating authoritative web-based bibliographies of major African-American authors. Our second goal is crucial: we're not interested in simply stirring and adding Black books to existing bibliographies like the BAL; rather, we want to ask: how would bibliographic and cataloguing practices have to change in order to accommodate Black print culture and its modes of production, dissemination, and use?⁵⁵

It is the second goal, however, that asks the really important questions and establishes the trajectory for groundbreaking new discussions among library professionals, metadata specialists, literary scholars, and others who would have a direct stake in advancing the project.

The BBP worked to achieve its stated aims through a consortium model that was formed during a series of meetings that took place between 2017 and 2019.⁵⁶ The BBP held its first meeting in March of 2017, a brainstorming meeting that framed the project and discussed possibilities for how to proceed. I was invited to attend this first working meeting, and I participated as one of the collaborators in thinking through how the project's bibliographic data could be digitally rendered and made accessible. With Melissa Barton, Jim Casey, Ryan Cordell, Amy Earhart, Molly O'Hagan Hardy, Cecily Marcus, Eileen Moscoso, Sarah Patterson, and Carol Rudisell in attendance, among others, the meeting had representation from such institutions as the American Antiquarian Society, Yale University, Texas A&M, University of Minnesota, Northeastern University, and the University of Delaware.

54. Weixlmann, "Ishmael Reed," 82.

55. Jacqueline Goldsby and Meredith McGill, "Project Rationale," Black Bibliography Project, <https://blackbibliog.org/about/>.

56. Goldsby and McGill, "Consortium," Black Bibliography Project, <https://blackbibliog.org/about/>.

At this meeting, essentially two possibilities for digital mediation were discussed at length: one was converting entries to a PDF format and the other involved exploring the potential of drawing upon the accessibility and online ubiquity of Wikidata for creating digitally accessible reference materials. The next meeting happened the same year in October, and it continued building on the momentum of the first meeting by bringing librarians and Black print culture studies scholars in conversation with each other. The following year saw meetings in May and November, and the BBP working with Michael Winship used these meetings to work out prototypes for how the bibliographic metadata would be structured. The final meeting took place in January 2019 where participants continued working with Winship in integrating descriptive bibliographical methods into the project's standards and workflows.

The consortium work culminated on November 14 and 15, 2019, with the "New Directions in Black Bibliography" conference. Led by the project's leaders, Goldsby and McGill, the conference was divided into sessions covering a general introduction to the project with project team members Melissa Barton, Brenna Bychowsky, Mark Custer, Audrey Pearson, and Timothy Thompson; a session that brought attention to the work of curators with Barton, Cheryl Beredo, Beverly Cook, and Delisa Minor Harris; a session with leading Black print culture studies specialists including Kinohi Nishikawa and Derrick Spires; and one on new media that featured, among others, Jim Casey, Brandi Locke, and Elizabeth Watts Pope. The conference concluded the following day with a series of working groups and a descriptive bibliography workshop that I co-facilitated with Erin McGuirl, executive director of the Bibliographical Society of America.⁵⁷

Black Bibliographia

"Black Bibliographia: Print/Culture/Art" was held at the University of Delaware on April 26 and 27, 2019 (see figure 1). Helton first proposed the idea for a symposium that would center the Black book arts to Curtis Small, Coordinator of Public Services for Special Collections at the University of Delaware, and me roughly a year prior to the event. We were both filled with enthusiasm for the idea from the start, and we all began brainstorming about how we would approach the theme, the range of issues the symposium would seek to address, and how we could go about organizing in terms of resources and logistical planning. We set about developing the theme and the call for papers with special attention to how we could achieve the best results with respect to attendee participation and the scholarship. As the year of organizing proceeded, Helton and Small in particular worked tire-

57. As the BSA's executive director, McGuirl has been instrumental in developing and implementing the association's recent Equity Action Plan, which seeks to codify many of the ideas that resulted from a serious engagement with BIPOC discourses and diverse forms of scholarship.

lessly in putting all the necessary pieces together for a successful symposium. We were especially impressed with the quality of the submissions, and we decided upon a 10-minute paper format to invite as many speakers as possible. We also made sure the symposium would be free and open to the public and that our keynotes and guests would be compensated and provided for with any accommodations that we could offer at our disposal.

The difficult work of what became a team of organizers and volunteers was rewarded in the intellectual quality of the proceedings, and the symposium turned out to be a landmark event for the meeting of the two discourses of bibliography and Black print culture. Goldsby and McGill of the BBP keynoted the event along with the book artist Tia Blassingame. Letterpress printer Amos Paul Kennedy, Jr. led a printing workshop at the University's Raven Press. Coordinating this workshop with the press was one of my primary contributions to the organizing effort. I had first printed with Kennedy close to a decade earlier at a poster printing workshop that was put on by the Southern California chapter of the American Printing History Association (APHA). My first impression of Kennedy as a printer was that he was a printer "for the people." He was a great teacher and brilliant with his craft. His letterpress work always contends with race and Blackness with a level of frankness that some find provocative.⁵⁸ That day I first printed under his instruction, I took note of the hard bop playing on a portable stereo as background music. It seemed as if the improvisation of the music flowed with the improvisational style of Kennedy's printing technique. As Andrew Steeves describes it, "Kennedy's ability to balance forethought with the exploitation of the unexpected opportunities that arise as many layers of ink hit paper is to a great extent what makes his technique and its result so evocative."⁵⁹ His letterpress workshop for "Black Bibliographia" introduced many of the attendees to letterpress printing for the first time, and they were able to learn more about his background and legacy with a workshop led by Courtney Becks the following morning that was coupled with a lunchtime screening of the 2008 documentary on Kennedy, *Proceed and Be Bold!*

In addition to the letterpress workshop, other attendees were able to participate in a bibliography workshop led by Maryemma Graham of the Black Book Interactive Project that included presentations from the project's staff. Among the many papers delivered during the course of the two days of proceedings, Nazera Sadiq Wright's presented her paper on nineteenth-century autograph albums and Black girlhood; Spiers expounded abolitionist William Still's place in the literary history of Black

58. Courtney Becks, "Amos Paul Kennedy, Jr., Letterpress, and Black American Print Culture," *Art Documentation: Journal of the Art Libraries Society of North America* 38, no. 1 (2019): 174–83, <https://doi.org/10.1086/703390>.

59. Andrew Steeves, *Print! Amos Kennedy, Jr. & the Fine Art of Rabblousery* (Kentville, NS: Gasperau Press, 2014), [4].

American literary production; Nishikawa delivered a paper on the work of Glenn Ligon; Charmaine A. Nelson spoke on the connections of enslavement with the print culture in Quebec during the eighteenth century. Closing out the symposium, Tia Blassingame's talk on her artistic and teaching practice and Robin Coste-Lewis's poetry reading were so moving that I (and I wasn't the only one) was filled with emotion at the unique way that their delivery was filled with hope and inspiration combined with pathos and power. One truly felt a sense of community being born in real time.

One Press, Many Hands

Organizing the 2019 conference was a labor of love. APHA was the first membership organization I joined as a budding community college student interested in pursuing a career in rare books. After 12 years of active membership, two conference papers, an article, and a service position in the Southern California chapter, I was entrusted with the opportunity of organizing APHA's 2019 conference. When I first joined in 2007, I immediately realized that the membership was predominantly non-Black. Nonetheless, I found that the Southern California chapter as a whole was incredibly open, welcoming, and generous in taking me under their wing as an aspiring student who, at that time, had comparatively little knowledge of printing history. As intimidated as I was by the content of APHA lectures and talks I would attend in those early years, the members always made me feel that I was part of the group. Therefore, when the opportunity to organize the national conference came to me, I decided to use it both for the purpose of helping to foster diversity and inclusivity in the organization and to continue the momentum that started with the Black Bibliography Project consortium. The result was the 2019 conference "One Press, Many Hands: Diversity in the History of American Printing" held at the University of Maryland, College Park during the last weekend of October that year.

Organizing this conference was hard work. The difficulty resulted from a number of factors: I was co-organizing "Black Bibliographia" at the same time; I was on a lecture tour that included talks at Harvard, Penn State, and Temple University; my daughter, my second child, was born the year of the conference; and, most of all, it was the first conference where I served as the lead organizer. I had trouble with all aspects of the organizing work from securing a venue to keeping within a reasonable budget. Teaming up with Matthew Kirschenbaum and UMD's BookLab in organizing the conference, and having help from other members like Mark Samuels Lasner and Casey Smith, proved to be a lifeline in seeing the project through to its conclusion. Yet one of the most difficult challenges I faced was working to ensure that a conference that focused on diversity was itself diverse and intersectional in terms of demographic makeup and intellectual representation. Achieving that goal

required careful and strategic decision making from the review of paper submissions to the price point for admission. In my view, the work proved to be successful.⁶⁰

My intention for the conference, as I previously indicated, was to continue some of the important discussions that commenced with “Black Bibliographia” and the work of the BBP. Hence, I invited the graphic artist Colette Gaiter and the literary scholar Kinohi Nishikawa as keynotes. Their addresses approached the importance and vitality of Black print culture from two different angles: one, with an eye toward the significance of present work in letterpress and graphic design; the other, with a focus on the relationship of printing, graphic design, and Blackness from a historical standpoint. There were a number of shorter talks during the conference that also centered Black culture in the history of printing. Phillip Troutman’s talk covered the work and career of Patrick Reason; Robyn Phillips-Pendleton delivered a moving lecture on the history of book illustration in its visual associations with race and racism; and Charmaine A. Nelson’s research on enslavement and printing was brought into conversation with Jordan Wingate’s research on enslaved labor in the printing of the *Charleston Courier*. The thematic focus of this conference, however, was expanded to encompass the histories of other *minoritized* populations in the United States, as scholars like Kadin Henningsen spoke on printing and gender construction and Kevin A. Wisniewski presented on Mary Katherine Goddard. Much like “Black Bibliographia,” the proceedings were supplemented by other activities. In this case, attendees were able to take a tour of UMD’s David C. Driskell Center, participate in a printing workshop with Lynette Spencer at UMD’s Book-Lab, and watch a screening of the documentary *83M80: Letterpress in the Digital Era* hosted by the film’s creators Gonzalo Hergueta and MRKA.

Conclusion

In my experience, the intellectual code switching involved with the strategic navigation of the interracial convolutions of academia is rooted in what I have come to understand about the nature of “discourse” itself. Discourse is a politically inflected, interrelated network of social and communicative processes by which knowledge is produced within a paradigm.⁶¹ Being determined to participate in a discourse that historically has had almost no visible representation from someone of my racial identity has been a challenge. My initial experiences of the discursive

60. Attendees of the conference attested to this assessment; see, for example, Amy Papaelias, “One Press Many Hands: APHA Conference Notes,” *Alphabettes* (2019), www.alphabettes.org/one-press-many-hands-apha-conference-notes/.

61. This framing of intellectual discourse is conceptually linked to Michel Foucault’s many groundbreaking interventions on the study of discourse. See, for example, Foucault, “Orders of Discourse: Inaugural Lecture Delivered at the Collège de France,” *Social Science Information* 10, no. 2 (1971): 7–30, <https://doi.org/10.1177/053901847101000201>.

practices of bibliographical scholarship were often characterized by isolation. I held a profound appreciation for both my mentors and my peers, and I genuinely enjoyed the material I was learning. Still, I felt a lingering, undeniable sense of remoteness from being, more often than not, the only person of color in the room and almost always the only Black person.

As I reflect on what the state of the discourse was like more than a decade ago, I do so with the recognition of how monumental the progress has been and how precarious that progress is in terms of its sustainability. Of course, when one views progress in accordance with a nonlinear relation to temporality and anti-Blackness as indivisibly wedded to modernity, it is not assumed that society is always on a clear path toward a better future.⁶² Even now, part of the backlash to last year's collective focus on race in America has resulted in state-level bans on critical race theory that extend to public universities. The situation should stand as a testament to the dedication of those who have been doing the reparative work of fostering inclusivity in their respective domains not only since last summer but throughout the entirety of their academic careers. What the events of the past four years have shown is that serious literary scholars, book and print historians, bibliographers, librarians, catalogers, and other information professionals can come together with the goal of changing a paradigm. Through interdisciplinary collaborations, their vision and labor can expand the boundaries of an intellectual tradition while establishing new methods for scholarship in the process. And, although the events that facilitated the embodiment of this moment of discursive perpendicularity effectively culminated and concluded in 2019, the racial reckoning of the past year has attested their importance and vitality. The ripple effect of these conversations, too, has proven to be demonstrably impactful. As of 2021, one can take a course with Nishikawa or Spires at none other than the same Rare Book School that catalyzed my decision to pursue a career in the fields of bibliography and rare book librarianship.

As both an emergent area of intellectual discursive practice and as an evolving disciplinary methodology, merging Black print culture studies with bibliographical practice itself is not a panacea for all the previous deliberate silences, unintentional omissions, and multigenerational forms of erasure that have resulted in past forms of bibliographical scholarship. Bibliography, particularly when applied to marginalized literary traditions and especially when considering the racial politics of literacy in its relation to anti-Blackness, will at its best be representative of a privileged subset of cultural production crafted in a language largely accessible to the upper social echelon of the highly educated. Many of the same limitations imposed on

62. For an in-depth argument on Blackness and modernity, see Derrick R. Spires, "Genealogies of Black Modernities," *American Literary History* 32, no. 4 (2020): 611–22.

interracial representation of the bibliographic record have likewise arisen in our intraracial attempts at documentation because the logic of selection has exclusivity built into it. Even the idea of a universal bibliography must find ways to flatten diversity through abstraction, somewhat ironically, with the aim of producing a comprehensive inventory of a vast, ever-expanding universe of textuality. One can argue that this necessary dependency on abstraction was the Achilles' heel of Paul Otlet's dream for the *Mundaneum*, an international center devoted to organizing and housing all of the world's knowledge. For Otlet's grand vision to function, the historical materiality of each text's information vessel would need to be transformed to the point of losing all historical contextualization of previous forms of transmission. Accurately documenting the record of transmission is the very problem much of the work of descriptive bibliography has sought to address.

When applied to the intraracial documentation of Black cultural production the threat of erasure lies mostly in the flattening of format. As has been evidenced in the anthropological and sociological studies of W.E.B. Du Bois, Zora Neale Hurston, St. Clair Drake, and many others, the sophisticated orality of Black vernacular and the richness of its *orature* even today must find its representation restricted to bibliographic records of published transcriptions, retellings, and interpretative mediation, printed or otherwise encoded in accordance with an established metadata schema. The same can be said for practices that dwell at the edges of our understanding of textuality like quilting or narrative forms of dance choreographed to the accompaniment of Black poetry and lyrical song. There are also class-based forms of exclusion that can result in the discounting of a sizeable body of contemporary popular literature produced by, for, and within the Black community (e.g., urban lit, contemporary street poetry, independent Black comic books, etc.). Yet, the very idea of centering Blackness within bibliography offers new opportunities for expanding not just the scope but the logic of that representation. What emerges from a productive conversation between two genuinely interested intellectual discourses is a renewed sense of possibility of what each could be, or a new vitality infused in questions about what each could offer to the processes of knowledge-making through a more inclusive documentation of cultural production.