AGAINST A SHARP WHITE BACKGROUND

Infrastructures of African American Print

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Making Lists, Keeping Time

_Infrastructures of Black Inquiry, 1900–1950_

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As a small child, my mother took me with her to the little vine-covered library on the grounds of the Capitol. There I first fell in love with librarians, and I have been in love with them ever since—those very nice women who help you find wonderful books!

_Langston Hughes, The Big Sea_

A quiet infrastructure of black thought dwells in mid-twentieth-century paratext, in the opening pages of African American anthologies and narratives that address their thanks not to gods or kin but to a less intimate cohort of muses: list makers, indexers, taxonomists. “The library staffs at Howard, Hampton Institute, Lincoln University, and Virginia Union University were generously cooperative,” reads one. “Mrs. Catherine Latimer, Reference Librarian in the Negro Division of the 135th Street Branch Library, was very helpful,” reports another. And so often appears the name Dorothy Porter, curator of Howard University’s Negro Collection, that when she retired in 1973 it seemed there was hardly “a major black history book . . . in which the author hasn’t acknowledged Mrs. Porter’s help.” What if we read these acknowledgments not as evidence of any one book’s debts but instead as
accumulated traces that record a field’s hidden substrata? Doing so moves the figures thanked—bibliographers, collectors, and library workers who managed black archives in the early twentieth century—out of prefaces and into the center of African American knowledge production. In an era when “the Negro” was figured as unlettered or absent from the past, these list makers and librarians undertook work as audacious as it was retiring: they mapped blackness as a capacious site of inquiry.

The protagonists of these acknowledgments built on a long tradition of black memory practices. From antebellum literary societies that created libraries to Victoria Earle Matthews’s 1895 call for a “systematic effort” to preserve “the records, books and various publications . . . produced by us,” black thinkers articulated the importance of assembling material objects: words, paper, evidence. Before and after the turn of the twentieth century, bibliophiles made their homes into museums, safeguarded documents, and filled their parlors with books. Their private efforts laid the groundwork for public collections “by and about the Negro” that arose by the 1940s at two dozen branch libraries and black colleges from New York to Los Angeles. The professionally trained curators who ran these “New Negro libraries”—many of whom, in contrast to their bibliophile forebears, were women—created tools for readers to access an expanding corpus of “Negroana.” Those tools have served as perennial sources for writing African American history. Making them the subject of history, however, requires attending to knowledge producers and practices that nearly refuse to draw attention to themselves.

Dorothy Porter once argued that as a librarian, her mantle was to identify “the need for reference information yet unwritten” and see to it that “books and articles are written and compilations made.” Operating at a distance on the “yet unwritten,” such interventions are structured by deferment. They become visible only after the fact, with the appearance of the projects they sourced. That invisibility has subtended gendered assumptions about the intellectual value of library work. Kelly Miller, dean at Howard University, once caricatured a librarian as “one who merely knows how to arrange books on the shelves and keep them well dusted.” In more complimentary terms, Langston Hughes praised Chicago’s “charming” librarians as “those very nice women who help you find wonderful books!” It is no accident that the verbs Miller and Hughes equate with librarianship—help, dust, shelf, arrange—all connote domestic labor. But rather than simply dismiss their language as chauvinistic or diminutive, what if we plumb the theoretical work it unwittingly denotes? How does one “help . . . find wonderful books,” for example, without defining a corpus of black literature? How to shelve a book without a taxonomy? How to
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arrange thousands of texts without protocols for categorization? And what is
dusting if not a stand against disuse and obsolescence? These verbs, then, point
to librarianship’s true bailiwick: the making of infrastructures for inquiry. 9

This infrastructural agenda lies concealed in the unremarkable documents
librarians produced. Not treatises but lists: bibliographies, catalogs, and indexes.
This essay will explore these three types of documents, which challenge critical
interpretation even for a field like book history. 10 Akin to commonplace books
or anthologies, lists engage writing in the aggregate—through enumeration and
categorization—and after the point of production—through storage and cita-
tion. But evidence of their curatorial hand is comparatively slight. Bureaucratic
in tone and covert in viewpoint, they compile in the name of “information,”
transforming content into data with little editorial fanfare. Indeed, bibliogra-
phies, catalogs, and indexes are neither designed for “reading” nor considered
“writing”; they exist at the formal and gendered edge of authorship. 11 (The
Chicago Defender once described librarian Vivian Harsh as “a brilliant historian
who never wrote,” a characterization that says more about notions of writing
than about Harsh, since she produced reams of text—most of it one kind of
list or another.) 12 In spite of the critical difficulties, however, wrestling with
such “backstage” genres offers new insight into the history of African American
knowledge production. 13 These seemingly rote genres not only illuminate the
contested terrain of infrastructure building for black thought but also confront
the frequent elisions of curatorial labor in theories of the archive. 14

What becomes apparent when we turn to these objects is that acts of enu-
meration and organization were urgent and endemic to black thought in the
first half of the twentieth century. W. E. B. Du Bois was a bibliographer. Paul
Laurence Dunbar was an attendant at the Library of Congress. Nella Larsen
and Arna Bontemps were librarians. Langston Hughes filed index cards for the
historian Carter G. Woodson. Alain Locke wrote a study guide for the Ameri-
can Library Association. Horace Cayton dreamed up cataloging projects. 15
The list of list makers could go on. That the work of famous men like Locke
and Du Bois becomes a footnote to their oeuvre precisely when it most re-
sembles that of librarians only underscores the gendered slant of methodolo-
gies in intellectual and literary history. 16 But the ubiquity of these associations
between writing and information—the sheer number of people itemizing
blackness—should arrest our attention. At a time when black scholars could
not access archives, when major reference works did not index black-authored
periodicals, and when a branch library could ban works on “the emancipated
Negro,” the stakes of enumeration were clear. 17 There is good reason for the
long tradition—from Du Bois as bibliographer to Audre Lorde as librarian—of
African American writers working across multiple terrains of knowledge production. In a racially segregated information landscape, black thinkers necessarily made their arguments through files and filing structures as well as through poetry and prose.\textsuperscript{18}

**Enumeration: Black Bibliographies**

In 1900 Daniel Murray, an assistant at the Library of Congress, appealed to “men of literary knowledge,” asking for information on works by “Negro authors.” It was a question few had posed and one Murray spent the rest of his life trying to answer.\textsuperscript{19} His first effort, the “Preliminary List” of almost three hundred titles by black writers, was the first stand-alone accounting of its kind.\textsuperscript{20} Displayed in the American Negro Exhibit at the Paris Exposition, Murray’s bibliography drew the awe of Du Bois, who called it “remarkable and striking.”\textsuperscript{21} If this modest list was a revelation, as Murray and Du Bois asserted, it was because its interest in authorship stood in stark contrast to bibliographies about “the Negro” that preceded it, most of which sought to explain the “problems growing out of the presence of several million freemen, of another race, among an enterprising industrial nation.”\textsuperscript{22} These earlier compilations of information tagged black-authored texts as a sidelight on race relations. Poetics or politics that did not neatly prefigure or explain such “problems”—Phillis Wheatley’s devotional verse, for example, or the jeremiad in David Walker’s *Appeal*—belonged to no pragmatic category of knowledge about the “Negro Question.”\textsuperscript{23} By framing “Negro Authors” a subject of inquiry in its own right, Murray made space for writings iterative of blackness if not always of “race.” In other words, he redrew the parameters of what could and should be enumerated.

As Murray’s work suggests, one goal of African American thinkers at the turn of the century was to build data sets. Before the rise of black-themed anthologies, bibliographies were part of a spate of list making, from the litany of names in Gertrude Mossell’s 1894 *The Work of the Afro-American Woman*, to statistical aggregations in *The Negro Year Book*, to dictionaries like *Who’s Who of the Colored Race*.\textsuperscript{24} The definitional work such lists undertook can be missed among the rows of text and strings of facts that populate their pages. But embedded in these data were reformulations of “the Negro” as a field of inquiry. In one of Du Bois’s own acts of bibliography, for example, the 1905 *Select Bibliography of the Negro American*, he noted that sourcing the history of slavery was “especially difficult” because most extant scholarship concerned “the system” rather than “the slave.”\textsuperscript{25} Even just to find and list works that foregrounded enslaved lives,
then, performed a critique. Likewise, Arturo Schomburg’s 1916 *Bibliographical Checklist of American Negro Poetry*—the first to detail black authorship as a specifically literary category—waged undeclared battle over the shape of a black poetic tradition. Contrary to the reigning idea that “Aframerican poetry, qualitatively speaking,” began with Dunbar, Schomburg situated its origins in the eighteenth century and beyond the United States. Though Schomburg’s list carried no preface or editorial comment, its size alone surprised even the most astute observers.

The form in which Schomburg effected this surprise was apt yet deceptively plain. Enumerative bibliography entails just “the listing of books according to some system”: a survey that identifies the boundary lines and marrow of a given subject. Such a list explicitly promises only “information,” but it also makes an implicit point about what subjects are worthy of compilation and how they should be framed. By stripping content to its barest elements—author, title, place, date—enumerative bibliographies approach a field through accumulation rather than exegesis; their work, as Du Bois noted, was about the “sum of accomplishment.”

Standardized and itemized rather than narrative, the list form seems to visually stabilize the category under study. That evidentiary look of “structured synopsis” is one reason, perhaps, that Murray’s “Preliminary List” went on display alongside Du Bois’s sociological charts and “Photographs of Negro Types” at the 1900 Paris Exposition. If not necessarily meant to be read (consulted, perhaps, but not in unbroken fashion), early bibliographies were intended to impress. That Du Bois himself produced no less than sixteen bibliographies on the “American Negro” between 1897 and 1914 indicates the centrality of this framing device for turn-of-the-century black thinkers.

The apotheosis of this enumerative project arrived circa 1930, when Monroe Work, a Tuskegee sociologist, had just published *A Bibliography of the Negro in Africa and America* and Dorothy Porter was completing her first study, “Early American Negro Writings.” If Murray’s and Du Bois’s exploratory lists had probed the boundaries of the “Negro” as a category of knowledge production, Porter and Work filled in that category with obsessive detail. Porter’s comprehensive listing of pre-1835 books and broadsides by African American writers bored down to the textual richness—in imprints, editions, and authorial networks—of an era previously “little-known and little-explored.” It shifted the definition of authorship toward collectivity, counting as “writing” not just single-author literature but also organizational documents like by-laws and minutes. While Porter’s list was fine-grained, Work’s *Bibliography of the Negro in Africa and America* was colossal. At more than six hundred pages (only sixteen of which concerned the “Race Problem”), it stood as an unmistakable monument,
materially and mnemonically, to the scope of Africana as a research area.\textsuperscript{36} In the granularity of Porter’s exhumation of a single period and the grandness of Work’s global survey, by 1930 bibliographers had refuted any notion that black information stood primarily as an answer to a sociological crisis of the present.

From these encyclopedic data-building ventures emerged a series of smaller bibliographies made by librarians in special collections of Negroana. “Reading lists” rather than exhaustive accountings, they staged radical possibilities for public engagement with black literature and history.\textsuperscript{37} Notably, these lists re-framed black authorship in ways that advanced New Negro politics (even as, ironically, the authorial role of the librarians who wrote them disappeared from view). Previous bibliographies on “The Negro” had denoted the names of black authors with an asterisk or (N), in effect alerting readers to anomalous occurrences in lists dominated by white knowledge producers.\textsuperscript{38} By contrast, in an unheralded 1925 list entitled “The Negro,” the 135th Street Branch Library in Harlem removed such symbols and announced that “the chief aim of the compilers has been to let the Negro speak for himself.” The list’s unnamed creators populated it largely with black-authored works; brief annotations explained the inclusion, where necessary, of white-authored entries.\textsuperscript{39} In 1936 Porter enacted a similar inversion in \textit{A Selected List of Books by and about the Negro}. Here, she used asterisks to denote authorial racial identity, but the marked and unmarked categories exchanged their usual places, for Porter made asterisks indicative of \textit{white} authorship. In each of these lists “The Negro” became a category of knowledge produced \textit{through} black writing.\textsuperscript{40}

African American writers had long been subjects of doubt or awe, as evident in the authenticating statements that framed their work from Wheatley forward.\textsuperscript{41} It is worth noting, then, that a turn in the enumeration of black expression—from exceptional to implicit, to the unsaid site of saying—occurred not in a manifesto but in two otherwise unremarkable and ephemeral reading lists. One was printed as a tiny pamphlet that did not bear Porter’s name on its cover, and the other, not credited at all, appeared in the \textit{New York Branch Library Book News}. The locations of these interventions make sense, however, when we recall that both Porter at Howard and her counterparts at the 135th Street Branch Library undertook their work from within a world where books by black authors were so popular with readers that they literally fell apart from overuse.\textsuperscript{42} In these spaces of reading, librarians had discovered, black authorship connoted not a curiosity or a mere fact but a mode of affiliation and a site of pleasure. In their bibliographies, then, the epistemological practices of categorization and footnoting followed the materiality—in broken bindings and dog-eared pages—of Harlem’s and Howard University’s reading habits.
These small bibliographies responded to the demands and desires of readers in spaces that were a “crossroads for authors and leaders and ordinary men.” Vivian Harsh’s reading lists, which rarely bore her name, often appeared in mimeographed programs for community events held at the George Cleveland Hall Branch Library, on Chicago’s South Side, where she was head librarian. In 1936, for example, Harsh created a list of “further readings” for attendees of a forum on Haiti, which featured novelist Arna Bontemps as speaker and Ruth E. Shepard, wife of a local janitor, as chairwoman. Harsh’s ephemeral lists did not announce themselves as intellectual fusillades, but they intervened directly in the local politics of segregated information. Even in Chicago, where black residents could use libraries anywhere in the city, they would find biographies of Sojourner Truth and Paul Robeson, for example, only at the Hall Branch, where Harsh housed her Special Collection on the History and Literature of the Negro. The bibliographies she produced, then, were maps: guides for readers to navigate a landscape of information where black literature was missing, literally and figuratively, from the main stacks. Her list making reminds us that, by design, infrastructure is both meta and mundane.

Organization: Catalogs and Classifications

When Du Bois and Murray compiled their bibliographies at the turn of the century, extant “Negro collections” were few in number. With a scarcity of material assemblages, early list makers constructed collections in theory. By the early 1930s, however, a growing set of New Negro libraries held collections in fact. And the holdings at the largest of these repositories—at Fisk, Hampton, and Howard universities, as well as at public libraries in Harlem and Chicago—were fast exceeding the organizational capacity of the list form. To manage their collections in the face of this expansion, librarians needed not static bibliographies but “moveable fences”: ways to arrange and make navigable unwieldy sets of objects. At stake in their arrangements were the accessibility, materiality, and futurity of the collections. What would readers look for in these materials now and decades hence? How to make a changing group of texts respond to readers’ queries? In answering such questions, librarians moved from enumeration toward organization, from surveys to systems.

Those systems necessitated not just a list but a filing structure: a three-dimensional architecture with many points of entry and corridors to lead readers from one item to another, or what we might now call a database. That architecture, circa 1930, was the index card file, and in libraries its specific form was
Its data included headings, name authorities, and call numbers—all part of an information scheme at once relational (articulating the joints between disparate objects), codified (operable by many), and scalable (able to incorporate additions in perpetuity). This structure invites “reading” even less than a bibliography, for a catalog encourages searching rather than perusal.\(^4^9\) It can produce assemblies of information in response to specific inputs, but the mechanisms and cross-references that fuel its search function remain obscured behind drawers labeled only Aa–Am, An–Az, and so on.\(^5^0\) If a bibliography at least announces its categories, the claims made by a catalog yield to the act of inquiry.

Contrary to this seeming diffidence, however, the alphanumeric sequences and truncated prose on a catalog card represented contested hierarchies of information to frame “Negro books.” In assigning subject headings and class numbers to objects in their collections, librarians shaped vocabularies for describing black ideas and determined how (or whether) a reader would find her way to a text. But they did not make such determinations with unbounded autonomy, for each catalog entry reflected the shared protocols undergirding American library practice, from standard hardware like cards and cabinets to data structures like Library of Congress Subject Headings and Dewey decimals. Any act of cataloging, then, engaged with a matrix of rules. For librarians of “Negro collections,” the marginality of blackness within this matrix politicized every instance of numbering, naming, and filing.

In the Dewey Decimal Classification, the number 326—“Slavery, Serfdom, and Emancipation”—was not sufficiently detailed to accommodate a black history collection. Dewey’s system of “universal” knowledge was fastidious in certain areas. The number 642, for example—“Serving, Table, and Entertaining”—had a designated place, 642.55, for works that described the meal plan at Harvard University. “Serving, Table, and Entertaining” was, in fact, twice as detailed as “Slavery, Serfdom, and Emancipation,” which was cursorily divided into ten broad subcategories. For a collection with thousands of works on slavery, 326 produced a material and epistemological bottleneck, crowding a multitude of unsorted titles around a single class number.\(^5^1\) In response, librarians managing black collections revised Dewey’s system, disregarding his admonition that catalogers use the decimals according to their “exact and universal meanings.”\(^5^2\) At Howard, Dorothy Porter enlarged 326 tenfold, opening up more than a hundred class numbers to delineate histories of slavery, slave resistance, and freedom.\(^5^3\)

Such expansions were not atypical for libraries with specialized holdings.\(^5^4\) But the classification problems faced by African American collections were not
simply about depth—and could not be solved by adding decimals alone—because the hardwiring of Dewey defined blackness in ways inimical to the organizing principles of black libraries. Chief among the malignancies that Porter and her colleagues encountered was 325.26, the designated class number for the “Negro Question.” In Dewey’s taxonomy, this number appeared under sociology (300) in a subdivision called “Colonies and Emigrants” (325), thus positioning blackness as foreign to the nation. Moreover, 325.26 served as an awkward catchall for any book about African American life, yoking together works as divergent as Du Bois’s *Black Reconstruction*, a historical treatise, and E. C. Adams’s folkloric *Congaree Sketches*. Porter recalled that in many white libraries, even the poetry of James Weldon Johnson, “who everybody knew was a black poet,” was sequestered at 325.26.

Where “universal” taxonomies faltered, librarians of black collections resisted the standardization they otherwise embraced. Many rejected 325.26 outright and moved works like Charles S. Johnson’s *The Negro in American Civilization* to 323, Dewey’s class for “internal relations with groups and individuals.” This one-digit relocation shifted blackness from the outside to the inside of citizenship, encompassing questions of class, political struggle, and equality within a polity. They also took out of 325.26 works that belonged elsewhere, placing James Weldon Johnson’s verse, for example, at 811, the Dewey class for poetry. But what to do with books not of black poetry—which should be shelved with poets—but books about it? In other words, how to categorize conversations about race without narrowing their concerns to the Negro Question? At St. Augustine College in North Carolina, librarians reimagined 326 as a prefix for works on “Negroes in the United States,” thus placing a book about black poetry at 326.811. In this parallel shelving system, 326 gave physical coherence to “Negro books” while using Dewey’s “infinite combinations” to delineate their disciplinary diversity. As each repository rewrote and rewired Dewey, cataloging black books became an improvisatory exercise in numeracy.

Not just numbers but vocabularies, too, required revision. In 1900 a few dozen descriptors had sufficed for Du Bois to sort a small list of works on the American Negro. Librarians who required a more sprawling vocabulary to manage their holdings in later decades, however, turned to Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH), a system of standardized, federally managed terms to catalog works by author and subject. The LCSH system was a reliable tool for knowing whether to file a book under “Negro women” or “Women, Negro,” but it proved insufficient for keeping step with the evolving concerns of black print culture. As a result, catalogers at Fisk, Howard, and the Schomburg Collection (as the Division of Negro Literature, History, and Prints at the 135th Street
Branch Library came to be known) collaborated to find apt language for black books. A cataloger for the Schomburg Collection, for example, queried Porter: “Have you now a heading that covers the Capital ‘N’ controversy? . . . The L.C. card has the heading Negro race which I don’t think is explicit enough for this book.” Here, a cataloger struggled over naming an object that was itself about naming: Adam Clayton Powell’s treatise in favor of the appellation “black” rather than “negro” or “Negro.” To address the inadequacy of generic placeholders like “Negro race,” librarians drew up lists of “supplemental” terms to expand LCSH, adding subjects like “Passing,” “Pan-Africanism,” and “Nat Turner’s Insurrection.”

Looking at the trajectory of one such “nonauthorized” term makes clear both the absences in prevailing subject vocabularies and the possibilities produced by descriptive work inside African American collections. In the 1930s, LCSH made little distinction between the many forms of black music, using only broad terms like “Negro musicians.” Inventing their own cataloging language for music, then, librarians at Fisk made “Blues” a heading and used it to catalog Elmer Simms Campbell’s 1938 *Esquire* article “Jam in the Nineties,” a paean to ragtime, swing, and the blues subtitled “Ballads about roses and happiness were for white people to sing but the blues belonged to the colored.”

Decades later, LCSH caught up to Fisk, adding the heading “Blues (Songs, etc.)” to its lexicon. When Fisk librarians subsequently cataloged George Mitchell’s 1971 autobiography, *Blow My Blues Away*, they no longer needed to draw upon an in-house vocabulary; they purchased the printed Library of Congress card for Mitchell’s book that bore the new authorized term. Officially filed under “Blues (Songs, Etc.),” *Blow My Blues Away* joined Campbell’s “Jam,” which had been lurking in Fisk’s catalog at “Blues,” unauthorized, for three decades. Fisk librarians’ fugitive lexicography made visible—in a sequence of catalog cards—a long tradition of blues writing that elsewhere had been given no proper name.

The politics of naming and numbering hinged on the minutiae of data, but it also aspired to a national black information system. With support from the Works Progress Administration in the 1930s, black thinkers used card catalogs to initiate vast cooperative experiments in data sharing. At Howard University Dorothy Porter led Project A—the “largest card record of publications by and about the Negro ever made available in one place.” She enlisted ten repositories across the country to ship their catalog records to Washington, where she oversaw an assembly line of relief workers who copied and combined their contents. In Chicago Horace Cayton and Elizabeth Wimp directed “A Bibliography by and about the Negro in the United States,” also known as the Chicago
Afro-American Union Analytic Catalog, which drew together forty thousand citations identified by workers who pored over cabinets, files, and indexes in libraries across the city.\(^6^7\) Both projects reflected New Deal trends in information architecture taking shape through “union catalogs” that amalgamated library data federally and regionally.\(^6^8\) But as racial composites rather than geographic ones, Project A and its Chicago counterpart mapped a different intellectual terrain. Had either survived the collapse of New Deal funding, the dream of an enduring and encyclopedic apparatus for black enumeration might have materialized.\(^6^9\) While that aim remained elusive, its locus of possibility had shifted—from the feverish endeavors of a single list maker, often male, to institutional collaborations that leaned heavily on the technical routines of library-trained book women.

**Retrieval: Indexes to Black Periodicals**

Catalogs were adept at representing discrete objects—a book, a tract, perhaps a pamphlet. And they excelled at historical accumulation, keeping track of a collection’s oldest objects while expanding to include new ones. If a reader wanted to know where, for example, she could find David Walker’s 1829 *Appeal*, consulting the union catalog in Chicago would quickly reveal that in 1938, only one library in that city owned a copy: the Hall Branch Library, where Vivian Harsh had built the Special Collection on the History and Literature of the Negro.\(^7^0\) But what if a reader posed a question whose answer existed only in a fleeting fragment of newsprint or sought a poem whose only appearance had been in a magazine? In other words, what of text that eluded the bound objects represented in a catalog?  

Black magazine and newspaper publishing, which had expanded with the Great Migration, was in full flourish by midcentury.\(^7^1\) The black press told stories that had not entered the formal pages of a monograph and perhaps never would. “There are so many surprising and startling historical events . . . relating to the American Negro that are not recorded in the Standard Histories,” declared the Harlem scrapbook maker Alexander Gumby, who gathered evidence of these events as they flitted through clippings, ticket stubs, and other ephemera.\(^7^2\) At Howard University, library users expressed “constant demand” for contemporary material that “has not yet been printed in book form,” Dorothy Porter reported. They wanted to know “the number of Negro votes for Dewey and Truman,” asked about “the attitude of the press towards Paul Robeson,” and sought facts about “Ethiopia, Music, Lynching, Scottsboro.” The card catalog could answer but few of these queries. Articles, Porter knew,
were “the only thing available.”73 But where were these articles stored? How would someone retrieve them when every story was quickly supplanted by the next week’s news?

To capture such “surprising and startling” material required shifting the temporality of periodicals from serial reading to permanent recall, from currency to memory. In this reframing, texts of fleeting use would endure as part of an archive of snippets.74 A variety of information technologies in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries performed this archival function for ephemera. Personal scrapbooks remained popular, while commercial innovations included clipping bureaus, which could be hired to track press coverage of a specified topic, and indexing services, like Poole’s Index to Periodical Literature, which offered a look-up mechanism for popular serials.75 In library practice, “analytical cataloging” bored into bound publications to find “essays, articles in magazines, and similar hidden material” and created records for them in a card catalog.76 Most libraries, short the resources to do such detailed cataloging, instead built subject files, collections of “miscellaneous odds and ends” that “were as wanderers with no suitable abiding place.”77

Enumerators of black print engaged all these technologies. In 1900 the Hampton Institute inaugurated its clipping file, “one of the earliest large-scale, systematic ventures in day-to-day Black documentation.” Tuskegee’s Office of Research and Records created a vast clipping enterprise to manage data for its annual publication, The Negro Year Book. At the 135th Street Branch Library, Catherine Latimer acquired every item listed under “Negroes” in mainstream periodical indexes, as well as items from black periodicals that were not indexed, accumulating “literally hundreds of thousands of writings which would otherwise be virtually lost.”78 References to articles, reviews, and poems could be found in the Chicago Afro-American Union Analytic Catalog and, occasionally, in the card catalog Porter built at Howard. Fisk librarians briefly indexed the Norfolk Journal and Guide, “to be for the Negro what the New York Times’ renowned index . . . is generally,” while staff at Howard created indices to The Crisis, Opportunity, and the Journal of Negro History.79

This painstaking work proved impossible to sustain in collections that rarely had more than one person to simultaneously acquire, advise, annotate, archive, catalog, classify, clip, file, index, and sort. At Howard, Porter organized volunteers to act as a decentralized clipping bureau: “Mrs. Brandon has clipped articles on the Negro from her copy of the Washington Post. . . . One Howard Faculty member has agreed to cut her copy of the Star for us and a friend in New Jersey has promised to clip papers she reads.” But such ad hoc efforts were intermittent; Porter repeatedly lamented that “our files are not
up-to-date,” noting “little time” for “indexing and work with clippings.” Indeed, given limited resources, she struggled over whether Howard’s Negro Collection should focus on preserving the past or keeping up with the present. Was it to be “a literary museum of Negro life and history” or “an informational bureau”?80

That question loomed large for black repositories, which could not rely on public or private infrastructures that centralized the labor of making periodicals searchable. Few of the WPA-funded newspaper indexing projects covered the black press, for example.81 And commercial tools—like the H. W. Wilson Company’s ubiquitous Readers’ Guide to Periodical Literature, which indexed “the most up-to-date material in new magazines” and turned old ones into “permanent reference works”—did not include a single “Negro interest magazine.”82 In 1943 Wilson’s Readers’ Guide listed more than seventy subheadings and cross-references under “Negro,” pointing readers to articles on race relations and black biography in publications like Ladies’ Home Journal and Christian Century. But almost none of these stories came from the black press.83 For libraries that aimed to collect material “by and about the Negro,” the Readers’ Guide recorded less than half the story. Once again, the racial coding of early twentieth-century information systems made blackness the object but not the author of knowledge.

The black nationalist leader Hubert Harrison, himself an inveterate keeper of clippings, once argued that American journalism, through both silence and sensationalism, had fueled “the putrid passion of race hatred,” and he called for battle “in the very teeth of the American press.”84 This battle marked the afterlife of serial print as well as its moment of publication. Editors and curators alike understood that even if newspapers and magazines were materially preserved (and they were not always), storage without a retrieval mechanism would limit the circulation of black thought. Librarians and writers had common cause, then, to redress the omissions of commercial indexing services. In 1930 Du Bois urged subscribers to The Crisis to press for its inclusion in Wilson’s Readers’ Guide—to no avail.85 Three decades later, Doris E. Saunders, librarian of the Johnson Publishing Company, engaged in a similar campaign for Ebony.86 The American Library Association told Du Bois that “when a magazine is found very useful in libraries, . . . it is very likely that the Wilson Company will be urged by librarians to index [it].” Yet, when Dorothy Porter asked in 1936 if Wilson would publish her proposed index to selected Negro periodicals, it said there was too small a public for such a project.87

In the face of such refusals, librarians in the 1940s turned to the making of yet another kind of list: indexes of black serials. While Fisk and Howard had intermittently indexed individual titles like Opportunity, there remained an urgent
need for a multi-title index that could be maintained and distributed nationally. The first to reach a public audience was *A Guide to Negro Periodical Literature*, a self-published, subscription-based service launched in 1941 by Albert P. Marshall of North Carolina State Teachers College. It would, Marshall promised, “make usage of Negro periodicals . . . easier by serving the same purpose for them as the Wilson indexes serve the general reader.” With shoeboxes of three-by-five-inch cards, Marshall cataloged, by author and subject, articles from the best-known magazines—*The Crisis*, *Opportunity*, and *Phylon*—as well as the smaller organs of fraternal societies, teachers’ associations, and black colleges. The *Guide* appeared quarterly until late 1943, when Marshall joined the Coast Guard, and again briefly in 1946. Postwar issues added new magazines like *Ebony*, *Negro Traveler*, and *Pulse*. After a four-year lapse in coverage (a lapse still felt, as Marshall’s work has not been fully replicated), Charlotte W. Lytle, a librarian at Central State University in Ohio, took up the project, and it remained in print for half a century.

As a “master key to the American Negro’s viewpoint,” serial indexing captured the texture of historical contingency to an extent impossible in the methodical pacing of a catalog or the hindsight of bibliography. Periodical indexers often used more flexible and specific terminology than book catalogers—an approach that could record the names of black women like the musician Harriet Gibbs Marshall and the civic activist Nannie Louise Hansberry (mother of Lorraine Hansberry), who appeared in periodical literature but rarely in books. The *Guide to Negro Periodical Literature* tagged articles with terms that recorded fleeting historicity: names that garnered the briefest of headlines, failed movements, bygone enterprises. Marshall’s first volume included headings like the antilynching bill (fiercely debated but never passed), Brown Bombers Baking Company (the largest, but short-lived, black-owned bakery in the country), and Lucille Bluford (whose losing suit to enroll in Missouri’s journalism school was eclipsed by later desegregation cases). It also made space for black commentary on topics—“Indians in Latin America” and “Socialism,” for example—that would not have been linked to “Negro” in another index. Resonant with a dynamic black public sphere, the *Guide* produced an infrastructure for ephemeral black thought.

Marshall’s twenty-eight-page list, and Lytle’s continuation of it, became an enduring and collective effort to “give more permanency” to black serials. Its history tracks the racial politics of twentieth-century information systems: how black print culture dwelt outside the margins of the “most important reference work for any library,” as the Wilson index billed itself, and when those margins, under pressure, had to move. Over time, as the Wilson company slowly
began to cover black serials, Marshall and Lytle indexed only what remained unindexed—a choice that pointedly underscored the adjunct nature of their project, one made necessary by the exclusions built into prevailing routes of search and retrieval. In 1960, more than two decades after Porter urged Wilson to issue a black periodical index, the *Guide to Negro Periodical Literature* at last came under the imprint of a major publisher, G. K. Hall.\(^96\) Though it may be easy now to take such a project for granted, as digitization makes wide—if still incomplete—swaths of African American writing fully searchable, this mimeographed list making stood for decades as a modest bulwark against desuetude.

**Infrastructures of Inquiry**

The term “infrastructure” leans first on its base word: not the ethereal, mobile qualities of information but its “permanent installations,” the structures and culverts that move matter. The emergence of African American bibliographies, catalogs, and indexes coincided with a moment—roughly 1900 to the end of World War II—when important elements of the twentieth century’s information architecture took shape through national archives, public libraries, federal records surveys, the adoption of universal cataloging standards, the spread of office technologies like mimeograph and electric typewriting, and the rise of long-distance radio and early computing.\(^97\) Such transformations profoundly enabled African American knowledge production in the public sphere. But like other communication structures, from film to interstate highways, they also inscribed the logic of black marginalization into the very design of information.\(^98\) Understanding how bibliographers and librarians confronted the racial coding of this architecture reveals the conduits and constraints that shaped what black thinkers could find, keep, and know.

But there is another story at work here, too, one suggested by infrastructure’s prefix. *Infra-* means “beneath,” the substrata. It also connotes meter: the pattern in either music or poetry that by keeping time supports improvisation. If we think not of beats but of inquiry, we see how black archive building and enumeration provided an internal basis, indeed a subbass, for the richly unpredictable directions in which the field of African American studies would develop across the twentieth century. When Daniel Murray issued his “Preliminary List of Books and Pamphlets by Negro Authors” in 1900, and when librarians like Dorothy Porter began their careers in the 1920s, most titles by black authors were out of print, few libraries held such works, and there was little agreement about what might constitute a “core” collection for the study of black history and literature. That the New Negro era became “compulsively
documentary” was, in part, to address those conditions—in short, to make a field.99

By the time Porter retired in 1973, the landscape for research and reading looked quite different, but much of its scaffolding rested in an earlier era. The reprint publishers that revived an out-of-print canon of black writing in the 1960s, for example, mined the old stacks of Negroana collections to find forgotten texts.100 Likewise, the microfilm sets, facsimile catalogs, and interlibrary loan mechanisms that made materials for black studies widely available repackaged, with new media, cataloging and compilations begun decades before.101 For her part, Porter taught other librarians to build the ethnic subject collections student activists demanded.102 To undertake the study of African American expression today, then, is to owe something to the labor and institution building of these early curators, even if infrastructure, like the people who make it, is often invisible. There is almost no path from 1900 to the research possibilities of today that does not trace in some way the intellectual grooves carved by Porter and her counterparts: Vivian Harsh, Catherine Latimer, A. P. Marshall, and others who appear briefly in midcentury acknowledgments. Catalogers and list makers all, they could never fully encode the imagination; they would inevitably both file and misfile ideas, both cultivate and narrow the questions asked. But in recording and enumerating a tradition, they did, literally, keep time: they were the systems builders of black thought.

Notes

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1. Sterling A. Brown, Arthur P. Davis, and Ulysses Lee, eds., The Negro Caravan: Writings by American Negroes (1941; Salem, NH: Ayer Company, 1991), vii. Claude McKay, Harlem: Negro Metropolis (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1940), vii; Benjamin Quarles, cited in Jacqueline Trescott, “Chatelaine of Black History,” unidentified clipping [ca. 1973], box 13, Dorothy Porter Wesley Papers (hereafter DPW Papers), Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. (At the time of research, these papers were minimally processed.)


9. John Durham Peters’s colloquial definition of infrastructure is apt: “the basic, the boring, the mundane, and all the mischievous work done behind the scenes.” Infrastructure, per Peters, “is demure. Withdrawal is its modus operandi.” The Marvelous Clouds: Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 33–34.


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23. In Gubert’s chronology of early black bibliographies, Murray was the first to include Wheatley and Walker in a bibliography on “the Negro.”


28. The postbellum, pre-Harlem poet and anthologist William Stanley Braithwaite told Alain Locke, upon seeing Schomburg’s work, that “he was not aware of the amount of material.” Locke to Schomburg, Thanksgiving Day, 1916, box 5, folder 30, Arthur A. Schomburg Papers, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library (hereafter SCRBC).


35. Porter departed from Vernon Loggins, whose *The Negro Author: His Development in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1931) was the first full-length narrative analysis of black authors before 1900. Porter excluded periodicals from her study but still covered more titles than Loggins, who limited himself to single-authored works.


37. If the encyclopedic bibliography of Monroe Work was akin to the genre of historical anthology, these new lists mirrored the occasional anthology comprised of only contemporary or thematic works. See Jeremy Braddock, *Collecting as Modernist Practice* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), 16.

39. The compilers of the 1925 list were likely Catherine Latimer and/or Ernestine Rose. The absence of a byline for either woman illustrates how the shifting locus of black bibliography toward library collections was accompanied by increasing anonymity for the bibliographers. “The Negro: A Reading List Compiled by the 135th Street Branch, the New York Public Library, Situated in Negro Harlem,” *Branch Library Book News* 2 (December 1925): 133.


43. L. D. Reddick, typescript, draft introduction to *What the Negro Thinks about Democracy*, n.d., Lawrence D. Reddick Papers (unprocessed), Manuscripts, Archives, and Rare Books Division, SCRBC.


45. Readers’ Bureau, Chicago Public Library, *The Negro and His Achievements in America: A List of Books Compiled for the American Negro Exposition* (Chicago: Chicago Public Library, 1940). The fact that these and other black-themed books were “not obtainable at other local libraries” is also noted in an unidentified newspaper clipping from the *Chicago Daily News*, [ca. early 1930s], box 7, folder 21, Hall Branch Records.

46. Monroe Work’s 1928 *Bibliography* ran to seventeen thousand entries and still drew charges of serious omission.


49. N. Katherine Hayles has described the strength of databases as “the ability to order vast data arrays and make them available for different kinds of queries.” “Narrative and Database: Natural Symbionts,” *PMLA* 122, no. 5 (October 2007): 1604. On how search functions delimit those queries, see Lisa Gitelman, “Searching and Thinking about Searching JSTOR,” *Representations* 127, no. 1 (Summer 2014): 73–82.


52. Dewey, *Decimal Classification*, 35–47.


67. Both the Howard and Chicago projects produced card indexes available on-site. The Chicago project was eventually published as *The Chicago Afro-American Union Analytic Catalog: An Index to Materials on Afro-Americans in the Principal Libraries of Chicago* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1972). Project A was not published.


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70. Chicago Public Library, *Chicago Afro-American Union Analytic Catalog.*


75. *Poole’s Index* began in 1802. William Frederick Poole and William I. Fletcher, eds., *Poole’s Index to Periodical Literature*, rev. ed. (New York: Peter Smith, 1938).


86. Doris E. Saunders to Dorothy Porter, April 14, 1960, MSRC Records.


90. By 1946 the *Guide* had variously indexed forty-two discrete publications.


