

## *Introduction*

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The decade from 1900 to 1910 is pivotal in marking a new century. For African American literature and culture it is a decade defined by complex negotiations with the past, vigorous and at times tense engagements with the present, and hopeful, if tempered aspirations for the future. Having seen the gains of the Reconstruction era dismantled by the previous century's end, some African Americans greeted the new century with a renewed sense of hope and guarded optimism, looking to create, as Booker T. Washington put it, "A New Negro for a New Century."<sup>1</sup> If Washington hoped to document the upward struggles, progress, and patriotism of African Americans that could secure for them a vital place within American society, others, such as W. E. B. Du Bois, continued to protest racial injustices and to enlist their literary and cultural works to demand social, political, and economic equality for African Americans. It would be an oversimplification, however, to see this period as dominated by oscillations between these two seemingly disparate figures. Instead, for most African Americans, the decade was marked by continuity and change, opportunity and oppression, and hope for the future in the face of bitter disappointment. As African Americans made gains in literacy, education, entrepreneurship, and military service, they also experienced the spread and implementation of Jim Crow segregation, the rise of racial terror and lynching, disenfranchisement through poll taxes and other means, and the expansion of debt-driven credit financing and the convict labor system – all experienced in the context of continued industrialization, increased immigration, and vast changes to information and transportation technologies. These dichotomies, and the complex context in which they arose, were reflected in and informed by the literary and cultural imaginings of African American authors, artists, and intellectuals, who, at the turn of the twentieth century, stood as intermediaries between what had gone before and what was yet to come.

In many ways, the 1896 Supreme Court decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* marks a transitional moment – though not a distinct break – in African American literary history. At the close of the Civil War, the United States faced the question of how to remake the nation. What would be the relationship of the 4 million formerly enslaved African Americans, as well as the longtime free Black citizens, to the US body politics? How would immigrants, indigenous Americans, women, and the laboring class constitute their new relationships and protect their rights in the postwar society? Would they recognize, as Frances E. W. Harper had argued, that “We are all bound up together in one great bundle of humanity, and society cannot trample on the weakest and feeblest of its members without receiving the curse in its own soul”?<sup>2</sup> Seeming to heed Harper’s call, the Reconstruction era, from 1865 to 1877, saw a herculean effort on the part of African Americans and their Republican supporters to transform the postwar society in a way that came closer to realizing the ideals of American democracy. During this time, more than 4,000 schools were founded to educate formerly enslaved people; Black colleges, including Fisk, Morehouse, Howard, and Hampton were founded; the Thirteenth, Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, abolishing slavery, granting equal protection under the law, and extending suffrage to Black men, respectively, were passed; and African Americans made important strides in literacy, political representation, and professionalization. Those gains, however, were painfully short-lived. By 1877 the United States withdrew federal troops from the South, leaving African American lives and rights woefully unprotected, and with the 1883 repeal of the Civil Rights Act of 1875, the hopes for federal support to enforce the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments vanished. By the time the US Supreme Court ruled in *Plessy v. Ferguson* that racial segregation in public conveyance was not unconstitutional, states throughout the South had already gone to work undoing the legal and political gains granted by and symbolized in the so-called Reconstruction amendments. The decision in *Plessy* presaged what was already clear: that the Supreme Court had authorized a state-by-state travesty, the results of which would be second-class citizenship for African Americans and the sanctioning of a racial regime within the United States that envisaged a future of racial distinction created and maintained through a campaign of sexual and racial violence, discrimination, terror, and intimidation.<sup>3</sup>

While Anna Julia Cooper, and so many of her African American contemporaries, had tried to forestall this travesty of justice, arguing as she did in 1892 that “the cause of freedom is not the cause of a race or a

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sect, a party or a class – it is the cause of humankind, the very birthright of humanity” and appealing to white women not to cast their lot against other oppressed peoples, by the last decade of the nineteenth century, many white Americans were ready to wash their hands of the “race problem” in the South and to move forward into the new century, leaving sectional divisions behind them.<sup>4</sup> More than simply close the door on sectional divisions, however, the campaign of racial terror and political backsliding in the South was supported and buttressed by a reunionist ideology of benign neglect in the North. In particular, the post-Reconstruction era saw northern white “friends” promulgate theories of slavery as a benign institution.<sup>5</sup> This historical revisionism was part of the reunionist ideology that sought to dispense with questions of Black political rights and racial justice in favor of a national reconciliation between the North and South. This reunionist ideology required that slavery be reconfigured, not as the brutal system of forced labor that it was, with its aftereffects continuing to shape the current social, cultural, and political life of the country, but as a gift that brought African Americans into contact with the civilizing forces of white America, north and south. For African Americans grappling with life in the post-*Plessy* era, it meant entering into a debate about the history and meaning of slavery and finding new literary and political strategies and artistic outlets. It meant creating infrastructures of support for Black publishing and Black lives, and perhaps more than anything, the *Plessy* verdict decided, as Du Bois predicted, that the problem of the twentieth century would be the problem of the color line.

Despite the grim reality of laboring under the solidifying regime of Jim Crow segregation, African American authors, artists, and intellectuals did not succumb to hopelessness. Even as access to white mainstream publishing outlets was curtailed by efforts to control the image and representation of African Americans, there were renewed energies that manifested in different forms of political activism, literary and cultural creativity, and community self-help and advocacy that made the first decade of the twentieth century an extremely productive one. By 1896 there were 150 African American newspapers and magazines, including professional journals, most of which maintained a broad purview, publishing informative pieces alongside poems, sketches, essays, ads, announcements, letters, and notes. African American journals and newspapers fanned out from coast to coast and constituted both a real and imagined community of readers and contributors who found a space to exchange their political, literary, intellectual, and theological writings, while protesting injustice and uplifting

the race.<sup>6</sup> African Americans also made inroads into Black-owned book publishing, most notably with the Colored Co-operative Publishing Company, that, as the chapter by Alisha Knight demonstrates, not only published the *Colored American Magazine*, but also experimented with publishing the works of a white author. In autobiography, narrative fiction, poetry, editing, and journalism, as well as in the visual and performing arts, African Americans fueled the transition from the nineteenth century into the twentieth. As Frances Smith Foster and William Andrews argue, in the years before World War I, “African Americans were reading and writing, publishing and pontificating in virtually every genre and in every literary style.”<sup>7</sup> They continued to advocate for civil and political rights, protest inequalities, and publish even as they turned inward to strengthen and fortify the infrastructures of their own communities. From Monroe Majors and Lawson Scruggs to Gertrude Mossell, Victoria Earle Matthews, and Pauline Hopkins, African American authors and intellectuals evinced efforts to establish, record, and recognize diverse traditions of Black writing and cultural and intellectual productivity. Likewise, in Du Bois and Daniel Murray’s list making and bibliographic interventions, they worked to establish categories of both African American literature and Negro authorship that would impact the way these fields took shape in the twentieth century and right up to today. As the contributors to this volume document, in all these ways and more, African Americans were involved in creating and defining new spaces and forms to support Black literature and expressive culture at the turn of the twentieth century.

And yet, in conventional periodizations of African American literary history, the years from 1900 to 1910 still tend to get lost. While work by Henry Louis Gates Jr., Barbara McCaskill, Caroline Gebhard, and James Smethurst has shifted our attention to show how African Americans in the postbellum, pre-Harlem era met the racialized onslaught of the nadir with renewed artistic and cultural productivity, the years between 1900 and 1910 still have not received the critical attention they deserve.<sup>8</sup> As scholars such as Ajuan Mance and Elizabeth McHenry have argued, the canon of African American literature has been overdetermined by the privileging of white readership as a marker of African American literary success.<sup>9</sup> This privileging of white readership has meant that certain writers and particular literary techniques have come to dominate our definitions of what is distinctive about African American literary traditions in the postbellum, pre-Harlem era. In particular, Paul Laurence Dunbar and Charles Chesnutt, the two authors who gained the most notable crossover success

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in achieving commercial and critical white readership, subsequently have been among the most anthologized, reprinted, and celebrated literary figures of the era. Their literary techniques of engaging and subverting established literary conventions in an effort to reform their white readers or, as Chesnutt explained, to prepare whites for the idea of Negro equality by leading them “imperceptibly, unconsciously, step by step to the desired state of feeling” have become key characteristics of what is distinctive in African American literary tradition.<sup>10</sup> Ironically, the failure of audiences to be swayed by Chesnutt’s and Dunbar’s efforts to engage, subvert, and transform their views, and thus the inability of their literary efforts to forestall the solidification of Jim Crow segregation, suggests that the authors’ commercial success actually might have been a political failure. Audiences often willfully erased or blithely overlooked the subversive content of their literary works, yet still got to enjoy cultural depictions that affirmed the stereotypical ideas already circulating in more overtly racist literary and cultural representations. In other words, Chesnutt and Dunbar learned that appealing to white audiences through established literary conventions of the plantation tradition, minstrelsy, and/or dialect fiction would not affect the change in the hearts and minds of their white readers they may have hoped to inspire. By 1900, both had become disillusioned by the dictates laid out for their literary works by white publishers and reviewers. Dunbar continued to find commercial outlets for his writing up until his death in 1906, but by 1901, Chesnutt was unable to find a mainstream commercial press for his fiction. His more direct modes of addressing racial injustices and white supremacy were judged too “bitter,” by William Dean Howells, the turn-of-the-century’s key arbiter of American literary culture.<sup>11</sup> Not without some irony, Chesnutt’s and Dunbar’s writings were seen by some Black authors, even before the end of the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, as catering to white audiences and moving only between the two registers, as James Weldon Johnson put it, of “humor and pathos.”<sup>12</sup> These retrospective assessments judged Dunbar’s and Chesnutt’s work, especially that in dialect fiction, as part of an earlier, accommodationist period in which literary and artistic expression was overdetermined by the need to write to white audiences and to present a certain image of Blackness that could counter the stereotypical representations that sought to caricature and belittle African Americans. While Harlem Renaissance writers such as Johnson and William Stanley Braithwaite may have seen these literary and artistic representations as relics of a past they themselves had transcended, this view flattens out the period before, offering a limited

assessment of the work early twentieth-century African American authors accomplished, the context in which their writings circulated, and the range and diversity in the kinds of literary and cultural productivity taking place. These assessments also miss the influence that persisted across the decades and generations. The chapters by Laura Vrana, M. Giulia Fabi, and Jeffrey Stewart, for instance, demonstrate the continuity and diversity that shaped the transition between the modernist New Negro aesthetic of the 1920s and the long poetics of protest that stretched from Phillis Wheatley through the post-Reconstruction years to the Harlem Renaissance and into today.

Further, as McHenry and Mance suggest, a new critical approach to this period would turn attention to failure as a generative space where Black cultural and literary productivity took place beyond the white mainstream commercial marketplace. Failed efforts at mainstream publishing also illuminate how the mechanisms of publishing and print culture are racialized and gendered in ways that controlled access to the literary marketplace, revealing as Hanna Wallinger does in Chapter 7, a context for understanding the transitions between the literary productivity of Black women in the 1890s and efforts to curtail and control that productivity by the first decades of the twentieth century. There too, in our efforts to reconstruct African American literary history, the very success of recovery projects like the Schomburg series of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers, have in some ways, led to an eclipsing of attention to Black women's productivity in the following decade. While the Schomburg series has been critical in foregrounding the intellectual productivity and monumental works produced by Black women throughout the nineteenth century, it also inadvertently obscures the long careers and literary output that Black women writers such as Anna Julia Cooper or Mary Church Terrell maintained into the first half of the twentieth century. Locating the dynamic intellectual energies of Black women in the move from the "Woman's Era" of the 1890s into the early years of Jim Crow segregation in the twentieth century, however, requires critical attention to the cultural and political context in which Black women were writing and working. It requires that we ask questions about what happened to the intellectual and activist energies of the late 1890s as we turn into the new century. How, for instance, did shifting political terrain impact Black women's publishing opportunities, and how did the gender politics of Black leadership shape Black women's participation in larger public discourses? How were Black and white literary outlets circumscribed by the politics of race and gender, and how do we recognize and account for Black women's literary and

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intellectual productivity that often took place outside conventional mainstream and/or commercial spaces of book publishing? Chapters in this volume, including those by Alisha Knight, Wallinger, and April Logan take up these questions and offer us new paradigms for recovering both the challenges to and innovative strategies for recovering Black women's intellectual productivity at the turn of the century.

Taken as a whole, *African American Literature in Transition, 1900–1910* works to revise our understanding of this period by introducing new paradigms and new archives for reconstructing and evaluating the literary and artistic productivity of these transitional years. In particular, the volume is organized through attention to what Eric Gardner suggests are three sets of critical questions. Gardner argues that as we revise and assess the contributions and place of this period in our longer literary history, we must attend to questions of “geography, genre, and publication circumstance,”<sup>13</sup> and, I would add, particularly as inflected through gender, sexuality, class, and the politics of racial representation. Thus, this volume is organized into four parts that look at the intersecting and dynamic energies that shaped this transitional moment. Part I considers the circumstances in which the objects of African American cultural expressivity circulated, foregrounding how African Americans participated in shaping the literary, intellectual, and artistic landscape of the early twentieth century. Part II moves us well beyond early assertions that post-Reconstruction literature moved between only the two registers of pathos and humor, showing how African American novelists, essayists, and poets engaged in aesthetic experimentation to find new forms to represent the modern valances of complex racial realities. While this period is defined by much more than the debates between Washington and Du Bois, their influence in the period, and on our historical understandings of it, is unmistakable. Thus, Part III reassesses this influence by resituating Washington and Du Bois in relation to a range of voices that complicate the conversation about what blackness and Black leadership at the intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality would mean in a new century. The chapters in Part IV move us beyond the space typically associated with turn-of-the-century African American literature. More important than simply introducing new geographical spaces, however, the authors ask how interethnic, cross-racial, and transnational networks impacted thinking about Black aesthetic and political engagements with the continued operations of white supremacy, at home and abroad. These chapters ask us to envision an African American literature that attends to the entanglements, networks, and alternative circuits of dynamic interaction that cast

Black thinkers and writers in the first decade of the twentieth century as modern and international in scope.

### **Summary of Part I, “Transitions in African American Authorship, Publishing, and the Visual Arts”**

By the turn of the century, African Americans had established a firm presence in Black newspaper and periodical publishing. Through religious, secular, professional, and literary publications, the Black press constituted a foundational institution of African American cultural, political, and social life. Eric Gardner, France Smith Foster, André Williams, and others insist we account for the important work of Black periodicals, showing how critical attention to them impacts our understanding of African American literary practices – revising our understanding of what Foster refers to as the origin story of African American literature, of how Black print culture developed and where Black literature takes place.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, at the turn of the century Black newspapers and periodicals continued to have a major presence. But alongside a dynamic, varied, and vibrant Black periodical culture, Black book publishing continued to take shape. African Americans had long been involved in book publishing, but those efforts often intersected with the mechanism of print culture and publishing in deeply racialized and gendered ways. From the white prefaces to Black texts to the authorizing statements that were intended to legitimate Black writers’ “authenticity,” Black authors have had to negotiate unequal power relationships when contending with white publishing houses, editors, presses, and general assumptions about who had the right and ability to write, to claim authorship, and to be considered an author. Chapters in this part take a unique view of these questions, considering how Black authors worked to establish the category of Black authorship beyond the conventional markers being established within white-owned and white-controlled outlets and spaces. They also consider how African Americans sought to make inroads in Black book publishing, reversing the all-too-familiar trope of white outlets supporting Black authors, and instead experimented with the publication of a white-authored text by a Black-owned publisher. These efforts, alongside the work of Black artists such as Henry Ossawa Tanner, William A. Harper, and William Edouard Scott, suggest the ways African Americans at the turn of the century were carving out Black spaces for literary and cultural arts that were both national and international in scope.



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As Laura Helton argues in Chapter 1, the turn of the century saw a massive effort to establish the category of “negro” authorship, centering African Americans not just as the producers of literary texts or as writing subjects but also as deeply and intentionally involved in building the infrastructure to recognize the existence of a long, dynamic, and expansive tradition of “Negro” literature. Helton’s chapter shows that through their work in bibliography, familiar figures such as Daniel Murray, W. E. B. Du Bois, and later Dorothy Porter proved the existence of an African American literature, and sought to present, organize, and categorize it to include a range of works that documented a “blackness” understood beyond “the Negro problem.” As Helton argues, turn-of-the-century bibliographers were engaged in questions not only about what constitutes “literature” but also about racial identity, about who would count as a “negro” author, and about how to posit racial identity within the existing bibliographic structures. In this opening chapter, Helton tracks a transition in the category of African American literature, what she refers to as a definitional “tightening” of the category of Negro literature, showing how this tightening also meant the “disappearing” or exclusion of a great many works that would have been considered part of the turn-of-the-century understanding of African American literature. From the outset then, Helton’s chapter makes us aware of the constructed nature of categories such as “Negro literature” or “African American author,” while also bringing attention to the role of African Americans in imagining the possibilities of a much broader category of literature that would get constricted and delimited in subsequent iterations. Helton’s chapter reminds us that the understandings of African American literature that have come down to us were in no way “inevitable” and that there was a moment at the turn of the century when African American literary workers were imagining much broader possibilities.

Following Helton’s attention to the development of the categories of “Negro authorship,” in Chapter 2, Alisha Knight revisits Black book publishing, reversing an assumed dynamic in which Black writers were the supposed beneficiaries of white publishers. Instead, Knight shows how the Black-owned Colored Co-operative Publishing Company (CCPC), founded in 1900, shaped a white author’s publishing venture and, in the process, set a precedent that worked to redefine the role of the Black book publisher. Knight’s chapter traces this transition in Black-owned commercial publishing from the beginnings of the CCPC and its publication of Pauline Hopkins’s *Contending Forces* and founding of the *Colored*

*American Magazine*, to then focus on the significance of one of CCPC's lesser known publishing ventures: the publication of *In Free America*, an anti-lynching tract by Ellen Wetherell, a white northern woman and Socialist from Massachusetts. As Knight argues, CCPC's publication of Wetherell's book marks a transitional moment in Black book publishing, in which a Black-owned publisher sought to create both an interracial readership and authorship. While this radical, interracial effort was curtailed by the conciliatory politics that defined Booker T. Washington's takeover of the CCPC in 1904, CCPC's early efforts in interracial publishing would be taken up in the following decades, most notably through the NAACP's Crisis Publishing Company.

As with Black publishing and print culture, African American visual arts underwent a transition in the first decades of the twentieth century, as key figures worked to define what it meant to be an African American artist. In Chapter 3, "Reevaluating African American Art before the Harlem Renaissance," Rhonda Reymond revisits one of the most recognized African American artists of the period, Henry Ossawa Tanner. Reymond reveals not only that Tanner was an exemplar of African American education, art, and cultural achievement but that he was also part of a cadre of artists who were engaged in the professionalization and internationalization of African American art at the turn of the century. They were not, as Alain Locke had asserted, merely a transitional generation whose main contribution was to quell public skepticism about Black technical competencies in the visual arts. Rather, as Reymond shows, this cohort of Black artists opened new imaginative spaces through their international travels and cosmopolitanism. Just as Tanner's counterparts in literary fields were working to establish and define an African American literary tradition, Tanner and his cohort of Black visual artists were establishing themselves as acknowledged professionals within the art world and interrogating and refining what it meant to be a Negro artist. As such, Reymond's chapter establishes Tanner and his contemporaries at the intersection of a network of discourses that reveal their creative engagements with artistic forms that could account for Black experiences.

### **Summary of Part II, "New Negro Aesthetics and Transitions in Genre and Form"**

Turn-of-the-century transitions in genre and form were closely connected to the social and political context that shaped the first decade of the twentieth century. Not only were Black intellectuals deeply invested in