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BUILDING BIBLIOGRAPHICALLY

Susanna Ashton

To Make Negro Literature: Writing, Literary Practice, and African American Authorship by Elizabeth McHenry. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021. Pp. 296. $28.95 cloth.

Recovery work in literary studies is briefly lauded but rarely is allowed to linger. Scholars might applaud a recovery of a fragment or a lost essay, but it is uncommon for them to then return to it or for it to genuinely reshape the reputation of an entire author's oeuvre. Elizabeth McHenry earlier work, *Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African American Literary Societies* (2002), was rightfully appreciated as a special kind of recovery work because it pulled together questions that were both literary and historical in nature about what recovery might actually mean when trying to limn the history of African American readers. This new book, *To Make Negro Literature: Literary Practice, and African American Authorship*, is a satisfying continuation of many of those themes although its wider scope and creative albeit occasionally disjointed methodology does make it a more difficult study to parse. The rewards are well worth it, however. This volume mines unexamined archives and neglected fields of thought to sketch out why failed publications, bankrupt publishing ventures and disdained modes of textual distribution fundamentally constructed a world in which Black writing and the powerful ideas about social and cultural values could emerge as we see them today.

The overall argument of this study isn't counterintuitive, but

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that doesn't mean it isn't compelling, authoritative, and absolutely insightful. McHenry lays out four rich and complex studies to demonstrate that the scaffolding and false starts or even failures of various kinds of authorship, bookmaking, modes of information organization, and constructions of Black literary history in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are overlooked and yet vital to understanding the structure of the Black literary history we can more easily see in the works by Dunbar or Chesnutt, for example, which were published and disseminated to acclaim during this time. As she puts it, she isn't interested in discovery practices per se (although her work's bringing to light so much of Mary Church Terrell's oeuvre, especially her fiction, is a consummate contribution and made this reader, at least, eager to dive into Terrell's work one day soon—McHenry's close reading of "Betsy's Borrowed Baby," a story of an attempted rape of a Black heroine on a Jim Crow train car, for instance, suggests that Terrell deserves a lot more critical attention than she has received thus far). McHenry is instead trying to limn this "subterranean work of literary production" to show the structures that have made "literature, in the traditional sense, possible" (237).

Her first case study is perhaps the most difficult to explore because it involves a notion of miscellany as understood through architectural logic. She walks readers through the significance of *Progress of a Race* as a book, which she usefully understands as a "schoolbook" and one that marks a transition from readerly literacy to a broader concept of the literary. To get at this, she examines the role of a kind of volume that simultaneously features history, art, and social commentary, information that is at once instructional, entertaining, and arcane, while frequently trafficking in unattributed or plagiarized material from other sources. Most significantly, these books were sold by subscription and here McHenry digs into the ways in which subscription publishing, long degraded but vital to the development of the Black reading public, needs to be understood in all of its particulars as a late nineteenth-century enterprise that was sold to people who might see this as perhaps the first book outside of a Bible that they might acquire for their families. Her work unpacking the particular stakes of subscription publishing for Black audiences and Black contributors and editors during this era when Black people were unable to enter many libraries or bookstores is powerful scholarship that has only been touched upon very briefly by other scholars.

The second chapter, "Thinking Bibliographically" is bit drier,

perhaps because of the nature of the subject matter, but makes its case brilliantly. Here, she unpacks the ways in which bibliographies of Black literature were imagined and how these kinds of inspiring proscriptive or sometimes casually commercial lists of Black writing were shaped differently and with specifically racially inflected challenges. She sees them as "the framework that gave purpose and legitimacy to Black Culture" (79). She usefully examines notions of enumeration in terms of Black gender politics and the ways in which such lists illustrated not only the quantity of intellectual activity but also, more interestingly, their "discursive quality" (85), as these lists often invited engagement from the audiences. Her focus then moves to Daniel Murray's work with the Library of Congress to construct an ambitious but ultimately unfinishable authoritative bibliography of Black writing for the Paris Exposition of 1900 and how that, in turn, allowed W. E. B. Du Bois to build lists that actively modeled how texts might engage one another in contestable categories of thought.

McHenry approaches the third chapter by studying one of the most astounding cases of ghostwriting known in American literary history, that of the indefatigable T. Thomas Fortune, examining how his work with, for, and occasionally despite Booker T. Washington, allowed Washington to be hailed as the most influential Black author of the era without writing or even conceiving most of his own output. (She also hints a bit at the ways in which Victoria Earle Matthews and other ghostwriters, editors, and unsung contributors similarly enabled Washington's heralded "output." The cost of this relationship on Fortune's own promising career and the dissemination of his own politics was hugely consequential perhaps to the ways in which the writings on race history and culture in the United States thereby developed. McHenry writes that "the alliance forged between Washington and Fortune illuminates competing definitions of the author and different conception of authorship. For Washington, claiming authorship was about gaining the writer's power, prestige and legitimacy; for Fortune, the historical value of his writing is located in the extent to which he gave these things away by subordinating his presence as a writer to the power of his words" (186).

Mary Church Terrell takes the center of the final case study, and McHenry examines the significance of her role in literary history by starting with a biographical analysis about this brilliant and educated woman who spent much of her life pursuing a literary career, which eluded her. McHenry argues

that Terrell's supposed failures mask much about racist expectations of what literature might be during this time. As she demonstrates effectively, Terrell refused to couch her fiction in placating or stereotyping ways, as Chesnutt or Dunbar would do, and it was this, at least in part, that prevented her from broadly circulating the fiction she drafted to expand on the social and political commentary she advanced in her other writings.

Overall, all these chapters stand well on their own. Indeed, they are so deeply and creatively researched that they are each almost dense enough to merit expansion into separate books. Her work on the cultures of Black subscription publishing and Fortune's career and, most of all, her thorough and smoothly authoritative work on Terrell's life, are all especially and acutely fine and will be vital reading to any scholars seeking starting points on these subjects.

Susanna Ashton is a professor of English at Clemson University. Her research explores notions of authentication and identity in narratives of slavery and freedom. For 2021–22, she was a W. E. B. Du Bois Fellow at Harvard University's Hutchins Center for African and African American Research. Her latest book is A Plausible Man: The Untold Story of the Escaped Slave Who Inspired Uncle Tom's Cabin *(New York: New Press, 2024).*