Against A Sharp White Background: Infrastructures of African American Print, eds. Brigitte Fielder and Jonathan Senchyne (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2019), 318 pp.

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> In every race, in every nation, and in every clime in every period of history there is always an eager-eyed group of youthful patriots who seriously set themselves to right the wrongs done to their race or nation or sect and sometimes to art or self-expression. No race or nation can advance without them.
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> Alice Dunbar-Nelson, "Woman's Most Serious Problem" (1927)

> He is summoned and asked to swear upon the only book the judge will allow in "his court." PaPa LaBas won't dare touch the accursed thing. He demands the right to his own idols and books. It reminds PaPa LaBas of the familiar epigram: "Orthodoxy is my Doxy, Heterodoxy is the other fellow's Doxy."
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> Ishmael Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972)

Alice Dunbar-Nelson and Ishmael Reed are but two of the twentieth-century wordsmiths whose tools included editing, publishing, poeticizing, narrating, and whatever else made their work matter in service to African American art, attitudes, and activism. The earnest, often bodacious claims and conclusions of the contributors to this anthology are energetic, passionate, sometimes ingenious, manifestations of proclamations such as those cited above. Many, maybe most, of the word workers for this volume are "youthful patriots" but their ranks include PaPa LaBas scions P. Gabrielle Foreman, John Ernest, and Beth A. McCoy. Their expressed design is, in Foreman's words, to determine how their own work can "recognize, honor, and extend the *spirit* that undergirded the production of Black print culture so we can remember not only the intellectual stakes but also the interventionist grounding of our scholarship, our work, and our own lived and print histories" (55-56).

This is an ambitious and tricky quest, and the result has its quirks. The work of these contributors is varied. So too are their disciplinary discourses and particular purposes. Some essays derived from larger, broad, deeply researched scholarly projects. For example, Laura E. Helton's "Making, Creating Time: The Infrastructure of Black Inquiry: 1900-1950," is groundbreaking and instructive in recognizing librarianship and celebrating individual librarians as preservers and organizers of materials that both enable and generally determine subsequent scholarship. Helton's provocative article calls for responses that it facilitates with 102 footnotes. On the other hand, an essay by diverse hands—John Ernest, Rian Bowie, Leif Eckstrom, and Britt Rusert's "Visionary History: Recovering William J. Wilson's 'Afric-American Picture Gallery"—consists of

interesting expansions upon an already popular topic. Such a multi-authored text models and encourages a kind of collaborative scholarship far too rare in the humanities and arts. Aria S. Halliday's disclosures about Katherine Williams-Irvin and Olive Diggs's roles at Chicago's *Half-Century* and the *Sunday Bee*, Kinohi Nishikawa's revelations about the politics of responses to Richard Wright's *Black Boy*, and Jim Casey's data about the impact of asterisks and other characters on search engines further suggest the volume's range of topics. The sections of the anthology: "Infrastructures," "Paratexts," and "Formats" struggle to frame the assemblage, but, as the editors note, the writings "spill out" and "across."

In and of itself, an assemblage is what an anthology is. And its structure, including sections, title, epigrams, and introduction, is the medium helping to make message. The editors' "Introduction: Infrastructures of African American Print," is a fascinating explanation of unity and intent. It also demonstrates some of the problems of interpretation and authority that recur in parts of the project. The introduction begins with two apt epigrams: "Books and black lives . . . still matter" and "We're always already in the book. We've always already been in the book." Attributed to Prince Rogers Nelson and Ahmir "Questlove" Thompson, the words seem chosen as much for their connotative as for their denotative impact. Prince and Questlove are primarily celebrated for edgy performances of superb musicianship. Their citation manifests the anthology's purpose of expanding our concept of print culture beyond the page and the academy. Even if readers like me are so surprised that they put the book down and do quick web (re)search, they make that point. In more than music have Prince and Questlove earned credentials as writers and cultural critics. However, I also discovered, for the first of a few times in this volume, that some points are made only by a little suspension of the rules of scholarly etiquette or at least by a gentle indulgence for good intentions. For example, at the Grammy awards, Prince said, "Like books and black lives, albums still matter." "Albums" is the subject of the independent clause and of Prince's focus. Ellipses should signify insignificant omission; otherwise, they distort meaning and undercut scholarly authority.

Fielder and Senchyne's introduction lets the epigrams sit on their own and proceeds to quote an online headline about one of the innumerable police shootings, defines and redefines "hashtag," and explicates a poem in Claudia Rankin's various editions of *Citizen*, among other examples, in order to spotlight "race and racialization" as load-bearing pillars in the "information infrastructures" through which African American print "reflexive[ly]" moves and changes. Their book's title, they explain, references a sentence in Zora Neale Hurston's 1928 essay "How It Feels to be Colored Me." Hurston wrote that "I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background." The editors translate:

> This is to say that racial identity, and the norms and risks that attend its specific form, is not simply an expression of one's inherent self but rather a constant negotiation of power within a field of others. We draw our book's title from Hurston's words not to center discussions of whiteness but to acknowledge the additional antiracist work inherent in African American print culture studies. (5)

This winding, ornate explanation contrasts with Hurston's amazingly concise and fertile image; more jarringly, it seems oblivious to the conundrum affected by their intent.

The editors say their work "*has crafted itself* alongside the backdrop of a predominantly white field that *has necessitated* the additional labor of working against existing structures of exclusion and erasure while also producing the innovative creative work, conversations, and methodological practices of African American print culture" (5-6; emphasis added). They assert that in often responding to "various and historical forms of physical violence, structural exclusions, and attempts at rhetorical erasure," African American print culture becomes "a form of resistance and antithesis to black death" (6).

The introduction is a fair statement of one of the book's pillars, but it gives me pause and, I think, confounds the editors' purpose. Is it really necessity to have a (white) background to truly appreciate a (black) foregrounded object? Without a background of violence, exclusion, and erasure, can not the "innovative, creative work, conversations, and methodological practices of African American print culture" be sharply seen? Is this ultimately a remodeling of sociological criticism that subordinates text to context, that makes appreciation of art and artifice, concepts and conversations of African American wordwork only a by-product of history and circumstances?

Perhaps my concerns are mere generational quibbling. The source of my major disappointment in the volume can also be one of its strengths; for the collection prods me to employ a hermeneutic of suspicion that leads me to reexamine my own assumptions. Parts of this anthology are vexing, but all are also engaging. Ultimately, what's important about *Against A Sharp White Background: Infrastructures of African American Print* is its "interventionalist grounding" in an issue that the editors and I know should be the infrastructure of public scholarship. Again, Foreman articulates our basic question:

> Can those of us reading this be and join members of a community that teaches, supports, and make unaccounted, unmeasured sacrifices, that mounts "not here on my watch" actions, singular and collective, spectacular and quotidian, organized and inspired? As we attend to the cultural and informational as well as nonalphabetic and material content of Black print culture, how do we also attend to the spirit of its genesis. . . ."? (55)

Alice Dunbar-Nelson, Ishmael Reed, Era Bell Thompson, Toni Morrison, W. E. B. DuBois, PaPa LaBas, Huey Freeman, and a legion of other transgressive wordsmiths should be proud.