

“I AM SURE THAT YOU KNOW YOURSELF THAT IT IS A VERY GOOD JOB”

THE EARLY LIFE AND LIBRARY OF DOROTHY PORTER



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HISTORY 215J: THE ART OF BIOGRAPHY

Photograph of Dorothy Porter, taken May 23, 1951 by Carl Van Vechten, from Photographs of Blacks, J.W. Van Vechten, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT. [http://brbl-dl.library.yale.edu/vufind/Record/3536291?image\\_id=1104674](http://brbl-dl.library.yale.edu/vufind/Record/3536291?image_id=1104674).

Author's note:

In this paper, I refer to Dorothy Burnett Porter Wesley as Dorothy Porter. Porter did not marry Charles Harris Wesley until both were elderly; no one before 1979 would have called her Mrs. Wesley, though Porter's archives, it should be noted, are the Dorothy Porter Wesley Papers. Dorothy married James Porter in 1929, but for the sake of clarity, I call her Dorothy Porter throughout.

I use the terms "black", "Negro", and "African-American" interchangeably according to my own judgment based on their context within the paper and not necessarily as African-Americans might have been referred to contemporarily in the same context. I do not use the term "colored" unless it is used in a quote, though its popular use is an historical fact. "New Negro" and "Black America" refer to proper terms, and are used in the appropriate places as such; they are not interchangeable with the above terms. A capitalized "University" refers to Howard, while "Moorland Library/Foundation/Collection" and the like refer to the materials that would later comprise the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center at Howard University. The Arthur B. Spingarn collection would not be acquired until 1946, and Moorland-Spingarn would not be so named until 1973.

I have attempted to keep spellings unchanged, an approach that I hope allows the characters to speak for themselves. Gus Burnett, for example, referred to his brother as Hays rather than Hayes, and Dorkas Fellows, a spelling reformer, wrote phonetically. I have also not changed capitalizations, though they may not reflect modern sensibilities.

## 1968

In March of 1968, Stokely Carmichael looked out on the crowd of students in Howard's administration building, trailblazers in what would be a string of student takeovers of campus buildings around the country. A Howard University graduate who would later be named the "Honorary Prime Minister" of the Black Panther Party, urged the students to consider the greater implications of their solidarity. "This protest is not just a matter of students and academic freedom," he told them. "It is a case of Black students at a Black school fighting against an anti-Black education." The 2,000 exhausted students had four demands: that president James M. Nabrit, Jr. resign; that black history and culture be emphasized in the curriculum, and that the University more closely align with the goals and needs of the community; that the thirty-nine students charged with misconduct during the protests leading up to the sit-in be acquitted; and that a judiciary system be established.<sup>1</sup> The protestors' agenda looked remarkably similar to the one put forward by striking students in 1926, who successfully demanded the resignation of Howard's last white president, J. Stanley Durkee, and the institution of a black studies curriculum in the University. Little, it seemed, had changed since then. After four days, the administration agreed to two of the four demands. All charges against the students were dropped and a judiciary committee was authorized. But curriculum changes "will require further discussions," and Nabrit would retire on schedule that summer.<sup>2</sup>

In July, as Nabrit stepped down, Dorothy Porter wrote to friends and colleagues to invite them to her workshop on the topic of "Bibliographic Resources for a Study of the American Negro." The topic of bibliography, the listing of compiled works and the practice of their

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<sup>1</sup> As quoted in Charles J. Hamilton, "Howard Students Continue Sit-In as University Seeks Injunction," *Harvard Crimson*, March 21, 1968, <http://www.thecrimson.com/article/1968/3/22/howard-students-continue-sit-in-as-university/>.

<sup>2</sup> As quoted in Hamilton, "Howard Dispute Settled After Four-Day Protest," *Harvard Crimson*, March 25, 1968. <http://www.thecrimson.com/article/1968/3/25/howard-dispute-settled-after-four-day-protest/>.

classification, might seem dry. However, Porter knew that a library is an inherently political space, and can be a site of revolution. The doyenne of the field of black bibliography needed successors who realized, as she had almost a half-century earlier, that the field was important, and it was still growing:

The increasing requests of scholars, teachers, librarians and students for source materials on a variety of subjects relating to the Negro, the demands of black students for 'Black Courses' in all disciplines, the need of the white community to acquire a knowledge of the Negro and his past, the desire new programs of American Negro Studies to rapidly acquire materials on the Negro and the rush of established collections of Negro Americana to augment their collections indicate the need for this workshop.

The demand she cited for the workshop echoed popular sentiment she encountered on campus in 1931, when she first secured a staff position in Howard's library. Students and scholars demanded an Africana collection, and Porter was appointed to build and describe one for them. Overcoming many obstacles, Porter had singlehandedly built Howard's library into the world-class research institution it clearly was by 1968. Throughout the 1960s, she would be forced to defend her decision to open the collection to all scholars, white and black, regardless of their parent institutions' segregation policies, and to physically defend the collection she had nurtured from just 3,000 to over 180,000 items against student activists who objected to the number of materials that included the word "Negro". Collections should be used to understand the times in which they were written, she argued. A library should respond to its patrons' wishes, but it should also be seen as a space for reconciliation and for challenging perceptions through exposure to different viewpoints. There would be no deaccessions.

The saying "When one door closes, another one opens" only holds true if someone has the strength of character to look for that open door instead of banging on the closed one until her

fists bleed. By 1968, Porter was opening doors for others, finding scholars just the letter, diary, or pamphlet in the vast collection to spark their research and creating staff positions for undervalued black librarians. Tenacity, hard work, and an inability to believe that “impossible” existed had catapulted her to the top of her field. But without suggesting that she was not a dynamic figure later in life, it is fair to say that a series of strikingly coincidental events between the years of 1926 and 1936 shaped the scholar-librarian Porter would come to be more than any other time in her life. Of course, any other person in the same circumstances would not necessarily have become the person Porter became; being in the right place at the right time would have been inconsequential if Porter had not taken advantage of the situations she was placed in. But Porter’s timing was impeccable, from graduating high school in time to enter Howard University in the first of its “Golden Years” to the well-timed sick leaves of not one, or two, but three people who presented obstacles to her advancement. These sorts of circumstances were beyond Porter’s control, though the decisions of what to do with the opportunities she encountered were entirely her own.

These sorts of moments of good timing and good fortune affected Porter less after 1936, when Howard’s library and Porter’s personal life were more settled and established. By 1939, her course was charted, as was that of her beloved library. This paper traces the most formative decade of Porter’s life through correspondence, official documents, newspaper articles, and diaries. It demonstrates that Porter was well positioned from her early years, primed by her parents, to become one of Howard’s leading public intellectuals, then outlines Porter’s higher education, what she studied and why, and the importance of the first jobs she held in forming her expectations of the workplace and of herself. It aims to understand Porter’s character and

personality through communications she had with her coworkers, mentors, and friends. Only by understanding this decade in Porter's life can we begin to appreciate the person she later became.

### **Family: 1877-1925**

Porter's father, Hayes Joseph Burnett, was the definition of a self-improved man in an era that valued the same. The details of his beginnings, other than his birth year of 1877, are murky. It is not even clear if he was born in Arkansas or Oklahoma. According to his half-brother Gustee Willie "Gus" Burnett, owner of Burnett Radio and Electric Co. Cut Rate Repair Shop, Porter's paternal grandfather "was a soldier of the Civil War and drawd about \$100.00 per mo. I think his mother was a Indian Squaw & I forgot her name and his father's name also." Hayes had several full brothers from his father's first marriage to Mary L. Artis, Arthur, Jimmy, Leo, "and there are 3 or 4 more brothers yet," and three half-brothers, Stephen, Bennie, and Gus, as well as a half-sister who died at age sixteen, from his father's second wife. No photographs of Hayes as a young man survive. Gus "had several snapshot photoes, but the women...carried off as fast as I put them down, some lady took my snap shot the other day, and I haven't had any taken senced we been married."<sup>3</sup>

Hayes "was compelled to fight for an education every inch of the way and he made a fight like the gallant fellow that he was and won."<sup>4</sup> He graduated from Howard University in the dawn of the twentieth century, and finished medical school at Howard in 1904. He was well liked and widely respected, securely positioned within the black elite as a founding member of the Montclair, New Jersey NAACP chapter and a commissioner of the town. A cornerstone of

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<sup>3</sup> Gustee Willie Burnett to Dorothy Porter, January 20, 1936, box 35, Dorothy Porter Wesley Papers, JWJ MSS 93, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT (hereafter cited as Wesley Papers).

<sup>4</sup> Obituary for Hayes Joseph Burnett, *Howard University Record*, 1922, box 35, Wesley Papers.

the black community, he also received accolades from white society, such as a certificate from the United States Public Health Service recognizing his contributions as an acting assistant surgeon during the 1918-1919 influenza epidemic. His life path does not just contrast with his brother Gus's; it shows a complete rejection of his upbringing. Gus kept his brothers' addresses in a safe deposit at the bank in case of fire or theft, but Hayes never wrote, called, or visited.

"Dorothy what on earth is the matter up there as soon as I give you a description of every thing you didn't answer how is every body up there I never did get any letter from Brother Hays, I can't figure out what gone wrong all at once."<sup>5</sup> Burnett had died young, in 1922, more than a dozen years before Gus was able to get in touch with Porter. In this time, Gus and his brothers had been kept in the dark regarding Burnett's whereabouts. Gus's letters to Porter, written in a tense, unpracticed hand, reveal his longing for a connection with Porter and her family, an understanding of what Porter would have recognized as qualities of a respectable man, and a deep awe of his brother coupled with fear of having been left behind. "I am starting a chicken ranch this spring & also another car too - - - so wish me good luck, and I would like offel much to see you & your husband. I don't think you would be ashamed of your Uncle Gus, I think I will have some pictures taken in my full dress shirt."<sup>6</sup> His letters asking about her work as "a liberian or what was that word" barely allude to new information or questions coming from Porter's end.<sup>7</sup> It seems his longing to be a part of her life was unrequited.

Porter's mother left a much fuller record of her life, but it is largely a record of sorrow and loneliness. She was born in 1887 in Virginia as Roberta Ball, daughter of William and Sallie "Sadie" Ball and granddaughter of Edward and Eliza Murray and Carrie and Charles Ball. The Ball household was a secure, happy, Christian, spiritual one. A promising young student, she

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<sup>5</sup> Gustee Willie Burnett to Dorothy Porter, n.d., c. 1936, box 35, Wesley Papers.

<sup>6</sup> Gustee Willie Burnett to Dorothy Porter, January 20, 1936, box 35, Wesley Papers.

<sup>7</sup> Gustee Willie Burnett to Dorothy Porter, n.d., c. 1936, box 35, Wesley Papers.

couldn't remember a time when she couldn't read, and was sent to Boston at a young age to get the kind of education she was barred from in Virginia. A schoolteacher there decided, somehow, that she liked the name "Bertha" more than "Roberta," and changed her name in the school records. Bertha stuck. Roberta was forgotten like a childhood nickname. But in Boston, she was placed in a grade much below than her ability. "Having come from the South the assumption seemed to be that I could not know much." She was forced to undergo examination after examination and was only allowed to advance one grade at a time, despite her performance. But she was tenacious. She was promoted three times in one year, and when she reached the age-appropriate seventh grade, she skipped the next two.

Bored as a student, she traveled to New York to care for an aunt, where she met her husband, Hayes Joseph Burnett, then a medical intern. They married after three months' courtship, and soon after, she gave birth Dorothy, who was followed by Hayes Jr., Leonie, and Alice. In her memoir, written in pencil in a standard composition notebook, she only mentioned her children once. Dorothy was very clearly her rock, the stable force that continually picked her up and set her life straight, a role Dorothy also played for her sister Alice, who was clinically depressed and unemployable. Bertha's children served as substitutes for the warmth her husband failed to provide, and proved to be her solace through a cold marriage. "When my first child was born, Dorothy, I was sure I could never be happier. I felt that all my pent up emotions had found an answer. I lived for my children. Perhaps I loved them so much that I am afraid my husband felt I shut him out. I was not aware of it but something happened. Some how we lost companionship." Hayes was one of the busiest men in New Jersey, running several organizations and serving in public office on top of being a practicing doctor. Bertha picked up tennis as an outlet, and turned out to be quite adept at the sport, ranking fourteenth in the region by 1927.



Like her husband, she was active in progressive organizations in the area, a charter member of the Montclair YWCA and New Jersey's first tennis club, which met at the Burnett's comfortable home at 33 Maple Place. Hayes did not live long enough to see Dorothy's wedding, but while his death might have been somewhat liberating for Bertha, it left her financially and emotionally unstable. Her second marriage to James Sadler was a drain on her depleted store of physical and pecuniary resources, and it was again something of a relief when James died at war in 1946, making her a widow for the second time.<sup>8</sup>

### **School: 1926-1931**

Dorothy Burnett was born in Warrentown, Virginia on May 25, 1905. Her parents, educated, prominent, and encouraging of their children, pushed her to excel academically and socially. Higher education, unattainable by so many black women in her time, was clearly on her horizon. Smart, ambitious, but undecided on a career, Porter entered college to become a teacher at her mother's urging.<sup>9</sup> Fate and perseverance pointed her elsewhere. She managed to earn four degrees in ten years, attending first the Miner Normal School in Washington, D.C., a school established by Myrtilla Miner as the Normal School for Colored Girls in the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>10</sup> Shortly after Porter's graduation in 1925, the school would be accredited and renamed Miner Teachers College, as Porter would come to refer to it in her own resume. Three decades later, it would be integrated and incorporated into the public university system of D.C. She "hung around" Lula Allan, the librarian at Miner, "discussing books that were on the shelves around her

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<sup>8</sup> Bertha Ball Burnett, memoir, box 35, Wesley Papers.

<sup>9</sup> Linton Weeks, untitled article, *Washington Post*, November 15, 1995, box 97, Wesley Papers.

<sup>10</sup> "Normal school" was widely used as a synonym for "teaching school," possibly playing off the idea of educational norms.

chair and near to her.”<sup>11</sup> They became intellectual companions and good friends, and when Allan fell ill during Porter’s final year at Miner, Allan recommended that she keep the library going. The temporary position lasted just a year, but Miner served as a training and proving ground for Porter as a librarian. Having achieved a degree in technique of teaching and management in two years, with average grades, a class rank of 32, and no desire to teach, Porter decided to return to school.<sup>12</sup> She spent two years at Howard, 1926 to 1928, where she worked as a student assistant in the library as she earned her bachelor’s, and simultaneously worked toward a B.S. in library science from Columbia during the summers of 1927, 1928, and 1929. She completed a master’s degree in the same field during full-time study at Columbia from 1930 to 1931.<sup>13</sup>

Had Porter entered Howard just one year earlier, she might not have become the doyenne of black bibliography. There was arguably no single more important year in Howard’s history, except, perhaps, its founding, than 1926. In 1918, J. Stanley Durkee became Howard’s eleventh (white) president. While he did make a concerted effort to recruit more black faculty than any of his predecessors, there was a bitter stalemate between the predominantly-white board of trustees of the University, who were content with the uninterrupted lineage of white theologian presidents, and Howard’s black alumni, who believed that a black university in a city with such a

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<sup>11</sup> Dorothy Porter Wesley, interview by Avril Johnson Madison, published as “Dorothy Burnett Porter Wesley: Enterprising Steward of Black Culture,” *Public Historian* 17, no. 1 (1995): 19, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3378349>, hereafter cited as Wesley and Madison, *Enterprising Steward*.

<sup>12</sup> Diploma from Miner Normal School, June 17, 1925, box 5, Wesley Papers.

<sup>13</sup> See Porter’s 1945 application for a renewal of her Rosenwald Fund Grant, in which she refers to the college as Miner Teachers College, box 5, Wesley Papers. There has been a perpetuated historical inaccuracy regarding the year she received her MLS. Every modern secondary source lists her as completing her bachelor’s degree in 1931 and her master’s degree in 1932. However, the program from her Columbia graduation ceremony shows she received her master’s on June 2, 1931. Furthermore, in her Rosenwald Fund application, she lists the summers of 1927, 1928, 1929, and 1931 as semesters of coursework toward her bachelor’s, and lists 1930-1931 as years dedicated to her master’s, a time frame which almost certainly included the summer of 1931. This also accords with evidence of work toward a bibliography, her master’s thesis project, from as early as 1930, and evidence of her starting work at Howard in 1931. Therefore, I use 1931 as her graduation year, not 1932. I am unable to discern the source of that misinformation.

large black population deserved to have an African-American with a background in education, not just religion, at its helm. Under Durkee's leadership, though individual scholar-activists flourished, the University as a whole failed to participate in the renaissance of black culture that was happening all around it. The board of trustees shunned black studies as an illegitimate field, refusing even, for example, to allow Carter Woodson, the second African-American after W. E. B. Du Bois to earn a doctorate at Harvard, to teach courses in black history.<sup>14</sup> In 1925, Howard alumni began to organize in earnest against the president. Their private bitterness toward Durkee turned into public protest. The *Baltimore Afro-American* published an article criticizing Durkee's leadership every week from April 1925 through July 1926.<sup>15</sup> The faculty chose sides carefully, causing a schism between those who worried about facing retribution and those who saw Durkee's presidency as an obstacle to the core mission and growth of Howard.

Whatever misgivings certain faculty and alumni may have had, the students of Howard decided to strike in 1926, acting out of what Kelly Miller praised as a commitment to "hang together or hang separately."<sup>16</sup> The reason for their strike was opposition to compulsory Reserved Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) participation – "What is this going to be, an army or a university?" – but their vocal rage also implied their lack of faith in Durkee and the board. In March 1926, Durkee, seeing the writing on the wall, resigned, but not without a last swing at those he was leaving behind. In his resignation letter, he wrote, "I did the things that had to be done, which no one else would do. I knew great opposition would develop, I knew that those who could not see would fight. I did hope that I might be spared to put Howard University into the class of one of the greatest American universities. Our colored people would not permit

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<sup>14</sup> Zachary R. Williams, *In Search of the Talented Tenth* (Columbia: University of Missouri, 2009), 20.

<sup>15</sup> Williams, *Talented Tenth*, 24.

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Williams, *Talented Tenth*, 29.

that.”<sup>17</sup> On March 26, 1926, the trustees of the University voted unanimously to appoint a black president, signaling a new era at Howard.

The question of who that new president would be divided faculty, students, and alumni. Charles Wesley’s candidacy was widely popular, but Mordecai Johnson, a young, charismatic pastor was appointed. He was stepping into an environment of deep divisions, bitter bruised egos, glaring disparity between administration and faculty, and a distrustful, emotionally-charged student body. But, he viewed his position as a calling and a duty, and with this in mind, sought to build the greatest faculty and facilities of any American university, black or white. Johnson was a zealous, swift-acting messiah. He managed each year between 1926 and 1931 to roughly double the annual appropriations Howard received, even as the Great Depression hit, increasing the appropriations from just \$218,000 in 1926 to \$1.2 million in 1930. With this money, Howard was able to add sixty-three professors to its ranks, quadrupling the faculty. Under his leadership, Howard quickly rose to prominence in the 1920s and 1930s, concurrently with the domination of the “New Negro” mentality and the artistic and cultural proliferation of the Harlem Renaissance. In fact, one could easily make the case that Washington, not New York, was the true center of this rising race consciousness, with its large black population, black cultural institutions, strong black middle class, and influential politicians and activists.<sup>18</sup> It was in this environment of ambitious growth that Porter spent her time at Howard.

Porter’s promise was recognized early in her career. She applied for a grant from the Julius Rosenwald Foundation, known colloquially as the Rosenwald Fund, to complete her

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<sup>17</sup> Resignation letter of J. Stanley Durkee, quoted in Williams, *Talented Tenth*, 33.

<sup>18</sup> Wilson J. Moses’ reexamination of the time period concludes with the sentiment that there was an “over-reactive condemnation by artists and intellectuals of the follies and foibles of the black bourgeoisie” who supposedly comprised Washington’s black population, among other factors which have led to the historiographical dominance of New York over Washington. Wilson J. Moses, “The Lost World of the Negro, 1895-1919: Black Literary and Intellectual Life before the Renaissance,” *Black American Literature Forum* 21, no. 1-2 (1987): 61-65.

master's degree. By the time Porter entered Columbia, just over a decade after the establishment of the Foundation, \$63 million in matching grants had been given to various universities, museums, hospitals, settlement houses, Jewish welfare and cultural organizations, and toward thousands of "Rosenwald Schools" in poor, rural, primarily African-American school districts around the south. Hundreds of thousands of students and teachers were affected by these charitable donations. Porter was one of roughly one thousand black students to receive Rosenwald scholarships toward higher education.<sup>19</sup> The only issue with her otherwise stellar application was, as George Arthur, Associate for Negro Welfare at the Fund wrote to Porter in April 1930, that her proposed budget, covering tuition and personal living costs, was wildly outside of the \$1,000 they typically offered. Her estimated clothing expenses alone were \$300. "We had hoped that you would be able to take enough clothing with you to cut down the purchase of clothing to only that which would be necessary to keep you in good appearance."<sup>20</sup> When one could buy ladies' shoes for less than a dollar, \$300 for clothing is quite high. Then again, a nice suit could cost over \$30, and it would have been to this high standard that Porter aspired. She did somehow manage to trim her budget, and was awarded a scholarship of \$1,000 towards her graduate degree.

In the flurry of these exciting times, it is almost a footnote that she sat down to write her application as a newlywed, having just married James Amos Porter in December 1929, exactly two months after Black Tuesday. Their marriage was a happy one, the coming together of two dynamic, creative, charismatic Howard graduates who were early pioneers in their respective fields of African-American librarianship and art history. It was such an obviously loving and supportive partnership that Porter rarely felt the need to put their relationship on display.

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<sup>19</sup> "What Is the Julius Rosenwald Foundation?", Sears Archives, last modified March, 21, 2012, <http://www.searsarchives.com/people/questions/rosenwaldfoundation.htm>.

<sup>20</sup> George Arthur to Dorothy Porter, April 8, 1930, box 5, Wesley Papers.

Dorothy and James would eventually travel the world together, and they would have a daughter, Constance, who would follow something like an amalgamation of both her parents' paths. But in 1930, Porter knew that in James, she had found a kindred spirit intellectually and also, unfortunately, financially. The Porters were not earning anywhere near \$1,000, roughly the average salary in 1930, and would barely earn this amount even a decade later. In her Rosenwald application, she was budgeting for two.

One can easily imagine the youthful Porter sitting down to write her inflated budget. It would be unfair to call Porter materialistic, but it is perhaps apt to say that Porter's securely middle-class upbringing made her push for circumstances that would afford her a materially comfortable life, while she was often presented with situations in which she was expected to settle for making less than her male colleagues, not to mention the well-paid positions she was automatically "unqualified" for because of her skin color. Even while she was preparing her application, she received a letter from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) offering her temporary employment as a junior library assistant, a civil service job which would have offered her, for the first time, a relatively good salary in the rising tide of the Great Depression, access to a network of professional librarians, adequate staff support and physical library resources for the first time, and a well-respected institution to include in her résumé. Despite her ties to Howard and the open status of her Rosenwald application, she leapt at the opportunity, writing back immediately. Days later she scrawled angrily in the job offer's margins, "I was not accepted when it was learned I was colored," and filed the letter away.<sup>21</sup> Nothing would come of fighting their discriminatory decision.

Porter's matriculation at Columbia was as chronologically auspicious as her matriculation at Howard. Once again, if she had enrolled just one year earlier, her path might have been

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<sup>21</sup> United States Department of Agriculture to Dorothy Porter, April 5, 1930, box 5, Wesley Papers.

dramatically different. In 1926, after years of being housed in Albany, the New York State Library School was transferred back to Columbia when a fire in Albany consumed nearly 10,000 volumes.<sup>22</sup> Before the summer session of 1926, library courses at Columbia were offered through the Department of Extension Teaching of Columbia, and were intended to prepare students to become library assistants in large institutions or to run small libraries. Instruction was on the undergraduate level only. The first year when specialties in bibliography and reference, the fields which informed Porter's work most, were offered was 1927, the year she matriculated as an undergraduate.<sup>23</sup>

Auspicious timing and financial aid could not alleviate the difficult social situation Porter encountered in Columbia's master's program. She was prohibited from living in the dormitories with the other (white) students, for example, and her academic advisor told her on her first day that she would not be able to get through library school because of her "inferior background," to which Porter responded, "Well, I'm going to work hard, and I'm not going to do any socializing. I'm not going to go to the theaters, I'm not going to do anything but work. I've come to do the work, and I intend to get it [done]." The woman, unimpressed with Porter's work ethic, responded, "Just don't come too near me." But the cruel advisor broke her leg in the beginning of Porter's second semester, relegating her to bed for the term. She was unable to stand in Porter's way, a lucky break for Porter who, for the second time, was able to benefit from another's absence.<sup>24</sup>

Porter was interested in the appraisal of collections of early works by and about black authors. To appraise a collection, one first needs to know exactly what is in that collection, and

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<sup>22</sup> Darthula Wilcox, *The Library of the School of Library Service, Columbia University, New York City* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1951), 1.

<sup>23</sup> Ray Trautman, *A History of the School of Library Service, Columbia University* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1954), 36.

<sup>24</sup> Wesley and Madison, *Enterprising Steward*, 20.

exactly what exists in the world. These conditions sound laughably broad and simplistic, but they are crucial to the job. Both tasks are daunting; a single collection can have tens of thousands of items. Tens of thousands of books would be easy enough to count and price, but what of pamphlets, photographs, and diaries? Once that task is complete, one must contextualize the archive. Have runs of magazines or sets of letters been divided among collections? Are any of the materials unique to the collection? If they are not, who else owns copies? What is the relative condition of this collection's materials compared to that one's? How much did they pay? Usually, one looks for a bibliography on the subject area as a starting point. Porter asked these kinds of questions in order to advance her own work on classification and cataloguing, but finding the answers to these foundational questions literally did not exist, she changed her course, turning instead to bibliography. Her thesis topic was a product, once again, of an absence. If the answers could not be given to her, she would provide them herself.

A mountain of work lay before her. She wrote to dozens of university and public libraries, private collectors, book dealers, and historical societies in an attempt to compile a list of the works they held by and about African-Americans. The few positive responses she received were mainly from historical societies, such as those in Connecticut, New Jersey, and Maryland. Most had one or two items, a pamphlet or letter, usually. She had less success in larger institutions. C. H. Hastings of the Library of Congress, for example, wrote that they had between 1,500 and 2,000 books written before 1901 by African-Americans, but "a hasty examination of the collection failed to locate any book as early as 1835." Hastings advised her to extend her study to a later date if she "wish[ed] to include any considerable number of books." Undoubtedly, the bulk of these materials was certainly produced after 1835, but it is highly unlikely that *none* of these materials were. The issue, Hastings admitted, was the lack of any



concerted effort on behalf of the library staff to catalogue the items. “There is no list of these books that we can send you.”<sup>25</sup> The Public Library of the City of Boston’s editor of publications gave her an even more direct answer. “We do not, in the Library, bring out in the catalogue the material written by negroes.”<sup>26</sup> Luckily, Porter was not the type to heed advice like Hastings’ which encouraged her to give up work not yet even begun; what she gleaned from their discouraging answers was closer to *this does not yet exist*. She decided to fill the void. The result was a brilliant master’s thesis, “Afro-American Writings Published Before 1835,” that heralded the beginning of Porter’s decades-long career in bibliography. Due to Porter’s perfectionism and unyielding search for new materials, as well as publishers’ hesitation, it would not be published in its full form until 1971 as *Early Negro Writing, 1760-1839*.<sup>27</sup> George Arthur of the Rosenwald Fund commended her on its (partial) completion: “I am sure that you know yourself that it is a very good job. It should be in every library as a reference matter, even in its present form.”<sup>28</sup>

### **Work: 1931-1933**

In 1932, as the nation sunk deeper into economic and spiritual depression, half of the graduates of the Columbia School of Library Service were unemployed, the first time since its founding in 1887 that the school had any real difficulty in placing its graduates.<sup>29</sup> Porter was not one of them. As a student, Porter moonlighted in the 135<sup>th</sup> Street Branch of the New York Public Library (NYPL), which housed what was then known as the Division of Negro Literature, History, and Prints. In the 1930s, the NYPL maintained a strict quota of black employees. The

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<sup>25</sup> C. H. Hastings to Dorothy Porter, December 4, 1930, box 5, Wesley Papers.

<sup>26</sup> “Editor of Publications” to Dorothy Porter, April 2, 1931, box 5, Wesley Papers.

<sup>27</sup> There seems to have been a publisher interested in printing her work in 1935. She met with him over the winter recess of 1935, but the work remained unpublished. See Dorothy Porter to the Board of Trustees, December 11, 1935, box 35, Wesley Papers.

<sup>28</sup> George Arthur to Dorothy Porter, April 8, 1930, box 5, Wesley Papers.

<sup>29</sup> Trautman, *A History of the School of Library Service*, 40.

only place to be employed within the system was 135<sup>th</sup> Street, the only way, through death or retirement. Once again, an absence, of a circulation librarian out on maternity leave, opened a door for Porter.<sup>30</sup> Porter's cheerleader and mentor at 135<sup>th</sup> Street was Edward Christopher (E. C.) Williams, the first professionally-trained African-American librarian who led Howard's library and instructed in Romance languages, with whom she worked closely over the summers between academic terms.<sup>31</sup> The Division was at the heart of the cultural revolution happening in Harlem. Porter knew Langston Hughes, a classmate of her brother's, well, and had befriended the mercurial Zora Neale Hurston. They and other figures of the Harlem Renaissance would gather at the library, which functioned as something like the community's center for both culture and organized activism, and would congregate at a diner nearby on 137<sup>th</sup> Street for lunch and dinner. Even during shifts at the circulation desk, Porter was in constant interaction with passionate, creative people.<sup>32</sup>

The Division was largely comprised of the personal collection of Arthur Alphonso Schomburg. Born in Puerto Rico of German and African parents, Schomburg became interested in collecting to disprove a teacher who told him "the Negro had no history." The NYPL purchased his vastly undervalued collection of around 6,000 books, 3,000 manuscripts, 2,000 etchings, and thousands of pieces of ephemera in 1926 with a \$10,000 Carnegie Foundation grant.<sup>33</sup> Even with such a foundation, it was difficult to attract the "best and brightest" because of the negative association with being a part of a struggling black institution. A position at 135<sup>th</sup> Street would be underfunded, undersupported, and without any job security. Williams knew head

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<sup>30</sup> Glendora Johnson-Cooper, "African-American Historical Continuity: Jean Blackwell Hutson and the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture," in 28.

<sup>31</sup> Helen H. Britton, "Dorothy Porter Wesley: A Biographer, Curator, and Scholar," in *Reclaiming the American Library Past: Writing the Women In*, ed. Suzanne Hildenbrand, 170.

<sup>32</sup> Wesley and Madison, *Enterprising Steward*, 22.

<sup>33</sup> Johnson-Cooper, "African-American Historical Continuity," 37.

librarian Ernestine Rose wanted Porter to continue her work, but he could offer her something better. He ran down the stairs to meet Porter before Rose did. “Miss Rose wants you to take a job here, and I want you to come to Howard.” “You haven’t offered me a job at Howard,” she reminded him. “Well,” he said, “I’m offering it to you now.”<sup>34</sup> And so, Porter left the North to return to Howard.

“It really gives me a thrill for the work I have done in getting together that library,” Jesse E. Moorland, the black minister and leader who donated his vast personal collection to Howard’s library, wrote to Porter when he heard of her imminent arrival. “I am more pleased than I have been at any time in the past, because somebody is to be in direct charge of the work.”<sup>35</sup> His collection of about 3,000 books had sat, along with the Louis Tappan anti-slavery collection and University’s founder General Oliver Otis Howard’s Africana collection, uncatalogued and unusable since they had been acquired decades earlier. Coinciding with the rising consciousness of the New Negro movement, as well as the introduction of a black studies curriculum at Howard under Johnson’s leadership, Porter’s main task, other than the cataloguing of those collections, was to gather all the materials from the shelves of the main library to build what was originally called “Books By and About the Negroes.” Ironically, aside from the work she had done toward her thesis, Porter had little knowledge of African-American historiography before taking the job, and would spend her evenings in the company of Howard figures like Alain Locke and Carter Woodson “in order to learn something about my history.”<sup>36</sup> She would walk the book stacks, browsing the spines, and would take any book she thought related remotely to African, Caribbean, African-American, or slave history. Before expanding the collection, she first had to

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<sup>34</sup> Wesley and Madison, *Enterprising Steward*, 22.

<sup>35</sup> Jesse E. Moorland to Dorothy Porter, March 5, 1930, box 4, Wesley Papers.

<sup>36</sup> Wesley and Madison, *Enterprising Steward*, 17.

assemble what was already there.<sup>37</sup> With an understanding of Howard's extremely limited resources – the library would not have an acquisitions budget for years – Moorland advised Porter to “Take time and be sure of your ground so that we shall make the very best of what we have.”<sup>38</sup>

Years of elite higher education had drained Porter's inadequate financial resources, though, and in December 1931, she wrote to Moorland to announce her resignation. She had been offered a job as the librarian of Miner, the position she had held casually, temporarily, a few years earlier.<sup>39</sup> Moorland was disappointed. “It seems too great a loss for you to leave. I am not sure but that you are making a serious mistake. The urge of economic advantage by no means equals the opportunity you now have and also the ethics in the matter, inasmuch as you received aid for the reason you hold the position you now hold.”<sup>40</sup> Facing his paternalistic words, Porter assured him that she had “not acted from choice.” First, her debts were immense. The woman who budgeted \$300 for clothing was not living within her means. Second, the library itself was in poor shape, having no “necessary supplies” and no designated student assistant to complete the immense amount of work expected from her. There was also the fact of the “glaring disparities” in the degree-holding librarians' salaries, which “could not be satisfactorily explained.”<sup>41</sup> In the years before the shift toward accreditation, and thus professionalization, of librarians' degrees, librarians' wages were kept artificially low relative to the salaries of other women with their same educational backgrounds by the widespread practice of hiring untrained,

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<sup>37</sup> Wesley and Madison, *Enterprising Steward*, 24.

<sup>38</sup> Jesse E. Moorland to Dorothy Porter, March 5, 1930, box 4, Wesley Papers.

<sup>39</sup> Dorothy Porter to Jesse E. Moorland, December 10, 1931, box 4, Wesley Papers.

<sup>40</sup> Jesse E. Moorland to Dorothy Porter, December 17, 1931, box 4, Wesley Papers.

<sup>41</sup> Dorothy Porter to Jesse E. Moorland, December 17, 1931, box 4, Wesley Papers.

amateur library workers who were willing to work for inadequate wages.<sup>42</sup> The bifurcated, gender-based hierarchy, wherein library schools ran subprofessional training classes for high school-educated women to learn the practical side of library work while actively recruiting men for master's and doctoral programs, aided in large part by the Carnegie Corporation, heightened these issues.<sup>43</sup> Porter's degree was rare, but severely undervalued.

There were larger issues, though. "I had to work with Mrs. Emma Murray," she recalled tersely, but mildly, years later when speaking of Howard's acting head librarian.<sup>44</sup> To Moorland, she wrote more explicitly, "My plans for the reorganiz[ation] and administration for the [collection] have been mutilated by the acting librarian and given back to me in the form of duties. I may not correspond with outsiders on business pertaining to the Moorland Collection, except through the acting librarian. This forms a definite obstruction to effective work with this collection, especially as regards enlargement." Porter painted Murray as a draconian figure, oppressing her staff through unequal pay, work unsuited to their qualifications, and general disorganization, and noted the complete lack of intervention and support from the administration, including from Moorland himself. Though "I cannot possibly say what the extent of my regret on giving up my work with the books which you have spent the majority of a life time in collecting really is for it was my serious intention to devote the coming years of my life to the care of them," it was clear Porter had already made up her mind to leave. "I want you to search these reasons carefully to see if you cannot yourself justify my actions by them," she challenged Moorland.<sup>45</sup> The conditions she faced were all too typical among librarians, as was her decision

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<sup>42</sup> Joanne E. Passet, "You Don't Have to Pay Librarians," in *Reclaiming the American Library Past: Writing the Women In*, ed. Suzanne Hildenbrand, 226.

<sup>43</sup> Passet, "You Don't Have to Pay Librarians," 265.

<sup>44</sup> Wesley and Madison, *Enterprising Steward*, 22.

<sup>45</sup> Dorothy Porter to Jesse E. Moorland, December 17, 1931, box 4, Wesley Papers.

to leave rather than accept them.<sup>46</sup> His response to her was equally typical in the history of the service and education professions, whose practitioners are so often given lower wages and willed to seek and be satisfied with immaterial rewards.<sup>47</sup> Addressing none of Porter's concerns, Moorland's hastily written reply to Porter was, "You are needed and no one knows so well as you do how badly you are needed."<sup>48</sup>

By January 4, it was clear she would not be moving from Howard. When she was offered the job at Miner, Porter was not aware that she could not legally accept the position. Her unawareness was understandable, as she had been told earlier she could be released easily from her contract with Howard.<sup>49</sup> On January 8, the Washington, D.C. Board of Education rescinded her appointment to Miner, "result[ing] from the fact that Mrs. D. B. Porter has not been released from her contract with Howard University."<sup>50</sup> What happened in between late December and early January speaks more to the characters of Moorland and Johnson than other episodes in Porter's life. Other than Porter, they were arguably the two most important people in the history of Howard's library. Their immense contributions and commitments and strong, zealous natures advanced the library beyond what Porter could have done alone, but these same virtues could be vices in their personal relationships. In hindsight, it is difficult to judge them negatively for what they did to Porter in the final days of 1931, because without their strong-arming, Porter might, once again, have set upon an entirely different path, but technically, they did lie to Porter for their own advantage.

Her threatened exodus did not lead to improved conditions. She still had to constantly fight the smallest of battles. She wrote to Howard's treasurer for an update on lifting the

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<sup>46</sup> Passet, "You Don't Have to Pay Librarians," 213.

<sup>47</sup> Passet, "You Don't Have to Pay Librarians," 207.

<sup>48</sup> Jesse E. Moorland to Dorothy Porter, December 20, 1931, box 4, Wesley Papers.

<sup>49</sup> Dorothy Porter to the Board of Education, January 3, 1932, box 5, Wesley Papers.

<sup>50</sup> Board of Education to Dorothy Porter, January 8, 1932, box 5, Wesley Papers.

restriction on her telephone. “It may be that I would not have to make an outside call for two weeks,” she explained, “and then it may be that I would need to make two in one day, as it has been the case this morning in connection with the recent lynching.” In her characteristically logical but exasperated tone, she concluded, “I am certain that it is unnecessary to give you any further justifications for the need of an unrestricted phone than those already given.”<sup>51</sup> Lacking the funding to even purchase office supplies, she developed a habit of rummaging through Johnson’s wastebaskets for the pieces of scrap paper his secretary would discard.<sup>52</sup>

Though these pecuniary squabbles occupied much of her time, she was somehow able to keep the broader mission of the library in mind. She published the first informational pamphlet about the library, recently renamed the Moorland Foundation, in 1933. The purposes of the Foundation, according to the pamphlet, were fourfold: to accumulate, record, and preserve material by and about the Negro; to assist interested students of Negro life to pursue the scholarly exploitation of the material in the collection; to instill race pride and race consciousness in Negro youth; and to provide a great reference library on every phase of Negro life.<sup>53</sup> Moorland had been only partially correct; it was true that Porter would not get an opportunity anywhere else like the one she was offered at Howard, but it was perhaps more accurate to say no one would run with the opportunity offered at Howard more than Porter. The first of Porter’s goals for the Foundation, expansion and exhaustive collection, was accomplished virtually singlehandedly by Porter over the next six decades. The three other goals would be reached consequently through the achievement of the first. No one knew the collection better than Porter, in large part because she was responsible for the acquisition of such a substantial portion of it.

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<sup>51</sup> Dorothy Porter to V. D. Johnson, November 28, 1933, box 5, Wesley Papers.

<sup>52</sup> Wesley and Madison, *Enterprising Steward*, 24.

<sup>53</sup> Dorothy Porter, “Purposes of the Foundation,” 1933, box 5, Wesley Papers.

## Europe: 1935

As committed as Porter was to her library, she was always thrilled to travel with James for his work. The Porters left Washington, D.C. at six in the morning on the sixth day of the sixth month of 1935. Union Station was about to enter its heyday. In the coming years, with the escalation of the international conflict that would become the Second World War and the great mobilization of citizens, soldiers, and politicians that accompanied the declaration of America's entry into the same, as many as 200,000 people would pass through the train station each day. On her way to the train, Porter passed through Daniel Burnham's Beaux-Arts arches, suspiciously reminiscent of the arch-laden buildings he had designed for the World's Columbian Exposition, all pure white, triumphant, and imposing. The building, unique in style and character at the time it was built in 1907, set the tone for the capital's subsequent iconic buildings, like the Lincoln and Jefferson Memorials, the Supreme Court Building, and the National Gallery, as it set the tone for Porter's trip. Looking up, she saw the hexagonal coffers of the main hall, with their more than seventy pounds of gold leafing, and looking down, the acres of marble that pave the hall.<sup>54</sup> Burnham designed Union Station to be a symbolic, and physical, gateway. Wealth and power are on display. The Porters reached their New York-bound train and settled in. A few hours later, their lunch companion in the dining car was an older gentleman with a kind face and, though unpretentious, an air of wealth. He held a ticket in his hands that was "a yard long," indicating a long journey was already behind him, and a long one would still be ahead after the Porters left him in New York. Though from the Deep South, Porter wrote in the red leather-bound, gilt-edged travel journal she kept during the whole trip, the man "did not object to my presence – even ask[ed] me if the sun was in my eyes and offered to lower the shade a bit." That conversation was the first of many surprising ones she would have over the next few weeks.

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<sup>54</sup> "History of Union Station," <http://www.unionstationdc.com/info/infohistory#Architectural>.



The ship would pull out of the harbor at two in the afternoon the next day, “escorted by airplanes and boats of all descriptions.” Police guarded the pier, allowing only passport-holding, bona fide passengers of the S.S. Normandie to get within several blocks of the pier. Excitement was palpable. People were already calling the Compagnie Générale Transatlantique’s enormous flagship liner the greatest of the world’s ocean liners. Porter would be on the ship’s maiden eastbound voyage, the first of 139 the ship would make.<sup>55</sup> Her first trip abroad would be in style.

Or perhaps it is more apt to say it would be surrounded by style. Cabin 1032, the Porters’, was not in first or second class, which the Porters passed through when they boarded the boat and on many occasions throughout the long voyage. “Such beauty and luxury” were not to be found in third class. This is not to say they did not enjoy their fair share of rest and relaxation, sorely needed by both of them. Porter, ever the archivist, zealously, religiously, even, kept notes on their every breath. Their first day on the boat was filled with sunbathing on the deck, dancing, talking, games of horseshoes, “too much food,” and Bicardi cocktails. One day, the pipe burst in third class, flooding the cabins. They were sent to the first class deck while their quarters were being drained and cleaned. While window shopping for flowers and lingerie, “etc.,” Porter picked up some S. S. Normandie souvenirs, hot commodities for friends and family waiting back home for the famed liner’s return. The first class salon was “a real palace”; no expense was spared for the celebrities and aristocrats among the passengers. When their room was ready again, the Porters returned to third class, where some excitement awaited. After dinner, Porter took a “run around the fish deck with a young white man. We surprised many (had such a good time).” She also met the fun Madame Perey, “who says she craves romance,” with whom the Porters were able to brush up on their French and sing Russian drinking songs. Some nights, when dancing was too difficult due to the choppiness of the ocean underfoot, Porter walked

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<sup>55</sup> Harvey Ardman, *Normandie: Her Life and Time* (New York: F. Watts, 1985), 46-47.

around the first class deck, where she “saw beautiful women in beautiful clothes.” The attractive, petite woman – just five feet tall and ninety-nine pounds in 1936 – was fixated on the luxury of first class. She would never have been able to afford the fare. She and James rivaled their white counterparts in intellect, natural talent, and, importantly, ambition, and Porter was brought up in a household that valued all of the above, but their salaries would always be low, and their skin color would keep them out of many places regardless. Her striving for acceptance among the higher class, coupled with her admiration of and longing for the material success she saw among her fellow passengers, reflected the broader black middle class’s aspirations. Once they reached dry land again, she would find, in Europe, a place where these doors were open.

The Porters, happy to be on stable land upon which they could dance and drink – and drink they would, certainly – without toppling over, disembarked in Normandy. Some of Porter’s journal passages are, from a modern perspective, poignantly heartbreaking glimpses of a continent on the brink of war that cannot imagine the physical, emotional, and moral havoc the next decade will wreak on their soil and their people. The S.S. Normandie itself, the gem of the Atlantic, would be captured by Americans and converted to a warship, the U.S.S. Lafayette, but would capsize and catch fire, marking the end of both its aristocratic halcyon existence and its short-lived military career.<sup>56</sup> On the train from Normandy to Paris, they were seated in a compartment with a French woman, who “later proved helpful in suggestions and talked French to Jimmy,” a Polish music student returning home with her mother who “furnished us some laughs,” and a Jewish girl. The reader experiences a visceral urge to warn these women – *Go! Leave! Before it’s too late!* What became of the French lady? Was she present for the surrender of her city? Did she live to see its liberation? What of the Polish music student and her mother?

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<sup>56</sup> John Maxtone-Graham, *Normandie: France’s Legendary Art Deco Ocean Liner* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007), 216.

Were they safe in either Poland or France? And the Jewish girl? Did she escape? As Porter would never know, we will never know. How many years would it be before the same assortment of women could gather without care or fear together in a train compartment from Normandy to Paris?

But this is all speculation, rumination. It is certain that when Porter got to Paris, she was struck not with a sense of impending doom, but with the sense of awe, hope, and romance with which the city blossomed in June 1935. The day after reaching France, Porter walked alone through the streets, browsing bookstores, clothing shops, using the public transportation with an ease that made her proud of the progress she had made in her command of French, and spending time at the Rockefeller Foundation, which had an office in Paris until 1959.<sup>57</sup> After window-shopping, she walked to the Cathedral of Notre Dame. “Thought I’d drop dead before I reached the top of the tower. Saw the great bell and stood under it while it was gently touched with a hammer. What a sonorous note.” The ringing bell inaugurated her stay in Paris, where her only complaint was that “One must pay for everything in Paris. Even to sit on the chairs in the Jardin [des Plantes].” After taking donkey and camel rides around the Jardin, she relaxed by the shore of the Seine, knitting and people-watching. She took notes to remind herself what surprised her, what she liked, what she wanted to go back to. Even a quick note about the evening – “Had an enjoyable evening of champagne and Cointreau” – contains a reminder – “I like Cointreau very much” – for the future Dorothy’s reference.

Porter followed James to Paris for his work, but never one to take a vacation, she turned her attention to the great cultural centers of the city and scoured them for bibliographic material. She enjoyed the Museum of Ethnology’s library, where she found a “wealth” of materials. She

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<sup>57</sup> “Rockefeller Foundation Field Offices, Record Group 6.1 – Paris, 1917-1959,” Rockefeller Foundation Archives, <http://www.rockarch.org/collections/rf/rfparis.php>.

spent much time in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France. She was shocked to find that there were no barriers to her entering and using the library, was more surprised to actually be given extra privileges, as a librarian, and was even more surprised when she was able to bring home several new books in “Negro studies” that the library had recently acquired.

Porter was not drawn only to Paris’s obvious institutions. She met Countee Cullen on the street on July 11<sup>th</sup>, spent some time with her colleague at Howard, Alain Locke, and toured the “very agreeable” Charles Ratton’s gallery the year before he would open it for public exhibition to critics who sang crazed praise for his juxtaposition of surrealist works with tribal art. Recognizing a fellow collector, he gave Porter a brass crocodile paperweight from the Ivory Coast. She loved Enid Raphael’s “interesting studio whose walls are really decorated with art” for its dedication to eclectic collecting, but more importantly, for the crowd the socialite opened her studio to, “persons of Negro, Spanish, French, and German blood,” and in the same breath, for the “cocktails, salad, ham, olives, cheeses, etc. [that] filled our stomachs and gave us all a good spirit.” It was the kind of gathering Porter could not find in Washington, D.C., as was the following night’s entertainment, a lecture in French about living in China by “Madame Leow,” which sparked a heated discussion about the Chinese among the group, “which was an interracial one.” She ended her entry, “Rum and a little wine today.”

These interracial interactions were, literally, remarkable to Porter. She made a note every time she was in such a foreign situation. When James and some African-American ex-pats put on a Senegalese celebration with a concert of Negro spirituals and a poetry recital, with port wine and champagne sandwiching songs, Porter remembered, “Dancing began about 12:00. Many blondes were there dancing with black boys. Blonde white men danced with black girls.” In America, she was rejected from jobs based on her skin color alone; in Paris, she watched as

interracial couples danced late into the night to Senegalese folk music. On her return journey, she expressed only one disappointment: “If I could only travel first class. The boat hardly seems to move at all.”<sup>58</sup>

### **Moorland: 1936**

Porter came back from her Europe trip reenergized, with pages of addresses to send postcards to and lists of new Negro books not yet available in America to send for. As much as the institution was changing, its context was not. Works by and about black authors, artists, and intellectuals were still actively marginalized, as were the librarians who collected and promoted them. In 1936, Porter received a letter from Wallace Van Jackson, librarian of the historically black Virginia Union University, inviting her to attend the 58<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference of the American Library Association (A.L.A.). “For the first time the Association is honoring Richmond [Virginia] with its conference and the local Committee of Arrangements and the A.L.A. headquarters are anxious to have Negro librarians attend in large numbers,” he wrote. Porter penciled in “*Why?*” above this statement. It was to remain an unasked and unanswered question. In 1976, the A.L.A. would award Van Jackson their Special Centennial Citation for his work in developing black academic libraries in America and developing library services in Africa, but forty years earlier, he was in the awkward position of speaking for others. “Because of the traditional position of the South in respect to mixed meetings,” he continued, “it seems necessary to have the position of the American Library Association and its committees made known. It is also advisable to suggest to Negro librarians the conditions they should expect to find in Richmond during the conference.” He was writing on behalf of the A.L.A. to say that they had received promises from the hotels housing the conference that “delegates to the

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<sup>58</sup> Dorothy Porter, Travel journal, 1935, box 97, Wesley Papers.

conference may use the same entrance as the white delegates and will be received and housed in the same manner during the conference meetings.” However, he clarified, “This does not mean that Negro delegates may obtain rooms and meals at these hotels as this is forbidden by Virginia laws...Those meetings which are a part of breakfast, luncheons or dinners are not open to Negroes, who may, however, attend sessions which are followed by meals provided they do not participate in the meals.” Even in the general sessions, which would be open to “mixed” company, “Provisions will be made to seat Negroes in the front right hand section of the main floor of the auditorium during the general sessions. This same section is reserved for them at the large group meetings and round tables at the hotels.” But, he concluded, in order to encourage attendance, the A.L.A. procured a large block of fifty free rooms and free breakfast to accompany them, along with otherwise available reduced-price housing, as if a lack of funds alone would keep Porter and other black librarians from attending. “We hope you will find it convenient to visit this conference in Richmond, and we await your early reply.”<sup>59</sup>

Never one to keep quiet when she had something to say, they did not have to wait long for Porter’s reply. She wrote directly to Louis R. Wilson, the president of the A.L.A., then the dean of the University of Chicago’s Graduate School of Librarianship, to express how “unfortunate” it was that many Negro librarians the Association wished to woo to Richmond would not be able to attend “because of the discriminatory features of the conference.” Being able to use the same entrances as the white librarians, but having to sit in the front right hand section of the auditorium “makes my attendance at the conference impossible.” But pressing further, Porter demanded Wilson’s personal “attitude concerning this matter,” urging him in the future to “avoid meeting in southern cities where persons are still absurd enough to think that the color on one’s skin makes one different,” and stating that her continued membership in the

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<sup>59</sup> Wallace Van Jackson to Dorothy Porter, March 18, 1936, box 5, Wesley Papers.

Association depended on their policy regarding Negro delegates. She was the queen of biting backhanded compliments when she felt underestimated. Before signing off, she bid Wilson, “I hope from your point of view that the conference will be a successful one.”<sup>60</sup> His answer, she implied, would indicate what he valued most: either camaraderie and professional development, or exclusivity and stasis for a whole group of librarians. In sum, did he consider her his peer?

Wilson, on behalf of the A.L.A., refused to take responsibility for the convention’s conditions. “The arrangements for seating at Richmond were made by the local committee in Richmond in accord with...conditions which prevail there but over which it had no control. Disregard of [the] law is a misdemeanor punishable by fine of \$100 for each case.” Ignoring her larger question of whether the Association as a whole supported the discriminatory policies, and would not rather hold the convention in a city free of them, he maintained an apologetic attitude toward the local committee, and acknowledged Porter’s concerns without offering any options for a way she and other black librarians could feel comfortable attending. Missing her wit entirely, or possibly refusing to admit he had been outplayed, he ended his letter, “Please let me thank you for your expression of interest in the success of the meeting.”<sup>61</sup> Her résumé, thereafter, read: “Member, Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, Inter-American Bibliographical and Library Association.”<sup>62</sup> The A.L.A. was not worth her time.

With or without the A.L.A.’s support, by 1936, Porter and her library were entering a new era. Like the other public intellectuals of Howard, Porter was shaped by the struggles of the black experience, which reaffirmed her commitment to engaging the public on issues of importance to the black community.<sup>63</sup> Porter was essentially becoming the spokeswoman for

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<sup>60</sup> Dorothy Porter to Louis R. Wilson, March 30, 1936, box 5, Wesley Papers.

<sup>61</sup> Louis R. Wilson to Dorothy Porter, April 3, 1936, box 5, Wesley Papers.

<sup>62</sup> Application for renewal of a grant from the Julius Rosenwald Foundation, 1945, box 5, Wesley Papers.

<sup>63</sup> Williams, *Talented Tenth*, 3.

black bibliophilism. “Some of the literary work of the future should, and must, be done by people in the race,” she told a Norfolk newspaper, “but unless our people buy more books, in general, and buy the books by our writers, they will not be able to add to our store of knowledge of ourselves and our answers, or to record fictionally the mods of our people.” With her characteristic logical wit, she told the readership, “It happens that writers must eat and that it costs money to publish books.” Give books by black authors for Christmas, she urged.<sup>64</sup> That year, bookworm Mordecai Johnson was able to secure \$1,120,812 in federal funding for the library, almost as much as he had secured in total funds for the whole university the year Porter joined Howard.<sup>65</sup> Other librarians and archivists were writing to her asking for bibliographies of the materials she had collected. The library facilities that could be built with a million dollars accelerated Howard’s rise. For the first time, Porter could assure potential donors “that the materials you lend or give us will be taken care of, now that we have good facilities for preserving such materials.”<sup>66</sup> In just a few short years, Howard had gone from having no black studies collection to being *the* go-to institution for research on Africans and African-Americans, and it had gained this status largely because of Porter’s efforts alone.

The funding Johnson earmarked for the library, though substantial, hardly covered its operation costs. Porter, along with everyone else, was underpaid. At the end of a decade of service, Porter was only earning \$1,900 per year, significantly less than the median salary for Columbia graduates.<sup>67</sup> The funding included no additional allocations for acquisitions. Porter, charming, friendly, and tenacious, was creative above all. “As a younger woman...she was very

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<sup>64</sup> Editors, “Xmas Books By and About Negroes Make Ideal Gifts And Help Negro Authors,” *The Virginian-Pilot*, December 28, 1935, box 9, Wesley Papers.

<sup>65</sup> Williams, *Talented Tenth*, 48-49.

<sup>66</sup> Dorothy Porter to Duke Ellington, January 31, 1939, box 9, Wesley Papers.

<sup>67</sup> The median salary for graduates in 1938 was \$2,200. Trautman, *A History of the School of Library Service*, 43.



pretty, and she could use her beauty to influence people. She was a little bit flirty,” her coworker remembered.<sup>68</sup> Apart from gathering Africana from all corners of the disorganized main library, she “acquir[ed] anything I could in any way from other areas – book dealers, friends, every way except stealing. I never stole a book.”<sup>69</sup> Book dealers and publishers proved to be key donors to the library. She read reviews, ordered catalogues, and “had to beg, beg, beg” them to send her materials as gifts.<sup>70</sup> She donated every book authors and scholars gave her in thanks for her research help. Johnson did the same. Some faculty gave their collections unwittingly, when Porter combed their wastebaskets for materials toward the Howardiana collection she was building. She even knew all the funeral directors in the area. She would be at the funeral home as they were carrying the body out, there to see about getting the recently deceased’s papers.<sup>71</sup> Most important, though, were the personal relationships she forged with potential donors. She almost always got what she asked for. “For over 60 years, I have hated Howard University,” Will Marion Cook, the famed black composer and violinist, wrote to Porter. He vowed to never give the library a thing.<sup>72</sup> Within a week, his position changed. “Many, many thanks for your beautiful answer to my evil harangue. It brought tears to my eyes...So long as I live – and where ever I am – you have but to call upon me – and you will find that I am grateful – and shall respond.” He signed his letter “Dad Cook” and vowed to send her an autographed copy of “something worthwhile,” which inevitably would land in the library.<sup>73</sup> Duke Ellington responded to her request for materials for Negro History Week by sending the original manuscript of *Mood Indigo*, his most famous work. Written “while waiting for his dinner to be fixed,” the version

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<sup>68</sup> Janet Sims-Wood, interview with the author, New Haven, CT, April 1, 2014.

<sup>69</sup> Wesley and Madison, *Enterprising Steward*, 24.

<sup>70</sup> Wesley and Madison, *Enterprising Steward*, 22.

<sup>71</sup> Sims-Wood interview.

<sup>72</sup> Will Marion Cook to Dorothy Porter, February 3, 1939, box 9, Wesley Papers.

<sup>73</sup> Will Marion Cook to Dorothy Porter, February 8, 1939, box 9, Wesley Papers.

Porter received contained a sixteen-bar strain Ellington had cut from the song.<sup>74</sup> This approach was echoed in official information science channels, which explained, “personal letters seem to bring better results than formal library ‘beg’ letters, and money is less important in many cases than writing to the right person.”<sup>75</sup> In Porter’s case, money was always a concern, as she was often outbid by endowed libraries for the things she wanted, but many times, the greater task was making people realize they held materials that future generations could use to understand the time period, which is why she could just as easily be found hobnobbing with an important dealer as sweeping someone’s dusty basement on a hunch. Certainly, Porter was convincing, but above all, she truly cared, and she was willing to go to great lengths to show it.

### **The Catalogue: Beyond the Decade**

As Porter fought her contract at Howard, Melvil Dewey, the father of modern librarianship, passed away at age eighty. Their lives had been intertwined for years. It was he who founded Columbia’s School of Library Service in January of 1887. With the help of janitors, legend has it, Dewey was able to improvise a classroom out of an unused storeroom, furnished with makeshift and discarded furniture, as well as a wagonload of his own chairs.<sup>76</sup> But Dewey was unabashedly sexist and racist. The Columbia trustees asked for Dewey’s resignation in response to his undignified requirement of a photograph and physical description with women’s applications, and happily accepted his offer to move the school to Albany, where it remained until 1926.

The Dewey Decimal System standardized and revolutionized library classification, but it reflected the prejudices of its founder and of its time. The classes 396, Women’s position and

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<sup>74</sup> Billy Strayhorn, secretary for Duke Ellington, n.d., c. March 1939, box 9, Wesley Papers.

<sup>75</sup> Wilcox, *The Library of the School of Library Service*, 7.

<sup>76</sup> Trautman, *A History of the School of Library Service*, 12.

treatment, and 397, Outcast studies, are no longer in use. Anything related to reproduction and sexuality was listed under “Hygiene.” There were two numbers, 325 and 326, which categorized colonization and slavery, respectively, under which anything by or about Africans and African-Americans would be listed. *Ebony* would be listed there, instead of with other periodicals. A poem by James Weldon Johnson would be there, too, instead of with other poets. Schomburg battled the issue in his own collection, deciding to give up and arrange all his materials by spine height and color instead.<sup>77</sup> Porter wrote to Dorkas Fellows, Dewey’s successor, who had moved the Dewey headquarters to the Library of Congress, requesting that Fellows expand the system to accommodate the growing collection of Negro works Porter was quickly amassing. Dorkas, in her phonetic spelling, “suggested...the possibility of uzing for the most part regular [Dewey] numbers for the topic at hand, with some prefixt designation, e.g. N for Negro, to indicated the special angle from which the subject was being considerd.” As to accepting Porter’s “special skeme, this wud depend on the way in which yu had workt out the subject, for which it wud be necessary that I examin yur expansion, which I shud be glad to hav yu bring or send at yur convenience.”<sup>78</sup> The expansion was not approved. When she heard Fellows’ decision, Porter followed in the great tradition of her fellow public intellectuals at Howard, who proposed innovations to counteract the systematic challenges confronting Black America rather than solely illuminating them; she took her typewriter and rewrote the system herself.<sup>79</sup>

In 1939, with the help of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), Porter published the first catalogue of the collection, titled *Catalogue of the Books in the Moorland Foundation*. Porter was inspired by the Oberlin College library’s classified catalogue of their anti-slavery propaganda collection. “I was afraid it might go out of print while I was waiting for the library to

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<sup>77</sup> Johnson-Cooper, “African-American Historical Continuity,” 32.

<sup>78</sup> Dorkas Fellows to Dorothy Porter, December 6, 1934, box 5, Wesley Papers.

<sup>79</sup> Williams, *Talented Tenth* 4, Wesley and Madison, *Enterprising Steward*, 25.

get funds for it,” she (half) joked to Moorland. “It is the type of catalogue that I hope to see printed some day on our collection. I shall really shout with joy the day our collection gets an endowment.”<sup>80</sup> A catalogue would signal a new era for the library, as pre-digital age libraries gained legitimacy through the publication of and subsequent demand for their catalogues. With a catalogue would come new sources of funding. Catalogues, like the funding which followed their publication, were necessarily political documents.<sup>81</sup> John R. Whitten, Junior Race Relations Officer for the WPA, commended Porter on her “capable direction” in preparing the catalogue. He, like the Howard administrators, must have received some of Porter’s exasperated letters. “I am aware of the great difficulties you surmounted in getting this publication completed. It is a splendid example of the ability of the thousands of ‘white-collar’ workers who are now dependent upon the Federal Government’s vast unemployment program for subsistence, and deserves much attention and extensive use.”<sup>82</sup>

Of course, catalogues alone do not secure donations. Published works that include items from a collection keep the collection relevant and, importantly, legitimize funders’ dollars. Porter would send Howard professors suggestions for thesis topics based on unused materials in the library, and would prove to be an integral resource to black researchers, but Porter also encouraged white scholars to use the library, as they were the ones who had the money and connections needed to be published. When James could not find a publisher for his groundbreaking *Modern Negro Art*, the Porters personally funded its printing, at a sum of over

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<sup>80</sup> Dorothy Porter to Jesse E. Moorland, December 8, 1932, box 4, Wesley Papers.

<sup>81</sup> The Schomburg Collection’s catalogue, for example, would be rushed to press the year after *Brown v. Board of Education* by librarian Jean Blackwell Hutson, who understood that racism and hatred were not legal battles, and who worried that desegregation would be used as a convenient excuse for taking away financial support. See Johnson-Cooper, “African-American Historical Continuity,” 41.

<sup>82</sup> John R. Whitten to Dorothy Porter, March 27, 1939, box 5, Wesley Papers.

\$2,000.<sup>83</sup> Before the 1960s, there was virtually no support for black scholarship, let alone black scholarship in black studies, and Porter made the historically prudent choice of opening up the library to anyone with an interest in the materials, a commitment she would later leverage in order for Howard's students to gain access into all-white schools' libraries.

### **The Archive: Today**

I was warned I would not find much in the Dorothy Porter Wesley papers, housed at Yale University's Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. The bulk of the collection is her professional, rather than personal, papers. Notes taken while digging in basements, antique stores, and historical societies around the world fill most of the Paige boxes. The few biographical and personal items she did leave are mainly from later in her life, when she was a well-known public intellectual and she must have realized, as she urged her donors so many times, that someone, someday, could use her papers to understand her time. This paper is a product of pulling together the little material she kept from her young adulthood in an attempt to recreate the most formative years of her life, the years which sparked her interest in the field which she would come to rule over and which brought her to Howard in the first place.

Memories are ephemeral archives. They are sites of recollection, reshaping, remodeling, and reiteration. The archive of Dorothy Porter Wesley is a collection of ephemeral memories. At one point, she started keeping everything, even her troubled sister Alice's recipe collection, which included a recipe for SPAM SPREAD Cheeseburgers: "Split four hamburger buns and toast them. Spread each half with SPAM SPREAD. Place slice of cheese over spread and add tablespoon of ketchup. Heat at 350 degrees F, until cheese melts." The papers of the woman who, in her life, was so meticulous about collecting and cataloging are barely processed. The

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<sup>83</sup> Wesley and Madison, *Enterprising Steward*, 35.

folders are unlabeled, a product of the baseline processing approach the Beinecke is currently practicing to combat the miles of uncatalogued materials it owns. There is a pack of flossers in Box 97, likely signifying that someone literally swept Porter's entire office into boxes indiscriminately before shipping. Perhaps she simply ran out of time to organize her own papers. Her former coworker, Janet Sims-Wood, thinks "she was so busy doing the work, and again she had two husbands. There was just so much."<sup>84</sup>

But there is more at play. There is something unsettling about being able to browse through Porter's materials, diaries, memos, flossers and all, in the comfortable reading room of the Beinecke. "I guess in my heart of hearts," Sims-Wood confesses, "I want to think she wished it had come to Moorland."<sup>85</sup> Dorothy Porter Wesley, James Amos Porter, and Charles Harris Wesley, colleagues, friends, and lovers in life, were supposed to remain together in death. Instead, James Porter's collection was sold at auction for \$50,400 to Emory's Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library<sup>86</sup>; Charles Wesley's papers went to his fraternity, Alpha Phi Alpha; and most of Dorothy Porter's papers were bought by the Beinecke through Swann Auction Galleries via William Reese for \$43,200, going for less than the estimated \$75,000 value of the lot.<sup>87</sup> Seventy-two boxes were accessioned in the original purchase, the other fifty-four boxes coming later, when the Wesley family found additional materials in storage.<sup>88</sup> The

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<sup>84</sup> Sims-Wood interview.

<sup>85</sup> Sims-Wood interview.

<sup>86</sup> "Printed & Manuscript African Americana, Sale 2204 Lot 141," Swann Auction Galleries, February 25, 2010, <http://catalogue.swanngalleries.com/asp/fullCatalogue.asp?salelot=2204+++++141+&refno=++627661&saletype>.

<sup>87</sup> "Printed & Manuscript African Americana, Sale 2271 Lot 296," Swann Auction Galleries, March 1, 2012, <http://catalogue.swanngalleries.com/asp/fullCatalogue.asp?salelot=2271+++++296+&refno=++655495&saletype>.

<sup>88</sup> Guide to the Dorothy Porter Wesley Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, [http://drs.library.yale.edu/HLTransformer/HLTransServlet?stylename=yul.ead2002.xhtml.xml&pid=beinecke:wesley&query=dorothy porter&clear-stylesheet-cache=yes&hlon=yes&filter=&hitPageStart=1](http://drs.library.yale.edu/HLTransformer/HLTransServlet?stylename=yul.ead2002.xhtml.xml&pid=beinecke:wesley&query=dorothy%20porter&clear-stylesheet-cache=yes&hlon=yes&filter=&hitPageStart=1).

rest of Porter's materials, mostly her varied, enormous personal collection of books, manuscripts, and objects, are housed in the African-American Research Library and Cultural Center of Broward County, Florida, Porter's final resting place and home of her only child, Constance "Coni" Porter Uzelac. "The normal source of this eclectic assortment of material would be years in assembly. Perhaps using eBay one could replicate this collection, if one had the time, money, energy and expertise of an archivist, scholar, and bibliographer."<sup>89</sup> Uzelac, it is known, was at one time in possession of all three collections. Because Porter's will is not available, it is impossible to move beyond speculation in speaking of what might have happened between Porter's death in 1995 and the Swann auction in 2012 which brought Porter's collection to Yale.

What is not speculative in the least is Porter's supreme influence on Howard and on the history of black bibliography. There is no one who rivals Porter's contributions to the field. She was the first, and the greatest. Everyone who comes after her will be following in her (petite) footsteps. She founded the field, shaping it in her own image. Her life was a remarkable mix of fortunate circumstances and the great prescience to take advantage of them. Where others might have only seen absence, she saw opportunity. "Go on and talk," she told a reporter a month before she succumbed to cancer. She had a paper napkin clipped to her shirt and was eating an early dinner of chicken, carrots, and peas. "I want to get rid of you. Seems like every time I try to do something these days, there's somebody asking me a bunch of questions."<sup>90</sup> Porter never felt like she had an abundance of time; she always felt pressured, knowing that every moment not spent sweeping up a basement for materials that just might lead some researcher somewhere, entering one of the thousands upon thousands of uncataloged items – and counting – into the

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<sup>89</sup> "Dorothy Porter Wesley Collection," The African-American Research Library and Cultural Center Special Collection, Broward County Library, <http://www.broward.org/Library/AARLCCSpecialCollections/Pages/AAWesleyCollection.aspx>.

<sup>90</sup> Linton Weeks, untitled article, box 97, Wesley Papers.

system, or networking with possible publishers and donors was a moment wasted. Even when she retired, she remained committed to the library; the only real change she experienced was in pay. Perhaps the best way to conclude a sketch of Porter's life is by using her own words as an epitaph: "You do it incidentally."



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