THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF BLACK BIOGRAPHY

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In 1986, John Hope Franklin made the following statement concerning black history,

> "Why not pull the veil back and see how much more there was? Perhaps it would provide some real justification for a strong claim for better treatment of Negro Americans; perhaps it would indeed provide the argument for equal treatment."[1]

For African Americans, biography is much more than an "inferior form of history." [2] When one speaks of American history, they initially conjure up the American Revolution, Civil War and Reconstruction, and both World Wars. Likewise, there seems to be endless source material on each of those periods, even those dating from before the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Existing in America, there are at least two distinct historiographies. One examines the collective "American experience" and looks at the political, economic, and social progression of the United States. The other historiography is rather young, examining those who were denied individual rights, democratic participation, and citizenship guaranteed under the law. In 1852, Frederick Douglass, penned the inspirational essay, "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" Douglass, a true American patriot, challenged Americans to question its national identity and collective memory. Simply put, Douglass's essay forces historians to question when America begins for the black American? Consensus historiography simply does not address or answer that question. If one takes the traditional historian's view, America began in 1776. However, that origin does not address African American historiography.

From 1776 until the end of the Civil War, African Americans were denied citizenship, leaving an absence of the black experience in American historiography. Historians have designated historical participants into two groups, those who were historical actors and those who were acted upon. Concerning African Americans, historians ignored them as historical

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[1] John Hope Franklin, "Afro-American History and the Politics of Higher Education," *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 40, no. 2 (November 1986): 29.

[2] Lois Banner argues that historians rank biography as an "inferior history." For more information, see Lois W. Banner, "Biography as History," The *American Historical Review* 114, no. 3 (June 2009): 580.

participants for over a hundred years. To revise Douglass's famous question, what to the slave or their descendants is American history? For African Americans, there exists a community history, one rooted in the collective experiences of the entire race. Biography served as their first official contribution to American historiography, serving as evidence of their historical participation. Without that, there simply was no archival past. And before a historical tradition had been established, autobiography was the first phase of black biography.

Arguably, the eighteenth century was the conception of America's national memory. Before the professionalization of history, the American Revolution had been the unquestioned period of the country's founding. The Founding Fathers, the period's major historical actors, remain vital to the American psyche today. As it pertains to American history, the Founding Fathers are celebrated as champions for American democracy, liberal idealism, and the world's most revolutionary empire. For almost half of the twentieth century, historians rarely challenged their legacies. Historians treasured the Founding Fathers' correspondences, diaries, and collections, leading to numerous biographies dating back to the early nineteenth century. Considering the extensive literature on the Founders, the Founding Fathers are responsible for America's national memory.

However, the "spirit of 76' has not been shared by African Americans. Black memory has been shaped by the visual of human bondage, the separation of the black family, and the brutality of chattel slavery. Thus, historians have dated the earliest slave narratives to the eighteenth century. John W. Blassingame stated that "the central theme which runs through these autobiographies is the demand for the recognition of black manhood."[3] Therefore, one of the most famous slave narratives ever written was Olaudah Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*. In his autobiography, he details life before the Middle Passage,

[3] John W. Blassingame, "Black Autobiographies as History and Literature," The *Black Scholar* 5, no. 4 (December 1973- January 1974): 2.

proving a rich and significant African culture. Equiano's autobiographical account served as the preeminent account for the descendants of enslaved Africans. Though autobiographical, slave narratives were revisionist historiography, countering the perception that enslaved people had no origin. Eighteenth-century slave narratives undoubtedly inspired those that came in the nineteenth century. With the intention of rediscovering themselves, free blacks pursued the presumably obscure past. For them, there was no archive or documentation of their family origins. Thus, black people relied on two texts for history: the Bible, and slave narratives. The Christian Bible and slave narratives served as the original archive of the black experience.

Piecing together their past, African Americans pursued their ancestry, often alluding to Africa. Inspired by the bible passage, "Ethiopia shall soon stretch forth its hands unto God," Ethiopianism was born.[4] Prior to the Civil War, the sole mission of historical pursuit was to inspire abolition. Christian spirituality and African pride were "primary sources" for anti-slavery movements. Slave narratives were some of the earliest critiques of the American system, often exposing the moral atrocities of American slavery, and debunking the idea of an inherent national "revolutionary character."

In 1845, Frederick Douglass wrote *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, the most influential narrative of the nineteenth century. Advocating for abolition, Douglass's narrative culminated all slave narratives. Moreover, his message resonated loudly inspired hope in enslaved people. Douglass represented what African Americans could aspire to be, a former slave turned self-educated orator and radical abolitionist. Racist whites viewed Douglass as an agent for national dissension and disruption in the plantation South, a

[4] For information about Ethiopianism, see W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Company, 1903); George Shepperson, "Ethiopianism and African Nationalism," *Phylon*, 14, No. 1 (1953): 9-18; James Quirin, "W.E.B. Du Bois, Ethiopianism and Ethiopia, 1890-1955," *International Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 5, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2010-2011): 1-26.

sentiment shared by early white historians. Therefore, narratives should be viewed as the first successful revisionist historiography, inspiring those who would later be labeled revisionist.

Arguably the last and most influential slave narrative was *Up from Slavery* (1901). Almost a decade after becoming America's most famous "New Negro", Booker T. Washington's autobiography responded to the new era plaguing blacks. In the era of Jim Crow and southern lynchings, Washington's account inspired black economic mobility, advocating for industrial education. However, the inspiring journey of a former slave becoming the most successful black man in the South was not universally lauded. In fact, certain news outlets suppressed the circulation of *Up from Slavery* upon its release. Those same racist outlets promoted another black autobiography, one written by a self-hating mulatto.[5]

Like previous slave narratives, *Up from Slavery* was more than an autobiography. Washington's autobiography was a historical account of black progress, a story of resilience during slavery and achievement through the ongoing black nadir. Its inspiration galvanized a budding black leadership class, a class that would shape the trajectory of American historiography. Though *Up from Slavery* captivated several up-in-coming blacks at the time of its publication, Washington's reputation soured amongst intellectuals. To some, an underlying premise of *Up from Slavery* was an appeal to assimilate with white supremacists. They were insulted by Washington's reputation accommodationist messaging and felt betrayed by the notion that blacks needed to assimilate to a white supremacist society. If black biography served as a cultural indicator of who held the mantle of black leader, it was the new intellectuals who

[5] For information about William Hannibal Thomas, Robert Norrell, *Up from History: The Life of Booker T. Washington* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 233-234.

decided black America deserved a better face. *Up from Slavery*, a once heralded foundational text, now became a portrait of a man viewed as a traitor to his race.[6]

Progressive era historiography, defined by its patriotic optimism, was a period of revisionism for blacks. Particularly in the field of history, black scholars worked to build an archive that rivaled the American consensus. In 1901, the same year as Booker T. Washington's famous publication, W.E.B Du Bois first conceived of the "negro encyclopedia" project.[7] The black encyclopedia was part of Du Bois's early effort to create a documented and archival black past. In 1900, just a year prior, he helped orchestrate the Paris Exhibit, displaying numerous African American collections.[8] Professor Henry Louis Gates argued that,

> "Du Bois sought to marshal a mountain of evidence to refute the centuries of aspersion cast upon the character of the African by a racist West eager to justify the economic exploitation of Africa and its Africans."[9]

Indicative of the black archival era, there was an organizing effort to collect and chronicle the African past. Rather than appear passive in the pursuit of civil rights, the archival era historians sought to disprove inferior status by showcasing their rich African roots. Pan-Africanist in nature, black biography centered more nationalist perspectives on race. Famed for its declaration that "the color line would be the problem of the 20th century," the *Souls of Black Folk* (1903) was also a critical contribution to black biography.

In "Of Booker T. Washington and Others", a chapter of *Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois's critique of BTW was a documented and public split amongst black leadership. Out

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[6] See Ta-Nahesi Coates, "The Tragedy and Betrayal of Booker T. Washington," *The Atlantic*, March 31, 2009; David Levering Lewis, *W.E.B Du Bois: A Biography of a Race, 1868-1919* (New York: Henry Holt, 1992), 265-342; Robert J. Norrell, *Up from History: The Life of Booker T. Washington* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 438.
[7] Henry Louis Gates, "W. E. B. Du Bois and the Encyclopedia Africana, 1909-63," The *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 568 (March 2000): 203-219.
[8] Lewis, *W.E.B Du Bois: A Biography of a Race, 1868-1919*, 242-43.
[9] Gates, "W. E. B. Du Bois and the Encyclopedia Africana, 1909-63," 204.

of black intellectualism grew two types of intellectuals, the radical black nationalist and the black accommodationist. While Du Bois's career makes it hard to place him in a binary camp, those camps shaped the state of black biography going forward. An often overlooked chapter in *Souls of Black Folk*, "Of Alexander Crummell," chronicled the life of a black nationalist. For Du Bois, Alexander Crummell was one of his greatest influences, inspiring him to become a member of the American Negro Academy that formed his Talented Tenth philosophy. For intellectuals, the *Souls of Black Folk* was the most influential African American text of the 20th century, surpassing BTW's *Up from Slavery*. Following its critical reception, Du Bois became the true successor to Frederick Douglass and the face of black America.[10] Therefore, his intellectual approach defined later generations.

Prior to Du Bois and the second generation of black historians, there was a first generation of black historians. In 1882, George Washington Williams conducted the first overall history of African Americans.[11] Working with a lack of sufficient resources, first generation historians achieved the unimaginable, establishing a historical foundation for blacks.[12] In succession of the first generation, Du Bois emerged as an early black historian. The first black PhD from Harvard, Du Bois was trained in American historiography. In addition to Du Bois, the second generation included Carter G. Woodson. Considered the founder of black history, Carter G. Woodson also graduated from Harvard University in 1912.

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[10] Earl E. Thorpe, "Frederick Douglass, W. E. B. Dubois and Booker T. Washington," *Negro History Bulletin* 20, no. 2 (November 1956): 42.
[11] For more information about the life and career of George Washington Williams, see John Hope Franklin, *George Washington Williams: A Biography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).
[12] Dorothy B. Porter, "Bibliography and Research in Afro-American Scholarship," *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 2, no. 2 (May 1976): 77.

Though trained in the traditional American school of history, second generation historians built black historiography. In 1910, Du Bois founded the *Crisis* magazine, the official magazine for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). In 1916, Woodson founded the *Journal of Negro History*, a journal covering all aspects of African American history and culture. Both publications promoted and organized black scholarship, providing opportunity for little known black profiles and biographies. The *Crisis* and *Journal of Negro History* did more to formally advance black biography than any other institutions in America. Though they featured biographical entries, they did not have an abundance of source materials. Hence, it was the third generation who would formally publish academic biographies. The first generation of professional black historians, third generation historians enhanced black biography and gave it academic credibility.

The third generation featured a plethora of professional historians including: John Hope Franklin, Rayford Logan, Benjamin Quarles, and Charles H. Wesley.[13] Noticeably, the first field of black historians consisted of mostly men. Like white historiography, black history was no stranger to misogyny. This group of historians can be characterized as racially conscious, politically and legally astute, and revisionist. In what could be classified as the traditional school of historiography and post WWII era (1940s), black historians revised earlier racist schools of thought. Historian Robin D.G Kelley summarized this generation by stating that,

> "Scholars such as George Washington Williams, Benjamin Quarles, and John Hope Franklin might have extended their scope beyond the boundaries of the United States, but their work was focused primarily on the American republic and how unsuccessful it has been at fulfilling its promise of democracy and freedom for all."[14]

[13] David Blight, "Review: The Restoration of Black History: Benjamin Quarles and the Paradox of Race," *Reviews in American History* 17, no. 1 (March 1989): 152-158.
[14] Robin D.G Kelley, "But a Local Phase of a World Problem": Black History's Global Vision, 1883-1950," *The Journal of American History* 86, no. 3 (December 1999): 1047.

In examining the famous periods of American history, they wrote black history into the historiography and exposed the misinterpretations of the romanticized eras. John Hope Franklin became famous for *From Slavery to Freedom* (1947), but his greatest contribution to black biography was his revising of Reconstruction history. In 1954, Rayford Logan became famous for his declaration of the "black nadir," defining the period after Reconstruction as the worst for black Americans.[15] Benjamin Quarles added to Civil War historiography with several books revising the period, his most famous being *The Negro in the Civil War* (1953).[16] As it pertains to biography, Quarles's *Frederick Douglass* (1948) was arguably the most extensive biography of Frederick Douglass.

Of course, America had known of the "great man" and the "special negro" that was Frederick Douglass. But there was an effort to suppress the radical Douglass, the man who opposed racial compromise and supported militancy. For black historians, the radical Douglass was their hero, Douglass was much more than the man synonymous with Abraham Lincoln. And though Lincoln's reputation amongst black scholars was still relatively favorable, he was not black America's "great white savior." Arguably, black historians placed Lincoln in his best and most proper context. In Quarles's *Lincoln and the Negro* (1962), Quarles demonstrated the complexities of Lincoln, stating that,

> "Doubtless the Negro's attitude toward Lincoln was tinged by wish fulfillment, seeing him as they wanted him to be. On plans for freeing the slave and extending to Negroes the right to vote, Lincoln actually seemed to drag his feet or, at best, to lead from behind."[17]

[15] Rayford Logan, *The Negro in American Life and Thought: The Nadir, 1877–1901* (New York: Dial Press, 1954).
[16] Wilson J. Moses and Benjamin Quarles, "African American Historiography and the Works of Benjamin Quarles," The *History Teacher* 32, no. 1 (November 1988): 77-88.
[17] Benjamin Quarles, *Lincoln and the Negro* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1962), Foreword.

Franklin argued that this generation was most inspired by Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935), incorporating the best qualities of Du Bois's generation.[18] More importantly, this generation still felt that revisionism would lead to policy reform, evidenced by John Hope Franklin's involvement with Brown v. Board of education.[19] In the 1960s, social history became the dominant field of history. Influenced by the ongoing social movements, historians began to center the "people's history" of the United States. Therefore, the New Left historiography would be among the last to have optimism about American government and its political process.

Rooted in twentieth century intellectual debates, the integrationist vs nationalist argument had not been settled. Though there was a surge of black nationalism in the twentieth century, black historiography mainly advocated for integration. Even Du Bois, who could have been considered nationalist, vehemently opposed Marcus Garvey.[20] Up until 1965, black biographies centered those who were patriotic and pursued racial equality.

Though there was a radical nature in all its subjects, the consensus frowned upon racial separatism. However, the children of the social movements began to sour on the American ideal. Who could fault them? Politics and policy seemed to have little if any effect on the hearts of white supremacists. The growing disillusionment and the assassinations of significant civil rights advocates (the Kennedys, Malcolm X, MLK, etc.) led to radical scholarship. New Left historians reflected their radical students who were influenced by Black Power and new wave feminism. After the 1955 Montgomery bus boycott, MLK took the mantle of the consensus "black leader," following in the footsteps of Douglass, Washington and Du Bois. However, 1960s college

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[18] John Hope Franklin, "On the Evolution of Scholarship in Afro-American History," in *The State of Afro-American History: Past, Present, and Future* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986), 13-17.
[19] John Hope Franklin, *Mirror to America. The Autobiography of John Hope Franklin* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2005), 156-59.
[20] See Lewis, 37-84; Wilson S. Moses, "Marcus Garvey: A Reappraisal," *The Black Scholar* 4, no. 3 (1972): 38–49.

students were not moved by this designation. By no fault of his own, King became a Washington like symbol for black Americans due to whites highlighting the more conciliatory aspects of King. Despite that, black Americans admired the more radical King. In 1958, King published his autobiography, *Stride Toward Freedom*, following in the black autobiographical tradition. In The following year, black historian L.D Reddick published the first biography of Martin Luther King, Jr.[21]

Decades after his assassination, King became the acceptable black face for white historiography.[22] Contrary to the consensus, black power rejected white historiography. Even more than the revisionist era, the fourth generation were more critical of America's heroes. Therefore, Malcolm X, a taboo subject for whites during his life, became the "shining prince" for black power. In 1965, immediately after his death, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* was published by Alex Haley. This became the seminal text for angsty and radical black, becoming a foundational text for black nationalist scholarship. Lerone Bennett, one of the most accomplished fourth generation black historians, was arguably the most popular black power historian. With the growth of black studies, Bennett's audience grew, shaking up the historical profession.[23]

Fourth generation historians, specifically Bennett, rejected the interpretations of American historiography's great men, even Lincoln, the once "Great Emancipator."[24] Though Bennett did not speak for all black historians, his assertion represented the radical attitudes of the fourth generation. Vincent Harding, a contemporary of Bennett's, helped form the Institute of the

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[21] L.D Reddick, *Crusader Without Violence: The First Biography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959).
[22] See 1980s King biographies, David Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (Morrow, 1986); Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-63* (Simon & Schuster, 1988).
[23] James E. West, "Lerone Bennett, Jr.: A Life in Popular Black History." *The Black Scholar* 47, no. 4 (2017): 3–17.
[24] See "Reexamining the Racial Record of Abraham Lincoln," *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* no. 29 (Autumn 2000): 126-131.

Black World (IBW) in 1969.[25] Based in Atlanta, The IBW was a collection of black intellectuals who studied the nonviolence movement, black nationalism and Marxism. As it pertains to black biography, the IBW existed from 1969-1983, resulting in the study of more radical biographical subjects. Therefore, those who followed this generation formed historiography's most interdisciplinary and radical era.

Once the black power students became professional historians, historiography radically changed. Now, there were both white and black women at the center of historical debates. While previous historiography ignored or overlooked significant women, the 1980s historians corrected those silences in the historiography. Black women became the field's most transformative historians, incorporating black feminist ideology.

In 1979, John Hope Franklin became the president of the American Historical Association (AHA). An older Franklin witnessed and contributed to the transformation of American historiography. The following generations were finally controlling the historical pen. Franklin's election as president signaled the merge of two distinct historiographies. After a series of historical debates, Peter Novick published *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (1988), demonstrating the impact diverse and radical thought had on the field of history. In 1989, David Levering Lewis made the following statement regarding African American historiography,

> "Although African American historiography has reached full adulthood, there remains an ambivalence about its place. That ambivalence, a consequence of an evolving, special relationship with what may be characterized as mainstream history, manifests itself in the psychological bedrock of many historians."[26]

[25] Derrick E. White, "Black World View": The Institute of The Black World's Promotion of Pragmatic Nationalism, 1969–1974, *The Journal of African American History* 95, no. 3-4 (Summer-Fall 2010): 369-391.
[26] David Levering Lewis, "Radical History: Toward Inclusiveness," *Journal of American History* 76, no. 2 (September 1989): 472.

After the incorporation of gender and culture studies, one could argue that historiography is still in need of a definitive school of thought. Postmodern historians argue that rigid definitions have led to the division and misinterpretations that plague the field of history today.[27]

However, I argue that a new consensus would be beneficial to the field of history. Can historians not all agree that the traditional school had it wrong? Can historians not all agree that a solely white interpretation of American history is counterproductive? The answers to those questions are more universal than one might think. In 2024, even the most traditional historians agree with those assertions. Black biography has suffered from a lack of a consensus historiography. Like no time before, there are countless avenues for research in black biography. New Left historians who despise the notion of "great men history", have more of an opportunity to change that.

Much like white historiography, the great men of black history have been taken to task and rightfully so. In a field as young as black biography, one could argue revisionism is a couple years too early. No figure demonstrates this point more so than Booker T. Washington. With the publication of Washington's papers in the 1970s and the ever-present Du Bois school of thought, he has suffered from unfair and unpopular interpretations. In 2005, black public intellectuals debated over his reputation in *Uncle Tom or New Negro? African Americans Reflect on Booker T. Washington and Up from Slavery 100 Years Later.* In the debates about Washington's legacy, the merging of black and white historiographies has led to a fairer interpretation. Southern white historians, specializing in white violence and Ku Klux Klan historiography, have been critiqued for adding to one-sided Reconstruction historiography. However, it was southern violence

[27] See Louise A. Tilly, "Gender, Women's History, and Social History," *Social Science History* 13, no. 4 (Winter 1989): 439-462; Nancy F. Cott and Drew Gilpin Faust, "Foreword: Recent Directions in Gender and Women's History," *OAH Magazine of History* 19, no. 2 (March 2005): 4-5.

historiography that gave Washington's legacy its proper context. Violence historians brought forth evidence of political and racial violence during the black nadir, Washington's era of black leadership. Robert Norrell, professor at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville, wrote arguably the fairest biography of Washington, concluding that,

> "His efforts to shape his own symbolism, and that of African Americans as a group, should be marked as a shrewd and valiant effort to lift his people."[28]

Rather than tear down the "great men" of black history, new generation scholars must look to explore those who operated outside of privilege and power. Jessie Carney Smith, librarian emerita at Fisk University, published numerous encyclopedias highlighting black men and women. Smith's encyclopedias gave every historian a starting point for new biographical subjects. Black biography has never rooted in romanticism. Rather, it was rooted in revisionism, a true example of American patriotism. Foundational principles of freedom, equality, and civil liberty were only emboldened and uplifted by black biography. It has been this historiography that has been most effective in changing the hearts of the American people. So, what is black biography in the twenty-first century?

Black leadership has never been more diverse and decentralized. If someone was asked, who is the chosen leader of the race, they would conjure up several names, including men and women. Arguably, the most meaningful black autobiographies have come from the first black president of the U.S.[29] Despite that, Barack Obama would not consider himself a race leader, at least not in the vein of the abolitionists and civil rights activists. Subsequently, autobiography can appear to have lost its relevance to the black community.

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[28] Robert Norrell, "Have Historians Given Booker T. Washington a Bad Rap?" *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* no. 62 (Winter 2008/2009): 69.
[29] See Barack Obama, *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* (New York: Times Books, 1995); *The Audacity of Hope* (New York: Crown, 2006); *A Promised Land* (New York: Crown, 2020).

I contend that the autobiographical tradition has finally been supplanted by traditional biography, a testament to the evolution and the gradual integration of the field. Historians are finally able to the totality of the black experience. Black historiography has reached the place that the traditional historiography had reached years ago. Today, black historians benefit from extensive source material in the form of manuscript collections, meaning endless potential for black biographies. Black biography production directly correlates with the publication of significant papers. For example, Booker T. Washington's first major biography followed *Booker T. Washington Papers, vol. I & II* in the 1970s. In 1992, David Levering Lewis's Pulitzer-prize winning biography followed the publication of Du Bois's papers at University of Massachusetts at Amherst. Lastly, Jefferey Stewart's award-winning biography followed the publication of Alain Locke's collection at Yale.

A recent trend in the field of black biography has been the analysis of black librarians, bibliophiles and collectors. Amongst scholars, there has been an increasing interest in the establishment of black archives and collections. Therefore, black biography has embarked on its new biographical journey, exploring those who remade American historiography.[30]

[30] "Remade American history" is a reference to Laura Helton's recent publication, *Scattered and Fugitive Things: How Black Collectors Created Archives and Remade History* (Columbia University Press, 2024).