2. The Beggar's Case

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As we saw in chapter 1, opponents of the Civil War invalid pension system drew a bright line between veterans who received federal benefits and those who rejoined the labor force. But it should not surprise us that these distinctions were hardly cut and dried, or that pensioned veterans often worked. Many veterans, especially those with lower disability ratings, had trouble making ends meet with their pensions alone. Getting by was especially difficult immediately after the war, when benefits were in fact rather modest. It was only after years of lobbying that rates of pay rose to the lavish levels that enraged pension skeptics. Consequently, many disabled veterans returned to the jobs they held before the war. Others discovered they could neither live on their benefits nor find work for which they were suited. To top off their pensions, many of these latter appealed not to the state but to strangers. On streets across the nation, they were joined by comrades whose claims had been outright rejected, but also by people thrust out of the labor force for any number of reasons during the decades of economic tumult that followed the Civil War.

A conspicuous presence in public life, these “beggars” were often regarded as lazy, deceitful, and worse, even by those who gave them money.1 Many street operators no doubt shrugged off these insults and attacks, seeing pity and disgust as two sides of the same coin. Others, though, insisted that they were working—not as manual laborers but as writers. As Susan M. Schweik and Ann Fabian have shown, in the postbellum era poor people commonly solicited donations in return for broadsides, handbills, or whole books of their own composition (figure 2.1).2 “Mendicant literature” did not originate in the late nineteenth century, of course. But the rise of inexpensive job printing made it easier than ever
for people without means to bring their writing before the public. As Schweik notes, mendicant literature of the era runs the gamut from brief lyric poems to multivolume prose narratives.³ Ultimately, though, the genre was defined less by a given set of formal conventions than by how these ephemeral texts were used—namely, to “transform” begging into work. Where mendicancy was outlawed or unwelcome, poor and disabled people could point to their writing as a visible means of support and perhaps avoid arrest or violence. Where begging was tolerated, mendicant literature fundamentally changed the nature of the charitable exchange along similar lines. What might otherwise appear a pathos-laden encounter between donor and supplicant became an economic transaction between buyer and seller. That this transformation was never complete or entirely persuasive only added to its appeal. Rapt but circumspect donors could convince themselves they were paying for someone else’s labor while luxuriating in romantic fantasies of selfless compassion. And even the mendicant writers most seriously committed to their craft knew what they stood to gain by keeping up sentimental appearances: steady business.

In the annals of literary history, mendicant writing often appears as a colorful footnote to more canonical developments or a transgressive inspiration for better-known writers.⁴ Thanks in large part to Schweik’s research, the genre is now recognized as a crucial archive of vernacular disability culture. But the sleight of hand with which turn-of-the-century mendicant writers transformed begging into work also finds an unlikely parallel in the era’s changing attitudes toward charitable and philanthropic giving. For much of US history, charity was seen as a necessary evil. Even when guided by the best of intentions and the noblest of sympathies, a common refrain went, charity too easily fosters idleness, the root cause of pauperism. Better to let the poor learn the value of self-reliance, no matter the hardships they might encounter along the way, than to subsidize their moral failures. This diagnosis remained persuasive well into the postbellum period (and continues to find traction today). But if in previous eras outrage over indiscriminate almsgiving led to forceful (if soon forgotten) calls for self-restraint, in the latter half of the nineteenth century reformers set out to purge charity of its emotional charge once and for all. To do so, advocates of so-called scientific charity endeavored to shift the scene of charitable exchange from the street to the page, thus replacing the vexed immediacy of personal encounter with the rational mediation of the document.⁵ Though manipulative beggars and reckless pedestrians
might indulge in the pleasures of arbitrary giving, charity workers prided themselves on being white-collar professionals. Perhaps unsurprisingly, reformers oversold the novelty of scientific charity and the strength of their own resolve. But they also overlooked how much their methods shared with the practices and people they aimed to police. In becoming scientific, modern charity took a page out of the mendicant writer’s book.

2.1 “Being so crippled,... he is unable to do the day’s work of an ordinary laboring man, and the only means left to him to make an honorable living, is in selling the following original poem.”
To be sure, scientific charity’s genre of choice was not mendicant literature. The movement turned instead to the novel mode of bureaucratic documentation and evaluation that would come to be known as social casework. As practiced today by social workers, case managers, and many others, social casework encompasses a variety of methods and goals. But as a “little tool” of professionalization in the late nineteenth century, social casework served a narrower purpose: ensuring that decisions about giving money to a particular individual (or cause) were rooted in objective facts and not gut feelings. Doing so meant at base affirming the incommensurability of work and emotion, a touchstone for the emergent regime of bureaucratic rationality but also for older ideologies of gender and sexuality. Bureaucracy, as Max Weber observed, requires “the successful exclusion of love, hate, and all purely personal, irrational, and emotional elements to which calculation is alien, from the process of discharging official business.” In order to assert their professional bona fides, charity workers thus had to hold the vagaries of emotion at bay. But making the business of charity official also meant rejecting the field’s historical association with women and the feminized excesses of pity and compassion. Armed with the protocols of social casework, charity workers—men and women alike—would subject poverty and social need to the rational (and hence masculine) intervention of bureaucratic documentation. Only then could charity work become work.

Formally speaking, social casework at the turn of the century was a peculiar and peculiarly collaborative exercise in life writing. Compiled from documents and records composed by both charity workers and charity seekers—the people whose lives were to be rationally parsed and committed to the page—casework belongs to the longer cultural genealogy that contemporary scholars often theorize simply as “the case.” Etymologically speaking, case derives from the Latin word casus and the Middle English cas, meaning a fall, as in something that befalls someone. Cases involve specific individuals and events, but they can only be understood comparatively. To say “this is a case,” in other words, is to generalize. It is to say “this is a case of that.” This tension between the general and the particular defines the case (and the case study) across the disciplines. As Lauren Berlant argues, the case “hovers above the singular, the general, and the normative.” It is “any irritating obstacle to clarity” that, in its call for resolution, reveals more about the “conventions for folding the singular into the general” than about the singular itself. André Jolles puts the matter more concisely: the case is not a record of fact but a prompt for decision:
is this a case of that?\textsuperscript{11} For turn-of-the-century advocates of rational charity, the question was whether someone could meet the responsibilities of economic citizenship in the future and was thus a deserving recipient of aid in the present. Crucially, answering this question meant deciding on an applicant’s work ethic in order to reduce even the most singular of lives to a single word—deserving or undeserving.\textsuperscript{12}

This theory of the case, as it were, is not hard to substantiate. One does not have to spend long in the records of the New York Charity Organization Society or the Carnegie Corporation to see how casework rewrites the messy parataxis of lived experience into prompts for objective decision making. But neither is it uncommon in the archives of scientific charity for cases to feel less than resolved or still mired in the purely personal. Especially in dossiers that incorporate a variety of materials—from first-person affidavits to transcribed interviews and field notes—casework is often a muddle of competing voices and agendas. In some instances, this cacophony stems from the difficulty of nailing down a sequence of events or verifying a set of details, the inconsistencies in one document calling for the proliferation of ever more. And yet, the casework amassed by turn-of-the-century charity workers also registers the contingent and often contradictory efforts of applicants to contest how their life stories entered the file. Many applicants challenged how casework accounts for the particular through the general, arguing, “I’m not this—I’m that.” Others set out to trouble the foundational distinction that officials drew between work and emotion. Indeed, not only are tales of misfortune and woe hardly uncommon in the case files of scientific charity, but these stories often interrogate the cultural work of emotion and its relation to writing. Charity workers, this history of generic reckoning and reclamation makes clear, were not alone in borrowing from mendicant writers at the turn of the twentieth century. Charity seekers did as well.

This chapter explores how the rationalization of private giving at the turn of the twentieth century produced a counterarchive of the case rooted in vernacular disability culture. Focusing on the philanthropic funding of Black industrial education, my own case studies are drawn from the files of the Rockefeller-backed General Education Board (\textit{geb}), one of several corporate philanthropies that came to dominate the educational landscape of the rural South after the Civil War. Committed to the large-scale implementation of scientific charity, the \textit{geb} joined a wave of Northern philanthropy that sought to reconcile the reformist aspirations of elite whites in the North with the white supremacy of the New South. Instead
of following their hearts, as sentimental abolitionists had a generation earlier, Northern reformers were to be guided by data. Only verifiably deserving Black schools would be funded—that is, those that adopted orthodox industrial curricula and could demonstrate their commitment to churning out well-disciplined workers unlikely to upset the delicate racial balance of the New South. The gebe and other philanthropic outfits relied on meticulous casework, record keeping, and investigation to hold up their end of the bargain. Black industrial schools played no less important a role. Teachers, administrators, and even students worked in a variety of print genres to transform their schools and even themselves into cases. But this ephemeral archive of (institutional) self-representation also pushed back against the conventions of social casework—not least of all against the rigid distinction the genre was meant to preserve between emotion and work.

The story told here thus builds on the history recounted in chapter 1, broadening our sense of the print culture of social welfare by turning from public provision to private giving. The invalid pension claim mediated between individuals and the “precocious welfare state” of the post–Civil War era, and social casework played a similar role in the evolution of charitable and philanthropic practice. To sketch out this story, I draw on a rich body of interdisciplinary scholarship that traces how scientific charity paved the way for foundation philanthropy and, more recently, the evidence-based project of effective altruism. In focusing less on legal or social history, however, than on the documentary genre of social casework, this chapter ultimately asks how people caught in the clerical networks of scientific charity negotiated an ideological truism equally binding on either side of the public/private divide: only those who work or are willing to work deserve help. The ephemeral traces of these negotiations reveal that the disciplinary ambitions of charitable and philanthropic institutions did not go uncontested, least of all by Black educators who found themselves beholden to Northern capital. Indeed, the textual record of scientific charity represents a forgotten repository of African American print culture and Black disability writing, an archive in which advocating for oneself also meant interrogating how and why causes become legible only as cases.

In this regard, the vernacular history of the case sketched out here also speaks to efforts across the disciplines to reimagine the relation between work and emotion. From feminist reclamations of “the unfinished business of sentimentality” to labor histories of the freak show in disability studies and
generative elaborations of Afro-pessimism, Black optimism, and “wake work” in Black studies—across a range of critical traditions, scholars have begun to rethink what work emotion can do and how it might bring about structural, even utopian, change.\textsuperscript{16} At first glance, the circulation of social casework in the print culture of social history—and especially in the philanthropic funding of Black industrial education—might seem decidedly less ambitious. Given the asymmetrical power relations at the heart of the charitable enterprise, after all, even the most dissident reappropriations of social casework usually aim less at escaping than at gaming the system. And yet, the counterarchive of the case explored in this chapter, particularly in its relation to the genre of mendicant literature, may point these ongoing conversations about the “cultural work of emotion” in a new direction.\textsuperscript{17} The question to ask is perhaps not only how emotion can become genuinely productive, but rather how we can accord emotion social value or even social utility without putting it to work.

**The Science of Begging**

To grasp the idea of social casework, we might imagine laying hold of an individual applicant’s dossier. Pressed between thumb and forefinger, the feel of the outermost folder—of heavier stock than the files within—augurs a sense of resolution. It is a tactile reassurance that all relevant details have been gathered, but also that these details matter only because they can be generalized into a clerical directive: this or that pile. Indeed, our folder first becomes a case not when we press it closed but when we place it atop others. We have the sense, moreover, that no emotion was involved in this operation, as if the decision had been taken out of our hands entirely. It is a matter not of intuition, that is, much less compassion, but a rote and almost automatic following-through after a rational process of elimination has run its course. By the same token, we also have a feeling of accomplishment. Coming to a decision on this or that case is evidence of productivity—or work having been done. This thought experiment, of course, bears all the hallmarks of wishful thinking. The case is defined, after all, as much by the nagging detail that can’t quite be ignored as by the promise of abstract clarity. And try though we might to follow bureaucratic best practices, depending on what exactly is in the folder we would will into a case, there is nothing to say that we haven’t actually been following our sympathies or even our desires all along.
The case, in all of its ambivalence and irresolution, first became part of US social welfare practice in the charity organization society (cos) movement, which popularized the paradigm of scientific charity. Founded in England in 1869 and soon spreading from Buffalo, New York, to hundreds of US cities, the cos movement pledged to eliminate “indiscriminate almsgiving” of any kind. Charged encounters between beggars and pedestrians were to be made a thing of the past, as was the aid arbitrarily given by civic and religious groups. Most donors, cos officials conceded, were inspired by pity and benevolence. But behind such sympathy was a desire for emotional gratification that was too easily sated and brought little genuine benefit to those in need. “Relief is easy to give,” reformers argued. “Permanent improvement is slow and hard.” Charity organization societies thus aimed to create an objective bulwark against the sentimental status quo, not by disbursing funds of their own but by coordinating resources among various benevolent societies and donors—and ensuring that generosity was balanced with self-help. The latter almost always took precedence over the former. Not only did cos agents pride themselves on giving the poor only what they earned, but in returning clients to work they hoped to end the need for charity in the first place. For this to happen, wealthy Americans would have to follow the “well defined principles” of scientific charity and give with their heads rather than with their hearts. Charity seekers would have to learn that “honest employment, the work that God gives every man to do, is the truest basis of relief.”

The novel rhetoric of scientific charity notwithstanding, the cos movement initially shared a great deal with earlier benevolent traditions. When the first charity organization societies opened in the 1880s, in fact, investigations were carried out not by credentialed specialists but by socially minded middle-class women who volunteered to go “friendly-visiting” among the poor. These amateur agents collected information and conducted interviews, but their chief task was to lead by example and teach poor people the habits of middle-class respectability. These practices were rooted in the assumption that poverty was a moral failing and could best be remedied by contact with one’s “social betters.” By century’s end, more dynamic and less moralistic ideas of social need came to prominence. As a result, charity workers gradually began to professionalize. Crucial to this process was the formalization of the ad hoc methods of friendly visiting into a specialized and exhaustive regime of investigation and record keeping. Indeed, municipal organizations aimed to compile files on anyone...
who applied for assistance from any organization in the city. The information collected was to be filed in “registration bureaus” that were available to both private donors and charitable organizations to consult when evaluating new applicants. When cos agents were asked about someone who did not yet have a dossier, in many cases a “special examination” would even be launched on the spot to fill the gap.

No one played a more important role in professionalizing the investigatory work of scientific charity than Mary Richmond, with whom the term social casework originates. In her writing and from posts at the Philadelphia cos and the Russell Sage Foundation, Richmond standardized the training charity workers received and systematized the paperwork they produced. Social casework, Richmond maintained, was “a comprehensive method of inquiry and treatment” that began with the gathering of “social evidence.” Of relevance were “all facts as to personal or family history which, taken together, indicate the nature of a given client’s social difficulties and the means to their solution.” These facts often came directly from clients themselves, whether in the interview process or in personal letters and affidavits. After compiling these materials, charity workers consulted with the cos board to determine the right “social diagnosis” and create an appropriate plan of “social treatment.” The latter varied from client to client. The goal, however, remained the same: economic self-support. In many instances, the solutions proposed reflected the male breadwinner model, but at other times labor ideology trumped normative gender politics. As Emily K. Abel has shown, cos reformers often sought to institutionalize ill or disabled working-age men so that their wives, unburdened of their care, could join the workforce themselves. The oft-remarked uniqueness of every alms seeker notwithstanding, social casework thus inevitably subordinated the details of personal history to casework’s generic raison d’être—deciding whether the individual in question was willing to work.

The story of “how a crippled man became a shoemaker,” as told by the Associated Charities of Atlanta, exemplifies how charity officials set out to transform personal histories into social casework. “On the first day of December, 1909, as this man walked along the street upon his crutch,” he came upon “a gentleman” striding in the opposite direction. Not the pathos-laden exchange we might expect, what next happened bears out that gentleman’s commitment to the ideals of scientific charity and his mistrust of traditional almsgiving. “Noting his crippled condition,” the gentleman “stopped long enough to tell [the disabled pedestrian] to go to
the Associated Charities.” This the latter did, thereby beginning the formal process of investigation, documentation, and individualized assistance that would return him to productive wage labor:

A kindly interview brought out the facts that he was thirty years old, and had a wife and three small children. Until a year previous he had worked on a farm, when he lost his leg by an accidental gun-shot wound. Coming into town, for he could no longer support his family in the country, they were all living in one small room, rented from his wife’s sister, herself a poor dressmaker. The wife worked in a factory and was earning $4.50 a week. The husband took care of the children.

“Why couldn’t your wife stay at home with the children, do the sewing, and let you find some light work?” He was asked.

“She can’t see to sew, and it makes her eyes hurt,” was his reply.

With the facts of the case established, the “rest of the story” unfolds as a sequence of coordinated interventions undertaken by various agents in the community. One by one, the barriers to economic participation are removed. The intervention is ultimately deemed a success, however, not only because it helps the disabled man rejoin the workforce but also because it reaffirms the economic prerogative of husbands and fathers:

An oculist examined the wife’s eyes.

An optician gave her the glasses.

An institution supplied temporary employment to the work at which he proved his willingness to work.

 Relatives cared for the children while both parents worked.

A shoemaker agreed to take the man in his shop and teach him the trade.

A Sunday-School class provided money equivalent to the wife’s earnings so that she might care for the children while the man served his apprenticeship in the shoemaker’s shop.

A public hospital treated both husband and wife during temporary sickness.

The same Sunday-School class guaranteed the cost of a shoemaker’s outfit for the man and paid rent while he was building up a business.

 Numbers of individuals were found to give him work.

The result has been that this man paid for his outfit and is now making three times as much as his wife formerly earned. The oldest child is in school, and has done so well that he has been advanced in his grade. In short, a hovel has been made into a prosperous home.
There is certainly no reason, of course, to believe that the plan of “social treatment” created for the disabled shoemaker was as effective as this account suggests. But in its brief and evenly punctuated progress from precisely defined problem to perfectly managed solution, this succinct rendering of the shoemaker’s personal history exemplifies the case method that originated with organized charity. A “kindly interview” yields a plethora of “facts” about the client’s circumstances, only the most relevant of which are recorded in the initial narrative summary. As if to illustrate visually how these details are then streamlined into a logical sequence of issues to be addressed, the list that follows is a compendium of resources identified and actions taken. The successful conclusion of this process—a “crippled” man’s redemption as a productive shoemaker and a hovel “made into a prosperous home”—in turn bears out the tension between the particular and the universal that defines the case as such. The client’s personal story, in other words, is reduced to the case of a potentially and then demonstrably productive citizen and male breadwinner.33

In practice, however, social casework was rarely this straightforward. Nor was it always objective, the efforts of Richmond and others to professionalize the field notwithstanding. Historians who work in the archives of the New York Charity Organization Society, for instance, often note that applicants regularly relied on conventional representations of misfortune and direct emotional appeals. As David Huyssen suggests, this fact may well reflect a central power imbalance. Whereas charity workers “bore the perquisites of inquiry, judgment and most importantly record keeping,” applicants were left instead to their own devices and “individual powers of persuasion.”34 At times this meant stressing one’s work ethic above all else. As Abel writes, charity seekers were under enormous pressure to couch their appeals in the idiom of productivity and self-reliance. At the same time, however, many also wrote and spoke (in interviews transcribed for the file) “the language of emotion and intimacy.”35 With these kinds of appeals, Abel notes, charity seekers endeavored not only to engender sympathy in the charity workers with whom they interacted but also to “[maximize] their autonomy by asserting an alternative set of values.”36 These assertions could take any number of different forms, of course, and often ask to be read between the lines. At other times, charity seekers struck out more directly against the narrative discipline of social casework. Huyssen recounts the story of a woman who stormed into the New York cos office carrying a written “Synopsis of My Life,” a letter seeking vindication for the “lies” that the cos investigator had written about her
“on your long Postal Cards,” or the memorandum blanks used by the charity officials. Whatever result this protest might have yielded, both the “Postal Cards” and the “Synopsis of My Life” they inspired were placed in the applicant’s file—but further evidence to be considered in deciding on the woman’s case.

The contestations that mark the fissure between casework in theory and in practice are all the more pronounced in the records compiled by early twentieth-century philanthropic foundations. Financed with the fortunes amassed during the Gilded Age and made possible by sweeping changes in federal law, the philanthropic foundation was heir to the philosophical ethos and documentary protocols of the cos movement. Indeed, Andrew Carnegie and other industrialists proudly acknowledged how the earlier assault on indiscriminate almsgiving had inspired them to approach philanthropy with the same managerial detachment that had made them rich. Instead of investigating and evaluating individual charity seekers, modern philanthropic foundations set out to solve intractable social problems. But the tools they used to do so were nonetheless grounded in the casework methods first developed by charity reformers a few decades earlier. Each organization, institution, or initiative that applied for funding was rigorously investigated with an eye to determining both its operational efficiency and its potential for social utility. Even more so than applicants swept up in the rational bureaucracy of organized charity, however, the institutions that sought philanthropic foundations took on much of this documentary burden themselves. As such, the casework that documents these exchanges pushes at the genre’s limits, contesting not only the terms on which foundation philanthropy sought to fold the particular into the general but also the too-fine distinction it drew between work and emotion.

As twentieth-century philanthropic foundations continued the shift to bureaucratized and rational giving inaugurated by the cos movement, they took on a range of social issues. Education was a consistent concern, especially in the South, as it had been since the end of the Civil War. Indeed, the earliest substantial philanthropic foundations in the United States were created after the war to support Southern education, on a segregated basis. The first philanthropic foundation that addressed itself solely to African American education was the John F. Slater Fund for the Education of Freedmen. Created in 1882, the Slater Fund set two lasting precedents for the philanthropic support of Black education. First, only schools with industrial (rather than classical or liberal arts) curricula were
supported. Second, as early as the 1890s the Slater Fund brought the businesslike methods and documentary rigor of scientific charity to bear on an altruistic project historically associated with the sentimental politics of abolitionism and, after the Civil War, dominated by Protestant efforts to “elevate the Freedmen.” Broad enthusiasm for the Slater Fund’s methods and priorities among wealthy whites led in 1902 to the establishing of the geb, a Rockefeller-funded trust that would gradually come to monopolize the philanthropic funding of Black education in the South. The geb administered grants of its own, but it was also an umbrella organization that oversaw smaller foundations such as the Slater Fund, the Peabody Fund, the Jeannes Foundation Negro Rural School Fund, the Phelps-Stokes Fund, and the Julius Rosenwald Fund.

The foundation era of philanthropic support for Black industrial education ushered in by the geb was at once a turning point and a natural progression for the reformist project of scientific charity. To be sure, cos reformers in the North rarely concerned themselves with the needs of Black communities. And for their part, African Americans in the South knew that applying for charity would do little good and probably a great deal of harm. White Southerners would almost certainly use these appeals to justify the race’s further disfranchisement. As such, foundation philanthropy was most Black Americans’ first exposure to the doctrine of scientific charity, tailored though that doctrine was to the racial dynamics of the Jim Crow South. Indeed, the labor ideology and investigatory methods used to discipline would-be beggars in the North dispensed with any but the barest semblance of objectivity below the Mason-Dixon line. Instead, the economic coercion of the market was explicitly deployed to enforce the social subordination of Black Americans. Racism became scientific anew, we might say, approximating less the rigor of positivist physiology than the precision of bureaucratic rationality. Scientific charity thus ensured that the philanthropic support of Black education did not disrupt the racial politics of the postbellum South. As such, decisions made about the productivity and deservingness of particular schools were not isolated judgments. Rather, in deciding the case of any given Black industrial school, philanthropic foundations were in effect making a pronouncement on the viability of the only path of social advancement that turn-of-the-century racial capitalism could imagine for African Americans—collective progress through market-based manual labor.

The stakes were thus high for the countless Black industrial schools founded across the South toward the end of the nineteenth century, the
so-called Little Tuskegees. At a minimum, qualifying for philanthropic support meant verifying that one’s curriculum was thoroughly industrial, often more difficult than might be assumed. Schools were also forced to negotiate the bureaucratic protocols of scientific charity. To be sure, the paperwork submitted to grantors like the GEB was only one part of a broader fundraising project that often included door-to-door campaigns in Northern cities and benefit concerts of various kinds. The most common method of fundraising, however, involved printing ephemeral promotional materials, typically on the school press. These documents included fact sheets, annual reports, institutional histories, student-run newspapers, and reprinted lectures. As Laura Wexler and Allyson Nadia Field have shown, photography and film also played a crucial part in this work. Across these different genres, schools sought not only to put themselves in the best possible light but also to demonstrate a mastery of the formal conventions of scientific charity. Pathos-laden appeals were to be avoided in favor of taking stock of past industriousness and future potential. Schools also adopted the cultural logic of the case by abstracting the particulars of institutional experience into a generalized portrait of deservingness. This latter strategy was not as obscure as it might sound and could be easily accomplished by returning the genre of the case to its roots in biography. Accordingly, the fundraising materials produced by Black educators and students told the story of their school’s merit by recounting the personal history of a prominent representative, often the school’s principal or founder.

Booker T. Washington’s *Up from Slavery* exemplified this genre of (auto)biography as case; it was enormously successful in raising money for Tuskegee Institute, including an unheard-of one-time donation of $600,000 from Andrew Carnegie. But *Up from Slavery* is representative for another reason as well, namely the animosity it engendered among less sympathetic members of the public for whom the fundraising that sustained Black industrial education amounted to little more than shameless begging. Washington was routinely scorned for having “never done anything except to demonstrate his skill as a beggar in raising a million dollars from Northern sentimentalists.” For his part, Washington seems to have greeted slander of this sort with humor. In *Up from Slavery* he even playfully refers to fundraising as “the science of what is called begging,” a strange phrase that conjures both the rhetorical tricks of the mendicant’s trade and the rational aspirations of charity reformers. Ultimately, however, Washington left little doubt that he sided with the...
rigorous methods of objective investigation and documentation pioneered by cos agents and later taken up by foundation philanthropies. Nor was his allegiance in spirit only. Washington recruited members of the New York cos for Tuskegee’s board and was himself a trusted adviser of the geb. In that capacity, he offered candid assessments of schools seeking funding and made what were often make-or-break recommendations. Unlike Washington, however, many of his protégés were far less concerned about the specter of “begging” that shaped public opinion about Black fundraising. And many drew on their own experiences of disability culture and mendicant literature to transform themselves and their schools into cases.

Embodying Institutional Authorship

It is perhaps surprising that disabled writers, much less disability culture, had a hand in shaping the self-representation of Black industrial education. The “postbellum, pre-Harlem” era in African American cultural history is punctuated by forceful affirmations of the normative health and ability of the Black body intended to counter popular conceptions of Black inferiority. We need look only to the promotional materials produced at Tuskegee, however, to see how the labor ethos that industrial education shared with scientific charity created both institutional and rhetorical space for people with disabilities. A case in point is *Tuskegee and Its People* (1905), an anthology of autobiographical essays by prominent alumni commemorating the school’s fifteenth anniversary. The contribution by William J. Edwards, who experienced chronic pain and impaired mobility as a result of childhood tuberculosis, is representative. In “Uplifting the Submerged Masses,” Edwards describes founding Snow Hill Normal and Industrial Institute in 1894 and soberly surveys the challenges that lay ahead. He is more succinct when writing about himself. “I need not tell of the hard times and suffering that I experienced before I entered [Tuskegee],” Edwards observes. “But knowing that I was without parents and being sick most of the time, my hardships can be imagined.” Edwards’s measured tone creates a sense of decorum and respectability; nor does he spell out what readers likely suspected—that in his youth Edwards had been a “beggar.”

Opting instead to abstract the particulars of his history into a few lines of schematic prose, Edwards encourages readers to make the caseworker’s “social diagnosis”: he was an “orphaned invalid” who went on to become a productive citizen.
Such a gloss is in keeping with the bootstrap message of *Tuskegee and Its People* as a whole. But Edwards’s essay did not find its earliest readership in Washington’s lavish promotional volume. Rather, “Uplifting the Submerged Masses” first appeared as a cheaply printed booklet that invited sympathetic readers to tear off one of the perforated “coupons” on the last page and return it with a donation (figure 2.2). This essay was one iteration of a career-long project that found Edwards endeavoring to translate the story of Snow Hill and his own biography into the idiom of the case, while also drawing on his mendicant roots. In 1918, Edwards did publish a formal memoir titled *Twenty-Five Years in the Black Belt*. But most of his writing during the period recounted in that book appeared in forms closer to the coupon than to the codex: pamphlets, newsletters, annual reports. Across these and other genres, Edwards’s practice was to redraft and recycle as the occasion required. Though careful to telegraph his mastery of the protocols of bureaucratic administration, Edwards also embraced a peculiarly embodied mode of institutional authorship in which his disability features prominently. Such a strategy would seem to flaunt the antimendicant politics of scientific charity and the ableism of Bookerite discourse but also to undercut the subordination of the particular to the general at the heart of the case. Frequent allusions to Edwards’s disability, however, are not meant to draw out the specificity of his personal experience. Instead, staging the obstinacy of his body allows Edwards to redirect the emotional spectacle fostered by the mendicant exchange in order to draw attention to the material conditions of Black industrial education.

Beginning in 1899, the documentary materials produced at Snow Hill typically recount some version of the following story, quoted here from a 1908 pamphlet titled *Some Results of the Snow Hill Normal and Industrial Institute* (figure 2.3): “From 1881 to 1888 might be considered as the sick period of my life, for during this time I was of but little use to myself and nothing but a burden to others. Instead of getting better, I gradually grew worse until it was with difficulty that I could move about. I used two sticks in trying to walk. My bed during this period consisted of a few ragged quilts spread upon the floor of the cabin at night.” Readers who consulted *Some Results* for statistics on Snow Hill’s industrial and academic performance might have been surprised to encounter a personal statement like this on the first page. But Edwards’s narrative serves here less to supplant the information later provided in charts and tables than to create room for thinking about how experience is abstracted into evidence and at what cost. Edwards goes on, for instance, to describe the extraordinary
2.2 Fundraising coupons distributed with Snow Hill pamphlets, ca. 1910.
effort he put into making his experience at Tuskegee appear typical. Like Martin A. Menafee, whose story we encountered in this book’s introduction, Edwards struggled most in the brickyard. “It was the only work that my physical condition would not allow me to do without suffering great pain,” Edwards notes, “but I did not complain. Neither did I tell anyone of my physical handicap. During my four years’ stay at Tuskegee, I did not make one complaint. Nor did any teacher complain of me.”53 It is perhaps not surprising that Edwards had to pass as nondisabled at Tuskegee; the school’s admissions forms declared in no uncertain terms that “cripples were under no circumstances to be admitted to the night school.”54 But in a booklet distributed among potential donors, this anecdote tells us as much about the physical hardships encountered by disabled students at Tuskegee as about the writerly challenge facing Edwards as the principal of Snow Hill. Transforming oneself into a case involves rewriting individual experiences such that they pass for results. But though Edwards suggests that his career at Tuskegee can be neatly folded into the school’s narrative of steady achievement, the lingering suggestion that his experience might be irreducibly singular is not without advantage. Noting that he did not measure up to his alma mater’s physical ideal also allows Edwards to intimate that Snow Hill could no longer count on financial support from the Tuskegee machine.55 As such, the analogy between his “sick period” and Snow Hill’s financial health signals Edwards’s keenness to pitch his appeal further afield and to cultivate a philanthropic network of his own.56 From this vantage, the principal’s disabled body is not the liability Bookerite doctrine would suppose but rather a proliferative nexus of new connections.

Photography was also integral to Edwards’s efforts to reembody institutional authorship in the era of foundation philanthropy. Like Tuskegee and Its People and other works of Bookerite uplift, the mailers produced at Snow Hill often include studio portraits of teachers and alumni and staged images of students at work. These photographs serve most explicitly to convey the school’s respectability and its embrace of orthodox industrial education. Particularly common are before-and-after images of students, school campuses, and neighboring communities. A favorite among Bookerite educators across the South, the genre was also a staple of late nineteenth-century reform culture more broadly. From Civil War-era cartes de visite that featured Black Americans prior to and following Emancipation to the intake and graduation snapshots produced at Carlisle Indian Industrial School and similar institutions, before-and-after
photography harnessed the seeming self-evidence of the visual in order to make social transformations legible on the individual body. Whether representing the movement from slavery to freedom, from “savagery” to “civilization,” or from idle matriculant to self-supporting graduate, before-and-after images at once naturalize the identities at either pole and posit an impassible divide between them. What these images do not represent, however, is the means by which the transformation at hand was effected. Viewers do not know or cannot see, that is, what exactly was done to make the before image into the after image. In the case of Black industrial schools, the absent motive force was nothing less than the work of industrial education as such. Viewers presented with photographs of entering
and graduating students might well appreciate that a change has taken place. But they are left to imagine for themselves how the men and women pictured in the after column became so industrious.

The before-and-after images featured in Snow Hill fundraising materials are no exception. The paired photographs with which Edwards sought to capture the transformations his students underwent give us little sense of the actual day-to-day work they performed. In many of these publications, though, Edwards does use strategically paired images to bring his own labor as principal—above all the work of fundraising—to the fore. *Snow Hill: A Light in the Black Belt* (1907), for instance, includes before-and-after images of Edwards himself (figures 2.4–2.5): the first shows Edwards “as he appeared when he entered Tuskegee in 1888,” and the second presents him as the esteemed principal of Snow Hill. At first blush, the rhetorical force of this comparison would seem to lie in the distinction it draws between the capable race man, recognizable by the sartorial trappings of middle-class respectability, and the shiftless teenager, whose ill-fitting garb of coarse material seems to bespeak a life of bare necessity. Already acquainted with Edwards’s story, readers would likely have identified the young man as a beggar. This moral distinction between before and after is also shored up by the framing of each image. The oval portrait of “W.J. Edwards”—the principal identified by name rather than by the time and place of his photographing—is a study in Victorian propriety. The rectangular shape of the before image, by contrast, trades what Allan Sekula calls the “honorary” function of studio portraiture for the “repressive” function of surveillance photography. Whereas the elder Edwards looks directly at the viewer, his posture calmly telegraphing self-possession, the younger man exposes as much of his face as possible to the disciplinary gaze of the camera. The resulting image resembles nothing so much as a police booking photo, as if for the crime of vagrancy or “unsightly begging.” Whatever charge the viewer might imagine, the takeaway here would seem clear: Edwards before shares nothing with Edwards after.

Readers might come to a different conclusion, though, by contemplating the missing third term in this before-and-after pairing. How exactly, that is, did the unsightly beggar become the respected school principal? Given that *Snow Hill: A Light in the Black Belt* was intended to convince donors of the school’s industrial bona fides, most readers would likely have assumed that the transformation here was wrought by the careful and methodical intervention of Bookerite pedagogy. But absent visual evidence of Edwards’s education, we might also speculate that the distinction
2.4–2.5 Edwards before and after Tuskegee, from *Snow Hill: A Light in the Black Belt* (1907).
between Edwards before and after should be chalked up to the other mode of development implied by these images—namely, the natural progression of aging. Edwards, in other words, might have changed with the passage of time alone. A counterintuitive corollary would seem then at hand. The trappings of respectability aside, Edwards might not have been transformed in any meaningful way. Rather than document the dramatic change wrought by Bookerite education, from this vantage the paired images of Edwards bear witness to a more modest family resemblance of sorts—between the younger and the elder Edwards, to be sure, but also between the ostensibly different endeavors each pursues. If the first image invites us to imagine Edwards as a young mendicant, the second shows the revered principal making a similar if more respectable appeal. Both are ultimately engaged in the work of self-presentation. Crucially, this labor leads not to the creation of a wholly new identity but to the abstraction of the self into a form more immediately legible to the audience in question, whether pedestrians, wealthy donors, or charitable organizations.

From *Some Results* to *A Light in the Black Belt*, the fundraising materials produced at Snow Hill thus orchestrate scenes of seemingly sensational encounter to stress the labor of abstraction demanded of street mendicants and grant seekers alike in the age of scientific charity. As such, the intransigence of the body in these ephemeral documents is not an impediment to the generalizing logic of the case but a strategic means of its fulfillment. In addition to pamphlets and annual reports, printed on the school press and distributed to prospective donors, large and small, much of Edwards’s writing on behalf of Snow Hill took the form of personal correspondence with individual caseworkers and bureaucrats. In these documents, typically written on school stationery and modeled loosely on the conventions of the business letter, Edwards likewise drew attention to his body. In this context, though, his interest turns to exploring the kinds of social relationships that constellate around personal narratives constructed as cases. Though the occasion for Edwards’s writing was inevitably a grantor’s request for information—an inquiry about Snow Hill’s budget or enrollment, for instance, or its prospects for future growth—the letters he wrote to philanthropic organizations such as the GEB were usually addressed to particular caseworkers or bureaucrats and often adopted a tone of familiarity. To be sure, such formalities were in many ways par for the course, reflecting at once the deference that grantees were still expected to perform and the origins of the modern report in traditional epistolary forms. 

For Edwards, however, blurring the individual and the institutional was
not a gesture of simple politeness. It was also a means of reframing the nominally objective bureaucratic encounter as a case study in friendship.61

A case in point, as it were, is Edwards’s decade-long correspondence with Wallace Buttrick, who became the GEB’s first secretary and executive officer in 1903 and, after numerous other such roles, was appointed president in 1917. After years of limiting himself to discussing Snow Hill’s financial and material needs, Edwards’s letters suddenly took a strangely personal turn (figure 2.6). As if angling, in fact, for a return to the emotional encounters targeted for elimination by the Cos reformers who paved the way for foundation philanthropy, Edwards started to address Buttrick as a confidant. “About twenty-two years ago,” the first such letter in this vein begins, as Edwards was “partly recovering from an illness” that had left him all but “helpless to [himself] and made [him] a burden on others for seven years,” he learned about an upcoming church meeting. Getting there was no small ordeal, particularly given that his neighbors did little to hide their disapproval of him. Edwards thus resolved to make his way there unseen:

After all the other people had gone I would walk slowly behind and would wait a short distance from the church in the dark of the night until the service had begun, then I would creep up close to the rear of the church, where I could hear every word the preacher would say. After the sermon in these country churches, the negroes usually take up as much more time in praying for sinners and collecting money, (taking up collection, it is called) as the preacher consumes in his sermon. At the beginning of this latter service, I would start on my return home getting there far in advance of those who remained until the service was closed.62

It was at this meeting, as he lay hidden from the scrutinizing gazes of his neighbors, that Edwards heard about Booker T. Washington for the first time. The seed was planted, Edwards suggests, and the details of his travel to Tuskegee and his subsequent academic career would work themselves out in due time. Framed in this manner, Edwards’s backstory would seem predictable enough. But as communicated to a bureaucrat with whom he had corresponded for a decade without mentioning his illness, this anecdote gives pause. It is perhaps less important for the information it relays than for how it serves to disrupt philanthropic business as usual. Indeed, Edwards’s unexpected recourse to the details of his childhood strain at the generic limits of the case by prompting Buttrick to reciprocate what amounts to Edwards’s gesture of friendship. To be sure, Edwards and
Buttrick are not friends in any conventional sense. But in strategically disclosing his disability, Edwards does give the lie to rational charity’s blanket prohibition of emotion. He not only points out the obvious—that correspondents of such long acquaintance could not help but develop a mutual investment—but he also intimates that friendship itself is a case of sorts. There is to every friendship, of course, an intimate quality of the irreducibly personal and particular. But as a category of connection, friendship is nonetheless an abstract concept that some relationships fulfill and others do not. In this way, Edwards retools the conventional pathos that charity reformers likened to “indiscriminate almsgiving” by making himself into a very particular kind of case, a friend. As if repurposing, in fact, an earlier cos slogan—“Not alms but a friend”—Edwards works to convince his bureaucratic interlocutor, heir to that reformist movement, that he intends to return the favor.

Edwards’s formal memoir, Twenty-Five Years in the Black Belt, is at once the culmination of and a departure from the earlier experiments in
autobiography that fueled his fundraising on behalf of Snow Hill. Assembled largely from the pamphlets and circulars printed over the course of the prior two decades, this book recalibrates Edwards's ephemeral explorations of the tension between the particular and the general in part by blurring the lines between the informational and the aesthetic. He begins on familiar terrain, assuring readers that what follows is an objective account of an individual life that will nonetheless have much to say about the merit of the institution in question. But readers do not have to take Edwards’s word; he calls on “George W. Keyser, M.D.” to authorize his as a representative case: “[Edwards] had been sick for several months from scrofula and it had affected the bone of his left arm (hinneras) near the elbow joint, and the heel bone (os calcis) of his left foot. It was with much difficulty and pain that he walked at all…. The work of this pupil of Booker Washington—carried out under adverse circumstances—is worthy of emulation. He has, and is, now, doing much good work for his race.”63

The orthopedic surgeon, flaunting his Latinate vocabulary and diagnostic acumen, here replaces the abolitionist as the white authenticator of Black memoir. But Keyser’s comments do more than validate the truthfulness of Edwards’s autobiography. In attesting to how Edwards learned to walk, the physician also sanctions the allegorical leap that Twenty-Five Years in the Black Belt appears to demand. We have it on solid authority, that is, that Edwards’s past achievements in the “work” of physical rehabilitation exemplify the “work” of racial uplift that Edwards advanced through the literary labor of fundraising. But exactly what kind of work does this latter autobiographical project perform? Twenty-Five Years in the Black Belt offers any number of answers—bring in philanthropic support, increase enrollment, and improve the output of student industries, for instance. Such, of course, are the quantitative benchmarks we would expect in any accounting of institutional efficiency. And from this vantage, Edwards’s narrative of long odds and personal achievement would seem to transpose this numerical accounting of Snow Hill’s circumstances into the allegorical mode of the rags-to-riches story. Much of Twenty-Five Years in the Black Belt is indeed dedicated to suggesting that Edwards’s life story can be distilled into the facts and figures that quantify Snow Hill’s institutional health.

At other moments, however, Edwards’s autobiography takes a surprising turn away from such material measures of accomplishment. Instead, he explores how the authorial labor of self-abstraction demanded by foundation philanthropy might actually create a space of disinterested
introspection and aesthetic experience. In one of these peculiar flights of self-reflection, Edwards describes convalescing after a particularly trying surgery: “The first few days that I was alone were the most miserable days of my life. I tried to walk, but fainted once or twice at these attempts, so I had to be contented with crawling. Soon, however, I began crawling about the yard. I found several ants’ nests within about twenty or twenty-five yards of the house, and soon made friends of the ants. I would crawl from nest to nest and watch them do their work.” This is a striking, even strange scene. But Edwards makes it clear that he is not interested in the reader’s pity. Rather than making a spectacle of himself, Edwards emphasizes his own agency as a spectator. As he crawls along the ground, Edwards watches how “the ants worked by classes,” each in its own time and each with its own tasks: “One class would bring out the dirt, another would go out in search of food, another would take away the dead, another would over look those that worked, and still another class … would come out and look around and then return.”

Breezy with delight, these remarks continue for the better part of a page. And in the pages that follow, Edwards describes his own experiences with the organization of labor, both on his family’s farm and at Tuskegee. Readers are meant, it would seem, to extrapolate from the anthill to the industrial academy. A different allegory, however, seems in the offing if we focus on Edwards and not the scene he describes. Lying on the ground, Edwards takes no part in the efficient division of social labor playing out in front of him. Indeed, Edwards seems to be modeling the objective detachment that philanthropic officials brought to social casework. For Edwards, though, the decision at hand has less to do with work ethic than aesthetic experience. Is this performance (of labor), Edwards asks us to consider, something we like or not? This shift from bureaucratic decision making to aesthetic judgment is not as far-fetched as it might sound. The same tension between the particular and the general at the heart of the case is also crucial to conventional ideas of the aesthetic. As Kant argues, in judging a particular object to be beautiful, we are implicitly claiming that this beauty is universally apparent. Under ideal circumstances, everyone would agree that the object is beautiful and share in the aesthetic pleasure it affords.

We might chalk up Edwards’s turn to the aesthetic to writerly prerogative, the professional fundraiser momentarily dispensing with the bureaucratic templates to which he was usually bound. But this strange episode with the ants is also a tacit acknowledgment of how the autobiographical materials Edwards and his staff produced for donors and philanthropic
foundations were read. The bureaucratic objectivity asserted by charity agents and philanthropic officials notwithstanding, Edwards underscores that these professionals also read for pleasure. To be sure, the casework compiled and assessed under the umbrella of the scientific charity did not offer the same enjoyment that one might find in a best-selling dime novel or even in mendicant literature. But nor, Edwards suggests, did these files traffic only in the maudlin pleasures of the sentimental decried by charity organizations and philanthropic foundations alike. Rather, for Edwards social casework can also foster aesthetic appreciation. It remains an open question, particularly when we turn from this peculiar episode in Twenty-Five Years in the Black Belt to Edwards’s broader and often far more directly instrumental autobiographical project, just what kind of work appreciation does—or indeed whether it works at all.

**Showing Your Work**

An unflinching response to D. W. Griffith’s Birth of a Nation (1915), Oscar Micheaux’s Within Our Gates (1920) captures the racial violence of the post-Reconstruction era that is conspicuously absent from the portrait of Black life promoted by industrial schools like Snow Hill. Perhaps most famously, a flashback sequence at the end of Micheaux’s film crosscuts the protagonist Sylvia’s near rape at the hands of her biological father with the lynching of her adopted parents. For all its candor in exposing the gruesome anti-Black terror that held sway in the postbellum South, however, Within Our Gates shies away from representing the action that drives the film’s parallel plot in the North—Sylvia’s efforts to raise money for a struggling industrial school in Mississippi called Piney Woods. Not simply an oversight, the work of fundraising is purposefully obscured by means of an unlikely narrative coincidence. While in Boston about to start her rounds, Sylvia runs into the street to save a child from oncoming traffic (figures 2.7–2.12). When she is herself struck in turn, luck would have it that the owner of the car is a wealthy white woman eager to support Black industrial education. All that is left to talk about, it would appear, is the amount Mrs. Warwick would like to give to Piney Woods. This chance encounter gives pause, flagging as it does the film’s reluctance to show Sylvia asking for money. To do so would evidently compromise Micheaux’s investment in normative femininity and middle-class respectability. But the chain of happy events set in motion by the accident also registers an implicit skepticism about whether fundraising should count as work to
The historical school that may well have been the model for Micheaux’s fictional academy did not harbor any such misgivings about fundraising. Nor were teachers, administrators, and even students at Piney Woods Country Life School in Braxton, Mississippi, reluctant to show the effort they put into keeping their institution—and themselves—afloat. Indeed, even more explicitly than Edwards at Snow Hill, principal Laurence C. Jones and his staff and students at Piney Woods interrogated the rational protocols of foundation philanthropy to persuade donors that fundraising was work. Whereas Edwards relied on a novel mode of institutional authorship to sharpen the blunt sensationalism of the mendicant encounter into a nimble analytic, Jones and his collaborators championed the productive value of sentimentality itself—the more mawkish the better. This they did by likening the bureaucratic genre of the case to the stock figure and the clerical work of philanthropic administration to the literary labor of abstracting complex personal narratives into broadly legible tropes of need and deservingness.

Constructing a stock figure, Jones and his collaborators argued, was as demanding as transforming one’s story into a case. Both involved shifting the scene of philanthropic encounter from the street to the page in order to abstract the general from the particular and thus to pose a question to the reader: is this a case of that? Particularly in light of the role that disabled students played in this project, Piney Woods’s fundraising methods were contentious from the beginning. Even before the school was designated Mississippi’s sole institution for blind children of color in 1929, disabled children were integrated into both the academic and the industrial curricula. Although, as we will see, many of these students played an active role in shaping how their stories were used to raise money for Piney Woods, the school nonetheless gained a certain degree of notoriety. As an officer of the Rosenwald Fund warned, “The Piney Woods people are notorious beggars” who “succeed in interesting a great many people who are simply sentimental about the Negro problem without trying to find out what will really meet his problems.”

Jones’s fundraising venture began rather more conventionally, in much the same spirit of self-help and community-building on which the broader industrial education movement was founded. After graduating from the University of Iowa, Jones traveled to Braxton and approached the town’s Black residents with the idea of founding a school. The first practical
“Now that you are recovering, can you tell me what troubles you so?”

2.7–2.12 Oscar Micheaux, dir., *Within Our Gates* (1920).
step forward was a gift of forty acres provided by a former slave who had made a sizable sum in the North after the Civil War. Support then came from Black farmers and later from white business owners. With a stable cadre of local backers thus established, Jones sought funding from philanthropic organizations and donors in his native Iowa and in the North. In the tradition of Fisk University and Hampton Institute, he also sent musicians from Piney Woods on tour. In the years to come, the Cotton Blossom Singers and the International Sweethearts of Rhythm became an important source of revenue for their school and earned considerable acclaim along the way.71 As with Snow Hill, however, most of Piney Woods’s funding came from private philanthropic foundations and was of necessity procured not in person but on paper. Indeed, although Jones would recount the founding and funding of Piney Woods in two books of memoir and institutional history, *Piney Woods and Its Story* (1922) and *The Spirit of Piney Woods* (1931), like Edwards he spent most of his time writing to administrators and donors. And while Jones also took the bureaucratic conventions of scientific charity to heart, his writing—in mailers, reports, leaflets, and letters of application alike—was from the start of a decidedly more experimental nature.72

Much of the notoriety that Piney Woods attracted had to do with the use of photographs of and narrative by disabled students and alumni in fundraising materials. Many of these documents do indeed walk a fine line, often anticipating the worst impulses of the mid-twentieth-century telethon.73 The scandal of Jones’s methods, however, lay not only in how he ignored the foundation era’s prohibition on sentiment and spectacle (at a moment when foundations and individual donors had begun to articulate their revulsion to disabled bodies as paternalist opposition to exploitation and manipulation). Rather, the sensational writings that Jones and his students produced were controversial because it was all too clear how much effort went into their production. Had these appeals seemed truly heartfelt, or been legible as unmediated bursts of emotion originating in a desperate need for compassion, they probably would not have met with such hostility. As one disillusioned donor in Boston complained, “These letters always make a very pathetic appeal—the boy is always crippled, is fatherless or motherless.”74 Less offense would be taken, it seems, if Jones and his students had not been at such pains to show their work.

Jones’s earliest efforts to create stock figures representative of Piney Woods’s deservingness did not directly involve students. After first struggling to transform himself into a case, as Edwards had done for Snow
Hill, Jones turned to a series of other surrogate figures on campus, beginning with the white women who taught at the school (figure 2.13). These women were typically presented as sentimental figures of self-sacrifice and vulnerability, as in the mailer printed after a fire in 1921 that ruined the “largest and best building of the Piney Woods School,” the boys’ dormitory. The headline of this circular draws attention neither to the boys nor to their dormitory: “DISASTROUS FIRE / PINEY WOODS COUNTRY LIFE SCHOOL; TWO NORTHERN WHITE TEACHERS IN BURNED BUILDING.”

Readers do learn that two Black students were in the building as well, but Jones evidently assumed that the danger they faced would speak less directly to donors. Jones likewise sought to instrumentalize the school’s white teachers under less dramatic circumstances as well. These women were also called on to write to the school’s most ardent supporters or to loan their likenesses to various fundraising mailers. In 1918, for example, Nellie T. Brooks wrote to a select group of donors “whose hearts [she] believed would cause them to respond favorably” to the story of how she “gave a year of her life” to further the work being done at Piney Woods. This letter, of course, draws on the familiar conventions by which white women could powerfully represent the vulnerability and deservingness of others. But as reprinted by Piney Woods students in a circular destined for wider distribution, Brooks’s missive also became part of a fundraising agenda that showcased the labor involved in the creation of such a deliberately emotive persona. In this document, a studio portrait of Brooks appears adjacent to a photograph of the students she led in a “Class in Patriotism.” A collaborative statement captions this latter image: “This Letter Head was Designed and Printed by the Boys and Girls of The Piney Woods Country Life School ... in order that the lady whose picture appears hereon, and who came from up North, can help us get an education by interesting others.” The students seem to propose Brooks as an appropriate emblem of their school’s accomplishments and needs. But they also make it clear that theirs was the effort that went into producing Brooks as a conventionally sentimental sign.

The literary labor of Piney Woods students is also showcased in a circular titled “Broadcasting Their Smiles to You” (figure 2.14). In this single-page form letter, Jones draws on the visual logic of before and after to represent the transformative power of industrial education at Piney Woods. If the disabled students pictured at the top of the page inhabit the rhetorical before, the posture of the Piney Woods alumnus whose image appears at the bottom clearly marks the rhetorical after. With an extended
left leg figuratively accentuating his moral uprightness, Charles M. Shed embodies the past achievements and future promise of Piney Woods. But even as Shed offers a visual counterpoint to “those nine boys above,” the comparison ultimately has less to do with the spectacular transformation of unsightly bodies than with the pursuit of employment for disabled students.77 “Broadcasting Their Smiles to You” is remarkable, in fact, for the ordinariness of its ambition. Disabled students evidently shared the same goals harbored by all students at Piney Woods—to become “useful citizens.” And even though Piney Woods was not officially a normal school, like Shed, many of its alumni did go on to become teachers. The transformation imagined here is thus not from disabled student to nondisabled worker but from disabled student to disabled teacher. And as a stand-in for Jones, Shed also embodies the primary duty of the Bookerite administrator: fundraising. The most evident sign of Shed’s accomplishment, in other words, is that he orchestrates the rhetorical transformation of personal
narrative into case history while also underscoring the productive labor involved in creating a stock sentimental caricature. The “nine boys above” also play their part in this orchestration. The brief descriptions beneath each student’s name serve less to mark their bodies as aberrant than to stress their active involvement in the work of fundraising. Indeed, students’ poses cut against the cheerful passivity promised by the document’s title. Instead of having their smiles broadcast to readers, the students telegraph self-confidence and attentive readiness. Nor are the students exactly smiling, for that matter. These knowing looks communicate not helplessness but pride in the work of the student aid department.

It is precisely the work of fundraising so understood that Dean Carter, one of the nine students pictured here, stressed in the letters he wrote to
philanthropic individuals and organizations asking for donations to fund his scholarship. Carter addressed one of these letters to Wallace Buttrick, William J. Edwards’s longtime interlocutor, who had in the years since been promoted to president of the GEB. The first of these letters opens gently, in a familiar tone, by asking whether he has heard of Piney Woods (figure 2.15). After then glossing the school’s history and educational philosophy, Carter describes his own body: “I am a poor boy here in school. I have but one arm and one of my legs are broken so that I cannot straighten out and I can’t stand or walk at all. As this being the only school in the state of Mississippi where a poor cripple boy could get any schooling, Mr. Jones was kind enough to let me come down here and has given me a chance to write to a few people to see if they would help me.” 78 The analogy Carter draws between his body and financial need is clear. Carter, however, also specifies that he wrote these letters not as a favor to Jones or out of goodwill to the school but to earn his tuition fees, just as other students...
did in the industrial or agricultural departments. If Carter thus seems to embrace the popular begging letter and to transform himself into a stock sentimental figure, he also stresses the labor involved in doing so. As such, his literary practice productively confuses the sentimental caricature with rational case study by insisting that he has in fact earned the money he is requesting.  

The decades-long process through which Jones and his students perfected this balancing act finds its zenith in an unlikely mailer created in 1938 with the title “Abraham Lincoln and the Colored Man with One Leg” (figure 2.16). As if to substantiate the apocryphal lore that provided its conceit, this single-page leaflet also includes a mimeographed rendering of the check Lincoln made out to “colored man with one leg or bearer” in 1863. Now held by PNC Bank, the check was in private collections and out of circulation for most of the early twentieth century. Photographic reproductions, however, were hardly scarce. Readers of Collier’s could in 1907 buy a “Fac-simile of Lincoln’s check, payable to ‘colored man with one leg’” for ten cents. The check also appeared in later editions of Ida M. Tarbell’s popular Life of Lincoln, which was first published in 1900. For Tarbell, Lincoln’s kindness to the unnamed Black man was further evidence of the president’s famed generosity, a story to echo the tales of compassion she recounts in an extensive chapter called “Lincoln and the Soldiers.” There we read about the “scores of cases where [Lincoln] interfered personally to secure some favor or right for a soldier,” whether for the ailing “Pittsburgh boy” seeking furlough or for the “crippled soldier” the president met outside of the White House. Lincoln assured the latter that he “used to practice law in a small way” and helped the veteran apply for a pension “at the foot of a convenient tree.” Lincoln’s encounter with the “colored man with one leg” also took place near the tree, and it is likewise a story of simple sympathy: “One day as he crossed the park he was stopped by a negro who told him a pitiful story. The President wrote him out a check for five dollars” (figure 2.17).  

As reprinted at the top of a fundraising circular seventy years later, the “Facsimile of [the] check given in charity by Abraham Lincoln to a colored man with one leg” would seem intended to produce much the same compassion for Piney Woods. But the mimeographed image cannot help but emphasize the difference between then and now—between the Black amputee’s seemingly spontaneous appeal and Jones’s mechanical form letter. The faded reproduction likewise suggests that the charitable exchange it honors may have fallen short of the sentimental ideal it seems

2.17 Lincoln offering to complete the paperwork for a Union veteran's pension claim. Ida M. Tarbell, *The Life of Abraham Lincoln* (1900).
to epitomize. As historians and humorists of the day were eager to point out, Lincoln made his check out to a type rather than to a person. One commentator noted, for instance, that Lincoln’s phrase would have been “sufficient identification for the most careful teller at the meticulous Riggs Bank.” Although clearly pejorative, such invocations of minstrel typology nonetheless underscore the work performed by the Black amputee in becoming the “colored man with one leg.” In Tarbell’s account, in fact, this labor of self-fashioning distinguishes Lincoln’s Black interlocutor from the white soldiers. Whereas the president instantly recognizes the white soldier’s deservingness, the Black amputee must tell a “pitiful story” to win Lincoln’s sympathy. The “colored man with one leg” has no part of the effortless sentimentality that marks the president’s exchanges with the white soldiers. The latter are the passive beneficiaries of Lincoln’s fellow feeling, whereas the former earns what the president gives. From this vantage, “Abraham Lincoln and the Colored Man with One Leg” cites less an exemplary instance of sentimental identification than a knowing performance of deservingness that for Jones makes the work of fundraising socially legible as labor.

Recognizing that Jones reproduces Lincoln’s check in order to represent fundraising as labor helps us understand what is ultimately the governing conceit of “Abraham Lincoln and the Colored Man with One Leg” and Piney Woods’s basic fundraising strategy. As Jones clarifies, “It is not the appeal of a colored man with one leg I am calling to your attention, but the poor, ignorant colored boys and girls of the South whose minds are maimed like the man’s severed leg.” On its face, this analogy would seem but a tendentious likening of physical disability to the economic and educational injustices of Jim Crow. But how exactly are the figuratively maimed students “like” the “colored man with one leg”? If we bracket the obvious spectacle of injury, it seems clear that both model the cultural conventions of deservingness even as they also show their work. Indeed, the students who transform themselves into sentimental objects are “working their way, farming, cooking, [and] digging ditches.” The analogy drawn between the students of Piney Woods and the “colored man with one leg” is thus a comparison between what only appear to be disparate forms of labor—fundraising and the “actual” work performed at the school. In this way, “Abraham Lincoln and the Colored Man with One Leg” is the culmination of a history of formal experimentation defined above all by a strategy of both—and that encompassed mendicant practice as well as scientific charity: at once modeling sentimental conventions
and attempting to demonstrate that these performances constitute a form of labor in keeping with the ideals of industrial education. If William J. Edwards negotiated this apparent contradiction by inhabiting the tension between the particular and general that defines the genre of the case, Jones and his students took inspiration from the “colored man with one leg” in underscoring the productive labor involved in creating stock figures that, in the end, were also cases.

The Poetics of the Case

The efforts of Edwards, Jones, and their students at Snow Hill and Piney Woods to repurpose the genre of social casework find an unlikely parallel in modern and contemporary documentary poetry. Whether by selective editing, paratactic rearrangement, or caustic fragmentation, this body of writing seeks to wrest new meaning and fraught intimacies from putatively objective and obviously coercive archives of all kinds. An important early touchstone is Charles Reznikoff’s *Testimony* (1934), which reworks turn-of-the-century legal cases into a harrowing meditation on systemic violence. A similar commitment to disrupting the authority of the law informs M. NourbeSe Philip’s *Zong!* (2008), a work at the center of recent conversations about poetry, affect, and the archive. In this book of “fugal antinarrative,” Philip examines the paper trail created when the owners of an eighteenth-century slave ship filed an insurance claim for 150 Africans murdered en route to Jamaica. The poem attends to what the archive conveys and how, as Philip writes, but also to what it leaves unsaid and renders unsayable.

My intent is to use the text of the legal decision as a word store; to lock myself into this particular and peculiar discursive landscape in the belief that the story of these African men, women, and children thrown overboard in an attempt to collect insurance monies, the story that can only be told by not telling, is locked in this text. In the many silences within the Silence of the text. I would lock myself in this text in the same way men, women, and children were locked in the holds of the slave ship *Zong*.85

Philip’s task is twofold. In addition to dismantling the dehumanizing language of the case, *Zong!* seeks to “conjur[e] the presence of excised Africans.”86 The poet is “both censor and magician,” the poem an act of demolition and revelation. As such, we might also say that *Zong!* combines documentary poetry’s attention to the syntax of facticity with the
recovery project that scholars have begun to associate with the genre of outsider writing. Building on the robust theorization of outsider art in visual studies, literary critics such as John Wilkinson use this neologism to collate a wide variety of work by variously marginalized, excluded, and institutionalized writers. As the subgenre of prison literature makes clear, outsider writing is often shaped by particular discourses and practices of social discipline. But unlike documentary poetry, which begins with the textual substrate of institutional violence, outsider writing is an act of self-conscious representation first and foremost. It emerges in spite of the historical record, not because of it. Insofar, then, as documentary poems like Zong! seek to amplify the voices that history has silenced, they could well be called outsider writing. But given this literature’s insistent recourse to the violence and absence at the heart of the archive, this ethos of recovery is inevitably the inverse of an often more forceful commitment to “breaking the words open.”

The line between documentary poetry and outsider writing that Zong! both brightens and blurs is also useful in understanding how the genre of the case circulated in the print culture of social welfare at the turn of the twentieth century. Indeed, asking how social casework shifted the scene of philanthropic exchange from the street to the page confronts us with a question as familiar to poets and literary critics as to social historians: how do we read in the archive? Where the ideology and institutions of scientific charity hold sway, it is clear that many applicants found no opportunity for self-expression in the protocols used to rewrite their lives as cases. Our approach to these materials might thus resemble that of the documentary poet: we trace the patterns of narrative, syntactical, and formal restraint that sustain asymmetrical relations of power in the hopes of chancing upon a break in the case, as it were—not a clue that reveals the truth of a given life but a crack in the iron cage of bureaucratic rationality that allows a glimpse of the irreducible specificity of individual experience. And yet, as this chapter has shown, in practice social casework was not the objective decision-making machine theorized by charity organization societies and foundation philanthropies. The print artifacts produced at Snow Hill and Piney Woods certainly do reflect the pressure that teachers and students felt to make their case as a case. But these writings also reveal how that same bureaucratic genre was far more capacious, and far more literary, than one might expect. From this vantage, in fact, the GEB case files demand to be read as outsider writing—a trove of forgotten African American personal narratives and vernacular disability writing that has meaning above
and beyond the philanthropic transactions and acts of surveillance that originally brought them into being.

Mapping the formal distinctions between documentary poetry and outsider writing onto the print culture of social welfare, however, can also lead in the other direction—not to the literary as such or to the archive’s relation to the canon but to more overtly clinical uses of the case. The bureaucratic mode of accounting for individual lives promoted by advocates of scientific charity, after all, also found purchase in pseudoscientific and eugenicist projects of the era that likewise aimed to eliminate beggars, malingerers, and other “social dependents.” Reading the archives of scientific charity also requires making decisions about casework itself: is this case doing this or that? A book of experimental verse by an anonymous collective of poets, scholars, and activists identified only as the Blunt Research Group is instructive in this regard. *The Work-Shy* (2016) consists of two poetic sequences derived from the archives of various psychiatric hospitals, prisons, and reformatories joined by a brief reflection on poetic method—on “the obligation to seek permission to listen and the impossibility of obtaining it from a voice that cannot be reached.”89 The second of these poetic sequences reworks texts written by inmates, from diary entries to treatises, tabulations, rants, and undelivered letters, and would seem as such to fit squarely in the category of outsider writing. The first section of *The Work-Shy*, by contrast, presents a definitional, interpretative, and perhaps even ethical challenge. The poems in “Lost Privilege Company” are composed of phrases drawn from the case files of inmates in California youth prisons between 1910 and 1925.

Like Snow Hill and Piney Woods, these reformatories were funded in part by the Rockefeller Foundation. But unlike Black industrial schools, institutions like the Whittier State School were overseen by the Eugenics Records Office, a US organization instrumental in the international eugenics movement. As such, the casework compiled on inmates in reformatories across California—disproportionately young Hispanics and African Americans—was used primarily not to determine who deserved help but who should be recommended for sterilization. The young “wards” rarely speak in their own voices on this or any matter. The central conflict in “Lost Privilege Company” is thus whether an archive “originally compiled to justify the elimination of certain populations” can be the basis for poetry—no matter how virtuosic—that does not reproduce the violence visited upon those whose experiences have been all but excised from the historical record.
“Lost Privilege Company” engages this question directly and self-reflexively, beginning at the level of typography. Each of the poems in this section encodes two or more perspectives: italicized text indicates the voices of the young inmates; text without italics belongs to caseworkers; and passages in quotes convey the voices of the inmates, or their families and friends, as cited by caseworkers. What begins on the page as a visual contest between differently marked text then gives way, in the substance of these poems, to a semantic contest between statements made from subject positions we know to be irreconcilably different but which are nonetheless syntactically enjambed. The first of two poems titled “Pedro,” for instance, is structured as a list of caseworkers’ observations about an inmate (figure 2.18). The uneven left margin and irregular indentation evoke a page of handwritten notes and an associative scattering of impressions—not yet information—that seems at odds with the diagnostic imperative of the case file. Instead of adding up to anything definitive, that is, these reflections circle back continually to the same idea, as if to describe the inmate’s indolence from every possible angle, even his own. Indeed, though we are told that Pedro “wants to do everything but / what looks like work,” Pedro himself describes how, before becoming incarcerated, he did something that “looked” like work, namely “acting as look out for older boys.” He and his friends operated outside of the formal economy, but theirs was still a rational division of labor.

Just as Pedro’s voice is marginalized in his case file, however, so too is this work history illegible within the regime of forced labor in which he declines to participate. This question of what work looks like is thus also a question about what an authoritative voice sounds like, and in both instances the decision is clearly not Pedro’s. Each poem in “Lost Privilege Company” could be met with similar reservations, so canned are the voices of the inmates and so uncannily eloquent the experimental reimagining of the bureaucratic files that document their mortification. As such, *The Work-Shy* would seem to stand as a monument to the violence of the case, even for those—like Edwards, Jones, and their students at Snow Hill and Piney Woods—who possess some modicum of textual agency and are not (immediately) facing compulsory sterilization. But the ephemeral print culture of social welfare may also help us to read *The Work-Shy* and to understand better how the Blunt Research Group approaches its more immediately troubling archive. Though there can be no doubt that the inmates’ voices are effectively silenced in the files on which “Lost Privilege Company” draws, many of these poems nonetheless also register fugitive scenes
of writing—by turns abortive, failed, ineffectual, and imaginary. These moments suggest that inmates may have had a far more ambivalent relation to the genre of the case than we might assume. But they also illustrate what we stand to gain when we not only “close listen” to the voices that have been muted in these case files, as the Blunt Research Group describes its method, but also to close read the writing that has been excised from the record.

To be sure, these moments of writing are fleeting and few. In a second poem titled “Pedro,” for instance, we learn that the subject of this case file—not necessarily the first Pedro—was punished for an outburst in the yard when the wards gathered together to drill. As transcribed on the page, this outburst—“Ish gebibble!,” popular, probably polyglot slang for “Who cares?”—would seem a tragicomic but futile response to totalizing authority shared by both the drillmaster and the caseworker who reported this episode for disciplinary action. But after being transferred to solitary confinement, Pedro “wrote [a] four page letter / to the Superintendent stating that he was not guilty that / it could not have been him.” As if recognizing the inadequacy of his voice as an instrument of self-assertion, Pedro again

took up the pen. The only details we have about his letter—that it was four pages in length—suggest both his intensity of focus and his eagerness to make himself legible in the idiom of the case, or indeed even to produce a document that could be physically inserted into his own case file. There is nothing to suggest that this letter made it into Pedro’s casework, but neither is his the only memo of this kind in *The Work-Shy*.

At first glance, the story at stake in “Emmanuel” would seem to be about an attempted escape (figure 2.19). Emmanuel, identified both by his demeanor (“cold-blooded schemer”) and by his social network (“Stella Schreiber, cousin, living at 1021 Grand View Ave. Los Angeles”) evidently made his way to an island opposite Huntington Beach on July 4. From there Emmanuel sent school officials a postcard “saying he was having a vacation.” By splitting this statement between two voices, the caseworker’s and Emmanuel’s, the poem hints that the former might have meant to underscore the impertinence of the latter. The arrangement of these lines on the page also suggests that caseworkers misread Emmanuel’s sharp wit as evidence of “cold-blooded” scheming. By the same token, however, when we consider that the ephemeral print genre of the postcard serves, among
other functions, to place its sender at a certain place at a certain time, Emmanuel’s joke may be parodic rather than simply cheeky. It reproduces the caseworker’s desire to track his movements and place him in time and space, as evidenced by the insertion of his cousin’s address into the file. This work of parody continues with the piece of writing that next turns up: “they found a fifteen page letter / showing that he had been studying a code / of some sort.” Presumably hunting for clues about how Emmanuel has escaped or where he has gone, school officials find waiting for them a document that distills the information they are after into a “code” they cannot understand. They are left holding a case file that is of no greater use in understanding his motivation or even his whereabouts than the documents they themselves have compiled on Emmanuel. Both the last word and the last laugh are his: when inserted into his file, this document will become a decoder key of sorts, shaping how all the other writing produced about him will be interpreted in the future. His case will ultimately land in the pile marked “escaped.”